

SCANDINAVIAN STUDENTS PARTICIPATING IN SOCIAL ACTIONS: FINDING A UNIFIED MODEL

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Abstract

This article proposes a model of home environment and school climate on the participation of ninth graders based on 1999 Civic Education Study data of students in social actions. This study examined ninth graders' participation in social actions by means of a questionnaire; the data were analyzed using structural equation modeling methodology. The objective was to design a model, using two exogenous constructs –the home environment and school climate– and three endogenous constructs –students' political interest, political environment, democratic values and social participation. Based on IEA Civic Study data on four countries, Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden, the study demonstrated that political interest and school climate influence political interest and political environment and these endogenous factors influence democratic values of the students. Finally democratic values influence students' social participation.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years civics citizenship education is being redeveloped in the attempt to prepare young people for more effective participation in our complex, evolving societies (Howard, & Gill, 2000). More specifically, civics education has attracted considerable interest internationally and has become as a critical topic in both political and paedagogical discussion, as societies are demanding educational policies and school curricula designed to promote the development "good citizens" (Cogan, & Morris, 2001; Dunkin, et al., 1998; Torney-Purta, et al., 1999, 2001). Before curricula can be designed or improved, it is important to have clear understanding of students' ideas and perceptions of democratic values and consider the extent of their participation in social actions. The Civic Education Study, initiated by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA), was carried out in two phases. In the first phase, researchers conducted national case

studies examining the traditions, goals and conditions of civic education (Torney-Purta et al., 1999). In the second phase, nationally representative samples of the grades attended by the majority of 14-year-olds, their civic education teachers, and the principals of their schools were surveyed on civics. Over 93 thousand students from 28 countries around the world participated in this study (Torney-Purta, et al., 2001).

Citizenship has been defined as participation in the civic, political and social institutions of modern society (Marshall, 1963, 1997). Citizenship has also been described as a set of provisions to counteract the negative consequences of class or social inequality (Turner, 1993). It is obvious that a vicious circle is created when home background and school climate may prevent social participation, which is one of the most important elements of active citizenship. In that case, citizenship remains a theoretical system of rights and obligations that cannot counter balance the negative consequences of home-social inequality. Moreover, although human rights are universal in the sense that they belong to all, and are not restricted to members of a particular nation, race, or social class, in actual fact not all people in all societies have the same opportunity for social participation. In that sense, citizenship has a subjective component: willingness to act. Legal Possession of rights does not in itself ensure that individuals will feel themselves to be citizens of the country. As Heywood (1994: 156) put it: «Members of groups that feel alienated from their state, perhaps because of social disadvantage or social discrimination, cannot properly be thought of as ‘full citizens’».

A student's home and school environments are significant factors as in the construction of his democratic values and political interest, in fostering a political environment and encouraging social in participation. Several studies have found that school contextual factors affect students' civic knowledge, political attitudes and political participation (Niemi and Junn, 1998; Patric and Hoge, 1991). More specifically, a number of authors have reported that a democratic school environment is necessary for developing students' democratic ideals and values (NCES, 2001), and these are further enhanced through students' participation in extracurricular activities, especially those related to civic education (Patric and Hoge, 1991). Student involvement in school-based, civic-related activities has also been positively related to the development of high levels of political efficacy and civic involvement outside the school. Active citizenship can be as straightforward as helping a neighbor. For some people this comes naturally, perhaps as a result of family tradition; for others, active citizenship is seen as contributing to the common good rather than furthering the priorities and interests of specific individuals or groups in society (Lawson, 2001). Participation in social activities is a source of interest and challenge to many students, and may provide opportunities to explore new roles, work in teams and develop leadership skills (Halstead, & Taylor, 2000). The term 'values' (as in democratic values here) is used to refer to the principles and fundamental convictions that act as general guides to behavior, the standards by which particular actions are judged to be good and desirable (Halstead, & Taylor, 2000).

In this paper we examine the extent to which home background and school climate might affect students' social and political understanding and social participation.

DATA SOURCE

This study is based on data from the student questionnaires that were collected in 1999 as a part of IEA CivEd study. The total number of schools that participated in Denmark, Finland, Norway, Sweden, were 178, 146, 154, and 138, respectively. In this project each school selected one class of 9th graders. In each of the four countries a total of 3208, 2782, 3321, 3073 students respectively, participated in the study. The subset of students used in this research analysis was obtained as follows. Of the total number of students, only those who had completed the twenty-one questions on the student questionnaire were eligible. This led to a final sample of $N_{\text{(Denmark)}} = 580$, $N_{\text{(Finland)}} = 815$, $N_{\text{(Norway)}} = 799$, $N_{\text{(Sweden)}} = 643$.

