



Students - Teachers of the Future, Citizenship, and Inclusive Rights in Education

Lindita Lutaj¹

Ambera Duka²

¹Prof.Assoc.Dr., Department of Pedagogy, Faculty of Education,
Aleksander Moisiu" University, Durrës, Albania

²Doc. Dr., Department of Pedagogy, Faculty of Education,
Aleksander Moisiu" University, Durrës, Albania

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Abstract

The demand of equipping students with knowledge, skills, expression, attitudes, and values that aim to prepare them as future teachers in the exercise and protection of rights and responsibilities in society, in Albanian universities, is increasing. The study was conducted with 90 students of the Professional Master's program "Elementary Education" and the Bachelor's program "Pre-School Education" at the Faculty of Education, Aleksander Moisiu University in Durrës. The aim of this study is to assess the students' evaluation of programs that contribute to their civic development and prepare them for roles and responsibilities in society as teachers who will work in inclusive education and training of younger generations. The study methodology is based on reviewing the literature in the field, analysing the questionnaire responses from the students, and processing the data collected from the focus group conducted with the students. The study revealed that the university program places importance on the civic education and formation of students through the courses offered in this field. It was evident that teaching has improved in the level of theoretical knowledge and practical skills of the students. The establishment of a fair balance between theoretical information and practical activities is considered important. The study confirmed that the role of the teacher is crucial in the civic education and formation of students. The significance of this study lies in increasing students' confidence in their roles and responsibilities as future teachers, strengthening their role in safeguarding and respecting the rights of children, particularly those with disabilities, and promoting freedom of speech and respect for human dignity. The inclusion of civic education and human rights courses in all programs of the Faculty of Education, which prepares teachers, was seen as a necessity by all students. This is because, after completing this faculty, they will be in contact with students, which will enable the enhancement of students' benefits and their preparation as worthy citizens of a democratic society.

Keywords: Civic education, civic formation, responsibility, future teacher

1. Introduction

Values such as dignity, justice, equality, non-discrimination, and active participation have been extensively discussed in our society and globally. These principles and concepts are not only part of civilized countries but of all nations. In 1948, for the first time, nations worldwide agreed upon a set of principles to ensure the dignity, protection, and development of all human beings.

Based on previous studies conducted by various organizations on the use of violence in the school environment, as well as observations made during professional practices, a dilemma is noticed regarding the respect for children's rights. It is not uncommon to hear reports in the media of denial and lack of respect for these rights by teachers, which

escalates into more severe forms such as psychological and physical violence.

The Albanian state guarantees the respect and protection of human rights/children's rights through the Constitution of Albania. The university curriculum includes issues of civic education and human rights, extended across several subjects. The teacher is one of the key actors in transmitting knowledge, shaping expressions, skills, and civic values to future teacher students, preparing them to assume roles and responsibilities in the education and inclusive development of younger generations, worthy of their country and the wider community.

The fundamental feature of human rights education methods is interaction, meaning that a student recognizes, learns, and defends their rights, as well as fulfills the responsibilities that arise when they interact with others, when they ask questions, discuss, seek, discover, and maintain attitudes towards different phenomena.

The inclusion of human rights elements in the curriculum consists of three elements: learning about human rights, learning through human rights, and learning about human rights (Ian Lister, 1994). The presentation of learning involves a variety of procedures and strategies for explaining and processing teaching materials, as well as creating active and long-term learning experiences.

The purpose of education on children's rights is to create a peaceful society based on reciprocity and the essential values of all individuals (Reardon, 1998). Education on human rights is "learning that develops knowledge, skills, and values of human rights" (Human Rights Educators Network, 1998, p.21). Reardon believes that the basis of education should be action-oriented (Reardon, 1998). Students should develop decision-making skills to exercise their rights and responsibilities. Learning and teaching about human rights involve not only knowledge but also active skills and behaviors that represent values such as freedom, tolerance, and respect for truth (Lister, 1984).

