Exploring Students' Voices on Citizenship

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Abstract

This empirical study explores the views of young Spanish students´ on citizenship. Our general purpose is to analyse students´ conceptions of what it means to be a good citizen and also their views about which are the different contexts and places where people learn to become citizens in our society. 40 Spanish students of Secondary Compulsory Educational Level, aged 14-15, were interviewed before the introduction of Citizenship Education as a new statutory subject into the school curriculum. The value of student voices is one of the key features that need to be taken into account in order to develop a more effective and successful implementation of citizenship education in schools that promotes an active citizenship among young people.

Introduction

The recent introduction of Citizenship Education as a new statutory subject in the Secondary School Curriculum in Spain sets among its prior objectives the need to prepare students to assume their duties responsibly, to know and exercise their rights within respect for others, to practice tolerance, cooperation and solidarity among people and groups, to practice the dialogue, to strengthen human rights as common values of a plural society, and to prepare for the exercise of democratic citizenship. This Educational Act (LOE 2/2006), established that among the primary and secondary educational objectives is the importance to prepare students for the active practice of citizenship and the respect to human rights.

The implementation of this new specific subject in the national school curriculum as "Education for Citizenship and Human Rights", has posed a real challenge for all the educational community both in primary and secondary educational levels. And at the same time, it has generated a very intensive debate in the core of the Spanish public opinion as well as in the academic and educational-scientific fields. Despite recent parallel initiatives that are taking place in a European context and internationally, there has been a strong opposition to teach this subject in some regions of Spain, especially among those most conservative sectors of the society. Indeed, its inclusion has been subject to criticism and rejection by some important and influential media, as well as by various important groups belonging to different political, social and religious sectors of the Spanish society.

The debate on citizenship education and citizenship has developed considerably during the last few years both in the national and international contexts. As some authors have argued recently, an issue that has received considerable attention is the recognition that

citizenship and citizenship education are contested concepts and sites of intense debate (Haste, 2004; Kymlicka, 2000, 2001; Kerr, 2005; Osler and Starkey, 2003; Yuval-Davies, 1999). Indeed, different approaches stress different characteristics of what it means to be a citizen. In this way, different discourses and meanings of citizenship have been shaped over time and informed distinct teaching practices (Abowitz and Harnish, 2006). From this perspective, citizenship is a shifting and contested concept linked to social, cultural and political changes that have been produced over time in different societies. Thus, there are different types of discourses of citizenship and what it means to be a citizen in one discourse has a different meaning in other. These competing and multiple citizenship discourses have shaped citizenship education in schools. Questions about what constitutes a good citizenship and proper citizenship education are being raised in current debates and formal discussions on these issues worldwide in the last decade (Abowitz and Harnish, 2006; Kymlicka, 2000, 2001).

Although this emerging interest in citizenship education has led to a large number of curriculum initiatives and research studies throughout the world, it can be said that there are a general lack of empirical research that explore teachers and students conceptions of citizenship issues. In the last years, some studies have explored teachers' conceptions and ideas about what it means to be a good citizen in different societies (Davies, Gregory and Riley, 1999), as well as their understandings of citizenship, citizenship education and their pedagogical practices (Evans, 2006; Kerr, 2005; Wilkins, 2003). Nevertheless, there are only few studies that analyse students´ views on what constitutes citizenship and citizenship education from a more qualitative perspective. Some of these studies have explored how young people understand citizenship and their relationships with wider society (Lister, Smith, Middleton and Cox, 2003; Osler and Starkey, 2003). In Spain, there are only few studies ranging from exploring students' conceptions of citizenship issues (Cabrera, Marín, Rodríguez and Espín, 2005), to analyse how young people learn to be citizens through very diverse experiences and practices of citizenship (Benedicto and Morán, 2003). Although there is a growing recognition among researchers that this is an important field of study, there is still an important lack of studies advocated to explore young people views on citizenship issues and how they learn to be active citizens in very distinct contexts and places.

