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Baselines of Citizenship Education and Democratic Commitment within the European Horizon

Summary

1. Democracy is activity

When we consider the future of our present democracy then we require democratically-minded men and women. These are the children and young people of today. If democracy is to be a part of our hearts and minds in order for it to be lived out, then it is a question of education and upbringing. It can only then be renewed and refined from one generation to the next.

2. Democracy is a challenge

When citizens feel more inclined to be active beyond what the law allows them to be then democracy sheds its skin in an exciting manner which we are currently witnessing. During the process of democratic development there is a constant interplay between citizens and the state.

3. Support for non-governmental organisations

“Member states should foster the role of non-governmental organisations and youth organisations in education for democratic citizenship and human rights education, especially in non-formal education. They should recognize these organisations and their activities as a valued part of the educational system, provide them where possible with the support they need and make full use of the expertise they can contribute to all forms of education”. (Council of Europe Charter on Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights Education, Section III, pt. 10)

4. The ability to communicate

Decisive for the proper functioning of democracy is the extent to which communication is regarded as an essential point in current political conflicts. Since the eighties things have progressed a lot despite the fact that “accidents” still happen now and then. The police learn how to mediate in conflicts, political parties put on interesting discussions with people upholding different viewpoints, members of parliament are rated on the internet, managers receive coaching, company bosses do practical training among people belonging to a different world from their own.

5. The Republic is a centre of education

Education, which has contributed to the maturity and civilization of the Federal Republic is not just lifeless knowledge standing on the bookshelf, it is also democratic and social responsibility and decision making. Apparently, with its increasing preparedness for communication it would seem that democratic society is a huge education centre. This

is a basic hope of the Enlightenment: freedom cannot be suppressed because in the long term people cannot be prevented from thinking and communicating their thoughts.

6. The importance of being a member of society

In order for a child to identify with democracy he must experience a simple feeling in school: the joy of having a say in negotiating and organizing things. And he must feel the confidence that adults take his viewpoint seriously. But this requires a genuine opportunity to have a say in matters. It is hardly surprising when pupils have no interest in meetings in which nothing of any seriousness is to be decided.

7. Democracy test for schools

In a democratic society with a future, schools must be more democratic than what other institutions are on average. Since, as an institution, it really must be a model for other fields of society and therefore take the lead as a good example. So we have to ask: Does school see pupils merely as pupils or as future citizens active in a democratic republic? *“Member states should promote democratic governance in all educational institutions both as a desirable and beneficial method of governance in its own right and as a practical means of learning and experiencing democracy and respect for human rights. They should encourage and facilitate, by appropriate means, the active participation of learners, educational staff and stakeholders, including parents, in the governance of educational institutions.”* (CoE-EDC-Charter Section III, pt. 8)

8. The skills of active citizenship

Achievement in school subjects is doubtlessly important. The content of school subjects is a reason for learning and something which pupils can make use of. But learning does not merely take place in school subjects but everywhere. A central aspect in the new school syllabus is the teaching of skills in such things as making judgements, changing one’s perspective, solving conflicts and taking active part in organization. *“In all areas of education, member states should promote educational approaches and teaching methods which aim at learning to live together in a democratic and multicultural society and at enabling learners to acquire the knowledge and skills to promote social cohesion, value diversity and equality, appreciate differences – particularly between different faith and ethnic groups – and settle disagreements and conflicts in a non-violent manner with respect for each others’ rights, as well as to combat all forms of discrimination and violence, especially bullying and harassment.”* (CoE-EDC-Charter Section III, pt. 13)

9. De-Radicalisation: Rediscovering the core values

Most young people who go over to becoming rightwing extremists or islamists feel anger, they have developed a hatred of society, of the state, of people who look different, of the weak and of minorities. The school has the duty of offering these young people the positive counterpart of co-existence and with it the zest for de-radicalisation: humane, fair, sensitive, and above all for uncovering their buried feelings of what is morally right.

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