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## **Gender differences in the civic knowledge and attitudes of Finnish adolescents in the IEA civic education study**

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### **Background**

Civic education has seldom been evaluated in large-scale comparative educational studies. The International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) has conducted cross-national studies in this area twice, in 1971 and 1999, and Finland was involved in both of these studies.

The more recent IEA Civic Education Study was a long project, beginning with a qualitative exploration of the context of civic education in participating countries (Torney-Purta, Schwille and Amadeo, 1999). After developing and testing items, the empirical survey was administered in 1999 in 28 countries. Nearly 90,000 fourteen-year-olds participated in the study, which examined their civic knowledge, skills of interpreting political information, civic attitudes and willingness to be involved in civic activities. The Finnish sample in the international comparison consisted of about 3,000 fourteen-year-olds (Grade 8 of compulsory education). Similar data were collected for national purposes also from fifteen-year-olds (Grade 9), because the systematic teaching of social studies in the Finnish compulsory school begins as late as Grade 9.

The results of the international comparison were published a few years ago (Torney-Purta, Lehmann, Oswald and Schulz, 2001), accompanied by more detailed national reports (e.g. Brunell and Törmäkangas, 2002, for the Finnish data). The present paper reviews the gender-related aspects of the Finnish data, due to the relevance of gender as an indicator of educational and societal equity (Virta and Törmäkangas 2002).<sup>1</sup>

### **Civic knowledge and interpretative skills**

On the whole, there were no remarkable gender differences in civic knowledge in the Civic Education study, and gender is not directly related to the level of social knowledge or skills of the fourteen-year-olds. In the cognitive items, the international mean score was 100 (for males 99, females 100, standard deviation 20). In some earlier studies, e.g. IEA Civic Education Study 1971, males scored higher in the cognitive dimension.

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<sup>1</sup> The IEA Civic Education Study in Finland was administered by the University of Jyväskylä, Institution for Educational Research, and the national coordinator was Dr. Sakari Suutarinen, who has published a number of reports on the data. The national results were also published in the report edited by Viking Brunell and Kari Törmäkangas. The author of the present paper was member and chairman of the national steering group, and the present paper is partially based on her article about gender differences in the study, written together with Kari Törmäkangas.

(Torney, Oppenheim and Farnen, 1975; Torney-Purta *et al.*, 2001.) Finnish females succeeded slightly better than males.

In the international comparison, both the Finnish 14-year-old girls and the boys scored second highest after Polish students in knowledge items. However, their understanding was partly superficial. The 15-year-olds scored even higher, but they were not included in the international comparison. The scores of the Swedish-Finnish adolescents were very near the international average, and thus significantly weaker than those of the Finnish-language participants. (Suutarinen, 2002.)

The cognitive items were classified into knowledge and interpretative skills, although these categories overlapped. The knowledge items did not, however, focus on pure fact memorisation, but understanding and applying principles and concepts. The skills items required the pupil, for instance, to distinguish between facts and opinions and to interpret political cartoons.

**Table 1: Civic Knowledge and interpretative skills of the 14 and 15 year-old Finnish participants**

		Total score	Scores of knowledge items	Scores of skills items
14-year-olds (all)	females	110	107	111
	males	108	106	108
14-year old Finnish language	females	111	109	111
	males	109	108	109
14-year-old Swedish-language	females	101	99	104
	males	99	98	100
15-year-olds (all)	females	118	116	116
	males	115	114	112
15-year old Finnish language	females	119	117	117
	males	116	116	113
15-year-old Swedish-language	females	110	108	109
	males	103	104	101

Fourteen-year-olds succeeded slightly better in skills items than in knowledge items, while fifteen-year-olds scored high in both (Table 1). This may be explained by the systematic instruction of civics in Grade 9. Females scored higher than males in both dimensions in both age groups. In this data, females understood political concepts better, and for instance the difference between fact and opinion. It is difficult to explain why the Swedish minority students had weaker scores in both categories.

Although successful in the international comparison of the cognitive items, the Finnish respondents had little trust in their own knowledge on society. Notwithstanding the results referred to above, males and females differed in the self-evaluation of their cognition (Table 2). Only 8% of the Finnish girls agreed with the item 'I know more about politics than most of my age mates', and they also obviously underestimated their understanding of political issues. The self-estimations of the female students improved a little in the older group, but the difference with the males remained.

