

Political activism of low achieving and high achieving students in 10 European countries

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Abstract

Current paper uses ICCS 2009 data to investigate political interest and participatory attitudes of low and high achieving students in ten European countries. Our claim is that low cognitive competencies not necessarily are associated with low interest in politics and political participation. We assume that students in educational risk do not form a uniform group but instead represent different patterns of citizenship participation. Furthermore, their participation patterns currently in school and in the future politics are probably different. Low achievement may hinder trust towards and participation in school activities. However, for the future political activism the effect of low achievement may be both encouraging (compensating) or discouraging. Larger cross-country variance is to be expected in future political activism, partly explained by the political context. Two separate cluster analyses have been run to test the assumptions. The analysis resulted in four clusters differing by respondents' self-efficacy, and real or expected participation in various forms. Regarding current activism in school low achieving students belong mainly to one cluster whereas in future political activism they become divided into two opposite groups – one is totally alienated from politics whereas another group has high self-efficacy and readiness for multiple participation. Contrary to low achievers, high achieving students become more uniform in their future political activism. There is also interesting cross country variance in the clustering. By focusing on youth subgroups current analysis contributes to the better understanding of contemporary youth citizen activism and helps to design better targeted measures for education policy interventions.

Keywords: ICCS, low achievers, political interest, school activities, political participation, cluster analysis,

Introduction

The purpose of current paper is to compare political activism of low achieving students in ten European countries in the school context and in the future politics. The importance of socially active and competent citizens has risen profoundly into European agenda echoing the controversial state of affairs. Compared to their peers in Latin America young Europeans are less eager to be engaged in political activities (Schulz, Ainley, Fraillon, Kerr, Losito, 2010). Moreover, civic competencies seem to be negatively associated with intentions to be politically active except voting (Wattenberg 2012, Hedke & Zimenkova, 2013). At the same

time, both OECD PISA and IEA studies show that remarkable portion of students (about 10% in ICCS) across European countries do not possess basic competencies in reading and civics. What are their attitudes towards current and future political activism? Are low achievers more or less oriented towards participation compared to better achieving students? What forms of political activism they prefer, if any? These questions hint that educational inequality is not purely an educational issue, but has also broader social impact.

Theoretical framework and research questions

Clearly, issue of political participation of educationally marginalized groups is not entirely new for political socialization research. As a rule, low education is seen as one of the factors associated with low interest and participation in politics (Dalton, 2005). Low achievement and school attendance problems are more often studied in relation to students' individual socio-economic background, and low SES, immigrant background, or poor community resources are made responsible for poor educational achievement (Hart & Gullan, 2010; Baldi et al., 2001, Kahne & Sporte, 2008). However, little is known on social or political characteristics of those young people. Existing research suggest that low achieving students are more often alienated from politics and do not share liberal democratic values (Torney-Purta, 2009; Toots & Idnurm, 2012). But does this claim hold in various contexts and countries? In current paper we attempt to investigate issues of low achievers in more depth. Our central claim is that low cognitive competencies not necessarily are associated with low interest in politics and political participation. We assume that students in educational risk do not form a uniform group but instead represent different patterns of citizenship participation. Furthermore, their participation patterns currently in school and in the future politics are probably different. Low achievement may hinder trust towards and participation in school activities (Kahne, Westheimer, 2006; Hoskins, D'Hombres, Campbell, 2008). However, for the future political activism the effect of low achievement may be both encouraging (compensating) or discouraging. Thus, we ask, whether current and future participation of low achievers differs? Furthermore, we assume that the variance in future participation patterns is more evident compared to the current participation in school. Finally, if this diversification assumption holds we try to find factors that predict whether a student will in the future belong to the alienated or active citizens.

Data and method

The analysis is based on the ICCS 2009 student data. Ten countries, five from Eastern Europe and five from Western Europe with total of 31409 students were selected. To define low achieving and high achieving students we made use of proficiency levels of ICCS 2009 report (Schulz et al, 2010). Thus, the group of low achieving students is made up of students with civic knowledge score below 395 points (i.e. below level 1) and those, whose achievement score was above 563 points (level 3) formed the high achieving group.

