

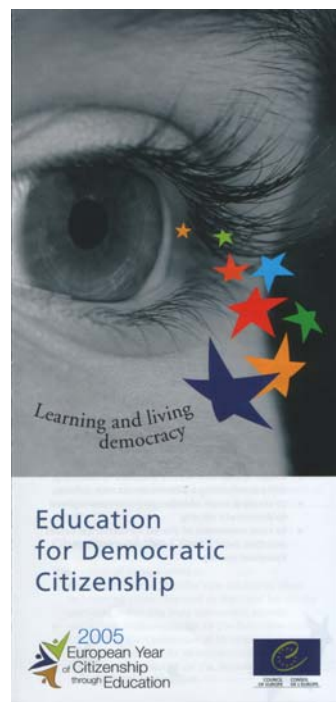
Education for democratic citizenship and its implications on educational assessment practices

by Leonard Grech

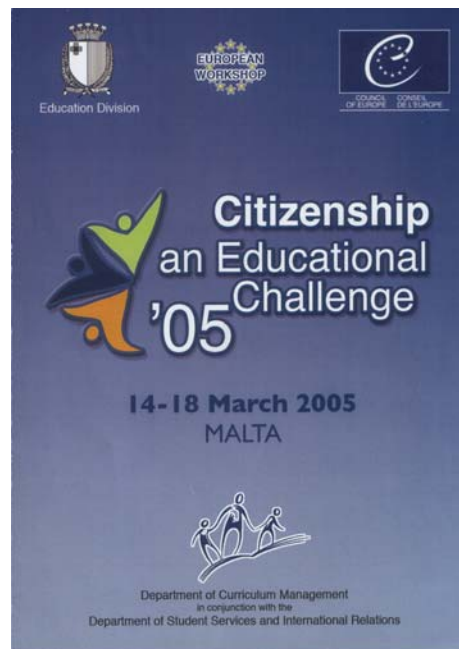
(The following article was first published in two parts in *The Times of Malta* on Friday 14th October and Friday 21st October 2005)

As a first reaction to the title one might perhaps wonder what is the connection between Education for Democratic Citizenship (EDC) and Educational Assessment Practices, particularly those being implemented in Malta. At a closer look, however, one immediately realises that far from being superficial, the relationship is very substantial.

The Council of Europe proclaimed 2005 as the ‘European Year of Citizenship Through Education’. During the year various activities have been taking place in European countries focusing mostly on the role of education in the preparation of young people for democratic citizenship.



Malta is no exception in organising activities of this kind. One of these activities was a five-day-long European Workshop held last March. It was entitled “Citizenship: an Educational Challenge”, and was organised by the Department for Curriculum Management in conjunction with that for Student Services and International Relations. Apart from the Maltese participants there were representatives from ten other European countries. The special guest speaker was Professor Audrey Oster from the Centre for Citizenship and Human Rights Education at the University of Leeds.



Professor Osler captivated her audience with her presentations. She dwelt on the maxim that ‘committed citizens can change the world’, which brings us to the challenge mentioned above, namely that of using education to influence citizenship. It was pointed out that citizenship is not just a status, which gives certain rights to the individual (for example the right to reside in the country, or the right to work and to vote). It is also a feeling intertwined with a sense of identity and therefore a sense of

belonging. Of course this general feeling of unity depends on whether all citizens enjoy equal rights in a given region or country. Discrimination, whether official or not, undermines the concept of citizenship, which has to be founded on justice, solidarity and brotherhood. Citizenship involves the acquisition of certain skills and values - pre-requisites for those who wish to live together despite their differences, be they political, social, religious, racial or cultural. Having a sense of tolerance is not good enough. Respect for the human person is basic if we really want to appreciate each other and truly start celebrating differences.

Considering the fact that in Malta, as elsewhere, society is becoming less and less homogenous in various aspects of life, Professor Osler's remark that citizenship education needs a common platform, assumes significant importance. This common platform has to be the study, the understanding, and the respect for Human Rights. Such rights apply to all, whether citizens of one's country or not, and are therefore universal and indivisible. The documents related to Human Rights include the United Nations Charter (1945), the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), the European Convention of Human Rights (1950), the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), the United Kingdom Human Rights Act (1998), as well as our own Constitution and the European Union Constitution.

It is the respect for Human Rights that guarantees our security, dignity, democracy, freedom and the right to participation. Children have to internalise the concept of reciprocity, that is the idea that “I respect you and you respect me”. This is what solidarity means in practice.

When we speak of Human Rights we are speaking about real people. It is not a question of merely studying the documents. You can have an expert on Human Rights who still feels detached from his or her obligations towards others. Citizenship education in a democracy is a failure unless it results in a sense of commitment to bring about change whenever Human Rights are being violated. It is very comforting to believe that committed citizens can change the world. To achieve this they need to be acquainted with the past so as to understand the present and be able to plan for the future. Children have to be guided in order to be able to realise that certain things should be preserved and other things should be changed. Therefore it is our duty to ensure that children develop those skills which will help them to face change, and other skills which will help them to be change agents.

