



Review

Review of the effects of citizenship education

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ABSTRACT

Based on the assumption that schools can play a significant role in the citizenship development of students, in most contemporary modern societies schools are obligated to provide citizenship education. However, the effectiveness of different forms of citizenship education is still unclear. From the empirical literature on citizenship over the period of 2003–2009 28 articles were selected on effects of citizenship education on students' citizenship. Our review showed the political domain of citizenship to be emphasized more than the social domain. An open and democratic classroom climate in which discussion and dialogue takes place appears to effectively promote the development of citizenship among secondary school students. Moreover, a formal curriculum that includes citizenship projects and courses also appears to be an effective type of citizenship education. The effects of citizenship education are discussed in relation to the quality of the studies reviewed.

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Contents

1. Introduction	159
1.1. The concept of citizenship	159
1.2. The concept of citizenship education	160
2. Method	161
2.1. Databases and search terms	161
2.2. Selection procedure, criteria, and outcomes	161
2.3. Analyses	162
2.3.1. Citizenship education	162
2.3.2. Social tasks, citizenship competences and behavior	162
2.3.3. Effects of independent on dependent variables	162
3. Results	162
3.1. Effects of the pedagogical climate	163
3.2. Effects of the curriculum in school	164
3.3. Effects of the curriculum out of school	167
3.4. Effects of extracurricular activities	168
4. Discussion and conclusion	169
4.1. Limitations of the study	169
4.2. Research design	169
4.3. Reflecting the broad conceptualization of citizenship	170
4.4. Schooling for citizenship?	170

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4.5. Implications for research and schooling	170
Appendix A	171
References	172

1. Introduction

The development of citizenship of young people and the role of education in this are current subjects of research as well as a lively societal discussion. The concept of citizenship in contemporary modern societies is primarily linked to the notion of democracy (Thayer-Bacon, 2008; Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). Democracy is interpreted as “a mode of associated living” (Dewey, 1966). Citizens are expected to be engaged in different contexts with different degrees of heterogeneity (e.g., the school, home, playground, community). “Good citizenship” requires people to behave socially but also be willing and able to reflect upon political and social issues and contribute critically to society (Westheimer, 2008). Generally speaking, citizenship is learned during the course of life through participation in different social practices (Biesta, Lawy, & Kelly, 2009). For young people, school is not only one of those practices, it is also an institution that explicitly aims at facilitating and optimizing the development of citizenship. Over the past two decades in almost all European countries (Euridyce, 2005) but also in Australia, Canada, and the US, compulsory citizenship education has been introduced into the school curriculum.

Imperative to the introduction of citizenship goals into the school curriculum is the assumption that the school can really contribute to the development of citizenship. However, the question remains whether this assumption can be established through empirical evidence. Which effects are reported of citizenship education on the development of students’ citizenship competences and behavior? Despite the increasing number of studies on citizenship education, a systematic review of the literature on this topic has yet to be published. Before presenting the methodology and outcomes of the current review we will elaborate upon the various conceptualizations of citizenship and citizenship education to frame the scientific discourse of the studies that are central to our review.

1.1. The concept of citizenship

In their review of contemporary discourses on citizenship, Knight Abowitz and Harnish (2006) have convincingly argued that in Western democracies multiple sets of meanings of citizenship occur in relation to varying discourses: from civic republican and liberal discourses to critical discourses (e.g., feminist, queer). Accordingly, citizenship is considered an essentially contested concept (Van Gunsteren, 1998). Nevertheless, Enslin (2000, cited in Knight Abowitz and Harnish (2006)) provides a generalized definition by stating that citizenship in a democracy (a) gives membership status to individuals within a political unit; (b) confers an identity on individuals; (c) constitutes a set of values usually interpreted as a commitment to the common good of a particular political unit; (d) involves practicing a degree of participation in the process of political life; and (e) entails acquisition of an understanding of laws, documents, structures, and processes of governance and the use of this knowledge. Depending upon the particular discourse, thus, the concept of citizenship is given specific form and content.

The form and content of the concept of citizenship particularly varies with respect to the question about the extent to which norms that are at issue for a democratic manner of living must be adopted by individual citizens. Westheimer and Kahne (2004), for example, distinguish the personally responsible citizen, the participatory citizen, and the social-justice citizen. The personally responsible citizen is one who acts responsibly in the community, helps those in need, works, and pays taxes. The participatory citizen is one who is actively involved in community organizations, helps organize community efforts to care for those in need, and knows how government agencies work. The social-justice citizen is one who critically assesses social, political, and economic structures, knows about social movements, detects and addresses domains of injustice, and tries to be fair and promote equal opportunities. Westheimer and Kahne actually plea for a conceptualization of citizenship that goes beyond “being nice”, “consideration of others”, “helping of others”, “caring for each other”, and so forth (cf. Leenders & Veugelers, 2006). In a democratic and multiform society, citizens must be prepared to make their own critical contributions (Wardekker, 2001). “Good citizenship” thus implies that citizens are willing and able to critically evaluate different perspectives, explore strategies for change, and reflect upon issues of justice, equality/inequality, and democratic engagement (Westheimer, 2008). A capacity to function in a socially accepted and responsible manner within a community is nevertheless, according to Westheimer, also part of “good citizenship”.

Beyond the conceptualization of citizenship largely in terms of a democratic political orientation, recent thinking has emphasized the notion of a “civil society” (Alexander, 2006) and the connections between citizens in terms of values and shared cultural meanings. As opposed to a classical political interpretation of citizenship with a focus on the state and the market economy, a conceptualization of citizenship in terms of civil society emphasizes social cohesion, the coexistence of citizens, and the personal development of individuals, norms, and values (cf. Oser & Veugelers, 2008). This *social* domain of citizenship is particularly important for the discourse on the citizenship of young people and their citizenship education. In a classical political interpretation of citizenship, youngsters are primarily seen as future citizens. As a consequence, citizenship

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