

# Citizenship education in Slovenia between past and future

**Marjan Šimenc**

## Introduction

It can be argued that there is a plurality of factors that influence civic knowledge of citizens, formal education being just one of them. Equally or more important are for instance media, peer groups and everyday experience of the students - in the final analysis society itself and its political culture should be studied in order to get a complete picture of civic education in a particular country. In this article the scope of analysis will be limited to the primary and secondary level of formal education leaving aside not only non-formal but also post-secondary and adult education. The object of my analysis is therefore just civic education in primary and secondary schools.

Before the examination of curriculum and teaching practices some general remarks, perhaps even more important than formal documents, are necessary for the understanding of civic education in Slovenia.

Slovenia has experienced a transition from a one-party system to a parliamentary democracy at the end of the eighties. One of the most obvious effects of that process at the level of the educational system was the abolishment of two explicit ideological subjects. A subject called "self management and the fundamentals of Marxism" was withdrawn from the curriculum of secondary schools. In primary school, the "social and moral education" was transformed into an experimental subject named "ethics in society". At the same time a rethinking of the educational system, which had started with the theoretical and practical opposition to the school reform in the seventies has been going on. The result was The White Paper on Education in the Republic of Slovenia which provided the conceptual solutions for the set of laws on education adopted in 1996.

Major emphasis of The White Paper, as summarised in an unpublished review of the educational policy in Slovenia, were: the public education system

- should be transparent and open;
- should be "legally neutral", in the sense that it should not adopt any particular ideology;
- should provide the possibility of choice at all levels;
- should encourage democracy in the decision-making in the system;
- should be a "quality" system emphasising learning rather than accumulation of facts.

As will become clear below, for our discussion "legal neutrality" and "quality" of the public education system are the elements that have important consequences for the conceptualisations of civic education in Slovenia. It is also important that in its introductory part, entitled Principles and Theoretical Point of Departure, The White Paper explicitly singled out the importance of citizenship education. In the context of school autonomy the importance of civic literacy was emphasised: "Due to the characteristics of the period in history which we live in, we should especially stress civic literacy and the knowledge of human rights." (Krek 1996, 44) Even more important, "education for and participation in democratic processes" was established as one of the basic principles of the Slovene education system:

"The essential premise for the participation in the democratic processes is the development of a critical spirit, personal decision-making, and autonomous judgement. School plays an important role in forming a democratic public, and in the development of the capacity to participate in the democratic processes. The contents of curricula (variations of the so called citizenship education) as well as their forms

## Inhalt

Introduction

Citizenship education and ethics

Status: in between

A brief description of the courses

References

are important for such a process." (Krek 1996, 48)

To some extent these principles are reflected in the general goals of primary and secondary education. The Law on the Elementary Schools in Article 2 includes a list of 14 goals to be achieved by elementary education. Among them there are three closely related to the conceptual space of civic education:

- to foster the feeling of citizenship and national identity as well as the knowledge of Slovene history and culture;
- to educate for mutual tolerance and respect for being different, willingness to cooperate, respect for human rights and basic freedoms and, consequently, develop the ability to live in a democratic society;
- to provide general and applied knowledge enabling pupils to face their social and natural environment independently, efficiently and creatively and to develop the capacity for critical judgement.

National identity, tolerance and critical judgement are important elements of civic education. However, at the level of the national education the aims of the compulsory education concept of citizenship are not explicitly mentioned. It is present in a more implicit form, in the expression "to develop ability to live in a democratic society". When the Law on the Elementary School was adopted by the parliament, the subject with the name Civic Education was not included in the list of compulsory subjects. The subject "Ethics and Society" was on the list. Its name was changed, as a result of negotiations between the parties of the coalition government, into "Citizenship Education and Ethics". As the reader might have guessed, this is not the usual practice. It shows that citizenship education is one of the privileged places where newly created democracy is trying to define itself.

