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Output-driven citizenship education

A focus on learning outcomes to improve the quality of citizenship education

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Chapter 6

General Discussion and Conclusion

Most European countries have formally placed the task of teaching students the competences needed to participate in a pluriform and democratic society with schools via citizenship education (Eurydice, 2017). Despite emerging research in this field, there is still a limited understanding of the factors that contribute to the quality of citizenship education (Coopmans et al., 2020). Interestingly, studies focusing on improving students' ability in reading and mathematics have frequently pointed to the positive effects of using learning outcomes as a basis for educational decisions (Van Geel et al., 2016; Van Kuijk et al., 2016). In the context of citizenship education, this has not been studied. While not neglecting the substantial differences between education focused on qualification (e.g., via reading and mathematics) and socialisation (e.g., via citizenship education), it was deemed worthwhile to examine the role of students' learning outcomes in improving the quality of citizenship education.

Hence, the preceding chapters examined the following overarching research question: 'To what extent are standardised measurement instruments able to provide for the psychometric quality and data allowing for insight into civic learning outcomes, and how can insight into civic learning outcomes be used to improve the quality of citizenship education in primary education?' As discussed in the first chapter, the studies in this dissertation were focused on standardised measurement instruments because they are generally more thoroughly developed and studied than unstandardised measurement instruments and offer better opportunities for comparison of the results across all participants. In addition, this research question has been delineated to the context of primary education, including special needs primary education, which is often overlooked in the literature. The studies in this dissertation focused on measurement invariance as one of the psychometric quality standards of measurement instruments (chapter 2), used a standardised measurement instrument to provide insight into the learning outcomes and characteristics of citizenship education in regular primary education and special needs primary education (chapter 3), developed and described the psychometric quality of a new standardised measurement instrument to measure young students' attitudes towards fundamental democratic values (chapter 4), and constructed a model for output-driven citizenship education to examine how insight into the civic learning outcomes of students can be used to improve the quality of citizenship education (chapter 5). In this final chapter, the main findings are summarised and interpreted.

Summary of Main Findings

This dissertation included four studies, of which the main findings are highlighted in this section. The first study (chapter 2) focused on the measurement invariance of a standardised measurement instrument based on a generic conceptualisation of citizenship competences. Standardised measurement instruments are often used to make cross-sectional or longitudinal inferences or to make comparisons across groups, such as studies pointing to robust differences in citizenship competences based on sex, socioeconomic position, and migration background (Dijkstra et al., 2015; Geijssel et al., 2012; Ireland et al., 2006; Kerr et al., 2007). Such cross-group comparative research is relevant to provide insight into whether students, regardless of their background characteristics, have equal opportunity to acquire citizenship competences. An important prerequisite for cross-group comparisons is the establishment of measurement invariance (Meredith, 1993). Measurement invariance indicates whether an instrument measures the same across groups (Isac et al., 2019; Steinmetz et al., 2009). Despite its importance for making cross-group inferences, measurement invariance is an aspect of the psychometric quality of standardised measurement instruments that received little scientific attention – particularly in within-country research (Steinmetz et al., 2009). In addition, as the interpretation of constructs can change over time (Putnick & Bornstein, 2016), it is important to periodically assess whether measurement instruments still comply with psychometric quality standards regarding measurement invariance. This applies particularly to citizenship education, which can be considered a dynamic construct that takes on meaning and moves along with changes in society (cf. Mattei & Broeks, 2018). Hence, this study assessed the measurement invariance of a standardised measurement instrument for citizenship competences developed over a decade ago to see whether the instrument still measures the same across groups in a more recent sample.

The findings in this chapter indicated that two-thirds of the measurement instrument allowed meaningful comparisons across sex, socioeconomic position, and migration background. In one-third of the cases, where the psychometric quality standards regarding measurement invariance could not be met, caution is placed on using these scales for cross-group comparisons. In these cases, the measurement instrument can still be used to describe all students in a group, grade or school. Moreover, exploratory analyses can highlight what questionnaire items need to be improved or replaced to develop the measurement instrument further. This chapter underscored that, given the dynamic nature of citizenship constructs, the psychometric quality of measurement instruments used to capture these constructs needs to be periodically assessed.

