

Learning Europe: Embodied European Citizenship Education through Democratic Participation, Mobility and Educational Communities

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Abstract: European citizenship education represents one of the most significant educational challenges of contemporary societies. Globalization, digital transformation, migration processes and geopolitical tensions have profoundly reshaped the concepts of identity, belonging and democratic participation. This paper proposes the concept of *Embodied European Citizenship Education* as a theoretical framework for understanding how democratic identity and civic responsibility develop through lived experiences of participation, cooperation, intercultural dialogue and international mobility. Drawing upon contributions from citizenship education, developmental psychology, educational sociology and embodied cognition, the study argues that citizenship is learned not only through formal instruction but also through meaningful social practices that engage cognitive, emotional and relational dimensions. Particular attention is devoted to the role of educational communities, international mobility programmes and digital citizenship in fostering democratic competencies and European belonging. The paper concludes that the future of European integration depends not only on political and institutional processes but also on the capacity of educational systems to cultivate active, responsible and democratically engaged citizens through embodied forms of learning and participation..

Keywords: European Citizenship Education; Embodied Learning; Democratic Participation; Intercultural Education; Educational Communities.

1. Introduction

The transformations that characterize contemporary societies have profoundly altered the meaning of citizenship, identity and democratic participation. Globalization, digitalization, migration processes, environmental challenges and geopolitical instability increasingly require citizens to navigate complex and interconnected social realities. Traditional conceptions of citizenship, primarily linked to legal status and national belonging, are no longer sufficient to address these challenges.

Within this context, European citizenship represents one of the most ambitious educational and political projects of the contemporary era. Since its formal introduction through the Maastricht Treaty, European citizenship has progressively evolved beyond a juridical framework, becoming a broader cultural and educational process aimed at fostering democratic participation, social cohesion and intercultural dialogue.

Recent scholarship has emphasized that citizenship cannot be reduced to knowledge of institutions, rights and duties. Democratic participation requires the



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development of competencies, attitudes and values that enable individuals to engage responsibly with diversity, complexity and collective decision-making. Education therefore plays a crucial role in preparing citizens capable of contributing actively to democratic life.

This paper argues that European citizenship should be understood as an embodied educational process. Drawing upon contributions from citizenship education, developmental psychology, educational sociology and embodied cognition, it proposes the concept of **Embodied European Citizenship Education** as a framework for understanding how democratic identity develops through lived experiences of participation, cooperation, mobility and intercultural encounter.

The central thesis is that European citizenship is learned not primarily through the transmission of institutional knowledge, but through meaningful experiences that connect cognitive understanding, emotional engagement and social participation. Educational communities, international mobility programmes and democratic practices provide contexts in which citizenship is not only studied but actively experienced.

Methodological Note

This contribution adopts a theoretical and conceptual approach based on an interdisciplinary review of literature concerning citizenship education, democratic participation, embodied learning and European educational policies. Its objective is not to present empirical findings but to develop an interpretative framework capable of connecting embodied education with contemporary debates on European citizenship and democratic learning.

2. European Citizenship and Multilevel Identity

The evolution of citizenship in contemporary societies reflects broader transformations affecting political, social and cultural life. While classical theories, such as Marshall's (1950) model of civil, political and social rights, remain important, contemporary citizenship increasingly extends beyond the traditional boundaries of the nation-state.

European integration has contributed significantly to this transformation by introducing a form of citizenship that complements national citizenship rather than replacing it. Individuals simultaneously belong to local communities, regional contexts, nation-states and supranational institutions. This condition has led scholars to describe citizenship as a multidimensional phenomenon characterized by multiple and interconnected forms of belonging.

The concept of **multilevel identity** provides a useful framework for understanding European citizenship. Individuals may develop attachments to different communities without perceiving them as mutually exclusive. Local, national and European identities can coexist and reinforce one another, contributing to broader forms of democratic participation and social cohesion.

As Delors (1996) emphasized, education must prepare individuals to “learn to live together” in increasingly interdependent societies. European citizenship education therefore seeks to cultivate openness, dialogue and cooperation while strengthening democratic values and civic responsibility.

Recent scholarship has further expanded this perspective. Osler (2020) argues that citizenship education should be grounded in human rights, democratic partici-

pation and intercultural understanding. Similarly, Osler and Starkey (2015) highlight the importance of preparing learners to engage actively in culturally diverse societies while maintaining commitment to shared democratic principles. European citizenship can thus be understood as an additional layer of democratic belonging that enriches rather than weakens national and local identities.

Developmental perspectives also support this view. Piaget (1972) demonstrated how cognitive development enables individuals to recognize perspectives different from their own, while Vygotsky (1986) emphasized the importance of social interaction in the construction of knowledge and identity. These contributions suggest that democratic citizenship develops through participation in social relationships and shared cultural practices.