## Citizenship education and ethics

This change, which required a change of the law, was just one episode in a long history of the subject. It was introduced in Slovene primary schools in 1953, under the name "Social and Moral Education", with the intention to abolish the (Roman Catholic) church "monopoly on moral education" and to provide a substitute for religious education. (Kodelja 1995, 164) With the introduction of eight-year primary school in 1958 it was replaced with the subject "Foundations of Socialist Morality" that was 14 years later renamed "Socio-Moral Education". In primary school it had a form of separate subject only in the grades 7 and 8 (one hour per week). Yet its content was in other grades in other subjects of primary school included. In the first years this was the task of a class teacher, and in grade 6 it was usually the task of the Slovene language teacher. Its main goal was a transmission of so the called "socialist morality".

In 1991 experimental subject "ethic and society" was introduced as a replacement for ideological "Socio-Moral Education" (at least at the level of official documents, in practise it is often something 'completely different'). A great number of schools applied for a membership in the project and experimental subject soon lost its experimental status. Some of the main aims of the new subject were: knowledge of values and relations; knowledge of human beings and society; development of the culture of dialogue; development of cognitive and behavioural skills. The content of the subject was articulated in 14 topics. The evaluation of the project showed that there is a considerable interest among the students for the following themes: human relations; differences between people; the place of human being in the different religions; knowledge and education; war, peace and non-violence, media and society. The least interesting were considered the following themes: humanism; cooperation and solidarity; tolerance; human rights and freedom; the Slovene nation and state. One of the results of the evaluation was a conclusion that there had been two main areas of moral education: the first dealing with the transmission of ideological interpretation of morality and society, the second being closely connected with the developmental problems of adolescents. The teachers had used different strategies to avoid the first and considered the second as the most important goal of the subject. (Justin 1997) This selective reading of the syllabus had been possible since in the eighties the socialist ideology was in decline and nobody expected

teachers to take ideological subjects "seriously". As a consequence, teachers had experienced the greatest degree of freedom teaching the subject which was supposed to include the greatest degree of indoctrination. Consequently, some of them would experience any transformation of the subject as potential limitations of the freedom they achieved in the past.

Besides the history of the subject, there are two other factors that are important for understanding the place of civic education in Slovenia. Slovene public space in the nineties has been dominated by two debates. The first one is a debate about knowledge, the second one about values and about religious instruction in public schools.

The debate about knowledge is in fact not a debate since the view that the curriculum is dominated by facts has faced little opposition. It is commonly believed that one of the major problems of the Slovene educational system is that students need to learn too much information while higher cognitive levels are neglected. As mentioned before, that was in fact one of the goals of the reform: the system should become a "quality" system emphasising learning rather than the accumulation of facts. And it is not surprising that learning facts is not popular among students either: among less popular topics included in the subject "ethics and society" one finds "Slovene nation and state", that is a topic which requires empirical knowledge about the organisation of the Slovene political system.

Perhaps an even more important influence is the debate about values. The White Paper took as a starting point universally accepted values that are to be found in international documents on human rights. The critics claimed and still do that the reformed Slovene school is without values. In the centre of this discussion is the place of religious education in public schools. From the end of World War II the religious instruction has not been part of the school system. After the regime's change at the end of the eighties the Catholic Church supported the introduction of religious instruction into public schools. Because of the important tradition of criticism of ideological nature of schooling, it was unavoidable that the desire of the Catholic Church to (re)introduce religious instruction in public schools was met with resistance. The attempts to introduce religious education in public schools were understood as attempts to exchange one particular and therefore exclusive value system with another. It is worth mentioning that the opposition to the introduction of this new subject was also motivated by the Slovene legal system, by the constitutional separation of the State from the church.

