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Does school support the adolescent participation in society?

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Abstract

The aim of the contribution is to propose some possibilities in the school that could stimulate adolescent social participation in the community. We researched the importance of active learning in the class, opinion exchanges with teachers and involvement in the extracurricular activities as well as students' social knowledge and motivation for the students' social participation. The study was conducted in the elementary and secondary schools in the capital of Slovenia in the school year 2007/08. Participants were students in the 5th and 8th grade of elementary school (N=816) and 1st and 3rd grade of secondary schools (N=816) as well as their teachers (those who teach the subject citizenship education in the elementary school and the sociology in the secondary school). They answered the questionnaire consists of multi-choice questions on class and extracurricular participation as well as social participation. The results revealed that the teachers considered the development of critical thinking and political knowledge as more important learning aims than formation of participative skills through active engagement in the class. Teachers also reported higher level of student involvement in the decision making in the class than the students have done. These experiences with decision making in the class as well as at the school level were among the most important predictors of students' social participation, besides the engagement in the school projects and interest activities with the social content. Students' social knowledge and motives also showed considerable effect on their social participation. Therefore the results are concordant with the basic domains of civic education in the school. But there remain the question of how to raise the very low proportion of students who are actively engaged in the community?

Key words: *social participation, active classes, extracurricular activities, social cognition, civic education, adolescents*

Introduction

The aim of civic education is to prepare young people for the active citizenship. There are three domains of civic education: the content of instructions, the values, and the praxis (Eurydice, 2005). The content of civic instruction refers to the societal knowledge and developing interests in the social and political issues among students. Civic values are mediated through the class and the school climate which emphasise the involvement of every student in the classroom or school community (Hahn, 1998) and promoting solidarity among them. Setting prosocial norms as important guiding rules of behaviour in the school also stimulates the development of civic values. And there are also the teachers' beliefs and

values as well as their behaviour in the class which shape the students norms and social values as long as they are accepted as important adult role models (Roth and Brooks-Gunn, 2003). The civic values are thought also through the instruction which is aimed to the development of critical thinking in students. The third domain of civic education focuses on the practice of democracy in the school. It could be reached through various interactive learning methods such as group work, discussion, projects, where students practice their interpersonal skills, group decision-making and have the opportunity for taking the responsibility for the group outcomes (Larson and Wood, 2006). The students should also have some opportunity for experiencing the involvement in decision-making (Hahn, 1998), e.g. in the setting of classroom or school rules, participating in the students representative structures, and choosing the common school project. The practice of civic knowledge gained in the school is also stimulated by the contacts within community, e.g. service learning (Pickeral, 2006).

In the present study the following research questions were proposed. The first: does the participation in the school stimulate the adolescents' social participation in the community? It was specifically studied what are the important school experiences for adolescents' participation in the voluntary work and the political activities? And the second question: does the civic education correspond to the adolescents' basic pre-requisites for social participation? It was focused more specifically on what is characteristic for civic education classes and do the adolescent gain the accurate knowledge, skills and values in the school which are needed for the social participation?

Method

The study includes two samples: one consisted of the students and the other of their teachers of civic education. The adolescent students were sampled in the primary school and high school as well. Primary schools were sampled proportionally to the municipalities in the Slovene capital whereas the high schools were sampled proportionally to the programme of the study (gymnasium, technical and vocational schools). In each school whole classes of students at the two grade levels were sampled. In the primary schools one fifth and one eight grade class of students participated ($N=816$; $N_5=401$; $N_8=415$). Their mean age was 10.7 years and 13.4 years respectively. There were 53.6 percent of girls and 46.4 percent of boys. In the high schools one first and one third grade class of students participated ($N=910$; $N_1=500$; $N_3=410$). Their mean age was 15.5 years and 17.5 years respectively. There were 55 percent of girls and 45 percent of boys. The sample of teachers consisted of one per each selected class who teach the civic education. There were 52 teachers in the sample ($N_5=16$; $N_8=19$; $N_{HS}=16$), mostly women.

Two questionnaires were constructed, one for students and the other for the teachers. Student questionnaire consisted of questions about the decision-making experiences (in the school, family and friends), school extracurricular activities and reasons for engagement, social knowledge (perception of social problems, possibilities for youth engagement in social problem-solving, obstacles for youth participation, attitudes towards social participation,

meaning of social participation), sociability (number of friends, peer norms), social efficacy beliefs, personal values, involvement in voluntary work (interpersonal and community) and political activities (conventional and unconventional). There were also questions included for demographic variables (sex and age) and schooling variables (general school achievements/grades, educational aspirations). Teacher questionnaire consisted of questions about the subject goals, methods and forms of teaching, school-community collaboration, attitudes towards youth participation.

