

The Students Participation in Democratic Life in Kosovo

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Abstract

Nowadays, in Kosovo, just as in many other countries, preparing young people to be active participants in a democratic society is an important issue, because democracy without participation is meaningless. Participation in community and in political development is a precondition for building a democratic system. Taking into consideration the importance of youth participation in democratic life, the youngsters should initially be educated in this aspect. They should have basic knowledge about essential citizenship concepts. In addition, they must be equipped with knowledge of many other related civic education. Schools, teachers and other educating institutions continue to have the main role on civic education. Considering what was mentioned above, the purpose of this paper is to present the perception of eighth grade students of elementary schools in Kosovo for some fundamental concepts of civilization as well as the role and importance that schools and teachers have to prepare students for participation in democratic life. The study contributes significant informations and data for further research about the students participation in democratic life in Kosovo. The results of the study are supposed to foster the teachers and others to become more effective in encouraging students to be more active in their societies and to build effective student-teacher partnership via policies, decision making, and practices.

Keywords: Democracy; Citizenship; Students participation; Schools; Teachers.

1. Introduction

Constant technological, economic and sociopolitical changes are common characteristic of modern societies. So, all these modern societies engage to participate, because participation is a key factor for citizenship and democracy itself. Democracy plays an important role in civic education. In regards to this, different philosophers, scholars have expressed their opinion throughout different historical periods.

Following 18th century philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau and 19th century philosopher John Stuart Mill, John Dewey believed that democracy was important not only because it stood for freedom and equality but because of its educational consequences. To begin with, he recognized Jefferson's views that for a democracy to be successful, people must be educated enough to recognize and express their own interests. "But more important, what Dewey believed, was the converse: for education to be more successful, it is necessary that people participate in democratic forms of life. That is, Dewey believed in a developmental argument for democracy which held that participation in democratic life is more educational for the population than is participation in any other form of political life" (Tozer, Violas and Senese, 2002).

According to Dewey, all members of a democratic society are entitled to an education that will enable them to make the best of themselves as active and equal participants in the life of their community ("Democracy, Education, and the Schools, 1996". Giddens (1991) argued that emancipatory politics makes primary the imperatives of justice, equality and participation. In this context, even in Kosovo society, a society in transition, emancipatory politics are focused on the education of young people to participate in democratic life. While, the citizens are those who constitute a society, and they are not only leaders of society changes, but they are individuals that will adapt to those changes, then, management of these changes is closely related to the education level of any society. Successful change in personal habits involves paying attention to how you are doing things and than making a conscious decision to do things differently. First, you make the decision to change and then you commit to the change over time (Lindsey, Martinez and Lindsey, 2007). Therefore, in Kosovo Curriculum Framework, civic education takes a particular place. The curriculum framework supports essential values of Kosovo students citizenship, which are consistent with the essential goals of education for democratic citizenship. In this regard, adequate assistance is being offered by relevant institutions as well as by competent people, which, with commitment and serious determination are directly impacting on education for democratic citizenship. The main aim of civic education in educative institutions is to improve the students' ability to independently judge the value of democratic society and to achieve this aims, the teaching policies should be well designed.

The main reasons that have incited us to this research have been discussions that are being made for different kinds of participations and the lack of interest in involvement of young people to participate in public and political life.

The purpose of this paper is to present not only student participation in democratic life in Kosovo, but also the role and importance of other relevant factors regarding the promotion of the participation. Regarding this, in this paper, we will talk about the importance of schools and teachers for education and motivation of young people in democratic life participation. So that teachers can play a significant role in teaching policies. From this point of view the development of civic education could not be isolated from the role that teachers play in constructing civic education programs at the school level. For that reason the purpose of this paper is to highlight the role that teachers play in constructing civic education policy in schools and classrooms.

The questions raised here are the following: Which is the role of schools in civic education? Which is the role of teachers to prepare students for participation in democratic processes? How do current practices in education and the teaching and learning process impact civic education? How can we encourage the youngsters to become active participants?

Finally it should be mentioned that democracy is a form of participation and participation is a broad concept and not only does it contain powerful political significance but it also includes social and economic meanings. Participating in simulations of democratic institutions may increase students' political knowledge, skills, and interest, though the data are not conclusive ("Facing sides: clashing views on controversial educational issues", 2006). On the other hand, the democratic civic education encompasses a set of concepts or fundamental values that are common to all modern democracies. Proper understanding of these concepts, values and their relationship in terms of rapid change, it is a prerequisite for effective participation and responsible citizens in the process of democratic development.

2. The Role of Schools and Teachers to Prepare the Students for Participation in Democratic Life

As Oakes and Lipton (2003) demonstrated, teachers and schools are the official and most formal people and institutions that educate, but they are not necessarily the most powerful or influential. Other people and groups will magnify and diminish the possibilities for rigorous and socially just learning communities. Although it is everyone's (parents, schools, communities) responsibility to work together for students' benefit, teachers and schools have the special job and opportunities to make this happen and to prepare students for participation in democratic life.

