



This paper is taken from

*Teaching Citizenship  
Proceedings of the seventh Conference of the  
Children's Identity and Citizenship in Europe  
Thematic Network*

London: CiCe 2005

edited by Alistair Ross, published in London by CiCe, ISBN 1 85377 389 1

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**Oscarsson, V. (2005) *Leamers' democratic competence*, in Ross, A. (ed) Teaching Citizenship. London: CiCe, pp 97-102.**

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This paper does not necessarily represent the views of the CiCe Network.



This project has been funded with support from the European Commission. This publication reflects the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained herein.

#### **Acknowledgements:**

This is taken from the book that is a collection of papers given at the annual CiCe Conference indicated. The CiCe Steering Group and the editor would like to thank

- All those who contributed to the Conference
- Cass Mitchell-Riddle, head of the CiCe Coordination Unit at the time of the conference, and for the initial stages of editing this book
- Lindsay Melling and Gitesh Gohel of IPSE, London Metropolitan University
- London Metropolitan University, for financial and other support for the programme, conference and publication
- The SOCRATES programme and the personnel of the Department of Education and Culture of the European Commission for their support and encouragement.

## Learners' democratic competence

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### Introduction

The main goals for Swedish schools are to create conditions in which learners can become good citizens with democratic values. They should also gain knowledge of democratic procedures, democratic principles, and the right to influence, be responsible for and participate in life in school (Skolverket 2000).

This paper presents some results of the National Evaluation of the Swedish Compulsory School 2003 (NU 03). The evaluation in grade 9 was of almost 6,800 learners and 1,600 teachers in 120 schools. The main aim of the evaluation was to find out to the extent to which the goals of the steering documents had been attained. A secondary aim was to relate these results to the national evaluation of 1992, to find if learners' level of knowledge had improved or not (Skolverket 2004, Oscarsson & Svingby 2005).

One of the most comprehensive questionnaires in the evaluation of the social sciences was called '*Democracy in theory and practice*'. About 2,200 learners answered questions about their knowledge and attitudes towards democracy, political institutions and democratic values, as well as issues related to their classroom atmosphere and the possibilities they had to influence the teaching and learning processes (Oscarsson, V. 2005).

### *Theoretical framework*

A Swedish government commission on democracy in 2000 stated that democracy can be seen as a form of decision-making and as a way of life. The representative democratic system is the basic framework, but to deepen the Swedish form of representative democracy, the commission stressed the concept of 'dynamic citizenship'. Everyone should have the opportunities to participate and to have influence, as well as to practise participatory processes. 'Dynamic citizenship' also implied deliberative democracy, which means a democratic dialogue based on the premise that everyone's knowledge, experiences and opinions are important for good decisions in free, open and equal dialogue at all official society arenas (SOU 2000:1).

The theoretical base for the items in the questionnaire are found in the concept of dynamic citizenship, which are in turn based on different theories or models of democracy (Dahl, 1989, Held 1997, Englund 1999):

- the representative democratic model, which focus on citizens' knowledge and awareness about politics and democratic processes;
- the participatory democratic model, which emphasises citizens' involvement in politics and active participation; and
- theories based on democracy as deliberation and communication.

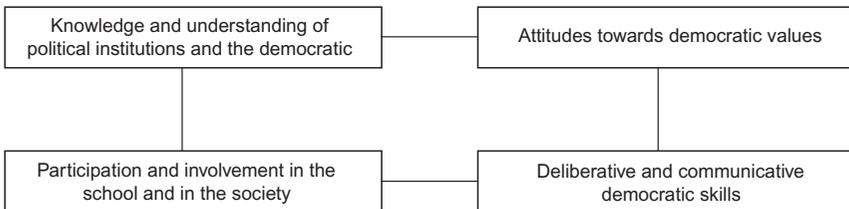
The steering documents for the compulsory Swedish school system were analysed in relation to these different democratic models. The national Swedish curriculum, as well as the syllabi for the social sciences, stipulates that learners should have knowledge of

democratic principles and political processes. The school must use democratic working methods and the learners should have an influence in the school. The school should prepare learners for active participation in civic life. A deliberate dialogue in the school – with an atmosphere of open communication as well as of mutual respect between teachers and learners – is considered to be a very important means for the development of democratic citizens (Skolverket 2000).