This paper aims to contribute in that way by showing the results of a study carried out to explore how students understand citizenship before the introduction of citizenship education as a compulsory subject in the curriculum. The main objectives were: a) to explore their ideas about what it means to be a good citizen in our society, and b) to know which are the places or "sites" where people learn to be a citizen. In the first case, students were asked to describe in their own words their currently understanding about some important citizenship issues. This will allow us to gauge which are their conceptions of this new subject area. In the second case, we wanted to know if the contexts mentioned by them for learning to be a citizen were ranging from more formal contexts (schools) to more informal ones (family, peers, neighbourhood, etc). In a more general way, we wanted to know the range of student conceptions of citizenship that schools and teachers need to be aware of in order to introduce and promote the teaching and learning of this new statutory subject into the school curriculum.

Method

Participants

The participants were 40 (21 females and 19 males) Spanish students of Secondary Compulsory Educational Level, aged 14-15 years. All students who took part in this study were studying in Madrid and were chosen randomly from different public schools. Participants were selected for participation in the study only if their parents had given written permission in response to a letter sent home with each child by the school. In addition, students receiving written permission were required to give their assent to participate.

Procedure

A semi-structured interview specifically designed for this purpose has been conducted to a group of Secondary Compulsory Students from different public schools in Madrid. All students were interviewed in their schools. The interview took place before the introduction of Citizenship Education as a new statutory subject into the school curriculum. Students were asked the following questions: a) In your opinion, what means to be a good citizen? Could you define what does it mean to be a good citizen in this society? b) Where you learn to be a citizen? Which are the places or "sites" where people learn to be citizens?

Results

Definitions of being a good citizen

Responses from students who provide a definition of what it means to be a good citizen are presented in Table 1. As it can be observed in this table, those categories most often used by Spanish adolescents in their definitions are related to obeying and respecting the norms, rules, laws (60%), respecting others (53%), not committing crimes, not to steal, not to disrupt public order (38%), keeping the city clean (33%), care for environment (30%), getting along with people, treating others well (23%) and helping others (18%).

Table 1. Most frequent responses given by students in their definitions of being a good citizen.

Categories	Frequency of responses
Obeying/ respecting norms, rules, laws	24
Not committing crimes, not to steal, not to disrupt public order	15
Respecting rights	3
Right to think freely, to fight for your ideals	3
Respecting others	21
Getting along with people, treating others well	9
Peaceful resolution of conflicts	2
Keeping the city clean, throwing the trash	13
Looking after the environment	12
Recycling	4

Helping others	7
Doing things for the welfare of your community	2
Assisting /working in organizations	1
Being tolerant, not to discriminate against others because of their race or ethnic origin	3
Solidarity with people of other cultures, religions	1
Accepting people who come to your city	1

For the purpose of this analysis, responses from students who provide a definition of what it means to be a good citizenship have been grouped into the following five thematic categories or dimensions (see Fig. 1): duties and rights, living together, environmental awareness, social action and community involvement and inclusivity.

