

# Pupil Council Members' Conceptions of Citizenship Education<sup>1</sup>

Metsärinne, M., Korhonen, R. & Niinistö, E-M. University of Turku, Finland

## Abstract

The task of this paper is to describe the conceptions of citizenship education of students on a pupil council at one Finnish comprehensive school. The main goal of the case-school council is to educate active, independent learners in civic education so they become engaged in school, community and global life. The theoretical framework for this goal consists of citizenship education in influence, democracy (especially equality) and participation. Based on these three dimensions, the research question is, 'What are pupil council members' conceptions of citizenship education?' Qualitative research methods and theoretical content analyses were utilised. The results from questionnaires answered by the pupils (n=47) concerned their opinions on the theoretical content of citizenship education by age group. Older pupils had more concrete conceptions than younger pupils of influencing council work and future civic activities. However, all pupils' conceptions of equality and participating were expressed on a more general level. A few suggestions for developing pupil council work through citizenship education can be interpreted from the results.

## Keywords

Pupil Council, Citizenship Conceptions, Citizenship Activities

## Introduction

The research question in this study is, 'What are pupil council members' conceptions of citizenship education?' The theoretical framework consists of

---

<sup>1</sup> If this paper is quoted or referenced, we ask that it be acknowledged as:  
Metsärinne, M., Korhonen, R. & Niinistö, E-M. (2020) *Pupil Council Members' Conceptions of Citizenship Education*. In B. Krzywosz-Rynkiewicz & V. Zorbas (Eds.), *Citizenship at a Crossroads: Rights, Identity, and Education* (pp. 622 - 634). Prague, CZ: Charles University and Children's Identity and Citizenship European Association. ISBN: 978-80-7603-104-3.

citizenship education on influence, democracy and participation. Empirical information was collected from a Finnish pupil council at a comprehensive school. The case-study school's main goals for civic education are to encourage pupils to think about and understand their opportunities to influence citizenship activities; to develop a global, community and school-level perspective; and to educate active, independent citizens and learners to participate in the school's student life.

Pupils' influence on citizenship education is linked to their responsibilities for the environment, societal well-being and a sustainable future. The goal is to augment students' abilities and motivation to act for the good of the environment and human well-being. Pupils are encouraged to build a dynamic identity that draws strength from the diversity and plurilingualism of individuals and communities. Pupils are also encouraged to construct knowledge, be critical and express their opinions.

Finnish basic education promotes democracy and active agency in civil society (Rautiainen, Vanhanen-Nuutinen, & Virta, 2014). Democracy and human rights are the basis of the values of Finnish education from pre-school to higher levels. Democratic children's rights are based on United Nation's Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN Convention on the Rights of the Child 1989), which contains the Declarations of Human Rights, and school law complies with these rights. The case-study school is seen as an integral part of culturally evolving and transforming societies in which the global and the local are constantly intertwining. Pupils learn to live in a world that is linguistically, culturally and denominationally diverse. The goals are to help students understand the essence of Finnish, European and global cultural identities, as well as equality; to discover their own cultural identity; and to develop capabilities for cross-cultural interaction and internationalism (cf. Core curriculum for basic education, 2014). The principle of equity is derived from the notion of equality—that all pupils are born equal in terms of dignity and rights. Equity focuses on the principle that all pupils have the right to fair and just treatment and that protecting and promoting equity is essential to achieving peace, harmony and productivity within and among communities (Schulz et al., 2008, p. 20).

The goals of participatory citizenship are to help the case-study school's pupils perceive society from different pupils' viewpoints in order to develop the capacities needed for civic involvement and to create the foundations for participating and acting diversely. According to the core curriculum for basic education (2014), pupils learn to make agreements, take on responsibility,

appreciate the value of trust, encounter and solve conflicts, mediate, do voluntary work and participate in the work of pupils' councils. 'Civic participation' refers to the manifestations of individual case-study school pupils' actions in their school and communities and in any community context. The level of participation can range from awareness to engagement to influence. The three subdomains of civic participation are decision-making, influencing and community participation (Schulz et al., 2008, p. 20).