The introduction of religious instruction into public schools could have decisive consequences for the position of civic education. In the existing organisation of civic education in Slovenia there is a specific subject compulsory for all primary school students. It only teaches values which are part of the broad consensus on basic values. If religious instruction became a public schools subject it could not be compulsory for all students. Therefore an alternative would be needed for those students who would not want to choose it. In some of the discussions, civic education or its equivalents, perceived by some as lay ethics, was proposed as the alternative subject. At the moment religious education is not part of the primary school curriculum. However, during the reform a new optional subject, "Ethics and Religion" has been introduced into the primary school curriculum with the intention to give objective, plural and critical information about the religions of the world. Another important change has also been introduced: after a forty-year period of one educational system the new legislation reintroduces the right to establish private (confessional and non-confessional) schools and provides considerable state financial support for them.

The Slovene Catholic Church and political parties with some affiliation with it are not entirely satisfied with the present state. It is often claimed, in professional journals and daily newspapers, that without religious education (catechism) no moral education is possible. As one theologian has written: "The conviction that ethics and human behaviour are dependent on religion is today well spread. Even though it seems that more and more people do not build their moral behaviour mainly upon a religious basis the thought that contemporary moral crisis is connected (also) with dry and cracked ground of the religious culture, and also with the marginalization of the Church influence, is nevertheless more and more spread." (Potocnik 1996, 93) It is obvious that the debate is far from being over.

## **Status: in between**

The system of education in Slovenia starts with non-compulsory pre-school education for children between the age of 1 and 6. At the age of 7 (after the reform at the age of 6) students enter eight-year (after the reform 9) compulsory primary school (which consists of primary and lower secondary level). After finishing primary school students may enrol in a (upper) secondary school of one of the following types: grammar school which prepares students for further studies; technical and vocational schools which prepare students for employment; short term vocational programmes. The duration of grammar school is 4 years, the duration of the vocational schools is 2 to 4-years and the duration of technical schools is 4 to 5-years.

The Slovene educational system is now in an "in between" period. The changes are being introduced gradually, so the old system partly still exists. For instance, the new curriculum for primary school has only been implemented in a number of pilot primary schools. In the school year 2003/2004 it will be introduced in all schools. The consequence is that at the moment the subjects are being taught according to two different sets of syllabuses.

According to the new curricula, civic education is present at all levels. It is present implicitly, in subjects like history, geography and Slovene language at all levels, and in sociology and philosophy in grammar school. However, the elements of civic education which are present in these subjects are not, if we put declarations aside, result of carefully preparation or planning. They are more side effects than result of the explicit intentions of expert groups to establish civic education as a cross-curricular subject. The reason for this is the absence of effective tradition of cross-curricular themes in Slovenia. If one would say that the best way to achieve a minimal representation of a certain topic in the school curriculum is to include it as a cross-curricular topic (and not as a separate subject), this would not be a completely inaccurate description of the Slovene school system at the moment.

In primary schools civic education is represented as a compulsory subject "Citizenship Education and Ethics", in grade 7 and 8, one hour per week. In grade 9 there is an elective subject "Civic Culture". In grammar school it is present as a compulsory elective content. In 3-year vocational schools "Civic Culture" is a special area within the subject called "Social Sciences".

## **A brief description of the courses**

The "Citizenship Education and Ethics" is the most important place of the citizenship education in Slovenia and will be dealt with later. For the other courses mentioned above just a brief description will be given. "Civic Culture" is an elective subject (one hour per week) in grade 9. The syllabus is conceived as a continuation of the "Citizenship Education and Ethics" and it includes topics like human rights, tolerance, discrimination, prejudices, etc.

In grammar school citizenship education is one of the compulsory elective courses. Each school has to carry out 15 hours of "Civic Culture". In comparison with other subjects, compulsory electives are different because there are no syllabuses set at the national level, only recommendations, and they are as a rule performed as projects, discussions, excursions etc. Recommendations for "Civic Culture" include a list of 5 topics (the constitutional order of the Republic of Slovenia, government, individual-society-state, political systems, the economic system of the Republic of Slovenia), and the course should include 3 topics from the list. Because there is little evidence as to the effectiveness of the elective contents it is difficult to estimate to what extend civic culture as an elective content contributes to the civic education of the students. However, a widespread opinion is that there is still enough space for improvement in this area.