To analyze political activism of low achieving and high achieving students we use cluster analyses that seems to be a relevant method for studying subgroups. Taken the assumption that different factors contribute to students' current and future activism we run two separate cluster analyses. The first analysis was performed to test variance in students' civic participation at school and the second – variance in students' planned political activities in future. Civic and political activism was operationalized by several variables present in ICCS2009 student questionnaires. Youth activism generally refers to behavior performed by adolescents with a political intent (Hart, Gullan, 2010). Yet, this intent is related to perceived internal civic efficacy. Low self esteem or low trust towards government (“politicians do not care”) often bring about decline of civic activism among youth (Kahne, Westheimer, 2006; Weller, 2007). Therefore it is important to include measures of civic and political efficacy when studying current or future youth activism.

For the first cluster analysis we selected items reflecting civic participation at school, perception of student-teacher relations, perceptions of value of participation at school and students' citizenship self-efficacy (21 items). For the second cluster analysis we selected items reflecting students' sense of internal political efficacy, expected participation in future protest, expected adult electoral participation and engagement in various forms of political activities (20 items). Finally, by applying a multinomial logistic regression we attempt to define the individual characteristics of students that determine their membership in a particular cluster.

The IDB Analyzer 3.0 and PASW18 software were used for statistical analysis.

Analysis

Both cluster analyses, one for the current school participation and another for the future political participation, produced four clusters with satisfactory statistical properties. Departing from our research assumptions we run the analysis separately for the current participation in school and in the politics in future.

Current clusters

Based on the mean value of variables, the current clusters were labeled as follows:

(1C)Low self-efficacy and engagement, conflicting relations: Students in this group typically never participate in school discussions or decision making, hardly in other school activities. They are uncertain in personal capability of organizing students, speaking publicly, or standing as a candidate in class. They have negative perception of student-teacher relations.

(2C)Low self-efficacy and non-engagement, but normal relations: Students in this group never participate in any school activities. Similarly to the first cluster they have low self-efficacy, but differently from the former perceive relations with teachers in a more positive way.

(3C)Low self-efficacy, mixed engagement and good relations: Students in this group are modestly active, they favor voting but not discussions. Thus, they think they will be doing not very well when speaking in front of class or organizing fellow students. Yet, they have good relations with their teachers and classmates

(4C)High self-efficacy and active engagement, good relations: Students in this group are most active compared to other groups and strongly support student participation in schools.

Also, they have positive perception of relations with teachers and among classmates

The distance is greatest (3.512) between the first and fourth clusters; and the smallest (1.859) between the second and third clusters.

Having defined these four clusters for current civic activism in the school, we proceed to the next step in order to test our hypotheses. Our central claim was that low cognitive competencies not necessarily are associated with low interest in civic and political participation. Thus, we look at the dispersion of students in educational risk within clusters. In parallel we apply the same operation to the high achieving group.

Table 1 shows the percentage of low achieving and high achieving students in each cluster per country. In case the share of an achievement group is highest within a particular cluster, the number is in bold. In all countries, low achieving students dominate in first and second

cluster, characterized by low self-efficacy and low or non-existing engagement in school activities. The main difference between these two groups lies in the different attitudes towards student-teacher relations in school, which are evaluated more positively or more negatively. The group of high achieving students is more uniform across countries. In all cases except Austria and Netherlands, they dominantly belong to the fourth cluster, characterized by high self-efficacy, active engagement, good relations with teachers and classmates. However, the balance of low achieving and high achieving students in the fourth cluster demonstrates a striking cross-country variance. In Czech Republic, Estonia and Norway only 5% of low achievers belong to the fourth clusters, i.e. are well engaged in schools; in Netherlands and Greece, in contrast, the academic achievement has much lesser effect on clusters' membership.

