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Influencing youth citizenship

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6. Influencing Youth Citizenship: Summary and General Discussion

Citizenship education can fulfill a crucial role in contemporary society, by equipping students with an understanding of collective issues such as democracy, social cohesion and sustainability, while providing them with the competences and motivation necessary to tackle and critically reflect on these matters in local, national and international contexts. A coherent and specific perspective on what it means to be a good citizen and an understanding of which factors may effectively contribute to youth citizenship development are pivotal in realizing the potential of citizenship education.

This dissertation draws on insights and methods from political theory, sociology, economics, psychology and the educational sciences to provide additional insight into these requirements, aiming to investigate how perspectives on citizenship education may be developed and which generic factors in education may contribute to citizenship development. After proposing a general framework that allows the formulation of coherent and systematic perspectives on citizenship education, it scrutinized whether and how various generic educational factors may effectively contribute to citizenship education. These generic factors are education features that are an inextricable part of education and can potentially serve multiple educational goals. They are often, rather than a characteristic of a dedicated citizenship education, an inherent part of education. Two categories of generic factors can be distinguished. The first category of intrapersonal factors included language ability and perspective taking, which shape how individuals relate to the world. The second category involved factors that influence citizenship development through interpersonal interaction, in particular the peer language environment and norms communicated by significant others.

Summary of findings

Study 1: Consensus versus contested citizenship education goals in Western Europe

The first study of this dissertation investigated the normative aspects of citizenship education and attempted to increase theoretical clarity by putting forward a systematic an

explicit way of formulating a vision on citizenship. Subsequently, an exploratory data analysis was conducted to examine the degree to which five Western European educational systems are associated with outcomes affiliated with these different types of citizenship goals.

The literature revealed that many schools have difficulty with the normativity inherent in citizenship education. Despite the compulsory character of citizenship education in an increasing number of countries, the majority of teachers report not having received any formal training to teach citizenship education (Barr et al., 2015; Chin & Barber, 2010; Euridyce, 2012; Thornberg, 2008; Willemse, Lunenberg, & Korthagen, 2008; Willemse, Ten Dam, Geijssel, Van Wessum, Volman, 2015). Not surprisingly, teachers across Europe report a lack of confidence or feel insufficiently equipped to teach about citizenship education and controversial issues, as some teachers resort to a social but apolitical view of citizenship that excludes critical thinking and discussion of controversial issues (Akar, 2012; Cassidy, Brunner, & Webster, 2014; Chin & Barber, 2010; Davies, 2006; Oulton, Day, Dillon, & Grace, 2004; Patterson, Doppen, & Misco, 2012; Radstake & Leeman, 2010). In the Netherlands, most schools have formulated rather general perspectives on citizenship education. These schools not only fail to specify more concrete citizenship goals, but as a result do not succeed in the systematic implementation of citizenship education either (Dutch Inspectorate of Education, 2013).

As academics have argued that the conception of what good citizenship entails is essentially disputed (Osborne, 2000; Van Gunsteren, 1988), we have set out to make the contested aspects of citizenship explicit and systematic. In doing so, we have distinguished between so-called consensus citizenship goals, that are generally shared in democratic societies, and contested citizenship goals, which are more frequently discussed within and across societies. Drawing on Miller's (2008) classification of political theories, we identify two central assumptions that explicitly or implicitly underlie conceptions of good citizenship: the social nature of man and the ordering of social relations. Positions taken with regard to these two assumptions are typically normative in nature, for instance when one's position is that social relations should be ordered in the form of a tightly-knit, egalitarian community. We subsequently discussed four political theories in the light of their assumption with regard to the social nature of man and ordering of social relations.

In addition, the exploratory data-analysis revealed that in the five Western European countries investigated, educational level is associated with outcomes that are affiliated with consensus education goals. However, education level does not appear to be systematically associated with outcomes derived from more contested citizenship goals, perhaps as only few schools have developed a specific, potentially contested perspective on good citizenship. Both findings were in line with our hypotheses.

Study 2: Youth citizenship at the end of primary school: the role of language ability

Schools are expected to stimulate a number of learning outcomes. Of these outcomes, mathematics ability and language ability have received ample attention in recent years, spurred by the outcomes of PISA, TIMSS and PIRLS studies. At the same time, worries about erosion of social cohesion and a lack of democratic engagement have led to renewed interest in citizenship education (Eurydice, 2012; The National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement, 2012). Traditional achievement outcomes and citizenship development are often presented as if they are in competition with each other. However, we argued on several grounds that a positive relationship between particularly language ability and youth citizenship development is plausible.