As can be seen from Figure 1, when speaking about what it means to be a good citizen, the most frequently dimensions of citizenship mentioned by students are related to issues such as duties and rights (37,1%), living together (26,6%) and environmental awareness (24%). Those aspects related to social action/community involvement (8,2%) and inclusivity (4,1%) are less frequently mentioned in their definitions.
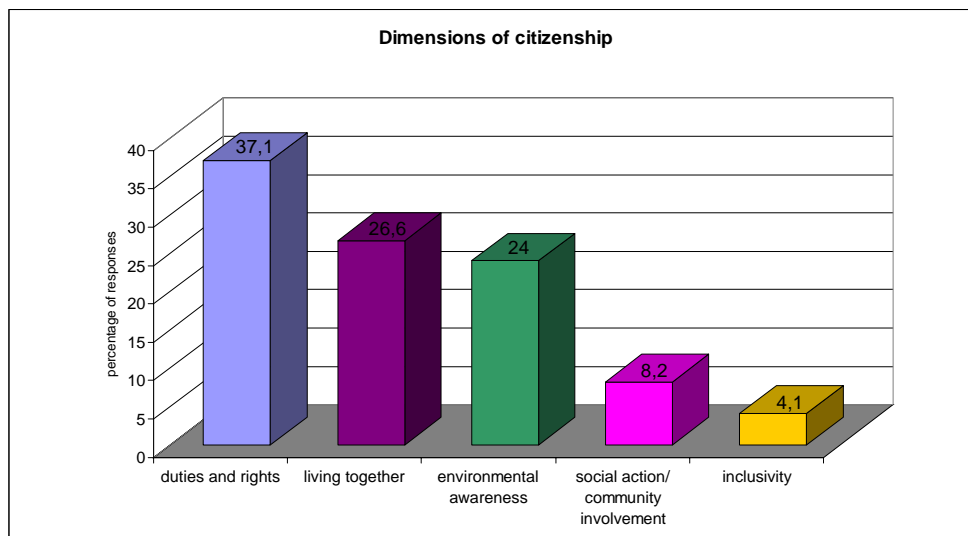
Figure 1. Dimensions of citizenship included in adolescents´ definitions

When analysing the different responses given within each dimension, it can be observed very interesting results. As can be seen in Figure 2, the thematic dimension labelled as *Duties and rights* was defined in a number of ways from obeying and respecting norms, rules and laws, respecting rights, to the right to think freely and to fight for your ideals. *Living together* was defined from respecting others, getting along with people, treating others well, to peaceful resolution of conflicts. *Environmental awareness* was defined from keeping the city clean, looking after the environment to recycling. *Social action and community involvement* was defined from helping others, doing things for the welfare of your community, to assisting and working in organizations. *Inclusion* was

defined from being tolerant, not to discriminate against others because of their race or ethnic background, solidarity with people from other cultures and religions, to accepting people who come to your city.

Similar results were found in a study carried out recently in Spain focused on exploring students' conceptions of citizenship issues (Cabrera, Marín, Rodríguez and Espín, 2005). In this study, students´ definitions of good citizen include the following dimensions: duties and responsibilities (35%) are considered one of the principal characteristics of being a good citizen, although most of them tend to stress the importance of having rights more than having duties in their definitions; The second dimension found is related to respecting others (31%), and respecting the environment (27%). With respect the other dimensions, it is interesting to stress here that only few students include an intercultural dimension related to the need of accepting other people coming from different countries and cultures (4%).

Comparing these results with other studies conducted with adolescents (Kerr, 2005; Kennedy, 2007) and adults (Davies, et al 1999), it can be observed that Spanish students' definitions of citizenship in our study are in some way similar to those found in other countries. If we see other international studies, like the Fjeldstad and Mikkelsen (2004) from Norway, they also find that students state that being a good citizen is related to participate in protecting the environment activities as the Spanish adolescents of our study say. The results of our study coincides in part with those found among Italian young people (Losito and D'Apice, 2004), since the majority of the Italian students interviewed answered in a negative way to the political ways of participation pointed out as related aspects to citizenship.

Interestingly, the need for citizens to understand and participate in the democratic process was not mentioned in students´ explanations about being a good citizen in our study. A similar result was obtained in a survey conducted in England (Kerr, 2005). In this case, students were presented with eleven common definitions of citizenship. When asked which descriptions best fitted their own definition of citizenship, students choose six items in a hierarchical way: belonging to your local, national or international community, people's responsibilities and obeying the law, making sure everyone is treated fairly, working together to make things better, people's rights (e.g., health, education, jobs, housing), being a good citizen. In contrast, those aspects related to voting, politics and government were the least often selected definition for citizenship. In the case of our study, these elements were not mentioned at all by Spanish students in their definitions.

