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Students' views on civic concepts, attitudes and experiences

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Introduction

What can we learn about perceptions about democracy, democratic attitudes, social action and the good citizen from the Cypriot ninth graders from the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement's (IEA) civic education study (CivEd)? In general we can identify a number of ways in which students in Cyprus compare favourably with young people from 27 other countries when it comes to the development of democratic attitudes and orientations toward participation. Cypriot students usually do not perform well in international research (e.g. TIMSS, PIRLS), so we are also interested in why they had better results in the Civic Education study.

The context of civic education in Cyprus

The concepts of democracy, democratic life and human rights, both in formal declarations and in practice, are important subjects in formal schooling practices and in the educational environment as a whole. Democracy is a fundamental concept included in the general aims of public education in Cyprus. According to the primary school curriculum (Ministry of Education, 1994b), the general aim of Cypriot education is 'the development of democratic and responsible citizens' (p13). The school is described as a democratic place where each child is accepted as having individual capabilities and weaknesses and is treated as an individual personality with different needs, interests and inclinations from others.

Civic education, as defined in the curriculum of the Ministry of Education (1994b), is to help students develop into free, responsible and democratic citizens who will in turn perform their duties according to their conscience and adopt democratic principles and procedures in their relationships with others. The aims of civic education are achieved through all the subjects of the curriculum (Torney-Purta *et al*., 1999) in the primary school so no teaching hours for the subject are defined, but in the gymnasium (junior secondary school) civic education is taught as a subject once a week (45 minutes) for one semester.

Civic education aims to introduce students to the concepts and the structure of social and political life, at acquainting them with the fundamental functions of a democratic state and at developing a sense of responsibility towards the state and society as a whole. Moreover, it aims to acquaint students with the Cypriot form of government, to help them understand institutions and local and international organizations and to develop in them positive attitudes towards their homeland and the world (Ministry of Education, 1991).

Within this framework, students should respect their fellow human beings and adhere to human rights (Ministry of Education, 1994). The introduction to the textbook for the

primary school *Becoming a Good Citizen* (Ministry of Education, 1994) mentions that primary school children are young citizens of the Republic of Cyprus and that it is necessary for them to know their rights and obligations at school, in the family, in the village or parish where they live, and in the Cypriot state in general. From the above, it is obvious that the democratic school places a great deal of emphasis on the rights and obligations of the citizens within a democratic environment on the basis of the declaration of human rights. However, despite the intentions of the Ministry, content analysis of the textbooks has revealed that textbooks do not contribute to the fulfillment of the general aim of education, nor do they succeed in implementing civic education's aims and objectives (Koutselini and Papanastasiou, 1997).

The active participation of students in the teaching and learning process at primary and secondary school is encouraged. In the primary school curriculum (Ministry of Education, 1994), where it is specifically mentioned that the teacher must: (a) create conditions of active participation on the part of students; (b) contribute knowledge; and (c) observe the development of students' work and help students when they face difficulties. On the basis of information provided in the textbooks, small-scale research is encouraged in areas such as environmental studies, science, conflict resolution, helping persons with special needs, and the election of student councils.

There are no examinations relevant to the concept of democracy because the aim is the general development of the student through personal contact with the democratic way of life by way of all subjects and school life in general. Visits and conversations with representatives of local authorities, student council elections and student-centred organisation of the school community are some examples of student contact with the democratic way of life.

Discussions on politics are allowed in schools, and the general impression that is projected is that active participation in common affairs is an obligation of the citizen and that the government is responsive to the wishes and claims of its citizens. Moreover, students in Cyprus are members of the youth organisations of political parties, which are special sections of political parties dealing with issues that concern the young.

Methodology

The Civic Education Study, initiated by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA), was carried out in two phases. In the first phase, researchers conducted national case studies examining the traditions, goals and conditions of civic education (Torney-Purta *et al*., 1999). In the second phase, nationally representative samples of the grades attended by the majority of 14-year-olds, their civic education teachers, and the principals of their schools were surveyed on civics. Over 93,000 students from 28 countries around the world participated in this study (Torney-Purta, *et al*., 2001).