In the second study (chapter 3), standardised measurement instruments are used to provide insight into the characteristics and citizenship competences of students in regular primary education and special needs primary education. In line with the attention to and importance of citizenship education over the last decade, research into the learning outcomes and factors contributing to these learning outcomes has increased (Coopmans et al., 2020; Dijkstra et al., 2015; Geboers et al., 2013). For example, providing students with an open classroom climate for discussion, a safe school environment and fostering positive relationships among peers and between students and teachers were often positively linked to students' civic learning outcomes (Isac et al., 2019; Sampermans et al., 2018; Wanders, Dijkstra, et al., 2020; Wanders, Van der Veen, et al., 2020). However, such insights are predominantly limited to studies conducted in schools for regular education. In special needs primary education, information about students' citizenship competences and characteristics of citizenship education is largely missing. The exception is a descriptive study among Dutch students in special needs primary education in 2021 (cf. Slijkhuis et al., 2023), which found that students in special needs primary education generally obtained lower scores on citizenship competences than students in regular primary education. This research finding was the starting point of this study. As such, the third chapter examined whether characteristics of citizenship education and citizenship competences differ across regular primary education versus special needs primary education and whether the relationship between attending special needs primary education and citizenship competences changed under the influence of characteristics of citizenship education. For example, whether the relationship between attending special needs primary education and citizenship competences is more positive for students who experience a positive teacher-student relationship.

The findings of this study demonstrated that students in special needs primary education obtained lower scores on citizenship knowledge, self-estimated skills, and attitude than students in regular primary education. In addition, students in special needs primary education experienced the classroom climate to be more open to discussion, but also experienced more unsafety in the school environment and lower quality teacher-student and student-student relationships than students attending regular primary education. Contrary to expectations, the relationships between attending special needs primary education and citizenship knowledge, attitude, and self-estimated skills were not significantly influenced by students' experienced unsafety in the school environment, the teacher-student or student-student relationship, or students' perceived openness of classroom climate. While no probable explanation for these results seemed available, it must be noted that students in special needs primary education are

no clearly defined group (Pijl et al., 2008) and cope with diverse learning and behavioural difficulties (Van der Veen et al., 2010). For applied skills, the negative main effect of attending special needs primary education was weaker when students experienced more positive relationships with the teacher and with fellow students and when students experienced a more open discussion climate in the classroom. An exploration of alternative interpretations of the interaction effects, when attending special needs primary education is seen as the moderator, pointed out that the relationships between two characteristics of citizenship education (i.e., the teacher-student relationship and an open classroom climate) and applied skills are positive when students attend special needs primary education (and not significant when students attend regular primary education). However, in most cases, the relationship between characteristics of citizenship education and citizenship competences of students did not change based on whether students attended special needs primary education. By demonstrating that standardised measurement instruments are able to provide insight into the learning outcomes and characteristics of citizenship education in both regular and special needs primary education, this study contributed to the available scientific knowledge in this field and set out an important foundation for output-driven citizenship education.

The third study (chapter 4) described the construction of a new standardised measurement instrument. The Fundamental Democratic Values Questionnaire was constructed to capture young students' attitude towards fundamental democratic values. The underscoring of fundamental democratic values by citizens, such as equality, tolerance and non-discrimination, is important for a democracy to persevere (Dekker & Den Ridder, 2016; Levinson, 1999; Welzel & Dalton, 2014). Moreover, it contributes to the peaceful co-living of different (groups of) individuals in a pluriform society (De Winter, 2004). Schools are one of the socialising agents that carry the task of fostering such fundamental democratic values in students as part of citizenship education (Council of Europe, 2018). A standardised measurement instrument gives schools insight into students' learning outcomes and helps schools adjust the curriculum to students' needs. In addition, a challenge that schools encounter when measuring and monitoring students' citizenship competences is the normative notion, meaning that what is considered ('sufficient') competence in citizenship is normative (Eidhof et al., 2016) and, therefore, essentially contested (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). A measurement instrument focused on fundamental democratic values meets this challenge of normativity in citizenship constructs. It does so by focusing on universal values which are fundamental for democracy and, therefore, less susceptible to debate (e.g., broad consensus can be found on the value that all individuals are of equal value). Such a standardised measurement instrument

aimed at monitoring students' attitude towards fundamental democratic values was not yet available to schools.