Dimensions of citizenship
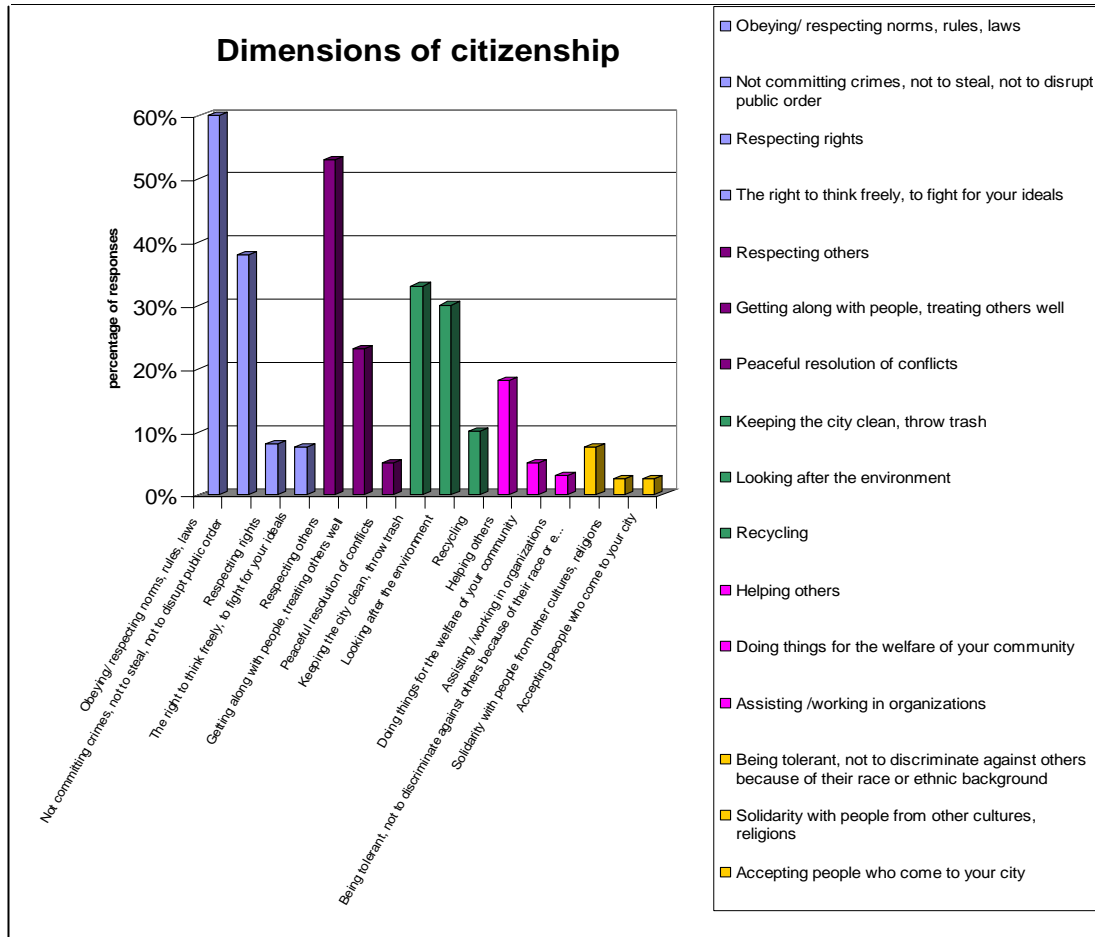
Figure 2. Most common student definitions of being a "good citizen"

Places and "sites" where people learn to be citizens

Responses from students who answered this question are showed in Figure 3. As can be seen from this Figure, when speaking about the different places or sites in which people learn to be citizens in our society, the most frequently contexts mentioned by students for this type of learning are the family (46%), the school (26%) and the street (20%). Some of them mentioned that people learn to be citizens with their friends (9%), while some students think that this type of learning takes place throughout life (9%) and everywhere (11%).

