

Civic education and the acceptance of democratic values: The role of participatory class climate

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to analyse the relevance of participatory class climate for the acceptance of democratic values among Serbian students who attend the civic education courses and to analyse the moderating role of students' socio-economic status. The data collected in the CE evaluation study (N = 1073, 42% of boys) were used. Multiple regression analysis has shown that democratic values are more embraced by the students of higher SES and those from the classes with a more prominent participatory climate. The relationship between PCC and the importance of democratic values is moderated by SES: the students with the lowest SES gained most from class participation in terms of accepting democratic values.

Keywords: Civic education; Participatory Teaching Methods; Participatory Class Climate; Values; Serbia.

Introduction

Civic education (CE) courses are often viewed as an important agent of political socialization, a 'school of democracy', which should enable and support the building of students' democratic competencies of active and critical citizenry. Based on the idea that democracy struggles if its main values and norms are not supported by well-informed citizens, CE is expected not just to increase political knowledge (e.g. of a political institution, processes, freedoms and human rights), but to enable the development of a more general democratic outlook (e.g. by promoting active involvement in one's society and democratic norms and values).

CE is indeed relatively successful in the transmission of the knowledge-related civic lessons. Numerous studies have shown that CE courses can be successful in increasing the students' (political) knowledge (e.g. Finkel & Ernst, 2005; Denver & Hands, 1990; Morduchowicz, Catterberg, Niemi & Bell, 1996; Baucal et al., 2019; Pavlović et al., 2020; Niemi & Junn, 1998; Tourney-Purta et al., 2001). Yet, the promotion of participatory attitudes, values and behaviours proved to be a much harder task, which CE courses often fail to accomplish (Baucal et al., 2009; Finkel & Ernst, 2005; Niemi & Junn, 1998; Ichilov, 2007; Pavlović, 2012).

It is often argued that a mere "exposure" to CE "messages" is not sufficient for the attitude and value

change or acquisition. The development of such an orientation is, in theory, dependent on the teacher's credibility, active teaching methods and supportive climate (Finkel & Ernst, 2005; Ichilov, 2007; Morduchowicz et al., 1996). The context (open class climate) and teaching methods (participatory methods) serve as its precondition. Additionally, the CE courses, in general, or class and school social "texture", in specific, could be of more relevance for some students. Those with lower socio-economic status (SES) can benefit more in the supportive learning context, since they lack suchlike practices in the off-school context (Langton & Jennings, 1968; Niemi et al., 1998; Ichilov, 2007).

This study is aimed at analysing the relevance of CE courses for the acceptance of democratic values. Specifically, research aims were to analyse (1) the relevance of participatory class climate (PCC) for the acceptance of democratic values among Serbian students who attend the CE courses and (2) the moderating role of students' SES for the relationship between PCC and democratic values acceptance.

Method

Participants and Procedure

The data collected in the CE evaluation study (N = 1073) were used. Participants were final-year students from 20 high schools in Serbia (58% girls). One quarter of students were from grammar high-schools (26%); 66% of students attended 4-year vocational high schools, and 8% were 3-year vocational school students.

The data were collected in 2019, using the pen-and-paper questionnaire that was administered in schools, during CE courses.

Data and measures

The questionnaire used in the evaluation study included a large number of variables and several of them were chosen for the present purposes.

The following measures were included.

Socio-economic status (SES). The combined level of parents' education was used as the measure of students' SES level. Higher values imply higher SES.

Durability of CE attendance. The grade at which students started attending CE courses (the first grade of elementary school (ES) / the fifth grade of ES / the first grade of high school). This measure was included as control. Higher values imply shorter CE attendance.

Participatory class climate (PCC). A composite index ($\alpha = .78$) comprised of several variables measuring how often the teacher encourages the freedom of expression and critical thinking (5 items; e.g. “How often did the teacher promote critical thinking in class?”); how often CE classes include participatory methods (6 items, e.g. “How often did you learn of democracy, citizens’ rights etc. through a debate?”); how often class atmosphere is open and constructive (4 items; e.g. “How often was the class climate cooperative?”). All items were followed by a five-point scale (1. Never – 5. Very often). Higher values on this measure imply more prominent PCC.

