CHILDREN AS DEMOCRATIC ACTIVE CITIZENS. EXPERIENCES AND PERSPECTIVES OF YOUNG STUDENTS

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Abstract

Political socialization in its institutional and latent form has greatly preoccupied researchers. However, research examining political socialization from the perspective of young students is minimal. For that reason present study was carried out, aiming to investigate whether and to what extent primary school students in Greece understand democratic consciousness and develop active citizenship attitudes and behaviors. A qualitative approach was followed and sixteen semi-structured interviews were realized with students of 11-12 years old attending the last class of primary school. Among the most important findings is that while students engage in activities that cultivate active citizenship, they do not seem to be able to grasp the political significance of their action and the social impact it has. Furthermore, they are quite aware of the issues their community faces and are very interested to take part in actions aimed to improve their community, although they are not quite forthcoming with taking initiatives.

Keywords
Students active citizens, Active Citizenship, Political Socialization, School Political Socialization, Democratic Education, Democratic Citizenship

1. Introduction

The socioeconomic developments that occurred in recent years have created global changes that affect the cohesion, peace and sustainability of societies around the world. The 4th industrial revolution and the changes it brings to the daily lives of people, in combination with the predominance of the political dogmas of Neoliberalism and the policies of the New Public Administration, cause rifts and significant disturbances that tend to upset the post WWII established world social order (Lynch, 2014; Hill & Kumar, 2009) . Despite the ever-increasing growth and development of democracies around the world, the growing interconnectedness and networking of individuals and societies, and the undeniable improvement in the standards of living and education worldwide, our societies continue to be plagued by human rights abuses, poverty, social inequality and general socio-political unrest (UNESCO b´).

One of the solutions proposed by international organizations, such as the European Union (2016) and the United Nations (2021), for the aforementioned challenges is based on education and in particular on 'Global Citizenship Education'. This type of education is based on peace and human rights education and aims to provide students with the attitudes, predispositions, values and inclinations that support acceptance of self-expression, active citizenship, creativity, sustainable development and promotion of democracy and peace worldwide (UNESCO). With regard to the European Union in particular, the above scope has been incorporated into specific policies, as it adopted, in March 2015, the Paris Declaration, which specifically aims at citizenship and the cultivation of the democratic values of pluralism, the acceptance of diversity and the elimination of discrimination at the social and economic level through education (European Commission, 2016 ; UNESCO b´).

Taking into account that children are going to be the citizens of tomorrow, the consolidation and cultivation of political socialization in the context of educational process is therefore a key stake, which is being thoroughly studied, not only in a global level, but also in local (Dill, 2007). In terms of education, the creation of democratic and active citizens, who are interested and involved in the commons is of the utmost importance; especially for the pluralistic, democratic societies of the 21st century (UNESCO).

In contrast to that prevailing idea stands the Greek education system, in which civil education is not considered a major subject, as it is initially taught during the last two years of Primary School. However, one can easily fathom that gaining a deeper knowledge and understanding of the issue is of vital importance for understanding our present and shaping our future.

 The main issue addressed in this research is whether and to what extent primary school students in Greece develop and understand democratic consciousness and active citizenship attitudes and behaviors. Moreover, it aims to examine whether latent political socialization taking place in school plays a role in creating or cultivating democratic attitudes and perceptions in young people.

The point of view from which the above topics are approached is that of the young students, as there is a clear lack of research on this perspective, both locally and internationally (Nicotera, 2014). However taking their views into account is both useful and necessary since children are going to be the citizens of tomorrow.

More specifically, we tried to answer the following research questions: 1. How students, finishing primary school, aged between eleven-twelve years old, understand active citizenship? and 2. How they experience it while they themselves operate within their respective frameworks in order to develop and strengthen their role as active citizens?

