

Citizenship Education in Higher Education as a Support for Democracy and Educational Quality

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The purpose of this essay is to support the need to address citizenship education as a transversal axis in the integral or holistic training of the professionals of today, contributing to human development for peaceful and democratic coexistence, promoting the construction of citizens with ethical values, respectful of the common good and the public sphere. The method used consisted of argumentative criticism based on documentary analysis, considering the approach to the problem (introduction), the development (arguments) and the conclusions that have been inferred. The results and conclusions were that the development of citizenship competencies should be addressed throughout the different curricular experiences or subjects of a given professional career, creating spaces for learning experiences with the purpose of forming integral professionals: probity, commitment to social reality, strengthening and consolidation of democracy, professionals capable of transcending technocratic pragmatism, interested in participating in politics with ethical solvency, capable of building social relations marked by respect for the individual, equality, a sense of justice and the common good.

Keywords: citizenship education, human development, democracy and integral education

INTRODUCTION

In recent years and decades, the subject of citizenship education has been addressed in the academic communities of the social, political and economic sciences and in the field of education, but it has also become of great interest to society in general. Lopez (n.d.) says that citizenship education has been a central theme in democratic societies of all times and that each model of democracy (republican, liberal or social) considers different elements for citizenship education, with the objective that all individuals assume their place in the society in which they live (p.2). In the same perspective, Gutierrez (2009) argued that “without citizenship education, democracy is not possible; without citizens, citizenship will not be possible either” (p.12).

From this perspective, society as a whole has great expectations in the performance of professionals in these times of great changes and global crisis, being considered bastions of democracy and protagonists of constant change. The challenges and difficulties that reality is presenting to higher education institutions are becoming greater every day. It requires them to face adverse situations in a proactive way, considering the future by planning and thinking strategically and holistically.

In this sense, controversies could be raised about the quality of higher education, through the following questions: is it the professional efficiency expressed in technocracy that gives higher education superior quality or, on the contrary, should the quality of higher education be manifested in professional efficiency, suitability, probity and civic commitment to the universal principles of the common good and justice? Unfortunately, in many cases neither suitability nor civic commitment is observed in the professionals of this era; on the contrary, cases in which they have succumbed to informality are frequently noted, evading the payment of taxes or criminal complaints or judicial processes which have led them to the deprivation of their freedom.

Held (2006), quoted by Gasca and Olvera (2011), argued that self-development is possible for everyone in a society that allows participation in its development and in the solution of social problems, and fosters a critical citizenship, capable of taking a continuous interest in the process of government. In this perspective, they maintain that university or non-university higher education institutions should become agents of transformation and consolidation of the democratic model, assuming the challenge of building citizens of integrity and interested in participating as a response to the needs of the social environment. This position implies participating in collective decisions.

Consequently, this essay will attempt to answer the following questions: Why and for what purpose should citizenship education be addressed in higher education? Who is a citizen? When does a human being become a citizen? What are the requirements to be a true citizen? What is the relevance of citizenship education in the development of communities and the maintenance of democracy? In this sense, it will be argued that only through citizenship education and transversality in the curriculum of higher education, will it be possible to articulate professional training with the family and society as a whole.

DEVELOPMENT

Iriarte and Ferrazzino (2013) proposed in their research that the higher education systems of Argentina, Chile, Venezuela, Uruguay, Peru, Bolivia and Brazil have promoted in recent decades professional training to meet the demands of the labor market and the specific development of skills and knowledge of each discipline, under the mercantile business logic. However, they discovered and considered that the issue of citizenship education is of vital importance and considered that the autonomous development of knowledge, social and ethical responsibility is a fundamental requirement in the professionals of this era. In this sense, the research contributed to understand how the construction and exercise of a citizenship education, understood as belonging to a community, would contribute to diminish in part the social fragmentation and inequalities in the face of the questioned idea of the global economy.

Gasca and Olvera (2011) in their research argued that universities have a role as agents of change and consolidation of democracy, assuming the challenge of building citizens of integrity, interested in the needs of the physical and social environment, in collective decision making, who conceive themselves as participating citizens and not merely as voters with a view to satisfying their own interests. They emphasized the priority role of university social responsibility being capable of promoting the social management of knowledge for all social actors, with the aim of building an informed, responsible and participatory citizenship, capable of confronting injustice, unsustainability, violence and corruption.

Therefore, considering the aforementioned research and following the guidelines of Gutiérrez (2009, p.110) who argues that democracy requires, for its strengthening and consolidation, citizens capable of living their citizenship, democracy requires “democratic”, active, social, political, critical and participatory citizens. These citizens are not born, they are made, they are formed (p.110). Certainly, the foundations laid out in basic education are insufficient. Structuring citizenship education in the perspective of achieving this

objective requires an articulated continuity between basic education and higher education at the university level.

Savater (2017) in a recent interview to *Voz Populi* raised a thesis that reinforces the approaches of this essay “Education should form citizens, not employees”. That is, education should not be limited to train civil servants, technically prepared professionals but also people with commitment to institutionality, democracy and respect for the common good. “Education should not only aim to train people with work skills, but also people capable of understanding society. Educating to form citizens also means forming rulers. All citizens are rulers, even if they delegate the power to govern to their representatives. For this, it is necessary to create a society capable of understanding the other, of persuading and being persuaded, of having an attitude in which arguments are understood and presented”. (par.11).

Currently, in the context of the values of a consumerist, individualistic and relativistic society, the possibilities of developing citizenship competencies that allow greater participation of university students or professionals in public life to exercise their rights and duties responsibly are scarce. Currently, universities have been losing this important intentionality and their curricular models tend to be more technocratic designs than globalizing humanistic designs. In many cases, humanities subjects are excluded and the topic of citizenship education has been limited to its sporadic expression in certain civic events. In higher education institutions, the curricular intentionality of developing citizenship competencies for a full exercise of rights and responsibilities and for active participation in the public space has been lost. According to Leon (2001) “the consequences of this situation are innumerable and serious, and affect both personal and institutional development as well as national development. A country without conscious, active and committed citizens has no future.” (p. 12).

