
Participation Experiences and Civic Concepts, Attitudes and Engagement: implications for citizenship education projects

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ABSTRACT This article considers participation experiences of 14 year-old and upper secondary students in six European countries that were involved in the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) Civic Education Study: the Czech Republic, Norway, Portugal, Slovenia, Sweden and Switzerland, countries that vary in their history of institution of democratic regimes. Participation has been considered as a crucial dimension of citizenship, and experiences within civil society are viewed as a relevant opportunity for developing personal and social resources essential for the survival and expansion of democracy. Additionally, participation experiences in adolescence seem to be a good predictor of political engagement during adult life. Results show that participation is most evident in organisations that provide enrichment activities (sports, music, computers), but both 14 year-old and upper secondary students are involved in voluntary activities, in some civic-related organisations (mainly Scouts, religious affiliated and environmental), and in experiences within the school (with student councils and school newspapers at the top). However, cross-national and cross-age variations are significant. Overall, there seems to be a positive impact of the frequency of students' involvement on civic concepts, attitudes and engagement, but results also reveal that more is not necessarily better. The most relevant implication for the development of citizenship education projects is that 'action' can be a powerful learning tool but only if it is intentionally designed and systematically supported: the quality of participation experiences, both in terms of meaningful involvement, of interaction with (different) others, and opportunities for personal integration, is therefore crucial if the goal is to promote the personal empowerment and social pluralism on which the essence of democracy relies.

Renewed interest in citizenship is visible across several disciplines and discourses since the 1990s (Van Steenberg, 1994), making citizenship, as Ignatieff (1995) puts it, a contemporary 'myth that appeals to our political imagination' (p. 53). European educational policies have followed this general

trend, with a particular emphasis on citizenship education as a crucial goal of education emerging since the mid-1990s (Menezes, forthcoming) [1] due to the recognition of the growing phenomena of social exclusion, discrimination and political disengagement, together with diluted feelings of social belonging and cohesion (Torney-Purta et al, 1999). The International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) Civic Education Study also departs from this acknowledgement of participation deficits in our democracies and aims to explore how young people construct meaning out of the political world, in terms of knowledge, competencies, attitudes and behaviours (Torney-Purta, 1994). In the context of the IEA study, analysis of civic engagement and participation of 14 year-olds and upper secondary students included a diversity of attitudes and behaviours. In this article, we will analyse European students' political experiences both within and outside the school and their impact in dimensions of civic concepts, attitudes and engagement, within six countries in the IEA Civic Education Study, which tested both younger and older adolescents: the Czech Republic, Norway, Portugal, Slovenia, Sweden, and Switzerland.[2] It should be noted that these countries include both societies with long-established democratic traditions (Norway, Sweden and Switzerland), and countries (Czech Republic, Portugal, and Slovenia) that have only experienced democratic transitions in the last three decades.

On the Relevance of Political Engagement and Participation for Democracy

Even a brief analysis of the field of citizenship theory reveals that citizenship is far from being a consensual, fixed-meaning concept (Dahrendrof, 1994; Van Steenberg, 1994; Kymlicka & Norman, 1995; Carter & Stokes, 1998; Janoski, 1998; Benhabib, 1999; Torres, 2001). However, there seems to be some agreement that citizenship contains both a normative, formal dimension, which regards 'the belonging by individuals [within a political community] [3] ... of certain universalistic passive and active rights on a specified level of equality' (Janoski, 1998, p. 9), and a sociological dimension, involving the individual's feelings of belonging to the community and daily experiences that entail exercising one's rights and duties (Benhabib, 1999). Even if the emphasis on citizenship within educational discourses does not explicitly recognise this dual dimension of the concept, it is in fact the tension between the two features of citizenship, normative and sociological, that accounts for the criticism that the project of equality that underlies citizenship failed (Ignatieff, 1995), and that underneath claims for (formal) universality is a pressure for homogeneity that denies and represses individual and group differences (Young, 1995) – a discussion that is not only at the core of contemporary citizenship theory (e.g. Beiner, 1995), but has also relevant educational implications. Emphasis on a formal dimension would limit citizenship education to a mere 'mechanism of diffusion, socialization and recognition of

