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A keynote by Michalis Kakos

Citizenship education is dead, long live citizenship education!

Thank you all for coming to listen to my loud thinking session today and a big thank you to NECE for giving me this wonderful opportunity.

I will start this by trying to continue the discussion which followed the keynote by Ulrike Guérot, last year in Thessaloniki. I think that it was the last question following her presentation in which one of the delegates asked for her thoughts with regard to what citizenship education could do in order to address all the urgent issues that Ulrike had discussed. I still remember her somewhat puzzled expression and her effort to kindly avoid replying with one word: Nothing!

I think that it is fair to say that since Ulrike's presentation the only significant change with regard to the gloominess of the situation in Europe is the speed in which political and social developments unfold and the urgency of the multiple crises currently unfolding. Therefore if last year was too late for citizenship education then I guess it would be quite naïve of us to suggest that a window of opportunity has opened up this year…

My question then follows from Ulrike's response. And I would like to rephrase it in a couple of different forms:

- Is it too late for citizenship education?
- Does citizenship education (and us with it) become completely irrelevant in times of crisis?

I'm not sure whether these are questions that I should phrase during a conference of citizenship educators or in a counselling session but I will give it a go anyway.

My thesis will be developed in three steps. First, I will start by giving a tentatively positive answer to the above questions.

Secondly, I will suggest that this irrelevance of citizenship education is not the result of the current crisis but of the way that we are thinking about citizenship education, about its role and its place within formal education and of our approach to education as the answer to all social issues. With this I will return to the questions and I will argue that Ulrike gave the right answer to the wrong question.

Thirdly, I would like to suggest that a new, fresh and radical form of citizens' education rather than a repackaged product still has a place in the educational experiences that we offer to young citizens – but the aversion of crises as a result of this education may be a benefit to be reaped by our grandchildren rather than by our children.

I would like to start with the second point, which is my understanding about what is dysfunctional with the current model of citizenship education, at least as it has been applied in England but also in Greece and dare I say in many other countries.

It is not a new observation that we tend to think about citizenship in terms of a cure to political and social malaises. In the last years I had the incredible opportunity to explore this together with colleagues in the Citizenship for Hard to Reach Learners Focus Group and I think that it is fair to say that much of our discussions have been about the ethical, political and educational implications of approaching young citizens effectively as ignorant, more or less citizenship-less individuals who are in need of our enlightened, positive and democracy-devoted indoctrination. Attached to this approach is the belief that critical thinking and active participation –these two as one item, not separately- should assist the development of particular skills, attitudes and behaviours.

Indicative of this is understanding of citizenship education as the answer to social problems, at least in the English context, is the 1998 report by the commission led by Sir Bernard Crick which had clearly associated the need for citizenship education to the multiple malaises identified in the end 90s English society.

Equally, if not more problematic has been in my view the fact that we have been aiming to engage young citizens in this process by using their participation in what we call formal education but I think that we should be more accurately refer to as 'schooling'.
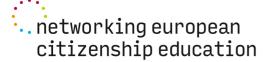
I think that there are several problems in such plan for citizenship education. I would like to name a few:

Firstly, there are implications for the methods that we use:

I will refer selectively to some of them.

There are no many colleagues with an interest in education for democratic citizenship who would disagree about the significance of students' engagement and practice in open debates exploring controversial issues – or, more appropriately in my view, approaching social issues as controversial. I do not intend to discuss here the methods for teaching of controversial issues – we may hear about this from the horse's mouth during the next presentation.

My attention is only on what we observe from a number of studies, with a recent one referring to relevant practices in Norway, with regard to practitioners' discomfort to deal with dissensus. There is a strong tendency –and I do not blame the teachers here, much as I might wanted to- for school practices to forcefully lead to an agreement. In my view this is indicative of a misunderstanding about the function of democracy which suggests that a democratic decision is the end of the dissensus. Yet what we know is that democracy allows disagreement to continue, and that democratic processes are very much based on the responsibility which is assumed by those who disagree after a decision has been reached:

this is the responsibility to monitor the effectiveness of the agreed practices. Biesta reminds us that the political subject is not the producer or consensus but the product of dissensus[1] and I am wondering about the democratic quality –if I may say- of the educational product delivered as a result of a forced consensus. As I said this is not something that I blame teachers about in the sense that they do not necessarily actively produce it but it is rather embedded in the school practices for a number of reasons and they do little (or cannot do much) to get rid of.
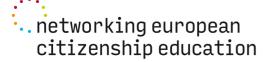
APPROPRIATENESS OF SCHOOLS

And this brings me to the second point that I want to raise with regard to the appropriateness of methods and settings. This is a more general question about schools as appropriate places for such form of education. I think that the deficit model seems to tie well with the model of education that is applied in schools: the ignorant-turned knowledgeable student, the non-citizen turned to an active and responsible citizen. We trust schools to 'teach' citizenship because teaching is what schools do.

