

Civic Education in Algeria ... How to Shape the Road for a More Practical Curriculum?

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ABSTRACT

The study examines the current curriculum of civic education in Algeria, along with the civic education course implemented in the United States of America, using the Community Based Learning (CBL) methods. We have interviewed a sample of young active leaders in the society, and asked them about the real impact of civic education course in their life choices. Instructors and educators were also involved in the study in order to have their feedback about the current curriculum and the possible ways of implementing CBL in Algeria. As a conclusion, this research suggests that the civic education course in Algeria can indeed be enhanced by using the modern methods of CBL, and in order to adapt it according to the Algerian customs and culture, the Algerian Muslim Scouts (AMS) should establish a partnership with schools, particularly with Civic education courses, in order to provide a real platform for students to practice the theories learnt in class.

KEYWORDS: Civic Education; Algeria; Community Based Learning; Scouts; Nationalism; Civic Engagement

1 INTRODUCTION

Algeria, the country of martyrs and revolutions, has always been known by its great, ambitious and courageous youth. They are those who have completely devoted themselves for their country throughout its long bright history, starting from the French colonization era to the civil war in 1990's. Indeed, the Algerian revolution in 1954, has always been a glorified symbol, across the world, of sacrifice, determination, bravery and loyalty to the nation. Such a national consciousness would not have been brought to fruition without the extremely effective role of Islamic Scouts at that time. In fact, Islamic Scout is the entity that fathered all Algerian combatants during revolution. It was the institution where youngsters usually gain a sense of patriotism and national ideology. One of its graduates said: "It's hard to start a revolution. Even harder to continue it. And hardest of all to win it. But, it's only afterwards, when we have won, that the true difficulties begin. In short, .. there's still much to do" said Larbi Ben Mhidi in the movie of "Battle of Algiers". Ben M'hidi is one of the great young Algerian freedom fighters during the revolution [12]. Nowadays, the exact same spirit and consciousness are needed in order not to expel a colonist from the territory, but rather to expel passiveness and dependency from youth's mentality. Today, after more than fifty years of independence, that flame of eagerness to serve the country, the nation and the community should not be extinguished, as it is imperatively needed.

However, the president of the republic Abdel Aziz Bouteflika, as declared by Echourouk newspaper, confessed in his speech to the nation, lack of youth civic engagement in Algeria. He called educators to put more efforts on restoring the values of nationalism and civic engagement for Algerian youth (Lakhal). This leads to the rise of a critical question about what methods of promoting civic education, Algeria should follow. Should educators leave the mission merely to Islamic Scouts and ask them for more efforts nowadays? Or should they start promoting civic education through schools and enhancing the curriculum? If it is the latter, what are the best methods of civic education that suit Algeria's culture and context?

2. ANALYSIS APPROACH

In order to investigate further the issue, we have interviewed a sample of 15 students who are actively engaged in the society today. The main question for students was: " Today, as an active young leader in the society do you think that it is the curriculum; of civic education which Impacted your life choices to be actively engaged in the society? Or it is the effect of other factors? If so, what are they? (family, friends

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..etc) Furthermore, to ensure the credibility of the opinions we are getting, we have involved Algerian educators and Civic education instructors in the research, giving their opinion about the current curriculum and also providing possible ways of enhancing it. We asked instructors about their personal evaluation for the current curriculum plus their ambitions of developing the CEC course to be more of a practical course rather than a pure theoretical one.

The research contains also a simple comparison between the curriculum of CEC in Algeria and other countries, in order to use the strong points and detect the drawbacks in the national one. As part of the research, we have also investigated what the CBL is, and how it is actually implemented in other countries. Also, we consulted experts and experienced scouts to define the objectives and the great mission of the Scouts.