Morin (2001) further argues that contemporary education must address complexity and interconnectedness. Citizens increasingly belong to multiple communities and are required to navigate diverse cultural and social environments. Citizenship education should therefore foster the ability to understand complexity without reducing it to simplistic oppositions.

From this perspective, European citizenship is not merely a legal status but a learning process through which individuals develop democratic competencies, intercultural sensitivity and a sense of shared responsibility. The construction of European identity depends less on institutional arrangements than on opportunities for participation, dialogue and cooperation across social, cultural and national boundaries.

The concept of multilevel identity therefore provides the foundation for a pedagogical understanding of European citizenship. It enables individuals to maintain local and national attachments while simultaneously recognizing themselves as members of a broader democratic community founded upon human rights, solidarity and shared responsibility.

3. Embodied European Citizenship Education

The central argument of this paper is that European citizenship should be understood not only as a legal or political status but also as an embodied educational process. While traditional approaches to citizenship education have primarily focused on the transmission of civic knowledge, contemporary research increasingly suggests that democratic participation develops through lived experiences that engage cognitive, emotional, relational and social dimensions simultaneously.

This perspective draws upon the theories of embodied cognition developed by Johnson (1987) and Lakoff and Johnson (1999), which challenge the traditional separation between mind and body. Human understanding is not produced exclusively through abstract reasoning but emerges through interactions with the physical, social and cultural environment. Learning is therefore a holistic process involving experience, emotions, relationships and action.

Research in social neuroscience has further reinforced this perspective. Gallese (2007) demonstrated how embodied simulation contributes to empathy, social understanding and interpersonal communication. Individuals develop the capacity to understand others not only through intellectual reflection but also through relational experiences that involve emotional and embodied dimensions. Such findings are particularly relevant for citizenship education, where participation, cooperation and

democratic engagement depend upon the ability to recognize and respect different perspectives.

From this viewpoint, citizenship cannot be reduced to the acquisition of information concerning institutions, rights and responsibilities. Democratic competencies emerge through participation in social practices that foster cooperation, dialogue and shared responsibility. Individuals learn citizenship by experiencing citizenship.

The concept of **Embodied European Citizenship Education** refers precisely to this process. It describes educational experiences through which learners develop democratic identity and a sense of European belonging by actively participating in collaborative, intercultural and socially meaningful activities. Citizenship becomes a lived experience rather than a purely cognitive construct.

This approach is especially important within the European context. For many young people, Europe risks appearing as a distant institutional reality associated with regulations, bureaucratic procedures and political debates. Educational experiences capable of connecting learners directly with European values and practices are therefore essential. Europe becomes meaningful when it is encountered through relationships, cooperation and participation.

Recent studies on experiential and place-based learning support this interpretation. Mannion, Biesta, Priestley and Ross (2023) emphasize that democratic participation develops through meaningful interactions between individuals, communities and social environments. Civic engagement grows when learners perceive themselves as active contributors to collective life rather than passive recipients of information.

Several educational practices exemplify this embodied approach to citizenship. Collaborative learning projects encourage students to work together in pursuit of shared objectives, developing competencies such as communication, negotiation and collective problem-solving. Service-learning initiatives connect academic learning with community engagement, allowing participants to experience democratic values through concrete social action. Similarly, simulations of democratic institutions and youth participation programmes provide opportunities to practice deliberation, representation and decision-making.

Particularly significant are experiences that involve intercultural encounters. Contact with individuals from different cultural, linguistic and social backgrounds encourages learners to confront alternative perspectives and reconsider their own assumptions. Such experiences contribute to the development of empathy, openness and democratic dispositions that are fundamental to European citizenship.

Emotions also play a crucial role in this process. Feelings of trust, belonging, solidarity and mutual recognition influence the development of civic identity and democratic commitment. Citizenship is not exclusively a rational phenomenon; it is deeply connected to emotional experiences that shape how individuals relate to communities and public life. Educational approaches that ignore these dimensions risk reducing citizenship education to a purely formal exercise.

Embodied European Citizenship Education therefore proposes a broader understanding of democratic learning. It integrates knowledge, emotions, relationships and participation within a unified pedagogical framework. Citizenship is learned through action, dialogue and shared experience rather than through instruction alone.

Ultimately, the development of European citizenship depends upon the creation of educational environments in which democratic values can be experienced directly. Through participation, cooperation and intercultural engagement, learners develop

the competencies and dispositions necessary to contribute actively to democratic life. In this sense, citizenship is not merely taught—it is lived, practiced and continuously reconstructed through experience.

