

The influence of the education reforms in Latvia on the quality of civic education and democracy in the teaching/learning process

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Abstract

The transition to a democratic state management form has been taking place in Latvia since regaining the independence. The changes have most directly affected also the education system which has been continuously improved. The transformation of paradigms is one of the aspects of education reforms. The teaching/learning methods used in the lessons have essentially changed. The aim of this study is to find out how the change of the education paradigm from teaching to learning has influenced the quality of civic education and the use of democratic study forms in the lessons. In order to achieve the given aim, the study will search for the relations between the achievement of Grade 8 students of Latvia in civic education and students' attitudes. Special attention will be paid to a democratic learning environment and the differences in students' who learn in the Latvian language and who learn in the Russian language attitudes to the freedom of word when discussing political and social political issues in the lessons.

The study performed the secondary analysis of Latvia's data in IEA CIVED and IEA ICCS, using the descriptive statistic methods.

Keywords: IEA ICCS, IEA CIVED, international comparative studies, quality of civic education.

Theoretical framework

The aim of the study is to find out how the change of the education paradigm from teaching to learning has influenced the quality of civic education and the use of democratic study forms in the lessons.

The study is looking for the relations and their changes between the students' achievement in civic education and the language of instruction as a factor that influences a democratic learning environment in the classroom.

Due to the end of the Cold war and the third wave of democracy, several new states have emerged in the world, part of them regained the independence they had lost (Huntington, 1991). Separating from the USSR, Latvia made a step towards regaining of independence on May 4, 1990. Thus along with the regaining of independence the issue about the transition of the newly emerged state to a new form of state management – a democratic state became topical.

Looking upon citizenship in the context of democracy, it could be assessed and analyzed from several angles, thus visibly showing that citizenship as well as democracy is not uniform. British sociologist T.H. Marshall at the beginning of 50s of the 20th century developed a theory which treats citizenship as a complex structure. This theory puts forward three main components of citizenship - civil citizenship, political citizenship and social citizenship. (Marshall, 1988)

C.Baber emphasizes that teachers' personal attitude and methods used in acquisition of civic education play an important role in this process. Teachers who understand the interdisciplinary role of civic education are able to delve into the judgments, attitude and behaviour of their students. Changes are the most effective if the teacher is certain about what he/she teaches. (Baber, 2006)

Fullan (1999) admits that learning habits are the most difficult to be changed when introducing such learning traditions that encourage a broader cooperation among students, teachers and society as a whole. One of the preconditions when implementing educational reforms should be striving towards changes in teaching, learning and the surrounding conditions that promote these processes.

The change of education paradigms has taken place parallelly with different reforms of the education system in Latvia (Kangro and James 2008) and the improvement of its quality thus marking the

transition from teaching to learning (Bluma, 2001), placing greater emphasis on students' involvement and contribution in the teaching/learning process.

Students' attitude to a lesson and its run is an indicator that will reveal in the study whether at present there is open and democratic learning environment. The interpretation of the research results provide essential contribution to the assessment of the quality of civic education in relation to the change of education paradigms and reforms in Latvia as the participant country of the European Union.

Data sources and statistical analysis

The study uses the Latvia's data of the international study on civic education CIVED (Civic Education Study) and ICCS (International Civic and Citizenship Education Study) organized by IEA (International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement) in 1999 and 2009.

The CIVED 1999 study sample included Grade 8 students from 150 schools and in 2009 study 152 schools participated. CIVED study involved 2849 students, and ICCS, in its turn, - 2572 grade 8 students. Students in the CIVED study were stratified according to the language (the Russian language, the Latvian language), according to the placement of the school in one of the five regions, according to urbaziation – the capital Riga, state- level cities in Latvia, towns and countryside (Kangro, 2004, Drivdāle-Karuškina, Geske et al., 2003). The sample of the ICCS study was divided into several stratification levels according to the urbanization (Riga, state- level cities in Latvia, towns and countryside), the language use in the classroom (Latvian, Russian) and the school type (primary and secondary educational institutions).

The secondary analysis of Latvia's data uses the descriptive statistic methods using the linear regression in order to determine the influence of different factors on the development of a democratic learning environment as well as provides the comparison of the achievements in relation to the results of the attitude issues in the cross –section of the language of instruction.

In order to determine the changes that have taken place during the last ten years, the differences between students' replies on the activities which took place during the discussions on political and social issues in the classroom in 1999 and in 2009 were defined with the help of frequencies.

Results

Open climate for classroom discussions

The possibility to express a differing opinion is more interesting to boys than girls. Boys openly do not agree with the teachers than girls. However, looking upon this question in the cross –section of the language of instruction it should be concluded that students with the Russian language of instruction are the ones who most disagree with the teachers' political views. In distinction from students with the Latvian language of instruction it is more important for the students with the Russian language of instruction that the teacher when developing a discussion on political and social issues encourage them to express their view point.

In distinction from students of Riga and other cities and towns of Latvia, it is more important for the rural students that the teachers encourage them to express their view point.

