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Civic education: Case study of Poland. Changes and developments

Edukacja obywatelska: studium przypadku Polski
Zmiany i rozwój

Abstrakt: W artykule omówiono współczesną koncepcję edukacji obywatelskiej oraz jej historię, która sięga czasów starożytnych. Edukacja obywatelska jest postrzegana jako proces kształcenia jednostek na temat ich praw i obowiązków jako członków społeczeństwa oraz przygotowania ich do uczestnictwa w procesie demokratycznym. Jednym z kluczowych celów edukacji obywatelskiej jest promowanie aktywności obywatelskiej i zaangażowania w proces demokratyczny. W artykule podkreślono interdyscyplinarność edukacji obywatelskiej i jej związek z dobrze skonstruowanym systemem edukacyjnym, a także wskazano najważniejsze zagrożenia dla tego procesu wynikające z procesów dezinformacyjnych. Celem artykułu jest przybliżenie znaczenia i rozwoju edukacji obywatelskiej oraz analiza jej stanu w Polsce, z zaznaczeniem zmian, jakie zaszły na przestrzeni XXI wieku. W tym celu autorka postanowiła porównać różne raporty dotyczące zarówno stanu demokracji, jak i edukacji w Polsce. Ponadto autorka chciała podkreślić znaczenie tego, kto i jak edukuje społeczeństwo oraz jak dużą rolę odgrywa edukacja obywatelska w formalnym wychowaniu obywatelskim młodzieży. Takie idee zostały również przedstawione w rekomendacjach.

Słowa kluczowe: edukacja, społeczeństwo obywatelskie, historia, szkoła, demokracja, dezinformacja

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Abstract: This article discusses the modern concept of civic education and its history, which dates back to ancient times. Civic education is perceived as the process of educating individuals about their rights and responsibilities as members of a society and preparing them to participate in the democratic process. One of the key objectives of civic education is to promote active citizenship and engagement in the democratic process. The article highlights the interdisciplinary nature of civic education and its connection to a well-constructed educational system, as well as detects the biggest challenges for the process. The purpose of the article is to introduce the importance and development of civic education and to analyze its state in Poland, noting the changes that have taken place over the course of the 21st century. To accomplish this objective, the author decided to compare various reports on both the state of democracy and education in Poland. Furthermore, the author sought to underscore the significance of the individuals responsible for educating society, as well as the methodologies employed in civic education, which significantly influence the formal civic education of young individuals. Such ideas were also presented in the recommendations.

Keywords: education, civil society, history, school, democracy, disinformation

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Introduction

Civic education is a crucial aspect of every society as it plays a vital role in shaping citizens' understanding of their roles and responsibilities in the society, government, and politics. It involves educating individuals about their rights, freedoms, and duties as citizens, including how to participate in civic activities and democratic processes. Effective civic education can help to promote active citizenship, social cohesion, and democracy. As such, it is an essential component of modern education systems. Importantly, it needs to be stressed that the very idea of it dates back to ancient times.

Despite its importance, civic education has faced numerous challenges, especially in recent times. With the rise of fake news, disinformation, and declining trust in government institutions, the need for effective civic education has become even more critical. The challenges faced by civic education are not limited to information, but also funding and policy support. In many cases, civic education is viewed as a secondary priority and often receives inadequate funding and policy support.

This article aims to explore the current state of civic education, with a focus on Poland. It describes the concept and meaning of civic education, examines the challenges, including mismatch with regard to the priorities and policy support, as well as the role of civic education in promoting active citizenship, social cohesion, and democracy. It also discusses best practices and recommendations for improving civic education programs. The article aims to inform policymakers, educators, and stakeholders in civic education about the need for adequate support and funding for effective civic education programs. Ultimately, this article hopes to contribute to the improvement of civic education programs and promote active citizenship, social cohesion, and democracy.

Goal of the Paper

This paper aims to explore and analyze the contemporary landscape of civic education in Poland, tracing its historical roots and emphasizing its evolution in the 21st century. The overarching goal is to shed light on

the significance of civic education in shaping active citizenship and democratic engagement. By examining reports on the state of democracy and education in Poland, the paper seeks to identify trends, changes, and challenges within the civic education framework. Furthermore, the paper aims to underscore the interdisciplinary nature of civic education and its integral connection to a well-constructed educational system. The primary objective is to provide a comprehensive understanding of the importance of civic education in Poland, considering the dynamic socio-political context, and to offer insights that can inform educational policies and practices.

