



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

Without explicit authorisation from CiCe (the copyright holder)

- only a single copy may be made by any individual or institution for the purposes of private study only
- multiple copies may be made only by
  - members of the CiCe Thematic Network Project or CiCe Association, or
  - a official of the European Commission
  - a member of the European parliament

If this paper is quoted or referred to it must always be acknowledged as

***Latzaki, M., Chelms, S. (2005) The Notion of Political Representation in Primary School Children and Teaching Implications, in Ross, A. (ed) Teaching Citizenship. London: CiCe, pp 123-132.***

© CiCe 2005

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

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.

# The Notion of Political Representation in Primary School Children and Teaching Implications

*Maria Latzaki and Sarantis Chelmis, Faculty of Primary Education, Ethniko kai Kapodestriako Panepistimio Athinon (Greece)*

This paper explores the implications for teaching that arise from the concept of political representation, a fundamental political concept of modern democracies. The first part of the paper places the notion of representation within the larger framework of democratic institutions, and defines interconnections with other major political concepts of democracy (such as political equality, dialogue, justice, and decision making). The second part examines the way primary school children realise the idea of representation, the criteria they employ in electing representatives and their idea of the ideal representative. The paper's findings indicate the emphasis primary school children place on particular characteristics in a candidate, such as honesty, respect for others, school achievement, rule following, social or ethnic background and interpersonal communication abilities. Finally, an interdisciplinary teaching programme is presented for fostering a responsible stance in electing representatives. The programme draws on various subjects such as Byzantine history, language, social and political education and mathematics, and uses a variety of teaching methods such as role play, group discussion, drama and counselling.

## Introduction

In every social group the presence of a leader seems necessary. Even from a very young age children tend to select a leader who will be responsible for the smooth operation of their group. The leader's role is multiple: he or she has to try to keep group cohesion, settle inter-group disagreements and conflicts, allocate roles and responsibilities, establish rules and represent the group with other groups or higher authority (Maloukou *et. al*, 2002).

The way a group appoints a leader differs according to the group's goals, to its synthesis, to its members' relationships and to the broader political socialisation of group members. For example, members of a sport team choose their leader using the criterion of efficacy in the sport, whilst in a family, parents are considered natural leaders. Leadership in authoritarian regimes is hereditary or elitist, while in democracy leaders are appointed through voting process.

Political leadership in a democracy, the focus of the present study, is strongly tied to the voting behaviour of an electorate that, ideally, is both well informed (Krinks, 1999) and has critical thinking skills and decision-making abilities. J S Mill maintained that 'an ignorant electorate would be bound to choose unsuitable representatives and that under such circumstances democracy would collapse or revert to some less desirable and less demanding form of government' (Wringe, 1984:82).

History shows the importance of critical thinking and decision-making abilities of the electorate for the survival of the Athenian democracy in 5th century BC. Since all adult town members were expected to participate in political processes, through discussing and passing laws, appointing governors and drawing lots to appoint judges, the guarantee of social and political stability and welfare was citizen's experience in dealing with the political matters of town. This was clear to the first citizen of Athens, Pericles, who

praised the Athenian democratic system for being clear of dogmatism in the election of governmental officials:

We have a form of government that does not try to copy laws of other states, but, contrary to that, we are an exemplar for the others. And [this form of government] is called democracy because it is not based upon the will of any minority, but on the will of the majority. And, according to the law, everyone has equal rights within his private life, though, as far as the election of the persons that are to undertake a town's government department is concerned, we choose someone according to the degree of his ability in a certain domain, not because he belongs to the upper social class and he is not banned from offering a social service in case he is poor or comes from a lower social class... (Thucydides, *Epitaph*, 431 AD).

Within democratic settings, which became more and more complex, basic knowledge of reading, writing, mathematics and music soon proved inadequate. Involvement in public life needed much more than this; it needed a broader education and an enhanced ability to think, to talk, to be assertive and take public decisions and to be aware and responsible of the possible consequences of those decisions (Zeller and Nestle, 1980; Guthrie, 1987). Sophists were the first to undertake the role of citizenship educators in ancient times. Visiting Greek cities around Mediterranean they taught political virtue, rejecting the old doctrine which considered virtue as the property of nobility, passed upon father to son (Zeller and Nestle, 1980: 99; Guthrie, 1989). Socrates expanded the scope of citizenship education by introducing the concept of critical thinking, a middle way between dogmatic thinking and scepticism characterised by a questioning stance, a faith in the powers of reason and creativity. Similarly, Dewey placed intelligence at the core of democratic functioning and supported the view that intelligence was not a quality only enjoyed by a caste thought to be superior to other members of society (Wraga, 1998).