rights' (Gentili, 2000, p. 146), therefore stressing 'knowledge about' *citizenship as a fact* instead of acknowledging that citizenship is the product of ongoing *social and political deliberation and construction* based on criteria that are circumstantial (Benhabib, 1999) – meaning that citizenship education should, rather, focus on students' empowerment for assuming an active role in this process of defining and expanding citizenship itself. This would imply engaging students as 'active change agents' (vs. clients or consumers) (Pinkett, 2000, p. 2) and therefore a displacement from knowledge to action – which involves competences, dispositions and the critical awareness and mobilisation of social resources (Zimmerman, 1995): 'learning includes drawing upon personal and social systems resources and extending communication with others' both within and outside 'the person's own immediate life space or daily interaction' (Kelly et al, 2000, p. 141), and therefore students' experiences (both within and outside the school) must be (re)located at the centre of citizenship education projects.

The prominence of 'active citizenship' within educational policy documents seems, nonetheless, to overlook that 'active' means quite different things across political democratic traditions (Eisenstadt, 2000), with participation ranging from citizens being 'spectators who vote' (Walzer, 1995, p. 165) to being conceived 'as a basic right ... [to be exerted] in the largest possible number of social life scenarios ... ensuring [citizens] the possibility to control the conditions that govern their lives' (Eisenstadt, 2000, p. 7). Therefore, when educational policies enforce 'active citizenship' one might ask whether they favour a 'playing by the rules' citizen who episodically votes and regularly pays taxes, or consider active participation in a multiplicity of life contexts as essential for the survival of democracy (Santos, 1998). It is particularly (but not exclusively) under this latter communitarian perspective that participation in voluntary associations within the civil society assumes a centrality for democratic life. Participation allows for citizens to develop *personal and social competencies* essential for political action (Battistoni, 1997; Stewart & Weinstein, 1997), to become *empowered* by exerting control over their lives and the life of their communities (Zimmerman, 1995), to improve their *sense of community* (De Piccoli et al, 2002), to get involved in the process of *public deliberation* over citizenship definition and expansion (Habermas, 1999) and to experience *face-to-face interactions* with other citizens who might have different perspectives on the common good, thus increasing both *social pluralism* (Arendt, 1958), *interpersonal trust* and *tolerance* (Stewart & Weinstein, 1997; Morgan & Streb, 2001; Putnam, 2001). Finally, participation experiences during adolescence and young adulthood seem to be a good predictor of political engagement during the adult years (Verba et al, 1995; Flanagan & Sherrrod, 1998; Hahn, 1998; Youniss et al, 1998; Roschelle et al, 2000). But it should be noted that the benefits of participation are dependent upon factors such as the organisational structure of associations, favouring participation that occurs in the context of horizontal and democratic associations (Putnam, 1993), and the significance and quality of the experience, that is, experiences

should be meaningful from the point of view of the participant and enable him/her with lasting genuine and challenging opportunities for 'action' balanced with systematic occasions for personal integration (Sprinthall, 1991; Ferreira & Menezes, 2002).

However, research on participation shows a declining tendency, mostly when it comes to traditional political organisations such as parties and unions, but also in relation to other civil associations, both in youngsters and adults (e.g. Hahn, 1998; Putnam, 2001) – a phenomenon which has been related to the growing personalisation of political life (Braga da Cruz, 1995), to increasing individualism in our societies (Koliba, 2000), to the privatisation of social life and leisure (Putnam, 2001), and to the emergence of 'market democracies' in which citizens are more and more political consumers rather than actors (Boyte & Kari, 1996). This is why the analysis of the IEA Civic Education Study data regarding participation in civic-related organisations is of particular significance. In this article, we will consider 14 year-old and upper secondary students' participation experiences, and explore their impact in terms of dimensions of civic concepts, attitudes and engagement.