To achieve the outlined goals, this research employs a comparative analysis of various reports on democracy and education in Poland. By examining multiple sources, the study aims to triangulate information, providing a more robust and nuanced perspective on the state of civic education. This approach allows for the identification of patterns, trends, and changes over the course of the 21st century.

How to define civic education?

The modern concept of civic education has been reshaping for centuries. It can be perceived as the process of educating individuals about their rights and responsibilities as members of a society and preparing them to participate in the democratic process. It encompasses a range of topics, including history, government, politics, and current events. As Westheimer and Kahne (2004) note, "Civic education refers to learning about citizenship, democracy, and society; it encompasses the acquisition of knowledge, skills, and values necessary to participate in democratic decision-making and governance". One of the key objectives of civic education is to promote active citizenship and engagement in the democratic process. Hence, it is designed to empower one to be able to decide and actively shape constructively the future of the society or community one belongs to (Barber, 1998).

Before getting to the descriptive part of the paper and focusing on the state of civic education, there is a need to focus on its history.

The roots and developments

The discussions on civic education have roots back in the ancient times. The concept has been rethought by different scholars and philosophers and is still currently being shaped according to a system in which it is implemented. According to ancient Greek philosophy, the *polis* was a community that emphasized education, referred to as *paideia*. As Plato wrote in his *Laws*, “ask in general what great benefit the state derives from the training by which it educates its citizens, and the reply will be perfectly straightforward. The good education they have received will make them good men”. The goal of civic life was for citizens to develop themselves, not only through education but also through the internalization and practice of the community’s highest ethical ideals. As the Athenian remarks in the *Laws*, education should be designed to *produce perfect citizens* who know how to rule and be ruled. This required training in various fields, such as the arts, philosophy, sports, and warfare, as well as enculturation in the city’s customs and participation in its religious, social, political, and professional activities. The development of one’s moral character was also essential, and a strong sense of duty to the city was crucial. As Aristotle wrote in his *Politics*, “the end of the state is the good life, and these are the same for the individual and the state”. The concept of *arete*, or excellence, was closely intertwined with *paideia*. Together, they formed a process of self-development that was vital to civic development. As the Athenian remarks in the *Laws*, “the aim of the whole educational system is to produce citizens who have a sense of justice, who know how to rule and be ruled, and who have the virtues necessary to maintain the state”. In essence, the practice of democratic politics in Athens was not only a means of generating good policies for the city but also a curriculum for the intellectual, moral, and civic education of its citizens. The aim was to produce virtuous and excellent citizens who would benefit the state. As Pericles famously stated in his *Funeral Oration*, “We cultivate refinement without extravagance and knowledge without effeminacy; wealth we employ more for use than for show” (Thucydides, 431 BC).

Throughout history, the concept and implementation of the educational process has been developing. Ancient and medieval thinkers postulated that good

governance and good citizenship were intertwined, as a polity would crumble without virtuous support from its citizens. Aristotle held that a just and strong city-state required virtuous individuals, who could only exercise political virtues in a just society (MacIntyre, 2014). This viewpoint, now known as “civic republicanism”, has been expanded by authors such as Wolin (1989), Barber (1992), and Arendt (1958).

Classical liberal thinkers, on the other hand, saw potential drawbacks to making good governance dependent on widespread civic virtue. Firstly, any demanding and universal system of moral education would be incompatible with individual freedom. Secondly, states had a poor track record of instilling moral virtue in rulers or subjects (MacIntyre, 1984). Thomas Hobbes, for example, believed that the government should be designed correctly to prevent political disaster, rather than attempting to improve civic virtue, due to his pessimistic view of human nature (Hobbes, 1651).