In recent years, the Finnish people have taken positive steps toward developing civic activities, including building citizens' confidence in social institutions and trust in one another (Niemelä, 2015), but civic activities should be developed more for school citizenship activities. There have been major weaknesses in young Finns' interest, changes in attitude and a culture of participation (Suoninen, Kupari, & Törmäkangas, 2010; Rautiainen & Räihä, 2010). In Finland, 'civic participation' is often understood as teacher-organized activities, social data and civic studies, even if it concerns all effective means for civic education in society. The future challenge for Finland is to open up the concept of civic participation to incorporate a wider context of interaction among individuals, cultures, the environment and society. (Hansen, 2007.)

## **Method**

Qualitative research methods and theoretical content analyses were utilised in this study. Pupils (n=47) answered questionnaires concerning their opinions on the content of citizenship education and also regarding their school grades. The school grades were pre-school and grades 1–2, 3–4, 5–6 and 7–9. In this study, students on the pupil council were between six and 15 years or age. It is presumable that pupils' conceptions of influence, democracy and participation through citizenship activities become broader as pupils become older.

The case-school context differs from ordinary basic schools in Finland because it is a training school of a department of teacher education at the University of Turku. Pupils are used to listen and communicate with student teachers, as well as to try out new learning methods. One of the main goals of civic education at the case-study school is to educate active, independent learners who are engaged in both school and community life. In Finland's 2016 national curriculum, a new goal is to guide pupils in developing a sense of global citizenship, thus, the case-study school's goal is also to encourage pupils to think about and understand their opportunities to influence citizenship activities from a global perspective. Pupils are able to voice their opinions through the pupil council. Examples include

shaping the school's learning environment and overall atmosphere through holding different events. Two representatives on the council are elected for one academic year by other pupils from each class from grades 1 to 9, as well as pre-primary education. The council has scheduled meetings about every other week where they discuss other pupils' suggestions on different school-related topics. For example, this could include making changes to the school-yard and having cafés for the upper classes. Besides different entertainment- and atmosphere-related topics, the council can comment on the school rules. If the council wants to change a particular rule, it can, for example, forward its ideas to the teachers, and the matter can be officially discussed in the teachers' own meetings.

This study's questions on influence, democracy and participation through civic education are based on the contextual framework by Schulz et al. (2008, p. 30), which distinguishes among four types of contexts:

1. The context of the wider community, which comprises the wider context within which schools and home environments function. Relevant factors can be found on the local, regional and national levels. For some countries, for example, members of the European Union, the supranational level might also be relevant. The context of the wider community was divided in two question parts for this study: Questions of influence and democracy, especially related to equality, were created to obtain pupils' hometown community conceptions and global perspectives on civic education.
2. The context of schools and classrooms comprises factors related to the instruction students receive, the school culture and the general school environment. The context of schools and classrooms was the third part of the questions in this study, and they are also concerned with pupils' influence on and equality conceptions of civic education.
3. The context of the home environment comprises factors related to students' home background and social out-of-school environment (for example, peer-group activities).
4. The context of the individual includes the students' individual characteristics.

The last two contexts, the context of the home environment and especially the context of the individual, formed the fourth part of the questions used in this study and concern pupils' participation on the pupil council.

Pupils (n=47) answered questionnaires concerned their opinions on influence and equality from the context of schools and classrooms, as well as hometown and global perspectives on civic education. The questionnaires were collected in autumn 2016 and in spring 2017. The questions were the same both times and for all pupil council members from preschool to grades 1–2, 3–4, 5–6 and 7–9. Pupils' answers on influence and equality questions did not vary greatly by age group. Thus, only the next to youngest pupils in the second and third classes and the oldest pupils in eighth and ninth classes were asked questions on participation. This was done to determine more clearly how the views of the oldest and youngest differ and in what way it would be useful to cooperate with them? It was a random sample, with two younger pupils and two older pupils on the pupil council interviewed. Questions concerned pupils' participation from the context of home environment and the individual, and they were collected in spring 2017.