In 2 and 3-year vocational schools "Civic Culture" is included into "Social Sciences". The subject consists of three parts: History, Geography and Civic Culture. The topics that should be dealt with in the latter are: myself and others, religions and beliefs, authority and rebels, rights and responsibilities, elections, market, social policy, the world I live in. The two-year programs contain 85 hours of "Social Sciences", three-year dual system programs contain 105 hours of "Social

Sciences" and three-year non-dual programs 210 hours.

Four-year vocational education and training programs do not have a unified "social sciences" subject as a part of their respective curricula. Instead separate subjects, namely History, Geography and Sociology are to be found. It seems that the programs do not contain proper civic education contents because in the course of the curricular reform the three traditional scientific disciplines have occupied the whole space. However, it could be argued that in these programs some elements of the subject Civic Culture have been included in History, Geography and Sociology. The problem is that this has not been done as a result of intentional planning, as mentioned before, and without enough attention to the education of the teachers. As a consequence in the transition from formal to implemented curriculum these implicit civic related contents might get lost.

After this brief overview of civic education in other programs I will concentrate on the primary school subject "Citizenship Education and Ethics". There are several reasons for this choice. The most important one is the fact that the subject is a compulsory subject of a compulsory primary school. This means that the whole generation of students are exposed to it. On the other hand the public debate about civic education was concentrated on this subject, forgetting somehow that there are other subjects and other aspects of civic education too. So the subject has a kind of symptomatic role. In some sense it embodies the dilemmas that exist in Slovene society about civic education. I do not want to claim that it represents Slovene conception of citizenship education since the subject is rather controversial and there is no general consensus as to the role it should fulfil. But it could be claimed it reflects this controversial status of the citizenship education in Slovenia.

The syllabus has been carefully prepared. An advisory group consisting of 12 experts was nominated. Three of them were the teachers of the subject "Ethics and Society", 2 professors from the theological faculty, 3 from the philosophical faculty (one philosopher, one psychologist, one from department for comparative literary studies), one from the teachers training college, one from social sciences faculty and one from education research institute. It seems that members from different faculties were seen as a kind of guarantee that different views on civic, value and moral education were represented. The construction of the syllabus involved negotiations between different views and the resulting syllabus was a compromise acceptable to all members of the group. It is to be expected that the syllabus that results from such a process does not take as its starting point one clear definition of citizenship but rather includes elements from different approaches.

In fact, in the syllabus no special definition of citizenship education is given. The subject is characterized rather vaguely: "In the subject students acquire knowledge about society, reflect upon their experiences and develop their capacities for understanding and solving ethical questions. The educational process fosters the development of skills that enable students to participate more autonomously in the life of community. At the end of primary education the subject Civic Society and Ethics connects already acquired knowledge about the social phenomena and the awareness of ethical questions into rounded up, internally coherent yet open interpretative wholes." (Schlamberger 2002, 5)

The description of the subject refers to knowledge about society and participation in the community. The conceptual framework consists of a general concept of society and community rather than more specific the political system or government or citizenship. The vocabulary is neutral yet there is a subtle implication: the subject deals with society and not with politics. This avoidance of politics in a narrow sense is also noticeable at the level of aims. Three types of aims are given:

- a) Acquisition of knowledge that enables young people to develop independent answers to social and ethical questions.
- b) Development of ethical attitudes and skills that are a precondition for independent, free and responsible social action.
- c) Development of capacities for forming relatively complex and internally articulated civic and moral judgements and basis for moral action.

This avoidance of citizenship in hard sense might be motivated by historical reasons. As mentioned before, a subject called "Self-Management and the Fundamentals of Marxism" was part of the curriculum of the Slovene secondary schools. One of its aims, besides indoctrination, was knowledge about the political and economic system. Ideology and information about the system were thus closely connected. Not only because of their factual connection in the same subject but also because a neutral description of the system was not possible: what was given as a neutral description of the economic and political system already presupposed a certain ideological position. This might be one of the factors that lead to the present situation in which learning about the political system has little place in the syllabus.