The analytic framework

The analysis of the steering documents in relation to these three different democratic models became the analytic framework for the concept of ‘learners’ democratic competency’.

Learners’ democratic competence –an analytic framework of different democratic dimensions



Frequencies were calculated for learners on the different variables, and for different groups of learners according to sex, socio-economic background and according to learners’ relationship to teachers. The mutual interrelations between the different democratic perspectives were analysed.

## Results

### *Knowledge*

Learners’ knowledge about political institutions, political processes and basic democratic principles do not reach the standard when related to the goals in the steering documents.

Most learners lack knowledge of basic facts about the Swedish election system. On the open-ended question ‘We have elections in Sweden every fourth year when the people choose representatives to... Well, to what?’

Only 40 percent answered correctly and eight out of ten learners did not mention that there are elections to the local and regional levels.

Fourteen questions on political institutions, agents and political processes were given with three alternatives, ‘correct’, ‘incorrect’, ‘I do not know’. Examples of this type of questions were ‘Sweden is member of the European Union’, ‘Can the parliament dismiss the prime minister?’ There are 349 members in the Swedish parliament’, ‘Parliament takes decision on new laws’.

About 50 percent of the learners gave correct answers to 7 of the 14 questions. Boys had a slightly higher frequency of correct answers to this type of simple factual question. Girls scored higher on interpretation items, for example on our question ‘how to interpret a

political message'. These gender differences are in line with other research results (Svingby 1997, Oscarsson V., 2005).

It should be stressed that the learners in this study did not have a lower level of knowledge about political institutions, processes and actors than the Swedish electoral as a whole. Several items in the questionnaire correspond to items given to a representative sample of Swedish voters. The frequencies of correct and incorrect answers are almost the same (low) level (Holmberg, & Oscarsson, H., 2004). However, this comparison is not quite fair: the school learners had specific targets to attain about knowledge of politics, whilst the electorate did not.

#### *What is important?*

The low level of factual knowledge about politics is not acceptable or up to standard when related to the goals and objectives in the documents that guide schools. However, is this low level essentially related to the function of a representative democratic system?

Some democratic theorists argue that it is very important that citizens have a sound knowledge of basic political facts, as a necessary prerequisite for a well-functioning democratic system (Pettersson 1998). Others argue that it is more important that voters in a country like Sweden can locate the parties and the political candidates on an ideological scale. Such awareness helps the voters locate themselves in the political landscape and makes it possible for them to form opinions and have standpoints on controversial political issues. Thus, if the citizens have well functioning ideological model, like the left-right dimension in Swedish politics, a democratic system will be solid and well functioning (Downs, 1957, Oscarsson, H., 1998).

We asked the learners to locate the seven political parties in the Swedish parliament on a left-right scale. The outcome was that most were able to locate the different political parties on the left-right ideological scale.

Thus, the learners' perceptions of the Swedish party system are quite clear. Furthermore, two of three learners are also well aware of the basic principles that underpin a democratic society. These results must also be considered when we judge the learners' knowledge and understanding of politics and democracy.

#### *Participation and influence*

There were several items in the questionnaire which were supposed to measure the learners' possibility to influence what was to be learnt, how to work, and the degree they considered that they could influence the amount and content of tests, and their textbooks.

The results are quite clear. A slight majority feel they can influence the teaching methods in the social science subjects. A majority consider they have little, or very little, influence on subject content, textbooks and tests. There is a huge gap between the curriculum and syllabi goals and the realities of school when it comes to learners' possibilities to influence and to practise participatory processes in the school.

On the other hand, our results show that the learners are potential active participatory democratic citizens. They were asked about their current and future activities in society to influence on civic issues. Almost one third already had experience of demonstrations, and a fifth had experiences in addressing policy decision makers, collecting money for solidarity and other interest groups. Far more of them stated that they intended to take part

in such activities in the future, as means to influence civic issues. However, only about 10 to 15 percent said they would become members of a political party or use illegal protest actions as ways to get influence.

One interesting finding from our study is that there is not any significant correlation between the possibility of influencing school affairs and the perceived possibility of having an influence on civic affairs. A common conception is that if students have possibilities to influence school they will thus be trained to be active and participative citizens. Our data does not confirm this common idea (Oscarsson, V., 2005).