The curriculum program provides teacher students with knowledge about civic education, children's rights, and the rights of children with special needs. Students acquire in-depth knowledge about the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, the place of children's rights and those with special needs in the Constitution of the Republic of Albania, knowledge about institutions protecting children with special needs, etc. Through the activities carried out, students acquire diverse and interactive methodologies for integrating children's rights in general and those with special needs in the school curriculum for civic education and formation, equipping future teachers with professional competencies. The main focus lies in raising awareness among teacher students about the work they should do with students with special needs, the methods and approaches they should follow to educate values respecting the human dignity of everyone, while familiarizing themselves with civic competence, crucial in a society that aspires to democracy.

The recognition and respect for civic values that teacher students should possess in order to educate tolerance, understanding, compromise, and cooperation in their communities hold importance. They should analyze the significance of recognizing and respecting children's rights, argue the role of fundamental institutions in their protection, whether those of the United Nations or the European Union, appreciate the role our country has played and continues to play in protecting.

2. Literature Review

Education for children's rights is more than just an issue. It is a way of thinking about the world, the inclusion and implementation of human rights principles, respect for human dignity, acceptance of diversity, tolerance, and equality. For a teacher, it is not enough to have knowledge about educating children's rights; they must also demonstrate and transmit values to students through their behavior and teaching methods, as students learn more from what teachers do than from what they say.

Democratic civic education encompasses a range of fundamental concepts and values that are common to all modern democracies. The principles of democracy are universal, but their implementation is carried out in accordance with the specific circumstances of each society, so students are prepared to live as citizens in a democratic society. Member states should support the inclusion of education for democratic citizenship and human rights in higher education institutions, especially those that prepare future teachers, while respecting the principle of academic freedom of these institutions¹.

Citizenship education goes beyond the boundaries of school and community and challenges the division that exists between formal and non-formal education, between curriculum-based activities and extracurricular ones, as well as

¹*Recommendation CM/Rec (2010)7 of the Committee of Ministers on the Council of Europe Charter on Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights Education (Adopted by the Committee of Ministers on 11 May 2010 at its 120th Session), pp.7.*

between schooling and socialization. As such, it develops the interactive nature of the teaching and learning process and promotes the continuous exchange of roles between teachers and students. At the same time, by focusing on acquiring the necessary skills and competences for action and social change, citizenship education retains all the characteristics of a deliberate human endeavor that harmonizes theorizing with public discourse.

"British studies have shown that giving responsibilities within the school system has a significant impact on students. Giving responsibilities is an expression of trust in students' abilities and helps teachers establish higher behavioral standards. It also has positive effects on students' behavior and their achievements in lessons".

In Austria, master's programs in civic education, organized by various universities, are available to teachers of all subjects and all schools. They are designed to support teachers in implementing civic education as effectively as possible within their specialized subject and/or the fundamental principles of education for civic education.

"Letting go of civic learning is like letting go of a fundamental pillar of American democracy. Our commitments to civic equality, democratic responsibility, public discourse, and a political culture based on shared values all depend on broad civic knowledge, skills, and inclinations."

"The law grants the government the right to issue a series of legislative decrees to regulate these aspects, among other things: the content of the curriculum in the school education system, the duties and characteristics of the national assessment system, the criteria for student transition from the high school system to the vocational education and training system, school-work changes, the norm for the state examination at the end of the first cycle of the education system, and the initial and in-service training of teachers".

The integration of children's rights in the teaching process is important because these rights, when addressed in all subjects, become knowledge and later expressions. The learning of children's rights becomes more interesting for students because they are treated in diverse ways and forms in different subjects. Implementing the teaching of rights through activities makes classroom lessons more engaging and attractive. The education of children's rights is oriented towards several independent areas: learners, knowledge, concepts, teaching practices, as well as interdisciplinary projects.

The role of the university in teacher training and certification, as well as ensuring the quality of teaching, is of great importance. The university plays a fundamental role in preparing student teachers since the teacher diagnoses students' behavior, plans, initiates, and supervises learning activities in the classroom. They need to understand the students' real experiences in school, know and comprehend their families and communities they come from in order to be effective in their work.

The university contributes to the preparation of future teachers, primarily as responsible citizens of the country. "Usually, the word 'citizen' is defined as a member of society. In reality, a citizen cannot be simply a member of society. From this perspective, a citizen is an active constituent of the human community, capable of understanding and fulfilling their rights and responsibilities as a member of that community"².