But are really these institutions the appropriate environments for such form of education? I suspect that I do not need to discuss with you about performance targets, about exams and about overloaded teachers as I bet that you are all well aware of these issues.

I will only bring up three issues with regard to the appropriateness of schools:

- The first is that schools do not only respond to the demands by policy makers and inspectors, or by an invisible yet very present bureaucracy but also to an array of expectations from the public, including parents and students. I often have the feeling that although one cannot overestimate the influence of the experiences that schools offer on our children, we tend to misunderstand the kind of experiences that parents and students expect from schools to offer. And by doing so we forget that the most prominent of these expectations are very much in line – or in the best of cases do very little to challenge schools' institutional nature. I think that it is for this reason that these expectations are in fact co-responsible for the establishment of a discourse which we have good reasons to believe that is rather incompatible to democratic practices, to critical thinking and to active participation.

- The second issue with regard to the capacity of the school to accommodate the kind of citizenship education which I suspect that those of us who are present here today more or less share, is that their function is associated with the distortion of a fundamental element of citizenship and democracy: citizens' rights and particularly the young citizens' right to education. One of the most widespread misunderstanding which is shared among students and teachers –at least in schools that I have visited, researched and taught in- is that schooling is compulsory. Every time I hear a teacher asking a student to behave, to listen, to do anything that a teacher demands I smile when thinking about the kind of debate to which the discussion could lead if the students decide to pick up the challenge. This will be inevitably a discussion about whether students choose or are forced to attend

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[1] Biesta, G. (2011) The ignorant citizen: Mouffe, Ranciere, and the subject of democratic education. *Studies in Philosophy of Education*, 30 (2) 141-153 (p. 150)

school and consequently whether the teachers are there to serve students' right to education or to exercise the responsibility to guard them within the confines of the institution. I smile also every time I have this discussion with my students who are trainee or in service teachers. I smile but it is not a laughing matter that they do not hesitate to agree with the statement that 'all school-age (whatever this age may be for each country) students have to attend a school'. Yet we all know that education is one of the fundamental rights that children should enjoy. If there is an obligation is the obligation of the parents and more generally of the community to fulfil this right. It is the right of the students to be at school, it is the obligation of the parents to send them to school if they have no other means to educate them and it is the responsibility of teachers to educate them. Yet how appropriately does the image of students attending schools in England – and in many other countries – represent the exercise of a right?

How can we trust then these institutional settings to educate young citizens in democracy when they fail so easily to act in accordance to the rights of those who are to receive this education?

US and Them

So far I outlined my concerns about the deficit model of citizenship education with regard to the role of the teacher and the appropriateness of the school as provider of such education.

My third point relates to the observation made by Osgood et al that citizenship education is called to promote "'remedial' approaches […] misrepresented as 'active democracy', in which services are trying to be 'universal' (thus avoiding stigma) but are simultaneously 'targeted' (to make sure those who need 'fixing' or improving are reached) (Osgood et al, 2013: 26)[2].

This last point has been deliberated at length and depth among our focus group and we have tried to present our deliberations in the book that our group has published and is described in the title: *Us and Them*. **Us**, the enlightened, **Them**, those in need of our education. Particularly in relation to those whom we call *Hard to Reach learners* I think that we tend to forget that political practices are inevitable, that students do not come to us to teach them *to be* political but to explore with them *why they are* political – because they are already politically active themselves, whether consciously or not. What is our role is to assist them in the exploration of the political dimension of their practices and to allow them to discover the implications and effectiveness of these practices in bringing change, in improving the quality of life and in serving their endeavours – but without necessarily US *judging* THEM.

I will no spoil your reading of the book by revealing the plot, what I would only like to say is that this is in my view where the current model of citizenship education fails to support the development of an inclusive democracy. Democracy is not of course inherently inclusive, quite the contrary in fact, and efforts for inclusion to be achieved are undoubtedly necessary. However, it is quite paradoxical that our efforts to support inclusion often start with the re-education of the excluded rather than with the exploration of the reasons that there are

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[2] Osgood, Jayne, Deb Albon, Kim Allen and Sumi Hollingsworth (2013) Engaging 'Hard-to-Reach' Parents in Early Years Music-Making. London: The National Foundation for Youth Music

closed doors behind which there are those who consider themselves as being 'included'. Politically, this targeting of the excluded generates further distance and it also generates anger and fear. It also generates feelings of wrongdoing, of political incorrectness among those who are targeted. Until of course these targeted groups find a way to voice their opinion. And usually they use this opportunity to express their anger, and for this reason is a voice that fills us with pessimism and fear. Perhaps these voices stay silent during opinion polls but they are certainly expressed during referenda and elections. I think that we heard such voices a couple of days ago together with the announcement of the results of the US elections. The Hard to Reach spoke. And **We** did not like what **they** said.