Consequently, citizenship education should be considered as a transversal axis in higher education. Transversality, according to Botero (n.d.), has become an articulating instrument that makes it possible to interrelate the educational sector with the family and society. The transversal axes are globalizing instruments of an interdisciplinary nature that cover the entire curriculum and in particular all areas of knowledge, disciplines and subjects in order to create favorable conditions to provide students with greater training in social, environmental and health aspects. (p.1)

Therefore, citizenship education should not be approached in the higher education curriculum as a specific subject, in which topics are developed and at the end of which students are supposed to have developed certain competencies with which they could be called democratic citizens. From the perspective of citizenship education as a transversal axis of the university curriculum, it is argued that citizenship competencies should be developed in all professional careers and in all curricular experiences or subjects.

The treatment comprises, according to León (2005) from a multidimensional perspective: “Political dimension: It is that dimension that refers to the power relations that we build at personal, interrelational, institutional and symbolic levels. Its importance is central in the development of citizenship because it defines the meaning of coexistence and participation in public spaces” (p.25). From this dimension, citizenship education should be built in a climate of respect for differences: race, sex, ethnicity, disability, sexual orientation, religion, social class, etc., promoting learning-teaching actions based on communication, trust, cooperation, participation, openness, equality and freedom. In higher education institutions there is a hierarchical structure of powers, which must be elected from time to time by the student community, according to the establishment of their statutes and regulations. In short, this dimension should promote shared and participatory power, with a view to the common good of organizations and society as a whole.

Socio-affective dimension: The aspects of identity and self-esteem are of tremendous importance in people’s lives. “Citizens must be able to feel themselves as persons, capable of acting with autonomy and with the capacity to manage their fears. This dimension seeks to empower students emotionally, providing them with conceptual and practical tools that help them face social and public life, developing social skills that improve their ability to interact and build confidence and security, in relation to other people” (p. 25-26). Learning to live together is a daily task, which implies lifelong learning. Higher education must promote the development of social skills or soft skills: the ability to work in a team, tolerance, capacity for dialogue, negotiation skills and mutual agreements. The learning and teaching methodology applied in the

different curricular experiences should tend to strengthen and generate a culture of authentic “learning to live together”.

Ethical dimension: It implies or presupposes the development of moral reasoning and that this will be evidenced in the concrete actions of people in the perspective of responsibility, justice and constant search for the common good, transcending any individualism or egocentrism. In this regard, Leon (2005) stated that “a civic ethic is an ethic that takes responsibility for other citizens. It is an ethic of recognition, responsibility and care. It is learning to take care of the interests of each and every person” (p.26). The ethical dimension presupposes the care and defense of life in its various manifestations; it implies developing a cognitive and mental structure to generate a culture of life and defense of human rights.

Intellectual dimension: Citizenship education implies developing increasingly higher levels of moral judgment, which will manifest itself in civic thinking, i.e., thinking about public affairs, the issues that involve all people in a physical and social environment. According to Leon (2005) “it implies learning to mobilize our cognitive abilities with autonomy to develop creativity and criticality, in order to guarantee a political participation of contribution and build a truly democratic culture” (p.27). Societies demand critical citizens with the capacity to think for themselves for the benefit of the common good, and in this perspective, professionals must articulate the accumulation of knowledge for the service and well-being of all.

In short, the professional graduate of a university or non-university study center, who has been formed, needs to learn to think, discuss and negotiate with his peers, but not as a pose or sporadic skill, but as a disposition to change for constant improvement in social coexistence and problem solving, always with a view to achieving the common good.

CONCLUSION

For several decades, higher education institutions in Europe and Latin America have ensured the training of their students in professional competencies for insertion or incorporation into a job, under the technocratic mercantile logic, leaving aside civic training, social responsibility, and ethics. Citizenship education as a transversal axis in the curriculum of higher education will tend to generate awareness in the construction of social citizenship inclined more to the reduction of social inequalities and above all to the conservation and defense of ecosystems, the care and defense of the environment, and the planet itself. As a platform of higher education, the learning of civics has the directionality of building a sense of belonging to the political community of which we are part; a sense of belonging that has to do with a sense of responsibility and identification with the public affairs of the country, which may include problems, needs, dreams or aspirations, but that consider the interests of all and for this it requires developing a social, democratic, ethical and political thinking.

That demands to be treated in the different curricular experiences of university education, influencing the development of those very experiences, in the classrooms, generating spaces of citizen exercise in a serious and responsible way, such as the election of delegates, the care of “public” spaces in the university campus itself, such as the care of gardens, avoiding environmental pollution and actively participating in the democratic life of the country by various means, such as radio, television and social networks.

An integral or holistic look at higher education is a necessity, and it has been so since the beginning. We have become aware that university or non-university education should be articulated with basic education, that the human being is formed throughout life and that civic competencies are skills that presuppose other capacities such as moral reasoning, the development of identity and the development of social skills in the perspective of the search for the common good or concern for the public, an aspect that has been diminished in a highly materialistic, hedonistic and individualistic society.

For human beings, the desire to live in harmony and in a just society where the rights of all are respected is a dream and a constant task. Undoubtedly, times have changed. Since the French Revolution, authoritarianisms have disappeared in many cases and in the course of time, new and more dignified forms of coexistence have been erected and consolidated in many nations. In these times, democracy through its

political principles guarantees the main rights of the individual person, such as freedom and the right to life, and demands the active participation of all for its permanence and consolidation.

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