The data were collected in the school year 2007/08. The first hypothesis was tested by hierarchical regression analyses of students' data, using step-wise method of selecting the predictors in seven blocks of predictors (1. demography and schooling variables, 2. individual beliefs, 3. motives, 4. decision-making experiences, 5. collaborative experiences, 6. social knowledge, 7. sociability). The regression analyses were done separately for the primary and high school students. In each sample the predictors were regressed on voluntary work and political participation separately. The second hypothesis was tested by ANOVA for the civic education among different grade levels.

Results

A regression model for participation in voluntary work was used in indication of precursors for social participation.

All together the four blocks of predictors – motives, decision-making and collaborative experiences and sociability – explained 18.7 % of variance of participation in the voluntary work of younger adolescents that shows their middle predictive power (see table 1). Six blocks of predictors – individual believes, motives, decision-making and collaborative experiences, social knowledge and sociability - explained 18.0 % of variance of participation in the voluntary work of middle adolescents what shows their middle predictive power.

The demographic and *schooling* variables, entering the regression in the first block, were not important predictors of participation in the voluntary activities of adolescents in none of the age groups. *Individual believes* predicted only middle adolescents participation in the voluntary activities. They were expressed as social values and self-efficacy believes. Together they explain 2.8 percent of variance. The most important *motives* for participation in the voluntary activities were learning and decision-making in both groups of adolescents. Together they explained 3.8 and 2.3 percent of variance respectively. Experiences in decision-making have also small but important effect on participation in the voluntary activities in both age groups (explained additional 5.8 and 1.9 percent of variance respectively). They appeared as the opportunities for decision-making in the class for the younger adolescents and as the opinion exchanges with mentors for the middle adolescents. The *collaborative experiences* showed additional, although small, effects in both age groups (they explained additional 8.1 and 6.5 percent of variance respectively). The experiences which appeared to be important for the younger adolescent participation in the voluntary activities were gained at the school projects and the school actions and the social circles. The

middle adolescents gained the important experiences at the school actions and the social activities in the school but also in the social interest activities in the community. Additionally, the *social knowledge* explained 2.9 of variance in the group of middle adolescents. The participation in the voluntary activities was predicted by the middle adolescents' perception of less individual obstacles to youth participation, more public and more individual social problems and their understanding of participation as the social act. The block of variables indicated adolescents' *sociability* were important for the younger and middle adolescents' participation in the voluntary activities, but their effects were again very small (explained additionally 1.0 and 1.6 percent of variance). Less time spent with friends predicted more participation in the voluntary activities of the younger adolescents. On the other hand the norm of actuality and the number of friends in the neighbourhood predicted the participation in the voluntary activities of the middle adolescents.

The effects of all separate groups of predictors on the participation in the voluntary activities were small in both age groups. The most powerful predictors were collaborative experiences. But the joined effect of both types of experiences, in the decision-making and collaboration, was middle sized in the group of younger adolescents and small in the group of middle adolescents (explained 13.9 and 8.4 percent of variance).

Table 1: Regression model of adolescent participation in voluntary work

Predictors of participation in VOLUNTARY WORK	younger adol.		middle adol.	
	stand. Beta	Δ R²	standard. Beta	Δ R²
1. DEMOGRAPHY & SCHOOLING		/		/
social values			,069	
self-eficacy beliefs			,071	
2. INDIVIDUAL BELIEFS		/		0,028
reason: learning	,025		,024	
reason: decision-making	,169		,067	
3. MOTIVES		0,038		0,023
opinion exchanges with mentors			,097	
decision-making in the class	,215			
4. DECISION-MAKING EXPERIENCES		0,058		0,019
school projects	,175			
school actions	,163		,147	
social activities at school			,104	
social circles	,097			
social interest activities outside of school			,143	
5. COLLABORATIVE EXPERIENCES		0,081		0,065
individual obstacles to participation			-,099	
participation as social activities			,078	
perception of socio-cultural problems			,065	
perception of individual social problems			,071	
6. SOCIAL KNOWLEDGE		/		0,029
norm of actuality			,095	
No. of friends in the neighbourhood			,079	
time with friends	-,099			
7. SOCIABILITY		0,01		0,016
R²		**,187**		**,180**

Regression model of the participation in the political activities

The political participation was measured only in the middle adolescent group, therefore the hierarchical regression analyses of seven blocks of predictors were done only for this group (see table 2). The model showed small predictive power of political participation (explained 11.7 percent of variance in the middle adolescent group).

