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Editorial

1 Introduction

Elections are seen as a core element of all understandings of democracy and most conceptions of citizenship education aim at fostering competent participation in elections. States and governments are interested in high levels of voter turnout as a symbol of political legitimation. Most of them launch educational policies for securing and increasing political participation. In the recent past, however, many old and new democracies witnessed a slow but constant decrease not only in electoral participation but also in their citizens' interest in politics. Apparently, a growing part of them was discontent with the perceived outcome of their political system, the responsibility and achievement of the ruling political classes, and with their own socio-economic situation. In the opinion of others, elections didn't change much more than an exchange of personnel within the political classes which had no or little impact on their own conditions of living and future expectations.

This rather sceptical picture of the state of political participation is very popular. At present, however, the gloomy painting seems to need some brightening – paradoxically against the backdrop of challenges to democracy and democracies due to the coincidence of a complex of disturbing collective experience within a rather short period of time:

The surprising results of the presidential elections in the US and of the Brexit referendum in the UK, the long-standing “guided democracy” in the Russian Federation and the upcoming autocracy in Turkey, the installation of illiberal democracies in Hungary and, more and more, in Poland – all of them supported by a big part of the respective population –, the increasing support for illiberal, xenophobic and hyper-nationalist movements and parties in many countries and the feared success of right-wing politicians in the presidential elections in France and parliamentary elections in the Netherlands and Germany. Core countries of Europe are expected to fall prey to populist politicians, authoritarian and isolationist policy and illiberal conversion of the polity.

2 Counteraction from the electorate?

However, the impression of an alarming accumulation of severe threats against an accustomed understanding of political and societal democracy seems to trigger some

counteraction from the electorate, expressed, for instance, in the Dutch election returns, a relatively high voter turnout, the astonishing success of a pro-European presidential candidate in France or the recent pro-European movement “Pulse of Europe” in several countries of the European Union.

Although the Dutch case may create a certain feeling of relief, liberal democracies in Europe and beyond continue to be challenged. Some European democracies display deep political antagonism and their societies seem to be more or less divided, not only into a number of parallel societies or even tribal islands, but also in terms of socio-economic class, inheritance of socio-economic status and extremely unequal distribution of risk, uncertainty and insecurity. In times of economic globalization, the principal tension between capitalism and democracy has become more obvious than before.

Moreover, in some countries a considerable part of the population is formally excluded from political citizenship. Socio-economic and political disadvantage especially applies to the migrant working force and their families and to refugees and asylum seekers. Parts of the autochthonous population – among them past immigrants living in a country for generations –, perceive themselves as disadvantaged in terms of income, wealth, status and influence. Against this backdrop, everybody who speaks about citizenship and citizenship education must not remain silent on economic and political inequality.

Citizenship education is confronted with perturbing evidence indicating that parts of the youth show a tendency towards radical nationalism, illiberal politics and authoritarian leadership. Moreover, in some countries, governments or the ruling political and economic classes misuse formal and informal citizenship education for securing support for the prevailing power relations and ideology and for minimalizing criticism and opposition. From studies we know that sometimes teachers' attitudes, beliefs and classroom practices are not so close to a democratic education which should foster an independent and critical thinking of the students. This applies even to the field of civic and citizenship education. Empirical evidence, however, is mixed. Some studies are to be found in the Journal of Social Science Education (see e. g. [Margarita Jeliakova in JSSE 1-2015](#), [Georgi Dimitrov in JSSE 1-2008](#)).

In this situation, the editors of the Journal of Social Science Education are happy to contribute to the current debates by publishing some topical papers “just-in-time” in this issue. We will continue our efforts in this regard in the next edition of the JSSE. It will present papers dealing with the problem of inequality and democratic attitudes, mock elections and critical democratic citizenship, the contribution of young migrants to teaching politics and

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country reports on citizenship and economic education in Bulgaria, Croatia, Hungary and Italy.

