Young citizens and their parents, peers, and teachers in a changing world

Social contexts of citizenship competences in adolesence

Karkdijk, E.M.

Publication date
2025

Chapter 1

Introduction

During adolescence, individuals increasingly develop understanding of and opinions about the world they grow up in. As young citizens, adolescents have ideas and concerns about society. One apparent illustration of youth engagement in recent years is the *School Strike for Climate*, a worldwide movement involving over one million students who went on strike from school to protest and demand climate action (Amaria & Barclay, 2019). Also in less visible ways, adolescents are involved in society, such as by staying informed about current events, being concerned about social or political issues, engaging in discussions about these topics, or doing voluntary work.

To navigate society successfully, individuals need citizenship competences — knowledge, attitudes, and skills that enable them to understand and participate in a pluriform and democratic society (Eurydice, 2017; Ten Dam & Volman, 2007). Besides the individual importance of developing these competences, understanding and supporting adolescents' citizenship competences also has a strong societal significance: a well-functioning democracy is dependent on engaged and supportive citizens. But how do adolescents acquire the knowledge, attitudes, and skills they need to participate actively in society? To answer this question accurately, it is necessary to take into account the social environment in which adolescents develop citizenship competences.

There is broad consensus that development happens in interaction with one's environment, as outlined in various developmental and socialization theories (cf. Bandura, 1977; Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Coleman, 1988). Also with regard to citizenship competences, the school, home, and peer contexts can be considered key socializing contexts. Put more strongly by De Winter (2004, p. 17), in a democracy "the continuity of a peaceful, just society depends significantly on how new generations are raised." Within the different social contexts in which adolescents are embedded, they explicitly and implicitly share opinions, exchange ideas, internalize values, and engage with social norms regarding how to interact with others. These contexts can be described as *mini-polities* or *mini-democracies*: social settings in which adolescents can experience being members of a community and practice democratic principles, values, and policies (De Winter, 2004; Flanagan, 2012). Adolescents' attitudes are affected by the people who are close to them: the civic attitudes of parents and peers are related to adolescents' own civic attitudes (e.g., Degner & Dalege, 2013; Miklikowska et al., 2019; Wanders et al., 2021; Zagrean et al., 2022). At the same time, broader societal factors may affect civic development. Today's youth grow up in a society facing serious societal and environmental challenges. Concerns about increasing polarization, populism, and weakening social cohesion pose risks to democracy (e.g., Ruth-Lovell & Grahn, 2022). Moreover, on a global scale, environmental issues and violent conflicts threaten young people's future. Within this context, adolescents face the challenging developmental task of identifying their role and place within society (Flanagan & Gallay, 1995; Sherrod et al., 2002).

Despite wide acknowledgement of the importance of various contextual factors, research on adolescents' citizenship competences over the past decades

has predominantly focused on schools. Schools are considered pivotal in fostering adolescents' citizenship competences, as emphasized by their legally mandated responsibility in delivering citizenship education. Schools also are also unique in their potential to reach all young people, regardless of adolescents' diverse backgrounds. However, studies on citizenship education show that factors beyond the school context, such as socioeconomic status, also relate to citizenship competences. Still, a broader perspective on the developmental context of citizenship competences, including the home and peer contexts, remains largely unexplored.

This dissertation

Potentially important contextual factors (e.g., parents, peers, societal issues) and the mechanisms underlying these factors (e.g., congruence) remain insufficiently understood in the literature on adolescents' citizenship competences. A better understanding could lead to more effective support for adolescents in their civic development. Insight into the role of the developmental context could, for example, help reveal opportunities for support that is more attuned to adolescents' experiences and needs. This dissertation thus aims to deepen understanding of the contribution of contextual factors to adolescents' citizenship competences in a changing context. Its central research question is: "To what extent are adolescents' experiences with their parents, peers and teachers, as well as their concerns about the world's future, associated with their citizenship competences?" The next section of this chapter introduces the key concepts of the dissertation, followed by an overview of the remaining chapters.

Citizenship competences

A resilient democracy depends on engaged citizens who endorse democratic principles and participate in democratic processes. Concerns about diminishing social cohesion and weakening support for democratic practices and principles have driven the increased focus on citizenship competences and citizenship education (De Groot et al., 2022). Citizenship competences are generally defined as the knowledge, attitudes, and skills that individuals need to participate adequately in democratic and pluriform societies (Eurydice, 2017; Ten Dam et al., 2011). More specifically, these competences enable individuals to perform so-called social tasks in everyday life: acting democratically, acting in a socially responsible manner, dealing with conflicts and dealing with differences (Ten Dam & Volman, 2007; Ten Dam et al., 2011).

