# Adolescents' perceptions on citizenship: Analysing empathy and social engagement by positioning dilemmas

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## Abstract

*This paper reports on findings from a study of elementary children's perceptions on citizenship in Spain, based on individual positioning related to a mass media event of possible identity discrimination. The study analyses empathy and the social positioning of children and how through different dilemmas their positions changed or remained stable. These dilemmas were applied to a sample of one hundred and twenty students of different grades and incorporated both quantitative and qualitative analysis. The implications for global citizenship education are considered, as well as theoretical considerations on how positioning reveals complex dynamics of social performance among children.*

*Keywords: Citizenship education; empathy; social engagement; positioning; dilemmas*

## Introduction

### Concepts and concerns: debating citizenship education

The long series of reflections that globalization has brought about are well known, running in order to understand each other not as originated in closed and ontological national communities, but rather as part of imaginary communities (Anderson, 1991). These communities, with specific histories, are interconnected in a new world system (Wallerstein, 2005) creating new social and global relationships. New millennium societies emerged with significant identity crises among its members, who were precluded from joint responses to local and global common challenges. In other words, democratic societies were not educating its citizens with rights and commitments under, or generating among them an identity that is recognized or felt as belonging to act collectively and globally (Cortina, 1997). Following this, several educational researchers have refocused their studies to the democratic education, focusing on the concept of citizenship as a key to integrating the demands of social justice with the subjectivities of community members (Cortina, 1997). Citizenship education has been approached from different perspectives such as sociology, psychology, law, history, anthropology, and education ( e.g. Bruner, 1998; Benhabib, 2006; Davies, et.al., 2010; Haste, 1983, 2001, 2004; Kymlicka, 1995, 2004; Kymlicka and Norman, 2000; Lawson, 2001; Nussbaum, 1999, 2005; Osler and Starkey, 2001, 2003, 2005; Singh, 2001; Simone and Kymlicka, 2002, Shapiro and Kymlicka, 1997). The main objective of Citizen Education is that young learners develop a commitment to their reality and their

future and that they, based on democratic values, be agents of change in the present and the future. These studies are based on intertwined theoretical methodologies and assumptions in order to build initiatives focused on training people on universal values such as respect, tolerance, non-discrimination, the idea of otherness, peace, conflict resolution and responsible social action, among others (De la Torre, 2009; Diaz Barriga 2006; Trotta, Jacott and Lundgred, 2008)

According to the extended review of literature on global education presented by Zong, Wilson and Quashiga (2008) and the theoretical discussion about Citizenship by Condor and Gibson (2007), there are three approaches to Citizenship Education: political, sociopsychological and identitarian.

The political approach refers to fostering active social participation, that is to say, involvement of students in the democratic development of society through either formal institutional or alternative ways (Haste, 2004), both public and private, and along a spectrum of interventions considered more congenial and efficient to young learners (from electoral participation, collecting signatures, collecting money for charity, volunteering in NGOs or civic associations, to participation in demonstrations, social movements, youth, student or cyber collectives and in actions related to the individual sphere, as well as alternative patterns of consumption and gender, blogging, and so on).

The psychosocial approach refers to the individual in society at three levels: understanding oneself as a subject, in collusion with others in society, sharing and practicing democratic values (Barnea and Schwartz, 1998). To do so, the approach seeks to develop the ability of decentration, the abandonment of selfishness and the development of prosocial attitudes in order to fully unfold in a collective and culturally situated setting in relation to others. It also aims at fostering capacities of sympathy, empathy, solidarity in the individual and commitment to the peers, society and others who do not belong to the individual sociocultural context (Rose, 1990, 1996).

Finally, the identity approach is based on the idea of Citizenship Education related to the feeling of belonging to a specific community within a global web of communities. Some authors have defined it as the conflict between the cynicism of Diogenes and the love to the nation (Nussbaum, 1999). This approach suggests that a person can develop an identity based on a diverse range of historical and cultural factors and social and global relationships, rather than just national symbols and official narratives of the origin of the country. In these terms, being a good citizen does not mean being a good patriot but being an individual that is aware of his/her multiple identities constructed by the interweaving of different relationships in different cultural contexts. This relates to the construction of an identity without excluding the other and being open to diversity in general.