In an attempt to understand first the CEC, and to discover its implemented methods worldwide, we used various references. Dr. Elizabeth Beaumont, who has made a research paper about the best teaching pedagogies for civic education, emphasizes on the benefits of involving students in the learning process. Through the pedagogy of the intense interaction among students, peers and faculty all together; an environment of continuous and persistent activism is created. In fact, faculty gives the students some certain tasks, or some research topics, which directly affect the local society. In fact, faculty and CEC instructors coordinate previously with different NGO's, in order to identify the problems and issues of local society, that need to be resolved. This way, students will not only take academic credit for completing these tasks given by instructors, but meanwhile they will have the opportunity to engage directly with NGO's and tackle their issues and their society's. This method enhances various aspects of civic responsibility on youth, such as: critical thinking, sense of social responsibility, tolerance and non-authoritarianism [5]. Therefore, having civic engaged youth will positively impact society, economy and even future nation strategies.

Indeed, this is what was highlighted by Jan Liss, the executive director of Project Perciles, and Ariana Liazos, a research assistant for the civic engagement project at Harvard University. In their article for the change magazine about their Civic Education Course (CEC), they have reserved a whole section for the benefits of civic education. Jan and Ariane mentioned that CEC has a direct impact on communities. They illustrated the example of Winder University's social work student, where students created an annotated atlas for community assets map of Chester, PA. "Such CEC project provided valuable information on local problems to community partners" said Ariane. Another example is the students at Ursinus College who preserved and promoted local historic sites [8]. Thus, to reach all these benefits, and to shape the road for the aim of a practical civic education, promoting effective bridges between college classrooms and community, the Algerian educational system should adopt new international methods for promoting civic education.

Most of these methods, such as CBL (Community Based Learning) and Experiential Learning are successfully used worldwide. Therefore, Algerian educators need to integrate Islamic Scouts in school programs as social partner, while implementing Community Based Learning. Such methods incorporate the academic and theoretical material given in schools with the real world experience, which enables student to practice their knowledge and enhance their skills in various fields. By interacting directly with society, and impacting it; educators will be able to develop the sense of citizenship in Algerian youth.

As stated before, one of the most active organizations in Algeria is the Algerian Muslim Scouts (AMS). It has a great impact on youth and society alike, through their numerous activities. In the newsletter published by the International Union of Muslim Scouts, which the AMS is a member of, the objectives of the organization are stated clearly. According to the newsletter, the mission of Muslim Scouts is to build a young generation who are able to impact their local society and contribute to making a better world. AMS believes that this mission will be achieved only through contributing to education of young people through a based value system, which focuses on the values and virtues of Islam. As for the activities of World Scouts Movement and AMS, they are stated in their official paper about methods and strategies of learning within Scouts. The paper is written by John May, the chairman of educational methods committees in the World Scout Movement. The objectives is to promote and coordinate social, humanitarian and relief activities through organizing many seminars and conferences about voluntary work [10].

Indeed, AMS and since its establishment in 1933 has participated in many voluntary activities during national crises, and also big spectacular shows in national ceremonies, such as the 50th anniversary of independence. As an illustration, the AMS released a report about their contribution in handling the national crisis of Beb El Oued's earthquake in May 2003. According to the report, the AMS managed to

gather more than 1500 AMS leaders and volunteers. They reached the affected area within less than 48 hours. Also, besides the hundreds of tons of aids delivered, more than 7000 AMS leaders and volunteers were physically involved in the process of the relief as a whole, collaborating with the ministry of social solidarity [1]. This alone shows the huge human potential AMS possesses, which is always ready when the country and the nation calls up. Indeed, the national general director of Algerian Muslim Scouts (AMS) announces clearly that their mission depicts on deepening the sense of nationalism in youngsters, so that they will be ready to serve the country in whatever way, when the country is need. Moreover, in his interview with El Masaa Newspaper, he emphasized that “AMS trains its youth to be civically engaged, and to be prepared for serving their community and their nation whenever and wherever” [3]. Thus, AMS has proved that it is a school of well trained national leaders and volunteers, always ready to serve their nation.

