

Opting for an emancipatory approach to active citizenship in reception education: an exploration

Coaching young people in reception education in their development of citizenship competences can be done from different approaches with different purposes. In order to start working on active citizenship within reception education, we find it desirable - based on the PPGO! and in analogy with the Active Citizenship Learning Line in secondary education - to opt for an **emancipatory approach or an empowerment approach**. The development of citizenship competences is not an end in itself, but a means for pupils to fully participate in and help shape an inclusive society. Growing citizenship competences should contribute to the **empowerment of** learners. We refer below to the socially vulnerable position of many young people in reception education, explain the concept of empowerment and make the link with active citizenship in school.

The diversity within reception education is great and versatile. Both with regard to past school experiences, future prospects, reasons for migration and (traumatic) events before, during and after arrival in Belgium, the differences are as numerous as the number of young people within reception education. Therefore, we cannot homogenise this target group - just like all class groups -. However, the majority of these young people do have in common that they live alone or with their families in a **socially vulnerable position** when they arrive in Belgium. After all, after a long period of powerlessness about one's own life situation, young people with a flight history in Belgium are often again confronted with the dependence of official bodies for their residence permits and for the provision of their own livelihood.

As Vettenburg (1989) puts it, social vulnerability is understood to mean: *the risk of undergoing the negative aspects (control, sanctions) in contact with social institutions and of benefiting less from the positive offer, time and again.*

The theory of social vulnerability is an explanatory model for situations of deprivation and exclusion. This theory states that the exclusion and disadvantage of groups in society can be explained by factors at three levels: the **micro, meso and macro levels**. The micro level is about the individual level such as self-image and self-confidence and the competencies that a person develops. The meso level refers to institutions and organisations such as schools. The macro level relates to the organisation of society on a social, economic and cultural level, such as legislation on the asylum procedure, social security and the organisation of Flemish education. People in a vulnerable position in society, including many young people in reception education and the families to which they belong, can experience exclusion mechanisms at these three levels. In the theory of social vulnerability, the macro level is often seen as the root cause of exclusion and deprivation. In the context of active citizenship and the pursuit of an inclusive society, it is important to bear this stratification in mind in terms of exclusion mechanisms and vulnerability.



Taking into account the socially vulnerable position of many reception education youngsters, we place active citizenship in the context of the theories on **empowerment**.

Van Regenmortel (2002) describes empowerment as *"a process of individual and collective strengthening in which individuals, organisations and communities acquire mastery of their own situation and environment. Empowerment is about 'interdependence' and 'togetherness', not about maximum independence of the individual or groups."*



Empowerment, as well as social vulnerability, must be understood within the systems approach at micro, meso and macro level. This means that empowerment can be worked on at the individual level by, among other things, focusing on the development of (citizenship) competencies. However, this cannot be seen in isolation from the need for institutional and structural adjustments at the meso and macro levels to enable the empowerment of individuals and groups and to achieve an inclusive society.



The concept of empowerment often occurs in the context of poverty reduction. However, the concept of empowerment can also be used in other contexts. After all, it is an open concept. Empowerment is a continuous, dynamic and contextual process. For example, empowerment for an reception education pupil from Eritrea who resides in Belgium as an unaccompanied minor differs from empowerment for a 65-year-old single man who has been unemployed for a long time. We can start from an **empowerment approach** to strengthen both the reception education pupil and the unemployed man in order to participate in society as a fully-fledged citizen. This approach aims to improve the negative aspects of a situation by looking for positive things. She focuses on the well-being, the forces within the individual and his/her environment and environmental influences. Not on problems and risk factors. It is a positive and proactive approach and requires a bottom-up approach.



Working on **active citizenship at school from an empowerment approach** can strengthen young people in vulnerable positions at **the micro level**, i.e. the level of the individual. Coaching young people in citizenship competences strengthens them to participate fully in society. Under the section 'Competence-based working on active citizenship', we go deeper into the question of how competence development can contribute to empowerment among young people.



At the level of the school (**meso level**), **it is** also possible to work on space that facilitates the empowerment of pupils. GO! wants to stimulate active citizenship at school level by promoting a culture of citizenship in which the participation and participation of all pupils at school level helps shape life at school. In the section 'Towards a broad citizenship culture at school' you will find suggestions to work on a citizenship culture at school.

Subsequent reservations:

- The exploration of active citizenship, vulnerable social position, empowerment and citizenship didactics is still in full development within GO! The concrete elaboration and testing of a citizenship didactics to get started in reception education is a next step.
- Of course there are also many young people in education outside reception education who are in a socially vulnerable position. An emancipatory approach to active citizenship can therefore guide all forms and levels of education.



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