These three approaches are not mutually exclusive, on the contrary, they are intertwined in theory and practice, setting complex networks of action and reflection. Nevertheless, some researchers have criticized the fact that the idea of citizenship that supports these proposals is

set in a context of Western stability, and have argued that a rethinking is needed considering also the new concepts emerged from the new global realities of emerging democracies and transitional societies, Western and non-Western, that put the different explanatory Western paradigms in crisis (Haste, 2004; Zong, Wilson and Quashiga, 2008).

One of the main topics regarding citizen education, transverse to the three approaches, is related to getting young people involved and to participate socially. Several researchers have asked themselves what kind of experiences engage young people and have come to several conclusions: Some authors have defined young people's disengagement as apathy characterized as disillusionment toward traditional politics, democracy and social participation, and a lack of sense of the Other (Galston, 2001). Nevertheless, other studies have argued that is not apathy but different ways of conceiving life, society, democracy and the Other among young people, which lead to their disinterest in traditional political or social participation (Condor and Gibson, 2007; Haste, 2004; Weinstein and Wring, 2002)

Considering the above, this paper aims to analyze adolescents´ perceptions on citizenship, focus on their sense of empathy and types of positioning toward cultural discrimination. Related to this, will they be able to positioning themselves into other ones place? Will it be the same type of positioning among young learners of fourteen and sixteen? Will it be the same type of positioning toward their peers and those in government? Thus, this research explores notions of citizenship based on a questionnaire applied to one hundred and twenty students, fourteen and sixteen years old, from middle-class schools in Madrid. This instrument uses different dilemmas involving the position taken by students in terms of putting themselves in another one´s place, facing an event of potential identity discrimination, considering the reactions of their peers and the government decisions involved.

**Methodology**

The study attempts to analyze students' perceptions on citizenship through a test based on positioning dilemmas. This test was constructed taking into account discussions of the Crick Report (1998) and several investigations related to the perception of and positioning of young people regarding social responsibility toward others and those in authority, as well as toward political decision making processes and cultural recognition (Condor and Gibson 2007; Haste 2004; Oldfield, 1990; Mcdonough, 2007).

The questionnaire was built around the advertising campaign for *Burger King* Spain (2009), *The Texican Whopper ("Texican"* hereafter*)*, which once originated a discussion on cultural discrimination by the use of stereotypes against Mexicans (see Annex 1). The instrument is based on individual positioning through activities focused either on adolescents´ position in front of their peers, categorized as *microcitizenship*, and on government and politicians decisions, categorized as *macrocitizenship*. The test was applied to one hundred and twenty students of fourteen and sixteen years old (sixty per age group) from middle-class schools in

Madrid, and was subsequently analyzed using both quantitative and qualitative techniques. Implementation for the present matter consisted of three phases, framed in the categories of *microcitizenship* and *macrocitizenship*:

- Exposure of the poster and the video of the *Texican* to the students;
- the individual positioning of students in relation to what Mexican boys and girls of fourteen and sixteen years old felt and believed about the *Texican*, based on hypothetical participation in a *chat* (*microcitizenship*);
- and the individual positioning of students in relation to the actions of celebrities and politicians from the reaction of the Ambassador of Mexico in Spain to the *Texican* (*macrocitizenship*)

Construction, conceptualization and analyses of the instrument are based on four categories of analysis:

1. Patriotic exaltation: the student is based on a strong emotional identity to position and represent the social and historical realities; this category is regarded as very egocentric and not pro-social;
2. Identity Reaction: the student has a realistic view of stereotypes, taking sides with one of the two, to position and represent the social and historical realities; this category is regarded as self-centered and a little bit pro-social;
3. Relativistic opinion: the student does not feel alluded to, is detached emotionally from the event, and has and overall analysis that allows him/her to represent a more critical society and history, without taking a position. This category is regarded as egocentric and ambiguous, and pro-social passive, sarcastic;
4. Perspectival view: the student becomes aware of its cultural engagement but critically analyzes the overall event and considers different perspectives on it, socially and historically. He/she is not self-centered and placed in what others involved can feel, has a pro-active social attitude.

### Results

Two different analyses are exposed. On one hand, the students' position toward peers is analysed, and on the other, their positioning toward government decision and policy makers is studied.

### *The Burger Chat: putting ourselves in the other's shoes*

Eight comments were selected for this task, two for each category of analysis outlined above. Each participant had to review every comment in terms of agreement or disagreement and explain their position. Quantitative and qualitative analyses were implemented.