Substantive empirical support was found for the validity and reliability of the Fundamental Democratic Values Questionnaire. Also, most fundamental democratic values were moderate to strongly related to each other and with other citizenship constructs, which underscores the validity of the measurement instrument. Moreover, eight reliable scales could be distinguished. In terms of measurement invariance, a sufficient level could be established in all eight scales, which allows for a meaningful comparison of associations and (in one case) means across sex, migration background, home language, educational sector, and grade. Furthermore, the results of the first measurement of the Fundamental Democratic Values Questionnaire indicated that most young students underscoring fundamental democratic values to a great extent. Mean scores were highest (3.70 on a four-point Likert scale) for 'the rejection of discrimination' and lowest (3.15 on a four-point Likert scale) for 'understanding of others', and disagreeing responses (i.e., students who 'totally disagree' with a statement) manifested most in the scale 'rejection of intolerance'. A comparison of means across migration background, which the analyses of measurement invariance allowed for, demonstrated that students with a migration background underscoring 'equality', 'freedom of speech', 'tolerance', 'rejection of intolerance' and 'rejection of discrimination' significantly less than students without a migration background. However, as we have no additional information available, such as whether this entails students with a migration background from more, equally or less democratic countries, or students in a specific level of educational attainment or socioeconomic position, caution is preserved when interpreting these results. In sum, this chapter described the construction of a valid and reliable standardised measurement instrument that provided valuable information on young students' attitude towards fundamental democratic values and demonstrated that students agreed with fundamental democratic values to a great extent.

The fourth study (chapter 5) theoretically reflected on how insight into students' civic learning outcomes can be used to improve the quality of citizenship education. By doing so, a model for output-driven citizenship education was proposed. An output-driven approach has been well-studied in the educational domain that focuses on qualifying students for participating in future education, the job market and the economy broadly perceived, for example, by teaching reading and mathematics (Van Geel et al., 2016; Van Kuijk et al., 2016). Contrarily, in the educational domain that focuses on socialising students for participation in a pluriform and democratic society, an output-driven approach has not been studied (Eurydice, 2017). As such, the question of whether an output-driven approach could also be applied to

citizenship education has received little attention. While not neglecting the substantial differences between education in the qualification and socialisation domains, the considerable empirical evidence demonstrating the positive effects of an output-driven approach on students' learning outcomes in the qualification domain underscored the potential of such an approach for citizenship education. As such, derived from the literature, five building blocks of an output-driven approach were distinguished: (1) the formulation of a vision, which is the basis for (2) concrete learning objectives, which leads to (3) curriculum design, of which the school can (4) measure the learning outcomes, which are the basis for (5) evaluation and possible necessary follow-up steps (cf. Kippers et al., 2018; Ledoux et al., 2009; Van der Kleij et al., 2015; Van Geel et al., 2016; Van Kuijk et al., 2016).

Departing from these building blocks, this study theoretically reflects on two characteristics of citizenship education that make applying the building blocks to citizenship education less self-evident. The first characteristic is the normative notion in citizenship education, meaning that what is considered ('sufficient') competence in citizenship is normative. When clear guidelines on the desired level of student achievement are largely missing, it is expected from schools to decide what civic learning outcomes are important to foster and when these learning outcomes are at the desired level. This chapter emphasised that, amidst normativity, common ground can be found in values conceived as fundamental for democracy. In this respect, normativity may be more limited in scope than often assumed and not an insurmountable obstacle to output-driven citizenship education. A focus on the common ground may even help schools to deal with the challenges of normativity, as it provides a relatively 'objective' point for departure in deciding on the learning objectives in citizenship education.

