Democratic Practices at School. Theoretical and Research Ascertainments

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Abstract—The modern democratic society must ensure the realization of the ideal democracy through the education of the youth with knowledge-skills and critical thinking and finally through the education of democratic citizens. A democratic citizen is defined as a citizen who is personally responsible, participatory, and oriented towards social justice and has the will to work for the realization of democratic ideals. The key issues the study focuses on are: What school practices contribute to the preparation of democratic citizens? What is meant by the open / positive climate of the classroom and how is it related to the strengthening of citizenship according to research data? The main purpose of the study is to reflect and raise awareness about the democratic conditions we must ensure in schools, to avoid the erosion of institutions and the rejection or loose commitment to the rules of democracy.

Index Terms—democracy, democratic practices and school, open / positive school climate, research ascertainments

I. DEMOCRATIC EDUCATION AND SCHOOL CLIMATE

In a first analysis of the term democratic education refers to a democratic educational environment that provides learning opportunities to all students and the opportunity to develop their skills and cultivate further skills. Students in school experience various conditions, which with proper management can contribute to the acquisition of democratic experiences (Edelstein, 2007: 9 et seq.). This first means providing opportunities to acquire knowledge and cultivate skills (both through teaching and in an interdisciplinary - interdisciplinary context), to develop skills for democratic action (how to work together, negotiate, resolve conflicts, etc..) and opportunities to build and develop democratic values, orientations, and attitudes. In these ways students develop the critical ability to evaluate and make decisions on important issues of social life.

Democracy is the only condition that ensures that all students could participate actively in political and social life (Knowles & McCafferty-Wright, 2015: 12). And the promotion of democracy is a goal that the school must achieve. Knowledge is a necessary but not sufficient component of democratic education. In addition, the formation of an appropriate condition is necessary, which necessarily means a positive, open atmosphere in the classroom, for students to cultivate skills, such as understanding complex issues and different points of view and supporting their positions, skills necessary for political and social participation.

In the context of democratic education, school culture

includes processes of participation, dialogue, and joint decision-making in school institutions, such as class councils (Edelstein, 2015: 20; Kiper 1997; Friedrichs 2004; 2009) or extracurricular committees or school partnership and student representation (political forums, community projects, etc.). Research shows that such conditions in the school environment enable children to develop social, moral, and democratic skills and values and to form attitudes that enable them to argue and react to any critical situation dangerous to democracy. The school as a place where children gain experiences and practice, to acquire the social and political identity that they will develop as members of the wider social context has an essential responsibility for the formation of the democratic citizen (Edelstein, 2015: 218). Therefore, the role of education policy is considered essential for the promotion of democracy.

Education policy that promotes democracy is determined by key guiding values that ensure human rights, social inclusion, and development (Edelstein, 2015: 19). It is an educational policy that promotes in practice a school climate and a school culture that allows the development of skills and the cultivation of skills, so that children are educated to become good active citizens, capable and valuable members of a society (Homana, Barber, Torney-Purta, 2006). Research shows that the more opportunities children are given to respond as citizens, the more they develop analytical and critical thinking (Billig, Root & Jesse, 2005; Kahne et al. 2000, et al.).

The *school climate* is shaped by the characteristics of the wider community, public policies (government, community, and school), school history, leadership characteristics, teaching staff and students themselves. Achieving a positive school climate that promotes engagement with social and political issues requires the recognition of its importance and the conscious commitment of all involved, in terms of not only achieving academic progress but also the state development of students. The term "school culture" is broader and includes not only the values, traditions, beliefs and expectations of members of the school community but also the recognition of these characteristics as essential elements of the school climate, so that its function can be understood. political system and society (Homana, Barber & Torney-Purta, 2005: 2-3).

The conditions that outline and define the positive school climate for the development of responsible and capable citizens in the context of an effective social education are defined by Homana, Barber & Torney – Purta (2006: 4 et

seq.), as follows:

- 1) All members of the school community recognize that the purpose of education is also political
- 2) The child at school not only acquires knowledge but also develops skills (participation, cooperation, dialogue, communication) etc.
- 3) All those involved in school learning work together to approach and understand the knowledge conveyed to the public. With the support of teachers all problems are creatively solved
- 4) Interactions between students and between students-teachers are formed based on mutual trust and acceptance of the different
- 5) Students participate in the planning of school assignments and their cooperation is based on dialogue in a democratic environment
- 6) Connecting the school with the wider community (social commitment and interaction for effective social education) for students to develop a sense of belonging to the team, the school community, and a commitment to learning, support and interaction with the wider community.

Research on democratic practices in schools to date has highlighted the effectiveness of a positive open climate. The positive open classroom environment enables students to participate in the exchange of views, while encouraging them to express themselves on current political and social issues and discuss their different views (Hess & Avery, 2008; Schulz et al., 2010; Castro & Knowles, 2017). Every discussion in the classroom has only positive results (Levy, 2013 et al.). In addition, several studies have found that an open climate in the classroom has a positive effect on the development of citizenship, as well as increasing levels of political commitment. Any substantive and critical discussion in the classroom on current social and political issues of a democratic society, such as human rights, peaceful coexistence, etc. increases state knowledge and promotes individual participation in politics (Nikolaou, 2018: 89 et seq.; Zhang et al., 2012; Campbell, 2008; Knowles & McCafferty-Wright, 2015).

