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ADOPTION AND UTILIZATION OF ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP AS A MEANS OF TEACHING AND EDUCATING STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

Abstract

The present critical-interpretive study and paper constitutes an endeavor to demonstrate that active citizenship is a fundamental pillar in cultivating the academic, communicative, and social skills of students with disabilities, and does not merely represent a tool of socialization. Consequently, self-perception, self-efficacy, the development of critical thinking, and the empowerment of the voice of students with disabilities are reinforced through their active participation in collective activities. At the same time, it is ascertained and established –that teaching through practices of active citizenship– provides a comprehensive learning framework, since it is connected with equality, social justice, and education for human rights. Finally, certain proposals of practical interventions are presented/deposited, aiming at universal access to education, equal participation, and the assurance that students with disabilities will enjoy the same rights and opportunities as all their peers.

Keywords: active citizenship, adoption, utilization, teaching students with disabilities, inclusion

Introduction

It is usually ascertained that the educational process and practice for students with disabilities often focuses on therapeutic and/or supportive practices, leaving in the background the cultivation of their social and political skills and abilities. The United Nations Convention (United Nations, 2006) on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, however, explicitly and affirmatively highlights the need to promote their (persons/students with disabilities) full and equal inclusion and participation in all fields of social life. Education, as a fundamental mechanism of socialization, on the other hand, must contribute to the cultivation and promotion of active citizenship skills from childhood, especially for students who are at risk of marginalization, stigmatization, and isolation from the socio-cultural context (Balestra et al., 2022). Therefore, at the center of the bidirectional relationship between education and active citizenship is placed, on the one hand, the way and the form in which active citizenship can be utilized as a means of teaching for students with disabilities, and, on the other hand, how education contributes to the shaping of citizens with critical thinking and creativity, with a sense of social justice, and with the capacity for collective action (Gallo & Owen, 2021; European Commission, Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture, 2024).

The adoption, in this case, of practices of active citizenship in school classrooms may take many forms, that is, from collaborative activities and student councils to actions of social contribution and participation in community development programs (EnfoqueEducacion, 2024). Through such practices, it is discerned that students with disabilities are empowered to express their voice, to develop leadership and responsibility skills, and to co-shape in advance substantive and practical decisions. Furthermore, active citizenship functions as a bridge between academic learning and life beyond school. This implies that students who cultivate skills of cooperation, dialogue, and collective responsibility are, in effect, more prepared to respond to the challenges of social and professional life (Barber et al., 2021; Schulz et al., 2022; Cabello et al., 2024). In this way, it becomes understood that active citizenship is transformed into a tool for strengthening cohesion, social equality, and substantive inclusion. However, what must be underlined and emphasized is that the introduction of active citizenship in the education of students with disabilities requires a paradigm shift, which means that there must be a transition from the traditional/teacher-centered/historical/outdated model of teaching to

a more participatory, student-centered, co-educational, and inclusive model of implementing all the aforementioned (Bae & Park, 2019). In other words, it is recognized that this specific transformative framework lays the foundations for the acceptance of diversity, equal inclusion, and the creation of a society where every individual will have a voice of expression and a space of individual and personal creativity, autonomy, and self-determination (Dalcin, 2022).

Interweaving of the fundamental principles and values of active citizenship with inclusion and democratic rights

Active citizenship is defined as the active and conscious participation of the individual in the commons of the public sphere, with the aim of promoting social justice, solidarity, and democratic life. In reality, it is not only about the possession of political rights, but about their substantive utilization through participation in active activist collective actions that positively influence the social whole (Council of the EU, 2022). Regarding education, it must be mentioned that active citizenship incorporates dialogue, cooperation, critical thinking, and responsibility as central axes of the learning process and fermentation. Particularly for students with disabilities, it is considered and judged that their inclusion in education cannot be complete –without the cultivation of active citizenship–, since their substantive participation ensures that they will not remain on the margins, but on the contrary, they will have a role in the shaping of their school everyday life and social functioning. Education through active citizenship, therefore, renders the student with a disability –not only a recipient of knowledge–, but also an acting citizen with rights, obligations, duties, and responsibilities (Clay & Rubin, 2020).

Beyond everything else, it is judged that active citizenship is closely connected with the concept of inclusive education, since both focus on the removal of barriers and exclusions and on the creation of equal, fairly and justly distributed opportunities (Kleinschmidt, 2024). For this reason, it must be noted that inclusion does not concern only the physical presence of students with disabilities in school, but mainly their participation in the learning process and in the social becoming (McCausland et al., 2018). At this point, it is emphasized that active citizenship provides the theoretical and practical framework and foundation for the substantive involvement of students in collective processes and actions of uplifting for the better their participation and establishment in the functioning of the social superstructure (Jung, 2024). At the same time, it is ascertained, as the social model of disability also supports, that the limitations experienced by persons with disabilities do not derive exclusively from their biological condition, but from the social and institutional barriers that restrict and/or exclude their participation from the events and happenings of the public sphere. In a certain way, it becomes apparent that the promotion of active citizenship functions as a practical response to these obstacles and impediments that appear in the everyday life of students with disabilities, cultivating in this way a climate of credibility, fairness, acceptance, participation, equality, and cooperation (Ata, 2019; Sanpasuk, 2022).