Sample and Instrument

Data includes both the 14 year-old and upper secondary students' samples tested in six European countries involved in the IEA Civic Education Study: the Czech Republic, Norway, Portugal, Slovenia, Sweden and Switzerland. Details about the sampling procedure can be found in the IEA international data reports (Torney-Purta et al, 2000; Amadeo et al, 2002); however, it should be noted that the upper secondary students' sample is not only more diverse in terms of age and grade, but also more subject to selectivity than the younger sample (in fact, the proportion of the sample in relation to the respective age cohort, i.e., the coverage index, varied from 0.39, in Switzerland to 0.99, in Norway [see Amadeo et al, 2002, pp. 32-40 for a fuller discussion]). These countries from northern, central and southern Europe vary in their democratic tradition, with major political transitions both in Portugal (in the mid-1970s) and the Czech Republic and Slovenia (in the late 1980s).

The IEA Civic Education Study test and survey (see Torney-Purta et al, 2001, ch. 2, for details on the process of instrument development) included a total of 15 items related to *participation in associations*, involving both in school (e.g. student councils) and out of school (e.g. youth organisation affiliated with a political party or union) experiences, ranging from more informal activities and groups (e.g. collecting money for a social cause; a group conducting activities to help the community) to more organised institutions (e.g. sports, arts, environmental, religious, ... organisations). Students were asked to declare both *whether they participated in these organisations* ('yes' or 'no') and *how often did they attend meetings or activities of these organisations* (on a four-point-scale, 1 = 'almost every day [4 or more days a week]', 2 = 'several days [1 to 3 days a week]', 3 = 'a few times each month' and 4 = 'never or almost

never'). The participation experiences considered can be typified into four groups:

- *within-school experiences*, that is, participation in student councils, school newspaper groups, and student exchange programmes;
- *extra-school enrichment activities*, such as participation in sports and arts/drama/music organisations and computer clubs [4] – that are probably related to both the expansion of adolescents' education and the use of leisure time, rather than with actual opportunities for civic (even broadly conceived) participation;
- *voluntary activities*, such as participating in a charity collecting money for a social cause or in a group conducting activities to help the community; and
- *involvement in civic-related organisations*, such as youth organisations affiliated with political parties, environmental, human rights, cultural/ethnic and religious organisations, UN/UNESCO clubs, and girls' and boys' scouts.

The survey also included items on civic concepts, attitudes and engagement. In this article we will focus on citizenship concepts, trust in government-related institutions, positive attitudes towards immigrants, political interest and expected political participation. With the exception of political interest, all other dimensions were the result of confirmatory factor analysis (see Torney-Purta et al [2001] and Amadeo et al [2002] for a complete description of the scaling procedures), and were validated both for the 14 year-old and upper secondary students.

Citizenship concepts explored youngsters' perspectives about citizens' responsibilities ('an adult who is a good citizen ...' with a four-point-scale from 'very bad' to 'very good' for democracy) and involved two factors: importance of *conventional citizenship* (e.g. votes, joins a political party, follows political issues, engages in discussions) and of *social movement-related citizenship* (e.g. would participate in a peaceful protest against an unjust law, takes part in activities promoting human rights/the environment).

Trust in government-related institutions included five items on the national government, local government, courts, the police, political parties and the national parliament (using a four-point scale from 'always' to 'never').

Positive attitudes towards immigrants [5] included five items on equality of rights, equal opportunities in terms of education and voting, and the right of immigrants to preserve their language and customs (using a four-point scale from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree').

Political interest was measured by a single item ('I am interested in politics') using a four-point scale, ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 4 = strongly agree.

Expected political participation included 12 items on a variety of activities, including conventional, unconventional and illegal forms of political participation. Students were asked to declare if they felt they would do these activities in the future using a four-point scale (from 1, 'I will certainly not do

this' to 4, 'I will certainly do this'). However, only a three-item scale emerged through the confirmatory factor analysis, including joining a political party, writing letters to a newspaper regarding social/political problems, and being a candidate.

