

## Civic Education Around The World

### **-Reports from the Civic Education Study-**

#### **How can participation in civic activities be improved?**

**Christa Händle and Peter Henkenborg**

Repeatedly, youth studies have shown young people to display relatively little interest in the established political parties and mainstream politics, and to be reluctant to participate in civic activities. Young people's distance from politics is seen as a central problem of democratic societies. Can schools help to close this gap and to increase the willingness of young people to participate in civic life, or are these trends influenced more by the political culture of a society than by learning experiences at school? How is civic education taught in schools - as an integral part of school life, an instructional principle, or a distinct subject area? How do the aims, subject-matter knowledge, and didactic skills of teaching staff or the instructional time used for civic education influence student outcomes? Do all-day schools and heterogeneous school populations foster social learning and civic participation? The indicators and impulses provided by international comparative studies can help to address these questions. At the close of the last millennium, two large-scale assessments surveyed young people and their teachers with respect to civic education. Results from these studies will be presented in this special issue.

In 1995, a total of almost 32,000 ninth grade students and their teachers participated in the Youth and History project, which examined history and civic education (Angvik/ Borries 1997; Borries 1999; van der Leeuw-Roord 1998), primarily in Europe. In 1999, nearly 90,000 14-year-olds, the principals of their schools, and their teachers of civic education and three related subjects took part in the Civic Education Study (CIVIC), which was conducted in 28 countries, including rich industrial countries and less wealthy southern European, South American, and eastern European countries. Both studies were based on previous comparative studies and were prepared in careful cooperation with experts from the participating countries.

The Civic Education Study - which, like TIMSS, was initiated by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) - was carried out in two phases. In the first phase, researchers conducted national case studies examining the traditions, goals, and conditions of civic education in the respective countries (Torney-Purta et al. 1999). In the second phase (data collection: 1999), nationally representative samples of the grades attended by the majority of 14-year-olds, their civic education teachers, and the principals of their schools were surveyed on civics (Torney-Purta et al. 2001). In some of the participating countries, 18-year-olds were also surveyed.

The international student questionnaires took one-and-a-half hours (i.e., a double lesson) to complete. The German project group took the opportunity to develop a national questionnaire, which required an additional 45 minutes of testing time. In addition to the reports in English describing the results in international comparison (Händle et al. 1999), the German project group at the Max Planck Institute for Human Development has published several German articles and books presenting the studies and findings of the first phase of the project (Händle et al. 1999) as well as the results of the second phase for German readers (Oesterreich 2002).

The wealth of data collected provides for analyses and interpretations going well beyond the results published thus far on the national and international level. A particularly worthwhile approach is to describe the different patterns of civic education emerging across the participating countries, and to interpret cross-country similarities and differences in the context of the specific conditions for civic education in schools and the respective political culture. This is particularly important in that - in contrast to mathematical and scientific competencies, for example - civic knowledge is not acquired mainly in the classroom context, but is also learned outside school: in the political culture of the country, via the media, in discussions with parents and others, and through young people's own participation in social and political organizations and in school life.

Differences in the patterns and outcomes of civic education across the participating countries can best be described and interpreted by representatives of the countries in question. In this context, countries with results differing from the German results are of particular interest. How can these differences be explained? To what extent do differences in civic education programs contribute to these disparities? What can Germany learn from the countries whose young people show better results in civic competencies and attitudes?

## German students in international comparison

At the beginning of the 1970s, 14-year-olds in eight countries were first surveyed as part of an international comparative study initiated by the IEA (*Torney et al. 1975*). At this time of increased political mobilization in schools and colleges, German 14-year-olds were outperformed on civic knowledge only by their counterparts in the Netherlands, and scored higher than students in Finland, Ireland, Israel, Italy, New Zealand, or the United States. In Finland, Germany, and the USA, in particular, male students scored higher on civic knowledge than females. In all of the participating countries, and especially in the USA, the socio-economic status of the student's family showed a positive correlation with civic knowledge. An open instructional climate was also associated with greater civic knowledge.

