

Freedom of Expression and The Civil Participation of the Youth

Lindita Lutaj

PhD, University "Aleksander Moisiu" Durres, Education Faculty , Department of Pedagogy, Albania

Abstract

This study treats the importance of the education and the civil formation of the youth. The real possibilities that they have in expressing their free opinion and their active participation in civil actions. Relating to the experience of other countries and our country in this direction the results and possibilities for interventions need to be indicated. The goal of the study is to evaluate what is the level of the free expression of the opinion, what prevents the youth to express their opinion freely, how much support do they receive from other citizens in order to solve their problems, to assess how the university curricula help them in education and equipping them with active citizenship, if they believe that situation of the future will change and the areas and possibilities created for active participation in society. The study included 258 university students (Bachelor and Master Programs) of the Education Faculty in the university "Aleksander Moisiu" Durres. The students filled in a questionnaire with 21 closed questions. The study evaluated the problems that the students encountered, their possibilities to freely express their opinion and the factors that prevented them to do so. The study indicated that the free expression of the opinions and the active participation of the students is not in satisfactory levels. These levels are not enough for the actual requirements, and for this is required an open mind, collaboration, and funds to enhance the active citizenship. We need to accept the reality as it really is with the belief that it belongs to the present, and we should try to change the future in order to increase the youth trust in this direction.

Keywords: active citizenship, participation, freedom of expression, democratic citizenship.

Introduction

In the recommendations of the Committee of the Ministers of the European Council, among others is emphasized the fact that the democratic civil education includes a complex basic of concepts and values, which are the same for all modern democracies. The principles of democracy are universal, but their implementation is performed in accordance to the actual circumstances of each society, so the students are prepared to live as citizens of a democratic civilization. The member states should support the inclusion of the education for democratic society and for the human rights in the institutions of Higher Education, especially those that prepare future teachers, by respecting the principle of Academic freedom of these institutions (Recommendations CM/Rec (2010)7 of the Minister Committee of the European Council p. 7).

Active citizenship includes the strategy that needs to be followed if we want to continue to go toward the civilization direction. Education of the civil rights is actually the topic of the day in many countries, as it is given a special urgent consideration towards the preparation of the youth in order to confront the challenges and insecurities of furious changing life (Ichilov, 1998).

Sherry Arnstein in 1969, in relation to the participation of the citizens in the process of planning in USA developed the idea of "Levels of participation", in which are proposed eight "levels" of participations on the aspects of three extended categories: passive citizenship (manipulation, collective therapy); development of the image of active citizenship (information, consulting, symbolic participation) and active citizenship (collaboration, civil decision making, civil control). These levels have served as measuring indicators, in order to see the participations of the youth in the active democratic processes in many countries of the world.

Our youth should be prepared to undertake roles and responsibilities in life. "The key to be responsible in a modern society is to take responsibility of your own life, and this is a virtue of independence and autonomy. The independence of the

judgment is as necessary as the independence of the action. The individuals should be left to create their own opinions” (Civic Education in Europe, University of Boon, 2000). That mentioned, an important role plays the education system, as it prepares the youth for the future.

“Active citizenship in my opinion means taking responsibility for our own destiny. We cannot just let the government decide everything for us. It is important that when we develop certain skills that we also use them for the benefit of society” (Pedro Augusto Almeida, 2012, p.15).

“Active citizenship is very important. It’s vital to be engaged in the things you think matter, to improve your life and the lives of others, and to make the world a better place to live in. It means understanding what rights you have and what role you can play; using those rights and being involved in activities” (Andrzej Adamczyk, 2012, p.16).

Another important request of active participation is the tendency of citizens to be active in the community problems. In a democratic society this tendency relates to the rights and responsibilities of the individual in this society, with the ideals of a political community and a civil society. It includes the tendency of the individual to be an active member of the society, to respect the values of individuals and human dignity, to take personal civil, political and economic responsibility, to respect the rules, to be included and well informed with maturity and efficiency in the civil issues, to enhance the function and consolidation of a healthy democratic system in Albania (Shakaj, V., 2012, p.89).

“We need our young people to be active citizens, because this is their world and they need to be involved in decision-making. If I can do it, so can the others,” she declares. “To me, that’s what active citizenship is. As Gandhi said, you must be the change you want to see. It’s about giving people the tools to believe in themselves and make their voices heard” (Madi Sharma, 2012, pp. 52-53).

Education and civil formation can not be understood without the freedom of expression, without the active participation in the whole life of the country. “Education for a democratic citizenship is mainly focused on the democratic rights and responsibilities and on the active participation in the political, citizenship, economical, legal and cultural areas of society (Card of EDC, Recommendation CM/Rec (2010)7 of the Ministers Committee, 2010, p.7).