As noticed, the role of AMS in Algeria is undeniably important for our youth and community. Yet, AMS's values and experiences learned do not reach most of the Algerian youngsters. This is due to the fact that, only those who decide to join the AMS, are the ones whom these activities reach and touch. However, Algeria needs to spread the knowledge of civic education among all Algerian youth, not only part of them. Thus, school is the best appropriate place for such a mission. The school is where all Algerian youth must start their path of life. Their first steps in acquiring the knowledge needed for their future to be bright, are also in school. The minister of education Abubakr Benbouzid in his speech given in the international conference about CEC curricula, has emphasized on this point. He declared: “Building the sense of nationalism and civic engagement in our students' minds is primarily the role of CEC curriculum” [7]. As a result, it is not only the mission of AMS to promote civic youth engagement in Algeria, but it is also educators' mission as well.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS.

As a matter of fact, the Algerian school does not seem ready for such a big role alone. Actually, despite the existence of a CEC in the Algerian curriculum, experts could point out many drawbacks in it. First of all, the problem of using old teaching strategies and methods and not updating them for a long time. Since the independence of Algeria in 1962, the ministry of education has stated the objectives of CEC's taken in the middles and elementary school. The objectives are mainly to prepare young Algerian citizens to be civically and politically active and engaged in their communities [2]. Although these objectives may remain the same after all these years, the methods in which these courses are implemented cannot continue to be the same in the 21st century. Courses are purely theoretical and do not involve much on-site activities, which sharpen students' skills in many aspects. Indeed, Dr. Babahani Souad, a professor in Kasdi Merbah University and an active educator, expressed her frustration about the ways which CEC's are implemented in the Algerian school.

Not only professors, but also the opinions of Algerian students about the CEC's were investigated. The sample of students was carefully chosen. Mainly active youth were targeted. Those who are now involved in many programs of promoting civic engagement across the country, or taking some individual initiatives in their surrounding communities. Ten of the twelve interviewers expressed their dissatisfaction with the current methods implemented in teaching CEC. They all agreed about the point of asking for wider application of the knowledge received, so that they can enhance their skills and be able to apply it outside school. However, all the interviewers agreed on the fact that Algerian youth can be motivated easily. This is due to the typical values and traditions of the Algerian society derived from their customs and religious beliefs, as: harmony and charity. One of the interviewers pointed out that: “Algerian youth lack consciousness and awareness. They only need a trigger to unlock their great potential”.

After, he commented on the current method of teaching saying: “Unfortunately, the civic course we receive in class is only pen and paper... we don't get to practice”. On the other hand, Aymen one of the twelve interviewers praised the current CEC, and claimed: “Of course, the CEC we took in primary school were efficient and effective. I myself would not have participated in many charity activities that I did, if I had not learn about that in school”. He also added “If we need to better our CEC, maybe having a practical part would be great”. As noticed, the current CEC implemented in Algeria is perfect concerning theories and concepts conveyed to students. Whereas, concepts and theories are never enough. They do not last in youth's minds and mentalities. That is why, it is high time for a new practical method to be adopted. One of the most successful methods used worldwide is Community Based

Learning (CBL), known also as experiential learning or service learning.

"Tell me, and I will forget. Show me, and I will remember. Involve me, and I will understand" A Chinese proverb inspired the first writers of CBL and service learning programs [6]. Community Based Learning, known globally also as service learning is integrating the academic process at school with the experiential learning on the field. Both social partners and educators, work together to develop some projects according to the needs of community. These projects are presented to students who will work on them in class, to solve their community problems at the end [4].

Now that the need for CBL in Algeria is obvious, a logical question arises: How can this new method be implemented in Algeria? Taking into consideration its special cultural and social context. First of all, the ministry of education should start signing contracts with active social partners, including community associations and Non Governmental Organizations (NGO). The minister of education Benbouzid himself has confessed that the school absolutely needs the help of other institutions in order to achieve this mission together. The minister called families, mosques, society and media to play their role effectively and contribute to building the sense of civic engagement in our youth [7]. Therefore, there is an urge need to establish this coordination and collaboration between several entities of society to fulfill the mission.