2. Active citizenship

Active citizenship can be defined as the critical and active participation of individuals in the local, micro- level of the communities where the individuals live, or in the wider democratic context of their country, but also in hyper-national coalitions (e.g. the European Union) (Council of Europe b´, 2020). It has to do with concepts such as that of good neighborly relations, volunteering, charity, and generally with the cultivation and development of the concept of social duty. It is widely believed that following those concepts will promote fruitful coexistence and social and economic progress and development in all directions, especially in the multicultural and globalized social environment of recent decades (European University College Association, 2020; Karakatsani, 2003 ;Jansen et al., 2006)

In essence, active citizenship lies in individual participation and involvement in the process of improving the lives of the whole community and society in general. As a philosophy it promotes action, through a combination of political and non-political processes that aim to develop values, skills, knowledge and action that will be agents of change for the benefit of the community (European University College Association, 2020; Council of Europe b´ , 2020; Key Competence Network on School Education, 2020). Ultimately, the communities that succeed in achieving it will pose as agents of change and positive role models for other communities around the world.

Taking all the above into consideration, one could recognize in active citizenship two dimensions, one vertical and one horizontal (Karakatsani, 2003; Lin, 2013; IAWGCP, 2008). The vertical concerns the relationship that the individual forms with the institutions, which in turn determines the basic obligations and rights of the individual towards the state. The horizontal concerns the relations of individuals with each other and with the community in which they live, and is considered very important, as through it, individuals will be able to feel safe to interact in multicultural micro- (community) and macro- (state-planetary) levels.

One should not refer to the concept of the citizenship and attempts any analysis of it, without taking into account the international context in which this concept is included. In the new administrative framework formed by neoliberalism and its prerogatives, the role of the individual, as well as the role of the state, are modified and transformed in compliance with the standards that are adopted, projected and diffused through globalized networks and their flows (Thrupp, 2003; Torres, 2008; Appadurai,1990).

Based on research (Lemke, 2010), since the neoliberal state follows policies that withdraw from the provision of public services, the responsibility now shifts from the state to the person ,who is now placed as solely responsible for managing their personal and financial risks in areas such as healthcare, retirement and education. Neoliberalism as a political ideology aims to minimize state intervention, thus reducing the provision of social welfare services and increasing the so-called 'personal responsibility' and at the same time the self-care of individuals. In conclusion, in order to act effectively within society and to contribute to it, the individual must acquire business qualities, which will be the guiding manual of his action (Ambrosio, 2013; Torres, 2008).

3. Children as active citizens

Trying to explore how the concept of active citizenship is experienced and described by children, it is important to examine how the modern conception of childhood could influence and shape the children's' attitudes and predispositions.

According to our modern society's dogma, children are not viewed and treated as complete social agents before their political rights are legally granted upon them (Pechtelidis, 2015). That is, after

they reach adulthood (the age of 18 for most western societies). Children are recognized as a social category which has not yet been completed in socio-political terms and is largely perceived through the ideas resulting from the comparison of adulthood with childhood (Alderson, 1999; Gholami, 2016 ;Matthews, 2002).

The prevailing perception that children are developing human beings combined with the romantic view of childhood as it was formed in the 19th century, led to the belief that unless children become adults, human rights do not fully adhere to their needs and interests (Matthews, 2002). This ideology promoted the creation and adoption of the "Convention on the Rights of the Child" in 1989 by the United Nations (Council of Europe, 2020).

The degradation of childhood, as a prelude to adulthood, and the lack of recognition, from the part of the child, of the possibility of social action, is therefore quite present in all its activities and fields of action, such as school, family, neighborhood, etc (Wyness, 2002). The child is considered to be under the control, power and influence of an adult until he or she reaches adulthood, in order to be given political rights and no longer be recognized as a child. The granting of the citizen's right, as has been mentioned, is not simply about the right to vote. Adulthood is synonymous of self-determination and autonomy, complete responsibility of one's choices and actions, as well as full participation of the individual in the political and social development of the community (Davies, 2010).

It is more often than we want to recognize that children are not been given the chance to make decisions on their own affairs and take responsibility of their own acts (Papakonstantinou, 2020). Moreover, it is even practically impossible for them to claim their rights independently, through legal means, as they cannot move without the consent or assistance of an adult (with recognized political rights) ((Pechtelidis, 2015). Institutionally, children have the right to express their opinion if they are able to do so. In reality, however, since their participation in decision-making and implementation depends directly on an adult, it is very common for them to be deprived of this participation, based on specific developmental criteria (One, 2008). Developmental criteria are directly related to education and age, so until they are met by the child, their participation in social development is generally accepted to be limited (Tom Hall et al., 1999). Theoretically, society recognizes rights in children as its members, but in practice, children do not have the right to self-determination, since they are hetero-determined through their relationship with adults (Cockburn, 1998; Wayness, 2006).