The important relationship between citizenship education and democracy is stressed by Wringe who notes:

Democracies, by contrast [to undemocratic regimes], can only truly be so described if their citizens have some measure of education. This is almost as fundamental a requirement as the existence of some system such as voting whereby citizens express their will. For the point of voting is not marking a paper or raising the hand, but the fact that the citizen makes a choice. But it is difficult to see how citizens can be said to choose between either policies or rulers – as opposed to simply plumping for one or the other – without possessing some canons of judgment, some information and some means of assessing its reliability or relevance (Wringe, 1984:80).

The question that arises is what are these canons of judgment that lead to wise decision-making, how they are developed over time, and to what degree is a person free of institutional or social barriers that interfere with the processes of judgment (Rawls, 2001).

This paper plays particular attention to primary school children, trying to identify the criteria young children use in selecting a leader (in early school) or electing representatives (for older children). Particularly, we ask the following questions:

1. What explicit criteria do children use before electing representatives?

2. Is the choice of representatives influenced by implicit micro and macro social determinants, such as friendship attachments, educational background, family?
3. Are there any differences in criteria for children of different sex, of different socioeconomic districts and of different age groups?

### **Method of the study**

#### *Subjects*

The subjects for this study were 333 primary school children (M=155, 47%; F=178, 53%) from three schools. 32% were in the 4th grade (ages 9 to 10), 32% in the 5th grade (ages 10 to 11) and 36% in the 6th grade. Two schools were in a low income/low socioeconomic status district of Attica (63%) and one in a high income/high socioeconomic status district (37%). District differences were reflected to parents' (particularly fathers') socioeconomic background: in the first district, 7% of fathers had only finished primary school, 19% lower secondary education, 43% secondary and 31% tertiary. In the higher income area the figures were 5%, 5%, 17% and 74% respectively.

#### *Instrument*

A questionnaire was given to all the subjects. The questions were slightly adjusted in terminology for the younger subjects. They were firstly asked for some personal information: their name, sex and the occupation and educational level of their parents. Then they were asked to name the fellow student that they would choose as a leader (grade 4) or as a chair (grades 5 and 6). Lastly, they answered ten questions on 5 point scales (from 1= 'strongly disagree' to 5= 'strongly agree') about the reasons for their choice.

#### *Procedure of analyses*

The first group of dependant variables concerned the demographic characteristics of each of the pupils that was chosen as a classroom leader or chair, namely their sex and parental occupation and educational level.

The second group of dependant variables were about the explicit reasons for the subjects' choice. Variables in this group were divided into two major clusters: 'autonomous choice' (meaning that the choices was based on consideration of the candidate's suitability for the task) and 'heteronomous choice' (where choices were attributed to external societal pressures, or to nominee characteristics that did not link to leadership qualities). 'Autonomous choice' had the following variables:

- (a) emphasis to leader's/chair's character traits (sense of justice),
- (b) characteristics and his/her ability to deal with leader/chair duties, and
- (c) rule following behaviour ( $\alpha = 0.36$ );

'Heteronomous choice' comprised the following variables:

- (a) friendship affiliation,
- (b) school achievement,
- (c) teacher's influence,

- (d) parent's influence,
- (e) candidate pressure,
- (f) societal pressure and
- (g) nationality identification ( $\alpha = 0.74$ ).

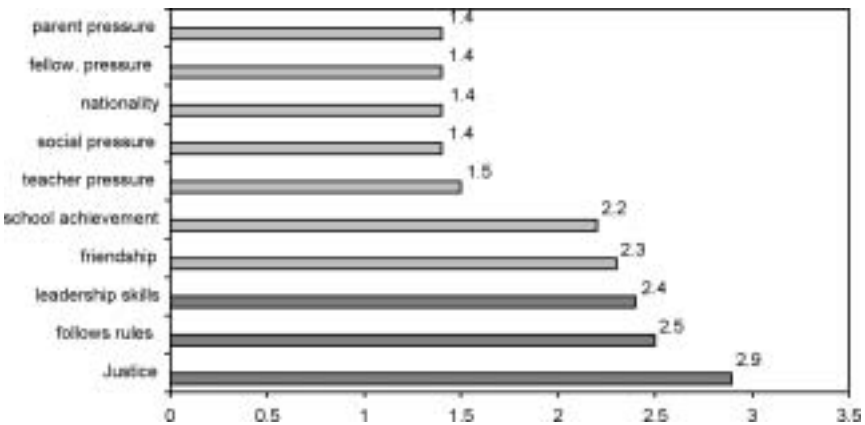
The data from the five-point scale was recoded into a three-point scale for a more effective manipulation.