Students' interest in politics seems to be of more importance in the political socialisation processes. We asked them about their interest in politics. The results show that they are quite interested in politics, and that their interest is at least as much as somewhat older age groups. Our data indicates that political engagement among 15 to 16 year old students has increased during the last 10 years (Holmberg & Oscarsson H., 2004).

A learners' interest in politics promotes his or her democratic competence. The stronger the political interest, the higher scores on our measures on political knowledge and on the different variables which measure participation and influence on school issues and in the society. There is also a positive correlation between political interest and attitudes towards democratic principles and values. The stronger the political interest, the stronger are positive attitudes towards democracy.

#### *Attitudes towards democratic values*

When the learners respond to the open question 'How would you like to describe democracy', about 70 percent answered 'the people decide' or 'the people rule'. This is a correct answer in some sense and reflects what usually is said in textbooks.

There were very few answers that indicated a deeper understanding of the concept democracy, and less than 25 percent referred to democratic values such as equal rights, freedom of expression, religion and opinion, the right to form political parties, free and fair elections and the majority principle.

When learners were asked to agree or disagree with statements on basic democratic values, such as the right for persons with right or left wing extreme opinions to freely express their opinions, between 30-40 percent would like to impose restrictions on citizens' constitutional civil rights.

Learners were also given several questions about the degree to which they agreed on fundamental democratic values such as the inviolability of human life, equality between women and men, and solidarity with the weak and vulnerable. The results show a very broad gap between the goals of the steering documents and learners' opinions and attitudes. About 30 percent considered that capital punishment should be allowed. Almost 40 percent would not allow Muslims to build mosques, and 30 percent agree with the statement that Swedish immigrant citizens should be expelled if they had committed crimes. Girls had far more positive attitudes towards democratic values than boys.

Our data clearly indicates that the mission for schools to impart basic democratic values is a tremendous challenge.

*The deliberative democratic dimension*

The fourth dimension in our analytic framework of learners' democratic competence was learners' possibilities of developing democratic skills. The steering documents stress the importance of learners developing the ability to put forward arguments and express their own views in an open and mutual respectful atmosphere.

Englund (2003) considers that deliberate dialogue in the classroom, with many opportunities for students to discuss, argue and to talk about different problems and points of view, as the most important tool to develop democratic competences.

Several questions were aimed at measuring the deliberative democratic dimension. We asked learners about their perceptions of different aspect of the classroom climate, such as the degree to which the teacher assisted and supported them, as well as listened to their opinions and took them into consideration. Furthermore, we asked to what degree the teacher respected the students' standpoints and to what degree the classroom climate was open for different opinions and perspectives.

Statistical analysis shows that six of the questions in this field form a deliberative dimension, which we called 'classroom climate'. About 75 percent consider their classroom climate to be good or very good. The teacher's role in establishing the positive classroom climate is very important, according to the learners' views.

*How to promote the learners' democratic competence?*

Our analyses of the learners' democratic competence on these four different democratic dimensions show there are severe shortcomings in achieving the mission of the school to impart fundamental democratic values, and in giving opportunities for learners to influence their own learning. The most alarming result is that teaching, poorly promotes knowledge of democratic and political processes.

Yet there is one important dimension of the concept 'learners' democratic competence' that is close to the goals and visions in the steering documents. This is the deliberative dimension of democracy, in this study labelled as 'classroom climate'.

Our data clearly demonstrates the importance of a positive classroom climate for promoting the other aspect of learners' democratic competence. There is a strong correlation between the perceived classroom climate and knowledge about politics and democracy. There is also a stronger positive correlation between classroom climate and the participation and 'influence' variables, as well as between classroom climate and democratic values. Thus, deliberative dialogue at the classroom level seems to be a crucial tool to promote and develop students' democratic competence.

A further important element in creating the preconditions for learners to acquire and develop their democratic competence is the promotion and encouragement of learners' interest in politics and civic affairs. Such an interest will have positive effects on all four dimensions of learners' democratic competence, as there are significant positive correlations between political interest and the different aspects of democracy. However, we have found that the strongest correlation is between political interest and positive attitudes towards democratic basic principles.

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