Each country that wants to be an important part of European Union tries to have a qualitative education. “Democratic Civil Education is an indicator of the development of the quality of a country’s education, a strong supporting point for social development and adherence to the European Union” (Gora, C., Gore, V., & Skolstvo, Z., 2007, p. 14). Civil education equips people with knowledge, skills and contributions to actively and efficiently participate in the society, as critical citizens that know how to take responsibility seriously. The youth are the most important part of the society. In this context the students should play their active role, as the student who is not a citizen in his class today, cannot be a citizen of the country tomorrow. The study research shows that students that follow civil education/citizenship courses at school are more informed about the political life (formal and informal) and for this reason there are more chances for participation in the future (Hahn, 1998; Niemi and Junn, 1998).

Alma Powell, Alliance of the American Promise emphasizes that when the youth discover that they may be agents of change, wonderful things happen. They start serving on the neighborhood, teach others on public issues, develop new solutions for difficult political challenges and finally become voters, creators of community projects, and leaders of our communities and the nation. The center of this transformation, from a spectator to a citizen contains the meaning of who we are, our democratic values and the individual roles that we can play (Report, Guardian of Democracy, 2003, p.24).

Bole and Gordon, are critical that schools and public institutions in the US are not teaching people how to be active citizens, able and encouraged to criticize the status quo – all of which they perceive to be essential if the challenges of social cohesion, truly active representative democracy, and democratic cooperation are to be met successfully (Bole and Gordon, 2009, p.273).

In the curricula frame of the Pre-university Education of the Republic of Albania, among the key competencies of long life learning is the civil competency. The student is committed to the overall good. The student creates relations to the others, with the society and other cultures. He understands and respects the differences between people; accepts and respects the others; demonstrates responsibilities for the issues of general public interest; embraces and enhances beneficial changes for the personal life, for the society and the environment (IZHA, 2014, p.15). Even the students who are preparing to be teachers in the faculties of education in universities should know and implement the civil competency, as they will

work with lots of generations of students who are the future of our country, and will contribute in putting strong foundations of democracy.

Being that the youth are the future of a country, investing in them means contributing in progress and the future. One of the main objectives stated in the European Strategy for the Youth 2010 - 2018 is the promotion of the active citizenship, social participation and solidarity of all the young people. (May 7th 2012). Active participation of the students in all the activities is very important. This leads to improving the feeling of citizenship among them. The students are active in various activities that are organized, but it is important the fact that they take roles and responsibilities on their own in order to organize these activities, as they are more open, more sincere on what they do and say, and more cooperative with others.

Indeed, fostering the ability of members of the University community to engage in such debate and deliberation in an effective and responsible manner is an essential part of the University's educational mission. (The Committee on Freedom of Expression at the University of Chicago, "Final Report of the Committee on Freedom of Expression," 2015).

The European Council and the European Committee among others have stated that roles for adults in youth participation may include:

- caring: being available and showing genuine concern for young people;
- flexibility: being willing to listen and adapt;
- support: working with young people, rather than doing things for or to young people;
- commitment: valuing the rights of young people to have a voice in decisions affecting their lives, and creating opportunities for meaningful involvement;
- respect: demonstrating acceptance of young people's contributions, values and opinions. (The European Council and the European Committee, 2010, p. 111).

"There is no better site for political or democratic action than the school itself and the students' own community" (Filipovitch & Ozturk, 2012, p. 85).

Today's world absolutely requires collaborative critical thinkers, creative and courageous innovators, and true lifelong learners (Prensky, 2005; Tapscott, 1998; Robinson, 2009).

School directors should monitor the school politics so that all the members have the opportunity to learn and practice what it means to be an engaged member, to profit an understanding for the democracy and the role they play in it, and to learn how to be active members of the civil society (Homana, G., Barber, C., & Torney-Purta, J., 2006, p. 10).

A major work and endless analyses have been done in order to gather information and different facts which helped to get the results. The question is what practices can change this non functional culture that exists in our youth? It is needed to determine the behaviors that accompany the values of democratic citizenship, in supporting the contemporary standards and new techniques, and implementation of the new ways to work in collaboration, for an active contemporary citizenship.

Research methodology

This study treats a very delicate and very important issue nowadays. The goal of the study is to evaluate what prevents the youth to express their opinions freely, to assess how the university curricula help them in education and equipping them with active citizenship, and the areas and possibilities created for active participation in society.

The study included 258 university students (Bachelor and Master Programs) of the Education Faculty in the university "Aleksander Moisiu" Durres. The students filled in a questionnaire with 21 closed questions. The study evaluated the problems that the students encountered, their possibilities to freely express their opinion and the factors that prevent them from doing so.