This study is based on data from the student questionnaires, which were collected in 1999. In Cyprus, the whole school population (61 gymnasia - the secondary junior schools) participated in this project, and from each school two classes of ninth graders were selected. In total, 3,106 students participated in the study (about 30% of the entire population).

The IEA study of civic education assessed ninth graders for their civic knowledge, concepts, attitudes, and experiences. The mean age of the sampled ninth graders was 14.8 at the time of testing. Fifty-one percent of the students were females and 49 % were males.

Results

Perceptions about democracy

Democracy rests on the idea that citizens should have certain rights and freedoms, such as the rights to free expression and to freely associate with others in voluntary groups that form civil society. Ninety-four percent of ninth graders said that it was good for democracy when everyone has the right to express their opinions freely. Ninety-one percent of the students said that it was good for democracy when citizens have the right to elect political leaders freely. Fewer students (85%) said that when people peacefully protest against a law they believe to be unjust, that is good for democracy and 63% stated that they were willing to ignore a law that violates human rights. Most ninth graders (90%) said that it was bad for democracy when wealthy business people have more influence on the government than others.

Democratic attitudes

In democratic societies citizens must be willing to extend the rights that they would claim for themselves to others. Most students (94%) agreed that immigrants should have the opportunity to keep their own customs and lifestyles, and that after living in the country for several years they should have the same opportunity as other citizens to vote in elections (79%).

Social action and the good citizen

In the IEA study students were asked about characteristics they associated with being a good citizen. The behaviours which students were most likely to say were important or very important to good citizenship were participation in activities to help people in the community (91%), taking part in activities promoting human rights (93%), and taking part in activities to protect the environment (78%). Students did not consider participation in political parties as a demonstration of active citizenship, which was also the case for all the other countries participating in the IEA citizenship study. The variables used to define the conceptual areas are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Factors, variables, Items, Means, s.d.

Cyprus Factors	Questionnaire items	$\overline{X}$	s.d.
F1 Democratic values	d1. When everyone has the right to express their opinions freely	3.75	0.64
	d2. When newspapers are free of all government control	2.49	0.96
	d3. When private business have no restrictions from government.	2.03	0.81
	d4. When people demand their political and social right	3.50	0.89
	d5. When citizens have the right to elect political leaders freely	3.68	0.73
Good citizen is the one who…			
F2 Social participation	s1. participates in a peaceful protest against a law believed to be unjust.	3.27	0.81
	s2. participates in activities to benefit people in their community (society)	3.44	0.68
	s3. takes part in activities promoting human rights	3.61	0.64
	s4. takes part in activities to protect the environment	3.16	0.88
	s5. has the will to ignore (disregard) a law that violates human rights	2.74	1.17
	s6. helps voluntarily poor or elderly people in the community	3.11	0.69
	s7. collects money for a social cause	3.05	0.72
	s8. collects signatures for a petition	2.70	0.81
	s9. participates in a non-violent (peaceful) protest march or rally	3.22	0.76
The frequency of…			
F3 political interest	i1. reading articles(stories) in the newspaper about what is happening in my country	2.94	0.96
	i2. reading articles(stories) in the newspaper about what is happening in other countries	2.83	0.94
	i3. listening to news broadcasts on the radio	2.61	0.97
F4 Political environment	e1. discussions with parents or other adult family members of what happening in the county politics	2.98	0.93
	e2. discussions with parents or other adult family members of what is happening in international politics	2.91	0.94

Discussion

The results of the IEA study reveal several positive indicators of effective civic education in Cyprus, but there is no reason to be complacent, as the findings also suggest considerable room for improvement.

