

Scales of European Citizenship: how young European students see their future

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"There is something dreadfully wrong with an education system that claims to be personalised and listen to young people, which aspires to be world class, seeking to nurture successful learners, confident individuals and responsible citizens, but which has allowed the curriculum to be so utterly distorted that learning about our place in the world (and its future) is considered to be marginal in comparison to the mundane "learning skills". Let us lift our sights. We need to trust teachers again to engage with the discipline and young people to create a curriculum for the future: exciting, relevant and with a heart," D. Lambert., 2009

Introduction

The different realities perceived by young people in their daily life, as well as their relationships with the nearest people around them, are basic elements in the construction of their perceptions of the world and the current events in it. This image of their reality is also influenced by the inputs afforded by the mass media. One of the main aims of education is to help the young people to be active citizens in a complex and transforming world, to acquire the needed elements to build a global identity firmly rooted in their local place and making them concerned and active in a changing and diverse society. In this process, geographical education could play a relevant role as geography is present in many of the issues and decisions that affect our society, the environment and the spatial forms. A geographical education which seeks to develop students who will be active in society should aim at raising questions and building confidence and skills in using political judgement. In this sense, to teach geography means to make students competent in interpreting the main global change processes and the decisions taken by local, regional and national policies which affect not only their daily life but also the global ones.

Objectives, methodology and instruments of research

This paper presents the first findings of a European current research¹ based on the hypothesis that young people build their own ideas, representations and opinions about social problems and questions and that the influence of family and social environment, as well as their daily experiences, the mass media and the school learning, are fundamental in the construction and conceptualisation of social knowledge. This multidisciplinary research (education, sociology, psychology, communication and social sciences didactics), is being carried out by universities in four different countries (United Kingdom, Turkey, Poland and Spain)

All the research data has been gathered from different instruments and at the three different scales to take into account their worries, feelings and perceptions at these same three levels. The instruments used in the research are of different characteristics. The first one is an individual questionnaire combining open and closed questions, which affords elements for both quantitative and qualitative analysis (ie: indicate three personal fears and hopes on your

¹ *Citizens of the future: the concerns and actions of young people around current European and global issues* is a European project from the *European Collaborative Research Projects (ECRPs) in the Social Sciences*, financed by *European Research Foundation*. The Spanish team is composed by M A. Dooly, E. Collados, A. Luna, M. Oller, C. Vallejo and M. Villanueva

personal, community and global future). After administering the questionnaires, the students participated in a 'social role game' (*Ultimatum Game*) done in pairs, (boy-boy, girl-girl and boy-girl) to be followed by brief semi-guided interviews about their responses in the game. Finally and based on the respondents' answers in the questionnaires, small focus groups were chosen for more detailed data recording sessions.

In the case of Spain, two different universities participated in the research, Cordoba and Autonomous of Barcelona. Questionnaires have been collected from a group of 118 pupils, about their perspectives on the future at three different levels – the personal arena, their neighbourhood and the world. The questionnaires were given to three groups of students aged 10-11 (39% of the sample), 13-14 (34 %) and 16-17 (27%). In this paper we present the data collected in different schools of the metropolitan area of Barcelona. The pupils of the youngest group, belong to a public school with direct links to the Faculty of Education of the UAB. This school has a strong academic tradition and is considered one of the more innovative public schools in the area. The socio-economic background of pupils tends to be middle to upper class families. The other groups in the study belong to a combined middle and secondary education public school in a largely industrial area. The socio-economic background of students is mainly working class. approximately 12,5% of the population are immigrants (Serra, 2006).

The project is being developed along the last two years in the framework of citizenship education and the training of young people for democratic and active attitudes for social commitment. As Dekker pointed (1996) this training should not be relegated only to the compulsory schooling because this must be a "shared function" of all social agents aiming to contribute to create democratic values among young people. From this point of view, the teaching of geography in particular, can influence in their perception of reality, the way they assume their life within the community as well as how they acquire the personal values needed to face not only the private sphere of life but also the transformation of the society they will live. The efficiency of Geography lessons will depend on how the pupil's knowledge and perceptions about their present and future situation in society is taken into account and though, the way they integrate their daily reality and how they use it when constructing their geographical knowledge.

“young people are entitled to an education that helps them make sense of these experiences and all this information. Geography can contribute to this: it helps young people make sense of the world and can enrich their experiences of it. It can inform the way they participate in the world as local and global citizens”.
(Roberts, 2009)

The aims of the research are can be summarised as follows:

- To know how young people understand key concepts as violence, conflict, unemployment, tolerance, environmental protection, health.....at a different spatial scales (local, national, global).
- To analyse how the geographical environment, the people around them and what they learn in geography lessons, are affecting the social knowledge of young people.
- To evaluate in what amount their perception on the future of social problems in their local sphere is affecting positive vision of their own personal futures (hopes and fears).
- To investigate personal attitudes towards an active commitment at local and global scale.

