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Evaluating Civic Competencies: Toward Good Assessment Practice

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"How can we learn to live together in the 'global village' if we cannot manage to live together in the communities to which we naturally belong – the nation, the region, the city, the village, the neighborhood? Do we want to make a contribution to public life and can we do so? That question is central to democracy," writes the UNESCO commission on education.[2] Ever than the days of the Enlightment, more than two hundred years ago, this question has been on the agenda of humankind, and little progress, we feel has been made toward answering this question. On the contrary, the ability to live together seems to not keep pace with the growing challenges of a quickly growing globalization and the perils of more and more powerful means of destruction. Wars and civil violence seem to have become more frequent and more brutal then ever.

Our educational systems must take this question very seriously, not only in theory but in every-day school-life. For this we have to attend closely to three parts of the educational process: effective educational methods, high teacher qualification, and good evaluation practice. All three parts are equally important and needed so that schools can "make a contribution to public life."

There is no question that schools *want* to make such a contribution. Research convincingly shows that, regardless of cultural background, most, if not all, children as well as adults share the will to live together in peace, to respect other people and to help people in distress. This, it seems, is nothing our schools really need to be concerned about too much. They can and should expect their students to have such a desire deep inside.

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[2] Delor, J., et al. (1996). Learning – The treasure within. Paris: UNESCO.

However, when it comes to judge and act upon our good intentions, all of us are far from being perfect. To a more or lesser extent, all of us lack the ability to listen to our opponents, to solve conflicts through discussion rather than through some form of violence or power, and to apply our high moral principles when we are swayed by our emotions. Schools most urging and honorable task is to teach the abilities needed to bridge this gap between our moral ideals and our behavior.

Yet can our schools fulfill this task? Three questions are of particular importance here: First, do such competencies play a proper role in the curriculum when compared to other educational aims, and do we have the proper methods to teach moral-democratic competencies? Second, are the teachers trained well enough for applying these methods? And third, is their an appropriate evaluation system in place to give us valid information on how effective our schools and teachers are in fostering civic competencies?

While the first two questions have been already addressed by many scholars, politicians and educators, the question of proper evaluation, I believe, has got too little attention yet. Evaluation is very important because we need to know more exactly whether our schools make already a contribution to the development of peace and democracy, and whether extra investments in education do have the expected "returns." Does education really promote civic competencies? Some believe not, because, in their eyes, education wants to prepare children for competition and for the struggle of life in a hostile world. Yet even people, who believe that schools have a democratic destination, are skeptical about their effectiveness. Evaluation research paints a mixed picture, which, however, gives support to some optimism.

Yet, present forms of evaluation do not support, and some even hinder, good methods and good teachers in doing their job. On the long run, a misfit of evaluation policies and educational aims will most certainly undermine any effort to improve civic education. Here are some examples. If we test only reading and mathematics skills, even the best-minded teacher will be discouraged to spend time and energy on civic education. If we evaluate schools, teachers and students only externally rather than letting them participate in the process and encourage self-evaluation, we provide the wrong role-model for democratic life. If we allow sloppy evaluation designs, by which we cannot draw unambiguous inferences in causes and effects, we stimulate chaotic discussions on the right educational policy making.

Worldwide, there is overwhelming evidence that education is effective in promoting civic competencies, and that it is even by far the most effective institution in this regard. Yet, this finding needs qualification. Most studies have actually dealt with civic *ideals* and civic *knowledge* rather with civic *competencies*. So this is not really evidence but inference.

Recently we made some progress. At the University of Konstanz in Germany, we have developed a new way to test children's ability to really respect others' point of views and to engage in a democratic discourse. Together with many researchers all over the world we have gathered new evidence. It was found that in fact most educational systems foster moral-democratic competencies effectively. This is especially true in central and northern European countries. Yet even in countries like Colombia, schools make a differences, as two large-scale studies by the District of Bogotá have shown. In one study, the moral-democratic competency of students increased markedly from grade 7 and 9, and was about as high as in European students. However, as another study showed, the development of this competence seems to come to an halt at grade 9. In the last two years of high school no progression seems to take place. Unfortunately, there are no studies yet that can help to explain this. We can only speculate that either teachers are not sufficiently prepared to foster these competencies beyond a certain level (which would emphasize the need to improve teacher education), or that the pressure on getting good marks increases as the kids approach graduation tests, which leaves less and less opportunities for practicing civic competencies in school. We should also keep in mind that these studies like most others were only snapshots and cannot be regarded as proper evaluation studies.

These examples may suffice to illustrate that in the field of civic education, the question of good evaluation practice has not yet been answered. To allow valid conclusions for educational policy making, good evaluation studies must fulfill six basic requirements:

- First, evaluation studies be grounded in a careful definition of the educational aims and standards; in many instances, we are not clear enough about what we want education to do: to instill civic values (e.g., democracy, peace), or civic knowledge (e.g., What is the name of the president? What is the meaning of democracy?), or civic competency (e.g., Can the student really listen to an opponent while emotionally aroused?).
- Second, they need to employ valid assessment instrument, which exactly measure what they are supposed to measure; in many instances we use civic attitudes or vocabulary as

rough “indicators” of civic competencies rather than try hard to assess such competencies themselves.

- Third, evaluation must focus on methods and policies rather than on humans or groups of humans, and must invoke peoples’ “intrinsic” motivation to learn, and avoid extrinsic motivation to succeed; when people (rather than methods and policies) are evaluated and sanctioned, such evaluation becomes “uncertain.” As two educational researchers, Audrey Amrein and David Berliner, explain, in order to protect themselves from humiliation and punishment, people invest most of their energy into producing good “marks” rather than into learning and development, and this is actually working against the very aims we pursue. The sanctioned test scores of students increase yet their competencies decrease.
- Fourth, evaluation must not only assess “output” (that is, what degree of civic competence the students have reached on a certain grade level) but also “input” (that is, what level of competence the same students have brought with them); otherwise we cannot attribute gains or losses in civic competencies to the effort of teachers and schools. The above cited findings were all from “one-shot” (cross-sectional) studies, and not, as required, from follow-up studies of the same students before and after they were taught civic competencies.
- Fifth, evaluation studies must aim at quantifying the amount of civic competencies gained through schooling rather than saying whether or not gains were achieved. Only through this quantification, we can say whether or not our investments in civic education “pay off”, and can convince the public that substantial expenses for civic education are justified. Only through this quantification (e.g., by calculating measures of “effect sizes”), we can also see how much bad educational practice impeded moral-democratic development.

In the past seven years, the Secretary of Education of the District of Bogotá has made an unusual effort to integrate the development of better educational methods and teacher training programs in the area of civic education, and to properly evaluate this. As first results from this evaluation show that these efforts pay off well. Schools, teachers, parents and students welcome new methods of fostering moral-democratic competencies like “dilemma discussion” and are eager to learn how to apply them. The teachers who have participated in a special continuing education program report that this program has effects far beyond civic education. It has strongly increased their motivation to teach, made their students more willing to learn, and improved the working climate in the schools. Assessments before and

after the program showed that the teachers also developed higher moral judgment competence during the course. In new studies in Germany, evaluation studies have shown that new methods like dilemma discussion can triple the effects of past civic education. To achieve such an success, we had not only to improve our method of teaching and the qualification of the teachers, but also the way we evaluate our efforts.

More information is available under the author's web-address:
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