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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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Some conclusions from the IEA study for civic education curriculum renewal

Edgar Krull

University of Tartu (Estonia)

Introduction

Civic education has for many years been a focus for educators around the world and issues surrounding this have been studied by a number of international organisations. In 1971 the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) made its first study of civic education in the context of the Six-Subject Study and in the 1990s undertook a new and comprehensive civic education study in 28 countries (Tiana, 2001). This paper analyses briefly the main findings of the recent IEA survey and draws some conclusions for the development of civic education curricula in the European context.

About the IEA Study

The goal of the IEA Civic Education Study (CES) was to identify and examine, within a comparative framework, the ways in which young people were prepared to undertake their roles as citizens in democracies. All the factors contributing to the socialisation of students, in and out of school, were to be considered. At school level the focus of study was not limited to the formal curriculum in any particular course, but included several subject areas across the curriculum. In addition to the provision of textbooks and a curriculum, opportunities for discussion in the classroom and participation in the life of the school were considered to be important and were included in the analysis. At the societal level, the study focused on opportunities for civic participation outside the school, especially in the local community (Torney-Purta et al., 2001).

The IEA CES was designed in two Phases. Phase I started in 1994, and consisted of qualitative case studies that examined the contexts and meaning of civic education in different countries and provided the background for developing research instruments to be used with students and teachers. Phase II was a test of civic knowledge and a survey of civic attitudes and engagement, that was analysed statistically.

The aim of Phase I was to collect information on the circumstances, content and process of civic education of the modal grade of fourteen-year old students in participating countries. To do this the IEA summarised country experts' views of what these students should know about eighteen topics related to democratic institutions and citizenship. Topics included elections, individual rights, national identity, political participation, organisations that characterise civil society, the relation of economics to politics, and respect for ethnic and political diversity (Torney-Purta, Schwill & Amadeo, 1999).

Phase II of the Study was largely based on information collected from the national case studies. Three study domains of clustered topics were identified as 'core international domains' of questions (Torney-Purta, et al., 2001, pp. 29):

- *Democracy*: What does it mean, and what are its associated institutions and practices?

- *National Identity, Regional and International Relationships*: How can the sense of national identity or national loyalty among young people be described, and how does it relate to their orientation to other countries and to regional and international organisations?
- *Social Cohesion and Diversity*: What do issues of social cohesion and diversity mean to young people and to how they view discrimination?

Three further domains of issues concerning the media, economics and local issues were identified but in a less systematic way.

In addition to defining these content domains, five different categories of capabilities or of changes that might be expected to occur in students as results of their educational experiences were determined. These capabilities were measured through test and questionnaire items on: knowledge of content,

- *skills in interpreting* material with a civic or political content,
- *understanding of concepts* such as democracy and citizenship,
- students' *attitudes* (for example, feelings of trust in the government),
- students' current *participatory activity* relating to politics

(Torney-Purta, et al., 2001, pp. 29–30). The basis for the test and survey design formed a matrix with one dimension represented by three content domains and the other dimension by the five capability categories.

The test was pre-piloted in twenty countries in 1998, and then both the test and survey instrument were piloted with about 200 students in 25 countries. The final instruments, consisting of 38 knowledge and understanding test items and 136 survey items, were translated into the national languages of the participating countries.

The test and survey were carried in two hours sessions in class with nationally representative samples totalling nearly 90,000 students in 28 countries in 1999. Twenty-three European countries participated: Belgium (French), Bulgaria, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, England, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, the Russian Federation, the Slovak Republic, Slovenia, Sweden and Switzerland. The study also included a short survey of teachers and school heads covering the same content domains as the student instrument, but with additional questions on school context and instruction.

Main findings of the student survey

Civic knowledge and understanding

In this domain students were tested on their knowledge and understanding of democracy and its defining characteristics, institutions and practices of democracy, the rights and duties related to being a citizen, national identity, international relations, and social cohesion and diversity.

In general, differences in political knowledge and understanding of teenagers from different European countries were not very significant. The international mean was 100; the highest score of total civic knowledge (111) was produced in Poland and the lowest (92) in Latvia (Torney-Purta, et al., 2001, p. 63). However, there was a difference between countries in their relationship to civic knowledge and understanding. In the majority of

post-socialist countries – Poland, Slovak Republic, Slovenia, the Russian Federation, Bulgaria, and Romania – the civic knowledge mean scores were significantly higher than scores for the 'understanding' items. In the remaining countries, understanding was lower but not significantly, except in Estonia where the level of understanding was higher. In the countries with long democratic traditions like Finland, Germany, England, Sweden, and Switzerland the mean scores for the understanding items were significantly higher than scores for the 'knowledge' items; this was not the case in Cyprus, Italy, Norway, Denmark, and Belgium, and in two countries belonging to this group – Greece and Portugal – the level of understanding was significantly lower than that of knowledge.