The questions that reduced the number of students in Denmark from 3208 to 580 are: To help [poor or elderly] people in the community (21% of students gave the answer "I do not know", or did not answer this question); To collect signatures for a petition (21%); and An adult who is a good citizen would be willing to ignore a law that violated human rights (20%).

The questions that reduced the number of students in Norway from 3321 to 799 are: To collect signatures for a petition (22% of students gave the answer "I do not know", or did not answer this question); To participate in a non-violent [peaceful] protest march or rally (21%); To help [poor or elderly] people in the community (21%).

The questions that reduced the number of students in Finland from 2782 to 815 are: An adult who is a good citizen would be willing to ignore a law that violated human rights (20% of students gave the answer "I do not know", or did not answer this question); To help [poor or elderly] people in the community (18%); and To collect signatures for a petition (18%).

Finally the questions that reduced the number of students in Sweden from 3073 to 643 are: An adult who is a good citizen would be willing to ignore a law that violated human rights (22% of students gave the answer "I do not know", or did not answer this question); Teachers encourage us to discuss political or social issues about which people have different opinions (21%); and To collect signatures for a petition (20%).

STUDENT INDICATORS

Twenty-one variables on the questionnaire were relevant to this study and were grouped into home background (3 variables), school climate (4 variables), democratic values (3 variables), social participation (7 variables), political interest (2 variables), and home political environment factors (2 variables). The variables used to define the conceptual areas are presented in Table 1. Thus, for the factor *Background of the family*, the following observed variables are assumed to be indicators of that factor: About how many books are there in your home? Do you get a daily newspaper at home? How many years of further education do you expect to complete after this year?

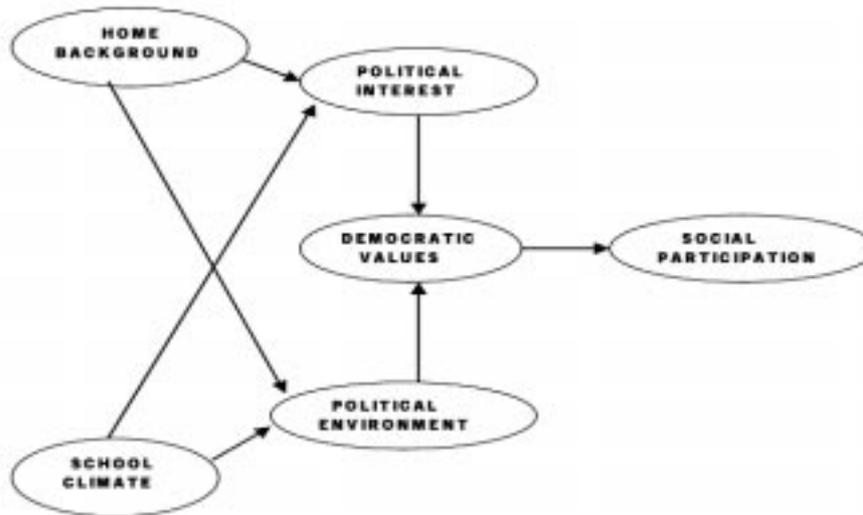
Table 1. The selected latent factors and the corresponding observed variables

<p>Background of the family</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">b1 About how many books are there in your home?b2 Do you get a daily newspaper at home?b3 How many years of further education do you expect to complete after this year? <p>Class-school climate</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">c1 Students are encouraged to make up their own minds about issuesc2 Teachers respect our opinions and encourage us to express them during classc3 Students feel free to express opinions in class even when their opinions are different from most of the other studentsc4 Teachers encourage us to discuss political or social issues about which people have different opinions <p>Democratic values in a democratic system:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">d1 Everyone has the right to express their opinions freelyd2 People can demand their political and social rightsd3 Citizens have the right to elect political leaders freely <p>Social participation</p> <p><i>A Good citizen is one who:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">s1 participates in activities to benefit people in their community (society)s2 takes part in activities promoting human rightss3 takes part in activities to protect the environments4 helps voluntarily poor or elderly people in the communitys5 collects money for a social causes6 collects signatures for a petitions7 participates in a non-violent (peaceful) protest march or rally <p>Political interest</p> <p><i>The frequency of:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">p1 reading articles(stories) in the newspaper about what is happening in my countryp2 reading articles(stories) in the newspaper about what is happening in other countries <p>Home political environment</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">h1 There are discussions with parents or other adult family members of what is happening in the country politicsh2 There are discussions with parents or other adult family members of what is happening in international politics
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PROPOSED MODEL

The proposed structural model indicates that the exogenous latent variable, home background, was included since it was hypothesized that parents with more schooling would place a higher value on political values and, as a consequence, would have a positive effect on their children's democratic values and social participation. The second exogenous factor, school climate, is also hypothesized to influence political interest and environment and so, indirectly, democratic values. Two endogenous factors that were hypothesized to influence democratic values are political interest and home political environment. Finally democratic values is hypothesized to directly influence social participation: the higher the democratic values, the greater the participation of students in social actions.