According to Hoskins and Mascherini (2009), active citizenship includes four dimensions, namely:

- Social identity, where it refers to the sense that most people have who consider and deem that they belong to some community.
- Political participation, where most people firmly deem that they must participate in decision-making processes and in collective bodies.
- Social participation, where by nature most citizens/people are bound by qualities such as their participation in collective actions, volunteering, and solidarity.
- Democratic values, where respect for human rights, equality, and the multi-level and polymorphic tolerance of diversity prevails, not only of the nature and life of each person, but above all of social differentiation and reality.

It is ascertained for students with disabilities that inclusion in such processes has dual value, since on the one hand, it promotes their personal development and sense of self-awareness, self-efficacy, self-empowerment, and self-consciousness of their undertakings and actions, while on the other hand, it strengthens their social image, as they are recognized as equal members of the community. Research data and findings demonstrate that the participation of students with disabilities in actions of social contribution improves their self-esteem (Sailer, 2022) while at the same time it cultivates positive attitudes, values, principles, and beliefs in their peers, reducing the phenomena of exclusion and prejudice. UNESCO (2021) proposes the integration of education for global citizenship (*Citizenship education for democratic and sustainable communities*) into the school curricula of all countries, emphasizing that social justice and sustainable development are not feasible without the inclusion of the most vulnerable and disadvantaged groups. Active citizenship as a pedagogical tool, therefore, provides the possibility of transforming education from a mechanism of reproduction of inequalities, distortions, and pathologies into a lever of social change (Jung & Bae, 2025). With regard to the educational framework and context, it is discerned that active citizenship is integrated into the broader philosophy of education for democracy, which emphatically leans on participation, critical thinking, and social justice. School units that cultivate active citizenship, obviously create opportunities so that students, regardless of knowledge, academic performance, and neurodevelopmental deficiencies and abilities, may experience the reality of responsible action, conflict management, and collective decision-making (Encina & Berger, 2021; Dansholm et al., 2024; De Wet et al., 2024).

The pedagogical weight of active citizenship in the upbringing and education of students with disabilities

The pedagogical significance and value of active citizenship for students with disabilities is connected with the sense of "belonging" to a group and/or community, with the empowerment of their identity, and with their self-esteem. For example, through actions and practices such as their participation in school councils and in co-shaping collective decision-making and group discussions, students with disabilities experience in real time and situations their social acceptance and at the same time strengthen their self-confidence (Chalachanova et al., 2021). In light of this reasoning, it is affirmed that their active involvement in such processes, fermentations, and procedures improves social interaction and reduces their isolation, while strengthening the shaping and building of positive attitudes and skills among their peers (Civics Renewal Network, 2025). The cultivation of active citizenship has multiple benefits for students with disabilities, since it contributes to the improvement of their self-perception as they acquire and conquer receptions and possibilities of a leadership role and realize that their voice has catalytic weight and importance. In this way, beyond everything else, their social integration and inclusion are reinforced, the barriers of communication and understanding with their peers are lifted, and their relationship in general with teachers is redefined and reframed (Jung, 2025). Also, their resilience in facing the difficulties of their daily school and non-school functioning is improved and promoted, since their participation in collective actions gives meaning and strengthens the sense of their individual entity (Fitzgerald et al., 2021; SOLIDAR Foundation, Santibanez, 2023; Aiello & Giaconi, 2024; Mangkhang et al., 2025).

Reliable and strong in objectivity data and findings reveal that students with disabilities who actively participate in school life present better rates of school retention and higher levels of satisfaction from their learning experience (Dees, 2025). Consequently, it is recognized that active citizenship functions as a catalyst of development, progress, and improvement of their academic and social course in all events (Carrington et al., 2021; Padía & Traxler, 2021). The introduction and use of active citizenship in the education of students with disabilities, from now on, constitutes a strategy and method that transcends the traditional framework and

environment of teaching and learning and promotes equal participation. In the field of Special Education and Training –even today–, very often emphasis and weight are given to the development of academic and/or functional skills, overlooking in this way the cultivation of psychosocial, behavioral, social, and political skills, which are critical for their life in the community and in the broader social system (Jackson et al., 2023). Active citizenship, therefore, arrives as “a bonding glue” that must definitely cover this gap, creating from another perspective and viewpoint opportunities for experiential learning –through which– students are connected with the happenings and establishments of the social nature (Paris & Alim, 2017). Active citizenship on the basis of this reasoning, functions as a “catalyst” that transforms the educational process into a tool of social change, providing students with disabilities the right, the possibility, and the ability to be active and effective participants and, not, simple recipients of the education they enjoy from the respective state (Kelsey & Fuhrman, 2020; Tai et al., 2023; Brand et al., 2025).