The second characteristic of citizenship education that makes applying the building blocks to citizenship education less self-evident is the limited availability of quality measurement instruments for schools to measure and monitor the learning outcomes in citizenship education. While the construction of the Fundamental Democratic Values Questionnaire, as described in the third study, contributed to overcoming this challenge, the need for ongoing development of measurement instruments in citizenship education is advocated. Both the normativity and the availability of quality measurement instruments for schools challenge the application of an output-driven approach in citizenship education. This is particularly the case given the relatively young tradition of measuring the learning outcomes in this domain and other challenges not unique to citizenship education, such as the data literacy

of school professionals. Yet, this chapter concluded that applying an output-driven approach to citizenship education seems feasible when these characteristics are carefully considered.

In sum, the individual chapters shed light on the ability of standardised measurement instruments to provide for the psychometric quality and data allowing for insight into civic learning outcomes and examined how insight into civic learning outcomes can contribute to improving the quality of citizenship education. As such, the studies in this dissertation were focused on the psychometric quality of a widely used measurement instrument (i.e., the second chapter), on the ability of standardised measurement instruments to provide for insight into civic learning outcomes in different educational sectors (i.e., the third chapter), and by focusing on the psychometric quality of a standardised measurement instrument aimed at measuring students' attitude towards fundamental democratic values (i.e., the fourth chapter). Moreover, a model was provided on the role of insight into civic learning outcomes in improving the quality of citizenship education (i.e., the fifth chapter). Recalling the overarching research question of this dissertation, it can be concluded that the ability of standardised measurement instruments to provide for the psychometric quality and data allowing insight into civic learning outcomes is generally confirmed. In addition, it can be concluded that insight into civic learning outcomes offers an opportunity to improve the quality of citizenship education, provided that specific challenges are carefully considered. The next section further elaborates on the implications of this opportunity and challenges.

Implications

Using an output-driven approach to gain insight into civic learning outcomes and the extent to which learning objectives have been met offers an opportunity to improve the quality of citizenship education. As described in the introduction of this dissertation, there is a discrepancy between the desired and accomplished achievement levels in citizenship education in the Netherlands (Munniksmas et al., 2017; Slijkhuis et al., 2021, 2023; Wagenaar et al., 2011). This discrepancy has been quite robust throughout the years and underscores the need to improve the quality of citizenship education in the Netherlands. In most European countries, including the Netherlands, thinking in terms of concrete learning objectives and measuring whether the curriculum meets the achievement of these learning objectives is less common practice (Eurydice, 2017). This contrasts the qualification domain of education, where students' learning outcomes are more frequently systematically monitored to indicate whether learning objectives have been met. Notwithstanding the challenges of applying an output-driven approach to citizenship education, following an output-driven approach may suit as guidance for schools to shift the attention from curriculum-centred citizenship education (e.g.,

organising a mock election or a project week on sexual diversity) to systematic and goal-oriented citizenship education (i.e., deciding on concrete learning objectives, for example, learning about democratic decision-making and hearing everyone's voice; designing a curriculum in such a way that it is expected to contribute to reaching the learning objectives, for example, with components such as a mock election, school policy that includes the voice of students, and lessons in which knowledge about how democracy works is transferred; and, at last, monitoring whether the curriculum suffices in reaching the learning objectives).

In the example mentioned above, monitoring learning outcomes via data collection within schools is used to serve instructional goals (i.e., using the data to improve the quality of classroom instructions, for example, by setting learning objectives based on classroom data) and school development goals (i.e., using the data to improve the functioning of the school, for example, via improvements in the policy, curriculum, or staff professionalism) (Schildkamp, 2019). In this respect, gathering information on students' learning outcomes in citizenship education helps schools adjust education to what students need to improve the quality of teaching and learning (Dijkstra, De la Motte, Ehren, et al., 2014). As such, monitoring students' learning outcomes is considered essential for the successful development of citizenship competences among students (European Commission, 2009; Eurydice, 2017). In addition to instructional goals, monitoring learning outcomes can also serve accountability goals (i.e., using the data to inform stakeholders, for example, parents, on what happens in the school and on the extent to which learning objectives have been reached) (Karsten et al., 2010; Schildkamp, 2019). Even though the studies in this dissertation were predominantly focused on using learning outcomes to serve instructional and school development goals, it is also important to consider the role of learning outcomes in accountability goals.