In the European context, citizenship cannot be separated from democracy. Citizenship is the individual’s relationship with the state and vice versa, as well as the relationship among citizens themselves. Children have to learn to live together in harmony by respecting each other’s rights. This is democracy in practice. During the European Workshop mentioned above, it was noted on more than one occasion that all our efforts would be fruitless unless pupils and students experience democracy at school and at classroom level. Educational assessment was mentioned, both formally during

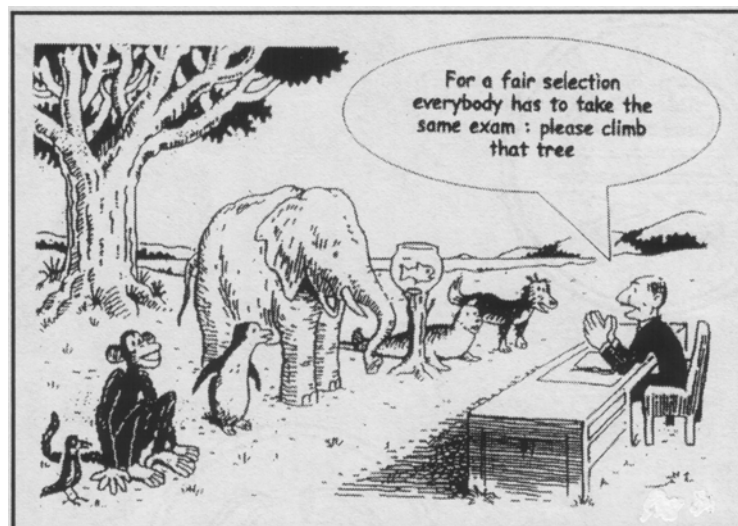
talks and discussions, as well as during lunch breaks. We tried to answer a very basic question, namely whether our practices are in harmony with the spirit of Education for Democratic Citizenship. Presenting practical examples will help to clarify the issue. Government Primary Schools stream pupils in a rigorous way according to academic ability in Years 5 and 6. This matter has been a source of debate for a very long time, with leading people in the education sector expressing their opinion against streaming. In her annual report (2004) the Commissioner for Children expressed herself very strongly against streaming. She even said that streaming goes against children's rights and should therefore be abolished (section 2a.2, p.29). It seems that the policy to stream pupils is in contradiction with our National Minimum Curriculum (1999) which states that "an inclusive education is based on a commitment, on the part of the learning community, to fully acknowledge individual differences and to professing as well as implementing inclusionary politics. This concept recognises the full range of educational interests, potential and needs of students" (p.36).

Streaming can be challenged on at least two grounds. First of all it goes against the concept of fairness. Secondly it groups pupils in such a way that is less conducive to learning than it is with mixed-ability groupings. Parents and other educators need to view these mixed-ability groupings as a gift, presenting "a range of ideas, methods and solutions that provide the material for pupils' discussion and reflection" (Clarke, 2003, p.11).

The Junior Lyceum and the Common Entrance Examination is another matter that has been referred to by the Commissioner for Children. One should seriously reflect on the fact that these examinations are causing extensive and unnecessary pressure and

stress on children, parents and teachers. At the tender age of ten years, the majority of Year 6 pupils sit for at least three examination sessions: the annuals held in February, the Common Entrance exam, and the Junior Lyceum examinations that are held in May. One must also refer to mock tests that are held prior to these examinations.

It is of paramount importance to ask a number of basic questions whose answers have a direct effect on Education for Democratic Citizenship. What type of messages are we transmitting to our children when we send them to different types of schools at the start of secondary education? Are we conveying messages of fairness and of equal opportunities? Is it educationally sound to adopt the criteria of academic ability in order to send children to schools which do not enjoy equal status? Have we thought seriously enough about the negative psychological effects on those children who fail these examinations? Are these selection methods contaminating the message that we can live together in spite of our differences? Before answering such a question we must remember that we are talking of a holistic education, that is one which includes all aspects of the development of the child and not merely the academic. Another question to ask is whether it is fair to impose a common examination on all children without recognising individual differences - which include abilities that are never examined either because we choose not to examine them or because they cannot be examined in the first place. We all know that not all matter that really matters can be assessed.



Source:
Brown (2003),
p. 164

During the European Workshop all participants agreed that there cannot be EDC unless democracy is practised in the classroom. Margot Brown (2003, p.164) points out that “in a democratic and participative school, a range of pedagogies which meet the learning style needs of pupils and offers them the opportunities to practise democratic skills are key elements of education for democratic citizenship.” This type of education cannot exist unless the learners are fully involved in the teaching and learning process. That is perhaps one of the reasons why formative assessment can be considered as being in total harmony with EDC. The learners must know and share the learning objectives as well as the success criteria. Moreover, in this scenario, the children themselves, rather than the teachers, are the protagonists because they construct their own learning.

Indeed, as the Queen pointed out in her Commonwealth Day Message (14th March 2005) “education is a precious gift which should be available to everyone, young and old. Not only does it equip us with the skills and the intellect to overcome the problems we face; it also increases our understanding of, and respect for, other people, whatever our differences may be.” The Queen goes on to quote Nelson Mandela (who may be considered a role model of a citizen) who said that “education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world”.

Bringing about change should be one of the aims of Education for Democratic Citizenship. This education has to be built on fundamental values that include fairness and equality. Everyone must have the fullest opportunity to develop one’s potential.

In view of this we need to reflect seriously on whether certain aspects of our educational assessment practices are really in line with the principles propagated by EDC.

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Mr Grech is an Education Officer at the Educational Assessment Unit. Views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the Education Division.