Figure 1: Model of social participation process



FIT STATISTICS

The proposed model was tested using LISREL 8.30 (Joreskog and Sorbom, 1993). First model fit is determined, then the significance of the various parameter estimates can be ascertained. Thus, a variety of fit statistics were applied to assess the fit of the data to the model, as follows: the goodness-of-fit index (GFI), comparative fit index (CFI), normed fit index (NFI), the root mean square of approximation (RMSEA), its 90% confidence interval, the Akaike Information Criterion (AIC), and the chi-square to degrees of freedom ratio (χ^2 /df), although it is well known that with large sample sizes, such as that used in this study, the size of the χ^2 coefficient has a tendency to reject models, even if they are only marginally inconsistent with the data (Raykov & Marcoulides, 2000).

Table 2: Goodness-of-fit indices

Fit statistics	Denmark	Finland	Norway	Sweden	JOINT MODEL
χ^2/df *	3.7	4.1	3.7	3.5	3.7
Goodness-of-fit index (GFI)	0.96	0.97	0.97	0.96	0.96
Adjusted GFI (AGFI)	0.96	0.96	0.96	0.95	-----
Comparative fit index (CFI)	0.96	0.97	0.97	0.97	0.97
Normed fit index (NFI)	0.95	0.96	0.96	0.96	0.96
Model AIC	776.16	851.08	766.49	737.62	3225.02
Independence AIC	14354.70	19067.25	15603.40	15036.19	70198.90
Saturated AIC	462.00	462.00	462.00	452.00	1848.00
RMSEA	0.069	0.062	0.058	0.063	0.62
90% Confidence Interval for RMSEA	(.063; .074)	(.058; .067)	(.053; .063)	(.057; .068)	(.059; .064)

*df=181 for Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden, df=808 for joint model

Table 2 presents the fit indices obtained for the proposed model; all indices indicate good model fit to the data. The three fit indexes GFI and CFI and NFI with values above 0.9 (in general) represent reasonable fit (Broome et al., 1997). The CFI is least affected by sample size (Hu & Bentler, 1995), and the RMSEA index, with its value less than 0.05, reflects a close fit, (< 0.08 reflects reasonable fit, and > 0.08 reflects poor fit). A not-too-wide interval is considered to indicate that the model is a plausible means of describing the data. The AIC is a special kind of fit index that takes into account both model fit and model complexity. Generally, proposed models with low AIC values (especially relative to the saturated model) are more likely to be better means of data description than models with higher AIC indices (Raykov & Marcoulides, 2000). This is not the case with our model. Finally, a chi-square to degrees of freedom ratio below 5 generally indicates reasonable model fit. Because in general the model was determined to fit the data reasonably well, we can now assess more thoroughly the significance of the empirical validation of the proposed model. The following models present the LISREL parameter estimates of the model tested. These parameter estimates are indices that represent the simultaneous contribution of each observed and latent variable to the overall model.

Figures 2, 3, 4 and 5 present the four path models based on the Sweden, Norway, Finland and Denmark data. Dot-lines in the path diagrams present the nonsignificant effects of independent latent variables on the dependent latent variables. As shown in Figure 2, which presents the model of social participation process for Sweden, the strongest direct effect on social participation was shown by democratic values (.86). This variable was comprised of a variety of values that students hold (e.g., the right to express their opinions freely, to demand their political and social rights, to elect political leaders freely). Thus, less positive democratic values were associated with lesser degrees of participation in social actions. The results further indicate that student democratic values were partially

explained by students' home political environment (.33) and their political interest (.32), as indicated by political discussions among the members of the family, or reading newspaper articles about events in their own or other countries. Finally, the home background was significantly correlated to political interest (0.53), and to political environment (0.23). The paths from school-class climate to political environment (0.71) and to political interest (0.45) were also significant.