The role of schools. The main role for a proper education of Kosovo citizens continues to belong to schools. Schools are directly engaged in developing the individuals and society of the future and people care a great deal about what kind of individuals and society will develop (Nelson & Palonsky & McCarthy, 2004): The school is the most important institution, it takes a rare place in building civil values of students, preparing them to face with different challenges, enabling them to exercise their rights and responsibilities, for being active, and responsible in life, society, etc. Tozer et al. (2002) found that the school could be a "laboratory for democracy" in which children developed the understanding, skills, and dispositions required for democratic life not only by reading about them in books but by interacting democratically in their learning activities.

In a democratic community children have to learn to be leaders as well as followers, possessed of "power of self-directions and power of directing others, powers of administrations, ability to assume positions of responsibility" as citizens and workers. Because the world is rapidly changing, children cannot, moreover, be educated for any "fixed station in life", but schools have to provide each child with training that would "give him such possession of himself that he may take charge of himself; may not only adapt himself to the changes which are going on, but have power to shape and direct those changes" ("Democracy, Education, and the Schools," 1996).

Schools are a focus of criticism and reform efforts because schools are among the most public of institutions, are one of the most common experiences people have, and are immensely important for the future of societies. Nelson, Palonsky and McCarthy (2004) have concluded that virtually every person spends long periods of life in schools; teachers may spend a lifetime. Schools carry significant social trust for transmitting cultural heritage, developing economic and political competence, and providing inspiration and knowledge to improve the future society.

With this in mind, the Kosovo authorities are committed to the education of all its citizens without exception. Education for democratic citizenship includes all groups and sectors of the society. Civic education as the main purpose of education can not be contested. It can not be talked for civil and political rights without educating citizens in this regard, and therefore the role of schools is undeniable. In this case, it is of interest, to mention the impact that indoctrination has on education. It is necessary and time requirement for civic education to go beyond indoctrination whether cultural or religious. Regarding this, Stephen Macedo argues that the public schools should teach students to

become active participants in democratic life and that this can be accomplished without resulting in political indoctrination. In reality, education and indoctrination are two completely different things. Indoctrination is anti-educational when used by the government, the church (religion) or by parents. "This argument is worrisome. It certainly throws the whole distinction between education and indoctrination out the windows" ("Taking sides: Clashing views on controversial educational issues," p. 406). In this context, schools in Kosovo should pay particular attention. Schools must become places where all voices are heard and where people learn to recognize power structures and negotiate power arrangements (White and Walker 2008).

The role of teachers. Teaching is one of the most influential positions in society. In terms of carrying values and ideas from generation to generation, teaching is next to parenting in its power. In some respects, teachers exert more influence on children's views and values than parents do.

According to Nelson, Palonsky and McCarthy (2004) society gives teachers authority to develop sound knowledge and values in children, and school is compulsory for that purpose. The child, being weaned from parental influence, looks to teachers for guidance. This is a particularly important responsibility. Teachers bear duties to parents, society, and the child to provide a suitable education. They also have ethical duties to the profession of teaching. These multiple responsibilities require accountability from teachers and schools. The role of teachers is extremely huge not only in preparing young people for active participation in democratic life but for their promotion processes to help the overall social development. It should be noted that in these processes students are competent, active and constructive partners. They are relevant factors in educational field changes. We should mention that students participation in the Bologna process is one of the key steps towards a more sustainable involvement and formalizing of the students in all decision-making bodies and in all discussions relating to higher education at European level.

Tozer et al. (2002) found that teachers typically accept the notion that a major goal of teaching is to prepare citizens for life in a democratic society, and most teachers believe that their teaching contributes to achieving this goal. Yet college students preparing to teach are rarely given an opportunity to engage in a sustained study of what life in a democratic society really means or how to go about educating students for participation in such a society. "To understand the meaning of democracy and to fit students for life in a democratic society require careful analysis. It is obvious, for example, that school systems in all cultures seek to fit people to their surrounding societies. It is not so obvious, however, that in a democratic society this process should involve equipping people to think critically about the degree to which their society is in fact democratic and to participate effectively in overcoming its undemocratic aspects. Thus, to prepare the students for participation in a democratic society, a teacher may have to consider how well his or her choice of teaching and management strategies fosters critical thinking and active political participation" (p. 5).

