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Young People's Civic Awareness and Engagement: Listening to their Voices using Thematic and Developmental Analysis

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Abstract

To promote young people's civic awareness and engagement we must understand how they make meaning of democratic systems and values, including human rights. Despite important surveys on young people's civic engagement, few researchers have conducted in-depth interviews to learn how they construct meaning of the civic knowledge, values, and agency that constitute their civic identity. This case study is of the perspectives that young people (age 17-18) hold. Views are analysed through thematic and developmental lenses using a Developmental Model of Civic Awareness and Engagement, which the author is currently designing to better understand how young people develop their civic identity and citizenship. This gives a base for constructive work in promoting their civic awareness and engagement.

What does democracy mean to you?

- Pétur (17): 'Being able to vote'
- Árni (18): 'People elect their leaders … then the nation gets the opportunity to decide … it is the nation that decides, not one man'.
- Fríða (17): … 'That all people are equal … each person is allowed to have a say ... The public should have a say regarding their country ... It would be unfair if only one man or a woman would decide everything'.
- Helga (18): … 'To respect each and everyone, that is democracy, and to have an open mind towards others … The aim of democracy is equal rights of all people … It is lovely to think of the possibility that some day all people could be equal.'

In these few quotes from Icelandic young people aged 17 and 18 we observe some similarities and differences in how they perceive democracy. All four stated that democracy means being able to vote and elect political leaders. In addition, Fríða referred to the values of equality and fairness and Helga to respect and equality.

The Context

Within democratic societies over the last two to three decades concern has been increasing about strengthening democratic values and systems including emphasizing human rights. The United Nations Conventions on Human Rights (Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948) and the rights of children (Convention on the Rights of the Child, CRC, 1989) have laid out fundamental values and norms for work with children and young people. The European Union, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), and the Council of Europe have integrated these values and norms into their own visions and programmes. In line with the European Union, the

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OECD (2001) focuses on human rights, democracy, and sustainable development as the fundamental normative criteria for economic and social development in its member states with a special focus on social inclusion.

The European Council, the Division for Citizenship and Human Rights Education, has launched special programmes around these concerns, including one on Education for Democratic Citizenship and Human Rights (EDC/HRE, 2008). Capacity-building and sustainability are at the heart of these programmes. For democratic citizenship to work successfully they emphasize the need to develop and promote civic competencies, i.e. competencies for democratic citizenship and social inclusion (life skills) within a lifelong perspective. Also referring to issues of human rights, the programmes aim at 'defining the necessary competencies, such as the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values needed for all individuals, regardless of the type and level of education, profession or age, to participate meaningfully in society' (op. cit.). One of the EDC/HR projects is 'Learning and Living Democracy for All'. Accordingly, for the last decade an increasing number of countries have included this emphasis on civic values and competencies, as well as citizenship education, in their laws and national curricula. For example, within the Nordic countries recently Iceland passed laws on compulsory school with this emphasis (Icelandic laws on compulsory school, 2008).

Educationally, a challenging question is what is the best way to improve, enhance or promote young people's civic awareness and engagement. Those of us who work within the constructivist tradition (Dewey, 1944/1916) find it important to place the child, or adolescent, in the centre. This child-centred approach means that as we work with young people to promote their civic awareness and engagement we find it important to understand how they make meaning of democratic systems and values and related issues on human rights. More precisely, as we base our work with young people on their thoughts and feelings about civic and human rights issues, it is essential to understand their perspectives by listening to their voices.

Some background

Important international surveys, using questionnaires, have been conducted to explore how young people understand the concept of democracy (Flanagan, Gallay, Gill, Gallay, and Nti, 2005), and their factual civic knowledge about political activities (Torney-Purta and Amadeo, 2003), as well as their civic engagement and civic attitudes (e.g., Torney-Purta, 2002). In general, these studies indicate that within older democracies in Europe conventional political participation seems to be diminishing. In particular voting rates are falling, party attachment is declining, and young people seem to show less trust in governmental-related institutions.

Most of these studies were conducted within the research project: The International Study of Civic Education/IEA (Torney-Purta, Lehmann, Oswald, and Schulz, 2001). A recent empirical study by Haste and Hogan (2006) challenges these findings. They suggest that in trying to understand what motivates young people to engage in civic action we must look beyond political activities to a more 'moral-political interface' (p 490). In this regard they claim we should pay more attention to civic actions such as

young people's volunteering and helping, and to how they make their voices heard and engage in more conventional actions.
Few studies seem to have used in-depth interviews with a focus on young people's civic awareness and engagement by exploring how they understand and make meaning of their civic knowledge, civic values, and civic participation (Taylor, Smith, and Gollop, 2008). One example of their view would be how they make meaning of the influences they themselves have and can have in their community as responsible citizens. Moreover, few have studied the different developmental ways in which young people understand their civic knowledge, and make meaning of their values and participation.

I believe that a developmental framework and methodology, based on listening carefully to what young people themselves have to say, can provide us with new insights about young people's civic awareness and engagement, and accordingly their civic identity. These insights should help us promote their civic growth when we work with them in our citizenship education programmes.