3. Methodology

This study highlights the role of university programs in the civic education of students preparing to become teachers in the pre-university education system, the relationship between theoretical information and practical activities, and the role of the pedagogue in engaging students in teaching and implementing various activities in the instructional process.

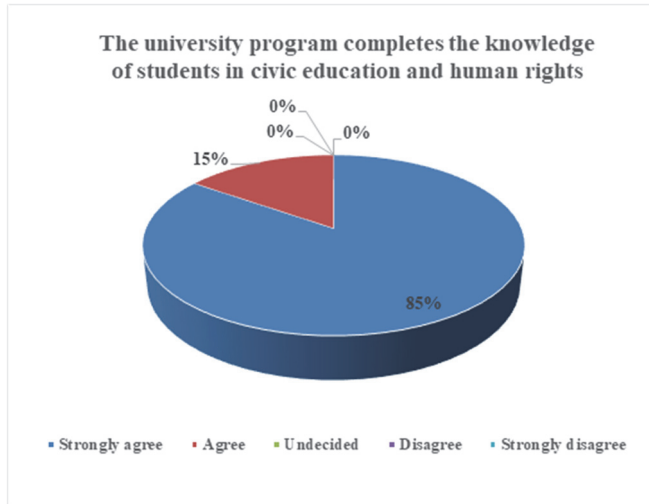
This study employed a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative research through a questionnaire administered to the participating students, and qualitative research through a focus group conducted with a subset of the students. The study was conducted with Master's students in "Primary Education" and Bachelor's students in "Pre-school Education" at the Faculty of Education, Aleksandër Moisiu University of Durrës.

The questionnaires were completed in the university premises outside of regular class hours. The sample for this study consisted of a total of 90 students from the Faculty of Education. A focus group discussion was conducted with 15 of the participating students. Among the 90 student participants, 95.6% were female and 4.4% were male, reflecting the specific characteristics of these fields of study, where females constitute the overwhelming majority. Data were collected from the students through both the questionnaire and the focus group, and then processed, analyzed, and the results were derived.

²Tamo, A. (1999). *Education of Democratic Citizenship in Primary School*, August. p. 1.

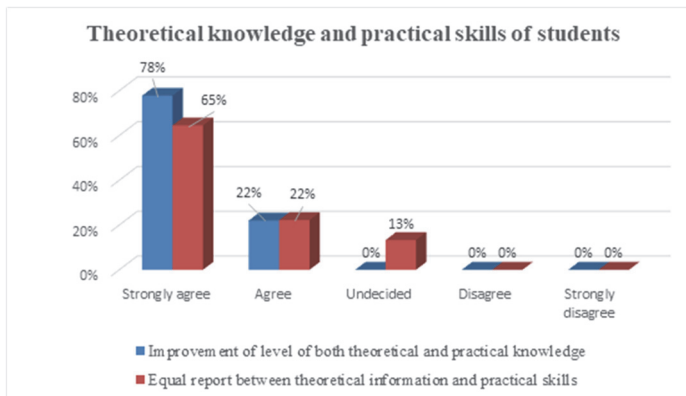
4. Analysis and Results

In the study, students were asked if university programs fulfilled their knowledge in the field of civic education and human rights. A significant number of students, 85% of them, fully agreed, and 15% agreed that the university program fulfills their knowledge in the field of civic education and rights. This is achieved through the instructional subjects they take in the program they are following.



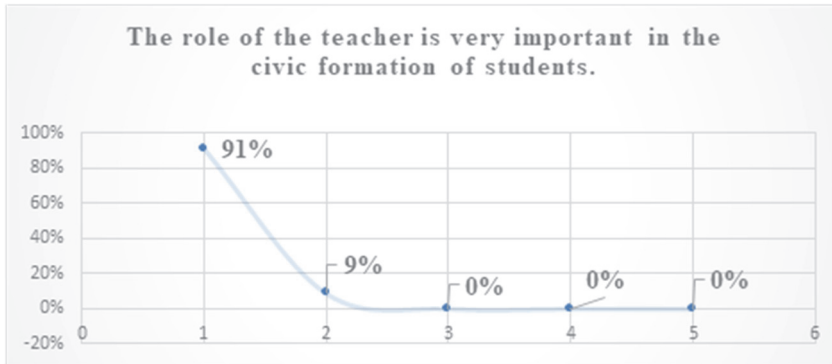
Graphic 1. The university program completes the knowledge of students in civic education and human rights