First of all, language plays a central role in processes of meaning making, or how individuals relate to the world. It does so not only by allowing individuals to describe outside objects, developments and their relations, but also by allowing one to reflect upon one's own experiences and developing a shared representation of reality with others (Holtgrave & Kashima, 2008; Kashima, Klein, & Clark, 2007; Lepore & Smith, 2008; Taylor, 1985). Moreover, recent evidence on reading shows that experiencing high involvement in reading fiction, or reading literary fiction in particular increases one's empathic engagement (Bal & Veltkamp, 2013; Kidd & Castano, 2013). Empathy, in turn, is positively associated with prosocial and cooperative behavior (Stocks, Lishner, & Decker, 2009). These language-related abilities, such as being able to self-reflect, discuss and develop a shared perspective on reality with others, and being able to take the perspective of others are all important requirements for citizenship behavior. Political socialization authors have recognized these insights, by ascribing an important role to language ability, as it enables one to convince, engage and organize others for political action (Brady, Verba, & Schlozman, 1995).

Our findings confirm the hypothesized positive relationship between language ability and youth citizenship outcomes. Language is particularly associated with positive citizenship attitudes and knowledge. Interestingly, cognitive ability as such was not found to be significantly correlated to most of the four citizenship outcomes (more specifically, intelligence was correlated to none of the outcomes, while mathematics ability was only significantly correlated to citizenship knowledge, but much weaker than language ability). Taken together, these results point to a special role for language ability in youth citizenship development processes.

Study 3: Inequalities in youth citizenship knowledge: does the peer language environment matter?

Study 3 investigated the influence of the peer language environment on (inequalities in) youth citizenship knowledge of grade 6 primary education students. Amidst worries of rising inequalities in political engagement between lower and higher educated members of younger generations, policymakers are turning towards schools in an effort to provide more equality of democratic opportunity. Schools have been shown to be able to contribute to youth citizenship development, for instance through fostering an open classroom climate (Geboers, Geijsel, Admiraal, Ten Dam, 2013; Isac, Maslowski, Creemers, & Van Der Werf, 2014; Keating, Kerr, Benton, Mundy, & Lopes, 2010; Van Aken, Hart, 2014). Given the apparent influence of one's classroom's peers' social characteristics, we have examined how the composition of one's classroom peers' language abilities may influence youth citizenship knowledge development, as citizenship knowledge is one of the most important predictors for citizenship behavior (Galston, 2007).

To our knowledge, this is the first study to employ a rigorous peer effects design on a youth citizenship outcome. Moreover, in studying the interaction between levels of ability and both the variation of and average level of peer language ability, it overcomes the limitations posed by the often used linear-in-means model of peer effects. In particular, the analysis of study 3 sheds light on the impact of the distribution of peer language ability, while also differentiating in the effect students of different ability may experience.

The findings demonstrate that low language ability students perform worse when surrounded with peers that display low language abilities themselves. They benefit from classrooms with variation in language level and a high average language ability level. The

findings also show that the average language level appears to have a slightly negative impact on overall youth citizenship knowledge, in line with the big-fish-little-pond-effect hypothesis. This hypothesis suggests that after controlling for individual ability, student develop a lower academic self-concept and subsequently perform less in higher ability classrooms.

Study 4: Using Significant Others and Perspective Taking to Resolve Intergroup Tensions

In many contemporary societies, individuals are likely to experience intergroup tensions. Yet they typically have difficulty to resolve such tensions in a way that serves the collective interest (Goren & Bornstein, 2000). The fourth study of this dissertation aimed to identify effective mechanisms for resolving intergroup tensions. Using goal-framing theory (Lindenberg, 2013) as a model of behavior, two mechanisms were identified to be suitable for educational practice: stretching the application of the citizenship norm of cooperation to the outgroup by activating the normative goal frame through (1) stimulation of perspective taking and (2) norms communicated by significant others. The repeated Intergroup Prisoner's Dilemma (IPD) game was used to model intergroup tension.

