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Opportunities for education and learning for active citizenship

ABSTRACT:

1. Democracy has to adapt to recent social and political developments. Decisions are increasingly made in the European Union. The global civil society withdraws from national decision-making. The international economy has national consequences that are out of politicians' reach. The EU is declared in crisis after the rejection in France and the Netherlands (and the expected 'no' in other member countries, like the UK) of the referendum about the EU 'constitution'. A gap is visible between politicians and citizens. Another issue, high on the political and public agenda, is the 'integration' of immigrants.

2. A democracy fails, can even collapse, if a large part of the population abstains from participation. A well functioning democracy needs participating citizens. Tensions between Islamic and autochthon citizens can increase as a consequence of terrorist attacks and lasting conflicts in Muslim countries. Societies with a multicultural population need to train their citizens to respect each other's opinions and religions.

3. Democratic citizens are not born as such; citizenship has to be learned. This is a mission for schools, but governments and parliaments have to decide about the priority. Due to the changing character of national politics new opportunities for adult participation should be created, like interactive decision-making, referenda, etc. Since there is a positive relation between participating in voluntary associations and political participation societies should invest in civil society.

4. Learning active citizenship should start as early as possible. In most countries the preparation of citizens is not adequate.

5. It is important to formulate a realistic, concise and practical set of competences (knowledge, attitudes and skills) that citizens need for participation. In various (international) institutions the formulation of civic competences is under way: OECD, Council of Europe, European Union,

Advisory Education Councils, ministries of Education, curriculum development institutions. The broad national and international discussion of standards for citizenship would attract considerable attention of teachers and trainers and put citizenship on the public and political agenda.

6. In order to function well in the current society citizens need to be media literate. Media education is especially vital to bridge the digital divide that exists in certain social layers.

7. Various institutions influence the acquisition of competences for democratic citizenship. School, the Internet, television, parents, peer groups, sport organizations, work place, neighborhood, the civil society.

8. The daily situation of youngsters and adults is decisive for democratic participation. If the daily situation of people is undemocratic, then learning democratic citizenship does not make much sense.

9. For effective citizenship education a democratic school and class climate is essential; but also: parents who define the borders for behavior and who create safe situations for their children; by transferring knowledge and training skills; by creating opportunities for co-decision in school and work; etc.

10. Recommendations

Democratic living, learning and working contexts are essential for democratic behavior.

Promote learning democracy by doing.

Formulate and discuss a standard with core competences for democratic citizenship.

Create opportunities for citizen participation preferably at local level.