Finally, a third group of dependant variables was used to monitor the factors that implicitly affect pupils' choices, which were related to sex and socioeconomic identification of the electorate with the nominee.

### Findings

Questionnaire responses showed that pupils seemed to be aware of the role of a chair or a classroom leader play a part in selection, because they appear to make the leader/chair choice using mostly 'autonomous' criteria ( $x = 2,4 - 2,9$ ), as opposed to 'heteronomous' criteria which come second in preference ( $x = 1,4 - 2,3$ ) (see bar chart 1). Data analysis reveals statistical significant differences in subjects' responses in terms of age, sex and socioeconomic background.

**Figure 1: Children's explicit criteria for choosing a leader.**



#### *Differences in the criteria for choice by age*

There is a notable difference between the three groups: older children more strongly indicate the competence characteristics of the person chosen as a representative, and the indices of 'heteronomous choice' decline significantly.

#### *Differences in the criteria for choice by gender*

Females appear more mature in making their choice: they give greater emphasis to the characteristic of justice in making their selection ( $t=-2.728$ ,  $\text{sig}<0.005$ ), and less emphasis to personal friendship ( $t=2.884$ ,  $\text{sig} <0.004$ ), to national identification ( $t= 3.356$ ,  $\text{sig}$

<0.001), to teacher pressure ( $t=2.103$ ,  $\text{sig}<0.036$ ) and to parental pressure ( $t=2.474$ ,  $\text{sig}<0.014$ ).

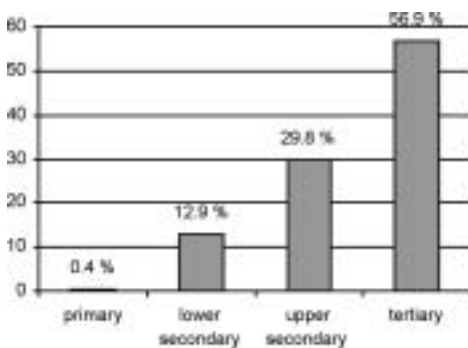
#### *Difference in the criteria for choice by residential district*

There were few differences between pupils from schools of the two districts. Pupils from the higher socio-economic district considered school achievement and rule-following behaviour more important criteria for making a choice of representative than did the pupils coming from the lower socioeconomic background. Pupils from the higher socio-economic district appeared to adopt more ethnocentric criteria than those from the poorer area.

#### *Implicit criteria in choosing a leader/chair*

The study showed that in parallel to the overt criteria for choosing a representative there were implicit criteria that played a catalytic role in the decision-making process. The subjects generally preferred a chair or a leader who came from a family background with higher education. This preference was unrelated to the subject's own family educational background: both educationally advantaged and disadvantaged pupils preferred a high status leader or chair (paired sample T-test:  $-2.728$ ,  $\text{df}=211$ ,  $\text{sig}<0.007$ ). This finding accords with earlier studies that showed that the 'leading crowd' in a school incorporates dominant background characteristics that relate to parental social standing (Cusick, 1991: 278).

**Figure 2. Family educational background (educational level of father) of children preferred for leaders / representatives**



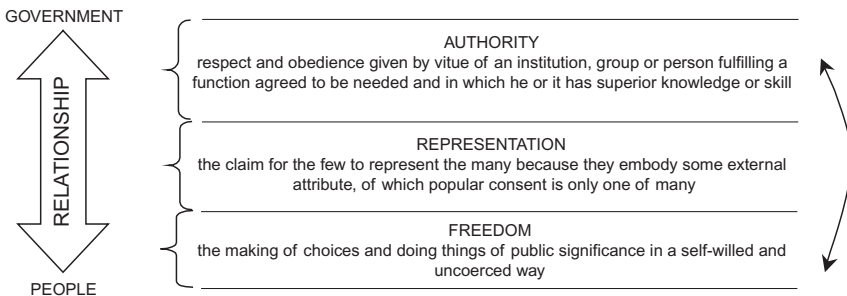
The data also indicated another strong implicit influence of gender identification. The great majority of subjects chose a leader/chair of the same sex as themselves: 78.9% of male subjects chose a male leader/chair and 79.4% of female subjects chose a female leader/chair. Combining this with the earlier mentioned strong emphasis on friendship affiliation ( $x = 2.3$ ), it appears that pupils' judgements are biased towards real or perceived obligations that stem from friendships within classroom.