Results and discussion

The students were asked where they felt better to express their opinion for the problems they had encountered. From the results we noticed that 80.23% stated that for the solution of their problems they rely on their families, and only 19.77% rely on the society. The expression of the opinion in government institutions, NGO, media, and political forums resulted in 0%. Students trusted more their families, and their support given in any case for the solution of the problems. Students were asked if they expressed their opinion freely. Around 23.26% did not express freely their opinion, 12.79% are neutral by not stating any response, and 63.95% stated that there were cases when they could freely express their opinion. They argue that "through civic engagement, individuals — as citizens of their communities, their nations, and the world — are empowered as agents of positive social change for a more democratic world" (Bole and Gordon, 2009, p. 276).

Related to the question on what prevented students from freely expressing their opinion in any matter they stated that 39.53% lacked the trust, 23.26% did not express themselves as they were insecure, 19.77% lacked the courage, 8.14% were indifferent, 5.81% were scared, 2.33% related their expression to the interest they had in certain circumstances and 1.16% stated they did not express their opinion as there were many bureaucratic actions which made them not to believe the problem would have a solution.

The question about the support that the students had from the institutions in solving the injustices, 53.49% state that this support does not exist, 24.42% are neutral by not stating anything 22.09% state that they have the support of the institutions. This huge percentage of the students that state not to have the support of the institutions and the ones that are neutral are points of attention for the future democracy of our country. This lack of responsibility for the support given in resolving the problems may lead to loss of trust from the youth.

When students were asked if they believed in the functioning of the state institutions, 63.95% stated they did not believe in institution functioning, 18.60% remain neutral by not answering the question and only 17.45% state to believe in the institution functioning. The loss of trust relates to the reality where the students live.

The students were asked if they themselves support others in problem solving and 4.65% stated not to support others in problem solving, 12.79% are neutral by not answering and 82.56% state to give help to others in need. They considered important that within the possibilities they would give help to the people in need.

About the question on their engagement on various political forums 81.39% state that they are not engaged in any political organization, 13.95% are neutral and 4.66% state that are participants of different youth political forums of the country. The students were indifferent and did not trust the Albanian political class. This lowers their desire to actively participate in all the democratic development of the country, and more over to be part of the political parties' forums. They accepted that they voted, as an impact from the family.

About the funds available for the enhancement of the active citizenship 56.98% of the students stated that they did not have any funds to support them in this direction, 29.07% are neutral and only 13.95% state that they have the right funds for an active citizenship.

An interesting question was the one on the collaboration of the various actors and institutions. Around 58.14% of the students think that there is no collaboration, 25.58% remain neutral and 16.28% state that there is a good collaboration between the actors and institutions. The high percentage of the students that notice the lack of collaboration shows that we are in an abnormal situation. This leads to problems not being solved, and the existence of bureaucratic actions.

According to the question that what is the impact of university programs in education and formation of the students in citizenship they answered as follows: 16.28% of the students think that these programs do not have an impact, 8.14% remain indifferent and 75.58% think that university program have an impact on citizenship.

While for the question on the impact of university programs in the improvement of the active participation, 18.61% think there is no impact, 17.44% are neutral and 63.95% think that university programs help education of the youth with the feeling of active citizenship.

When the students were asked on the active participation of the youth nowadays, 67.44% stated that participation is not on good levels, 16.28% are indifferent and 16.28% stated that this participation is sufficient. The high percentage of the

students that think that participation is not on the proper levels makes us think that we should think wisely about the future of our country. This is a reality which needs to change as soon as possible.

The students were asked if they believed that this situation would change in the future. 26.74% of them state that they are not optimistic that the situation will change, 18.61% are indifferent and 54.65% believe that things will change in the future and people will become more responsible for their roles and responsibilities as active citizens. They believe in the development of a democratic society, so it is necessary to work hard, in order to transform this trust of the youth into reality. "We need people who are models of active citizenship in order to have the kind of society we want to live in, and to encourage others" (Kathleen Walker Shaw, 2012, p.65).

What needs to be emphasized in this study is the considerable percentage of the students who are indifferent. They are not sure to express what is required as they do not trust the system, are scared, indifferent, experience lack of courage etc. Active citizenship helps to counter indifference. It is about taking responsibility on oneself and on the life of the surrounding community (Pavel Trantina, 2012, p.60).

Conclusions

This study is important as it tries to see the role of youth on freely expressing their opinion and their participation as active citizens of the society. The study evaluates the causes that prevent the youth to actively participate in society. It is important to assess the ways through which we can interfere to improve the situation in the future.

Considering the fact that family plays a major role regarding the support and confidence that they provide to the youngsters, family members should work harder to ensure maximum support towards their children.