As shown in Table 1, there are no significant differences by age in relation to the overall positioning of young people, from the more emotional and patriotic comments (Level 1. Patriotic exaltation). Moreover, a large percentage of the orientation of the positioning of young people is more toward the emotional identity, self centered (60% and 70% respectively), recognizing the outrage at the mockery of the symbols, and for the defense of the nation.

**Table 1. Subjects' percentage distribution by age and positioning to Patriotic Exaltation comments**

| Age | Level 1. Patriotic exaltation comments (%) | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | **Non** | **Patriotic exaltation** | **Identity reaction** | **Relativistic opinion** | **Perspectival view** |
| Fourteen | 21,1 | 26,3 | 36,8 | 15,8 | 0 |
| Sixteen | 0 | 29,4 | 41,2 | 23,5 | 5,9 |

This can be seen in the opinions of some young people*:* "totally agree!" (Elena.14); "I agree. If they did something similar with our (Spain) flag, I would be pissed off" (Miguel.14). On the other hand, a smaller percentage represents less self-centered positions of individual spectrum, and are mostly related to detachment with this situation: "hey, no big deal, let it go" (Ines.16)

In relation to more identity realistic comments presented (Level 2. Identity Reaction), it is possible to appreciate significant differences by age, finding a more pro-social positioning among sixteen-year-old children (sixteen, hereafter) compared to fourteen-year-olds (fourteen, hereafter). While more than half of young people of both ages is located at the most egocentric and self-centered end of the spectrum, another considerable percentage of young people in sixteen (41%) is close to pro-social levels, in contrast to the fourteen (See Table 2).

**Table 2. Subjects' percentage distribution by age and positioning to Identity Reaction comments**

| Age | Level 2. Identity Reaction comments (%) | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | **Non** | **Patriotic exaltation** | **Identity reaction** | **Relativistic opinion** | **Perspectival view** |

| Fourteen | 26,3 | 31.6 | 26.3 | 15,8 | 0 |
| Sixteen | 0 | 11,8 | 47,0 | 35,3 | 5,9 |

Some of the most common opinions regarding the comments presented refer to the identification and defense of a stereotype against another: "he does look inferior, but at least he is stronger and does not need help to open the pot "(Lourdes, 16); or criticism of the stereotype that is superior, from a realistic view of it:"The cowboy feels superior because he is higher than the wrestler, but he needed help opening the pot, so, haha!..."(Carlos, 14.) In connection with the views less egocentric of boys and girls of sixteen, it can be seen generally a detachment combined with a disinterest in the issue: "Both stereotypes are false, it is pointless to discuss this" (Esther, 16).

Continuing with the analysis, as indicated in table 3 related to the relativist comments presented (Level 3, relativistic opinion), very interesting results between the age groups were found. On the one hand, there is a significant decrease of more egocentric positions in both age groups (up less than a third of the population, although young fourteen did not answered significantly), and an increase of pro-social attitudes, maintaining the predominance among the sixteen (50%).

**Table 3. Subjects' percentage distribution by age and positioning to**
**Relativistic Opinion comments**

| Age | Level 3. Relativistic Opinion Comments (%) | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Non | Patriotic exaltation | Identity reaction | Relativistic opinion | Perspectival view |
| fourteen | 78,9 | 5,3 | 10,5 | 5,3 | 0 |
| sixteen | 14,1 | 20,6 | 15,9 | 33,5 | 15,9 |

It is important to stress that in this most pro-social majority percentage, there is no more predominantly disinterested points of view but rather general critical ironies, accompanied by criticism around governments and politicians involved in this situation:"The ambassador protests but in Mexico they continue eating their kind of hamburgers, so…" (Bea.16); "that is true, he should be working on other important social issues, instead of wasting time on this" (Luis.16); "what Mexicans should complain about is the salary of their ambassador"(Enrique.16).