Results

As shown in Figure 1, both 14 year-old and upper secondary students, in general, tend to be mostly involved in sports and art/drama/music organisations or computer clubs, which were typified above as enrichment activities, with voluntary activities coming second, followed by some within-school experiences and by involvement in civic-related organisations (namely scouts, religious-affiliated and environmental organisations). There are some interesting variations with age, the most notable being that involvement with youth organisations is twice as intense for the upper secondary students, even if engagement is lower than 8%.

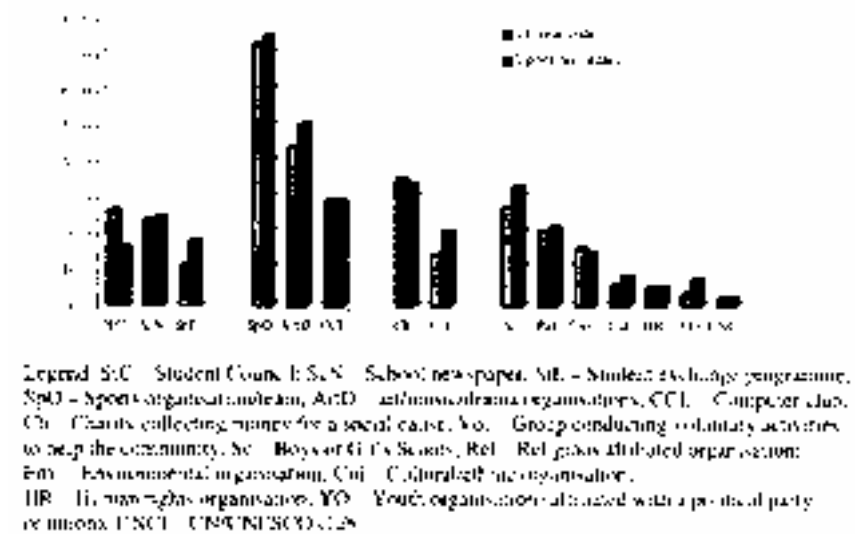


Figure 1. Total participation experiences of 14 year-old and upper secondary students in and out of school civic activities/organisation (Czech Republic, Norway, Portugal, Slovenia, Sweden and Switzerland).

However, there are evident cross-national variations that must be highlighted (Table I). In Norway, for instance, collecting money for a social cause is the most frequent experience for 14 year-olds, and also involves slightly more than 80% of upper secondary students – a clearly distinctive pattern from that of

other countries. On the other hand, both Norwegian and Swedish older students have less participation in student councils than their younger colleagues (whose involvement is nearly 50%), while the opposite is true for all the other countries (with percentages higher than 45% in Portugal and Switzerland). Scouts (with particularly high rates in Sweden) are the most relevant organisation in most countries (but not in Portugal) with regard to more strictly civic-related contexts. Religious affiliated organisations are second in most countries, with the exception of the Czech Republic. Participation in environmental organisations involves 10-15% of youngsters in general – with the Portuguese exception, where one in four students has experienced some form of participation. But, undoubtedly, the most significant cross-age increase regards participation in youth organisations affiliated with political parties or unions, with older adolescents participating at least three times more than their younger colleagues – even if rates are usually low, specially in those countries with a more recent experience of democracy (the highest percentage being that of Slovenia with 7.8), and rising to a maximum of 14.5% in Scandinavian countries (Norway and Sweden).