The results of the repeated IPD game show that the mechanisms increase both the willingness to cooperate with other groups and actual intergroup cooperation. Instances of intergroup cooperation were also associated with lower within-group distrust. Interestingly, the significant other treatment also induced higher understanding of the collectively optimal outcomes, suggesting that the perspective that one takes influences the processing and interpretation of subsequent information (e.g., the possibilities the rules of the game offer), in line with goal-framing theory. Typically, intergroup cooperation was established relatively early in the game, although a subset of teams realized the collectively optimal option in later phases of the game. This suggests that intergroup cooperation is most easily established early in situations of intergroup tension, as phases with competitive behavior appear to decrease trust in reciprocation by the outgroup. Finally, in virtually all sessions both within-group and intergroup cooperation was conditional; if team members of the outgroup failed to reciprocate cooperative signals, intergroup cooperation diminished, while free-riding by group members could also lead to breakdown of within-group cooperation.

Overall, the findings demonstrate the usefulness of goal-framing theory (Lindenberg, 2013) for identifying citizenship education interventions, while illustrating the value of a game-based experimental design to model and examine citizenship behavior in social contexts.

Discussion

The findings presented in this dissertation shed light on multiple requirements for effective citizenship education. After elaborating on the value of the proposed framework for formulating coherent and systematic perspectives on citizenship education, the influence of intrapersonal and interpersonal factors on citizenship development will be discussed. Finally, the implications of the substantial differences in citizenship competence between students will be considered.

A framework for formulating coherent perspectives on citizenship education

By putting forward a theoretical framework for dealing with the normativity inherent in citizenship education, we have enabled the formulation of more coherent and richer perspectives on citizenship education. Citizenship education scholars may draw on the framework for scrutinizing the theoretical consistency of a given perspective on citizenship education.

Although the distinction between consensus and contested citizenship goals on the one hand, and the central assumptions underlying contested citizenship perspectives on the other hand have proven useful, the specific political theoretical perspectives on citizenship presented are not collectively exhaustive. Within the proposed framework, refinements to the two central assumptions held by the political-theoretical perspectives can be considered. For instance, with regard to the social nature of man, one may also consider informing one's approach to citizenship education with empirical research that illustrates which impact social relations may have on the well-being of individuals (e.g., Grapin, Sulkowski, & Lazarus, 2015; Resnick, Harris, & Blum, 1993). Moreover, such research may demonstrate that the social needs and abilities of individuals may differ between individuals and within individuals over time. With regard to the ordering of social relations, one may not only aspire to prepare students for functioning in an ideal ordering of social relations, whether conceived as a specific type of community or not, but also for functioning in

current society, which may differ from one's ideal conception of the ordering of social relations. This underlines the importance of including consensus citizenship goals in citizenship education. In addition, schools should balance their own normative position on citizenship with facilitation of students' right to discover and develop their own position towards citizenship.

The literature suggests that education professionals find the normative aspects of citizenship education difficult to deal with, while most commonly held conceptions of citizenship in educational systems remain rather general. This is problematic, as it can inhibit further development of concretely operationalized citizenship education programs. The exploratory data analyses suggest that outcomes in line with specific, more contested citizenship goals are not associated with educational level. However, as these findings are based on national samples, they do not exclude the possibility that individual schools are generating such citizenship outcomes. Future research may explore how individual schools with richer conceptions of citizenship are dealing with the normative aspects of citizenship education, while also investigating which formal and informal training needs current education professionals have in this regard.

Intrapersonal generic factors contributing to citizenship development

How individuals relate to the world determines to a large extent how they will act in it. This dissertation has investigated two intrapersonal factors that are essential in shaping how individuals relate to the world. The first factor is language ability, which is one of the most fundamental tools human beings have for dealing with social interactions, as it enables one to make meaning, reflect, convince, communicate about perspectives and potentially establish a shared representation of reality with others. By explaining the various aspects of language that enable discussion, cooperation and conflict resolution, the conceptual relationship between language and citizenship competence has been further elucidated. The inclusion of specific and multiple measures of both language ability and other cognitive abilities allowed a precise examination of the unique contribution of language ability to youth citizenship development, whereas previous studies may have occluded effects of specific cognitive abilities due to imperfect operationalization of these abilities.

In addition, the effect of taking the perspective of the collective on the resolution of intergroup tension was demonstrated. This application of the perspective taking

mechanism enhanced the willingness to send potentially costly cooperative signals to the outgroup, increasing the likelihood of intergroup cooperation in a situation in which intergroup tension is salient. The findings suggest that perspective taking can induce a motivational process that is geared at establishing intergroup cooperation when possible.