Teachers are based on the principles and methods that will help the personality development of students-citizens, who first of all, will be educated to respect each other, respect the human rights, express their opinion freely, to be participants in various social organizations, equality between people regardless of age, gender, political or religious affiliation, etc. It is required from the teacher of civic education class to enable his students gain of knowledge on civic education and to serve as a reference point for learning the content that is included in civic education class (Sylaj, 2010). Learning about democratic citizenship includes other teaching skills that are important for the enabling process of students to become responsible citizens. Teacher embodies, bears principles, rules, and therefore, serves as a model for laying the foundations of democracy. Lastly, the teacher, through his attitudes and behaviors also conveys to students the educating principles of democratic citizenship. Giving students a voice in the management of the classroom and the school may well increase civic skills and attitudes. Teacher-student relations are crucial for the overall social development and schooling for democracy. According to White and Walker (2008), educators must develop critical thinking skills among students, in order to combat the trend of abandonment of active citizenship for passive consumerism. Dewey argued that schooling for democracy would only be fully functional when democracy had been extended to the workplace. ("Democracy, Education, and the Schools," 1996).

In the end we can say that teaching citizenship education to young children is one of the most important contributions that we can make as a teacher. The children we teach will assume positions of leadership and responsibility well into the 21st century.

3. Research Methods

In this survey, qualitative and quantitative methods have been used. The research¹ was conducted in two phases. The

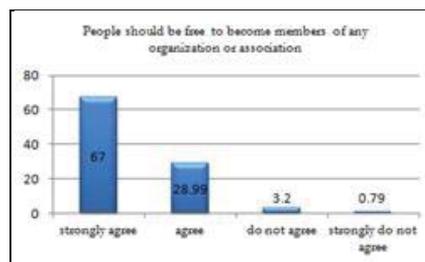
¹ The implementation of the project is done in collaboration with three institutions: Kosovar Education Center (KEC), University of Zurich (Switzerland) and the Faculty of Education (University of Pristina).

first phase of the research (pilot project) was conducted with eighth grade students in four schools of Pristina in 2009. The research was conducted by interviews and questionnaires. The second phase of the project began in October of 2011. It was conducted in 150 primary schools of Kosovo, in urban and rural environments. The research included the eighth grade students of different ethnicities: Albanian, Bosnian, Turkish, Serbian, Roma and Ashkali, of all municipalities of Kosovo. Selection of students was done in a random order. 10 students from each eighth grade were selected. A questionnaire was compiled for research. The survey included 1563 respondent-students. They answered the questionnaire on various concepts related to citizenship. The questionnaire was divided into sections. Each section presents some questions that students have answered. The processing of data was done after completion of the research in schools. Processing of emerging results was done by SPSS program.

4. Analysis Result

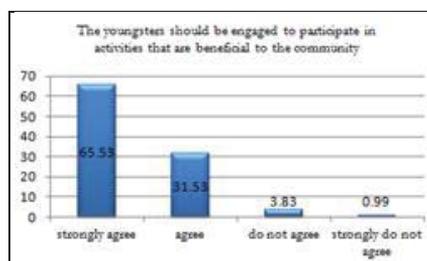
In the questionnaire, in section "Citizens and Society" are included questions related to participation of citizens different organizations and associations which impact the development of democratic processes. One of the questions posed in this section is as follows: "People should be free to become members of any organization or association". The study shows that many students, 67.00% of them, have given positive answers, they have proven that they "strongly agree" while 28.99% have said that they agree. Whereas, students with answers "do not agree" constitute 3.2%, and "strongly do not agree" constitute only 0.79%. (See Fig. 1)

Fig. 1.



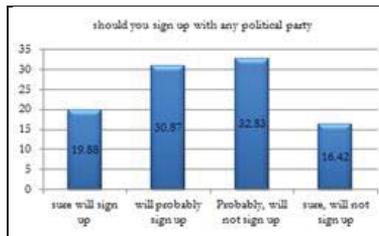
Another question from same section says: "The youngsters should be engaged to participate in activities that are beneficial to the community", 63.53% of students have expressed their positive attitude. 31.53% "agree", while only 3.83% of them "do not agree". The number of those that "strongly do not agree" is too small, 0.99%. From our study, we can see that students are aware that they should actively engage for the benefit of their community. (See figure. 2)

Fig. 2.



However, the question if "they should sign up with any political party", students gave these answers: 19.88% of them answered with "sure will sign up", where 30.87% said "will probably sign up", while 32.83% answered with "Probably, will not sign up", and 16.42% said "sure, will not sign up" (See. Fig. 3.)

Fig. 3.



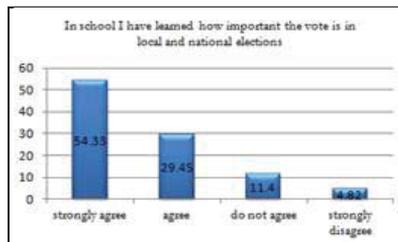
From the survey results, and the above question, it appears that about half of the students involved in the survey think that their membership in political parties is not important.