Students were asked about their mastery of theoretical knowledge and practical skills in the fields of civic education and human rights. Regarding the improvement of theoretical knowledge and practical skills, 78% of the students fully agreed, and 22% agreed, meaning that all the students acknowledged that the development of these subjects had significantly enhanced their theoretical knowledge and practical skills. The students positively assessed the proper integration of theoretical knowledge development with practical application, with 65% fully agreeing, 22% agreeing, and 13% not expressing an opinion on this relationship.



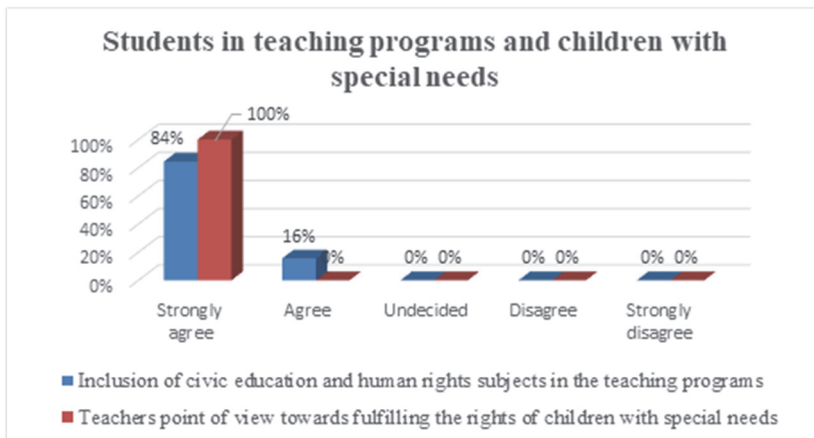
Graphic 2. Theoretical knowledge and practical skills of students

All participating students regarded the role of the teacher in the civic education and formation of students as highly important, with 91% fully agreeing and 9% agreeing that the teacher plays an irreplaceable role in the civic education and formation of students.



Graphic 3. The role of the teacher is very important in the civic formation of students

What is worth noting is that all students, to the extent of 84%, fully agreed, and 16% of them agreed, with the opinion that subjects in the field of civic education and human rights should be included in all university programs that prepare teachers. Future teachers, to a degree of 100%, appreciate the significant role that teachers play in recognizing and respecting the rights of children with disabilities.



Graphic 4. Students in teaching programs and children with special needs

5. Discussion

From the results of the data, we observe that university programs in the branches included in the study fully meet the students' knowledge in the field of civic education and formation, as well as in human rights, including the rights of children with special needs.

Based on the responses given by the students, we note that the teacher plays a crucial role in transmitting theoretical knowledge and shaping practical expressions in the fields of civic education and human rights. The performance of the teacher relies on standard-based collaboration between the two parties, the teacher and the student, which cannot be understood without respecting the rights of the latter. The assistance required by new teachers in

working with students with special needs is highly valued.

Regarding the improvement of theoretical knowledge and practical skills, all students express a sense of fulfillment in this regard. It is noteworthy that 13% of the students did not express their opinion regarding the relationship between theoretical information and practical activities. They were asked about this in the focus group, and they stated that they desired more practical activities outside the university environment as it would help them understand the real world and apply theoretical knowledge in practice.

From the opinions provided by the students in the focus group, it is evident that the role of the teacher in the civic education and formation of students, future teachers, is highly valued. They will contribute to the education system in recognizing and respecting the rights of children and children with special needs. In one way or another, the rights of children find space and opportunities to be addressed in different subjects. In this regard, the teacher's role is crucial, and their preparation in university classrooms should be taken seriously.