Different contexts for learning to be citizens
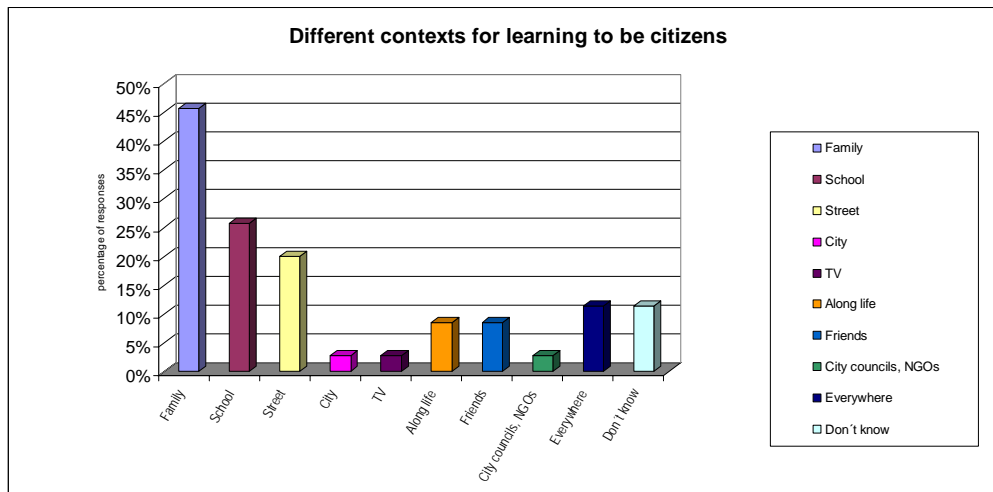
Figure 3. Different places or "sites" of citizenship education

It is interesting to stress here the fact that students think that one of the most important sites in which people learn to be a citizen is at school, although in Spain this subject had not yet begun to be taught as a compulsory subject in schools. This result supports the idea that citizenship education constitutes an implicit part of the curriculum in some schools, showing also the importance of citizenship for the life of schools as communities. With respect informal contexts for the learning and practice of citizenship, it is interesting to stress here that the only few students say that you can learn to be a citizen through the participation in different types of NGOs or in City Councils (3%). In our opinion, what this result may be showing is that there is a lack of connection between schools and the wider community, stressing the need to promote citizenship not only in the curriculum but also a more active citizenship through links with the wider community. It is throughout an increased student participation and involvement in the wider community that young people can become active citizens in multiple contexts within the local, national and global social networks and communities (Yates and Youniss, 1999; Younis et al, 2002).

Conclusions

The results of this study suggest that young people's views on the development of citizenship are composed of a wide range of dimensions, which focus primarily on issues relating to the duties and rights, competences for living together and environmental awareness. At the same time, they are influenced by different types of sites or contexts in which people learn and practise different forms of citizenship. Some of these influences include a wide range of "sites" for citizenship education (school, family, peer groups, community) and the various actors (teachers, parents, and friends) that take part in formal and informal education.

As these results have showed, students´ voices on citizenship support the idea that active citizenship is developed not only within the school community but also in other contexts outside the school. This means that in order to promote a more effective citizenship

education we must take into account that citizenship is not a process that can be realised exclusively at schools and that people learn to be citizens beyond the contexts of formal education (Kerr, 2003, 2005; Osler and Starkey, 2003; Yates and Youniss, 1999; Younis et al, 2002). One of the challenges for educators and researchers is to listen to students´ voices about citizenship issues and to try to provide a wide range of opportunities for students´ engagement and participation not only within the school community but also in the wider community outside the school.

Finally, the study reported here has provided some insights into the way students think about citizenship and how they construct meaning in relation to becoming citizens in this world. Our results support the idea of the importance of promoting active citizenship in spheres outside the school. As young people suggest, citizenship is not a process that can be realised exclusively in formal education contexts. Learning is taking place outside the school and schools need to be built on this learning in order to promote and encourage learners to engage in active citizenship within the school and the wider community at different levels, local, national or global.

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