On the other hand one of the aims of the reform, as mentioned above, was a creation of a "quality" system emphasising learning rather than accumulation of facts. In the context of the prevailing belief that in the schools too much rote learning is taking place it is natural to construct a syllabus in which lower-level objectives from Bloom's taxonomy play a minor role.

If we examine the topics that are prescribed by the syllabus we find the following situation. The content of the subject comprises both compulsory and optional themes. Compulsory themes are:

- life in the community (nation, state);
- family;
- role models and authorities;
- how we communicate and how we decide;
- mass media and information;
- generations and cultures;
- religions and faiths, Christianity;
- dealing with common questions: the question of democracy;
- vocation and work;
- future society.

In addition to these 10 compulsory themes the syllabus specifies additional 18 optional themes; no indication is given as to the time to be spent for each topic so it seems that the teacher has a considerable degree of freedom when deciding how much time to spend on each compulsory theme and how much on compulsory themes as opposed to optional ones.

The central recommendation to be found in the chapter "Didactical recommendations" emphasises the "specific epistemic interest of the student" (Schlamberger 2002, 33): "The conception of the subject 'Citizenship Education and Ethics' has as its starting point the specific epistemic interest of the youth and their experiences, acquired in their immediate environment (family, peer groups, school)." As a didactical recommendation that emphasises the importance of personal experiences of the students and their pre-understanding (of society and ethics) this is indeed an essential element of successful teaching of every subject. However, since nothing is written about the strategies for teaching the themes which students do not find interesting this might be understood in a sense that these topics do not need to be taught. In this way subjective feeling of the students about the topics might play the decisive role in the evaluation of its importance: if students say the topic is not interesting then it is not interesting. Of course, there is an additional problem: how do students know that a certain topic is not interesting if they do not know it.

If civic education is to be construed to encompass the preparation of young people for their roles and responsibilities as citizens, this is not an entirely appropriate starting point. Yet in the international IEA research on civic knowledge Slovene students did reasonably well on the knowledge test (their performance was a bit above the international average) so this aspect of curriculum has no obvious negative effects on their knowledge. Yet when asked about the structure of the Slovene parliament 44% students chose "the government and the president of the State" as the correct answer (and showed that the separation of power is not something they are familiar with). And only 30% of the students knew that the Slovene parliament consists of lower and upper house. Since taking part in general elections and selecting members of parliament is one of the most obvious manifestation of citizenship answers to the "Slovene parliament" question it might have a symptomatic role. But before going any further a note of warning is appropriate. Students who took part at IEA research went to school before the new syllabus was introduced. One can now only speculate about the knowledge of the new generations who are exposed to the new

curriculum. It is a fact, though, that the new syllabus does not give enough guarantee that the students will get the minimal information that is necessary for understanding their future role of a citizen. But it is also a fact that expectation should be limited if the subject has only 70 hours in two years.

The fact that "Citizenship Education and Ethics" has just one hour per week has an unexpected consequence. For the teachers teaching it this is (just) their second or third subject. Since they spend the majority of time teaching some other subject (IEA study has shown that for most of the "Ethics and Society" teachers history was their first subject, although Slovene language and geography teachers are also strongly represented) it is reasonable to suppose they spend more time preparing for them. When they were asked about the improvements needed the majority of them answered that they need more in service training about civic education related contents. Better teaching material and additional training in instructional methods were considered less important. This does not come as a surprise if one takes into account the recent history of Slovenia. It would be fair to say that teachers themselves might have difficulties understanding the changes in the economic, social and political system.