#### **Teaching implications**

Crick (1977), building from a tradition of political philosophy, proposed a basic set of political concepts for use in teaching as a sketch map, so that 'the teacher will be better able to help the pupil order and relate the disparate problems and issues of the real

political world' (p. 96). He suggested the concept of representation – which is the focus of this paper – as a relating concept between the 'governing' concept of authority and the 'popular' concept of freedom (see Figure 3). Leaders in a democracy, as delegated authority figures, are obeyed by the electorate out of respect, and incorporate power because they have certain skills or knowledge. There are many sources of a leader's power, such as position in a hierarchy, a role in an organisation (or in the classroom), relationships with other group members, personality, and the control of, or access to, resources (Dent, 2003). In contrast to obedience to authority, obedience to power comes from fear of being punished or deprived of material or social privileges: choice here is not free (self-willed and non-coerced).

**Figure 3: Relationship between the basic concepts of *authority*, *representation* and *freedom* (after Crick, 1977)**



The challenge a teacher faces is threefold: firstly, to help pupils develop and practice freedom of choice and become more autonomous in choosing leaders and policies; secondly, to help pupils become aware of the role representatives play within a democracy and the characteristics that make them authority figures; finally, to become an agent for change working to modify status hierarchies in classroom and to empower all children.

Figure 4 shows a proposal for the educational operationalisation of Crick's concept mapping. In the core circle are the educational tasks addressing the educational aims in the development of the concept of representation. These tasks include:

1. *Making choices.* Children examine decision-making strategies, consider the alternatives when faced with a decision and the consequences of actions, and learn to defend their decisions.
2. *Choosing a leader/chair (or the role of leadership in a democracy).* Children realise the role of political representatives as making choices on behalf of others. They examine the skills and knowledge representatives need to best fulfil their duties. They realise the importance of reasoned voting for the leader.
3. *The election process.* Children practice the democratic election process through simulating parliamentary elections.

**Figure 4: Educational framework for the development of the concept of representation.**

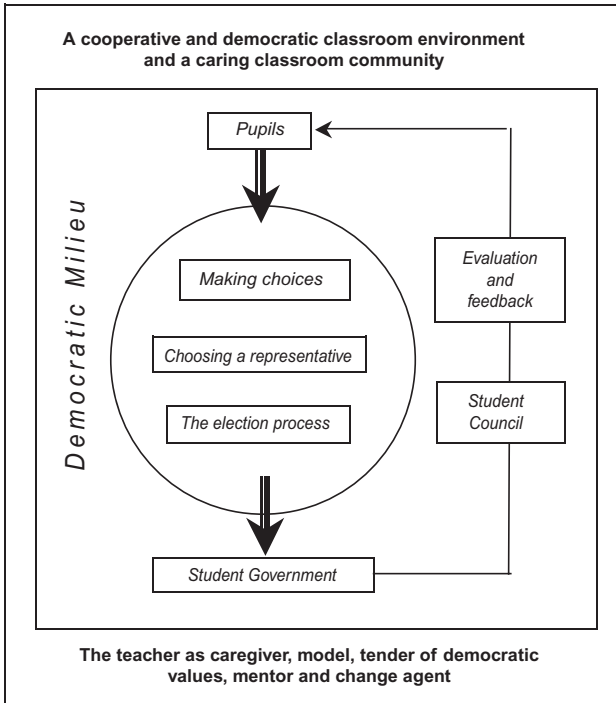


Table 1 analyses the learning experiences and interdisciplinary connections of these tasks leading to the formation of a student government. Whilst classroom democracy cannot authentically simulate a state's representative democracy, a direct form of democracy is more suitable for the small population of the classroom. Though simplified, this form of representative government gives children an opportunity to come face-to-face with leadership in various situations, and to balance representative power through a student council (see diagram 3). As a result, children gradually become experienced decision-makers, including electing representatives.