Although citizenship is a contested concept, there is broad consensus regarding the key aspects of citizenship that should be promoted to maintain a resilient democracy: tolerance of diversity, support for equal rights, nonviolent conflict resolution, civic engagement, and support of democratic practices and principles (Eidhof et al., 2016). In the *International Civic and Citizenship Education Study* (ICCS), from which part of the data used in this dissertation are derived, four content domains related to citizenship education are distinguished: a) civic institutions and systems (i.e. state institutions, economic systems, and civic

society), b) civic principles (i.e. equity, freedom, rule of law, and sustainability, solidarity), c) civic participation (i.e. decision-making, influencing, and community participation), and d) civic roles and identities (i.e. citizens, civic self-image, and civic connectedness) (Schulz et al., 2023).

The importance of fostering adolescents' citizenship competences is twofold: it empowers youth to become active participants in their communities, and having knowledgeable, engaged citizens is vital for a strong democracy. Understanding what factors contribute to or hinder adolescents' citizenship competences is therefore critical for individuals as well as for societies.

Development of citizenship competences during adolescence

Adolescence is a formative developmental phase, also regarding citizenship competences (Amnå, 2012; Metzger et al., 2018; Prior, 2010; Rekker et al., 2015; Russo & Stattin, 2017). During adolescence and early adulthood, forming a coherent self-identity is a core developmental task (Erikson, 1968; Marcia, 1966; Meeus et al., 2010). As part of this process, adolescents need to develop a view on society and identify their place in it (Erikson, 1950; Flanagan & Gallay, 1995; Rekker et al., 2017; Sherrod et al., 2002). Moreover, adolescents' increasing cognitive abilities enable them to engage in more complex thinking and recognize and integrate divergent values (Daniel et al., 2012; Keating, 2004; Kuhn, 2000).

The citizenship competences adolescents develop are indicative of the competences they exhibit later in life (e.g., Hooghe & Wilkenfeld, 2008; Metzger et al., 2019; Russo & Stattin, 2016). Developmental trajectories of citizenship competences over time differ between individuals and for different aspects of citizenship knowledge, attitudes and skills (e.g., Eckstein et al., 2011; Geboers et al., 2015; Grütter & Buchmann, 2021; Zaff et al., 2011). In general, whereas civic attitudes are less stable and more extreme during early adolescence, they tend to stabilize and become more nuanced in late adolescence and adulthood (Eckstein et al., 2011; Rekker et al., 2015; Russo & Stattin, 2016). Zaff and colleagues (2011) found varying levels and trajectories for diverse aspects of civic engagement between the age of 12 and 17. Within a similar age range, Geboers and colleagues (2015) found that citizenship knowledge generally increased, and societal interest declined. Moreover, the study revealed differences in citizenship development trajectories with regard to gender, migration background and educational track. Influences of demographic background variables were also found in other studies, such as the role of parents' socioeconomic status with regard to political interest (Neundorf et al., 2015; Shehata & Amnå, 2019). Other longitudinal studies show stability during adolescence in political interest, political trust and support of equal rights for people with a migration background (Hooghe & Wilkenfeld, 2008; Prior, 2010; Shehata & Amnå, 2019), and increasing political self-efficacy and support for democracy (Huijsmans et al., 2024). Overall, research suggests that, while important individual differences exist and citizenship competences generally mature during adolescence, the competences developed during this period are predictive of those in adulthood, underscoring the importance of

understanding how aspects of citizenship knowledge, skills and attitudes develop during this period.

Citizenship competences and contextual factors

According to the ecological systems theory by Bronfenbrenner (1979), development takes place in interaction with one's social environment. This environment can be seen as different interrelated systems (micro-, meso-, exo-, and macrosystem), each representing influential contexts in which individuals interact and engage with others. The theory encompasses a wide range of contextual factors that can influence development in different ways. This dissertation specifically focuses on aspects of the home, peer, and school contexts, as well as societal developments—aspects that are often underexplored in research on citizenship competences, but which may be particularly relevant for understanding and fostering these competences.

Various theories point to the potential direct or indirect effects of interactions within the microsystem (e.g., parents, peers and teachers) on adolescents' citizenship competences. The civic development theory (Lerner et al., 2014) posits that civic development occurs in bidirectional interactions between individuals and their contexts. According to the social learning theory (Bandura, 1977), individuals learn through observing and experiencing behavior of role models, such as parents and peers. They shape adolescents' attitudes through their own views, reflected in their behavior, practices, and communication (Kelly, 2006). Additionally, parents can create an environment reflecting democratic values, such as encouraging open dialogue, respect for different opinions, and mutual trust. Within schools, students also learn about democratic principles and have the opportunity to experience and practice these principles (Manganelli et al., 2015). For example, in class discussions adolescents are encouraged to adhere to the rules of respectful social interactions, also with others who hold views different from their own (Maurissen et al., 2018).