Future research may investigate the endurance of perspective taking effects over time. It may also further scrutinize which aspects of language ability influence citizenship development in particular, and how different types of language instruction in schools may foster citizenship development.

Interpersonal generic factors contributing to citizenship development

This dissertation showed that interpersonal factors influence citizenship development as well. In particular, it examined which peer language environments may exacerbate or reduce inequalities in citizenship knowledge, while also analyzing the role norms of significant others may have in shaping citizenship behavior. The findings suggest that lower language ability students develop more citizenship knowledge in classrooms characterized by variation in peer language ability and relatively higher average peer language ability. These results imply that when schools or policymakers consider changing the classroom composition, effects on citizenship outcomes need to be taken into account as well, in addition to effects on academic achievement outcomes. For situations in which the classroom composition remains intact, the results point to the importance of classroom strategies for dealing with dynamics arising from particular classroom compositions. Future studies may include richer analysis of teacher and school factors to identify the precise mechanisms responsible for these effects. Is the language used in classrooms with more variation in language ability indeed more inclusive to lower language ability students, for instance when discussing issues relating to citizenship? In addition, future research may use other peer effects designs to replicate these findings, by exploiting random assignment of students to schools and classes, policy-induced natural experiments or other exogenous events.

Norms communicated by significant others are shown to significantly influence intergroup cooperation as well. Corroborating earlier findings in anti-bullying research (Veenstra, Lindenberg, Huitsing, Sainio, & Salmivalli, 2014), these findings imply that significant others, such as teachers, may stimulate both normative motivation and behavior

of students if they express their own norms (provided these are in alignment with the desired outcome). If proven effective in educational settings, some teachers would need to overcome the desire to take a strictly neutral stance on citizenship matters, however (Oulton et al., 2004). The majority of teachers may nonetheless welcome this method, as it potentially enables schools to deal with in-school intergroup tensions in the short run, while enabling students to contribute to the social cohesion of tomorrow's diverse society in the long run. Of course, the same holds for the perspective taking mechanism explored in chapter 5.

Addressing inequalities in citizenship competences

Throughout this dissertation, significant differences in citizenship competence between different groups of students have been found. Students with lower educated parents and lower language ability score lower on virtually all citizenship outcomes, while ethnicity and gender also remain influential factors in large subsets of citizenship outcomes. Moreover, international comparisons show that Dutch students score low on a range of citizenship outcomes, such as citizenship knowledge, respect for equal rights of immigrants and women and interest in political and societal issues (Schulz, Ainley, Fraillon, Kerr, & Losito, 2010). This dissertation offers a number of insights that can be used to address these challenges. These will be discussed in the next sections.

Implications for policy

The findings of this dissertation illustrate that for decision-making on matters such as classroom composition or prioritization of subjects the potential effects on both cognitive and citizenship outcomes should be considered. A fortiori, in times of widely reported curriculum overload (NCCA, 2010), generic factors in particular have the potential to alleviate pressure on the educational system by contributing to fulfillment of multiple educational goals at once. For example, one may argue that if one would need to choose between prioritization of mathematics or language ability in primary education, an advantage of language education lies in its positive relationship with youth citizenship development. Moreover, the relationship between student-level characteristics such as language ability and citizenship competence may also contribute towards beneficial reciprocal relationships at the school- or classroom-level, for instance through an improved

school climate, which is known to improve academic attainment and youth citizenship development (Thapa, Cohen, Guffey, & Higgins-D'Alessandro, 2013). In other words, policies aimed at improving effectiveness of generic factors may reduce curriculum overload while potentially instigating positive emergent effects at the school- and classroom-level.

In addition, policymakers often approach the subject of citizenship education with great care, as they wish to respect freedom of education and avoid allegations of state-mandated indoctrination. As such, the requirements placed on schools in the Netherlands with regard to citizenship education are open to interpretation. While schools are expected to promote active citizenship and social integration, the degree to which schools are held accountable by the government is one in which they merely need to demonstrate having taken an effort towards these general goals. The Inspectorate of Education has shown that a substantial number of schools lack a concrete vision on citizenship education, and fail to systematically evaluate and improve their citizenship education (Dutch Inspectorate of Education, 2013). In schools that hold rather general, implicit views on citizenship education teachers may also feel less support and confidence to discuss controversial citizenship issues, let alone express citizenship norms themselves. As the combination of general, abstract government-mandated citizenship goals and the apparent inability of a large number of schools to formulate their own perspective on citizenship prevents quality control of citizenship education, the Education Council has recommended the government to delineate various more explicit and detailed citizenship education objectives, while respecting the freedom of education (Education Council, 2012).