In general, even if it is obvious that most youngsters have had some participation experiences – in fact, only fewer than 9% had no involvement at all across countries – these are mostly related to enrichment activities (sports and art/music/drama organisations and computer clubs). And even if these might provide opportunities that are important for developing the personal and social competences and resources that we discussed earlier, it is possible that their learning potential regarding citizenship might be less relevant than that of experiences which are intentionally initiated to produce some kind of social change (De Piccoli et al, 2002), as might be the case with voluntary activities, civic-related organisations and within-school experiences. Concerning voluntary activities and civic-related organisations, with some exceptions (Norway regarding charity in favour of social causes; Sweden vis-à-vis Scouts) participation tends not to involve more than 30% of the students, at best. It is relevant to note that more ‘traditionally’ political organisations only engage a minority of youngsters, and that engagement in environmental organisations, which sometimes are considered as ‘politically’ alternative contexts, tends to be lower than 15% (with the exception of Portugal). In this sense, the school emerges as a context where significant participation experiences occur, particularly in students’ councils (even with cross-age variations, with Scandinavian students reporting a significant decrease with age, while Portuguese and Swiss older students are significantly more involved than their younger colleagues), and in groups involved in the school newspaper (in general, more than 20%).

	CZE		NOR		POR		SLV		SWE		SWI	
	14	UpS	14	UpS	14	UpS	14	UpS	14	UpS	14	UpS
A student council/student government	13.1	19.2	47.0	19.2	25.1	52.8	18.1	35.9	48.6	10.6	7.9	45.3
A group which prepares a school newspaper	22.3	26.0	12.9	15.8	26.0	31.0	22.2	26.8	41.0	22.1	19.3	22.0
A student exchange or school partnership programme	5.4	13.1	10.7	13.5	24.3	40.7	5.7	7.1	7.7	15.8	14.4	24.5
A sports organisation or team	69.6	77.0	79.9	84.3	60.8	66.3	61.3	63.8	82.5	86.4	81.8	84.9
An art, music or drama organisation	44.6	54.3	47.3	43.4	36.0	44.9	37.0	49.0	52.2	52.8	47.7	61.3
A computer club	45.7	43.9	13.8	8.2	31.8	32.5	46.5	41.7	21.0	11.6	8.5	3.8
A charity collecting money for a social cause	17.7	15.6	84.1	80.4	19.7	37.0	33.3	30.3	24.9	21.1	26.9	34.6
A group conducting (voluntary) activities to help the community	22.1	24.5	17.6	20.7	9.0	22.3	11.4	19.7	7.7	7.7	11.5	26.2
Boy or Girl Scouts (Guides)	20.4	34.4	30.1	31.9	19.5	18.6	23.9	29.0	46.9	53.9	23.7	34.1
An organisation sponsored by a religious group	8.3	11.0	20.1	19.4	26.5	28.2	31.5	27.6	22.5	20.6	17.3	22.1
An environmental organisation	13.0	12.1	16.1	15.1	24.9	25.4	14.7	9.8	15.4	14.4	10.3	8.4
A cultural organisation based on ethnicity	6.7	4.3	6.7	5.0	3.3	5.1	5.7	11.2	5.4	8.4	6.4	19.9
A human rights organisation	1.8	1.4	5.8	5.7	10.2	7.5	3.9	4.8	5.1	9.7	2.6	3.2
A youth organisation affiliated with a political party or union	0.6	4.2	5.7	14.5	2.0	6.1	1.4	3.1	7.3	14.5	3.9	9.1
A UN or UNESCO club	1.3	1.1	2.8	1.8	1.5	1.1	3.9	4.4	2.1	2.4	0.9	1.7

Table I. Participation experiences of 14 year-old and upper secondary students in the various countries

There is also tendency for more diversity in participation experiences for the older group. The majority of 14 year-olds participate in one (Portugal and Switzerland), two (Czech Republic and Slovenia) or three (Norway and Sweden) different organisations; most upper secondary students are involved in either two (Slovenia and Switzerland) or three (Czech Republic, Portugal, Norway and Sweden).