When interpreting the data of comparative - and other - studies, however, it is important to bear in mind that these are measurements of reality that can be influenced in various ways. The level of familiarity with multiple-choice tests may affect scores on knowledge tests, for example. Positive effects may also result if a country's civic traditions and curricula correspond with the conception of the study. Furthermore, differences in what is regarded as socially desirable in a peer culture, school culture, or the political culture of a country, may influence student responses. It thus remains to be discussed whether differing concepts of what is considered socially desirable in the participating countries may have influenced questionnaire responses. For example, it seems worth considering whether the finding that students in Australia, England, Norway, Sweden, and the USA score better in interpreting civic information than they do in civic knowledge can be attributed to their greater familiarity with the politically correct responses implied by the former tests. In addition, it is important to take into account that results change over the young people's development, throughout their educational career, and with the political situation of the country. It can be assumed that the civic knowledge of respondents increases with age. For example, respondents in Poland, Cyprus, and the USA - countries with an above-average performance in the study - are six to eleven months older than their Belgian counterparts, whose performance was below average (*Torney-Purta et al. 2001*, p. 35).

Results of individual countries should be seen against the background of the patterns of results found for three different groups of countries sharing some characteristic findings. The young people in rich industrial countries, for example, tend to be low on measures of social and political engagement. The finding that students in the Scandinavian countries express an above-average willingness to participate in political and social activities in school could thus be interpreted as a positive result of civic education programs in these countries. The higher readiness of young people in the poorer southern European and South American countries to participate in political and social activities should probably not only be interpreted as an accomplishment of civic education programs, but in the context of the political culture and political movements of these countries. Compared to the countries in the other two groups, 14-year-olds in the eastern European countries report a low level of trust in the government and high expectations that it will improve social and economic welfare; they do not consider the classroom climate to be open and participatory, and are reluctant to participate in school. However, in Poland and Romania, students are significantly above the international mean in their willingness to participate in school, and young people in Poland see the classroom climate as positively as their counterparts in the rich industrial countries. How can these findings be explained? Can these positive outcomes be interpreted as achievements of civic education programs in these countries?

The results of the second comparative IEA study on civic education show that young people in Germany are no longer frontrunners when it comes to civic knowledge, but that they now are in the middle of the international ranking. Cross-country differences in this domain are fairly small, however (*Torney-Purta et al. 2001*, p. 53). The study shows only minimal gender differences in civic knowledge.

However, what is more alarming than Germany's middle ranking in terms of civic knowledge is the below-average performance of its students in other domains of civic education. Students in Germany

score below the international mean on three of the four scales measuring civic engagement, as well as on the scales assessing attitudes to immigrants and national identification. They exceed the international mean only in their support for the rights of women and their experience of an open instructional climate (*Torney-Purta et al. 2001*, p. 179). In international comparison, teachers in Germany see themselves to be competent in their subject area. They regard themselves as well paid and well equipped with instructional material. In order to improve civic education, teachers in Germany recommend further education in methods, more instructional time for civic education, project-based instruction, and more participation in schools (*Torney-Purta et al. 2001*, *Händle 2001*).

Germany falls into the category of rich industrial countries, the average gross national product (GNP) of which is around ten times higher than that of the eastern European countries, and twice as high as that of the less wealthy southern European countries such as Portugal, Cyprus, and Greece. Germany's GNP gives it in mid-league position among the rich industrial countries - behind Switzerland, Norway, Denmark, the USA, and Sweden, but ahead of Belgium, Finland, England, Australia, and Italy. At 4.8% of GNP, however, expenditure on the state education system is lower in Germany than in any of the other countries in this category. Education expenditure is highest in the Scandinavian countries (Sweden: 8.3%; Denmark: 8.1%; Finland: 7.5%, Norway: 7.4%), but in the USA it is also much higher than in Germany, at 5.4% (*Torney-Purta et al. 2001*, p. 17 f.).

Students in other rich industrial countries that spend a larger proportion of GNP on education achieve much better results than German students in civic knowledge (Norway, Sweden, USA), in their willingness to participate in school (Denmark, Norway, Sweden), and in their support for the rights of immigrants (Sweden, USA, Norway). All these countries have integrative school systems that do not require students to repeat grades and that provide a wide range of remedial support for lower achieving students, thus encouraging social inclusion and equality. These countries offer a broad spectrum of afternoon activities, thus affording more opportunities for social and civic learning than is possible in the half-day schools established in Germany. The finding that students in Germany consider the classroom climate to be just as open and participatory as students in these countries suggests that the low overall performance of German students is not primarily attributable to their teachers.

It seems worthwhile discussing why young people in countries such as Cyprus and Poland, which have both a low GNP and a low proportion of GNP earmarked for education, score high on both civic knowledge and civic engagement, as well as on their national identification and support for immigrant rights (*Torney-Purta et al. 2001*, p. 179).