It is very important to work on this issue, related to the increasing of confidence in youngsters, in order to avoid the fear and to defeat the indifference that is noted nowadays amongst youngsters. Strengthening the altruism, in order to support people in need in different situations. More work should be done regarding the sacrifice of our own good, for the good of the community.

It is important to include education and civil formation curricula in the university programs of the teaching faculties, and especially the qualitative improvement of the contribution these subject bring in the preparation of the youth with active citizenship. Regardless their academic formation, the student teachers of all the programs should have education and civil formation, to be prepared for active citizenship as this will make them overcome indifferentism, fear, and insecurity and also improve their self trust.

Taking into consideration the fact that there is a considerable number of students that evaluate as positive the impact of university programs, it should be considered a major work with students, in auditoriums for their education and civil development and in the organization of the practical actual actions to consolidate on them the feeling of active citizenship.

The study showed a clear reality that the students are not able to freely express their opinion. Also, there are no qualitative indicators in the direction of the active participation of the youth, as it is a very hard area which requires ongoing contributions and engagement from all the actors of society. This is noticed in the lack of participation in the civil actions, indifferentism, the lack of collaboration between the various actors of society, the lack of funds for these issues, lack of information, motivation and desire to participate, and finally the lack of interest that the students have.

Over 70% of youngsters think that University Curricula contribute in the students' education related to the feeling of active citizenship. Therefore, the responsibility that these institutions should take, is of major importance, in order to fulfil their mission, regarding the education and civil formation of the youth.

It needs to be seen the chance to study other factors that affect the improvement of active civil participation in the community, this for the fact that every person can create an individual way of understanding the phenomena, as people share opinions and have different points of view for the reality they live in.

Institutions play an important role on the resolving of the youth problems, in order to change the reality where they live, in order to gain trust of the youth for a better and more secure future of this country.

By taking into account that a considerable percentage of youngsters that participated in the study, expressed that they believe in the future, we need to work more with these students so that they would not feel dissapointed. This country needs people who have faith and who will give their support in order to improve the situation in the future.

The funds for an active citizenship need to be increased, through programs where the impact of civil education may find favorable environment. Creating chances of youth participation in projects related to civil education, being evaluated as new forms and very efficient to provide education and civil formation of the students. The development of new capacities of the students, fulfillment of the mission for education and civil formation is primary task for the Albanian integration in the European and world developments.

References

- [1] Card of EDC, Recommendation CM/Rec (2010) 7 of Ministers Committee, (2010). The Card of European Council for Education of Democratic Citizenship and for the Human Rights , p.7.
- [2] Council Decision of 27 November 2009 on a renewed framework for European cooperation in the youth field (2010-2018), OJ C311, 19.12.2009 [pdf], http://ec.europa.eu/youth/pdf/doc1648_en.pdf
- [3] European Economic and Social Committee, (2012). "Active Citizenship For a better European society", pp. 15, 16, 52, 53, 60, 65.
- [4] Filipovitch & Ozturk, (2012). Teaching the Social Studies through Your Local Community, p.85.
- [5] Gora, C. & Gore, V. & Skolstvo, Z. (2007). Strategy for Civic Education in Primary and Secondary School in Montenegro 2007-2010, UNICEF and the NGO Centre for Civic Education, p. 14 .
- [6] Homana, G. & Barber, C. & Torney-Purta, J. (2006). Background on the school citizenship, Education climate assessment, p. 10.
- [7] IZHA, (2014) Curricula Frame of the Preuniversity Education of the Republic of Albania, Tirane, pp. 14-15.
- [8] IZHA, (2014). Curricula Frame of the Preuniversity Education of the Republic of Albania, Tirane, pp.15-16.
- [9] Recommendations CM/Rec (2010) 7 of Ministers Committee for the member states for the Education Card for Democratic Citizenship and for the Human Rights of European Council (Approved form Ministers Committee May 11th 2010, in its 120th session), p.7.
- [10] Report, Guardian of Democracy. (2003). The Civic Mission of Schools in partnership with the Educating for Democracy, University of Pennsylvania, Division for Public Education, National Conference on Citizenship, p.24.
- [11] Shakaj, V. (2012). Didactics of Education for Democratic Citizenship, Julvin 2, Tirane, p.89.
- [12] Taylor, L., Parsons, J. (2011). Improving Student Engagement, p.7.
- [13] The Committee on Freedom of Expression at the University of Chicago (2015). "Final Report of the Committee on Freedom of Expression," p.2.
- [14] T-Kit 11 Mosaic (2010). The training kit for Euro-Mediterranean youth work, p.111.
- [15] University of Boon (2000). Civic Education in Europe, Same General Principles.