However, participation in itself says relatively little about intensity, meaning and complexity of the experience – all factors that emerge as relevant in the literature on the impact of participation (Amadeo et al, 2002; Ferreira & Menezes, 2002; Teixeira & Menezes, 2002). The IEA data considers only frequency of participation. In the total sample, around 28% of the 14 year-olds and upper secondary students never or almost never experience any participation, but the majority of the 14 year-olds (50.2%) and more than 40% of the upper secondary students do so on a regular weekly basis – therefore

with a tendency for a decline with age, probably related to increasing interpersonal concerns of older adolescents.[6] This tendency is particularly evident in those countries (Figure 2) that have experienced recent democratic transitions (but also in Switzerland), with the opposite occurring in Scandinavian countries. Across age groups, Norwegian students have the highest rate of weekly participation (above 60%), while Portuguese (together with older Slovenian) show the lowest (below 40%).

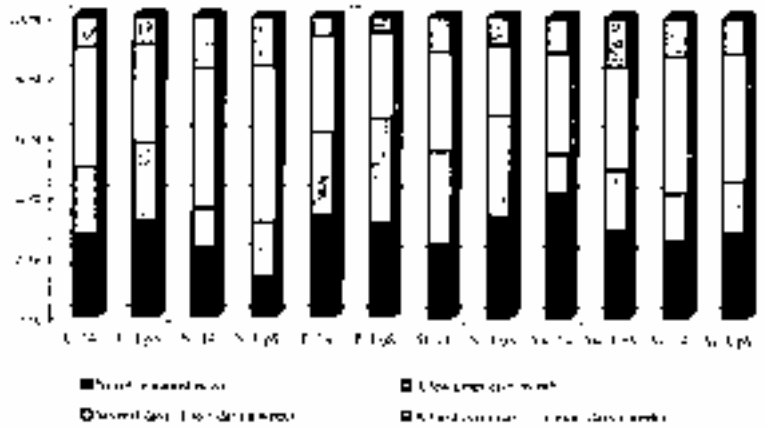


Figure 2. Frequency of participation experiences of 14 year-old and upper secondary students.

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To explore the impact of participation experiences in civic concepts, attitudes and engagement, we performed a multifactorial analysis of variance (MANOVA) using *frequency* of participation as the fixed factor. Since both gender and number of books at home have been shown to have a significant impact in at least some of the dimensions here considered (Torney-Purta et al, 2001; Amadeo et al, 2002), they were included as covariates. For this analysis, frequency was recoded at three levels: participation on a weekly basis, on a monthly basis, and never or almost never. Separate analyses were performed for each of the six countries and for each age group (Table II). Pairwise comparisons are based on Bonferroni confidence intervals.

		14-year-old students			Upper secondary students		
		Sum of Squares	Mean F	Fg. Between	Sum of Squares	Mean F	Fg. Between
CIVIL	CC	14.22	3.96	2.72	19.6	5.42	3.96
	SMI	16.128	4.16	3.71	19.9	5.5	4.07
	F	19.751	5.19	4.67	24.969	6.88	5.07
	Int.	25.865	6.76	6.14	28.871	7.99	5.86
	PI	59.2	15.57	14.07	69.62	19.34	14.07
NOR	CC	17.454	4.64	3.36	21.611	5.92	4.31
	SMI	16.907	4.48	4.02	12.959	3.57	2.61
	F	11.812	3.11	2.81	11.155	3.07	2.23
	Int.	40.556	10.72	9.76	27.989	7.72	5.61
	PI	46.545	12.51	11.30	31.458	8.75	6.35
FIN	CC	29.586	7.89	7.17	37.928	10.53	7.69
	SMI	30.407	8.19	7.47	38.149	10.59	7.76
	F	21.361	5.74	5.20	16.312	4.42	3.21
	Int.	28.464	7.64	6.92	14.138	3.93	2.85
	PI	40.385	10.92	9.90	41.809	11.61	8.50
SWE	CC	14.18	3.77	3.47	11.072	3.10	2.26
	SMI	20.491	5.42	4.96	17.210	4.78	3.50
	F	31.251	8.22	7.52	19.826	5.48	4.01
	Int.	10.003	2.64	2.42	11.153	3.12	2.28
	PI	14.991	3.99	3.67	11.022	3.11	2.27
UK	CC	11.928	3.17	2.92	14.21	3.95	2.88
	SMI	40.567	10.96	10.00	37.121	10.32	7.56
	F	26.457	7.12	6.56	28.508	7.92	5.81
	Int.	13.523	3.67	3.38	11.016	3.10	2.26
	PI	50.919	13.87	12.70	22.274	6.18	4.50
SWI	CC	63.075	16.94	15.44	30.479	8.47	6.14
	SMI	54.21	14.50	13.31	30.059	8.35	6.04
	F	13.765	3.71	3.42	25.009	6.92	5.03
	Int.	48.067	13.12	12.00	30.062	8.35	6.04
	PI	73.828	20.22	18.61	41.9	11.64	8.50

