

*Una revisión crítica a las competencias ciudadanas como  
paradigma oficial de la educación política en Colombia*  
*A critical review citizen competences as an official paradigm  
of political education in Colombia*

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**Resumen:** Se presenta un análisis crítico de la propuesta oficial del Estado colombiano sobre educación política fundamentada en la formación de competencias ciudadanas. Para ello se hace un breve recuento de la educación política en Colombia, luego se analiza esta propuesta en el marco del contexto mundial, para, finalmente, presentar algunas conclusiones sobre la necesidad de seguir avanzando, no sólo en la formación de ciudadanos desde la escuela, sino en la transformación de las escuelas en escenarios realmente democráticos.

**Palabras clave:** Competencias ciudadanas; Educación ciudadana; Educación política; Escuela democrática

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**Abstract:** A critical analysis of the official proposal of the Colombian State on political education based on the formation of citizen competencies is presented. This is done a brief account of political education in Colombia, then this proposal is analyzed in the context of the global context, to finally present some conclusions on the need to move forward, not only in the formation of citizens from school, but in the transformation of schools into truly democratic scenarios.

**Keywords:** Citizens' competences; Civic education; Political education; Democratic school

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The national policy on political education in Colombia has undergone transformations throughout its existence as a republic. The paths that have been constructed have been different in order to advance coherent and convincing proposals in the formation of responsible, autonomous and reflective citizens. These paths have led, in recent years, to the formulation of citizen competency standards, establishing themselves as a state proposal and thus assuming a paradigm within the current theoretical discussion on democracy, citizenship and political education. According to Echavarría (2008), four theoretical tendencies are those that predominate in the studies on political education in the country. From these currents we can observe the struggle between two opposed paradigms, one represented by the official position of the national educational policy, that is, citizen education from the perspective of the formation

of citizen competencies, and another critical paradigm that refers to a concept of an enlarged democracy from which he advocates a political formation and for the conquest of a "really" democratic school.

In this writing he presents a brief account of political education in Colombia in order to understand the background that has led to the formulation of the current proposal; then this proposal is analyzed in the context of the global context, supporting why it is considered a current paradigm in the field of education; the central concepts of this proposal are also examined, and the foundations, the structure and the strategies proposed in this educational policy are put forward to finally present some conclusions that arise from the critical reflection on this model and the need to continue advancing, not only in the formation of citizens from the school, but in the transformation of schools into truly democratic scenarios.

### **From civic education to citizenship competencies**

The official position set by the Ministry of National Education (MEN) has gone from the so-called civic instruction of the mid-twentieth century to education for democracy, coexistence, citizenship or peace, depending on the moment and the political urgency of the governments.

Thus, at the end of the 19th century and during almost half of the 20th century, civics in Colombia was strongly linked to the teaching of urbanity, the cult of national symbols and the memorization of the characteristics of the Colombian political regime. (Peláez and Márquez, 2006, p.18)

Civic education was then the official paradigm that for a long time oriented political education in the country. The important thing was, from this point of view, how to train citizens who would respect the norm, who would worship the homeland and internalize republican values. This type of education was understood as necessary to foster a national identity that was controlled by the elites. For historians:

The period from 1886 to 1958 is that of a complex process to incorporate the values of citizenship into political models of scholastic and antiliberal origin, without jeopardizing the political and social control of some leading groups that feel that their power to direct the country does not arise from the popular will but from some forms of social and cultural pre-eminence anointed by religion. (Melo, 2002, p.12)

However, it should be noted that since the 1930s, the teaching of history based on epic battles and patriotic heroes began to combine with practices that sought to promote democratic values, for example, the establishment of school government through the election of student president. These first attempts were frustrated with the beginning of the era of Violence and the subsequent arrival to power of General Rojas Pinilla. During this mandate, civic education was momentarily replaced by the Bolivarian chair, but then returned, although without the democratic enthusiasm that had been impelling.

