Contemplating modes of assessing citizenship competences

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A B S T R A C T

Assessment of citizenship competences has become common practice following the statutory assignment of citizenship education to schools in many countries. Assessment can serve various goals. The suitability of various types of instruments depends on the alignment with the goals intended. In this paper we evaluate four types of instruments and their suitability to assess citizenship competences. Tests and questionnaires, portfolios, game-based assessment, and vignettes are each evaluated in terms of seven attributes relevant to instruments aiming to assess students' citizenship competences. Our results indicate no single type of instrument aligns with all attributes, and expanding the range of available instruments appears the best way forward so that educators and researchers can make a choice that fits their purpose. The analysis presented provides further insight into the strengths and weaknesses of particular assessment types.

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1. Introduction

People are not born into actively engaged citizens. To effectively participate in society young people need the knowledge, skills and attitudes necessary to do so. Developing these citizenship competences involves acquiring knowledge of the functioning of a democratic society, the skills to interact with others and change perspectives, a democratic attitude and values such as responsibility, social engagement, equality and equity, as well as reflective ability by developing insights into social processes (Schuitema, Ten Dam, & Veugelers, 2008; Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). The political attitudes and beliefs that young people develop during adolescence (e.g. political interest and willingness to participate in society) largely determine their engagement in later life (Eckstein, Noack, & Gniewosz, 2012; Hooghe & Wilkenfeld, 2008; Quintelier & Van Deth, 2014). The importance of developing young people's citizenship competences is reflected in the statutory footing of citizenship education established in many countries (Eurydice, 2012).

Schools' success in teaching citizenship competences is monitored both through accountability to the various stakeholders (e.g. local environment, parents, government), as well as through in-school quality care. Assessment not only facilitates evaluating the quality of citizenship education in schools, but can also encourage a process of continuous quality improvement aimed at achieving an adequate alignment between the intentions of the school, the schools' educational practices, and the characteristics and personal goals of the specific student population. Assessment of citizenship competences can generally be said serve accountability, school improvement, and teaching and learning (Karsten, Visscher, Dijkstra, & Veenstra, 2010). The majority of countries (around 80%) partaking in the International Civic and Citizenship Education Study (ICCS) 2009 report some form of students learning assessment, and around two-third report evaluation of schools' provision in this area (Ainley, Schulz, & Friedman, 2013). In this paper we consider assessment as a special type of evaluation, and consider different instruments as modes of assessment (Dochy, 2001). To date, knowledge on student assessment in citizenship education is still preliminary, and no one way of assessing students' learning in citizenship education appears most suitable (Kerr, Keating, & Ireland, 2009; Richardson, 2010). The advantages and disadvantages of different modes of assessing students' citizenship competences are associated with the specific goals strived for.

Student assessment first and foremost serves to support students' learning. According to Jerome (2008) – following the American Psychological Association (1997) – assessment of citizenship education can have several beneficial effects on students' learning. First, learners who understand their current achievement are more likely able to plan ahead for further improvement. Second, the information derived from assessment helps teachers to provide appropriate feedback or adjust their teaching overall. Third, teams of teachers are able to compare

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results to discuss and improve teaching practice. Fourth, learners who are involved with their own assessment are likely to gain deeper insight into their own learning and the area in which they are learning.

Beside serving as a tool to support learning, assessment is also used to determine student performance (i.e. passing/failing grade). If desired, students' results can further be aggregated to evaluate the quality of schools in a specific domain, possibly in the form of an accountability measure for schools (Dijkstra et al., 2014b). Though evaluative applications generally incentivise student learning prior to assessment, they often do not aim to provide input to direct further learning.

For assessment of citizenship competences to serve both types of goals has proven no easy endeavour. Not in the least because citizenship competences remain a tentative concept: what constitutes 'good' citizenship appears to hold different meanings, as evidenced by the various types of citizenship distinguished (Knight Abowitz & Harnish, 2006; Van Gunsteren, 1998). If some forms of citizenship are at risk of not being acknowledged or undervalued, this would in turn affect the (construct) validity of assessment and deduct from the meaningfulness of assessment to the school as well as students themselves (Dochy & Moerkerke, 1997; Ekman & Amnå, 2012). Regarding assessing citizenship competences for student learning, the challenge for assessment then appears threefold: serving to support students' learning; evaluating students' performance; and providing meaningful insight into students' development of democratic citizenship. In this article we consider the demands this places on assessment of citizenship competences, the possible attributes of assessment instruments, and contemplate the strengths and limitations of different types of instruments. We formulate the following research question: *What opportunities do different modes of assessment offer to assess students' citizenship competences in a meaningful way, providing input to direct further learning, and appraisal of students' competence level?*