On this basis, the 'Convention on the Rights of the Child' has also been criticized, as it seems to recognize rights in children which cannot be implemented in practice without causing a revision of the relationship between children and adults and without degrading the responsibility and authority of the parents' policies (Quennerstedt & Quennerstedt, 2014). The questioning of the traditional role and rights of the adult parent has led countries like the USA not to award the 'Convention on the Rights of the Child' and to declare that they will try to achieve the goals set by the Convention through other means and (Tisdall & Punch, 2012).

Despite the aforementioned, the developments that have taken place in the fields of sociology and psychology in the last decades, have led scientists to recognize in children the role of a social actor (Jan Mason, 2011; Papakonstantinou, 2020) . This recognition implies that the child can form a social identity but also have a valuable perception about what is happening around them, which they

can adequately communicate to others through various means (Olson et al., 2014; Quennerstedt & Quennerstedt, 2014). It is also now accepted that adults do not successfully manage everything and certainly do not always behave in ways that promote the well-being and interests of children so their power over children must have clear limits (Tisdall & Punch, 2012)

The perception of the child as an active agent and as a citizen with rights is based on three assumptions, « a) the ability to perceive the world and produce valid meanings for it, b) the assumption that children's knowledge of the world may be different, but it is not inferior to that of the adults and c) children's perspective on social reality can help adults to understand childhood experiences better» (Pechtelidis, 2015: 180). The child is therefore accredited as being able, not only to exhibit the ability and the need to cultivate and present the features and behaviors of an active and democratic citizen; but also, to participate in the public sphere, at an age when their political rights are not recognized, at least legally. (Nicotera, 2014; Olson et al., 2014; Wyness, 2003; Wayness, 2006).

4. Methods

The qualitative approach was chosen, as it was considered the best research strategy (Bryman, 2017) in order to seize, understand and interpret students' experiences as active citizens and their perceptions of active citizenship. Through a purposeful sampling (Creswell, 2016), 16 primary school students (9 boys and 7 girls) were selected aged 11-12 and attending sixth grade of primary school. Their participation was voluntary and did not take into consideration any academic, social and economic criteria. In other words, it was free and welcome for any student to participate as long as they met the age and the school class criteria.

Although participants come from a variety of geographical locations in the Attica region, the sample could be characterized as homogenous, since there are mostly middle to upper middle-class participants that took part in this research. More specifically, participants come from four (4) schools, two public and two private primary schools of the entire Attica region (Greece). The last class of primary school was selected to make sure that all students have been taught the course of Social and Political Education for at least one year and may had the experience of an "in class" election process, something that is in a way customary for the final classes of Primary Education. However, it was made apparent that many have not participated in an electoral process within their class in recent years.

The technique that was considered the most appropriate for the collection of our data was the semi-structured interview (Blanchet & Gotman, 2001), which facilitates researchers' and participants' interactions and permits a more detailed and in-depth participants' expression. Interviews were programmed after students' participation acceptance and were realized in time and places chosen by them and their parents. Parents' written permission for their child to participate was obligatory. In addition, participating students were informed in details for the procedures and the scopes of the research, while all their questions were discussed and answered. Interviews' duration was approximately 50 minutes. Collected data were recorded and transcribed and then analyzed through thematic content analysis (Bryman, 2017).

5. Results: a glimpse on children perceptions and experiences
5.1.Who is an active citizen?

In terms of active citizenship, it is striking that almost none of the participating students knew the meaning, or had heard the term 'active citizen'. Only student 15 (SB.15) was able to define the concept in a total of 16 participants, however again not to a satisfactory degree, as the subject's

response relied on an etymological analysis of the given phrase, rather than being the result of a targeted teaching or a personal experience.

> *«-Do you know what an active citizen is?*
> *-Yes, he is the one who deals with what is happening ...*
> *-What do you mean by what is happening? How do you mean it?*
> *- That...he is the one who, if something happens, always does it, he is the one who   fulfills his obligations .... who always votes .... the one who does something ...*
> *-What do you mean he does something? What is he doing?*
> *-The citizen also has some obligations. He who always does them, and has never given up his obligations, and he who does what he ought to do and does what they [the state/ laws] say. »*
> *SB.15*

However, when the participating students were provided with a definition of active citizenship by the researcher, all subjects agreed that they understood the definition and considered it a very important form of citizenship. Most subjects state that they are or at least try to be active citizens.