Understanding concepts of democracy, citizenship, and of the responsibility of government

The results showed that 14-year old pupils have quite clear ideas of the general meaning of democracy when answering items asking 'what is good' and 'what is bad' about democracy. There was less consensus across countries on the concept of citizenship than about the concept of democracy.

In the majority of countries the youngsters considered obeying the law was the most important quality of good citizenship, and among conventional political activities they saw voting as the most important. In some countries students believed that both conventional and social movement activities are very important to adult citizenship and in some countries students believed that both activities are unimportant. Young people in the countries that have recently experienced major changes in their societies were more likely to support conventional than social movement citizenship activities for adults. The understanding of the 14-year olds about economy-related and society-related government responsibilities were close to that of adults in their respective countries. Generally, in post-socialist countries the students were more likely to endorse concepts of government that included responsibility for economic activities. These attitudes were especially strong in Bulgaria and Russian Federation but also in some other European countries like England, Finland, Portugal, and Sweden (Torney-Purta, et al., 2001, p. 88).

Attitudes toward the government, nation, and immigrants

The study showed that trust in government-related institutions was significantly above the international mean in countries which had a long democratic tradition, and below the mean in all the post-socialist countries with the exception of the Slovak Republic and in Portugal. The highest indices of trust were found in Denmark and Switzerland, where 85% and 76% of students trust the national government always or trust most of the time, and the lowest indices were in Slovenia, Bulgaria and the Russian Federation, where only 16, 29, and 30 percent of students expressed these levels of trust (Torney-Purta, et al., 2001, p. 97).

National attitudes were expressed as two factors in student answers: (1) protecting the country against outside influence and (2) positive attitudes towards one's nation. The latter factor involved feelings about the flag, pride in the country, and disinclination to live in another country. In general, students had very positive feelings about their countries: 45% of students 'strongly agree' with the positively worded items about love of the country and the flag, and approximately a further 40% 'agree' with these items. The large majority of students would not want to live permanently in another country, and 34% 'strongly agreed' and 52% 'agreed' with the statement 'this country should be proud of what it has achieved'. The highest degrees of national pride was shown in Cyprus, the

Czech Republic, Greece, Hungary and Poland, where the mean national score was over 11 points on the international scale (with a mean of 10 points). The lowest degree of national pride was found in Belgium with national mean 8.4.

In general, about 40% of respondents 'strongly agreed' and 50% 'agreed' that immigrants should have the right to have the same education as the indigenous population. Attitudes significantly below the international mean toward immigrants were uncovered in Bulgaria, Denmark, England, Estonia, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, the Slovak Republic, Slovenia and Switzerland. In all European countries surveyed except Portugal, female students had more positive attitudes toward immigrants than males (Torney-Purta, et al., 2001, p. 105–106).

Students' civic engagement and political activities

The study confirmed that teenagers' readiness for political activities was dependant on the political culture of their country. For example, 21% of Finnish, 37% of Estonian, 46% of Russian and 87% of Cypriot students would participate in a non-violent protest march. Also, the analysis of student responses revealed that there exists a relationship ($r=0.51$) between students' confidence in the effectiveness of participation at school and national level activities and the percentages of students' positive statements about having learned about the importance of voting in national and local elections. The international mean of students confirming that they have learned about the importance of voting was 55% but this index was very dependent on the country. For example, only 34% of Finnish students believed that they have learned about the importance of voting, but in Cyprus and Greece 72% of students expressed the same belief (Torney-Purta, et al., 2001, p 136).

Some findings in the teacher survey

The data from Phase 1 of the IEA study suggested that civic education is organised and taught in very different ways in the participating countries. In some countries it is linked to history; in others it is taught by teachers certified to teach the mother tongue; or it may actually be integrated into mother tongue instruction. Civic education in some countries is located in the subject of religious instruction, while in others it has been developed as Social Studies, drawing teachers from various social science backgrounds. In some cases civic education is conceptualised as an encompassing cross-curricular concern for the whole school. Four profiles were identified of teachers involved in civic education: teachers with a

- strong focus on history,
- strong combination of history and civic education, and
- no clear emphasis among subjects or disciplines, but differentiated into two types
 - with religion/ethics
 - without religion/ethics.

(Losito and Mintrop, 2001).