When discussing projected hopes and fears of children and adolescents, there may be several different ways to categorise the objects enumerated by the respondents in relation to the concepts of hope and fear. Boehnke *et al* (1998) make a distinction between “micro” concerns which place *self* (or intimates who are seen as extensions of self, such as family) and *place* at the centre, while “macro” concerns place external entities or *space* (e.g. society, the world or the universe). The questionnaires used in this research “obliged” the respondents to focus on

both micro and macro levels.

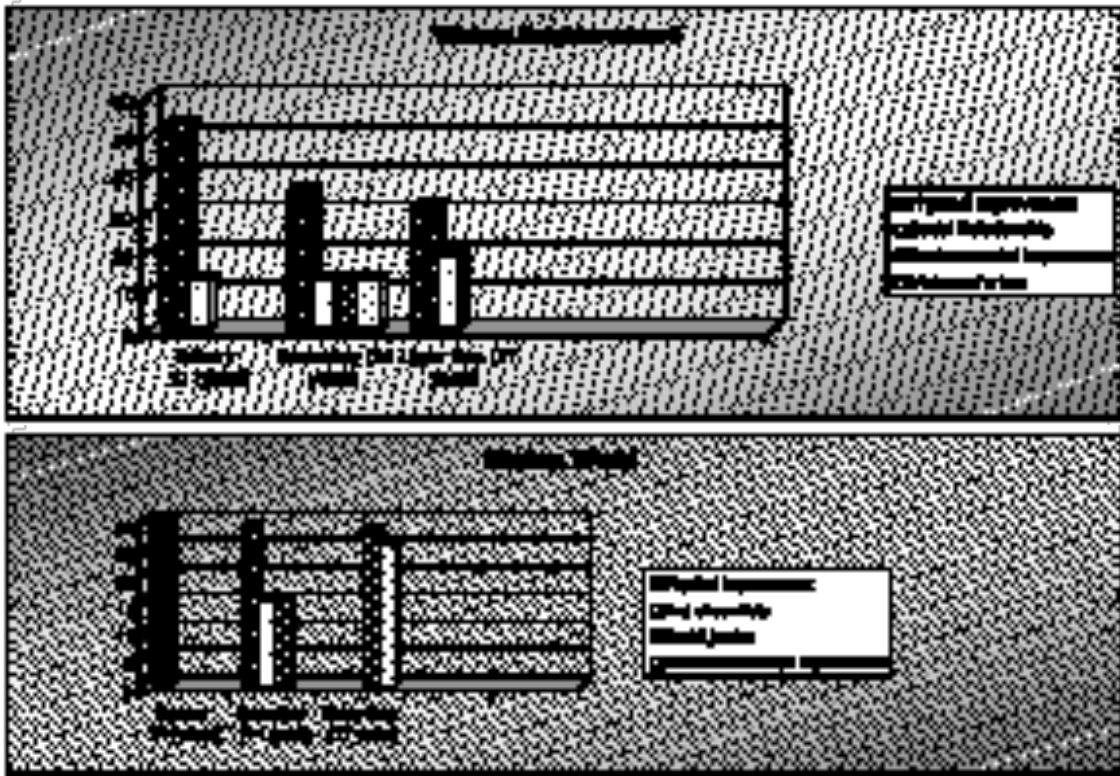
The analysis of data was based in two different methodologies, both qualitative and quantitative. The work we present is referred to the qualitative data analysis which was founded in the principle of “grounded theory”, a method consisting of systematic yet flexible guidelines for collecting and analysing qualitative data to construct theories “grounded” in data themselves (Glaser, Strauss, 1967). This meant to start with an inductive approach where data are given from inside and not from outside. Starting from the pupil's answers, a series of categories were obtained, offering a clear image of their wishes, hopes and fears. The categories were not established prior to analysis (profiling) since using grounded theory implies an inductive approach that allows the analysis to ‘emerge’ from the data. Nonetheless, the categories mentioned by Schwartz, et al. (2000): health, safety, environment, social relations, meaning of life, achievement at work and in studies, and economy did prove to coincide quite closely with the predominant themes that emerged and which were related to the fears and hopes of the respondents in a preliminary sampling, thus providing universal parameters or ‘key-words’ to use in the category descriptors.