An important premise of the ecological systems theory is that these different systems interact. The interaction between several microsystems is referred to as the mesosystem. The interaction, or synergy, has a unique effect on individual's development. The importance of the interaction between contexts and the role of various contextual factors in civic development has also been highlighted in the call for a democratic-pedagogical offensive by De Winter (2004). He argues that supporting adolescents' development competences needed for active citizenship should be a shared responsibility, given its significance for society as a whole (De Winter, 2000).

Besides the day-to-day experiences in the micro- and mesosystems of adolescents, societal changes and collective experiences at the macrolevel affect the environment in which adolescents develop. These may therefore also affect their citizenship competences (Jennings, 2002; Sherrod et al., 2002). More than a decade ago, Amnå (2012) posed the question how adolescents will shape their civic identities in response to "giant and complex political challenges, raised by

financial crises, democratization processes, the new world map of politics, climate change, and access to the Internet" (p. 612). Indeed, the past years have shown that the world is changing rapidly. Due to digitalization and increased use of social media, individuals today remain constantly connected, making the role of social interactions even more prevalent. Moreover, a large percentage of adolescents nowadays is concerned about the world's future (Hickman et al., 2021). Many experience stress or anxiety with regard to climate change (Ojala et al., 2021). Distress related to global crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic and climate crisis can negatively impact adolescents' mental health (Lass-Hennemann et al., 2024). Developments within the larger context and individual's concerns about them may very well be linked to their capacities to navigate their role in society.

In sum, adolescents' citizenship competences are expected to be related to contextual factors, whether more immediate or more distant, illustrating the importance of understanding the developmental context of citizenship competences in adolescence (Miklikowska & Hurme, 2011).

National context

This dissertation focuses on adolescents in the Netherlands. As in many European countries, citizenship education has received increased attention over the past decades in the Netherlands (De Groot et al., 2022). An illustrative example of this is the educational legislation of citizenship education in 2005-2006, the 'Active citizenship and social integration' law, which has been further expanded in 2021. Schools in the Netherlands are now obligated to promote citizenship and social cohesion through their curricula and school climate.

ICCS provides insight in students' citizenship competences and citizenship education in secondary education in the Netherlands, allowing for comparison with other countries. The most recent cycle (ICCS 2022) showed that the citizenship competences of eighth-grade students in the Netherlands are generally lower in several areas compared to their peers in comparable countries (based on similar Human Development Index and Democracy Index scores: Denmark, Norway, Sweden, and the German state North Rhine-Westphalia). For example, students score lower on civic knowledge, support for equal rights, intended voting and trust in civic institutions (Daas et al., 2024). Most of these findings have repeatedly emerged in previous ICCS cycles (Maslowski et al., 2012; Munniksma et al., 2017) and have remained rather unchanged.

In the Dutch education system, schools have significant autonomy in shaping citizenship education in line with their religious or philosophical orientations due to the constitutional freedom of education. Accordingly, relatively large differences in students' citizenship competences have been observed between schools (Daas et al., 2024). Moreover, the freedom of education gives many parents the possibility to choose a school that largely aligns with their own principles and worldview. Altogether, the Netherlands provides an interesting case for examining adolescents' citizenship competences in relation to their experiences at home, with peers and in school.

Dissertation outline

This dissertation aims to enhance understanding of associations between adolescents' citizenship competences and their experiences at home, with peers, and in school, within a changing context. A changing context refers to (adolescents' perceptions of) global environmental threats and negative expectations for European future, such as climate change, terrorism and intolerance, as well as societal developments during the past decade, including increased concerns about polarization and populism. In the following chapters, different contextual factors in relation to citizenship competences are examined.

This PhD trajectory was linked to the Dutch research consortium that conducted ICCS 2022, coordinated by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA). To supplement the ICCS data, we also collected data through an additional questionnaire concerning parents and peers. Data from both ICCS 2022 and the additional survey were used for the studies included in this dissertation. Table 1.1 provides an overview of the research questions, data, and analyses of each chapter. The four studies all involve quantitative data analyses. Multilevel analyses were used, to account for two-stage sampling of students within schools.