> *«-Do you think that it is important to be an active citizen?*
> *-Yes, it is important to be an active citizen because that way, (pause) because that way someone helps those around them and they become a better person, but they should not only care about their city, they should help the whole world, all the people of the world.» SB.2*
> *«-Do you think it is important for someone to be an active citizen?*
> *-Yes(pause) because if these people [active citizens] did not exist, then, the problems would not be solved very quickly and very efficiently, because there would not be enough [citizens to help] ... And I think it is quite important to help... to get some things done, yes.... I consider it very important ...» SB.10*

Another interesting aspect is the impression they have expressed, which refers to the fact that the respondents consider people under the age of 18 as 'minor' citizens, in other words, incomplete citizens. The aforementioned image is in full agreement with the current legal situation the underage people experience within Greece. Therefore, the participants feel weak in being able to provide services or civilian acts to the extent that they could or would like.

> *«-Do you consider yourself an active citizen?*
> *-Erm, ... (pause)*
> *-Or would you like to be ?*
> *-Yes, I would like to be but I am not often... I am a little young .... (Shy laugh)*
> *-So... you think that because you are young you are not an active citizen? Can't a young person be an active citizen?*
> *-No, they may be, and it's good for someone to be interested in the people around them, but I'm not, I've not done it, no, I've never had the chance to do that.» SB.2*

> *«-Do you consider yourself a good citizen?*
> *-Erm, yes ....*
> *-What do you do that makes you consider yourself a good/ active citizen?*
> *-Basically, I am still a child so I do not do political things.*
> *-OK, apart from the political part that you have to turn 18 to vote, is there anything you do now that makes you feel that you are a good/active citizen?*
> *"Not yet, I have not done anything ... I do not know, I am very young.» SB.6*

> *«-Would you say that you are an active citizen?*
> *-Yes, because sometimes I help -as much as I can of course- because .... I cannot yet go to the Mayor to talk about these [things/issues], but I am as much as I can...*
> *-Why do you think you cannot go to the Mayor?*
> *-First because I think they will not listen to me carefully...*
> *-Why;*

-Ehm, I do not know, they may consider that I'm joking .... Something like that ....
-Why do you think they will react this way towards you? Do you think the same thing would happen if your mom went?
-No...(they will react this waybecause I am a child and some people think that children cannot do some work and because I know that the mayor is one of these people, I know this about the mayor .... and I believe he will not listen to me.» SB.10

5.2. What is being an active citizen?

   In regard to whether students have participated in actions in the context of their role as active or 'good' citizens, the results show a relative heterogeneity. Not all subjects have, or at least do not recall their participation in actions to improve life in their region or the planet in general. One thing that is clearly evident from their statements, is that the respondents seem to have gained a positive impression from the actions they have participated in, and they seem willing to continue to offer as much as they can, given the opportunity.

   «-Did you enjoy your participation in these things [the neighborhood clean-up efforts or the environmental march]?
   -Yes, very much!
   -Would you try it again?
   -Of course, I would do it again, anytime I could! ... » SB. 14
   «- How was this experience for you?
   -Nice, it was fun...
   -Do you think the work you did was important?
   -Yes.....Because afterwards the beach was clean
   -Would you do it again?
   -Yes, of course [emphatically]» SB. 12

   Although not all of the research participants took part in civic actions, many of the respondents answered in the affirmative to the question of whether they were aware of any problems their area faces, showcasing tendencies of social and civilian perception. These findings come in contrast with prominent ideology that paints children as passive recipients or unaware altogether of the issues dominating the socio-political agenda of their communities. Through their answers, someone can understand that children know, understand, observe, judge, form opinions and in some cases come down with solutions to various social issues their communities are faced with.