The majority of teachers admitted that their teaching emphasised the acquisition of knowledge, but recognised that this should not be the case. For example, Italian teachers reported that, on average, 82% of emphasis is placed on knowledge though only 2% should be placed on this aspect of teaching. Belgian teachers were most confident in their teaching, reporting that 24% of emphasis is placed on knowledge, and that this was what it should be.

Major differences were found in teachers' preferred methods of assessment for civic education. In many Eastern European countries multiple choice tests were more popular than in Western and Northern European countries, where teachers reported that they rely mostly on written essays. In Finland 91% of teachers rely on compositions, in Germany 81%, in Greece 72%, in Norway 84% and in Sweden 79% (Losito and Mintrop, 2001, p 213).

Teachers were also asked to rate which qualities of being a good citizen their students should learn. The respondents almost unanimously approved *knowing about the country's national history, importance of obedience to the law, protecting the environment, and promoting human rights*. The most controversial quality was willingness to serve in the military to defend one's country. This quality received the highest rating in Cyprus, with 98% teachers agreeing or strongly agreeing with this. Teachers in Greece (95%) and in many Eastern European countries – Bulgaria (89%) Czech Republic (81%), Estonia (92%), Latvia (82%), Lithuania (85%), Poland (84%), Romania (95%) the Russian Federation (94%) and the Slovak Republic (84%) – also gave high ratings to this. Of the other countries, this index was lowest in Belgium (16%) and highest in Finland (61%). Evidently the willingness to serve in the army reflects the political atmosphere in a particular country.

Finally, and based on the content analysis of teachers' views, Losito and Mintrop point to the fairly low level of concerns that civic education should prepare students for a life in a globalised world (2001, p 172). The same problem was identified in CiCe accounts of students' identity, that generally disregard what pupils know of or think about European integration or its future (Krull, 2001, p 233).

Conclusions for civic education

Levels of political knowledge and understanding of teenagers from European countries were broadly similar, but there are significant discrepancies in student levels of civic knowledge and understanding, depending on their country. In the majority of post-socialist countries, and in Greece and Portugal, the civic knowledge mean scores were significantly higher than the indices for understanding. Evidently, in these countries civic education produces declarative knowledge. Consequently, more attention should be paid to the development of understanding in their civic education curricula.

In understanding concepts of democracy and citizenship and of the responsibility of government, the biggest differences appeared in the case of two last notions. Young people in the post-socialist countries were more likely to adopt the notion of conventional citizenship (obeying the law and voting) than the notion of active citizenship embracing social participation of adults. Also, students in these countries were more likely to think that governments are responsible for economy-related activities. These attitudes were also strong in other European countries such as England, Finland and Sweden. If a country seeks to strengthen liberal or participatory democracy, civic education curricula need to give more attention to developing active citizenship and to understanding the role of government in a democratic state. This suggestion primarily concerns many of the post-socialist countries.

The study provided useful information on teenagers' attitudes towards national governments, nation, and immigrants' political rights. Trust in government-related institutions was significantly above the mean in countries with a long democratic

tradition, and below the mean in former socialist countries. In many countries national pride was higher than the international mean, but it was significantly below the mean in Belgium. The attitudes towards immigrant rights were lower than the international mean in Bulgaria, Denmark, England, Estonia, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, the Slovak Republic, Slovenia and Switzerland. It is clear that extremist and irrational attitudes towards the government do not favour constructive political activity and development of democracy. Consequently, more attention should be paid to teaching about the role of governmental institutions in civic education in those countries where teenagers' level of mistrust level is high. In countries where attitudes towards immigrants are very negative, issues of immigration, its role in the life of these countries and intercultural education require more attention in civic education.

The study suggests that teenagers' readiness to participate in political activities as adults depends significantly on their understanding of the importance of voting in local and national elections, but in many countries a high percentage of students did not recognise that they had learned about these issues at school.

The teacher survey revealed both differences and similarities in the organisation and teaching of civic education. Four profiles of civic education teachers were identified. In Western and Northern European countries, teachers more frequently practised written composition as an assessment method than testing with multiple choice items. The situation was the opposite in many former socialist countries, which might explain why the level of knowledge is higher than understanding of civic issues in these countries. Teachers from different countries were unanimous in describing the qualities of good citizenship that their student should learn, but they disagreed in their ratings of willingness to serve in the national defence forces as an index of good citizenship. This index reached a high level of 98% in Cyprus, was over 80% in former socialist countries and dropped to a low of 16% in Belgium. Certainly, there is no single answer to what the appropriate level should be but, of course, civic education should not empower extremist attitudes. The teacher survey revealed also that national curricula pay too little attention to the preparation of pupils for life in a globalised world: this suggests that both the European dimension and intercultural education should receive more attention in civic education curricula.

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