While some classical liberal thinkers favored some degree of civic education and virtue, they also proposed limitations on the state and a strong private sphere to reduce dependence on civic virtue (MacIntyre, 1984). For example, John Locke argued that a gentleman’s “proper calling is the service of his country, and so is most properly concerned in moral and political knowledge” (Locke, 1693). Moreover, some of them focused directly on the subject of it. Rousseau believed that civic education was necessary to teach citizens to prioritize the common good over individual self-interest. He argued that when citizens asked themselves what was best for all, and answered accordingly, they were following the general will, which was the only legitimate foundation for laws and the only expression of moral freedom. However, he was ambivalent about whether individuals could overcome social corruption as society’s focus on private property led to inequality, social comparisons, and potentially negative emotions. Rousseau believed that exercising moral and political freedom to will for the general will was the act of a good person, and its exercise in the assembly was the act of a good citizen. Going further, for S. Mill, participation in representative government, or democracy, has both educational benefits for participants and positive political outcomes. He suggested that citizens should participate, even if elected or appointed officials can perform better, as a means of

mental education, strengthening their active faculties, exercising their judgment, and familiarizing themselves with the subjects they deal with. Jury trials, free and popular local and municipal institutions, and the conduct of industrial and philanthropic enterprises by voluntary associations are some examples of this principle. According to Mill, political participation is a form of civic education that is beneficial for individuals and citizens.

The role and place of civic education

It is therefore visible that civic education is undoubtedly connected to the process of education itself. It is not only about, as it may be wrongly perceived, sharing values and good practices, but it is strongly emphasizing the importance of a well-constructed educational system. Furthermore, it is interwoven with history, knowledge about society, law, psychology and a wide range of humanistic sciences. It can be, consequently, a deeply interdisciplinary concept that is implemented into reality by a wide range of educational tools used by various institutions, namely non-governmental and governmental international and state organizations, national institutions, as well as private stakeholders and companies.

In regard to that matter, who and how educates the society is of utmost importance. As Galston (2001) argues, civic education plays a major role of formal civic education in the political socialization of young people:

Although citizens are made rather than born, it does not follow that civic education is the key formative mechanism. To begin with, all education is civic education in the sense that individuals' level of general educational attainment significantly affects their level of political knowledge as well as the quantity and character of their political participation. In addition, noneducational institutions and processes – families, ethnic groups, voluntary associations, and concrete political events, among others – are crucial influences on civic formation. Indeed, the conventional wisdom for the past three decades has been that formal civic education plays an insignificant role in the overall process of civic formation. It is only in the past few years that the pendulum has begun to swing back.

This resonates with the link between educated civil society and democracy. This political system even etymologically (*demos* – people, society; *kratos* – rule) implies that there has to be an actively engaged society that is to act and decide. As revealed by Hess and McAvoy (2015) “Civic education is often viewed as an essential ingredient for sustaining democratic societies, improving public understanding of and support for democratic institutions, and fostering responsible and effective citizenship”. In addition to promoting civic knowledge and engagement, civic education aims to foster the development of certain values and dispositions that are essential for effective participation in a democracy. “Civic education should also help develop citizens who are committed to democratic values, such as respect for the rule of law, tolerance, and participation” (Hess and McAvoy, 2015).

For democracies, one of the crucial terms, that should be an inherent part of the civic education, is *co-operative problem solving* (CPS). This concept emerged as an effective approach to addressing conflicts, resulting from practical experience and drawing on participatory research, democratic decision-making, political decision-making, and inclusive management. CPS enables those involved in an issue to analyze and deal with a particular issue that affects everyone. The principles require that no one can exert pressure on others through the use of threats, coercion, bribery, or any other form of unauthorized influence. All concerned must be given sufficient time to express their thoughts and feelings, and no one should be able to monopolize the discussion. Insults or malicious disruption of the debate should be curbed. Once the initial emotions and views have been openly expressed, CPS involves considering the position of each related witness, expert, and those responsible for particular issues to clarify possible solutions. After listening to all the *pros and cons* according to the various options, participants have the opportunity to ask each other and the invited specialists any questions related to the issue under consideration to better understand how their common problem could be solved. The process prevents anyone from using their status, resources, or access to tools to manipulate opinions to intimidate or mislead others. Participants are encouraged to make possible suggestions and ask questions about issues formulated by others before considering how those

solutions that they believe are most promising should be ranked relative to others. Participants are prompted to give due consideration to what others might gain or have to lose before supporting any particular option. To make a compromise with others who have an equal say means to engage in a two-way exchange of opinions and make mutual concessions, which is the heart of authentic cooperation. Based on a list of the best options, participants use an agreed-upon selection process to choose which solution they support, agree on the responsibilities that each must undertake, and plan ahead to monitor how well the adopted solutions work in practice. Continuous feedback will support an assessment of whether the arrangements should remain in place or be adjusted (Tam, 2013).