Table 1. Membership of low achieving and high achieving students in clusters of current school participation;

Country	achievement group	1C	2C	3C	4C
Austria	low achievers	17,9	18,1	8,4	8,9
	high achievers	20,3	25,0	39,9	34,1
Bulgaria	low achievers	25,7	26,8	10,4	14,3
	high achievers	16,1	14,8	31,2	31,5
Cyprus	low achievers	36,4	38,6	14,6	12,9
	high achievers	6,3	5,3	14,8	23,4
Czech Republic	low achievers	11,0	12,7	4,7	4,6
	high achievers	22,7	19,5	34,3	44,6
Estonia	low achievers	13,9	9,1	3,6	4,8
	high achievers	25,6	30,9	41,7	47,9
Greece	low achievers	37,2	39,1	17,5	14,1
	high achievers	8,7	6,3	23,3	27,4
Latvia	low achievers	18,1	15,9	10,2	11,2
	high achievers	13,5	13,5	17,6	23,2
Netherlands	low achievers	22,5	14,3	10,9	15,0
	high achievers	11,8	22,6	33,3	28,0
Norway	low achievers	20,8	20,8	5,4	5,2
	high achievers	21,1	7,7	34,2	45,9
Spain	low achievers	18,6	16,9	6,6	6,9
	high achievers	15,1	15,6	27,6	36,1

Clusters of future activism

Next we define the clusters for future political activism by using different from previous step variables. Based on the mean value of variables, the future clusters were labeled as follows:

(1F)Broad-scale activists: Students belonging to this group are interested in politics, have already a party affiliation and plan to participate in wide range of activities from voting to illegal protest. They demonstrate high self-efficacy.

(2F)Alienated: These students are not interested in politics; they do not see themselves in any form of political activism except local elections; and never are going to join an illegal protest action.

(3F)Radical protesters: Students belonging to this group are not particularly interested in politics and do not like any party. Their self-efficacy is low, but they are likely to participate in radical illegal protest. Other forms of activism like volunteering, writing a newspaper or contacting the MP do not appeal to them

(4F)Moderates: Students of this cluster share modest political self- efficacy and interest; they typically have a favorite political party. Their participation intentions are fitting well to the model of a good voter. At the same time they are never going to join an illegal protest and unlikely take an active role in election process.

The distance is greatest (5.695) between the first and second and clusters; and the smallest (2.902) between the third and fourth clusters.

Having defined these four clusters for future political activism, we proceed to the next step in our analysis. The assumption was that for the future political activism the effect of low achievement may be either encouraging or discouraging. Thus, low achieving students are likely to be found in different clusters. As with former cluster analysis, we apply the same operation to the high achieving group as well.

Table 2 shows the percentage of low achieving and high achieving students in each cluster per country. In case the share of an achievement group is highest within a particular cluster, the number is in bold.

In all ten countries high achieving students form the significant majority in the moderates' cluster (4F). Low achieving students can be found in each remaining three clusters, although their share typically remains about 20%. These data demonstrate diversification of the future participatory models amongst low achievers. In Bulgaria, Estonia and Netherlands low achievers compose the biggest group among the broad-scale activists (1F); in several countries there are more low achievers than high achievers in this group. However not all students in educational risk become active citizens in the future. About the same proportion of them become totally alienated from politics (2F). In Cyprus they compose more than third, in

Austria, Bulgaria, Greece and Latvia more than fifth of alienated cluster. Finally, in Austria and Norway low achievers are the largest group in the cluster of radical protesters (F3).

Table 2. Membership of low achieving and high achieving students in clusters of future political participation