The four studies highlight different contextual factors that are expected to be associated with adolescents' citizenship competences, including aspects of the home, peer, and school environment, as well as broader societal dynamics, such as societal and educational changes over time and concerns about the future of the world. As citizenship competences refer to a wide range of aspects of knowledge, attitudes and skills, and the associations between contextual factors and different aspects of citizenship competences may vary, the studies focus on specific aspects of citizenship competences. These include civic knowledge, support of equal rights, trust in civic institutions, and civic engagement. Together, the studies provide a more layered understanding of how elements of the different contexts in which adolescents grow up are associated with their citizenship competences. The next section presents an overview of the four studies.

Table 1.1
Overview of the Research Questions, Data, and Analyses per Study

Chapter	Research question(s)	Data	Analysis
2	1) To what extent have students' perceptions of an open classroom climate for discussion and student-teacher relationship changed over time? 2) To what extent has the relationship between students' citizenship competences and an open classroom climate, and the relationship with teachers changed?	Student data of the Dutch ICCS samples of 2009, 2016 and 2022 (*N* = 7,385).	Multilevel regression analyses.
3	1) To what extent are adolescents' citizenship competences associated with perceived parental autonomy support and responsiveness? 2) To what extent does the perceived openness of the classroom climate for discussion interact with perceived parental autonomy support and responsiveness in relation to adolescents' citizenship self-efficacy and participation in civic activities at school?	Student data of the Dutch ICCS 2022 sample, including an additional questionnaire (*N* = 549).	Multilevel latent class analysis; multilevel regression analysis.
4	To what extent is the relation between civic attitudes of adolescents and the civic attitudes of their parents, friends, and classmates strengthened by the degree of congruence between these attitudes, and by the quality of each relationship?	Student data of the Dutch ICCS 2022 sample, including an additional questionnaire (*N* = 540).	Multilevel regression analysis; discrepancy scores correlations.
5	1) Which citizenship orientations can be distinguished among Dutch adolescents, based on sociopolitical interest, civic participation, and political trust? 2) In what way are adolescents' macrosocial worries related to these different citizenship orientations? 3) To what extent is the relationship between macrosocial worries and citizenship orientations moderated by citizenship knowledge?	Student data of the Dutch ICCS 2022 sample (*N* = 2,582).	Multilevel latent class analysis.

The **second chapter** focuses on possible changes over time in the extent to which schools contribute to students' citizenship competences. Societal developments and an increased focus on citizenship education in the past decades may have influenced the role of schools in fostering students' citizenship competences. However, empirical research on this topic remains limited. Thus, this study examines whether the association between school climate characteristics (e.g., an open classroom climate for discussion and student-teacher relationships) and adolescents' citizenship knowledge, trust in civic institutions, and support for equal rights for people with a migration background changed across 2009, 2016 and 2022.

The **third chapter** zooms in on the role of parenting; a rather underexplored area in the literature on adolescents' citizenship competences. First, the study distinguishes among adolescents who experience different patterns of perceived parental autonomy support and responsiveness. Second, it examines how these different parenting patterns are related to adolescents' citizenship competences. In this study, the focus is on trust in civic institutions, positive attitudes toward people with a migration background, interest in sociopolitical issues, citizenship self-efficacy, and participation in civic-related activities at school.

The **fourth chapter** examines the interrelatedness between different social contexts. Parents and peers are influential in the development of adolescents' civic attitudes, but these associations are often examined separately. Following the ecological systems theory of Bronfenbrenner (1979), these different contexts would be expected to interact. The study examines this congruency hypothesis, expecting that more similarity in the civic attitudes of parents, friends, and classmates strengthens the associations between adolescents' civic attitudes and those of their parents, classmates, and friends. The civic attitudes included in this study are trust in groups, institutions, and sources of information and positive attitudes toward people with a migration background.

The **fifth chapter** considers how adolescents' own negative expectations of the future of Europe and perceptions of global environmental threats relate to their civic engagement. Previous studies have demonstrated the usefulness of a person-centered approach when investigating individual differences in civic engagement (Amnå & Eckman, 2014; Tzankova et al., 2021). Building upon these studies, the research adopts a person-centered approach to examine adolescents' citizenship orientations based on civic participation, sociopolitical interest, and political trust. It then examines how these different orientations are related to adolescents' macrosocial worries, and finally whether this association is moderated by their citizenship knowledge. This study thus emphasizes the role of individual characteristics in adolescents' civic engagement within a changing world.

Finally, the **sixth chapter** summarizes all findings, draws main conclusions, addresses the overall implications and limitations of this research, and identifies directions for future research.