Structure and levels of young citizens' responsibility

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Abstract

Civic engagement is influenced by several special competences. There is no consensus identifying these civic competences, but some similarities can be found in defining civic skills. The aim of this study was to explore three civic competences: sense of responsibility, self-efficacy and proactive attitude. Connection of these competencies has been explored in Romanian and Hungarian adolescent sample, as well as the hypothesized structure of responsibility was tested. Data of 193 high school students confirmed two levels of sense of responsibility. Competence model was created after conducting linear regression analysis. The model proved that responsibility predict proactive attitude indirectly, and self-efficacy mediate this connection. After discussing the results some suggestion is given for teachers concerning the development of civic competencies.

Keywords: civic engagement, civic competences, sense of responsibility, self-efficacy, proactive attitude, adolescence

Civic competences became an important topic of social sciences from the end of the Cold War (Youness et al., 2002). Civic engagement and civic development have been studied from different aspects, but there is no consensus in defining and identifying elements of the civic competencies till now. Citizens of Western democracies have to adjust to new societal challenges, as demographic, political, cultural and economic changes. The tasks of young people in the modern era are twofold. They have to cooperate with the older cohorts connecting old and new values and they are required to find their own roles in the social and political system (Youness et al., 2002).

Civic development begins in the family. The school is the other institution which is responsible for the political socialization of students. Knowledge about the society and political system is essential to be a good citizen, but participation is the other crucial element that can be developed by education. Torney-Purta and colleagues (2001, cit. Youness et al., 2002) proved that the experience of democratic practice in the classroom related to knowledge of democracy, and it correlated with the adolescents' intention to take part in elections. The role of schools is emphasized in promoting civic engagement by Youness and colleagues (2002) including participating in communities or voluntary services. They also stress competencies, such as critical thinking, sensitivity to cultural differences and managing conflicts. They underline the ability of tolerance and respect for differences too.

Responsible citizen is another notion for modern citizenship (Citizenship education at school in Europe, 2005), which can be fostered by education. Responsible citizens have knowledge and awareness of rights and duties, and have some special competencies. Citizenship education is required to guide students towards values and attitudes: solidarity, social and moral responsibility, respect for oneself and others, democracy, equality.

The present study
The study focuses on three civic competencies: social responsibility, self-efficacy and proactive attitudes. These skills are important to engage in school life and in peer groups (Bear, Manning, Izard, 2003), and also in civic engagement. Schools are socializing settings as they provide possibilities for training civic competencies and for having experiences of democracy.

Moral or social responsibility is a decision concerning justice, rights and others' welfare (Bear, Manning, Izard, 2003). It creates positive school climate, and correlates with academic achievement and self-esteem. Responsible behaviour has four social cognitive elements: " " (Bear, Manning, Izard, 2003). Two components are similar to other concept of responsibility. These are perception of need to exhibit prosocial behaviour, and judgement what ought to be done. According to Krzywosz-Rynkiewicz (2012) responsibility is a type of competences for acting effectively in the social world. Responsibility is not only a subjective or affective category, but also a moral one that is people have to understand different perspectives of social situations. But responsibility is also a social category, as people have to integrate their own interest with social norms. Social responsibility has three dimensions (Michalik, 1998, cit. Krzywosz-Rynkiewicz, 2012): close social environment i.e. family; wider social setting (local community) and global dimension (world and people in general). Our approach of responsibility is similar to this three dimension model. We conceptualise social responsibility as concentric circles (Kékesi, Szabó 2011), which is in accordance with the concentric model of socialization proposed by Bronfenbrenner (1977). Individual responsibility stands in the middle of the circles, surrounded by groups and the social roles. Responsibility for wider social world is located on the periphery. Individual responsibility refers to personal choice of carrier, health behaviour, emotional reactions, and future family life. Responsibility for groups and social roles focuses on life of current family, peer groups, classroom and school. Responsibility for wider social environment contains decision concerning the country, Europe and future of the planet.

Self-efficacy is a general confidence in one's own coping capacity (Schwarzer, 1993). Bandura (1977) introduced the core concept of self-efficacy and he defined it as expectation of personal efficacy. It determines the quantity of effort and the coping style which are needed in stressful situations or aversive experiences. Schwarzer (1993) accentuates that self-efficacy is an optimistic belief about one's own competence in challenging circumstances. Strong sense of competence facilitates decision making processes and social integration. This study focuses on the psychological construction of self-efficacy.

Proactive attitude is a personality characteristic (Schmitz, Schwarzer, 1999). Proactive people believe in their rich psychological and intellectual resources, which can be

effective in changing themselves or their environment. They have a vision about future and their life goals, and they live according to their chosen values. Proactive individuals take responsibility for their own growth and they focus problem solving.