According to the research of Knowles & McCafferty-Wright (2015: 11 et seq.) In data of ICCS (3rd International Research on Citizen Education) an open climate classroom creates the right conditions for the promotion of useful knowledge and is effective in the future participation of students in political life. The open climate in the classroom contributes positively to both the orientation of the individual and the participation of the citizen. In fact, the transmission of political knowledge to students by teachers through activities (discussions, opinion analysis, etc.) is considered more essential than focusing on curricula aimed at acquiring theoretical political knowledge by students. In this regard, it is worth noting the study of Finkel & Ernst (2005) on the effects of the "Democracy for All" program in South Africa on high school students. Based on this program, it was found that passive teaching and transmission of political content has a significant impact on the political knowledge acquired by students but has no effect on political attitudes, participatory skills, trust in institutions, awareness of civic duty and obligations arising from citizenship. In particular, a program

aimed at knowledge of citizenship can benefit students, while a program that achieves student political effectiveness can promote their political commitment to a greater extent.

In conclusion, because the research records as very important the open and positive atmosphere in the classroom, so that students can participate in discussions, express and discuss different views, argue, highlight current social and political issues and feel comfortable in school environment, it becomes clear that educational policy aimed at shaping active democratic citizens promotes processes of determining the particular characteristics of the open school climate (Hess & Avery, 2008; Torney-Purta et al. 2001; Schulz et al. 2010).

The open climate of the classroom also contributes positively to the building of knowledge through the search and evaluation of sources for conducting dialogue and building arguments. It also contributes positively to the development of communication skills and political effectiveness, while at the same time achieving human rights education (Levy, 2011; Torney-Purta & Barber, 2004, 2011).

II. DETECTING KEY ELEMENTS OF STUDIES FOR THE EDUCATION OF DEMOCRATIC CITIZENSHIP

The challenges facing education today with the economic and social problems more important than the crisis, immigration, and the consequences of the growing lack of trust in European countries and the emergence of conditions that threaten freedom, peace, social cohesion, and democracy, make it necessary to promote fundamental human values by creating high expectations for citizenship (Eurydice Brief: Citizenship Education at School in Europe - 2017: 3-5). "In democratic societies, citizenship education supports students to become active, informed and responsible citizens, willing and able to assume their own responsibilities and those assigned to them within the societies in which they live in a national, European and international" (Eurydice Brief: Citizenship Education at School in Europe - 2017: 3).

Citizenship is cultivated and practiced in school in lessons and practices with the main purpose of supporting children in understanding their role as citizens and creating commitment to their role on a practical level. The ultimate goal is to develop a critical reflection on their rights, obligations and responsibilities as citizens.

Studies (Castro, Knowles, 2017) that explore citizenship focus their interest on the percentage of political participation from generation to generation with the assessment of voting as a form of political participation and on the other hand examine how it affects the school climate. students' social and political commitment, community involvement as adults, and political effectiveness (Bennet, Wells & Rank 2009; Torney-Purta, 2002). Furthermore, research has shown that political education programs contribute significantly to the political development of young people and the formation of citizenship (Galston 2001).

In relation to the need to shape the democratic citizenship and the creation of appropriate conditions in school that will cause the political and social commitment of young people, it is appropriate to focus on cognitive objects that promote the cultivation of values (empathy, solidarity, intercultural respect, transnationalism), democratic processes and participatory practices. And it is the social and political education courses that contribute to supporting democratic

attitudes and attitudes and positively reinforce the factors of political effectiveness, political participation, and democratic orientation of students. More specifically, Social and Political Education focuses on discussions, dialogue with respect for different views on the political system, it is ideologically open and not directed. Discussing controversial issues is very important because it enhances students' knowledge and interest in political and social issues, especially when children do not discuss political issues with their families. In this way, students form their own opinion on issues arising from the discussion, study and reflection that each time the dialogue that takes place in the classroom raises (Levine & Kawashima-Ginsberg, 2015).

Social and Political Education, therefore, includes not only teaching and learning regarding the state purpose of education but also the practical-experiential experience that students gain by participating in activities (in-school and out-of-school) that prepare them for their role as citizens in adulthood, as members of their social group. All stakeholders (teachers, principals, school staff) must work together harmoniously to achieve this goal (European Commission / EACEA / Eurydice, 2017).

According to the Eurydice information network, Social and Political Education aims at educating active, informed and responsible citizens. It therefore supports students through various processes to develop knowledge, skills, cultivate skills and adopt attitudes regarding effective and constructive interaction, critical thinking, responsible, democratic social behavior (European Commission / EACEA / Eurydice 2017). The literature, however, presupposes democracy as a framework for citizen education (Gutmann & Thompson 2004; Nussbaum, 2006).