3 Failure of citizenship education?

We start this issue with a provocative question: Are the educational outcome of social studies and the political outcome of the US presidential elections two closely intertwined phenomena? In his essay *American Democracy in Distress: The Failure of Social Education*, Richard Neumann argues that the crisis of democracy in the US not only originates from a range of severe political and economic problems, but also from the political and public marginalization of social and participatory education in schools. He criticizes the deterioration of civic mindedness and citizenship literacy and the dominance of an “education for conformity and control”. In his opinion, a shift towards a culture of research oriented learning and critical thinking in Social Studies could contribute to democratic change (for papers on critical thinking see [JSSE 4-2011](#), [1-2015](#), [2-2016](#), [3-2016](#) and [Laurence J. Splitter in 1-2011](#)).

The commentary of Isabel Menezes, *The Failure of Social Education or Just Going Down the Road of Post-Democratic Politics?*, emphasizes the experimenting of young people with new participation practices. She questions whether committed democratic action really stems from instilled information on citizenship or rather from an emotionally driven decision to take sides and to intervene. Hence, citizenship education should go beyond merely preparing the youth for postponed political participation and acknowledge children and the youth as citizens here and now.

Fostering a “thick type of engagement” may be one of the ways how to achieve this (see [Isolde de Groot and Wiel Veugelers in JSSE 4-2015](#)). In addition, the interested reader may refer to French educational policy in times of crisis as presented in “*Mobilising for the Values of the Republic*” – *France's Education Policy Response to the “Fragmented Society”* from [Matthias Busch and Nancy Morys in JSSE 3-2016](#). We will take up this topic in the next number of JSSE.

4 Political education and political biography

Much too often, research on citizenship education narrowly focuses on schools, curricula and classroom teaching and its short-term effects on knowledge, attitudes and reported behaviour. The paper *Political Youth Education in Germany: Presenting a Qualitative Study on its Biographically Long Term Effects* of Nadine Balzter, Yan Ristau and Achim Schröder presents individual case studies of former participants of extra-curricular forms of political education who are interpreting their own political biography. In educational practices, as they observe, the traditional triad of imparting knowledge, enabling judgement and encouraging participation is complemented with the dimensions of emotions, personal development and adolescents’ identity.

To systematize the effects of political education, the authors deduct a typology from the interviews made: political commitment, occupational orientation, poli-

tically enlightened attitude and acquisition of basic activatable political skills. They observe that political education can support personal political development in progress, work as significant instigator or as a first opener to the political field. Moreover, the findings highlight the impact of key persons in the education process on the political judgement and the important effects of distant or unfamiliar learning venues. The authors further stress the relevance of starting the learning process from the adolescents’ experience, of organizing options of experience and of establishing networks of local organisations of political education for the youth.

5 Advise applications and adolescents’ political identity

Normally, elections are thought to be a rather conventional experience of political participation. This does, of course, not apply to young voters. Their experience is addressed by Niels Nørgaard Kristensen and Trond Solhaug in their paper *Students as First-time Voters: The Role of Voter Advice Applications in Self-reflection on Party Choice and Political Identity*. In a study with a qualitative design, students in Norwegian schools were interviewed about their individual reflections on experience made with these applications for relating a party to the political self. The theoretical frame draws on identity theory, theory of society, practice theory and the concept of political identity.

The authors distinguish three types of making use of the voter advice applications (VAA): a sceptical, a confirmationist and an explorationist approach. They were surprised about “very little instrumental reasoning among our respondents” who, instead, grounded their reasoning “in altruistic arguments rather than in interest maximisation” and in value based reflection. VAAs work as tools of reflection, they help clarifying the political identity of the young voters the most of whom are taking voting very seriously and using it for finding their political identity. As a main conclusion from the research, the authors argue that “the goal of finding an identity should be more emphasised in political education at the expense of formal institutional knowledge”.

The next issue of the JSSE will continue the topic of young voters with a paper on mock elections. The reader may also be interested in a look back and browse past papers, for example on a tailored campaign for young voters in Germany or the impact of early social media on the youth in electoral processes (see the papers of [Patrick Rössler](#) and [Diana Owen in JSSE 2/1-2008/09](#)).

6 Inequality and political literacy

Socio-economic inequality affects a democratic polity in general as well as its educational system. Carla Malafaia, Tiago Neves and Isabel Menezes assume that participation is closely related to socio-economic class and status. Their article *In-Between Fatalism and Leverage: The Different Effects of Socioeconomic Variables on Students’ Civic and Political Experiences and Literacy* applies capital theory of Bourdieu to explain the differences of political literacy and participation patterns of

the Portuguese youth along the dimensions of cultural capital, economic capital and private or public school.