This approach paid little attention to the understanding of social, political and economic dynamics; it reduced the citizenship to the mechanical fact of voting; it highlighted citizens' duties on rights and left aside the political interests of youth. (Peláez and Márquez, 2006, pp. 20-21)

Civic education would have a reformulation in the year of 1984 from a curricular renewal proposed by the Ministry of Education. The main objectives of this reform would be to develop a pedagogy destined to inculcate democratic values and to stimulate the permanent discussion of these by the students, to reconstruct the concept of urbanity in the sense of orienting it towards coexistence in a plural and multicultural society, and to link education for democracy with the daily life of students. But it would only be up to the promulgation of the Political Constitution of 1991 - product of a great national agreement in which different political forces participated for the first time, including some coming from the insurgency after a peace process -, and the crystallization of an educational reform from the General Law of Education in 1994, which could bring about a change of vision in political education in the country.

To start, the new constitution states that "democratic practices will be promoted for the learning of the principles and values of citizen participation. The State will disclose the Constitution" (Political Constitution of Colombia, 1991, article 41). For its part, the General Law of Education proposes the mandatory education of the Constitution, education for justice, peace and democracy, as well as establishing as fundamental objectives of education:

The formation of fundamental values for coexistence in a democratic, participatory and pluralist society; (...) The development of civil, ethical and moral values, of social organization and of human coexistence; (...) The initiation in the knowledge of the Political Constitution, and the acquisition of skills to perform autonomously in society. (Law 115/1994, article 21, MEN, 2015)

To meet these objectives, the teaching of social sciences, history, geography, political constitution and democracy is established as an integral compulsory area, with which civic education disappears as a subject in the curricula of the country's schools. But in addition another series of dispositions is established to advance the formation in democracy of the students.

For example, schools are ordered to establish a manual of coexistence built by mutual agreement between the different levels of the educational community, which will replace the old regulations that were generated unilaterally by the governing bodies. The School Government is established, formed by collegiate bodies that are in charge of the administrative and academic direction of the schools through the democratic participation of all the sectors of the educational community who have representation in

them. And, in order to give participation to all the classes, mainly the students, and to bring the experience of democracy to the educational institutions, the election of the student representative and the student council was implemented.

In summary, the General Education Law established a new model of political education, abandoning the old idea of civic education and seeking a proposal for training for democracy. A new look from the integrality of the social sciences and multidisciplinary, the teaching of democratic values and constitutional principles, combined with practices of participatory school governance and coexistence manuals agreed by the community, would be the horizon designed to guide education in the country, all this synthesized in the formulation of Guiding Guides such as the Curriculum Guidelines of Political Constitution and Democracy (MEN, 1998) and Social Sciences (MEN, 2002).

However, when they were just beginning to know and implement in the institutions emerged a new curricular reform started in the government of Alvaro Uribe Velez under the name of Educational Revolution, which had as axis the transformation towards teaching skills. In terms of political education, the model was transformed to the formation of citizenship, through the formulation of the Basic Standards of Citizen Competences (MEN, 2004), which are thought as a set of knowledge, communicative, cognitive and emotional competencies that students from all over the country must develop, oriented towards the training of subjects capable of living together in society, so that they participate responsibly and democratically in the decisions that affect them and that value and promote cultural differences.

But before analyzing the proposal of citizenship competencies, it must be recognized that at the moment in which it was formulated, a whole movement was being generated in the world that sought the transformation of the teaching of citizenship, democracy and human rights from different fronts and With different perspectives, therefore, the proposal of the Colombian State is part of this global panorama.

### **Citizen education in the global context**

Citizen education has been gaining unprecedented importance in recent times. At the international level, a favorable environment for its development has been generated from the global documents that have been designed, mainly by UNESCO, which include it in the supranational educational policies deployed in the Education for All Objectives, the Millennium Development Goals and the Sustainable Development Goals.

According to statements by world authorities: "The third priority is to promote awareness of being citizens of the world. Education must be transformative and give life to shared values. It must inculcate an active interest in the world and with those who share it" (UNESCO, 2014, p.138). It is then a priority for

the United Nations system that has already begun to define its objectives, visions, aims and possible global contents.