Legend: C = Civic Republics, S = Norway, P = Portugal, N = Slovenia, SW = Sweden, S = Southern and CA = 14-year-old students, U = Upper secondary students, CC = General citizenship, SMI = Social movement citizenship, F = Trust of government-related institutions, Int. = Political attitudes and integration, PI = Political interest, FPP = Expected political participation, W = Week-based participation, M = Monthly-based participation, n = Number of students.

Table II. Summary of between-subject effects on the impact of frequency of participation on dimensions of civic concepts, attitudes and engagement for 14 year-old and upper secondary students

The general trend, consistent across countries and age groups, is that participation has, as would be expected, a positive impact. In most countries and age groups students who participate more frequently in meetings of organisations have higher expectations regarding their political participation in the future. With few exceptions, these students also tend to be more trusting of government-related institutions and more interested in politics. In most countries and age groups, regularly engaged students also favour more social

movement citizenship and conventional citizenship, and display more positive attitudes towards immigrants.

However, in some situations, more does not mean necessarily better: for instance, Norwegian, Slovenian and Swiss upper secondary students whose involvement is on a monthly basis value more than those with a weekly involvement social movement responsibilities of adult citizens; a similar pattern occurs with upper secondary Swedish students regarding political interest and expected political participation, and with the Swiss regarding positive attitudes towards immigrants (foreigners, as it was translated there). To understand these apparently inconsistent results one would need to consider other factors such as type of organisation, intensity and quality of the experience in itself, since specific characteristics of the experience might play a decisive role. For instance, it is impossible to determine in which organisation students are involved, and it might be the case that monthly participation in voluntary activities is more significant than weekly involvement in enrichment activities. One could also consider that if a particular experience is intense but not particularly meaningful or balanced with opportunities for personal integration, its potential for personal development is probably low or even perverse (Sprinthall, 1991). Additionally, results must necessarily be contextualised: for instance, the fact that experiences have no special impact can, in some cases, be explained by the national cultural context; that is, in countries where positive attitudes are more or less generalised, perhaps participation does not add on to this already positive trend. This could be the case for 14 year-old Portuguese and Swiss students whose mean positive attitudes towards immigrants, for the former, and trust in government-related institutions, for the latter, are significantly above the international mean (Torney-Purta et al, 2001).

Finally, the result of the Swiss younger students showing that more might even be worse in the case of attitudes towards immigrants, with those who never or almost never attend meetings having more positive attitudes than those who have a weekly involvement, might highlight one of the possible negative consequences of participation, namely, that it can reinforce 'prejudice towards the members of other groups' (De Piccoli et al, 2002, p. 5) – which stresses again the need to systematically consider the quality of participation experiences, including the opportunities for meaningful interaction with others who are different or have different perspectives.

Discussion

In 1968, Keniston argued that 'those who have had a youth' – one could add a youth in the context of the 1960s – would never become political consumers but active and critical citizens. Obviously, we are no longer in the 1960s and our times are that of political disengagement and apathy: we became more sceptical, more prone to see ourselves as attached to our inner and private sphere than connected to a public space where deliberation over the common

good takes place. We live in times of intense social fragmentation, with the emergence of a multiplicity of specific interest groups whose basic concern is the assertion of their rights and not the defence of any broad perspective on the 'common good' (Eisenstad, 2000) – this erosion of social solidarity and waning of social capital (Putnam, 2001) explains why 'the struggle for the common good together with the struggle for alternative definitions of the common good is losing meaning' (Santos, 1998, p. 17). And it is within this social context that 14 year-old and upper secondary students observed by the IEA Civic Education Study are 'having a youth'.