Rethinking Citizenship education

Conveniently I left no much time to discuss what exactly I am suggesting here. I will be as vague as possible hoping that your questions will help me formulate my ideas.

I think that the main point is that if there is a role for citizenship education for marginalised, for hard to reach and also for mainstream and easy to reach citizens alike: this is an education that actively engages everyone in an exploration and challenge of the structures and processes that lead to marginalisation and to questioning of anything that disengages citizens from the processes in which power resides, including disappointment itself.

It is a politically active citizenship education or, as the term *citizenship* has been always a bit confusing to me, I would say that it is a *political* education in the original sense of the word – the sense which allows the term to encompass every aspect of citizens' life and actions.

For this reason it is an education that is not afraid to discuss, explore, engage with ideologies but embraces them and facilitates young citizens' familiarisation with them. Ideologies are models of explanations of social phenomena and frameworks for the development of methods for change and as such should be embraced by such education. As educators we should use ideologies to explain social situations, we should hand them to citizens to use them as tools to understand and explain their personal circumstances.

In his keynote in this conference a few years ago Benjamin Barber had pointed out that we have misunderstood the service that citizenship education has to offer and that "young people do not live in ignorance but in disappointment"[i]. The rethinking of citizenship education that I am suggesting here is one that leads to an education that is rooted in realism, in the systematic exploration of social conditions encouraging at the same time participants not to lose sight of the fact that change *can* happen. In fact I would like to suggest that striking the Gramscian balance between realistic view of the word and the choice – and motivation – to change the order of this world for the development of more just societies is as close as we can get to the ideal model of citizenship education –if the concept of 'ideal citizenship' has any meaning.

Please allow me to doubt about the capacity of schools to embrace and promote such education. I may agree with Mayo who points out that there are always spaces of freedom in all institutions and that we can exploit these spaces in order to promote a different educational experience for the young citizens but one has to see the value in doing so.

What I think that we can more realistically expect from schools is at least not to prevent such educational experiences to be offered by those who can offer them – and to make some space for those who could support it to access young citizens and work **with** them (and not **at** them).

What we want schools to be able to do is to allow those who can (not because they are particularly brave but because they sit outside the power remit of the school) to enter and to use some of students' time to approach them as citizens, as political beings with the need to explore, understand and act.

The inclusion that we want to achieve might come by bringing practices together, by highlighting the overlapping spaces of political actions of groups, by exploring the methods that various groups can and do influence each other. I think that what we should be calling for is not education for inclusion but education for *empowerment* – and then face the inconveniences of the actions of empowered citizens. As Biesta points out, education is a beautiful risk that we should be prepared to take and so is democracy.

I think that we accept these risks not by agreeing on offering meaningful democratic citizenship education but we have already accepted them by agreeing to live in democracy. I think that it is important to accept the full range of responsibilities that our choice has generated – and education in uncertainty is well within this range.

If there is any relevance between the multiple crises that we currently experience and citizenship education is that they highlight the dysfunctional expectations that we have from such form of education. We use citizenship education to target and to divide and then we ask for the same form of education to unite. We use citizenship education to support free will but we hold very particular expectations with regard to the choices that citizens will freely make. I think that our responsibilities as citizenship educators include the acceptance of the risks that free citizens make. Our responsibility is to offer citizenship education because our young citizens have the right to it. Our responsibility as citizens is to debate with the citizens that we educate, to test ideas and ideologies and maintain our optimism that the outcome of this process will allow new generations of citizens to enjoy the same right.

One of my favourite Greek sayings suggests that whoever is Born Stupid, Dies surprised. I think that this last years have brought quite a few surprises and we, as intelligent beings and responsible educators cannot afford to ignore our responsibilities.

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[i] Barber, Benjamin (2011) Transnationalisation and Post Democratic Structures: What does it mean for Citizens' Participation and Civil Society in Europe? Keynote address at the NECE European Conference Closing the empowerment gap through citizenship education How to address educationally disadvantaged groups, 17 – 19 November 2011 Warsaw, Poland On line at www.bpb.de/.../NECE_KeynoteSpeech_ BenjaminBarber_20120418.pd (accessed 1 August 2016)