The aim of our study is to elucidate the connections among the variables, and to control the structure of our Responsibility Scale. Four hypotheses were tested:

H1: Young citizens' sense of responsibility consists of three levels: 1. individual, 2. group, 3 societal levels (Kékesi, Szabó, 2011).

H2: The students' sense of responsibility is the strongest in the individual and the lowest on the global level (Kékesi, Szabó, 2011)

H3: There are positive correlations between sense of responsibility, self-efficacy and proactive attitude (Schmitz, Schwarzer, 1999).

H4: Proactive attitude is predicted by sense of responsibility according to the definition of Schmitz, Schwarzer (1999).

Method

Participants

96 Hungarian and 97 Romanian high school students completed the questionnaires. The sample was comprised of 53% female and 47% male. The mean age of the sample was 17.3 years (SD=0.58). 59% of the students were 17 years old, 40% were 18 years old, and only 1% of the sample were 16 years old. The socioeconomic status (SES) of Hungarian and Romanian students was different, as more Hungarian mothers and fathers had higher educational level than those of Romanian parents.

Measures

Self-efficacy

The General Self-Efficacy Scale (Schwarzer, Jerusalem, 1995; Hungarian version: Kopp, Scwarzer, Jerusalem, 1993; Romanian version: Băban, Schwarzer, Jerusalem, 1996) was used to assess perceived effectiveness, a sense of personal action control or agency. The 10 items of the scale pertain to the optimistic beliefs about one's competence to cope with several stressors. Participant can answer with choosing the correct response from the following four options: 1= not at all true, 2= hardly true, 3= moderately true, 4=exactly true).

Proactive Attitude

Proactive Attitude Scale was designed to assess the beliefs concerning the potential of changes which can improve oneself and one's own environment. 8 items explore the resourcefulness, vision, values and responsibility, which are various facets of proactive personality characteristics. Likert scale was used ranging from 1 (not at all true) to 4 (exactly true).

Responsibility Scale

Responsibility Scale (Kékesi, Szabó, 2011) is a 16 items scale that assesses the sense of responsibility on three different levels: 1. individual, 2. social groups, 3. broader social and societal environment. The response format was a Liker scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 6 (absolutely).

Results

Hungarian and Romanian males have strong self-efficacy belief: they reach 31.08 scores (SD=5.51) from 40. Females tend to be lower in self-efficacy (M=28.83, SD=4.64). The difference between genders is significant (t=2.98 p=0,003). But the self-efficacy belief of the Hungarian and Romanian students is very similar (M= 29,46; M=31,14 respectively)

The students of Hungary and Romania believe in their own proactive capacity. It is proved by their high scores (M=26.20 score from 32). Neither gender, nor national differences have been found. Students of the two countries rate responsibility similarly: there is no significant difference between nations and gender. The responsibility score of the Romanian students is 60,39 (SD=8.73), while those of the Hungarians is 58.60 (SD=12.73).

A principal component analysis was conducted to determine the structure of Responsibility Scale. Two factors yielded eigenvalues greater than 1.0. The first factor comprised the broad societal environment and social group items, which was labelled as distant level. The second factor labelled proximal level contains the items of personal responsibility. The inner stability of the scale was not appropriate. Using standardized factor scores there was significant difference between Hungarian and Romanian boys. Hungarian boys have stronger sense of responsibility in connection with distal level than Hungarian girls and Romanian girls and boys (F=-2.644, p=0.008) (Figure 1). Romanian males reach higher scores on the proximal (self-relevant) level than Romanian females and Hungarian students (F=-3.122, p=0.02) (Figure 2).
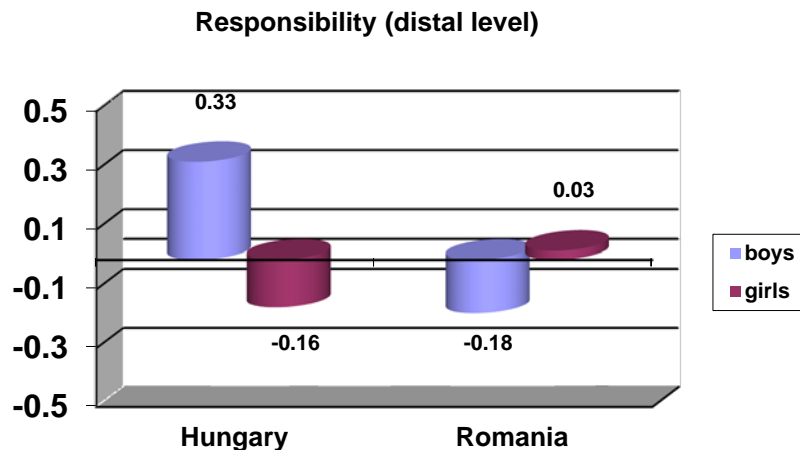
Responsibility (distal level)