First results

The results we present are those gathered along the first year and they are reflecting how young people of different ages are thinking about some aspects of their reality as well as their perspectives for the future at a three different scales. In recent years, the concept of scale has opened an intense debate among social sciences, due to the growing globalisation process. In this sense the pioneering work of Taylor (1989) is of great relevance because in it, the Wallerstein's theories on the world system were applied in a brilliant way while affording a new perspective on the impact of economy from the global reality to the daily experience at a local scale, through the national ideologies level. This scale model has generated controversy and it has been re-elaborated by different authors, discussing about how these scales are fermenting, through education, a conception of the reality in scales, which at their turn is conditioning the social mobilisation. (Luna, 2006).

Wishes

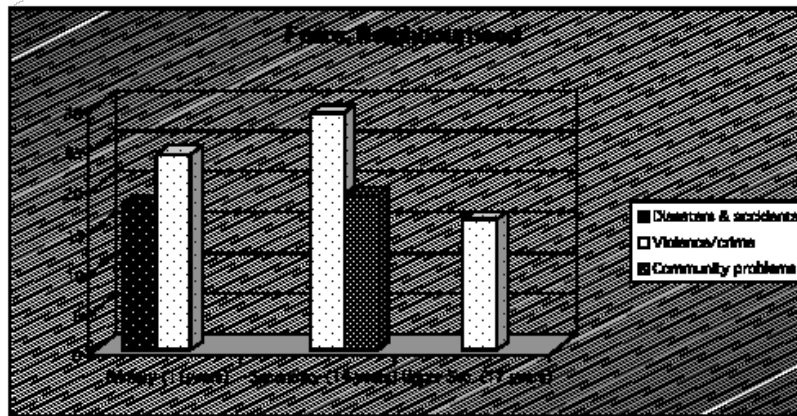
Concerning to the future of their local environment or “micro level”, the two most recurrent categories were related to physical improvements in the neighbourhood as well as infrastructures (new open areas, sports facilities and equipments, more retailing, less traffic...) and especially among the youngest group. The pupils of the three groups wishes also a better social environment, with the improvement of social relationships (less conflicts) or, on the contrary, less immigration, associated to the recent conflicts and crime in the neighbourhood. The 10-11 year old students did not mention social relations whereas the other two groups did. These included desires for better integration of immigrants and the more abstract hope for “*people in the nearby community to open their minds for greater comprehension between everyone*”. On the global level, environmental concerns were predominant, followed closely by concerns for 3rd world problems (economic and social inequalities, poverty, high death rates, economic improvement) and desires for world peace and end of violence in general. Social justice and world peace are especially relevant among the oldest pupils but they appear in a prominent place in the other age groups too.



Fears

At the “meso” and “macro” levels, fears focus on environmental problems (pollution, lack of water, climatic change, deforestation, world destruction..). One of the most recurrent environmental fears was, at that moment, related to the severe drought in the Catalan area. The answers of pupils were reflecting also, the impact of the mass media, generating news and alarm within the population. Social and economic problems (increasing poverty, high prices, economic crisis) and a growing violence and conflicts were shown as main concerns. The 14 years olds shows clear worries about being a victim (robbery, kidnapping..) and on social order degrading (worst conditions in the neighbourhood, properties destruction, school facilities degrading..), quite often associated to the increase of immigration. On the personal level fears of ill health or dying were also a recurrent category, more specifically for the 10-11 year olds who mentioned fear of losing a family member or prolonged illnesses as well as one mention of fear of having handicapped children. This was less prevalent for the older groups who placed more emphasis on fears concerning economic insecurity.

Relevant to these answers, it is significant to note important political and economic changes in the situation of Spain in the last 15 years. At the moment of the collection of data (2008) unemployment was not a major issue (although it is the main problem in Spanish society nowadays). Even in some cases, the younger pupils were asking about the meaning of the word “unemployment”. All the age groups included in this study have lived with continuous economic growth and political stability. In the second phase of the study, which is currently carried out with 90 new pupils, the concern about scarcity of water is replaced by the uncertainty of jobs.



It is important to highlight that immigration has been and still is, a relevant issue in the political, social and educational debates along the last years in Spain, which has been emphasised and reinforced by mass media. The public discourse about immigration use to place it as a problem and this is being reflected in social behaviour as an increasing “fear of other” which is clearly reflected in the answers of pupils. All the age groups, but mainly the oldest ones, are in schools with a high percentage of recent immigrant children (12,5%) and the pupils of the study are reflecting this cultural mix. It could be of interest to tell that among those pupils considered as nationals, the majority of them belong to families which, as internal immigration flow, arrived to the metropolitan area of Barcelona from the deep rural areas of the south of Spain in the 60,s of last century. Even this fact, the degree of empathy with “the other” is clearly related to the geographical scale, that means the level of proximity. Values as respect or generosity are bigger when the subject to whom these values is addressed, is at a bigger distance

Personal commitment to be agent of changes

Some parts of the enquiry are addressed to know about pupils self-perceptions on their own interest and capacity for improving the social and physical environment and also their willing to be involved in social projects or political actions. At a question as “*put an example of things you would like to do in the future, for a better improvement of your neighbourhood or the world in general*”, many of them show a clear relation between their fears and worries and their personal perspectives as agents of change. In the face of fears it is important to focus on people's images of preferred futures. If they can be elaborated perhaps they can provide the basis for creating a more just future (Hicks & Holden, 1995).