Country	Achievement group	1F	2F	3F	4F
Austria	low achievers	20,6	20,8	21,8	5,3
	high achievers	23,8	14,4	16,3	42,3
Bulgaria	low achievers	30,7	21,9	22,1	10,1
	high achievers	18,5	14,9	15,4	35,4
Cyprus	low achievers	26,6	32,4	29,9	11,3
	high achievers	14,1	4,3	6,7	26,0
Czech Republic	low achievers	10,4	11,7	11,0	2,4
	high achievers	35,6	17,6	20,9	48,0
Estonia	low achievers	14,6	7,4	12,1	2,9
	high achievers	28,5	27,2	20,7	51,7
Greece	low achievers	22,1	23,1	22,3	13,3
	high achievers	21,9	12,1	13,0	32,9
Latvia	low achievers	19,6	20,6	19,3	7,7
	high achievers	15,9	8,7	8,1	22,9
Netherlands	low achievers	29,8	16,3	17,3	6,5
	high achievers	18,3	18,9	16,5	36,6
Norway	low achievers	12,6	11,5	18,0	2,8
	high achievers	31,7	17,7	11,9	49,4
Spain	low achievers	15,3	13,2	13,9	4,4
	high achievers	20,3	16,9	15,9	38,7

Results

We attempted to compare political activism of low achieving students in ten European countries in the school context and in the future politics by focusing on the underperforming students. We used cluster analysis to define models of civic and political participation and multinomial logistic regression to find individual characteristics that determine membership in a particular cluster. The analysis resulted in four clusters differing by respondents' self-efficacy, and real or expected participation in various forms. From theoretical point of view we assumed that low cognitive competencies not necessarily are associated with low interest in politics, and therefore students in educational risk can represent different patterns of participation. To test this main assumption in depth three research questions were set. As a response to first of them, we found that students with low achievement level and students with high achievement level are allocated clearly in different clusters. Regarding current activism

in school, in all countries low achieving students dominate in first and second cluster, characterized by low self-efficacy and low or non-existing engagement in school activities. High achieving students were grouped more uniformly in a cluster characterized by high self-efficacy, active engagement, good relations with teachers and classmates. Thus, the assumption that the low achievement may hinder participation in school activities turned to be valid.

Secondly we argued that the variance in future participation patterns is more evident compared to the current participation in school. Also we assumed that in the future low achieving students become even more diversified. Results of the second cluster analysis and also comparison of the first and second cluster models confirmed our hypothesis. Low achieving students became divided into two opposite clusters – one is totally alienated from politics whereas another group has high interest and readiness to multiple forms of participation. Contrary to low achievers, high achieving students become even more uniform in their future political activism. We also argued that current low engagement in school activities may serve either as an encouraging (compensating) or discouraging factor for political behavior in the future. Thus, we asked whether current and future participation of low achievers differs. Besides diversification what can be regarded as a common trend, interesting cross-country variances became apparent. When speaking about current activities in school one group of countries demonstrates significant effect of academic performance on participation. Austria, Czech Republic, Estonia, Norway and Spain belong to this group. In Bulgaria, Cyprus, Greece and Netherlands, in contrary, engagement in school activities is not so divided across achievement levels. Does the same trend continue also when the future political participation is in focus? The picture turned to be quite mixed and thus the explanations should be taken with caution.

In Austria, 20,8% of alienated students are low achievers, but in Estonia the same figure is only 7,4%. Yet, in cluster of broad-scale activists one can also find significant share of low achievers - 20,8% in Austria, 14,6% in Estonia, 15,3% in Spain. Thus, low engagement in school activities may serve both as an encouraging or discouraging factor for future political activism. However, current analysis did not reveal any systematic pattern in it. Therefore we tried a multinomial logistic regression to find possible individual predictors. Our results show that students, who in the future are broad-scale activists tend to be males, born outside the country, and currently socially active outside the school. Students, who belong to the opposite cluster of alienated from politics, tend to be females, born in the country of test, their parents

are not interested in politics and themselves they have not been involved in volunteering, campaigns or other social activities outside the school.

Conclusion

By focusing on youth subgroups current analysis contributes to the better understanding of contemporary youth citizen activism. It also helps developing strategies to promote constructive engagement and demote possible radicalization of students in educational risk. The question why education has different impact on various groups of students in terms of future political participation poses interesting research challenges for the future. There is also interesting cross country variance in clustering. In some countries achievement groups are concentrated in one cluster whereas in others they are split more evenly across all clusters. Probably, some factors of school context can play the role here.

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