The findings from a multivariate analysis of data gathered by a self-report questionnaire confirm again that high cultural capital fosters political knowledge. But the political literacy of public school students is higher than of those from private schools – except for those who enjoy a high level of cultural capital. It may be that private schools are less successful in this respect because of avoiding a politicisation of school life. Interestingly, economic capital plays a crucial role for the level of political activism, as students experiencing private financial problems participate more often in diverse forms of political activism, especially in online participation or demonstrations. The study shows that socio-economic inequality has a clear impact on unequal political literacy and participation, which, however, depends on the organisational context and the specific situation of severe societal and economic crises.

Further papers on the impact of the social background on citizenship education and participation are to be found in JSSE 3-2014 (see for instance the papers of [Onken/Lange](#) and of [Jover/Belando-Montoro/Guío](#)).

7 Tensions between teaching and testing

Democratic citizenship education aiming at a *personal* political identity of young people and preferring pupil-centred and problem-oriented learning on the one hand, new public management policies which standardise purpose and outcome of social studies and govern educators and the youth by numbers on the other hand do not seem to be a good match. How do social studies teachers react to the local implementation of outcome-oriented modes of being governed? In *Constraints and Meaning-Making: Dealing with the Multifacetedness of Social Studies in Audited Teaching Practices in Sweden* Ola Strandler presents the results of a study based on classroom observation and interviews with experienced Swedish teachers. Are the extrinsic dimensions of social studies like generic aims, student-oriented approach, developing an “individual understanding of oneself, life and society” able to survive the outcome-oriented reorganisation?

Transparency to external stakeholders, a key feature of new public management, pressed teachers to reorient their teaching toward of “the measurable, reportable and evaluable”, to marginalise the extrinsic dimensions and to concentrate on the disciplinary intrinsic dimensions of the subject like scientific content, concepts, assumptions and models. They experienced tensions between teaching and testing, in a process of self-regulated assimilation they reacted by shifting the content towards “well-delineated, well-defined and assessable content”. Teachers, however, also appreciated the clarity of the new approach, the weight added to soft subjects like social studies through grading and examinations and the predictability of the learning process. Nevertheless, the policy change and its technical instruments challenge the traditional aims of social studies by reversing the culture of teaching and learning. More papers on output

orientation and testing in social science education are to be found in [JSSE 4-2010](#).

8 Understandings of prices and environment

The next paper does not discuss the impact of educational political change on teaching, but the impact of teaching on the conceptual change of students. Caroline Ignell, Peter Davies and Cecilia Lundholm focus on what Ola Strandler calls the intrinsic dimensions of social studies. In *Understanding ‘Price’ and the Environment: Exploring Upper Secondary Students’ Conceptual Development*, they present a qualitative longitudinal study on changes in Swedish upper secondary students’ conceptions of environmental issues in pricing (environmental externalities). They approach students’ conceptions on how prices actually are determined and judgements on how they should be determined as multiple alternative frameworks, not as scientifically deficient misconceptions. Everyday thinking of students in these issues is fragmentary and experience is missing or misleading. Although all students attended a course in business and economics, the changes observed were “tentative and transitional at most”, “no evidence of consistent change in conceptions” was found.

Students’ changes concerning the relation of pricing and environment turned out to be very diverse, their utterances on the perception of actual pricing and normative ideas of pricing were rather inconsistent. Consistent cumulative learning in the sense of moving forward from basic over partial to complex understanding over time was not observed, but students made progress toward partial conceptions explaining the relationship of environmental impact and price with reference to production costs and production externalities. A further important finding is that individuals operate with several aspects of conceptions at the same time. The authors also highlight that the students’ incoherent way of thinking about supply, demand and price hinders a differentiated understanding of environmental policy issues and limits the knowledge necessary for effective citizenship. Economic conceptions of young people are also discussed in [JSSE 2-2013](#).

9 Book review

Last but not least the reader may enjoy Ian Davies’ review of Joel Westheimer’s book: *What kind of citizen? Educating our children for the common good*. It is a promising read for those who like clear and engagingly written books on a key issue of citizenship education.