The data analysis was based on the three theoretical concepts of civic education. Because these concepts form only part of the definition of civic education, the data analysis used inductive category development content analysis. First, every pupil's answers were analysed to search and select their most essential conceptions from the written data on influence and equality. Second, pupils' essential conceptions of influence and equality were compared by school grade groups. Third, all pupils' essential conceptions were crystallized and put together in tables as subcategories of influence and equality conceptions on citizenship education. Fourth, pupils' open answers on participation in civic activities through council work are abbreviated as mainly described results and, fifth, they are compared with the results of pupils' conceptions of influence and equality. At the end of analysis, the question, 'What are pupil council members' conceptions of citizenship education?' is considered.

## **Results**

### **Pupils' conceptions of the influence of their citizenship activities**

Preschool pupils did not know how to influence city environments or other circumstances outside school. It was all about, 'I want to take part in decisions on what we playing in preschool'.

Pupils in grades 1–2 suggested that their opportunities for influencing their school begin with the teacher. Their suggestions were very abstract, such as 'tell the teacher' and 'with the teacher', as well as concrete, such as 'share how we can avoid littering' and 'be friendly'. The latter concrete thoughts were also

introduced to influence the comfort of the home city: ‘we must take care of our environment’ and ‘more sports’. In addition, this age of pupils wanted to add parks and ‘more equipment to parks’.

Table 1. School grade groups’ essential conceptions on influencing through citizenship education.

	What is your conception of ‘How you can influence...		
	the comfort of the school environment?’	the comfort of your home city?’	What else do you think is important to influence?
Preschool	Be at play	Don’t know	Don’t know
1–2 grade	Opportunity begins with the teacher	Through good behaviour	Add parks
3–4 grade	Doing and saying things	Doing and realizing the possibility to influence higher policymakers	Themes and references to equality
5–6 grade	Suggesting to the council and rector	It is quite complicated	Good teaching and living
7–9 grade	Through council work	The council can influence the higher level	Want to influence school matters

Pupils in grades 3–4 suggested that their influence on school comfort began with their own actions ‘by doing our own parts of things’ and ‘pupils can stop bullying at school’. Doing things to develop school comfort were expressed very abstractly, such as, ‘we as a council can say and decide schools things and themes days’ and by ‘saying things, and that way they move forward’. For the comfort of the home city, pupils also thought about doing things such as ‘using the services of local companies’ and ‘cleaning the garbage from the streets and lawns’. One of the pupils also realized it was possible to share ideas with the higher level of city organisation: ‘pupils can tell something to the staff of the city hall’. Other themes did not form a single entity, such as ‘more stuff for the school’, ‘a pupil can influence the food to be more healthy’, ‘I would like to plan which kinds of dance show there will be in schools’ and ‘nature is important’.

Pupils in grades 5–6 made suggestions to influence school comfort that were similar to those made by grades 3–4, such as ‘to be friendly to others’, with the

main difference that they made more direct suggestions for council work, such as ‘share the work of the council with other pupils’ and ‘share suggestions with the council’. For the comfort of the home city, pupils referenced experiences with their own behaviour—‘to be without vandalism’—and made suggestions ‘to share matters with more influential persons’. Notably, they felt that making suggestions to the city was quite complicated: it is ‘possible to influence, but it is rather time consuming’. Other themes did not form a single entity. Three main themes were pupils’ self-care (‘it is important to take care of our own thing’), seeking comfort in pupils’ lifetimes (‘suggestions for pupils’ good living and motivation’) and suggestions for good teaching (‘that student support good teaching’).

Pupils in grades 7–9 suggested similar themes to those of their peers for influencing school, but they also had views on the council’s work methods. Their thoughts for their own actions on the school council highlights their model behaviour, such as ‘support and encourage schoolmates’, ‘keep places clean’ and ‘act and behave as an example’. They had thoughts on how they could do council work ‘to interact with the rector, teachers and pupils’ or ‘for example, make suggestions to support pupils’. For the comfort of the home city, they felt this could be done ‘via council work’: ‘pupils can make initiatives to local decision-makers, for example, you can write a letter with your schoolmates’. Pupils in grades 7–9 also wanted to affect school issues: ‘pupils’ decisions should be developed’, ‘nobody should study at schools that have mildew dangers’ and ‘pupils should suggest educational content’.