The analysis of participation included a variety of experiences, some of which might be related to personal enrichment goals, while others more directly involve some type of joint action to promote personal development and social change (voluntary activities, within-school activities, and participation in civic-related organisations). It is obvious that not all of these experiences have the same potential as civic learning opportunities. However, as Putnam stresses, civic engagement refers 'to people's connections with the life of their communities, not only with politics' (1996, p. 1) – considering that there is a broad range of activities (such as socialising and visiting, being a member of a club or a bowling league) that might play a decisive role in promoting social networks, norms of reciprocity and generalised trust. In this sense, the analysis of youngsters' participation experiences in the six European countries here considered reveals that they are both diverse and frequent – even if cross-national variations are relevant. As might be expected, enrichment activities are the most frequent, but involvement in voluntary activities, in school civic-related experiences and in civic organisations show a participatory profile, namely, if one takes into account that fewer than 9% of the students had no involvement at all, and that most students have a regular frequent participation. Finally, if participation in the most conventional political organisations (youth organisations) is not very high, one might wonder if partisanship among adults is higher.

Results demonstrate that 'national norms and traditions appear to play a large role' (Amadeo et al, 2002, p. 138) regarding adolescents' participation experiences. Noteworthy is the relevance of collecting money for a social cause in Norway, of participating in scouts organisations in Sweden, and of being involved in environmental organisations in Portugal. Age differences also reveal a pattern of increasing diversity of experiences. Decline with age is evident in the Czech Republic, Portugal, Slovenia and Switzerland, but not in Scandinavian countries – stressing again the need to take specific national culture into consideration.

There is also a general positive impact of frequency of participation on civic conceptions, attitudes and engagement. However, in some cases, more is not necessarily better, and participation might even generate negative effects, as is the case with Swiss younger students regarding attitudes towards foreigners. Therefore, it makes particular sense to consider existing research that suggests that action in itself is not the answer to promote civic

development (Sprinthall & Scott, 1989; Ferreira & Menezes, 2002; Ribeiro, 2002; Teixeira & Menezes, 2002) in the organisation of citizenship education projects: *action*, i.e., meaningful and challenging experiences that enable people to do things must be balanced with systematic opportunities for *personal integration and reflection*, in secure and supporting *relational contexts*. Moreover, action implies *interaction* with others who inevitably are *different* and have different world visions. And only then can participation experiences contribute to promote both the personal development and empowerment and the social pluralism that are essential to putting democracy into being.

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Notes

- [1] A trend that ultimately prevailed over the 1980s focus on Personal and Social Education, which designated concerns with the role of the school in preventing youth problems (e.g. drug abuse, adolescent pregnancy, intolerance), preparing youngsters to deal with relevant life tasks (e.g. work-related, consumerism, environmental, interpersonal), and, in general, addressing not strictly academic issues (Campos, 1991; Menezes, 1999).
- [2] Only the German-speaking part of Switzerland tested the older population; however, no other central European country with long-established democratic tradition participated in the study of both 14 year-old and upper secondary students.
- [3] Janoski refers, in fact, to individuals within a nation state – a definition that does not account for supra-national political structures, such as the European Union.
- [4] Even if computer clubs might be organised within the school (the same could be argued for UN/UNESCO clubs) the criteria for typifying these experiences privileged the nature of the activity/experience instead of the institutional context where it occurs.
- [5] In the German-speaking areas of Switzerland ‘immigrant’ was translated as ‘foreigner’ – which might involve differences in meaning (Torney-Purta et al, 2001).
- [6] Even if beyond the scope of this article, results from the IEA study also addressed frequency of interaction with friends after school and time spent outside home with friends during the evening; results for the samples here considered show an increase in both items for the older students, as expected (data not shown).

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