Implementing the aforementioned idea in the educational process, results in shaping a more engaged and understanding civil society. Students in more democratic schools are happier and have a greater awareness over their own learning process and the phenomena in the surrounding world; participation allowed students to improve the art of communication and learner competence; the number of disruptive behaviors in the classroom decreased.

The relationship between awareness and action

While deliberating on the state of civic education, one has to ponder what is more important: the idea and its message or the active participation. There is no direct answer, as it is essential to recognize that between those two parts there is a cause-and-effect sequence, i.e., conscious action results from education and adopted values. Civic education aims to develop students' knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values to enable them to understand, participate in, and contribute to their communities and society as a whole. The National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) states that "civic education requires attention to knowledge, skills, and values in order to enable individuals to participate effectively in their communities and wider society". While action is a significant component of civic engagement, awareness plays a crucial role in building a foundation for meaningful action. There is the need to understand how democratic institutions work and what processes there are. Without a basic

understanding of how government works and the ways in which individuals can participate in decision-making processes, individuals may lack the confidence or ability to take meaningful action (Kahne & Westheimer, 2003).

Therefore, awareness is a crucial foundation upon which such action is built. As Niemi, Junn, & Sapiro notes, "civic education is not just about getting people to act; it is also about getting them to think, to learn, and to develop the skills, knowledge, and attitudes necessary for effective and meaningful civic participation" (1999). In regard to the schooling process, while we anticipate their activism, it is imperative to contemplate if any involvement in community affairs warrants commendation. For instance, performing tasks such as raking leaves in a city park may benefit the community, but students can gain more by participating in school council or the school's drama club (Koseła, 2013).

Disinformation – a rising challenge

While discussing the importance and implementation of civic education, it is important to highlight a relatively new threat for the successful civil educational process. Fake news and disinformation pose a significant challenge to civic security, as they can influence public opinion, create divisions within society, and erode trust in democratic institutions. Fake news refers to false information presented as if it were true, while disinformation is deliberately misleading information designed to influence public opinion. The spread of fake news and disinformation is made easier by the proliferation of social media platforms, which have become a primary source of news for many people. As a result, governments, civil society organizations, and media outlets are increasingly grappling with the challenge of combating fake news and disinformation to safeguard civic security.

Studies have highlighted the negative impact of fake news and disinformation on civic security. According to a report by the European Union, "disinformation can negatively impact public health, the democratic processes and institutions of the European Union and its Member States, and undermine the stability and security of societies" (European Union, 2021).

To address the challenge of fake news and disinformation, governments and civil society organizations

have implemented various strategies. For instance, some countries have passed laws to regulate social media platforms and require them to remove fake news and disinformation. In addition, media literacy programs have been developed to educate people on how to identify and verify information. According to a report by the Council of Europe, “media and information literacy (MIL) is a prerequisite for fostering active and informed citizens, promoting intercultural dialogue, and countering hate speech, fake news, and disinformation” (Council of Europe, 2018). Therefore, there is a need of a multi-faceted approach is needed, involving governments, civil society organizations, media outlets, and individuals. Efforts to combat fake news and disinformation must include the development of media literacy programs, the regulation of social media platforms, and the promotion of responsible journalism, among other measures. However, one have be careful assessing who is launching an *anti-disinformation* action. It is highly possible that when it is linked to a government that is not on the best terms with democracy or is to compete with the opposition for power, what may appear as a civic education program, it can be used for the very purpose of re-creating disinformation which will act in favor of the ones who rule (Homańska, 2022).

Civic education in Poland – the state of development

Before the year 2000, civic education in Poland was still in the process of development following the collapse of communism. According to a report by the Council of Europe (2000), “Poland has undergone a process of transformation over the last decade, which has brought with it a renewed interest in the development of citizenship education”. The report also notes that since the early 1990s, there have been significant changes in the school curricula and as it implemented the parts of civic education, it had a significant impact on rising awareness of the individuals in the educational process. Importantly, the report also highlights some challenges that existed at the time in implementing effective civic education in Poland. For instance, it notes that “the quality of civic education varies widely among schools, and there is a need for a more systematic approach to the subject” (Council

of Europe, 2000,). Additionally, there was a lack of resources and training for teachers, which could hinder the quality of education provided to students.