Education for global citizenship covers the concepts of peace, tolerance and mutual understanding, human rights education and related educational issues. It is a form of education that provides a framework to prevent violence in schools and promote intercultural understanding, interreligious dialogue, respect for diversity and empathy. (UNESCO, 2011, p.25)

For its part, the development plan of the European Union, approved in March 2000, known as the Lisbon Strategy, establishes that by 2010 all the education systems of the member countries of the European Union (EU) must guarantee "that the education and training centers promote more effectively solidarity, tolerance, democratic values and interest in other cultures and better prepare people to participate actively in society" (Gómez, 2009, p.49). For this, at that date, most countries should include the subject Education for Citizenship in national curricula.

The intention was already recognized:

Education for democratic citizenship is a factor for social cohesion, mutual understanding, intercultural and interreligious dialogue and solidarity, which contributes to promoting the principle of equality between men and women, and which favors the establishment of harmonious and peaceful relationships between peoples, as well as the defense and development of democratic society and culture. (Gómez, 2009, p.50)

However, each country began to apply the orientation in different ways, starting with the establishment of the subject, but without making too many transformations to the curricula. The case of Spain is particular. From the Organic Law of Education (LOE), enacted in 2006, a new subject called Education for Citizenship has been introduced, which "complements the traditional transversal approach of education in values without pretending to replace it with an exclusively focus discipline " (Caballero, 2009, p. 62).

The objective of this new subject, which is preceded by national controversy and even protests and rejection demonstrations, is:

Offer all students a space for reflection, analysis and study about the fundamental characteristics and functioning of a democratic regime, of the principles and rights established in the Spanish Constitution and in the treaties and universal declarations of human rights, as well as of the common values that constitute the substratum of democratic citizenship in a global context. (Caballero, 2009, p. 62)

To meet these objectives, the teaching of this subject was defined in some grades of primary and secondary education, defined from the concept of "basic competences", which is defined in Spanish legislation as:

Those skills that a young person or young woman must have developed at the end of compulsory education in order to achieve their personal fulfillment, exercise active citizenship, be incorporated into adult life in a satisfactory manner and be able to develop lifelong learning throughout life. (Caballero, 2009, p 63). One of these competences is social and civic competence.

In Great Britain, the creation of the subject Civic Education starts from the idea of forming:

Active citizens: eager, capable and empowered to influence public life and with critical skills to weigh arguments before speaking and acting, to build and radically increase in young people the best of existing traditions of commitment to community and service public, and so that each one trusts in their power to find new forms of participation and action with others. (Crick, 2002, p.6)

In this conception, the English proposal tries to reconcile two opposing positions with the citizenship, the traditional one that emphasizes the ideal of a good citizen that obeys the law, with the progressive one that emphasizes the idea of active citizenship that participates in voluntary associations, in political parties or interest groups. This conciliation also strives to make a subtle transformation, which happens when we move from a proposal of political education to one of citizen education: "surveys show that parents favor the idea of" citizen education ", but they may not always see with good eyes the "political education" (Crick, 2002, p.7).

In Latin America, the debate on citizen education also came and took hold in multilateral organizations.

The OEI ruled in favor of promoting its development at the regional level:

In a society as unequal as Latin America, the formation of free, educated and caring citizens is one of the main strategies that can lead, through the collective commitment of different social sectors, to overcome poverty, marginalization and inequality. (OEI, 2010, p.107)

Thus, Latin America is inserted in a global approach to citizen education that highlights the urgent need to promote democratic values in Latin American education systems, in order to produce stability for the fragile democracies of the region, as well as to combat two of its greatest obstacles, poverty and inequality.

### **The development of citizen competencies as a national policy**

The formulation of the Basic Standards of Citizen Competencies is the principle of the national policy of Citizen Education. They were formulated in 2004 and aimed to mainstream the entire curriculum in order

to improve the processes of training citizens who fulfilled the ideals outlined above. The first concepts that began to generate controversy were precisely those of standard and competence. For MEN, the concept of competence has nothing to do with competitiveness, "being competent means knowing and knowing how to do. Competence implies being able to use knowledge in the realization of actions or products (whether abstract or concrete)" (MEN, 2004, p.7). In the meantime, the standards recognize them as "clear and public criteria that allow establishing what are the basic levels of quality of education to which children of all regions of our country are entitled, in all areas" (MEN , 2004, p.7).