Based on the students' responses, the need for the inclusion of civic education and formation curricula in all teacher education programs was emphasized. Regardless of their academic training, future teachers must also possess civic education and formation. All teachers encounter situations with students that require their commitment and dedication; therefore, they need to be prepared to face these situations with the aim of shaping the younger generations as worthy citizens of Europe and the world.

Student teachers provide their opinions by highlighting several guidelines that they will consider in their work as teachers: not using violence against students, speaking clearly and understandably, being close to students, involving students in lessons as an integral part of the teaching process, always respecting children's rights, maximizing their efforts with children with special needs, assisting in their health rehabilitation, specialized education, and integration into society, continuously improving their living conditions, respecting students' freedom of speech by involving them in decision-making processes, organizing as many practical activities as possible on children's rights in schools and kindergartens, and collaborating with parents.

6. Conclusions

Based on the responses provided by the students, we observe that the teacher plays a significant role in equipping students with theoretical knowledge and practical skills in the fields of civics and human rights. Students seek a cooperative climate and positive communication for various issues. The use of diverse and appropriate teaching methods in civic education and human rights is considered highly effective. Creating conditions for each student to freely express their opinions and participate in discussions, becoming an active part of the group and the community they live in, has influenced the collaborative spirit between teachers and students.

This study is important as it represents a serious effort to understand the role that universities play in the civic education and formation of students, future teachers who will work with students at different levels of the pre-university education system, preparing them as active citizens of society. Identifying the ways in which we can intervene to improve our work in the future is important for enhancing indicators in the field of civics.

The study revealed a clear reality that the integration of theoretical knowledge with practical knowledge plays a crucial role in consolidating students' knowledge and preparing them as future teachers. This is a challenging field that requires continuous contributions and commitments from various stakeholders. Considering that students' civic participation is linked to indicators such as civic education and civic values they possess and transmit, it is essential to explore all possibilities for intervention and improvement of these indicators in the future.

Student teachers need to be aware of fulfilling their mission to contribute to the creation of a democratic society with responsible citizens who understand the roles and responsibilities they should assume in the community they live in. Working professionally, based on legal standards, enhances the university's image and the quality of service it provides to students.

Teaching civic values and behaviors is a complex matter, a process conditioned by various factors, so it would not be fair to expect immediate effects. Teaching in the field of civics yields results much later, and therefore, reflection is slow.

7. Recommendations

In university programs, importance should be given to the civic education and formation of students, future teachers, in order to give true meaning to this field. Students should have the opportunity to create experiences, becoming architects

and actors of their own lives, exploring new ways of civic engagement. To enhance the effectiveness of their work, there should be indicators to measure students' civic formation, contemporary monitoring standards should be applied, and real assessments of their situation should be made, utilizing the best capacities of the teaching staff.

Student teachers should have up-to-date knowledge and practical experience related to citizenship and human rights. They should foster self-confidence for individual action, become initiators of collaborative initiatives with local authorities and other supporting actors, to carry out joint school-community activities, exploring new forms and methods of intergenerational transmission. Developing students' capacities through increased civic education and methodological skills, transmitting positive civic values, and preparing students to be active citizens who assume roles and responsibilities for the well-being of the community, is of great importance.

Advocacy for increased funding to promote active citizenship, seeking forms of civic information and launching them, devising strategies to strengthen interaction between different institutions and universities, where activities promoting democratic values are promoted, is crucial.

Including civic education and formation curricula in university programs for all branches of teacher education is important. Regardless of their academic formation, student teachers should also receive civic education and formation. Treatment of current topics is important to generate interest among students. Activities should be more frequent and plentiful, as they empower students to be active and more self-aware in assuming their roles and responsibilities.

Based on this study, we recommend some modest ideas directed towards students in the field of teacher education. It is essential to focus on the formation of the teacher's personality, their behavior and dedication to the teaching mission, the belief that every student, including those with disabilities, should be respected and given the opportunity to develop themselves. Strengthening teacher-student collaboration, creating a positive and democratic climate, promoting freedom of speech, encouraging the assumption of responsibilities, eliminating all forms of discrimination, respecting diverse opinions, being open with students, and occasionally providing encouraging evaluations of their participation in decision-making are important aspects to consider.

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