A model: Civic Awareness and Engagement

I am currently designing a model to analyse young people's civic awareness and engagement (Adalbjarnardottir, 2007). It has a three-part focus. First, it looks at their knowledge and understanding of democratic systems and values and issues related to human rights, such as poverty, violence, and immigration. Importantly, we look not only at facts - what young people know - but also at their understanding of these facts. For example, what democracy means to them (see the quotes at the beginning of the chapter). Second, we focus on their own values, beliefs, and attitudes. These values can be ethical in nature, such as respect, care, trust, equality, and solidarity. Third, we focus on their agency and participation or action: how they see themselves as actors in their society. For example, how can they have an influence in their community and what do they do to have an influence, and why?

These constructs of knowledge/understanding, value beliefs/attitudes, and agency/action are illustrated in the upper part of Figure 1. As the figure shows, these constructs become integrated into the person's civic awareness and engagement.

In analysing young people's perspectives I use both thematic and developmental lenses (Adalbjarnardottir, 2002). With the thematic lenses the focus is on young people's concerns, the red threads in their expressions, both on an individual level and across individuals (Bogdan and Biklen, 1998). For example, when the four adolescents introduced at the beginning of this chapter were asked what democracy means, one theme in their responses was that people can vote and elect their political leaders. Individual themes in the interviews with Fríða were her values of fairness and equality and for Helga they were the values of respect for each individual and rights related to the value of equality.

Central to the psychological theory, the basis for the developmental lens, is the developing human capacity to differentiate and coordinate perspectives by understanding the relationship between one's own thoughts, feelings, and wishes and those of others (Selman, 1980). Competence in coordinating social perspectives is claimed to be a basic

capacity in social thought and action, that is, in how individuals understand and make meaning of social and ethical issues, including civic issues, and how they function in human relationships (Habermas, 1979; Kohlberg, 1984; Mead, 1934; Selman 1980).

The developmental lens is based on two models from our previous work. On the one hand we analyze the personal meaning adolescents make of risk and relationships (Adalbjarnardottir, 2002; Selman and Adalbjarnardottir, 2000), and on the other we analyze teacher professional development (Adalbjarnardottir and Selman, 1997). The theoretical roots of these models stem from the social philosophy of George Herbert Mead (1934), the educational philosophy of John Dewey (1916, 1933), and the developmental epistemology of Jean Piaget (1965/1932) as translated into a developmental psychology of moral judgment by Lawrence Kohlberg (1969) as well as social perspective-taking ability by Robert Selman (1980).

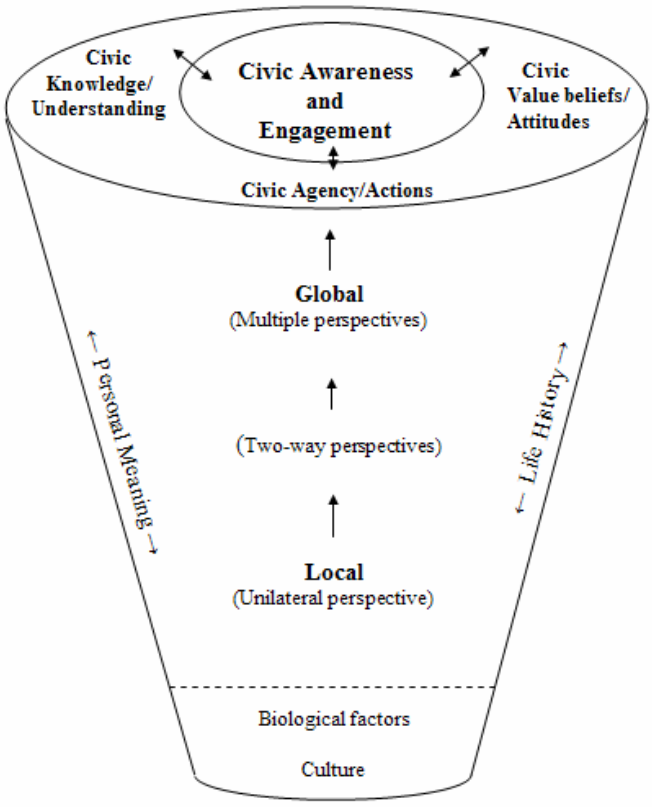

Figure 1. Civic awareness and engagement within a developmental framework

Applying this developmental tradition to the domain of citizenship, I believe that the ability to coordinate the perspectives of self and others - or of individual and society - plays an important role in young people's understanding of civic issues and how they relate them to their own life. Figure 1 illustrates how social perspective coordination is the core of the framework that underlies each of the three integrated constructs of

knowledge/understanding, value beliefs/attitudes, and agency/action. The conical shape of the figure reflects the developmental dimension of the conceptual model. Individuals develop their ability to coordinate social perspectives, moving from a unilateral perspective to mutuality of perspectives; their perspectives become broader and more flexible with time, experience, and reflection. Both cultural factors (e.g. type of society) and biological factors (e.g. temperament) as well as the individual's life-history (e.g. upbringing, schooling, particular events, friendship) play a role in how they make meaning of civic and human rights issues.