Contextualisation of citizenship education

Although a primary purpose of education has always been to prepare students for their roles as citizens in a democratic world, students from different countries hold different conceptions of democracy. Thus, a first conclusion is that contextualisation of citizenship education is needed in order to better understand the data obtained from the study. Moreover, reflection on the responses of different students on questions related to democratic values and attitudes reinforce the discourse on the necessity of differentiated curricula and extra-curricular activities, which will provide different experiences to different students.

Students' differences in cultural, social and family capital affect citizenship in regard to values, attitudes and interest in social participation, not only across countries but also within the same country. Some students' responses reflected an approach to democracy that focuses on people's powers and rights rather than the power and role of institutions. Especially in Cyprus, students' attitudes and perceptions were influenced by the national political problem (Koutselini, 2000; 2002) and the fact that they experience the power of institutions (national and international) in their everyday life, when they see that for thirty years the political situation has been unchanged.

Social participation

Students' engagement is considered the most important feature of civic participation. This refers to engagement with social, political, economic, and cultural events and activities, which takes us beyond civic knowledge to active participation. A main issue is whether engagement means political activities generally associated with adult political involvement, like joining a party, writing letters to newspapers or being a candidate for office, or whether it refers to forms of civic and political engagement unrelated to electoral politics or parties, such as collecting money for a social cause, participating in a non-violent protest march, or participation in environmental or community betterment organisations.

Democratic practices are very effective in promoting civic knowledge and engagement, but family input is also very important for young people's civic participation. A variety of factors may affect civic participation: societal-political structure and institutions, family background and family climate and practices, school rules, institutions and practices, group/peer dynamics, personal philosophy and self esteem. Further analysis of the data will show how students from different contexts understand and actualise civic participation and what factors affect their different understanding and participation.

The IEA Civic Education Study supports the view that civic participation of young students depends heavily on society life, school life and home environment (Rynkiewicz and Ross, 2004). Fourteen year-olds appear to lack the interest and will to engage in social action and to participate politically in the future, even in countries where students seem socialised and democratically competent. Thus, the question that arises is what

really constitutes the citizen's role, a question that tends to be accompanied in articles by the investigation of the reasons underlying students' less active participation. Why do 14 year-olds restrict the citizen' s role in voting and showing respect instead of linking it with an active interest in public affairs?

The majority of students adopt the passive rather than the active style of engaging in citizenship activities and avoid activist politics. Although they show a consensus that citizenship means to obey laws, democratic values, political and cultural differences across countries lead to different attitudes to government and institutions. Norwegian students express a higher degree of trust in government-related institutions, while in Australia responses focus on people's power and rights rather than power and role of institutions. What is the impact of family and school background on this situation? Interestingly, the Cypriot study indicated that social participation is stimulated by predictors related to family and school, which affect democratic values.

The discussion of social participation indicates that the issue is multidimensional in nature and that it could be related to school curricula and school practices, to the quality of teaching and the context of schools, to the passive or active reception of information, to the cultural capital of each sub-group of students, and to the depoliticised/politicised political environment.

Some questions relevant to that may be the following:

- do students from different contexts develop different conceptions of civic participation and different potential roles?
- what factors affect students' understanding and actual participation?
- is there any agreement among policy makers in different countries about students' role in the political process?
- do young students and adults hold the same ideas and expectations about civic participation?
- to what extent is civic participation of young people intended to contribute to the resolution of conflicts between social groups and minorities?
- does participation refer to the national, European, or /and international level?
- do students have opportunities for civic active participation?

Epilogue

The fact that strong democratic competence does not lead to strong engagement and participation cannot be easily explained. Do changing times lead to a changing understanding of citizenship? Contemporary societies, characterised by wealth and prosperity, give the message that they are not interested in the ideologies of parties; they are rather interested in the human rights project.

It is obvious from this study that to develop active citizenship we need the participation of students in political discussions and real problems with contextualised political

information. Moreover differentiated citizenship based on students' differences in cultural, social, school and family capital will contribute to better results on active citizenship, inclusion and participation of all the students.

It would be of interest to make a comparison of student views on perceptions about democracy, democratic attitudes and social action and the good citizen between western and eastern European countries.

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