Citizen competences have to do with the skills and knowledge needed to build coexistence, participate democratically and value pluralism:

Citizenship competences are the knowledge and skills that allow citizens to act constructively in a democratic society. (...) Citizen action (exercised autonomously and not by imposition by others) is the fundamental objective of citizen education. (Chaux, 2004, p.20)

In order to fulfill these aims, competences classified in three groups are oriented, each of which represents a fundamental dimension for the exercise of citizenship: coexistence and peace; participation and democratic responsibility; and plurality, identity and assessment of differences. The group of coexistence and peace gathers the competences that a citizen needs to be able to coexist with others in a peaceful and constructive way, without this means the absence of conflicts. For example, the following are standards of this group of competencies for grades one through three of primary education: I understand that all children have the right to receive good treatment, care and love; I recognize the basic emotions (joy, sadness, anger, fear) in myself and in other people. (MEN, 2004, p.16)

The group of participation and democratic responsibility gathers the competences that a citizen needs to participate actively and critically in the construction of agreements and in the decision making of their community. For example, the following are standards for this group of competences, for the fourth and fifth grades of primary education: I know and know how to use the mechanisms of student participation in my school environment; I know the functions of the school government and the manual of coexistence. (MEN, 2004, p.19)

The group of plurality and assessment of differences has to do with the necessary competencies for a citizen to promote respect and appreciation of the other, avoiding all types of discrimination, and strengthening the construction of the national identity from plurality and diversity. For example, the following are standards for this group of competences, for the sixth to seventh grades of secondary education: I understand that, according to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the National

Constitution, people have the right not to be discriminated against; I recognize that rights are based on the equality of human beings, although each one is, is expressed and lives differently. (MEN, 2004, p.21). The competencies, in turn, are classified in different types. They can be knowledge, cognitive, emotional, communicative and integrating skills. The knowledge refers to the information that must be understood for the exercise of citizenship. Cognitive skills have to do with the abilities to perform mental processes. Within these competences at the level of citizenship, the following are proposed: perspective taking, interpretation of intentions, generation of options, consideration of consequences, metacognition, critical thinking.

"Emotional competencies are the necessary abilities to identify and respond constructively to one's own emotions and those of others" (Chaux, 2004, p.22). Some of them are: identification of one's emotions, management of one's emotions, empathy, identification of others' emotions.

Communication skills refer to the ability to communicate with others, oriented towards constructive, peaceful and democratic interaction with others. Among others, they are: knowing how to listen or active listening, assertiveness, argumentation. Finally, the integrators are the ones that articulate in practice all the previous competences.

These competences were presented to the national educational community as a general orientation motivating the educational institutions so that, making use of their autonomy, they could construct different strategies and programs to develop them in their academic life. It is recommended, by the MEN, that citizenship competences do not generate another subject within the school curriculum, but that they live in a transversal and experiential way, mainly practical, in the daily life of the institutions. But institutional transformations are also proposed to make this learning effective, however, this aspect has not been widely disseminated:

It is necessary to approach the issue from an institutional perspective from which we examine how democratic our school is and, in this sense, how much our school is an environment where spaces really exist, for example, for collective decision making and the management of conflicts. (Mejía, 2004, p.84)

Despite this declaration of intentions, the proposed strategies to transform the institutions do not go beyond the revisions and updates of the Improvement Plans, as an exercise to evaluate how democratic an institution is in the light of different processes such as the takings of decisions, the school government, the manual of coexistence, conflict management, cross-cutting projects and relations with the community.