The correlations identified by this international comparative study are of particular interest for the promotion and improvement of civic education. As in the first IEA study, an open climate for classroom discussion shows a positive correlation with civic knowledge. The international report pays particular attention to factors that appear to have a positive influence on the intention to vote: civic knowledge, an open and participatory classroom climate, and learning about the importance of voting in school (*Torney-Purta et al. 2001*). In view of the low turnout in USA elections, this focus is quite understandable from the US perspective, where an important question is what schools can do to increase electoral turnout. However, the question of whether 14-year-olds who indicate that they expect to vote as adults actually do so remains unanswered. It is possible that their responses to this question are biased by socially desirable responding at school. Their later voting behavior is more likely to be influenced by that of their parents and other role models.

Perhaps more interesting and stimulating than findings on the intention to vote, however, are the negative correlations between civic knowledge and engagement found in many of the countries. For example, in some South American, southern and eastern European countries, students demonstrate low levels of civic knowledge, but their readiness to participate in political and social activities is high (Chile, Colombia, Lithuania, Portugal, Romania). In other countries, above-average scores on civic knowledge or interpretive skills are associated with below-average scores on several scales of civic engagement (Czech Republic, England, Finland, Sweden) (*Torney-Purta et al. 2001*, p. 179). Do these findings indicate that civic knowledge and civil engagement are two relatively independent domains that are shaped in different ways by the social and political culture of the society and the school? This supports the hypothesis that acquiring civic knowledge and learning social and political participation are both important aspects of civic education. In Germany, supplementary data concerning the effects of civic knowledge and democratic competencies on desirable goals of civic education were gathered in the national student questionnaire, in the tradition of studies on authoritarian and democratic personalities. These findings will be presented here (see also *Oesterreich 2002*).

The results of the four scales assessing political and social participation correspond in most countries: the readiness to participate in conventional political behavior and in socially engaged

political behavior, the willingness to show civic engagement in school and in adult life. As mentioned above, it can be interpreted as a positive outcome of civic education programs when - in contrast to the generally low readiness of young people to engage in political behavior - willingness to participate in school is high, as is the case in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark (though not in Finland).

Cross-country similarities and differences in student attitudes toward the rights of women and immigrants are also of interest. In the rich industrial countries, it is only in Norway, Sweden, and the USA that 14-year-olds voice above-average support for the equal rights of both women and immigrants. Discrepancies emerge in other industrial countries, where young people express above-average support for the rights of women, but below-average support for immigrant rights (Denmark, England, Germany, and Switzerland). Low levels of support for immigrant rights are found in countries where a high proportion of the young people participating in the study were born abroad - this holds for Germany (19%) and Switzerland (17%) - though not for all countries with a high immigrant student population, e.g., the USA (11%), Sweden (8%), and Norway (6%) (*Torney-Purta et al. 2001*, p. 35). The high support for immigrant rights expressed in Hong Kong can perhaps be explained by the fact that - although 20% of the students participating were born outside the country - migrants to Hong Kong generally have the same cultural background as the native population. Does the same hold for the Russian Federation, where 14% of the young people surveyed were born abroad, and students voice an average level of support for the immigrant rights?

To help achieve a deeper understanding of the factors impacting on the civic education of young people and to provide impulses for the improvement of civic education programs, particularly in German schools, we have invited experts - primarily from the countries that clearly outperformed Germany in the IEA Civic Education Study - to contribute to this Special Issue. The southern European countries are represented by Cyprus, where students earn very high scores on both civic knowledge and civic engagement (cf. Constantinos Papanastasiou et al.), and Portugal, where young people are low in civic knowledge, but high on measures of civic engagement (cf. Isabel Menezes et al.). The English speaking rich industrialized countries are of special interest because their young people are used to testing - in contrast to students in Germany. Accordingly the results in interpretative skills are above the mean in these countries. Especially the Australian findings support participation in school development (Suzanne Mellor). From the group of rich industrial countries we have also chosen Norway, a country in which young people exceed the international mean in all domains of civic education examined in the study, below-average scores only in their willingness to participate in conventional political behavior in adult life (cf. Rolf Mikkelsen), as is also the case in Germany. From the German perspective, we present findings on civic knowledge and democratic competencies gathered primarily by means of the German national questionnaire (cf. Detlef Oesterreich). The broad approach of the CIVIC study can contribute to a better understanding of civic education in contrast to narrow politics of league tables (Gita Steiner-Khamsi).

We hope that this Special Issue will further the thoughtful and creative analysis and discussion of the IEA Civic Education Study and the rich database this ambitious project has provided, and that the articles will both supply insights into the current state of civic education and identify potential points of intervention.

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