In this concern, it is suggested to establish a long term coordination between the Algerian school and AMS as an active social partner. AMS has proved its strong impact on youth and society in general therefore it could be the start to fill the gap. Thus, what should be done in order to bring this initiative to light? As a first step in this project, it is recommended to give students generous credit for these projects, in order to encourage them taking this step. Moreover, the social partners should be aware and ready to receive students who aim to sharpen their skills in all fields. This cooperation between school and social partners should be sustained for the long term, and should not be only occasional initiatives. In this scope of the matter, Dr. Babahani Souad, a professor in Kasdi Merbah University, Ouargla, Algeria said supporting this suggestion: "Our CEC's need absolutely a real reform, to be more practical than theoretical. Students should be encouraged to go more often to the field and experience the problems on-site. Also new creative ways should be brought up to maintain the link between school and social partners".

As for the curriculum, educators should be creative and do not limit it in one single course. In fact, CBL is not limited only to the CEC. It can be also implemented in other courses as biology, history and geography [11]. Mainly all courses which have part of sociology, can be contained under the umbrella of CEC. As an instance, Dr. Moony presented an example in the United States, where students are encouraged in history classes to go to an environmental NGO and work on a biology or geology problem facing their community. They study about it in class first, and then they go to implement their proposed solutions on the field with the help of these NGO's and school social partners [11].

The implementation of CBL in Algeria will have numerous benefits on students, society, nation and even future country planning. Indeed, by exposing students to the real life problems several times, and by interacting with NGO's during their school experience, their solving problems skills along with many social and leadership skills will be greatly enhanced. Also, students who have the opportunity to engage with their community from an early age, will be able to develop communication skills. Moreover, while interacting with people in real situations, they will learn solving problems skills. Above all, they will be able to interact with many society leaders and active individuals, which will help them widen their personal as well as professional network. As for the society, it will benefit at the first place from the projects implemented by both, students who have the academic background and NGO activists who have the experience and sufficient knowledge about society. Dr. Mason and in her paper explained how there is a mutual benefit between students and society in a closed circle. She explains how students start their research according to the community's problems. Later at school, and thanks to the academic material they investigate some suitable solutions for these problems. Finally, students go back to the site and implement their solutions on the ground. Certainly, the fact of how community directs the research of students, and then how students in return impact their society is incredible [9]. Moreover, many economic benefits can be witnessed through these projects. Not only this, but also when citizens see that school is seeking the solution of community problems, a sense of community ownership and pride will arise within society [6]. Lastly, leaders of the nation would be able to plan for the future of the country and make proper strategies, once they ensure the existence of young future pillars of this nation. Indeed, students who start to engage with their community early, their allegiance to the nation will always be maintained. After school, they are most probably to engage more with their society and

join community service NGO's. According to a study conducted by Dr. Robert and a group of researchers, they concluded that graduates from such programs will have all three needed portions of a civic engaged leader. Thanks to CBL, they will be fully aware of their identity, and have appropriate educational experience, and a civic one [13]. Thus, they will have a great sense of belonging, nationalism and active citizenship. All this together, will certainly draw such a bright future for the country.

4. CONCLUSION

All in all, in order to prepare young leaders to hold the responsibility of building the country, Algerian youth's civic engagement must be enhanced. This can be reached through implementing the methods of CBL in the current CEC courses. In fact, Algerian school can form a great cooperation with Islamic Scouts and other active NGO's. This cooperation will allow students to practice academic theories, taken at school, onsite and in the real world. Therefore, using this approach, the Algerian school will prepare a great generation of qualified youth, who are well civically engaged and well prepared to hold on their shoulders, the responsibility of leading this nation to the highest peaks.

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