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## **Experiential Learning and Political Education in Citizenship Education**

Citizenship education, and within it, political education, is about preparing young people for their roles and responsibilities as citizens (Kerr, 2000), or as Tristan McCowan (2011) puts it, political empowerment in the broadest sense. Relatedly, it is often suggested that young people in contemporary democratic settings are politically inactive and alienated from politics. Although such assumptions about young people are problematic, as research shows a heterogeneous political activity among young people (cf. de Moor et al., 2021; Svensson and Wahlström, 2021; Tsekoura, 2016), it is nevertheless important to acknowledge that there is a need to continuously strengthen young people's awareness of the importance of political participation and their role in society, thus empowering them to participate in political affairs. However, political education should not be based solely on imparting knowledge about the legal-formal framework of politics and social arrangements and a suffocating set of 'bare' facts, as this will only bore students (Crick, 2012, p. 14). Instead, it makes sense to orient citizenship education towards building and expanding the vocabulary of concepts we use to perceive and influence the world (Crick, 2012, p. 14). This means framing citizenship and political education through experiential learning, which opens up opportunities for the creation of new knowledge or the transformation of the self through a cycle of 'trying' and 'experiencing' (Dewey, 1985; Hildreth, 2012).

The article addresses the role and possibilities of practising experiential learning in the context of citizenship and political education. The central question is how experiential learning can be used to communicate citizenship education content, especially political content, to students in formal education. The underlying proposition is that experiential learning starts from the learner and his/her existing knowledge and the contexts in which the learner finds him/herself. This offers a basic orientation for designing citizenship and political education lessons in a way that the learner perceives, understands and reflects on them through the integration of theory and practice, experiential cognition, and concrete action.

In the first part of the article, we outline experiential learning as a pedagogical-didactic approach, briefly reflecting on how we should understand experience as such. We then present the development of the experiential learning approach, mainly through the perspective of the contributions of Dewey (1897, 1930, 1985, 1997 [1938]), Kolb (2012) and Freire (1970, 1985; McLaren and Lankshear, 1994). The central purpose of this part of the paper is to show what role these authors ascribe to the broader socio-political contexts of educational processes and how these contexts relate to experiential learning.

For John Dewey (1997 [1938]), considered one of the founders of experiential learning, it is experience that constitutes the foundation of learning. Dewey was convinced that experience is essential for the development of thinking and intelligence. In this respect, experience is always a world of ideas and is tied to the process of thinking by which we also become aware of ourselves and the world around us. In this sense, experience is also what can be characterised as a construction of reality that is at once personal and social, and as such always dependent on the socio-political context (Banjac et al., 2022, pp. 12–13; see also Jarvis et al., 2004, p. 55). Dewey's theory of experiential learning emphasises the importance of practical and active learning experiences. Dewey's theory therefore fundamentally underlines the importance of linking classroom teaching to real-world experiences, and encourages students to use what they learn in the classroom to participate or help others in the community.

Dewey's premises and the theoretical underpinnings of experiential learning are also an important reference point for David Kolb, whose model of experiential learning is perhaps the most widely used (Seaman et al., 2017). Similarly to Dewey, Kolb (1984) argues that experience is a cornerstone of the learning process (Seaman et al., 2017). In the 1970s, he developed his model of experiential learning, which emphasises the role of experience in the learning process. Kolb's model consists of four stages: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation, and active experimentation (see Banjac et al., 2022).

Kolb (2012) also importantly pointed out that the process of learning from experience is ubiquitous, and in this light, learning is the result of interconnections between the subject and the environment. Learning always involves and is based on a bidirectionality, namely the integration of new experiences into one's existing concepts, ideas, norms and values, and the adaptation of existing concepts, norms, ideas and values to new experiences.

Paul Freire's (1970, 1985) approach is also important from the perspective of teaching citizenship education and politics-related content, as he addressed the issue of power relations and political arrangements, including those related to education systems. Freire (1972) argued that education is not neutral and that it is inherently political, shaping the way individuals understand and interact with the world around them. In this context, education is a means of empowering individuals and communities to take control of their own lives and to strive for social change. Freire proposed a model of education that emphasises engaged attitudes on the part of students and teachers (Freire, 1970).