To conclude with, the position and status of civic education in the curriculum of the Slovene schools is secured. There is a traditional place in curriculum for this type of a subject. However, there is an absence of a tradition of effective cooperation between teachers of different subjects; this cooperation is essential for cross-curricular teaching of citizenship education. Even though it is often emphasised in official documents that certain themes should be dealt with in all subjects in reality little has been done to assure this coverage. One of the future challenges for citizenship education in Slovenia is certainly to continue this discussion with the teachers of civic related subjects. And to reflect upon civic related topics in all the subjects in order to make sure this topics really become part of the implemented curriculum. Last but not least: "ethics and society" was a non-assessed subject. However, teachers are required to assess students in "citizenship education and ethics". The decision on appropriate assessment arrangements is one of the biggest challenges facing citizenship education in Slovenia in the near future.

## References

**Justin, J. (1997):** Etika, družba, država. [Ethics, society, state]. Ljubljana: Pedagoški inštitut.

**Kerr, D./ Sardoc, M. (2002):** Redefining Citizenship Education: Common Parallels and Challenges. *The School Field* 2002, 3-4, 7-23.

**Kodelja, Z. (1995):** Laicna šola pro et contra. [Secular public school - pro et contra]. Ljubljana: Mladinska knjiga.

**Kodelja, Z. (1999):** The Teaching about Religion at Slovene Public Schools. *The School Field* 1999, 3-4, 153-157.

**Krek, J./ Šebart, M. (1999):** Državljska vzgoja, vrednote in izkustvo zloma iluzije. [Citizenship education, values and the experience of the breakdown of an illusion]. *Sodobna pedagogika*, 116, 118-139.

**Krek, J. (ed.) (1996):** White Paper on Education in the Republic of Slovenia. Ljubljana: Ministry of Education and Sport.

**Pecek, M. (1994):** Od družbenomoralne vzgoje k pouku o človekovih pravicah. [From social and moral education to teaching human rights]. *Casopis za kritiko znanosti*, 172-173, 119-126.

**Potocnik, V. (1996):** Poklicna etika v luci nereligiozne kulture. [Professional ethics in the light of non-religious culture]. In: Ludvik Toplak (Ed.) *Profesionalna etika pri delu z ljudmi*. Maribor: Univerza, 93-104.

**Razdevšek-Pucko Cveta, P. A. (1998):** The Slovenian Context. In: Stephenson, Joan; Ling, Lorraine; Burman, Eva; Cooper, Maxine. eds. *Values in Education*. London: Routledge, 110-130.

**Schlamberger, N. (ed.) (2002):** Učni nacrt: Državljska vzgoja in etika. etika [Citizenship education and ethics - syllabus]. Ljubljana: Ministrstvo za šolstvo, znanost in šport.

**Štrajn, D. (1999):** Citizenship in View of Public Controversy in Slovenia: Some Reflection. In: Torney -Purta, Judith; Schwille, John; Amadeo, Jo-Ann, eds. Civic Education Across Countries: Twenty-four National Case Studies from IEA Civic Education Project. Amsterdam: IEA, 545-556.

**Štrajn, D. (2002):** Civic Education and the Liberal Paradigm. *The School Field*, 20002/6, 145-153.

**Torney-Purta, J./ Lehmann, R./ Oswald, H./ Schulz, W. (2001):** Citizenship and Education in Twenty-eight Countries. Amsterdam: IEA.

---

KeyWords: civic education, Slovenia, citizenship education and ethics, The White Paper, project ethics and society, the Slovene educational system, civic culture, primary and secondary education, Social and Moral Education, debate about knowledge, debate about values, religious instruction, Social Sciences



■ (c) 2003 [sowi-online e.V.](http://www.sowi-online.de), Bielefeld ■ Leading Editor of Online Journal for Social Science Education 2-2003: Reinhold Hedtke ■ WWW-Presentation: Norbert Jacke ■ Processing: Saad eddine Fidaoui ■ URL: [http://www.sowi-onlinejournal.de/2003-2/slovenia\\_simenc.htm](http://www.sowi-onlinejournal.de/2003-2/slovenia_simenc.htm) ■ Publishing date: 2003/11/28