The *demographic variables* showed a small effect on the political participation of the middle adolescents. The older among the middle adolescents and boys participated more in the political activities. Individual *beliefs* did not show any additional effects on adolescent political participation. The *motive* for decision making explained additional variance in the political participation of the middle adolescents. Also *decision-making experiences* had an effect on political participation, specifically the involvement in decision making in the class. Middle adolescents gained the important *collaborative experiences* in the social interest activities outside school and also in the social activities at school. *Social knowledge* showed additional effect on political participation. Those middle adolescents who perceived less individual obstacles to participation and understanding the participation as cognitive act as well as perceive more public social problems and more opportunities for youth involvement in the political problem solving also participated more in the political activities.

The separate groups of predictors showed small effect on the political participation of the middle adolescents, as has been already shown for their participation in the voluntary activities. The social knowledge was the most powerful predictors of political participation of middle adolescents, which show the same predictive power as both types of experiences together (decision-making and collaborative ones).

Table 2: Regression model of adolescent political participation

|	middle adol.	
Predictors of POLITICAL PARTICIPATION	stand. Beta	Δ R²
age	,139	
sex	-,095	
1. DEMOGRAPHY & SCHOOLING		0,026
2. INDIVIDUAL BELIEFS		/
reason: decision-making	,091	
3. MOTIVES		0,014
decision-making in the class	,126	
4. DECISION-MAKING EXPERIENCES		0,024
social activities at school	,081	
social interest activities outside of school	,078	
5. COLLABORATIVE EXPERIENCES		0,014
individual obstacles to participation	-,132	
participation as socio-political thinking	,095	
perception of socio-cultural problems	,080	
opportunities for political problem-solving	,093	
6. SOCIAL KNOWLEDGE		0,039
7. SOCIABILITY		/
R²		,117

Civic education

Perceived subject goals

The most important goals for the teachers of all three grades were those related to the *development of critical thinking and social values* (see graph 1). They were represented as "developing solidarity and social values," "considering differences in the attitudes" and "developing skills for participating in the public life." On the second place of importance were goals related to *political literacy.* They were represented as developing "knowledge of cultural heritage," "knowledge about institutions and human rights" and "awareness of multicultural societies." The least important were the goals related to the *practical experiences in participation.* They were represented as "developing collaborative experiences," "stimulating community engagement" and "experiencing democracy at the school."
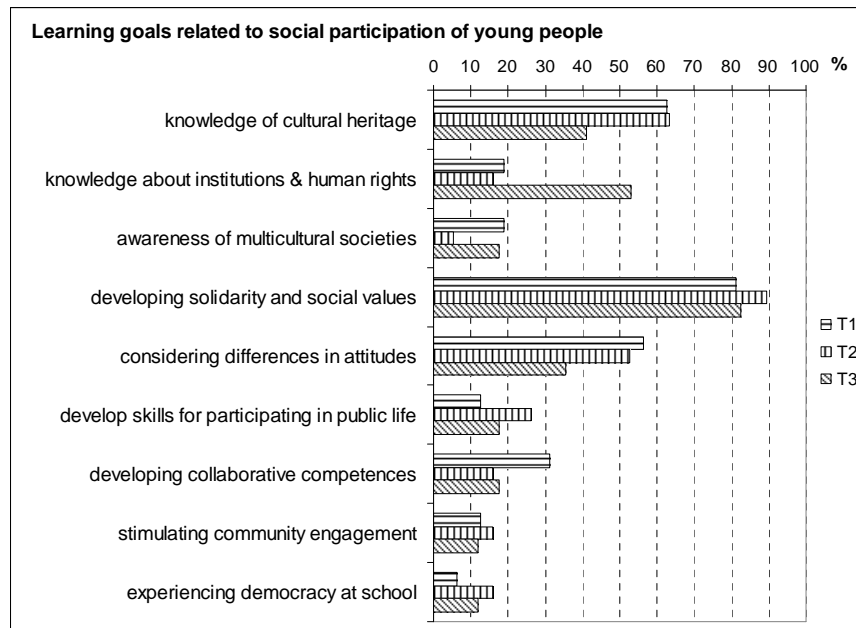
Graph 1: Learning goals of civic education

Students' involvement in the class

Teachers reported that their students were more frequently engaged in the setting the classroom rules, the assessment of knowledge and decision-making about school projects then they were in selecting the subject content or the methods of learning (see graph 2).