In describing the developmental component of the model, below I present some examples of the voices of the young people we met earlier in this chapter. We already have a hint of what democracy means to them. Here we focus on their agency and participation (see figure): would they like to have an influence within their school, and why or why not?

Pétur, Katrín, Fríða, and Helga all wanted to have an influence at school. They gave these reasons:

- Pétur: 'To be valued. Otherwise you wouldn't feel good at times.'
- Katrín: 'It would be fun to be on committees ... change the social life.'
- Fríða: 'If one doesn't have influences then nothing happens of the things you are concerned about ... Also, if somebody else has maybe … wrong opinions then it is extremely good to have an influence and provide them with restraint.'
- Helga: 'It gives me a lot, like talking about women's rights and to be able to explain it. Then one feels one is getting a bit closer to what is right.'

From a developmental point of view, i.e. using the developmental lenses, we ask ourselves: Do young people have the tendency to think of one person's perspectives? Or do they think about both their own perspective and those of others (individuals, society)? Are they locally oriented - here and now - with short-time concerns in mind? Or do we see a sign that they are looking beyond the school community: are they looking forward, holding long-term concerns in mind?

We can see that all four of them focus on what they themselves get out of having an influence. Pétur's thinking as it appears in the interview is directed to his own benefits of having an effect, 'to be valued,' which he connects to his own feelings. We do not see much of how it can benefit others. This does not mean, however, that he might not have such ideas even though he did not express them in the interview. The three girls refer to influences on themselves to have an impact as well as on others. Katrín refers to local influences (change the social life at school). Fríða wants to be able to put forward her concerns and influence other peoples' opinions which can be both within and outside school. Her perspective in this regard is wider than Katrín's. She mentions the possibility of correcting people's opinions if they are wrong and if so providing them with restraint. In this regard her approach is rather authoritarian which limits her perspective somewhat. Helga focuses on justice issues which can be within school but also go beyond the school community. She contextualizes these justice issues by providing an example of her concerns about women's rights. Accordingly, she seems to have a broader view than the others on what kind of influence she may have.

Finally, we focus on the young people's value beliefs and attitudes (see figure). When asked about what it means to be a citizen one of the things all four focused on was education as a social right and responsibility; this is a theme across their interviews. To them it is both a duty and a right to go to school. However, their perspectives were different in some ways:

To Katrín the right to an education was related to getting a good job and earning money in order to have a good life: 'It is of course important to have the right to go to school … Otherwise we wouldn't get a good job … If there are no good jobs … life will be terrible'.

Pétur, Árni, and Helga all emphasized equality: equal rights of people to go to school. They focused, however, on somewhat different aspects of the importance of education. To Pétur education provides citizens with a choice: they 'earn rights by studying … to choose a job'; to him it increases 'one's own salary and makes life easier'. To Árni education is a prerequisite for an individual to be free; education provides the individual with an opportunity to study what they want: '[Education] includes certain rights and just a freedom … one gets an opportunity for [education] and to decide what one wants to study.' We observe a psychological tone in his perspective. Helga emphasized education as a right each citizen should have, simultaneously emphasizing that in reality that they do not because of economic situations. She provided an example of financial costs, such as buying books and attending school instead of working. These costs, she said, make it difficult for young people to continue their education if their families do not have much money. She also said: 'Education is a way out of poverty but poor people are kept in a circle of poverty which makes it harder for them to get education with the consequence that their life is less likely to improve'. With a political and justice voice she added: 'If we do not want people who come from poor families to be in the same situation as their parents the only opportunity for change is education … Nothing else.' Thus, Helga places her perspective in a social and political context, emphasizing the rights of everyone independent of their socio-economic status, to receive education and to change the current situation.

To summarize, the right to education seems important to Katrín to get a job, to Pétur to have a choice in deciding which job to take on, to Árni to have the freedom to study what one wants, and to Helga to work towards the equality of citizens independent of their socio-economic situation. From a developmental perspective we can analyse their thinking as moving from a focus on the individual to individuals in general in social settings: from a material orientation (e.g. earning money) to a more psychological orientation (e.g. freedom) to a more social and political orientation (the rights of each citizen independent of socio-economic status).

Conclusion

With better understanding of young people's civic knowledge, their civic value beliefs, and civic agency and actions we should be able to work more constructively in promoting their civic awareness and engagement. One way to acquire deeper understanding of their perspectives and voices is to interview them about citizenship and human rights issues and analyse their responses by using the thematic and developmental

lenses presented in this chapter. The developmental model of Civic Awareness and Engagement is one analytical tool in exploring each child's or adolescent's knowledge, values, and agency; it simultaneously provides us with a base to work with them both individually and collectively in broadening their perspectives. Furthermore, using this approach, the study should help us understand how young people develop their civic identity.

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