### **Pupils’ conceptions about equality (democracy) in citizenship activities**

Table 2. School grade groups’ crystallized conceptions of equality in citizenship activities

	What is your conceptions about ‘How equality is...		
	in schools?’	in Finland?’	around the world?’
Preschool	Good	Is realized	Is realized
1–2 grades	Quite good, but not always	Different cultures	No, because education is not for all and there is poverty and war
3–4 grades	Same amount for all	Quite good in all towns	Problems in some countries outside EU
5–6 grades	Satisfied	Quite good	Problems with developing countries

7–9 grades	Diversity very good	Some bad attitudes	Women rights
------------	---------------------	--------------------	--------------

A preschool pupil thought that the school quality was ‘good’ and she was satisfied with the situation in Finland and around the world, although she knew some problems were ‘somewhere far away’. Pupils in grades 1–2 experienced school equality as ‘quite good’ and said everybody was ‘well behaved and lively’, but on the other hand, they expressed concern that this was ‘not always’ and ‘quite a bit, but sometimes not really’. Equality in Finland brings up cultural differences: ‘If you have a difficult culture, it maybe does not work’, and ‘it is difficult when you have immigration—you can not know how things will happen’. Pupils’ opinions of equality around the world had three main themes: poverty, wars and education in countries that cannot educate all children. Pupils suggested concrete actions for improving the world, such as ‘give medicines and food’ or ‘some goods can be given without payment’.

Pupils in grades 3–4 experienced school and Finnish equality much the same as pupils in grades 1–2, but they had more ability to compare some of their opinions. For example, when they thought there was equality in school, it was ‘because all get the same things; for instance, every class has its own football’ and regarding the Finnish level, they said, ‘well, because every city has the same kind of possibilities, which is a good thing’. And, even on a global level, they noted: ‘in Africa there are countries that do not have the same circumstances as in EU’, and ‘we have to respect other countries’. They wanted to make the world better ‘by adding recycling’, ‘reducing garbage’ and ‘understanding and respecting other countries’.

Pupils in grades 5–6 experienced school and Finnish equality quite the same as grade 3–4 pupils, but they conceived more abstract answers: ‘everybody is equal in school’ and ‘it is good at the town level’, but ‘there are countries in many places that are not so well’. However, they were able to think about the historical development of the global level equality: ‘in any case, there was much being done to develop equality’. Their ideas for making a better world were of the same kind as the younger pupils yet also were more abstract: ‘no war’ and ‘everybody must have the same value’.

Pupils in grades 7–9 positively experienced school equality and none mentioned any harms from diversity. For example, their opinion of equality consisted of ‘no bad words to others’, ‘good is when nothing is unusual, there is no unusual’, ‘that’s because we are not racists’, ‘I have not seen inequality’, ‘girls and boys have

been taught in the same ways' and 'well, because all are treated equally'. However, pupils' opinions of their own school's equality might be overrated because they saw many equality problems in Finland that surely effect behaviour at their school. Their opinions on equality in Finland included answers such as: '[Equality is] relatively good. Some people who can influence Finnish matters express their views, however, slightly incorrectly to all'. 'My opinion is that it is not very good. For example, the refugee crisis is a problem in Finland. All people are not equal. On the other hand, again, we have quite good political legislation for these kinds of problems' and 'otherwise well, but we have too much prejudice here in Finland'. In all, equality in Finland was experienced as quite good and better than around the world. Their views on equality around world had one theme, which was women's rights: 'Bad. There are poor women's and girls' positions, for example in India'. 'Not good. In developing countries, women have much more bad situations than men'. 'For example in Islam, woman have an underprivileged position. Equal treatment is not going to happen for all, for example to some of the black people'. Other answers were commonly expressed, such as '[It is] bad, but something better has happened. There is sadly much equality around the world', and '[o]ne can not do enough for the environment'. Naturally, the oldest pupils expressed their own equality in school with most diversity, and they saw problems in Finnish attitudes on equality. They also saw equality around world in broader terms than the younger pupils, who targeted it more strongly toward developing countries.

Describing influence and equality answers at question times 1 and 2 and between school grade groups

Pupils in grades 1–2 had no answers for how to influence life on a global level. When comparing the first response period to the second response period, it can be seen that pupils' direct suggestions for influencing and on equality views or actions became more abstract and teacher-directed the second time. For equality targets, there were no new answers. This might refer to better direction provided the second time, while the first time they said 'don't mess' or 'should not bully anyone'.

