

*School for Teachers
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EXPERIENCING CIVIC EDUCATION IN INTERCULTURAL ENVIRONMENT

Stefka Lyubenova

2nd English Language High School "Thomas Jefferson" – Sofia (Bulgaria)

Abstract. The reform occurring in the Bulgarian school necessitates the introduction of new programs and courses among which is civic education, which aims at educating students to become clear-thinking citizens who participate in decisions concerning democratic society. Bearing in mind the specifics of our school we, as teachers, are entitled to search for new and less common ways of teaching and if proved successful to turn them into viable practice.

Keywords: civic education; democracy; society; intercultural; tradition

Education has traditionally been perceived as a value in our society but unsurprisingly it has been too conventional to allow considerable growth and development of cultural and social values. Such has been the case until recently when the belief that we need citizens able to participate actively in the democratic processes of our society strengthened and a need for a better civic education has arisen. Teaching the essentials and acquiring basic skills in the classroom are crucial and have a large potential influence on the students but they can also be viewed as necessary foundations for further experiences outside of the classroom. Extracurricular activities are not only a way of putting the knowledge into practice but they also give excellent opportunities for utilizing participatory skills and if this is done at an international level (students from different countries and activities located in different countries) then we can speak of experiencing civic education in intercultural context.

No matter what the adopted approaches and methods are, civic education is an indelible part of the modern education, even more so in the post-communist countries in Eastern Europe where the creation of new values has posed a lot of questions and it has been seen as an answer to those questions and recognized as 'a crucial element of the infrastructure of their new democracies.'¹⁾ A society concerned about its welfare requires from its citizens ethical and moral qualities, respect for others, readiness to fight all forms of discrimination and this is where civic education comes in handy. Its three main objectives:

- educating people in citizenship and human rights through an understanding of the principles and institutions [which govern a state or nation];
- learning to exercise one's judgement and critical faculty; and
- acquiring a sense of individual and community responsibilities²⁾

could be attained in different ways depending on the cultural traditions of the education system but they are all in line with educating citizens to be responsible for the direction in which democratic processes in their country develop.

Although educating students about the basic human rights including civil and political rights is not a novelty to us, we have a long way to go before having a sustainable civic education. In this sense seeking approaches which can open up new paths for education can only contribute to making enhancements in this field. Accordingly, when we received an invitation by Foundation Netherlands-Romania to take part in Moot Court in The Hague, we seized the opportunity to explore a new means to civic education. Our school, like many others, has been doing Erasmus+ projects for quite a while but this was the first time we have partnered with a non-governmental organization which is mainly orientated towards implementing related civic education initiatives. We have already participated in three programmes organized by the foundation and we can safely say that we have built up a long-lasting partnership and a tradition to follow.

Foundation Netherlands-Romania is registered with the Dutch Chamber of Commerce and was legally founded in 1994 and since then it has been managed by a board of five members among whom Dr. Wim van Eekelen, Chairman of the European Movement, former member of the Dutch Parliament, former Minister of Defence; Prof. Dr. Jaap de Zwaan, professor of International Law at Erasmus University Rotterdam. The main aims of the foundation are:

- promoting inter-cultural, academic, socio-political and economic exchanges between the Netherlands and Romania as well as between other European countries;
- contributing to creating an active and involved attitude among the general public and young people in particular, by providing training, independent expertise and advising and by organising regular exchanges, seminars, conferences, etc;
- contributing to a closer co-operation between various European societies by facilitating intercultural exchanges, by disseminating proper information and by working together with other independent organisations;
- promoting the harmonisation of law and transparency at all levels and stimulating exchanges between the decision-making elite as well as advocacy, monitoring and research at international level.³

The program Postcards with Stereotypes/Fighting discrimination through active participation, in which our school took part, gave youngsters of various

European backgrounds a rare opportunity to get together and discuss European topics, while joining in intercultural and recreational activities dealing with contemporary issues in today's Europe. By focusing on the cultural differences and similarities between the countries involved and by representing their own ways of perceiving the European identity, the participants were able to understand each other's cultures better and to become more aware of the cultural diversity in Europe.

Learning to be active citizens also means learning to show respect for others and for their dignity in the same way as we respect ourselves and in this regard understanding how stereotypes and prejudices are formed and work is essential. Discussing what their stereotyped images of the other nationalities participating in the program are, sharing their direct experiences of discrimination, openly expressing their opinions, the young people realized that discrimination springs up out of ignorance and the first step towards combating it is gaining knowledge of it and then comes developing tolerance of the 'other.' As a result of their group work in multicultural teams the students created postcards with stereotypes which showed their ideas of dealing with prejudices and those cards could be used as an instrument for further reflection on how to struggle with discrimination on a daily basis.

Another kind of activities in which the participants were engaged were more of a political orientation. Political education has received due attention in our country recently but politics is still not broadly taught at school so the experience our students had is invaluable for them. One of the most important initiatives was the visit to the Dutch Senate and the young people had a golden opportunity to talk with Dr. Wim van Eekelen about the genuine relationship between politicians and citizens and what politicians can do to support equal opportunities for all European youngsters. The other initiatives (a discussion with the First Counsellor at the Polish Embassy about the institution and its principles; a debate at the House of Europe about the European ideals; a discussion with a representative of the new political European movement Volt about how to become active citizens) also helped the participants to understand some central truths about political life and the role and responsibilities each individual has in our modern society.

The process of teaching civics at school both requires and affords at equal measure various ways of achieving its main goal to prepare young people for civic life. The combination of traditional teaching approaches and new interactive methods encourage discourse and openness and empower students to think independently, to express their opinions confidently and to practice their participatory skills.

Participating in youth exchange programs especially designed to help youngsters acquire an understanding of contemporary cultural and political

problems provides an opportunity to blend the national and international. Thus, by experiencing different cultures in a new environment and engaging in activities related to civic education, students form attitudes and social bonds which can fortify their future performance in society.

NOTES

1. https://www.streetlaw.org/assets/site_18/files/articles/2018/civic%20education%20in%20the%2021st%20century%20-%20final%20pdf.pdf
2. http://www.unesco.org/education/tlsf/mods/theme_b/interact/mod07task03/appendix.htm
3. www.netherlandromania.eu

✉ **Ms. Stefka Lyubenova**

English Teacher

2nd English Language High School “Thomas Jefferson”

Sofia, Bulgaria

E-mail: stefka_lyubenova@abv.bg