These processes are likely to result in an individual or group dominance, or to a weakening of democratic spirit, unless they are embedded in a democratic classroom environment and a caring classroom community. The teacher's role is crucial for socialising pupils to democratic ideals, as he or she will be a role model and a care-giver, offering guidance and counseling and improving each pupil's political self awareness. In this way, 'high-status students will no longer believe that they have all the abilities and low-status students will believe that they have some of the relevant abilities' (Cohen et al., 1995:23), an understanding that will lead to greater citizenship fairness and equality.



| <b>Content - Themes</b>   | <b>Learning experiences</b>   | <b>Inter-disciplinary connections</b>   |
|---|---|---|
| <i>Making choices</i>   | <p><i>Literature</i><br/>Read literature and write a poem about choices.</p> <p><i>Discussion</i><br/>Discuss how one person's choice can affect others. Ask the children about choices they have made which have affected other people. Children discuss the importance of acting responsibly when making decisions (Hall, 2004).</p> <p><i>Presentation</i><br/>Teacher gives real life (historical) examples and counterexamples of responsible decision-making.</p> <p><i>Role Playing</i><br/>In small groups children make a play about someone who is persuaded to make a wrong choice and then regrets their decision</p> | <p>Language<br/>Drama<br/>History</p>   |
| <i>Choosing a leader/ chair (or the role of leadership in a democracy)</i>                    | <p><i>Discussion</i><br/>Discuss the role of the leader in historical contexts, examples and counterexamples, and list the qualities required by a decision-maker<br/>Discuss the need for representatives and their duties.</p>  | <p><i>Language - argumentation</i><br/><i>History (Byzantine and Ancient)</i></p>                   |
|   | <p><i>Discussion on a dilemma about the importance of representative's impartiality.</i></p>  |   |
|   | <p><i>Scenario: A representative has to take a decision contrary to the immediate interests of a person who voted for him/her or his/her friend.</i></p>  |   |
| <i>The election process</i>   | <p>Elections simulation<br/>Children organise class elections for a student council. Candidates prepare election campaigns to persuade their classmates for a vote (posters, speeches, slogans). Children reflect on this. Express themselves through writing and talk and art (music, painting). Form an elections supervisory committee to prepare ballot papers, count votes and present results.</p>  | <p><i>Language – argumentation</i><br/><i>Art</i><br/><i>Mathematics</i><br/><i>History</i></p>     |
| <i>Practicing democratic leadership and evaluating democratic processes in the classroom.</i> | <p><i>Discussion</i><br/>Helps children reflect on the council's ability to identify problems and propose effective solutions, the chair's ability to deal with pressure and crisis. Simulate parliamentary debates which take a social perspective. Discuss similarities and differences between classroom council, local council and national government and the limitations of democracy.</p>  | <p>Field trips<br/>Service learning<br/>Debates<br/>Self awareness training<br/>Moral education</p> |

**Table 1. Development of the learning experiences and the interdisciplinary connections around the content comprising the notion of representation.**

## References

- Cohen, E., Kepner, D., & Swanson, P. (1995). Dismantling status hierarchies in heterogeneous classrooms. In K. Rehg (Ed.). *Creating New Educational Communities: Ninety-fourth Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education (I)*. NSSE: Chicago.
- Crick, B. (1977) Basic concepts for political education. in B. Crick & D. Heater (eds), *Essays on political education*. London: Falmer

- Cusick, P. (1991) Student groups and school culture. in James P. Shever (ed), *Handbook of research on social studies teaching and learning*. New York: MacMillan
- Dent, F. (2003) *Leadership pocketbook*. Hants: Management Pocketbooks
- Grace, W. (1996) *Values, Vision, Voice, Virtue: The 4 'V' Model for Ethical Leadership Development*
- Guthrie, W. (1987) *Greek philosophers*. Athens: Papadimas (in Greek)
- Guthrie, W. (1989) *Greek sophists*. Educational Institution of National Bank of Greece: Athens (in Greek)
- Hall, G. (2004) *PSHE & citizenship in action* (v. 4 – 6). Dunstable: Folens
- Maloukou, E., Sambani, A. & Stoumbi, A. (2002) *Social and Political Education*. Patakis: Athens (in Greek)
- Rawls, J. (2001) *A Theory of Justice*. Polis: Athens (in Greek)
- Zeller, E. & Nestle, W. (1980) *History of Greek philosophy*. Estia: Athens. (in Greek)