**Table 2: Self-evaluation of civic knowledge and interest in politics in the Finnish data (percentages of answers 'strongly agree' and 'agree')**

	% of 14-year-olds			% of 15-year-olds		
	all	girls	boys	all	girls	boys
I know more about politics than most others of my age	18	8	30	20	10	30
When we discuss political issues, I usually have something to say	38	35	41	41	39	42
I understand most political issues easily	37	26	48	44	31	53
I am interested in politics	21	17	26	26	21	28

In the item 'I am interested in politics', a significantly larger proportion of 14-year-old Finnish boys (26%) chose the alternative 'agree' or 'strongly agree' than of the girls (17%). In the international comparison, the Finnish 14-year-olds had the weakest interest in politics, and the Finnish girls were the only group in which this percentage was below 20 (Suutarinen, 2002). In the 15-year-old age group, the basic difference between boys and girls remained, although the level of interest was slightly higher. It is, however, not quite clear what the respondents have understood by the concept politics. This discrepancy between high knowledge scores and remarkable disinterest was quite exceptional compared with other nationalities.

### **Attitudes towards government-related institutions and own nation**

In the international data, 14-years-olds had relatively strong confidence in government institutions, such as the national government, national parliament, local government, courts and police. The scores of the Finnish 14-year-olds were very near the international mean score, which suggests that this confidence has become stronger, in comparison with some previous research (Torney-Purta *et al.*, 2001; Suutarinen, 2002). In most countries (23/28), there were no significant differences in boys' and girls' confidence in the government institutions of their countries, which was also the case in Finland.

Adolescents' attitudes towards their own country were examined with items such as 'The flag of this country is important to me', 'I have great love for this country', 'I would prefer to live permanently in another country'. Some of the items were very affective, while some were more related to the economic or cultural situation in the country. In the international data, there were no clear-cut gender-related trends, and in 18 countries there were no significant differences in the attitude scores between males and females. In only nine countries did males express significantly stronger patriotism than girls (Suutarinen, 2002).

In the Finnish data, both the 14- and the 15-year-olds had supportive attitudes towards their country, scoring above the international mean score, and the males expressed clearly stronger patriotism than females, which was more evident among the Finnish-speaking than Swedish-speaking males. The Finnish boys belonged to those who were most attached to their country, while the girls were more ready to accept the item 'I

could live in some other country'. On the whole, the Swedish minority students expressed weaker commitment to Finland than Finnish-speaking students, and Finns had more patriotic attitudes than for instance the other Nordic participants.

### **Attitudes towards women's political rights and immigrants**

The research also included questions about gender equality, for instance about women's participation in politics, work, and administration. In general, the males were fairly supportive of women's right, although they expressed more negative attitudes in this respect than the females. In the Finnish data, the females were very determined about women's rights, but the males had attitude scores near to the international mean score, and the attitudes of the 14- and 15-year-olds were approximately similar.

Finnish males were more against the equality of women and men than Swedish, Danish, or Norwegian boys. Most negative in this respect were males from Eastern European countries; in these countries the females did not express strong support for women's rights either. Table 3 describes in more detail what Finnish adolescents thought about women's rights to participate in politics, government and work.

In all items, the males were less willing to accept women's equal rights to participate, and the figures of the 14- and 15-year-olds were very similar. It is remarkable that the older group had even harder attitudes. Although almost 90% agreed or strongly agreed with items related to similar wages and political participation, almost a fourth of males were ready to accept the idea that men are more justified in having jobs when there are not enough jobs for all, and about a third believed that men are more competent leaders than women.

Adolescents' attitudes towards immigrants were examined with items related to migrants' rights to maintain their way of living, their language, and their right to vote and receive education. In almost all of countries, males had more negative attitudes than females, and the Finnish males, irrespective of the age or language groups, clearly had more negative attitudes than females (Suutarinen, 2002). The Finnish females had attitudes corresponding to the international mean score, while the Finnish males shared the most negative ones in the data, together with the males from Switzerland, Germany, Denmark and Slovenia.

### **Civic engagement in schools and organisations**

Schools as social institutions can with their educational practices have influence on students' civic attitudes. The Civic Education study also included items about the social climate in schools and classrooms, the scope for students' engagement and open discussion, and also of their own interest in participating in decision-making, either directly or through student representatives.