In the second part of the paper, we reflect on the presence of experiential learning within citizenship education at both primary and secondary school level in the Slovenian formal education system. Citizenship education in Slovenia has a long tradition, stemming from many socio-political contexts and processes. Čepič Vogrinčič et al. (2012, p. 11) argue that one of the contexts for the development of citizenship education can be found in the previous Yugoslav system and socio-moral education, which represented a framework for the transmission of ideas and values related to the social, political and economic order of the time. Since the attainment of independence, however, we have been witnessing a process of gradual change, including modifications of the Slovenian (formal) education system, new socio-political realities at the national, European and global levels, and, at least in part, competing political (ideological) views on what the main goal of citizenship education should be (Banjac and Pušnik, 2015).

The subject Patriotic and civic culture and ethics is part of the compulsory primary school programme according to the Primary School Curriculum (Ministry of Education, 2022) and is taught once a week in grades 7 and 8. In both grades, the subject is therefore taught for 35 hours (70 hours in total), making it the subject with the smallest number of hours in the primary school curriculum. It has been renamed several times in the past, with the first curriculum drawn up in 1999 and updated in 2008 and 2011. The analysis shows that the current curriculum introduces experiential learning only to a certain extent. Namely, merely stating, as the curriculum does, that examples from the students' environment should be used does not mean that experiential learning is being implemented. Furthermore, some additional basic elements of experiential learning are missing (according to Dewey, Kolb and Freire), such as orientations towards the interplay of multiple processes of experiencing, reflective observation, abstracting and conceptualising, and active experimentation. In this sense, experiential learning can be said to be only indirectly used in Patriotic and civic culture and ethics, but not comprehensively operationalised.

Active citizenship is a novelty in the Slovenian education system at the upper secondary school level, as the curriculum documents (the curriculum for grammar school and the knowledge catalogues for vocational, secondary vocational and lower vocational education) were approved in 2020, the same year that Active citizenship became part of the upper secondary school curricula. It is therefore part of upper secondary education; however, it is not a "classic" school subject, but a compulsory subject included in the curricula under the category of other forms of educational work. Active citizenship has several elements of experiential learning, as it emphasises the need for experience, concrete activities and reflecting on them. On the other hand, it is important to stress that experiential learning is only weakly linked to political content and political literacy. The guidelines for teaching citizenship based on experiential learning seem to stand on their own and are not fully operationalised.

In the third part of the article, based on the analysis of the presence of experiential learning within citizenship education in primary and secondary schools, we carried out an in-depth interpretation and conceptualisation of the dimensions of the experiential learning approach as a pedagogical form of implementing citizenship education and, in this context, of the transfer of knowledge and skills related to political content.

A central element of citizenship education is democratic participation and the continuous reflection on democracy in its various meanings. The issue of democracy was central to Dewey (1966) and Freire (1985), both of whom were concerned with similar societal issues such as social inequality, intolerance and exclusion. They saw education not only as a way of addressing these issues, but also as a way of remedying them. Freire is particularly explicit when he argues that as people respond to the challenges of their environment in relation to the world, they begin to dynamise, master and humanise reality (Freire, 2005, p. 4).

Education, according to Dewey (1966, p. 114), has a key role to play here, since schools must be equipped to the extent and in such an effective way that they not only speak about inequality, but also eliminate the effects of economic inequality. Freire also addressed educational spaces as spaces for reducing or eliminating various discriminations, and overcoming injustice and oppression (McLaren and Lankshear, 1994). In this light, citizenship education offers a framework for enacting an engaged education that takes political issues as central (McCowan, 2006).

Such citizenship education requires, as a starting point, the application of broad democratic principles, collective and collaborative action. As McCowan (2006, p. 68) argues, it is not enough for citizenship education to provide a factual, 'dispassionate' and 'politically detached' form of knowledge transfer. Preparing students to become political actors (not in the sense of being politicians, but in the sense of engaging with political issues) does not only result from, and is not based on, the student's accumulation of knowledge, skills and values in the field of politics itself, but depends on deeper processes. The learner must first understand him/herself as a subject in the fundamental ontological sense, capable of influencing external reality, in order to become a political actor.