And democracy as a way of life is based on values such as active participation in social events, continuous cooperation with other members of the social fabric, acceptance of pluralism and cultural relativism, justice, dialogue, and the peaceful resolution of conflicts arising (Nussbaum, 2006).

Therefore, with Social and Political Education we aim not only at knowledge but also at the development of sensitized citizens, at the ability to form relationships between different elements in a society that is complex in terms of both the system of government and the heterogeneity of population and cultures Carretero, Haste & Bermudez, 2016: 300; Sinclair et al. 2008).

Since the 2000s, efforts and actions have been taken throughout Europe to teach students the goals of democratic education (Beutel, Fauser, 2007, 2009, 2011; Edelstein, Fausel, 2001; al.). The focus was on acquiring skills from all members of the school community for responsible action in civil society (Edelstein, 2015). Within the school, democratic practices that most likely ensure the formation of an active democratic citizen include: a) the existence of a student council, b) participation and involvement in the school environment, c) the functioning of the school community with democratic rules d) the Project for learning through engagement (interdisciplinary approach) e) mediation and constructive conflict resolution f) dialogue and discussion to clarify political issues and dilemmas (Edelstein, Frank & Sliwka, 2009).

Therefore, the conditions in the classroom and in the school in general must be formed as structures of

opportunities for experiencing democratic conditions. The active democratic citizen already experiences democracy from school as a way of life and as a value with the education he receives and with the possibility of developing skills and cultivating an active participating citizen (Dahl, 1999). A democratic school creates the right climate for the manifestation and defense of different views, the development of social trust, has the necessary structures (student council) that allow students to express their views, developing tolerance, openness, and leadership skills 2008; Berman 1997; Torney-Purta, 2002).

The study of the literature indicates that all the above are achieved (Evans, 2008), when the school teaches basic political knowledge, when children learn political skills and develop skills to participate in democracy, while preparing with a strong will to shape society accordingly. with their desires and actions "at their best". A democratic school must, therefore, a) offer opportunities for free expression of different views, b) have procedures of representative democracy e.g. student council and c) encourages students to take leadership positions and initiatives (Trafford, 2008).

This is how democratic citizens are formed, who according to Westheimer & Kahne (2004) are divided into three types: a) responsible citizens b) participatory citizens, c) citizens oriented towards social justice. All dimensions, of course, presuppose the appropriate education of young people in an environment of school climate and school culture that has developed in the wider context of a democratic state (Castro & Knowles, 2017). These conditions contribute to the development of social trust from an early age, which has been given special emphasis after research studies and findings (Flanagan et al., 2010), as well as to the increase of social knowledge and social responsibility (Knowles & McCafferty-Wright 2015; Castro & Knowles, 2017; Torney-Purta, 2002; Torney-Purta & Barber, 2004 et al.)

III. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it is found that a democratic school environment contributes to the development of students' statehood, when it encourages in the classroom cooperation, group responsibility and awareness of duty towards the whole (Pearce & Larson, 2006; Brewer & Gardner, 1996; Castro & Knowles, 2017 et al.). After all, as Biesta (2007) points out, democratic education and the development of democratic citizenship must begin very early in school, experientially initially, and with theoretical knowledge later and emerge through the political existence of students in the classroom. Here the decisive role of the teacher is evident.

Most studies exploring ways to enhance citizenship indicate the need for an open-democratic climate in the classroom and for the teacher to engage in democratic discussions of controversial issues in the classroom (Campbell 2008; Hess & McAvoy, 2014). Through these processes, democratic values are promoted, political knowledge and the possibility of social and political participation are increased (Knowles & McCafferty-Wright, 2015: 255-269). The school also has a political mission to play (Campaign, 2011; Carnegie, 2013, op. Cit. In: Levine & Kawashima-Ginsberg, 2015: 10). The school is not cut off from society but is an institution of society that changes and evolves according to social conditions. It is considered

appropriate for the school to be properly informed on current social and political issues, on the role of history, the rule of law and democracy, to discuss current local, national and international issues, and to conduct political education (Metz & Youniss, 2005; Hart et al., 2007), to take extracurricular activities aimed at involving young people or the school in the community (Smith, 1999; McFarland & Reuben, 2006), governance), to simulate democratic principles and procedures (Levine & Kawashima-Ginsberg, 2015: 10). All of these learning opportunities related to civic education increase students' commitment to their involvement as citizens (Levine, 2007; Kawashima-Ginsberg & Levine, 2014; Kahne & Sporte, 2008).

Because, then, democracies today are dying from within, suffering the erosion of institutions and not through military movements, through demagogues with directly anti-democratic tendencies who, however, rise to power through democratic means, through a growing populism (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018), education must protect democracy both as a value, as a preference given by internal consensus and to motivate us to act on our own initiative, to act democratically and as a practice cultivated in democratic environments that convey such experience. School should be such a living space. Modern conditions require convinced democrats who act democratically and cultivate democratic beliefs and values. The task of shaping active democratic citizens is undertaken through education, the ongoing processes in childhood and adolescence that shape our abilities and give meaning to our experiences. This is because every citizen must have a credible judgment and decision-making ability to play an active role in a democratic society.

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