Figure 1. Sense of responsibility: distal level (with standardized factor scores)
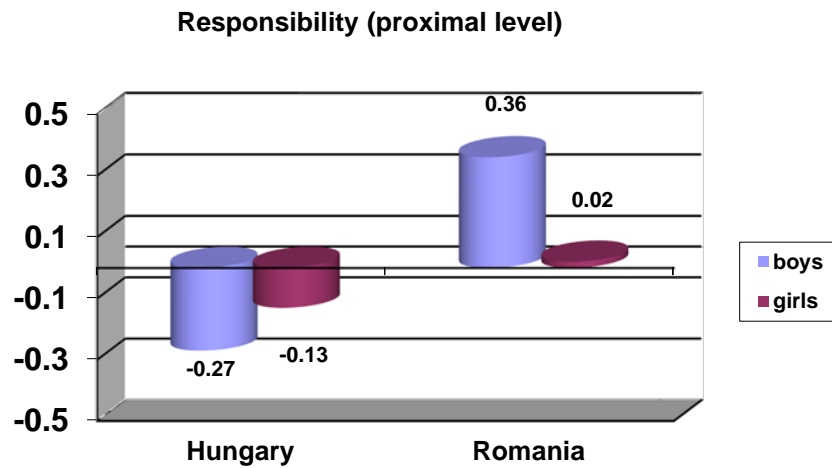
Responsibility (proximal level)

Figure 2. Sense of responsibility: proximal level (with standardized factor scores)

Testing the connection among the variables linear regression analysis was made. A model was created from three regression equations. Responsibility predicted self-efficacy (β=0.325, R2=.101), but did not predict proactive attitude, and self-efficacy had a direct significant effect on proactive attitude (β=.411, R2=.164) according to the model (Figure 3).
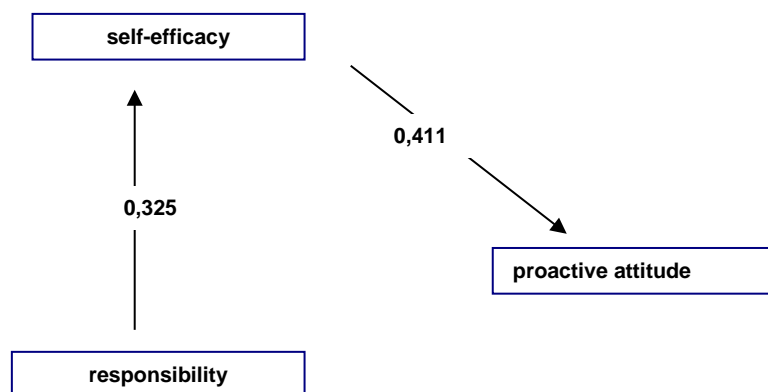

Figure 3. Competence model

Discussion
Two levels of responsibility have been confirmed in the study contrary to the expected three level concept. The first level is the proximal referring to the personal or self-related responsibility, e.g. family life, carrier choice, health status. The other level contains the

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distal component of responsibility, e.g. social (school) and societal (country, Europe, planet) factors. The Hungarian boys have greater sense of responsibility regarding distal level, and Romanian males believe in their personal responsibility. We hypothesize that the two cultures socialize males in a different way. Romanian culture accentuates the personal sense of responsibility, while sense of responsibility for the country and wider social environment is stronger in Hungary. Further study may explore the causal factors of this diversity.

Responsibility has not direct effect on proactive attitude, but self-efficacy mediates between responsibility and proactive attitude. The strong correlation between self-efficacy and proactive attitude has been proved (Schmitz, Schwarzer, 1999), but our result suggests that self-efficacy predicts proactive attitude.

Sense of responsibility can be developed (Krzywosz-Rynkiewicz, 2012), and this moral and social development is a crucial element of civic competencies. Proactive attitude is a newly defined personality characteristic which encompasses some old and recent components of active citizen's capacity. The competencies of responsible citizenship can be promoted in high school by the curriculum and by practicing democracy in peer culture.

If teachers want to improve the proactive attitude of students, they have different possibilities. They can choose a direct way to develop the proactive attitude by creating a special social environment, where students can decide upon actions and purposes, and can feel in charge of making things happen. Choosing the indirect way teachers can improve the sense of self-efficacy and responsibility. Responsibility for own actions and environment and self-efficacy are the very special focus of adolescents' self-esteem and self-concept. Therefore, high school students are reactive to situations where they can have feed-back from their own activity and consequence of behaviour.

Limitations and future directions
To enhance reliability of the results, we need larger sample. Responsibility Scale is required to develop, and to explore the facets of the scale. Social desirability can influence the responses of students, and so respondents can answer in accordance with the accepted social norms. Consequently, we have to control the connection of social desirability and the three variables of our study. As sense of responsibility has connection with the moral development of adolescents further researches are needed to explore this relationship. Cross-sectional and longitudinal studies could elucidate the development of responsibility and moral thinking during adolescence and their correlations.

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