



Citizenship development of adolescents during the lower grades of secondary education



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ABSTRACT

The present study focuses on the development of citizenship competences of Dutch adolescents, including the political and social aspects as part of adolescents' daily lives. We followed 5070 adolescents aged 12–16 years across a three-year period in lower secondary education. The variance on school and student level was estimated and a three-level mixed-effects regression model was fit to analyze differences in citizenship development. The results indeed show development of citizenship competences during secondary school, but the observed patterns were not always positive. Students generally showed an increase in their citizenship knowledge, but a decline in their societal interest, prosocial ability and reflective thinking. Differences between groups of students could be explained by both schools and student characteristics. Especially girls and minority students developed the most citizenship competences. Understanding these differences is important for schools to improve their practices in ways that support the development of citizenship competences of various groups of students.

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Introduction

Fostering 'educated citizenship' is one of the main tasks of schools (Campbell, Levinson, & Hess, 2012). Citizenship of adolescents as an educational goal is usually conceptualized in terms of the specific knowledge, skills, attitudes and reflection which people need to adequately and responsibly participate in a democratic society (Geboers, Geijssel, Admiraal, & Ten Dam, 2012; Knight Abowitz & Harnish, 2006). These components can be seen to form part of a broader concept of 'competences' (Rychen & Salganik, 2003). From the literature it is known that citizenship competences and behaviors differ for groups of students with regard to age, academic ability, SES, gender and ethnic background (e.g. Schulz, Ainley, Fraillon, Kerr, & Losito, 2010; Torney-Purta, 2002). From an educational psychology point of view mainly the specific age-related phase of

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development of students is accentuated, whereas sociologists' interpretations focus on students' social background and social capital and the way in which schools affect inequality in learning among students (e.g. Van de Werfhorst & Mijs, 2010).

An important issue that is increasingly addressed in the literature concerns the developmental trajectories of citizenship competences over time (Cleaver, Ireland, Kerr, & Lopes, 2005; Eckstein, Noack, & Gniewosz, 2012; Keating, Kerr, Benton, Mundy, & Lopes, 2010; Zaff, Boyd, Li, Lerner, & Lerner, 2010). These longitudinal studies largely concern the political domain of adolescents' citizenship development. The present study aims at gaining insight into the development of citizenship competences including both political and social aspects, starting from the argument that in the daily lives of adolescents citizenship is learned in a variety of practices. 5070 Dutch students aged 12–16 years across a period of three years (2007–2010), i.e. the first three years of secondary education, was examined to study the development of a broad area of citizenship competences as well as the differences for groups of students based on background characteristics.

The development of citizenship competences

Although citizenship is essentially a contested concept, varying from communitarian to liberal and critical-emancipatory interpretations, it is primarily linked to the notion of democracy (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). Barber (1994) distinguishes between 'thin' and 'strong' democracies. A thin democracy stems from a perspective of individualistic rights and actually diminishes the role of citizens in democratic governance. A strong democracy requires the participation of all people in all forms of social and political life. In much of the empirical literature on young people's citizenship competences, the focus is almost exclusively on the political aspects (e.g. political participation and engagement, voting, democratic attitudes) and, as a consequence, mainly on future citizenship (Geboers et al., 2012; Lawy & Biesta, 2006). Emphasizing the importance of a strong and resilient democracy, we interpret citizenship as a capacity to function in a socially accepted, responsible manner within a community and a capacity to critically evaluate different perspectives, explore strategies for change, reflect upon (in) equality, and democratic engagement (Westheimer, 2008).

In daily life, children and adolescents participate in all kind of practices, both social and political by nature, that allow them to build up their citizenship competences. Schools specifically function as learning environments for citizenship, not only because school time is a structural part of young people's daily life, but in and around schools they also meet peers and become part of social endeavors and challenges, such as the importance of taking care for one another and the difficulty of building up one's personal identity in an interdependent environment. Also they will find themselves confronted with new forms and roles of authority, the meaning of the existence of different interests and perspectives, as well as means to deal with that (speak up for yourself, classroom voting for joint decisions etcetera). Moreover, education – if the pedagogical space of the school is used well – provides both additional knowledge and opportunity for reflection upon such participation in social and political practice (or lack of it). Thus, childhood and especially adolescence are essential periods for the acquisition, practice, development and expansion of social skills, attitudes and behavior and schools take role in this.

Several longitudinal studies focus on the developmental trajectories of students' citizenship competences during adolescence. In particular such aspects of citizenship as obeying and agreement with the law, equal rights, trust in the government, political engagement, civic participation and participation in voluntary or service activities are investigated. In the German study of Eckstein et al. (2012) longitudinal stability was found between grade 8 and 9 and between grade 9 and 10 on students' willingness to participate in politics. Also the study of Zaff et al. (2010) showed invariance over time of active and engaged citizenship (i.e., the civic duty, the civic skills, the neighborhood social connections and the civic participation) of U.S. high school students from 8th to 10th grade. In the English studies of Cleaver et al. (2005) and Keating et al. (2010), however, a 'dip' was found in the citizenship attitudes with less positive efficacy, participation and trust in the government of 14 and 15-year-olds.

The school as a place for citizenship practice

Experiencing social and political practices that adolescents encounter and the extent or quality of participation differs for groups according to background characteristics (such as age, gender, cognitive ability, home environment). So it seems obvious that the development of citizenship competences resulting from participation in and reflection on these practices might differ for groups of students as well. Such differences were indeed found, as mentioned above. In several studies differences between students appear not only to be related to their social background but also to school track (Eckstein et al., 2012; cf. Janmaat, Mostafa, & Hoskins, 2014). International research – mainly concerning the political domain of citizenship – shows that schools have an impact on students' citizenship competences (approximately 25% of the variance found; Schulz et al., 2010). To answer the question what schools can accomplish, researchers have mainly concentrated on educational programs and pedagogical climate. Stimulating a democratic classroom climate, nurturing mutual respect, and creating opportunities for students to learn and practice democracy are found to foster citizenship (Geboers et al., 2012).

In particular in the differentiated educational system of the Netherlands where students at the end of primary school are selected for admission to either prevocational education or general secondary education, also the influence of school track is a relevant factor as it has been found to correlate with different types of citizenship (see also Geboers, Geijssel, Admiraal, & Ten Dam, 2014).

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