2. Theoretical framework

The distinction between assessment to direct further learning and appraisal of performance is generally considered as the use of assessment *for* learning (or: formative assessment) and assessment *of* learning (or: summative assessment) respectively (Taras, 2005; Wiliam & Black, 1996). We will first consider the implications of both these purposes of assessment, before exploring the implications of a developmental and meaningful assessment of citizenship competences. We then go into the issues concerning practicality of assessment in an educational setting.

2.1. Assessment of citizenship learning

Assessment of citizenship competences is of essential importance for schools to gain insight into the effectiveness of their efforts to promote citizenship learning, as it is primarily through assessment that we can find out whether a particular sequence of instructional activities has resulted in the intended learning outcomes (Wiliam, 2011). Summative assessment generally involves assigning students a (passing) grade or score. Two approaches can be taken to standardize students' performance.

Firstly, students' performance can be graded based on a set standard. Outcome descriptors are then used to describe the level of competence required to be deemed 'proficient'. Despite clear advantages of an absolute and external norm (Dijkstra & de la Motte, 2014) in the case of citizenship education there is as of yet no general agreement on what constitutes 'sufficient' or 'insufficient' citizenship competences. Citizenship competences has been shown to be a diverse concept, and the different interpretations cannot

simply be hierarchically rank ordered. Moreover, studies (using quantitative data) have shown elements of citizenship competences constitute distinct aspects and cannot be combined to form a single container concept (Hoskins, Vilalba, & Saisana, 2012; Ten Dam, Geijsel, Reumerman, & Ledoux, 2011). Considering the (thus far) impossibility to determine a single scale for valuing citizenship competences, and the lack of normative agreement on proficiency levels, one of the challenges for assessment is to develop standards or norms on which to ground evaluation of the various aspects of citizenship. These standards or norms can, for example, be elaborated on the basis of what various stakeholders (e.g. educators, politicians, parents) think young people need to function adequately as a citizen in a democratic society (intersubjective assessment).

Alternatively, students' performance can be compared to that of their peers. This approach is taken in most citizenship education studies. The 2009 ICCS study, for example, consisted of 25 scales assessing various aspects of young people's citizenship competences (Schulz, Fraillon, Ainley, Losito, & Kerr, 2008). Most of these were constructed through factor analysis of Likert-type items for which no performance-standard was set. The citizenship knowledge scale was based on an 80-item multiple-choice test. Based on the results, the researchers specified three proficiency levels of civic knowledge ability (Schulz, Fraillon, & Ainley, 2013). Although these levels are elaborated in terms of their content, they are essentially based on the performance of students partaking and thus constitute a relative norm.

Developments are still ongoing, but assessment of learning (AoL) has shown potent use to value students' citizenship competences. Specifically, AoL presents two attributes for assessment of citizenship competences

- Assessment allows comparison between students;
- Assessment allows comparison of students' performance to a norm.

2.2. Assessment for citizenship learning

Whereas assessment of learning is generally employed as a final assessment and seeks to value students' performance or progress, assessment for learning (AfL) seeks to promote the further acquisition of skills or knowledge (Dochy, 2001). AfL is defined as "the process of seeking and interpreting evidence for use by learners and their teachers to decide (1) where the learners are in their learning, (2) where they need to go and (3) how best to get there" (Broadfoot et al., 2002; numbers added). The first and second points are not unique to AfL, as they can be considered to equally apply to AoL (Taras, 2005). The third, however, marks the key difference with AoL because of the distinct attention for assessment as a process directly related to learning. Kerr et al. (2009) claim AfL is therefor particularly well suited for assessing citizenship competences, as citizenship education aims to equip students for current and future citizenship. Though arguably the use and applicability of feedback are part of the learning process, its implications for an assessment instrument are to at least provide input to facilitate learning. We therefor come to the following attribute of assessment for citizenship learning:

- Assessment provides input for students and teachers to direct further learning.

2.3. Meaningful assessment of citizenship competences

Amnå and his colleagues (Amnå, 2012; Amnå, Ekström, Kerr, & Stattin, 2009) consider a number of challenges for research into