



This paper is taken from

Reflecting on Identities: Research, Practice and Innovation
Proceedings of the tenth Conference of the Children's Identity and Citizenship in Europe Academic Network

London: CiCe 2008

edited by Alistair Ross and Peter Cunningham, published in London by CiCe, ISBN 978-0-9560454-7-8

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Krzywosz-Rynkiewicz, B. & Zalewska, A. (2008) Citizens of the Future: How young people perceive social problems from both local and global perspectives, in Ross, A. & Cunningham, P. (eds.) Reflecting on Identities: Research, Practice and Innovation. London: CiCe, pp. 97 - 100

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Lifelong Learning Programme

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 therein.

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
- The CiCe administrative team at 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.

Citizens of the Future: How Young People Perceive Social Problems from both Local and Global Perspectives

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Abstract

The aim of this research is to find out how young people understand key social problems, identify sources of their knowledge of them and describe their reaction towards them. More precisely, how do young people understand key social issues? where does their knowledge come from? and does the level of optimism towards key social issues seen from a local perspective depend on age, sex and ecological niche?. 372 pupils schools, aged between 11 and 17 underwent the test. Data was collected: on their opinions, their optimism/pessimism, and their sources of information. The research used qualitative and quantitative methods, a rarely implemented triangulation method that helps to select key questions and relationships as well as to explain their sources and mechanisms.

Introduction

Poland is a country characterized by a developing and consolidating democracy. The process of transformation of the last few years has resulted in the disappointment of the Polish society. Consequently, this led to the lowering of the level of optimism and the withdrawal of a large group of citizens from the participation in both political and social spheres. (Grzelak, 2005; Krzemiński, 2005). Such a situation is a serious obstacle in building a social capital based on the sense of trust and bond. (Sztompka, 2007). The phenomena of social anomie are observed not only in Poland. Both government and science circles of the European countries are debating over the reasons responsible for the loosening of social bonds and the decrease of the citizens' interest in politics (Beck i Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Bauman, 2001). In such a context, the building of civic activity among children and teenagers, that is among the group which is just at the point of gaining its first civic experiences, becomes a crucial issue.

It is worth noticing that in a popular understanding the meaning of civic activity is quite narrow – it is connected with the participation in elections (government, local government ones, referenda, etc.) and the readiness to foster national symbols. Such an understanding of citizenship is often brought up by the politicians. They identify the slogan: 'give your vote for your country', which is placed against the national emblem background, with the civic duty. Of course they are right. However, it should be emphasised that this is merely a small part of civic activity. Although it is true that this fragment influences the shaping of political reality, but it is less crucial when it comes to the building of social capital based on the sense of belonging and bonding. In order to make the perception of the phenomenon of citizenship clear, it is worth referring to the Kenny Kennedy's concept (1997). According to Kennedy, there are two types of citizenship: active and passive.

This paper is part of *Reflecting on Identities: Research, Practice & Innovation, Proceedings of the tenth Conference of the Children's Identity and Citizenship in Europe Thematic Network*, ed Ross A and Cunningham P, published by CiCe (London) 2008. ISBN: 978-0-9560454-7-8; ISSN: 1470-6695

Funded with support from the European Commission SOCRATES Project of the Department of Education and Culture. This publication reflects the views of the authors only, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained in this publication.

National identity is the source of passive citizenship. It results in eagerness to foster national symbols, myths and the history of one's own nation. As a consequence, the sense of national identity and belonging is created. Then it is transformed into the sense of community and it also establishes the readiness to defend common values, stimulates loyalty towards the rights and creates the readiness to protect them.

Active citizenship is linked to the need of participation and experiencing the influence on the social and political realities. It may assume either a political, social or personal form. Civic activity of a political nature is connected with conventional actions, such as participating in elections or being a member of a political party. Civic activity of a social nature is connected with the engagement in all types of formal or informal movements or organizations working for the community – from the participation in all kinds of social actions and voluntary jobs, to sending petitions or protesting. Civic activity of a personal nature is connected with building the responsibility for oneself and for one's own future. This activity is realized in a common saying, namely 'my fate is in my hands'.

Kennedy's concept offers interesting guidelines for educators who work out the ways of development of civic behaviours and ponder over the question of stimulating civic activity.