Certain characteristics specific to citizenship education make applying an output-driven approach extra challenging and require careful consideration. These characteristics are foremost the normative notion in citizenship education and the availability and quality of measurement instruments, which are extra challenging in the context of a relatively young tradition of measuring the learning outcomes in citizenship education. To meet the challenge of the normative notion, it is suggested to consider shifting the debate from a focus on where citizenship education is different between schools to a focus on the similarities in citizenship education. In other words, we should talk more about the common ground in citizenship education, which is much greater in scope than often assumed (Dijkstra, De la Motte, Ehren, et al., 2014). This is underscored by large agreement among citizens on what should be taught in citizenship education (Dekker & Den Ridder, 2016; Van Goethem et al., 2020), in which the

essence seems to be the *regula aurea* or Golden Rule (Wattles, 1996). This widely held ethic of reciprocity is better known as ‘to treat others as you want others to treat you’ and is also reflected in influential international policy documents such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. As such, an emphasis on contested learning objectives does not entirely do justice to the everyday educational practice in citizenship education, in which most of the content, methods and interpersonal relationships adheres to the principle of ‘to treat others as you want others to treat you’ and to fundamental democratic values as reflected in policy documents such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. A focus on the common ground in citizenship education seems to be more in accordance with educational practice as it is, and offers an opportunity for standardised measurement of learning outcomes and accompanying benefits such as comparability of results. At the same time, it is acknowledged that contested and school-specific learning objectives are indeed more complex to capture using generic, standardised measurement instruments and requires more effort from schools to find or develop measurement instruments that can capture the learning outcomes of these learning objectives.

To meet the challenge of the availability and quality of measurement instruments, the ongoing development of quality measurement instruments made available for schools to use (instead of allowing access for research purposes) needs to be constructed and examined by researchers and facilitated by policy. In addition, and also to do justice to the normativity in citizenship education, it is important to have a wide variety of valid and reliable measurement instruments available. In this respect, standardised measurement instruments are preferable because their validity and reliability can more easily be ensured. In addition, standardised measurement instruments offer opportunities for relative benchmarking (i.e., comparing the learning outcomes of students in grade 8 of one school to those of students in grade 8 of other participating schools) – which offers a solution to deal with the absence of absolute norms of proficiency. However, schools can also work ‘output-driven’ with other assessment forms, such as portfolios, rubrics, game-based assessments, and vignettes (Daas et al., 2016, 2019). Other forms of assessment may provide additional insights. That is, standardised questionnaires capture the citizenship competences of students in a way that is most efficient and time-effective for schools but does not always offer insight into students’ considerations – which, for example, a more qualitative means of measurement can capture better.

The challenges of normativity and the availability and quality of measurement instruments are strengthened amidst several general and domain-specific contextual factors. Most profoundly, data literacy of school professionals requires attention. Data literacy can be defined as “the ability to transform information into actionable instructional knowledge and

practices by collecting, analysing, and interpreting all types of data (assessment, school climate, behavioural, snapshot, longitudinal, moment-to-moment, etc.) to help determine instructional steps” (Mandinach & Gummer, 2016, p. 14). The challenge of data literacy is not unique to citizenship education (cf. Staman et al., 2017). However, it requires even more attention in citizenship education because of the relatively young tradition of measuring the outcomes and the shared responsibility for the quality of citizenship education by all school professionals. To meet these general and domain-specific contextual challenges, it is important to provide schools with more support and resources in, for example, interpreting learning outcomes to see whether the learning objectives have been met.