**Table 3: Attitudes toward Women's Political Rights in the Finnish Data (percentages of those who chose alternatives 'strongly agree' and 'agree')**

	of 14-year-old Finns (in %)			of 15-year-old Finns (in %)		
	All	girls	boys	All	girls	boys
Women should run for public office and take part in the government just as men do.	93	97	88	91	97	84
Women should have the same rights as men in every way.	96	98	93	95	99	90
Women should stay out of politics.	8	2	15	8	1	15
When jobs are scarce, men have more right to a job than women.	14	5	24	14	4	24
Men and women should get equal pay when they are in the same jobs.	94	98	92	92	98	87
Men are better qualified to be political leaders than women.	19	5	34	19	3	35

In all 28 countries, female respondents trusted more than males in their opportunities to have influence in schools, and in about a half (16/28) the difference was significant. The females also considered more often than the males that the school climate was open for discussion, and in 23 countries this difference was significant. This was also the case in the Finnish data. Finnish students trusted relatively little in their possibilities of participation and exercising influence in schools.

In all countries participation in political youth organisations was on a rather low level. The Finns were rather passive also, for instance, in school councils, although this may reflect the nature of the school culture as much as students' passivity. Gender differences were visible in this question, as the females were more actively involved in various activities (such as editing school newspapers, student mobility programmes, charity organisations), while males were more often involved in sports and ICT clubs.

Students were also asked about their intention to participate in civic activities as adults. Students in general very often agreed about the importance of voting, but had greater interest in activities not related to parties or electoral politics, such as collecting money for a social cause or charity, or environmental or community betterment organisations. Only a minority reported that they would be involved in illegal protest activities, such as spray-painting houses or occupying buildings. In the international data, the Finns had the weakest intentions to participate in non-conventional or illegal forms of civic activity. The Finnish girls were more ready to collect money, participate in voluntary organisations or collect signatures, while the boys anticipated more often that they might participate in more direct or illegal protest activities. On the whole, their willingness to engage in illegal activities was rather minimal, but there was a significant gender-related difference, as in other countries for this question.

## Discussion

The results of the IEA Civic Education Study in Finland were very similar for male and female participants in the cognitive dimension, although slightly better for girls. The results differ from those of PISA literacy research, where the difference between the

scores of Finnish females and males was one of the largest in the whole study (Linnakylä, Kupari and Reinikainen, 2001). The results of PISA research in 2001 showed that Finnish adolescents, especially girls, rank among the top readers by international comparison, but also that Finnish boys had better literacy scores than the boys of other nationalities. (OECD, 2000; Välijärvi *et al.*, 2002). However, civic knowledge scores resemble more the results of the PISA research on mathematical and scientific knowledge, where the gender differences were minimal. In the literacy test, the females gained better scores than the males especially in items in which they had to produce open-ended written answers, which was obviously due to their better writing skills, but in multiple-choice items the gender differences were smaller. Also the Civic Education Study consisted of structured items, which may partly explain the similarity of the scores.

What is worth consideration is the weak interest in politics in the whole Finnish data, and especially among the females. The items related to civic attitudes suggest among other things that Finnish students do not have great interest in active participation, and that they do not feel that they have opportunities to influence school life. (Torney-Purta *et al.*, 2001; Suutarinen, 2002). These results are supported by a recent international comparison of the quality of school life, which indicated that Finnish students, especially males, felt that the atmosphere in schools was not good. Their attitudes towards school were more negative than for example those of Scandinavian and Western European adolescents, resembling more the experience of Eastern European and Russian pupils (Linnakylä, 1996).

In the Civic Education Study, the girls were more interested in activities related to or arranged by school, and they also had more positive attitudes towards school – but not very strong confidence in their own understanding of politics. The boys had on the one hand more patriotic attitudes, and on the other hand more intolerant attitudes towards the rights of immigrants, and of women. Although it may be difficult to give recommendations for civic education on the basis of these results, the gender-related differences in the attitudes raise the question of the hidden messages carried by the school. Is the school perhaps reproducing the old structures and attitudes, or is it possible to change them by education? Although gender-differentiated citizenship education might emphasise and strengthen the existing differences, it would be important to support the self-confidence of the girls and the tolerant attitudes of all, especially male students.

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