Acceptance of democratic values. Students evaluated the importance of 19 values on a five-point scale (1. Not at all important / 5. Very important). The value syndrome consisting of seven values (freedom, justice, equality, social justice, minority rights, protection of the socially disadvantaged, friendly relations between nations) was used as a measure of the acceptance of democratic values ($\alpha = .88$). Higher values imply higher importance of democratic values.

Results

Multiple regression analysis was performed, with students’ SES, durability of attendance of CE, PCC and SES x PCC interaction as predictors, $F(4, 605) = 21.06, p < .001, \text{Adj. } R^2 = .12$ (Table 1).

The results show that the democratic values are more embraced by the students of higher SES and those attending CE classes with a more prominent participatory climate. The acceptance of democratic values was not significantly predicted by the durability of CE attendance.

Table 1: Multiple linear regression predicting the acceptance of democratic values from the set of predictors.

	B	S.E.	β	95% CI for B
Constant	-3.59	.76		[-5.09, -2.09]
Duration of CE attendance	.02	.04	.02	[-.05, .10]
SES	.30	.10	.51**	[.10, .50]
PCC	.98	.20	.82**	[.58, 1.38]
SES X PCC	-.08	.02	-.69**	[-.13, -.02]

** $p < .01$

The relationship between PCC and the importance of democratic values is moderated by SES (Figure 1). The relationship between the acceptance of democratic values and PCC is stronger in students’ with the lowest SES, and the weakest in those with the highest SES. The students with the least privileged social background “benefit” most from class participation in terms of accepting the democratic values.

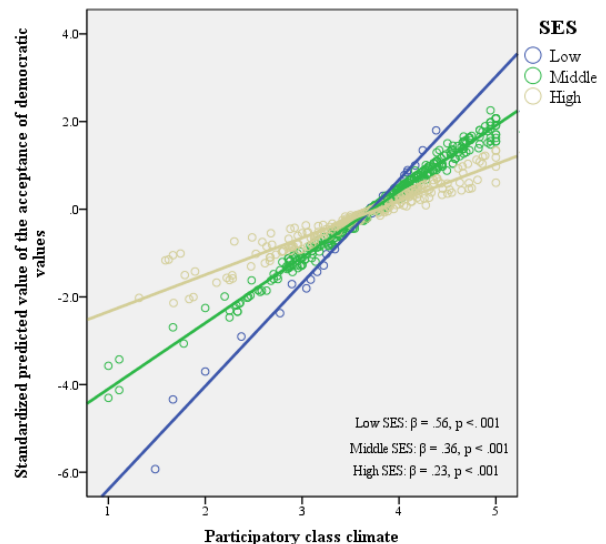


Figure 1: Standardized predicted values of the acceptance of democratic values by participatory class climate and socio-economic status.

Discussion and Conclusion

The results of this study support some previous studies that have shown the relevance of the context of learning and active teaching methods for the acceptance of participatory orientations (e.g. Finkel & Ernst, 2005; Itchilov, 2007; Morduchowicz et al., 1996; Baucal et al., 2019; see also: Džamonja Ignjatović et al., 2019; Pavlović et al., 2020).

We can argue that the application of the very same principle of tolerance, critical thinking and mutual respect that is promoted in the CE curriculum during CE classes has a significant “payoff” in strengthening the acceptance of democratic values. As debated, CE courses in the Serbian context are, in a sense, ‘schools of democracy’. Students learn ‘democracy’ by practicing it during CE classes on a small scale.

Underprivileged students gain most from the CE courses. It could be that CE messages are the most effective in cases when there is no ‘informational redundancy’ (Langton & Jennings, 1968), i.e. when CE lessons are novel experiences for students, not paralleled and/or repeated at home or elsewhere. Additionally, the fact that PCC is relevant for the acceptance of democratic values in general, i.e. ‘independently’ of SES, could mean that school climate can ‘compensate’ for the lack of other off-school resources in that regard.

Limitations and recommendations. The research design was cross-sectional and the conclusion regarding the CE courses’ ‘effects’ on democratic values is only tentative. Besides that, this study included only students that attend CE courses; conclusions based on the comparison between those who do and do not attend CE in terms of the acceptance of democratic values would be more valid. Future analyses would also benefit from more detailed measures of SES.

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