When comparing grades 3–4's first responses with their second responses on their influence and equality views and on their own actions, it can be noticed that the second time the pupils' answers had more uncertain expressions, such as 'I don't know' and 'not garbage', without any more argument. That might mean that pupils were tired of council work or that they were given too short a time to answer.

Pupils in grades 5–6 felt that making suggestions for city development was quite complicated. Nevertheless, their answers suggest that pupils in these classes were more aware than younger pupils that the main focus of council work is to make suggestions and try to move forward in council work. There were no new views on or targets for their own council work actions in their second answers. When comparing the pupils' first responses with their second responses, it is noticeable that the second time pupils' answers used more uncertain expressions, such as 'I don't know'.

Pupils in grades 7–9 thought about how they could do council work by interacting with the rector, teachers and pupils. That was the main difference between their answers and those of younger groups. For the comfort of the home city, they were more positive than younger pupils. Other themes was completely different from those of younger pupil: pupils in grades 7–9 wanted to affect school matters more clearly. Comparing their first responses with their second responses on both influence and equality, they were of a similar type.

## **Participating**

Second- and third-grade pupils' positive participating experiences were associated with their feelings on council work and thoughts for doing work with other age groups:

'It feels great and nice to take part in the student council's work'. 'It has been very nice'. 'The council is a lot of fun, sometimes exciting'. 'It feels great and really nice when we are able to affect the decisions made in our school'. 'All sorts of decisions concerning our school are made there! We planned, for example, a reflector campaign'.

'Pupils of all ages work together very well. Almost everyone has the courage to speak up and suggest different things for the next semester. It feels nice to hear about up-coming things in advance. (Although they weren't supposed to be told to other people yet, that was difficult sometimes.)' 'We haven't been a part of the council, but I don't know why. It's nice that the older pupils have given advice on how to do some things'.

Younger pupils' uncertainty was associated with working experiences and also their own actions on the council.

I wouldn't know what to do if I had to speak in front of the whole school. I'd probably panic. Makes me too nervous. The council's different activities have

gone well. Everyone has said their opinions and done their part. Everyone has affected the decisions and the work in their own way.'

'Sometimes I felt a bit nervous. It was nice to do different things for the reflector campaign. It felt exciting, also in a way that I probably wouldn't feel comfortable speaking in front of the whole school. Although the activities by the council have gone well and nicely.'

The grades 8 and 9 student council members only had positive feelings on participating in the work of the pupil council. They did not mention any negative points of view: 'I am very happy and honoured to be part of the student council'. 'I get to affect things that are being considered or that are already decided. I like it when the student council consists of many students, who are also interested in having an effect on, for example, new investments on and occasions at school.' 'Being part of the student council is like being in the parliament; it's exciting that you are being trusted, for example, with new school activity names (Lukula, Kultapallo) that are not yet shared with other students. When the school event is planned and organized by the student council and students come to the event, it's very pleasing to see that, maybe without me, this would not have happened.'

Over all, pupils' answers about participating in council work were expressed on a more general level than their answers on influence and equality in civic education. The answers expressed positive feelings; some younger pupils' had uncertain experiences with council work; and perhaps the most important and concrete things for them were naturally the projects done with others.

## **Discussion**

Pupils' opinions on how to influence civic education in general and as part of the council's work showed that younger pupils' (preschool and grades 1–2 and 3–4) thoughts were expressed quite broadly, but their thinking did not link to their actions as closely as did older pupils' in grades 4–5 and especially in grades 7–9. Answers regarding influence referred more to how to act on council work and on what they can act than did their open answers on participation. Answers on participation included no clear examples of earlier actions. They were well expressed on a general level, albeit largely positively. The results of their thoughts on pupils' influence can compare with Shier's (2001) model of five levels of participation: 1) children are listened to, 2) children are supported in expressing their views, 3) children views are taken into account, 4) children are involved in decision-making processes and 5) children share power and responsibility for

decision-making. In this study, the younger pupils' participation shows the same kind of lower levels of participation and older pupils can be seen participating on higher levels. Two suggestions can be made. First, younger pupil could be given more educative guiding for their thoughts and ideas on their own concrete actions and projects in council work. One way to improve could be using Shier's model, which seeks to identify three stages of commitment at each level: opening, opportunities and obligations for all ages of pupils on the council. The second way might be linked more concretely to how adults activate, provide responsibility for operations and empower pupils' council work through adults' council work targets (Kiili, 2011). These ways lead to a reflection on whether it is suitable to do council work with all grades 1–9 or should pupils of different ages be included through more differentiated methods? A second suggestion thus might refer to developing council work more with differentiated methods.

