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CiCe
Institute for Policy Studies in Education
London Metropolitan University
166 – 220 Holloway Road
London N7 8DB
UK

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Expected political participation: Differences between adolescents with and without behavioural problems

Kristi Kõiv
University of Tartu (Estonia)

Abstract

The four-domain structure for students' expected political activities has yielded valuable information about differences between the structure of adolescents' views on future political participation in terms of political obligations, political rights, voluntary activities and protest. The Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) self-reported version was completed for 325 adolescents for 11 to 16 years and prevalence rates of SDQ scales were calculated. A total of 26.8% of boys and girls were classified as abnormal in the total difficulties score and these pupils determined as a group of adolescents with difficulties, whereby the others contain the group of adolescents without problems. Measured with extended version of Expected Participation in Political Activities questionnaire two clear tendencies were revealed: (1) adolescents without behaviour problems tended to have higher scores in expected political participation in two areas – political rights and voluntary activities, compared with problematic adolescents, and (2) problematic adolescents tended to demonstrate higher level of political participation in the area of political protest activities.

Introduction

Young people's participant in citizenship education has been the subject of great deal of discussion including empirical studies (e.g. Menezes, 2003). As students, they are not yet citizens with the same rights and responsibilities as adults, but nevertheless are subject to socialization processes that prepare them for citizenship. From an educational perspective, marginalized sub-groups and minorities of any kind cannot participate in education (therefore also in society) on the basis of a single set of rules and procedures that fail to recognize difference. Inclusion through active participation is the core of European educational policy, especially in the area of citizenship education. There are limited data on young people's involvement in the full spectrum of civic and political activities, and that the general picture that emerges is one of apathy toward traditional politics (e.g. Youniss et al., 2002). Moreover, it is documented that there is a link between civic participation and adolescent behaviour problems (Vieno et al, 2007) indicating that adolescents who were involved in civic associations reported slightly less fighting, alcohol and tobacco use, but there is no research examining links between expected participation in political activities and adolescents behavioural problems.

This paper analyzes the potential effect of problematic behaviour on the pupils' expected political participation. It was assumed that the role of the behaviour problems of adolescents might influence the future political participation of pupils.

The aim of the paper is to identify differences between groups of adolescents with and without behavioural problems in expected political participation through an analysis of four aspects of citizenship: political obligations, political rights, voluntary activities and protest.

Method

Subjects

The sample included students in the fifth, sixth, and seventh grades from two randomly selected comprehensive schools in Estonia. Overall, there were 325 11-16 years old students: about half of them were boys (153 boys) and girls (172). The average age of this sample was 14.6 (SD = 0.8).

First instrument: Selection of subjects for subgroups

Behavioural problems were assessed using the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ; Goodman, 1997; Goodman, Meltzer, & Bailey, 1998). The SDQ is an internationally applied and validated screening questionnaire (SDQ, 2001). The self-reported version of the questionnaire for 11- to 16-year-old children was used to assess difficulties and strengths along the following dimensions: "emotional symptoms," "conduct problems," "hyperactivity/inattention," "peer-relationship problems," and a "prosocial scale." Each scale consists of five items; each rated on a three-point scale ("not true," "somewhat true," "certainly true"). Higher scores indicate more problems and/or more serious problems.

According to these cut-off points, children were classified as "normal," "borderline," or "abnormal" on each scale and on the total difficulties score. Total Difficulties Scale of the SDQ was used to find subjects for the group of problematic adolescents. 26.8% (N=87) of the boys and girls were classified as having abnormal behaviour as scored in the Total Difficulties Scale. Children with lower scores defined as normal or borderline by Goodman (Goodman, 2001) and were defined as adolescents without problems in the present study. Unproblematic study group of adolescents in the present study consists 73.2% (N=238) of the students.

Second instrument: Expected Participation in Political Activities questionnaire

Questionnaire included twelve items relating to a variety of expected political actions, where students were presented with the following question: "Listed below are several types of actions adults could take. When you are an adult, what do you expect you will do?" The questionnaire based on Expected Participation in Political Activities questionnaire Torney-Purta, Lehmann, Oswald and Schulz (2001, pp. 120–123) and a re-analysis of these items

(Kennedy, 2007) reflecting four broad conceptions of political actions by two questions constituted a scale “Political Obligations”, three items were included in the scale “Political Rights”, three items integrate “Voluntary Activities” and four form “Protest” scale.

The answers in 3-point scale were coded at 0 – “I will certainly not do this” to 2 – “I will certainly do this”.

Results

Table 1 shows the means of four basic categories in expected political action domains among pupils with and without problems. Using *t*-test, several differences between adolescents with behaviour problems and unproblematic study group were significant comparing basic categories of expected political participation.

Table 1. Basic categories of expected political activities in terms of political obligations, political rights, voluntary activities and protest (means) among students with and without problems and *t*- and *p*-values

Basic categories of expected political activities	Problematic	Control	<i>t</i> -value	<i>p</i> value
	Mean	Mean		
Political obligations	1.01	1.09	0.04	0.49
Political rights	0.20	0.40	-2.44	0.01
Voluntary activities	0.88	1.07	-1.90	0.05
Protest activities	0.58	0.32	4.66	0.00

Research results indicated that unproblematic adolescents were more positive than adolescents with problematic behaviour about political rights and voluntary activities as components of expected political participation.

Data also suggested that students with problems expected to participate as an adult more in political protest activities than did students without problematic behaviour.

There were no differences between two study groups in the attitudes toward political obligations as a one domain of structure of students’ expected political activities.

Discussion

There are limited data on young people’s involvement in the full spectrum of civic and political activities. In previous studies (Vieno et al, 2007) focus has been on links between youth civic participation and their behaviour problems (bullying, physical fighting, and alcohol and tobacco use), whereas this research studied links between youth political activities and their behaviour problems. The findings of the present work provided clear support for the hypothesis that the role of the behaviour problems might influence the youth future political participation. Research results show that problematic and unproblematic adolescents construct a quite different conception of expected political participation: students

with problems tended to evaluate more highly protest as a component of their future political participation and students without problems emphasised more political rights and voluntary activities.

Understandings the ways students see their future political participation both in terms of differences and similarities are important to discuss. The data of previous studies (Kennedy, 2007) show that students can discriminate between “political obligations” and “political rights” and that they are more likely to endorse the former than the latter. Present research suggests this result that political obligations are the most salient feature of young people’s thinking about their future active citizenship. Additionally, results indicated that problematic and unproblematic adolescents construct a quite similar conception of expectations to participate politically as adults in the area of political obligations.

The results reported here have significant implications for civic education. Education policy makers need to decide where the focus of civic education should be in relation to the active citizenship among different risky group adolescents. Given risky-group students weak endorsement of political rights and voluntarism - this may be an arena for development in school programmes just as political protest areas also need to be reinforced in the curriculum of citizenship education. This study reported here has provided some new insights into the ways different students think about their future political actions.

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