Teachers consult the classes about …
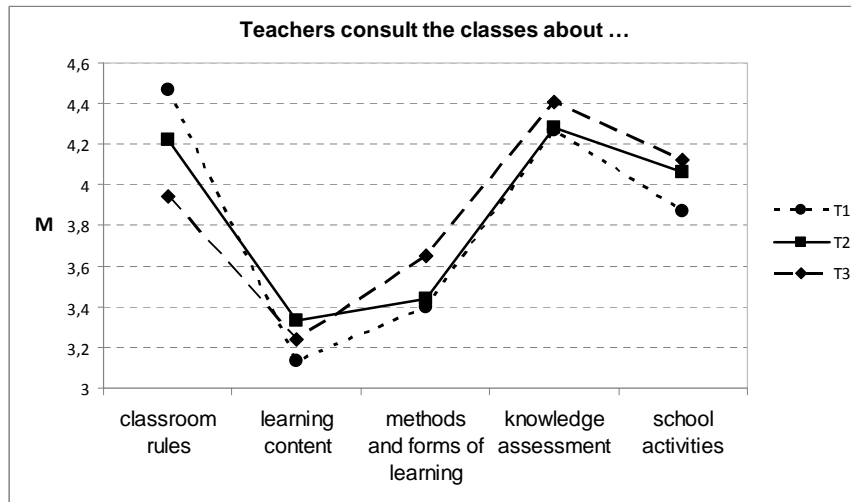
Graph 2: Involvement of the students in the class

Teachers' attitudes towards social participation

Teachers perceived the youth participation more as learning in the school, engagement in political activities or political thinking then as the involvement in the social activities (see graph 3). Their attitudes showed an impact on the frequency of their students' active involvement in the class (R^2=0.52). The teachers who thought that "the active involvement in the social institutions stimulate youth social participation," "the participation means solidarity," "critical thinking is not a necessary precondition for the participation" and "the participation does not mean helping people in troubles" also stimulating students' engagement in their classes.
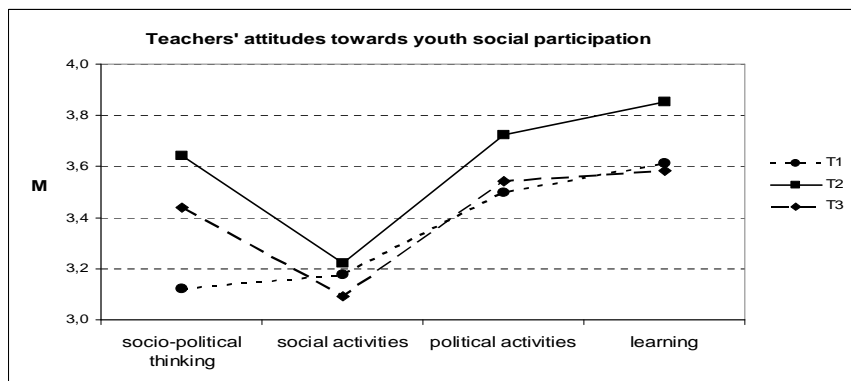
Graph 3: Teachers' attitudes towards youth participation

Discussion

Social participation of adolescents is motivated by their desire to learn and to decide about their own activities. The involvement depends on the experiences in decision-making with adults and working in the groups at social activities. The school stimulates social participation of younger and middle adolescents by providing the opportunities for engaging in the class decision-making as well as the project work and social extracurricular activities. The middle adolescents gained the important social experiences in the social interest activities outside of school. The adult leaders of activities are important for exchanging the opinions. Social cognition plays an important role in social participation in the middle adolescence. Different social knowledge is needed for the involvement in the voluntary work or the political activities. In the mid adolescence the individual social values and self-efficacy beliefs guide the participation in the voluntary work.

School is important learning context for adolescent social participation, providing opportunities for decision-making and working in the group. But in the actual classes there are lack of experiential learning and decision-making about the content and methods of learning. And also teacher's perception of subject goals and their attitudes showed that active participation in the school is not the main focus of civic education.

Conclusion

The results of the study showed that the civic education in the school should provide more opportunities for engagement of the students in decision-making and group work in the classes. The opinion exchanges among teachers and students should find the place in the curriculum. More endeavours should be focus on stimulating the engagement of students in the school projects, actions and extracurricular activities related to the community and political issues. And also the socio-political knowledge should relate to the students' every day experiences and actual problems in the community/society. But the question remains: is the school curricula open for more democratic exchanges with students?

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