Throughout decades, there has been a significant change in the educational processes, which was correlated to the overall changes and development that Poland and Polish nations have undergone. This was brilliantly revealed by Żywczyk & Wochniak (2022):

The results of surveys on the civic competence of Poles are not optimistic, although they are improving from year to year. There is noticeable weakened trust in state institutions, as well as to each other. This has a direct impact on the level of social capital and Gross Domestic Product (GDP) that is lower than in Western European countries. For years there has been little interest in grassroots initiatives, participation in volunteer activities and newspaper readership, which ultimately translates into low voter turnout. The events surrounding Russia’s military assault on Ukraine, initiated February 2022, have contributed to the national activation of so many sectors of society. However, the topic of war is increasingly receding into the background week by week and is being replaced by other issues, such as inflation causing a significant increase in the cost of living. It has not been known for a long time that society unites the most and forms a common front line in case of threats, unforeseen situations and disasters. However, on a day-to-day basis, Poles show low interest in public affairs and involvement in political life¹.

Such descriptions reflect the current trends. A study by Karski and Klimkiewicz (2018) examined the implementation of civic education in Polish schools and found that while there has been progress in incorporating it into the curriculum, there are still gaps in terms of implementation and teacher training. The study notes that “although civic education has been recognized as a priority, there are still many challenges to overcome, such as the lack of professional development opportunities for teachers”.

Similarly, a report by the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (2018) highlights the need for greater emphasis on civic education in Poland, particularly with regard to promoting tolerance

¹ Author’s translation

and combating hate speech. Moreover, according to another report by the European Commission (2021), Poland has made progress in terms of civic education in recent years, particularly with regard to its incorporation into the national curriculum. The report states that “civic education is present in different forms and at different levels of education” in Poland, and that “it is addressed in many subjects, such as history, social studies, philosophy, ethics, religion, and Polish language”. However, the report also notes that there are challenges facing civic education in Poland, including a lack of resources and training for teachers, and the need to address issues of political polarization and intolerance.

Recommendations

In conclusion, civic education stands as an essential pillar for the effective functioning of democratic societies, particularly in the contemporary landscape marked by rapid globalization. Only by implementing a well-structured and well-thought educational strategy, states can give the society the right tools for actively shaping the future. In the Polish case, while there has been progress in incorporating civic education into the national curriculum, there are still challenges to be addressed, particularly with regard to teacher training and promoting tolerance and respect for diversity. Based on the current state of civic education in Poland, several recommendations can be proposed to improve the quality of education and foster civic engagement among students.

First and foremost, it is recommended that civic education should be given greater priority in the curriculum. As Bieda and Krokosz (2019) note, “civic education is still not given sufficient attention in the Polish education system”. Therefore, it is essential to allocate more time and resources to civic education to ensure that students receive a comprehensive education in this area.

Secondly, civic education should be designed to encourage active participation and engagement among students. As stated by Sułek (2017), “civic education should emphasize the importance of active participation in civic life”. Therefore, educators should incorporate various experiential learning methods, such as simulations, debates, and community projects, to

encourage students to apply their knowledge to real-world situations.

Thirdly, it is recommended that civic education should be delivered by well-trained and qualified teachers. As noted by Nowakowski and Olbrycht (2018), “teachers need to be equipped with the necessary knowledge, skills, and attitudes to deliver effective civic education”. Consequently, it is essential to provide professional development opportunities for teachers to improve their civic education pedagogy and to ensure that they are up-to-date with the latest trends and developments in this area.

Fourthly, it is recommended that civic education should be supported by appropriate resources and materials. As stated by Bieda and Krokosz (2019), “civic education requires a range of resources and materials, including textbooks, multimedia, and digital tools”. Moreover, it is suggested to implement the CPS approach as much as possible. That being the case, it is essential to invest in the development and dissemination of high-quality and up-to-date resources that are aligned with the curriculum and cater to the diverse learning needs of students.

Finally, it is recommended that civic education should be evaluated regularly to ensure its effectiveness. As noted by Sułek (2017), “civic education needs to be subject to regular evaluation to determine its impact on student learning and engagement”. Hence, it is essential to develop appropriate evaluation tools and metrics to assess the effectiveness of civic education programs and to use this feedback to continuously improve and refine civic education practices.

To sum up, by implementing these recommendations, it is possible to improve the quality and effectiveness of civic education in Poland and to foster greater civic engagement among students.

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