Students in Riga start the discussion in the lessons about recent political events more often than students in other cities and towns of Latvia and in the countryside. At the same time it is important for students in Riga and in the countryside that their views on political and social political issues are similar with those of their peers. The rest of Latvia's students are more open to the pluralism of opinions.

In distinction from students of Riga and other cities and towns, students in the countryside expect from their teachers a broader explanation of political and social problems.

Class climate effects on civic knowledge

The total mean score of Latvia's students is 482. The mean score of achievement of students whose language of instruction is Latvian is 485, and of students whose language of instruction is Russian – 476.

Students with the Russian language of instruction who admit that they have never openly expressed an opposite opinion to what the teacher has said in the discussions on political and social issues have the mean score (414) which is by 16 points lower than of students with the Latvian language of instruction (430).

Students with the Russian language of instruction who admit that they sometimes have not openly agreed with the teachers in the discussions on political and social issues have the score (473) which is by 17 points lower than the score of students with the Latvian language of instruction (490).

Students who often oppose the teacher on political or social themes have a better mean score (507) in comparison with students who never do it (430).

Students who acknowledge that they are often encouraged to express their opinion in the lessons have better mean score (493) than students who are not urged to participate in the discussions (433).

Students who invite both the teachers and their classmates to express their views on political events have the mean score - 493 which is higher by 60 points.

Students who admit that they can openly disagree with the teacher in the lessons when discussing different issues connected with civic education have higher mean score (503) in comparison with the mean achievement of students who always agree with the teacher's view (427).

Students who admit that when discussing political issues teachers do not pay attention to different aspects of the problem under discussion, namely, the diversity of opinions (447 points for students with the Russian language of instruction and 446 points for students with the Latvian language of instruction) have lower mean score. Students, whose teachers emphasize different sides of one problem, in their turn, have higher mean score).

Latvian students who are not afraid of discussing political issues even if their opinion is different or wrong have the mean score which is higher by 17 points in comparison with the students with the Russian language of instruction (479 points for students with the Russian language of instruction and 496 points for students with the Latvian language of instruction).

Students with the Russian language of instruction who do not participate in the discussions if their opinion differs from the majority opinion have a lower mean score (458) than students with the Latvian language of instruction (481).

The mean score of students who consider that they themselves need to start the discussions on different political themes is similar (484) to both – students with the Russian language of instruction and students with the Latvian language of instruction.

Class climate changes from 1999 until 2009

During the last ten years the number of students who declare that they can openly disagree to the teacher's opinion has increased by 10 per cent (61 % CIVED, 71% ICCS).

However, the number of students who admit that they have never or very seldom start the discussion on politically topical issues has increased from 28% to 50%.

The number of students who acknowledge that the teacher often or always encourages the discussions on different issues that are related to politics has increased (from 69% CIVED to 80% ICCS) and the number of students who admit that teachers urge them not to express their opinion if it radically differs from the thoughts of the majority has decreased (from 68% CIVED to 54% ICCS).

Almost twice more students in percentage in 2009 ICCS study (36% CIVED, 65% ICCS) have indicated that teachers when introducing some of the social political problems hint at not only one solution to the problem but lays out several aspects of the problem.

Conclusions

- The time period from 1999 till 2009 is the time of paradigm shift which has been influenced to a certain extent by the education reform. The shift of paradigms indicates the prevalence of *learning* tendency over the old paradigm – *teaching*. Teachers, when discussing different problems related to the civic education more often offer different solutions to the problems and encourage students towards the pluralism of opinions.
- Both the students with the Russian language of instruction and students with the Latvian language of instruction who are not afraid to express a different opinion on political and social issues have higher mean score than students who do not express their opinion if that differs considerably from the thoughts of the majority.
- The teacher's personality and the desire to involve as many students as possible in the discussions and to encourage them to express their personal view is an important factor promoting achievement.

- The cross- section picture of gender, language and urbanization obtained within the study prove the essential differences and considerable indicative tendencies. Grade 8 boys unlike the girls are more interested in expressing their personal view, even if it does not coincide with the teacher's statements. Students with the Russian language of instruction are more active opponents to teachers and their classmates. Rural students are more inert participants in the discussions than students in Riga and other cities and towns of Latvia. Besides the students in the countryside unlike their peers in Riga and other cities and towns in Latvia find it more difficult to perceive the scope of the problems and their multilayer. Rural students need many examples that explain the problem. It means that the factor of the teacher being an illustrator (provider of the examples) is especially important in the countryside schools. Not only the students in the countryside schools but also students in Riga "ail" with the homogeneousness of the opinions. The most intensive pluralism of opinions is observed in the towns of Latvia outside the metropolis.
- A considerable relation between the students' activity during the lessons and the base of their knowledge has been recorded. Both the students who learn in Latvian and students who learn in Russian and are active initiators and/or participants of the discussions are more knowledgeable than their peers who minimally involve in the discussions or even ignore them.

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