4. Mobility, Participation and Democratic Learning

One of the most effective ways of fostering European citizenship is through direct participation in transnational educational experiences. While democratic values can be discussed in classrooms, they become significantly more meaningful when individuals experience them through cooperation, intercultural dialogue and shared learning activities. International mobility programmes therefore represent a particularly important dimension of Embodied European Citizenship Education.

Among European initiatives, Erasmus+ stands out as one of the most successful educational programmes in promoting democratic participation and European identity. By enabling students to study, train and collaborate in different countries, Erasmus+ transforms Europe from an abstract political project into a lived social reality. Participants encounter diverse cultures, languages and perspectives, developing intercultural competencies and a broader understanding of citizenship.

Research has consistently shown that mobility experiences contribute not only to academic and professional development but also to greater openness toward diversity, stronger democratic attitudes and a deeper sense of European belonging (Nussbaum, 2011). Such outcomes emerge because participants engage directly with situations that require adaptation, cooperation and intercultural communication.

From an embodied perspective, mobility experiences are particularly significant because they involve the whole person. Living in another country, interacting with unfamiliar social environments and building relationships across cultural boundaries engage cognitive, emotional and relational dimensions simultaneously. European citizenship is therefore experienced rather than merely understood.

Recent European policies have reinforced the importance of these initiatives. The European Education Area and the European Universities Initiative promote academic cooperation, mobility and transnational learning as strategic tools for strengthening democratic participation and European cohesion (European Commission, 2024). These programmes create opportunities for students and educators to collaborate across national boundaries while developing a shared commitment to European values.

Beyond mobility, participation itself constitutes a fundamental component of citizenship learning. Democratic competencies develop through involvement in collaborative projects, student representation, volunteering activities, youth forums and community engagement initiatives. Such experiences enable learners to practice responsibility, dialogue and collective decision-making in concrete situations.

Participation is also closely linked to peace education. The European project emerged from the desire to transform conflict into cooperation through dialogue and shared institutions. Contemporary citizenship education continues this mission by promoting democratic engagement, intercultural understanding and non-violent conflict management. As Habermas (1981) and Freire (1970) suggest, democratic societies depend upon citizens who are capable of engaging constructively with differences and contributing actively to the common good.

In this sense, mobility and participation can be understood as complementary dimensions of democratic learning. Both create opportunities for individuals to en-

counter diversity, develop empathy and experience citizenship as a practice of cooperation. Through these experiences, European identity becomes rooted in everyday interactions rather than solely in political discourse.

Ultimately, the construction of European citizenship depends not only on institutional arrangements but also on opportunities for meaningful participation. Mobility programmes, intercultural exchanges and democratic learning experiences provide powerful contexts in which individuals can develop the competencies, values and dispositions necessary for active citizenship in an increasingly interconnected Europe.

5. Digital Citizenship and New Democratic Challenges

The digital transformation of contemporary societies has profoundly reshaped the conditions under which citizenship is exercised. Information, communication and political participation increasingly occur through digital environments, creating both new opportunities and significant challenges for democratic life. As a result, citizenship education must expand beyond traditional civic knowledge to include the competencies required for responsible participation in digital societies.

Digital citizenship involves more than technical proficiency. It encompasses the ability to access, evaluate and produce information critically, engage ethically in online interactions and understand the broader social implications of digital technologies. In an era characterized by information overload, misinformation and algorithmically mediated communication, these competencies have become essential for democratic participation.

One of the most pressing challenges concerns the growing circulation of false or misleading information. Social media platforms and digital networks facilitate rapid dissemination of content that may influence public opinion without being subject to traditional mechanisms of verification. Citizens are therefore required to develop critical media literacy skills that enable them to distinguish reliable information from manipulation, propaganda and disinformation.

The emergence of artificial intelligence further intensifies these challenges. Generative AI systems can produce increasingly sophisticated texts, images and multimedia content, creating new opportunities for learning and communication while also raising concerns regarding authenticity, transparency and trust. Citizens must be capable of understanding both the potential benefits and the risks associated with these technologies.

Within the European context, considerable attention has been devoted to developing a human-centred approach to digital innovation. European policies emphasize the protection of fundamental rights, transparency and democratic accountability in the design and use of digital technologies. Such initiatives highlight the close relationship between technological development and democratic responsibility.

From the perspective of Embodied European Citizenship Education, digital citizenship should not be viewed merely as a technical competence. Even in highly digitalized environments, citizenship remains fundamentally relational. Democratic participation depends upon dialogue, empathy, trust and cooperation—qualities that cannot be replaced by technology itself. Educational processes must therefore help learners reflect critically on the social and ethical dimensions of digital life.

The development of digital citizenship requires educational experiences that combine critical thinking, ethical awareness and active participation. Learners should be encouraged not only to use digital tools effectively but also to understand how

these tools influence communication, social relationships and democratic processes. In this way, digital education becomes an integral component of contemporary citizenship education.