Many of the pupils are concerned with the environmental issues, and shows a clear disposition for recycling, to save energy, the use of electrical cars, not polluting.....and also, some of them have a positive attitude towards participating in community associations working for change. Some of the answers, mainly among the oldest age group, shows positive attitudes towards a cooperative work: “*the improvements in our society are the result of the cooperative work of many persons rather than the outcome of a single one*” . The answers to the question “*do you think that you can do something for a better future?*” show a much more skeptic attitude as the majority thinks that they can do very few things. This negative attitude increases with the age of pupils, as graphic shows.

Geography teaching and society: Some final reflections

This current research must be placed in the framework of recent approaches on the role of Geography in citizenship education, which places geographical knowledge, not only as a school subject but mainly as a context for the general educational activities. In this context, Geography lessons can be a powerful instrument to help pupils in the building of their perception of the world around; it is the subject in which young people learnt and discuss about the issues they

believe to be affecting their local area and the wider world: crime and anti-social behaviour, economy and jobs, war and terrorism, the environment and climate change and poverty and hunger (GA 2009). The school system should help pupils to draw alternative scenarios and to discuss how we could move towards the most attractive ones, to give them confidence in the possibility of a future.

In the research, when asked about actions done in the school related to the questionnaire questions, all the groups placed the environmental ones as first, not only as learning contents (greenhouse effect, climate change...), but also as direct actions (recycling, changing some unsustainable consumer habits). Other topics mentioned are related to values (respect, empathy) and charity actions (to collect food or clothes for some international action against poverty or crisis). It demonstrates that there is a clear relation between their wishes, fears and actions for change and the topics studied in school lessons. For instance, the 10- 11 year old group's fears for the future at a global level tended to be more specifically detailed in areas that they had discussed or studied at school. Thus, environmental concerns were labelled: that the ice caps melt; that world pollution worsens; that the drought continues; that there is more climatic change, etc. Equally, problems related to socio-economic inequalities were specifically named: lack of food for 3rd world nations, drought in Africa, world poverty. Other fears – which did not correlate with stated school subjects – were more ambiguously named, such as natural disasters that the world is destroyed or that humans disappear (without stating the cause). At the same time, they are hopeful that there will be more – that they will be able to afford some luxuries such as a big house, to travel around the world, to have a car and many of their worries centre around illness and death in their families.

It is possible to take Watts *et al.* (2003) theory of socio-political development (SPD) to describe how youth agency and a critical social analysis are directly related to their political action. In their early work, Watts *et al.* (1999) have shown how the relationship between an educational curriculum that works on increasing critical thinking can serve as the basis for critical consciousness and as a strategy to promote socio-political development. The framework also includes individual youth experiences. The fact that recent political developments (e.g. recent decisions made by the Spanish government; Basque terrorism), environmental issues (e.g. threat of drought in parts of Spain; global warming) coincides with students' indications in their questionnaires that they had studied and/or discussed social and political issues in their schools. (Dooly *et al.*, 2008).

As mentioned earlier, political awareness was evident in all the age groups, not just in the older group. The emphasis on the need for collaboration in order to achieve social change was also an intriguing aspect that has emerged in this preliminary study. The work of Solem and Klein (2008) emphasised also the impact of international cooperation in the geographical awareness; to communicate about issues with their peers in other countries requires them to reflect on their own perspectives. After this evidences, it can be argued that Geography can fulfil the need for a critical thinking about future. As Massey (2009) stated, learning geography is to be able to apply knowledge and conceptual understanding to new settings; what we need, it seems to me, is a global sense of the local, a global sense of place.

'Never before in history have there been states where people have been able to live so freely, and to have such a good, or better, life... I know that our world is not without its negative side: crime, cruelty, drugs. We make lots of mistakes and even if many of us learn from our mistakes, some remain a prisoner to them. That is how the world is; it sets us tasks. We can live happy and content. But that should be said loud and clear! ... Everyday instead I hear grumbling and complaining about the terrible world we have to

live in. In my view, the spreading of such lies is the greatest crime of our age, because it threatens to rob young people of their hope and optimism...' Popper, K. (2002)

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