Limitations and Future Research

The findings in this dissertation are subject to at least two overarching limitations. First and foremost, all studies in this dissertation were conducted in the context of primary education in the Netherlands. As a result, the generalisability of the findings to other countries or other educational sectors is limited. In the Netherlands, school autonomy is deeply embedded in history and culture (Dijkstra et al., 2021). In line with the constitutional ‘freedom of education’, schools have the autonomy to establish a school in line with a philosophical or religious orientation and to organise the curriculum, teaching and learning in line with this orientation (De Groot et al., 2022; Dijkstra et al., 2021). The findings in this dissertation are predominantly focused on how schools can use measurement instruments to improve the quality of citizenship education under the premise that schools have the autonomy to do so. As such, the findings may be less applicable to countries with a more centralised educational system where the quality of citizenship education needs to adhere to national norms and, for example, concretising learning objectives is not considered a task for schools. However, even when national norms for citizenship education are available, the insights offered by relative benchmarking using standardised measurement instruments in an output-driven approach can still be considered meaningful. In addition, the studies in this dissertation were conducted in primary education, including special needs primary education. The findings may be generalised to the context of secondary or pre-vocational education, but relevant differences between the educational sectors need to be considered. An example is that schools for primary education are generally smaller in terms of the student population and school professionals and have teachers fixed to a class instead of to a subject, which may cause that (aspects of) an output-driven approach are easier and faster to implement. Moreover, the general (e.g., data literacy) and domain-specific (e.g., shared responsibility) challenges may be easier to overcome in a relatively smaller school team.

As a second limitation, the studies in this dissertation were predominantly focused on how measuring students' citizenship competences using standardised measurement instruments can contribute to the quality of citizenship education. However, the quality of citizenship education can also be improved by using other (non-standardised) assessment forms – but it does require more expertise, effort and time from schools, which may not be feasible for all schools. For example, to measure whether students have sufficiently learnt about democratic decision-making and hearing everyone's voice, a school can also use portfolios, classroom observations, rubrics or vignettes (cf. Daas et al., 2016, 2019) to see whether this learning objective has been met via, for example, the curriculum design that included a mock election, school policy that underscores the inclusion of students' voice, and lessons about how democracy works. Similar to standardised measurement instruments, for non-standardised measurement instruments, it is also important to meet the quality standards (chapter 2), to take into account the educational sector of students (chapter 3), and to find ways to expand the availability and quality of measurement instruments (chapter 4). Eventually, like standardised measurement instruments, non-standardised measurement instruments can also be used to improve the quality of citizenship education by using them in the fourth building block in an output-driven approach.

Based on this dissertation, no inferences can be drawn about the effectiveness of an output-driven approach as a whole or the effectiveness of individual underlying building blocks. In light of this dissertation, it was deemed important to first explore the opportunity and challenges of an output-driven approach in citizenship education and use the findings as a foundation for further research. In line with the conclusion that using an output-driven approach to gain insight into civic learning outcomes is an opportunity to improve the quality of citizenship education, this dissertation marks an important lead for future research: scholars should test the effectiveness of an output-driven approach in citizenship education regarding the learning outcomes of students.

In Conclusion

The studies in this dissertation each shed light on how standardised measurement instruments can provide for the psychometric quality and data allowing for insight into civic learning outcomes and examined how insight into civic learning outcomes can contribute to improving the quality of citizenship education. As such, this dissertation contributed to the emerging field of scientific knowledge on this topic. Hence, this dissertation can be summarised into four main contributions. First, this dissertation includes one of the few studies assessing the measurement invariance of measurement instruments for citizenship education in

a within-country setting and, as such, provided insight into the psychometric quality of existing measurement instruments in citizenship education. Second, this dissertation pioneered by demonstrating that standardised measurement instruments can be used to provide insight into the civic learning outcomes and characteristics of citizenship education in special needs primary education. Third, in this dissertation, a new standardised measurement instrument for fundamental democratic values was constructed. As such, this dissertation contributed to the limited availability of valid and reliable measurement instruments for citizenship education. Fourth, this dissertation includes a first and innovative exploration of the feasibility of an output-driven approach to citizenship education and provided more insight into its opportunity and challenges. In sum, this dissertation gives valuable insight into the ability of standardised measurement instruments to provide for the psychometric quality and data allowing for insight into civic learning outcomes and examined how this can be used to improve the quality of citizenship education.