Ultimately, preparing citizens for the digital age means enabling them to participate responsibly in technologically mediated societies while remaining committed to democratic values, human rights and social responsibility. Digital competence is therefore not an alternative to citizenship education but one of its essential contemporary dimensions.

6. Educational Community and Shared Responsibility

Citizenship education cannot be entrusted exclusively to schools and universities. Democratic competencies develop through interactions that occur across multiple social contexts, including families, local communities, civil society organizations, cultural institutions and digital environments. The concept of the educational community reflects this broader understanding of learning as a shared social responsibility.

Dewey (1916) argued that democracy should be understood not only as a political system but also as a way of living together based on participation, communication and shared experience. Educational institutions play a central role in cultivating democratic habits, yet their effectiveness depends upon their capacity to connect learning with real social contexts and community life.

From this perspective, citizenship develops through active participation in meaningful social practices. Opportunities for collaboration, volunteering, community engagement and collective problem-solving allow learners to experience democratic values directly rather than merely studying them. Such experiences contribute to the development of responsibility, empathy and commitment to the common good.

Educational communities are particularly important in increasingly diverse societies. Encounters with different cultures, languages and perspectives provide opportunities for dialogue and mutual understanding while fostering inclusive forms of citizenship. These experiences help learners recognize diversity as a resource and develop the competencies necessary for democratic coexistence.

European citizenship education benefits significantly from transnational educational networks that connect schools, universities and civil society organizations across national boundaries. These collaborations create opportunities for shared learning and intercultural exchange, strengthening both democratic participation and European identity.

The concept of shared pedagogical responsibility highlights the need for cooperation among educational institutions, families and community organizations. Preparing individuals for democratic life requires coordinated efforts capable of integrating formal, non-formal and informal learning experiences.

Ultimately, educational communities constitute one of the most important environments in which citizenship is practiced and experienced. They provide the relational contexts through which democratic values become meaningful and contribute to the formation of active, responsible and socially engaged citizens.

7. Conclusions

European citizenship education represents one of the most important educational challenges of the twenty-first century. The social, cultural and technological

transformations affecting contemporary societies require new approaches capable of preparing citizens to engage responsibly with complexity, diversity and democratic participation. Traditional models centred exclusively on the transmission of civic knowledge are no longer sufficient to address these challenges.

This paper has argued that European citizenship should be understood as an embodied educational process through which individuals develop democratic identity, civic responsibility and a sense of belonging through lived experiences of participation, cooperation and intercultural encounter. The concept of **Embodied European Citizenship Education** provides a theoretical framework capable of integrating cognitive, emotional, relational and experiential dimensions within a unified vision of citizenship learning.

The analysis has highlighted the importance of multilevel identity, democratic participation, international mobility, digital citizenship and educational communities in supporting the development of European citizenship. These dimensions should not be considered separately but as interconnected components of a broader educational process. European citizenship emerges through experiences that enable individuals to connect personal development with collective responsibility and local identities with broader forms of democratic belonging.

Particularly significant is the role of participation. Democratic competencies are acquired not only through instruction but through active engagement in collaborative practices, intercultural dialogue and community life. Mobility programmes, educational networks, volunteering initiatives and democratic learning experiences provide opportunities through which citizenship becomes a lived reality rather than an abstract concept.

The digital transformation of society further reinforces the need for educational approaches that combine critical thinking, ethical awareness and democratic responsibility. Similarly, increasing cultural diversity requires educational systems capable of promoting dialogue, inclusion and mutual understanding while maintaining commitment to shared democratic values and human rights.

Educational communities play a decisive role in this process. Schools, universities, families, civil society organizations and European networks share responsibility for creating environments in which democratic values can be experienced directly. Citizenship education is therefore not the task of a single institution but a collective endeavour involving multiple actors and learning contexts.

The central thesis of this paper can be summarized in a simple proposition: **European citizenship is learned primarily through lived experiences of participation, cooperation, mobility and democratic engagement.** Knowledge of institutions and legal frameworks remains important, but it acquires meaning only when connected to concrete experiences that foster responsibility, solidarity and active participation.

If the twentieth century can be regarded as the century of the institutional construction of Europe, the twenty-first century may become the century of its educational construction. The future of European integration will depend not only on treaties, policies and institutions but also on the capacity of educational systems to cultivate citizens who are capable of transforming diversity into dialogue, conflict into cooperation and rights into shared responsibility.

In this sense, education is not simply a support for European citizenship; it is one of its essential foundations. The Europe of the future will be shaped not only by po-

litical decisions but also by the educational experiences through which new generations learn to live, participate and act together within a common democratic community.

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