   «-Do you know of a problem that exists here in your city .... or in your neighborhood?
   -Yes, over here in Perama area there is the problem with recycling ....
   -Tell me about it
   -There is not very good recycling here. Because several have requested it from the Mayor, some bins have been placed, but from what I noticed the bins do not work ... they are electronic bins and from what I noticed they do not open .....
   -Have you ever done anything, either with your friends, your school or family to raise awareness or about a problem your area is facing?
   -In the fourth grade, or in the third grade, we had sent a message [meaning a letter] to the Mayor - I think, or to the Prime Minister, I do not remember well- , about recycling ...
   -And how did that go?
   -Nothing happened after that ... No one replied» SB. 7

   «-Here in your area, do you know of a problem, let's say? Is there an issue in your neighborhood?
   -Many
   -Give me an example
   -Most of people cross with a red traffic light, or an orange […] Firstly, is the issue of the drivers' behaviour, and then we should definitely fix the sidewalks here in the area because they're a little ....

-And how could you help with that, I guess you do not mean to fix them by yourself with your own hands .....

-No, I could send a letter to the Mayor .... a message .... anything ... " SB. 8

Of the students who have participated in such actions, most engaged themselves in group actions, usually organized by adults and implemented by agencies, such as their school, the Ministry of Education or the Scouts. All activities described concerned actions that had an environmental impact, such as cleaning a beach, or the school courtyard, or events to help boost recycling in the neighborhood in general. Striking as it may sound, there were no actions described that are connected or seem to promote solidarity, respect and acceptance of 'the other' or aiming to raise awareness in the reduction of social inequalities. Finally, rarely will the subjects spontaneously take action to resolve issues in their social environment.

«- Do you know any issues, any problems, of the area where you live in or your neighborhood?
- Well, I do not think so, because we live in an apartment building and I only know the manager from my apartment block, I do not know anyone else ....
-With your old school, -as you told me at the beginning- that was close to your house, there in the neighborhood.... have you taken any action maybe to help with something that exists as an issue there in your area?
-We had done something about recycling, we had taken part in a school competition for recycling ...We had two large recycling bins at school, and parents and students brought things to the school to recycle .... electrical appliances such as dishwashers, cell phones I do not know, something like that .... » SB.9

«-Is there an issue where you live, in your area, or in your school that you know? That is, to know that there is this problem in your area
-No, in general our road here at least is very clean, i.e. it does not have as much garbage .... As in other areas ....
-Did you do something, with your family, with your friends, or with your school to help about a problem or an issue that you know exists in the city or in the area ....
-Yes, we had gone and collected garbage from the beaches ...It happened when I was in my first year with the scouts ...» SB.12

«-Would you characterize yourself as an active citizen?
-I think I would, because I have done different things ....
-Give me an example, what have you done?
-We [as a group of students] have collected garbage from the school yard, not my current school, my old one ..... We have protested because they wanted to cut down a tree from our neighborhood, outside our apartment building ..... of course now the tree was cut ..... but anyway [we tried], and various others ....» SB. 14

A few participants also reported carrying out actions with their family members (mainly parents), which also focused on environmental issues.

«-Do you want to tell me what you have done that you think has helped your neighborhood, or your city or society in general?
-For example, sometimes, because we live in a forest with my parents, we have a swimming pool, where different people come ....
- Do you mean your own pool?
"Not ours, where I live there is a swimming pool below our house and because different people come and throw various garbage .... And we go and collect them ..."[with my parents] SB.5

«- Do you consider that you are an active citizen?
-Yes.....

-Do you know of a problem that exists in your city, or that concerns your neighborhood, or your area generally?
-Yes, with the garbage, I know that they are thrown out of the bins, or even if the bins are not full people will leave them outside .... Or with the dogs that people leave them out to roam without a leash and defecate outside apartment buildings and their owners do not collect it .... Eeeerm yes ....
-Have you ever participated in an action to help with one of the problems that exist in your area or in your neighborhood?
- Not exactly me, it was my mom, but I do not remember clearly. It was something about the garbage again, because I live near the Panorama area, and something had happened over there ...... basically I have helped with some [unattended] dogs ..... because where I live, in the Panorama area, we found a dog being hit and we helped it, I do not know now if this is an action, we had called the animal welfare and they had come to get It....» SB. 4

6. Conclusions

From studying the research one can draw some interesting conclusions that have to do with how citizenship, in general, and active citizenship in particular is expressed in and understood by very young individuals in the Greek society.