Continuing this trend, the positioning of young people towards more pro-social attitudes remains, observing statistics related to the perspectival view level. The more self-centered attitudes decline to almost a quarter of the population, and among young people of sixteen, prosocial percentage rises to 65%. (See table 4)

**Table 4. Subjects' percentage distribution by age and positioning to Perspectival View**

| Age | Level 4. Perspectival View Comments (%) | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | **Non** | **Patriotic exaltation** | **Identity reaction** | **Relativistic opinion** | **Perspectival view** |
| fourteen | 73.7 | 15,9 | 5,1 | 5,3 | 0 |
| sixteen | 17,6 | 5.9 | 11,8 | 52,9 | 11,8 |

**Comments**

One of the most frequent comments related to the perspectival view seems optimistic about intercultural dialogue, even though nowadays this does not seem to be the widespread: "I agree, we must learn to cooperate among cultures, despite of current reality" (Irene.16). However, it is worth noticing that some opinions related to egocentric exaltation strongly reject the intercultural dialogue and directly offend the other participant: "U suck! You are not a patriot!"(Eva.14); "That cannot be! Mexicans & yankees cannot be friends, bullshit" (Jordan.14).

Finally, it is important to stress that the prosocial trend on what the children have commented by themselves continues into the *Burger Chat*. The majority percentage is in more prosocial levels, more widespread among young people sixteen (See Table 5).

**Table 5. Subjects' percentage distribution by age and personal opinion**

| Age | 5. Personal Opinion (%) | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | **Non** | **Patriotic exaltation** | **Identity reaction** | **Relativistic opinion** | **Perspectival view** |
| fourteen | 78,9 | 10,5 | 5,3 | 5,3 | 0 |
| Sixteen | 0 | 11,8 | 23,5 | 41,2 | 23,5 |

After reading all the comments of the *Burger Chat*, the participants wrote some interesting views about it, considering social values as respect, dialogue and some alternatives to the Texican problem: "I think it important that such discussions reach agreements, not just talk" (Bea, 16); "when we give our opinion, it must be done with respect" (Carlos, 16); "I do not feel offended, but I think they should be more careful with this type of advertising because it may offend others" (Esther,16); "People should think beyond flags and symbols, identity involves other things; nevertheless, I understand that some boys get identified with the flag and it is Ok to me" (Lourdes,16) As it can be seen, positioning among participants have changed significantly after the tasks.

### *The ambassador`s revenge. Positioning towards government decisions*

In this task, participants were informed about the conflict that occurred in 2009 around the Texican, specifically about the protest of Mexico's ambassador to Spain and the consequences that ensued; finally, given the risk of the Mexican government filing a lawsuit against them, Burger King withdrew the advertising campaign in Spain. Considering this, participants had to answer three questions: "Was withdrawing advertisement the best solution?; "Could another solution have been found? Which one?" and "As the Mexican ambassador, how would you have reacted and acted?". Quantitative and qualitative analyses were implemented.

Related to the first question, there are significant differences between ages. More than half of the teenagers of fourteen believe that the best option was to remove the propaganda, while among the group of sixteen, a majority believes that it was not the best solution (See table 6)

**Table 6. Subjects percentage distribution by age and answers to the best solution**

| Age | Withdrawing advertisement was the best solution? (%) | |
|---|---|---|
| | No | Yes |
| Fourteen | 42,1 | 57,9 |
| Sixteen | 76,5 | 23,5 |

It is important to note that when they were asked for another solution, a significant change in behavior occurred considering two situations: a large percentage of the population did not answer, and among the remaining population, less pro-social positioning increased compared to the more pro-social positioning, being 42% at both ages in contrast to the more pro-social

representing about a third among young people aged sixteen and 5% among those of fourteen (see table 7).

**Table 7. Subjects percentage distribution by age and personal solutions**

| Age | Could another solution have been found? (%) | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | **Non** | **Patriotic exaltation** | **Identity reaction** | **Relativistic opinion** | **Perspectiva l view** |
| Fourteen | 52,6 | 26,3 | 15,8 | 5,3 | 0 |
| Sixteen | 29,4 | 11,8 | 29,4 | 23,5 | 5,9 |

Many alternatives proposed by the students range from disinterest to distrust related to the idea that other solutions are not possible; at best, the alternative of not removing the propaganda and re-do it by changing the size of the characters was the most frequent, followed by Burger King (BK hereafter) apologizing: "I don´t think so. It is always the same, who cares?" (Ines.14); "I would have asked to change the size of the characters; BK should apologize" (Carlos.16) "Fuck BK and all transnationals. They always do the same" (Jordan.14).

Nevertheless, among the minority that has a prosocial point of view, there are interesting proposals, and they opt for dialogue in the search for alternatives: "Maybe ask Mexicans if they really think that *Texican* is offensive; if it is, they should dialogue or something, I don´t know" (Irene.16)

Finally, as it can be seen in table 8, there are significant differences between age groups and the positioning taken by each youth group in relation to what they would do if they were the Ambassador. While among the fourteen there is a predominance of egocentric and less pro-social attitudes (74%) among teenagers aged sixteen this type of position is a minority (35%).