**In conclusion. A critical analysis of the model**

The formation of citizenship, from the paradigm of citizen competencies, despite starting from important theoretical and investigative assumptions, and democratic conceptual constructions, has not had the expected impact on the education system. After a stimulating start in which the government was given great importance it has almost passed into oblivion and has become, in practice, the teaching of recipes to behave well in society or procedural formulas without much real content, or well it has been inserted little by little in the subject of ethics and values, being considered in colloquial terms as a "seam" or small-time subject.

Within the criticisms that are made to the model, one of the most insistent has to do with the very concept of competence, which is seen, from different social sectors, as part of the business and economic language that is to be imposed on education. Competence refers, from this vision, to compete, and standard is criticized as that attempt to homogenize the school population.

But going further, citizen competencies are criticized because they are considered insufficient and limited, with little real impact on the students' daily lives. "Sometimes, these skills seem more recipes light news section, skills that have immersed a knowledge: I use mechanisms to manage my anger. (Ideas to calm myself down: breathe deeply, get away from the situation, count to ten or ...)" (MEN, 2004, p 18) (Piedrahita, 2011, p 9).

In the analysis that different authors make of the document of citizen competences, criticisms appear both about the concept of competence and the content of these:

We conclude that the exercise of citizenship is understood as the performance of a set of competences capable of maintaining a democratic society in an ideal state, where there can always be mutual understanding, (...). However, this image of ideal democracy, on the one hand, does not correspond to current society and, on the other, is utopian in that it is an unattainable ideal Perafán & Mejía (cited in Peláez & Márquez, 2006, p 28).

The neglect of the social, cultural, economic and political context in the formulation of citizens' competences and subsequent recommendations is a failure that has not gone unnoticed. It can be considered then that:

A first challenge currently faced by citizen training programs is to understand and interpret the transformations that are taking place at the level of the political and political scenario, where it is then possible to ask: what is the current context in the What is the process of training in citizenship competencies? (Delgado and Vasco, 2003, p.5)

Understanding the political context within civic education comes together with the challenge of understanding and interpreting the renewed expressions of political action and citizenship. This would lead to understand the formation of citizenship from a multidimensional point of view, as it must deal with political, social and cultural pluralism. The absence of the daily reality of the student, the political context of the country and the regions in particular means that "the school discourse tends to become an empty sermon, a pure expression of good intentions, of those that pave the road to hell, when life goes in one direction and teaching in another" (Melo, 2002, p.12). In the Colombian context, these good intentions contrast with the persecution and systematic elimination of social leaders, with the constant stigmatization of people and groups that oppose government measures, with the political agenda that is imposed by promoting the limitation of rights of minorities and economic adjustment programs that de-publicize public education at all levels.

Other authors consider that formulating citizen competencies, mostly procedural, leads to an open depoliticization of citizen education. "Under the influence of technocratic conceptions and scientific rationality, education is covered with a supposed" neutrality "and" objectivity "with the purpose of not converting it into political education and" indoctrination" (Magendzo, 2002, p 28).

Giroux (2006) criticizes this conception of citizenship that considers empty of political content, reducing the citizen to a subject who complies with the laws, who follows the rules of the game, who fulfills his duties. According to him, citizen education from this conception is reduced to knowledge and skills, most of them to learn to behave well in society.

Another way to "clean" citizen education of any political claim is to assume that to train active, participatory, critical and responsible citizens, it is enough to teach some contents or advance a series of transversal projects in which different areas of knowledge are linked through of learning by doing. This is something, without a doubt, necessary, but not sufficient. Training for citizens requires not only changing curricula or mainstreaming competency standards, it is necessary to organize the school in another way that makes it possible to experience democracy, and this, of course, is a political task. This means that school institutions they must transform themselves to meet the standards they demand of their students. One of the essential aspects for a school that considers itself democratic is its "ethos of citizenship", that is, that the way in which it is structured is coherent with the development of the ideals proposed. (Hart, 2005)

A democratic school should allow, for example, that members of the educational community participate in the most important decisions for the school. It is contradictory, then, to think of citizen competitions

for children without having democratic structures in the institution. "You cannot have a person who says: Let's have a democratic curriculum ... and I'm going to impose it. Citizenship is not imposed, it is built" (Hart, 2005).

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