Pupils' conceptions of equality in civic education had no suggestions for joining younger pupils' ideas more directly to their own actions. All pupils' thoughts on equality problems and their developing ideas were described fairly commonly and were relatively unrelated to their council work or to school learning experiences. However, the results show how they could think and define worldwide problems of equality and also offer some ideas to solve them. On the other hand, the results could naturally suggest that in Finland many problems are not as big as in many developing countries, because so many examples were directed toward other countries. The results also show that pupils' answers on equality in civic education showed the widest global thinking among the three answer concepts. From the results on equality and participation, a third suggestion can be made: these concepts should be included more specifically as part of their pupil council work actions.

In all, pupils' answers were quite short and, at least in answering written questions, it was easy to write 'I don't know.' In the future, deeper studies could be done on pupil council work to obtain results on how they act and how pupils of different ages can participate and influence in different ways through their own actions in council work. This study also shows that pupils' opinions on equality can be overly optimistic, so this topic should be part of case studies, for example ethnographic studies. It could also be studied within the limits of adults' requirements and goals for council work so that results can be viewed realistically.

## References

Core curriculum for basic education (2014). Finnish National Board of Education. Tampere: Finnish National Board of Education.

Hansen, P. (2007). Yhteiskunnallista opettajuutta etsimässä. Kansalaisvaikuttamisen opettajankoulutuksessa – hankkeen loppuraportti. Historiallis-yhteiskuntatiedollisen kasvatuksen tutkimus- ja kehittämistutkimuksen tutkimuksia 10. Helsinki: Hakapaino.

Kiili, J. (2011). Lasten osallistuminen, kansalaisuus ja sukupolvisuhteiden hallinta. Kunnallisen lapsiparlamenttitoiminnan tarve, toteutus ja tavoitteet. In M. Satka, L. Alanen, T. Harrikari & E. Pekkarinen (Eds.) *Lapset, nuoret ja muuttuva koulu*. Tampere: Vastapaino. 167-204.

Niemelä, K. (2015). Suomi sijoittuu luottamustutkimuksissa mailman kärkeen muiden Pohjoismaiden kanssa. Miksi yhteiskunta on kaverimme? University of Helsinki. 13.03.2016. [<https://www.helsinki.fi/fi/uutiset/suomalaiset-luottavat-yha>]

Rautiainen, M., & Rähä, P. (2010). Suomalaisen koulutuksen osallistumiskulttuurin on muututtava. *Kasvatus*, 5(41), 477–481.

Rautiainen, M., Vanhanen-Nuutinen, L. & Virta, A. (2014). Demokratia ja ihmisoikeudet. Tavoitteet ja sisällöt opettajankoulutuksessa. Opetus- ja kulttuuriministeriön työryhmämuistioita ja selvityksiä 2014:18.

Schulz, W., Fraillon, J., Aienley, J., Losito, B. & Kerr, D. (2008). *International Civic and Citizenship Education Study. Assessment Framework*. International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement. The Netherlands: The IEA Secretariat.

Shier, H. (2001). Pathways to Participation: Openings, Opportunities and Obligations. A New Model for Enriching Children's Participation in Decision-making, in line with Article 12.1 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. *Children & Society*, 15, 107-117.

Suoninen, A., Kupari, P., & Törmäkangas, K. (2010). Nuorten yhteiskunnalliset tiedot, osallistuminen ja asenteet. Kansainvälisen ICCS 2009 -tutkimuksen päätulokset. <https://ktl.jyu.fi/julkaisut/julkaisuluettelo/julkaisut/2010/d093> [accessed on 07.06.2017].

UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. (1989).