Passive citizenship is created mostly by the traditionally understood school education (classes in history, literature, geography, etc.). Our knowledge about the national history, myths and symbols is acquired at school. Thus, to a large extent, this institution also shapes national consciousness which becomes the basis for national identity (Ross, 2007).

However, if we reflect upon the way in which active citizenship can be developed, especially in its social form, we should try to learn how children and young people understand social problems of the changing world. So far we do not know much about the young people's opinions related to social phenomena and how they understand them, about the source of their knowledge about these issues and how they feel towards them. According to Hicks (2002), the way we imagine the future is reflected in the way we measure the quality of life and the society's inner well-being. Our images about the future mirror the times we live in. The opinions of young people concerning the future allow for certain conclusions as for the roles young people want to assume as the citizens of the future (Holden, 2006). The orientations of young people towards the burning issues existing in the contemporary society are especially significant. These issues include: violence, conflict, unemployment, tolerance, environmental protection and health (Holden, 2007).

We can guess that the opinions of the young people referring to the above questions as well as the level of optimism they demonstrate towards vital social issues will greatly influence the creation of attitudes associated with willingness to participate in a social life. The media often present young people as a group of pessimists characterized by a pretentious attitude towards reality. Therefore, it is crucial to perform a systematic research that shows whether young Poles are active optimists or pessimists when it comes to social phenomena with the focus on the change of the level of optimism

depending on age, sex and ecological niche (big cities – small towns). In such analyses, age seems to be an especially important factor since, as we may assume, understanding of certain phenomena (for example concrete – abstract), the role of different sources of information (direct ones – media) and the level of optimism depend on the age-related notions like the level of education and the time devoted to the development of young people (school, early adolescence, late adolescence) (Bee, 1998). Sex may also play a significant modifying variable as it modifies the process and speed of the development of children and young people in the periods under consideration (Bee, 1998, Vasta, 1995).

The aim of the research is to find out how young people understand the key social problems, from where they take their knowledge about those problems and what their reaction towards them is. More precisely, the study aims at establishing the answers to the following questions:

1. How do young people understand the key social issues?
2. Where does the young people's knowledge about these issues come from? Does the role of different information sources depend on age, sex and ecological niche?
3. Does the level of optimism towards the key social issues seen from a local perspective depend on age, sex and ecological niche?

Method

372 pupils and students of primary schools, gymnasiums and colleges aged 11 – 14 – 17 from large urban areas and small towns underwent the test.

During the research the following data was collected: (1) opinions and beliefs referring to the said issues, (2) the level of optimism versus pessimism towards the issues from both local and global perspectives, and (3) the sources from which the pupils/students get the information about the issues.

The research was conducted with the use of quality and quantity methods. The opinions and beliefs were collected during group interviews, partially structured, when the questions like *what does ... (violence, conflict, unemployment, etc.)... mean to you; tell us more about ...; how do you understand ...; give examples of ...*, were asked. The interviews were recorded, transcribed and then analyzed by competent judges. There were 16 interviews conducted (4 in each age group and 8 in each of the social environments).

The level of optimism and the sources of information were studied as for quantity with the use of a 'What do you think about the future?' questionnaire (Holden, 2007).

The level of optimism was analysed according to a 5-point scale with the questions like:

- *Do you think that in the future in your area the level of violence will increase or decrease?* – local perspective
- *Do you think that in the future in the world the level of violence will increase or decrease?* – global perspective

The sources of knowledge were examined by asking to show on a 3-point scale (a lot – a little – nothing) the extend to which each of the mentioned elements is the source of

knowledge, for example about violence: Family, Peer Group/Friends School, TV/the cinema, the Internet, newspapers.

Results will be presented according to the following question:

1. How do young people understand the key social issues?
2. Where does the young people's knowledge about these issues come from? Does the role of different information sources depend on age, sex and ecological niche?
3. Does the level of optimism towards the key social issues seen from a local perspective depend on age, sex and ecological niche?
4. Does the level of optimism towards the key social issues seen from a global perspective depend on age, sex and ecological niche?
5. Can we observe in the groups which differ according to age and sex any differences as for the level of optimism towards those issues depending on local and global perspectives?