**Table 8. Subjects percentage distribution by age and positioning as ambassador**

| Age | As the Mexican Ambassador (%) | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | **Non** | **Patriotic exaltation** | **Identity reaction** | **Relativistic opinion** | **Perspectiva l view** |
| Fourteen | 10,5 | 47,4 | 26,3 | 15,8 | 0 |
| Sixteen | 17,6 | 5,9 | 29,4 | 41,2 | 5,9 |

It is worth noticing that non-prosocial comments are strongly reactionary, patriotic mixed with a kind of disillusionment to the politician performance, and related to corruption and incompetence: "I would have stayed quiet, do nothing and continue making money" (Miguel.14); "I would have reacted the same ´cause no one can make jokes of our national symbols; our flag is a serious matter" (Jordan.14); "I would have reacted more relaxed, and I would have demanded BK" (Isa.16).

On the other hand, it is interesting to notice that a substantial percentage of participants have a prosocial attitude toward political participation, mostly among those sixteen. Most of them would not have reacted as the ambassador did, and they also proposed alternatives based on dialogue: "I would not have reacted that way, maybe I should talk with my fellow citizens in Spain to get an agreement about what to do" (Carlos,16); "I would have proposed a debate among BK, me and consumers interested in the Texican, don't you think? ´cause some people may want to try it and they have that right" (Esther.16)

**General Discussion**

Although the size of the sample and the complexity of the procedure may preclude decisive conclusions, findings of this study shed some light on debates related to Global Citizenship Education and adolescents´ social engagement and development of empathy. As shown in the results, young learners were able to positioning towards the event presented, developing interesting arguments and reflections, moving from disinterest and indifference to explicit positions of identification, sympathy, irony, sarcasm, criticism or empathy. These transitions in adolescents´ positioning were not in a progressive, evolutional way but in different and more complex forms because of the cultural, social and emotional variables related to them. A significant aspect is the relationship between emotions and belonging, more specifically the emotional belonging to the nation. Many egocentric and disrespectful positioning presented in the results were based on their love to their nation and the defense of the national symbols against the mockery or jokes of some students. Further studies should take into account these variables and their impact in the young learners´ social and empathic development, in order to achieve a democratic education.

Moreover, it can be seen significant differences by age, noting that students of sixteen years old developed more pro-social arguments and positioning. It is worth pointing out that to the extent that they were solving the different tasks, their sense of empathy was increasing and so their engagement to the situation. Specifically related to the microcitizenship matters, their attitudes were changing significantly to a more pro-social positioning, more clearly among youth sixteen years old. Besides, they were able to *stand in someone elses´ shoes*. This is an evidence that teaching from positioning dilemmas by presenting views of peers can be a meaningful route to develop empathy and social engagement attitudes. On the contrary, results related to their positioning toward macrocitizenship shown disinterest, disillusionment and distrust to government institutions and companies. Reflecting with

young learners about the decisions of professional politicians and corporations can create a closeness and interest in government and political debates and, as we can see in positions of the students, these reflections are needed; often young people feel excluded from social and political debates and treated as if they were in a stage of life waiting to be adults. Results confirmed that trend. Nevertheless, it is worth notice that when students were asked to positioning as the Ambassador, they wondered about alternatives to the conflict based on dialogue, respect and cooperation, using sarcasm and sense of humor also, showing that they can build pro-social alternatives. This may be evidence of a kind of personalization of empathy, considering their difficulty or lack of interest to develop empathy towards social institutions.

Many attitudes that have been associated with apathy inherent in youth are related on several occasions with the lack of access to these social spaces and to the type of mechanisms that are carried out. This can be seen if we compare results of macrocitizenship and microcitizeship: young people have more prosocial attitudes and are more purposeful when interacting with peers' dilemmas, in contrast to the political and business related.

Further research, and generally social debates on citizen participation, should consider proposals to open social participation spaces for young people, allowing them to become socially empower, with their own cultures and ways of participation. In the same way, teaching young people how other peers from other cultural contexts represent social participation may allow the development of more empathic attitudes among them, changing their positioning toward others and themselves.

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**ANNEX 1  "New Texican Whopper. Joined by destiny"**
video: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mNabO2d-zbw