The implementation of active citizenship in the classroom, in particular, requires the creation of learning climates and environments that offer opportunities to all students (Kim et al., 2022a). Some exemplary practices documented in the international literature include: a) community connection programs, such as recycling, solidarity, volunteering, and cultural events, through which schools collaborate with local stakeholders, allowing students to contribute –in practice– to initiatives that enhance the daily practicality and life of the citizens of the community –of which they themselves (students with disabilities) are part–, b) school campaigns and actions, where students have both the opportunity and the capacity to engage in campaigns addressing social awareness issues such as rights, the beautification and preservation of the local environment, and accessibility –regardless of disability and/or not– for all citizens, c) student councils, where through their operation students with disabilities are included equally and meaningfully in bodies making fair decisions, proposing solutions for issues related to school life, and d) collaborative learning, because –through the creation and structuring– of working groups including students with and without disabilities, qualities such as solidarity, camaraderie, responsibility, altruism, genuine concern for others, humanism, spontaneous and sincere selflessness, and mutual support are cultivated (Hauver, 2019; Oosterhoff et al., 2021; Elia et al., 2024; Shaisombat&Wongsaphan, 2025).

Both UNESCO (2017) and the European Commission (2020; 2021) have highlighted the value of these approaches, emphasizing that participatory education cultivates democratic citizens, while simultaneously reducing the risk of marginalization and/or their disappearance from active participation in all expressions of the social fabric. The implementation of these practices clearly shows that students with disabilities are not passive recipients, but rather active members who can make meaningful contributions to the shaping of school processes and outcomes. At the same time, it is recognized that active citizenship contributes to the formation of a more inclusive school climate and environment, which can be differentiated and adapted to the abilities of students with disabilities (Hamilton et al., 2020). Their peers without disabilities, on their part, develop attitudes of respect, acceptance, and solidarity, which reduces school bullying and phenomena of discrimination and stigmatization. Furthermore, the families of students with disabilities observe their children being recognized as equal members of the community, which strengthens family–school collaboration (Zegwaard et al., 2023; Prudente & Demchak, 2025).

Conclusions – Recommendations

Overall, it should be mentioned that active citizenship contributes to achieving the goals of sustainable development and the implementation of international conventions on the rights of persons/students with disabilities and, at the same time, constitutes a decisive strategy that can lead to deeper social changes. In this sense, it is not merely a methodological choice for achieving the aforementioned. Additionally, it also contributes to the transformation of social perception regarding the acceptance and/or non-acceptance of disability. Therefore, students

with disabilities, when taking on leadership roles, participating in actions of common benefit, or presenting proposals in collective bodies, overturn stereotypes and prejudices that portray them as “incapable” and/or “dependent.” In this way, they are empowered themselves, while at the same time society is strengthened, becoming more open, fair, and inclusive.

Based on the above conclusions, specific proposals are formulated for the enhancement of active citizenship in the education of students with disabilities. At a pedagogical level, therefore, it is required: a) The integration of active citizenship into the curriculum with clear objectives and activities that promote participation, responsibility, and collaboration, b) the use of participatory teaching methods, such as collaborative learning, simulations, and action plans that give a role to every student, c) the creation of student councils and decision-making groups, where students with disabilities have an active, meaningful, and equal role, d) the integration of experiential activities that connect school learning with real social problems, such as environmental actions, social contribution, etc., e) differentiated teaching and individualized support, so as to ensure the meaningful participation of all, regardless of disability, f) the training of teachers on issues of inclusion, active citizenship, and differentiated teaching, g) the development of partnerships between schools, parents, local communities, and social stakeholders, so as to create a supportive ecosystem that nurtures and cultivates their skills and abilities, h) the provision of technological tools and support services that ensure equal access for students with disabilities to all educational activities, and i) the sensitization of society through campaigns, actions, and participatory programs that highlight the abilities of students with disabilities.

The adoption of these strategies can transform the classroom into an open, polymorphic, and multimodal laboratory of democracy, where students with disabilities learn not only at a theoretical level about society, but particularly through their practically meaningful participation in it. In this way, it is considered that active citizenship can constitute the foundation and the “touchstone” of an educational policy that promotes equality, democracy, and social cohesion. Investment in it (active citizenship), ultimately, ensures that all students, regardless of abilities and deficiencies, have the opportunity to actively contribute to shaping a more just and inclusive future of society.

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