The issue of loss of desire and willingness to participate in political parties, is considered a danger to democracy or "democratic deficit". Canivez (2004) express his opinion and says that it may be a consequence of the structure. At a given time, it would not be the fault of mediocrity politicians, but the political organization itself, the functioning of parties, etc. Political parties use the votes of citizens while demobilizing citizens themselves.

According to Hannah Arend, in democracy all citizens can pursue authoritative functions. However, the best capable ones for governing should be selected, the ones that have certain capacities and qualities. This role belongs to parties. They recruit and select state people, the ones that are able to govern effectively (Canivez, 2004).

In the "School" section of the questionnaire some questions related to schools and teachers are presented. The research results show that school has great importance in preparing citizens to be active participants in the democratic process. The students' answers to the question "In school I have learned how important the vote is in local and national elections" are as follows: from the general number of respondents 54.33% of students answered "strongly agree" and 29.45% of them "agree", whereas, only 11.40% of them "do not agree" and 4.82 "strongly disagree" (See Fig. 4)

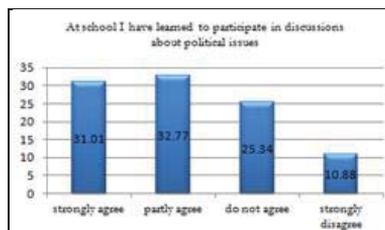
Fig. 4.



The study shows that students in schools have learned for religious tolerance, too! In the question "In school I have learned that religious tolerance is of great importance", majority of students, 66.58% answered "strongly agree", while 21.98% answered "partly agree". Only a small number of 8.9% answered with "do not agree" and 3.12% "strongly disagree"

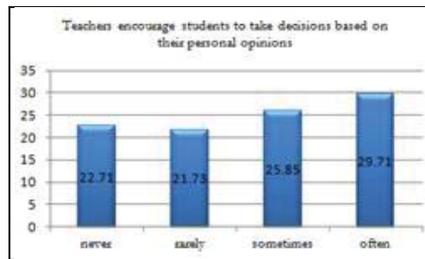
Based on the results of this research, it appears that Kosovo schools prepare their students to be participants on various political discussions. To the question: "At school I have learned to participate in discussions about political issues", 31.05% of students answered "strongly agree", while 32.77% of them said "partly agree". Only a small number of them responded negatively. 25.34% of them "do not agree" and 10.88% answered "strongly disagree". (See Fig. 5)

Fig. 5.



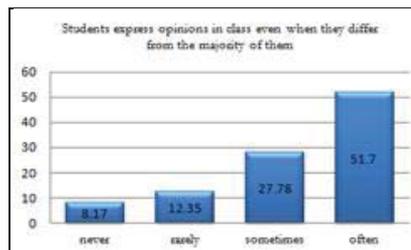
Teachers have a significant impact on increasing students participation in democratic life. They influence their students to build their own convictions regarding important issues. From the results of the research, in schools of Kosovo we can see how teachers influence students to take decisions based on personal convictions. To the question: "Teachers encourage students to take decisions based on their personal opinions", students gave the following answers: 22.71% of the total number answered "never", while 21.73% answered "rarely". And, 25.85 of them answered with "sometimes" and 29.71 answered "often". (See Fig. 6)

Fig. 6.



Teachers respect students' opinion even when they are different. This affects students to be willing to accept such a fact. To the question: "Students express opinions in class even when they differ from the majority of them ", students' responses were as follows: 8.17% of the total number answered "never", and 12.35% of them said "rarely", while 27.78% of them answered "sometimes", "51.70% responded "often". (See Fig. 7.)

Fig. 7.



5. Conclusion

This paper has shown the students participation in democratic life in Kosovo. In this regard, civic education is a critical and effective empowerment tool for promoting citizen participation in democratic and development processes. Also, the civic education is a continuous process of social education. In the process of civic education in schools and other educative institutions, the aims of civic education should vary according to the knowledge store and cognitive ability of students at different stages, and the corresponding contents of civic education should also be differentiated. On the other side, it is argued that the teachers can help civic education to develop civic competence involving civic knowledge, civic skills and civic disposition. Also in an democratic society, civic education would not only be taught and referenced at all grade levels in public schools, it would be a major component in all core academic classes. Knowing that participation is a key component to democracy, then, this component should be treated specifically. This issue should be dealt carefully, especially now that after the results of scientific research and various discussions lack of political, social activities and interests are noticed at young people. In this regard, in Kosovo, efforts should be made that educational institutions and other relevant factors put in their contribution, and education of young people for active participation in Kosovo society be a priority issue.

We should finally mention that from the results of this research project it is found that perceptions of students about the citizenship concepts and democratic education are connected with changes which Kosovo society is going through. Understanding of these concepts in terms of rapid changes and contemporary developments it is a prerequisite

for students' responsible participation in the process of democratic reconstruction as well as development of intellectual skills that enhance the quality of its role in the community.

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