To be more specific, one conclusion that emerges from present analysis and has not been referred to by previous research is that participating students cannot recognize and declare themselves as citizens. Even though, they have participated in actions with a significant civic value and social impact, these actions have not in fact been linked to active, let alone citizenship in general. It does not seem clear to them that they already function as active and responsible citizens, who perform a great social and civic work when they help and offer as much as they can in a variety of areas, thus creating an impact on the daily lives of many people around them.

One other issue that arose from the interviews and is related to the promotion of the culture of active participation of young-pre-adolescents is the sense of insignificance they have when they come in contact with established political institutions. It was reported that some young people have tried to contact the municipal authority of their area in writing, as a formal and appropriate channel of drawing the authorities' interest on a matter. However, they were treated with indifference and felt like people who do not deserve attention, or that their views or complaints were not significant enough to have a social impact. This treatment is perceived as a consequence of the lack of recognition of civil rights to persons under 18 years of age in Greece.

The above lead to the realization, that in order to be able to positively influence the attitudes and predispositions of young people towards political participation and active citizenship, the attitudes of people representing political institutions in our country should change in the most comprehensive way. This agrees with the idea of viewing the child as an active social agent in our communities and not as a passive, indifferent individual with little social impact (Gholami, 2016; Pechtelidis, 2015).

The aforementioned conclusion is reinforced by the finds that demonstrate that the majority of the civil actions mentioned are organized by adults (parents or teachers) or formal institutions, there is almost no action mentioned that has sprung directly from the children. Moreover, most of the actions aim towards animal welfare and the environment. It is most striking that there is no action mentioned that aims towards intersocial exposure and dialogue or solidarity towards fellow human beings. Actions that would arguably increase the children's socio-political awareness and promote democratic values by making several social groups 'seen' thus mitigating social differences in the future (Papakonstantinou, 2022).

Another significant conclusion is the fact that none of the interviewed students knew or had heard the term of active citizen. The lack of formal terminology and knowledge over civic duties agrees with previous research that has to do with the lesson of Social and Political Education (Annenberg Public Policy Center of the University of Pennsylvania, 2016; Conover και Searing 2000 as ment. in Galston, 2001). Nevertheless, when they were presented with a definition, they all agreed that it is very important to be an active citizen as it benefits oneself the community or even the society as it appears several students had participated in actions with a strong social impact and had drawn a significant amount of fulfilment from engaging in those actions.

It is therefore clearly evident that young people are aware of the issues that the community in which they interact faces, and are quite willing to assist in solving them. Thus, making clear that, active citizenship is not and should not be related to the age of individuals, but is expressed within the framework and requirements of civil society. In conclusion, one could not argue that the subjects have a wrong image of active citizenship in their reports of it. However, their reports and ideas seem to reflect their limited legal recognition as 'political beings' by the de jure reality of Greece and the ideas of childhood which it transmits.

It is clear however, that the subjects realize that people who have reached the age of 18 and receive the "full" title of citizen have rights and entitlements, although it is not clear to them what these are, which demonstrates their lack of teaching in the Social and Political Education course. Similar conclusions in relation to the lack of teaching and the effectiveness of Social and Political Education has been show in different researches worldwide (McAllister, 1998; Papakonstantinou, 2022).

7. Limitations and Propositions

Qualitative research describes and explains perceptions, opinions, experiences or even the constructed realities of specific individuals under specific circumstances. Present research managed to reach saturation due to the duration and the in-depth discussion with the participants. The fact that one of the researchers has great experience working with children of young age helped majorly towards interviews' realization. However, it is crucial to verify present results in a larger more general scale. A quantitative study is thus proposed as a sequel to present one. In addition, it would be interesting to adopt an experimental design and study the perceptions on active citizenship of young students, after being taught and trained as active citizens.

8. Implications

The present study constitutes one of limited sociological researches focusing on young children and aiming to understand their own ways of explaining the surrounding reality and placing themselves in it. Considering children capable of acting as citizens and believing in their strength to reform their environment, we succeeded on demonstrating that young Greek students have the will to implicate with the commons, to help improve their conditions of living and to adopt an active citizenship behavior. Finally, the aforementioned presented results reveal the need for main social institutions, such as families and schools, to inform young children about their rights and their responsibilities as citizens, as only that way our societies can hope for a better future.

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