The framework provided in study 1 may be used to inform such efforts, as it specifies both democratic citizenship goals that enjoy a fair amount of consensus and more contested, specific citizenship education goals that allow schools to formulate a citizenship perspective in alignment with their own value orientation. By doing so, stagnation of citizenship education development due to the contested nature of specific conceptions of good citizenship may be mitigated, as teachers would then be able to focus their citizenship education efforts more. Such a change in policy would ideally be accompanied with additional school leader and teacher training on citizenship education.

Finally, the demonstrated influence of the peer language environment of students prompts consideration of potential policies that may exploit these dynamics to address

inequalities in citizenship competence, as they hamper equality of democratic opportunity and may threaten the quality of and support for democracy (Bartels, 2009; Gallego, 2007). While the findings need additional replication to suggest policy-induced changes to classroom composition, they do highlight the possibility that the language used in classroom discussions in primary schools may not always be accessible to all students. Further research is required to establish whether this is the case, however.

Implications for practice

Which insights in this dissertation can be of value to educational practice? Firstly, the presented insights on generic factors can be used to inform decision-making and reduce curriculum overload in schools, as they may contribute towards the achievement of multiple educational goals at once. For instance, in addition to the examples mentioned in the previous section, one may argue that stimulating perspective taking of students may not only enhance intergroup conflict resolution, but can also stimulate the comprehension of topics that are multidimensional or complex in nature, as combining different perspectives on the matter can prompt fuller understanding of the topic at hand. Similarly, if teachers communicate establish a set of schoolwide citizenship norms, this may benefit students citizenship development, but may also improve the functioning of the organization as a whole (Elmore, 2005; Honig & Hatch, 2004; Kruse, Louis, & Bryk, 1994). Secondly, as elaborated upon, the use of the proposed framework for formulating a coherent and rich conceptualization of citizenship education may enable schools to implement better quality control, while schools that find internal agreement on specific citizenship education objectives may find it easier to focus their efforts. At the same time, the framework is flexible enough to allow for alignment with schools' own, more specific philosophical and value orientations.

In addition, the finding that language ability is strongly correlated with citizenship development offers schools evidence that language and citizenship development may go hand in hand. The findings caution against neglecting language development when a school prioritizes students' citizenship development. We speculate that increased integration of language and citizenship education at the end of primary school may be effective, as it may provide students with a more personally meaningful learning experience. In order to gain further insight in factors that contribute to citizenship knowledge acquisition of lower

language ability students, schools are well advised to pay attention to the influence of classroom language composition on student interaction processes. Additional awareness of the accessibility and inclusiveness of classroom discussions may improve the citizenship knowledge development of lower language ability students in classes with low variation in language ability. Such practices may be easier to foster in primary education, as teachers in secondary education typically teach multiple classes, which all have unique dynamics.

Primary and secondary schools may also take advantage of the findings presented in study 4. For instance, they may prompt students to look at citizenship issues from the collective point of view more often to stimulate positive intergroup attitudes. Teachers can also express support for citizenship norms if they want to stimulate citizenship development. Importantly, while expression of support of a certain norm can certainly have an effect, treatment of students in accordance with these norms appears equally important (Abdelzadeh, Zetterberg, & Ekman, 2014). The way in which such norms are stimulated has an impact as well, as direct approaches to citizenship education in which norms are simply imposed on students in the forms of rules, appear ineffective (SCDRD, 2010). Finally, we speculate that the effectiveness of citizenship education is higher when not one, but all teachers engage in voicing citizenship norms, as students may then be more likely to process them as general, rather than teacher-specific citizenship norms.

As the generic factors examined in this dissertation have been shown to contribute to citizenship development of students, a final implication of these findings is that attention to citizenship development can be given by teachers regardless of their subject. In fact, the presented findings suggest that there are different processes through which citizenship development may be stimulated, whether this concerns language development, discussion of controversial issues from different perspectives, or speaking out about citizenship norms. This suggests that all teachers can contribute in a manner that is aligned with their own professional convictions and abilities, and that citizenship education certainly does not need to be confined to one or two subjects, but can rather be integrated across the curriculum.