Figure 2: Model of social participation process for Sweden

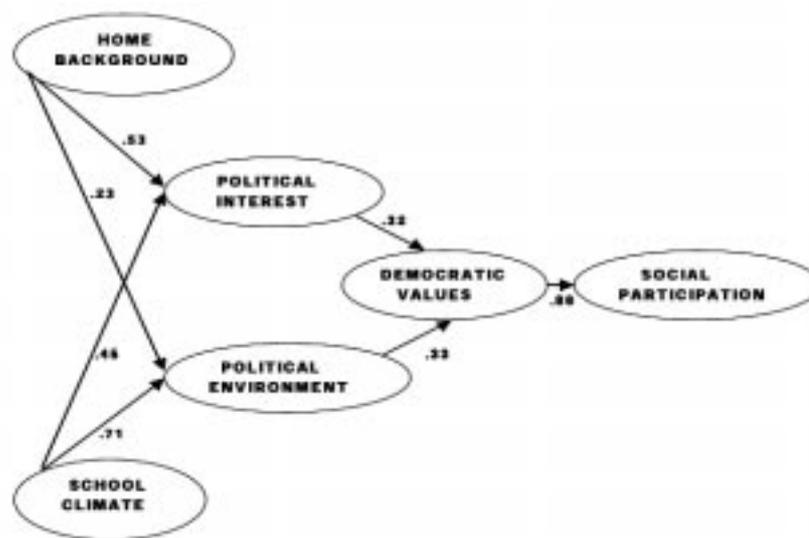


Figure 3 presents a model for Norway's social participation process; like Sweden, all paths are statistically significant. Specifically, the paths from home background to political environment (0.53) and to political interest (0.42) were significant. Paths from school-class climate to political interest (0.39) and to political environment (0.27) were also significant. Paths from political interest (0.39) and political environment (.27) to democratic values were also significant. Finally, the path from democratic values (0.64) to social participation was also significant.

Denmark differs from Sweden and Norway with in only one respect. The path from school climate to political interest is not statistically significant. All other paths are statistically significant, the strongest being home background on political environment (.95) and political interest (.92) followed by the direct influence of democratic values on social participation (.52).

The model of Finland (Figure 5) shows some similarities with Denmark. That is, there is a strong influence of home background on political interest (.96) and political environment (.96), but no statistically significant influence of school-class climate on the above factors. All remaining paths are statistically significant, with democratic values correlating most highly with social participation (.34).

Figure 3: Model of social participation process for Norway

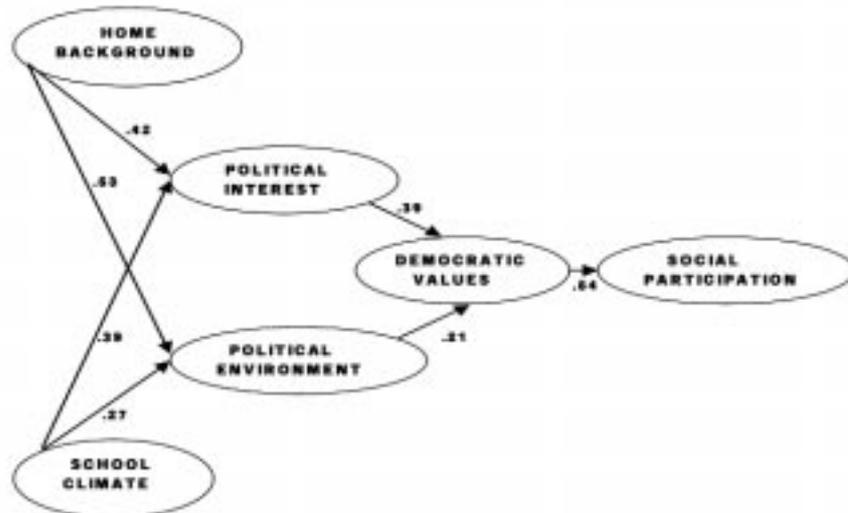


Figure 4: Model of social participation process for Denmark

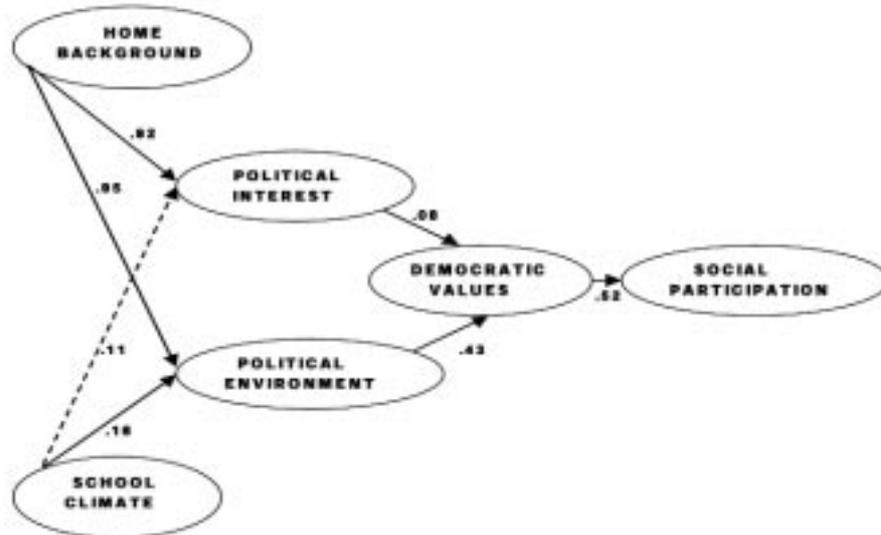


Figure 5: Model of social participation process for Finland

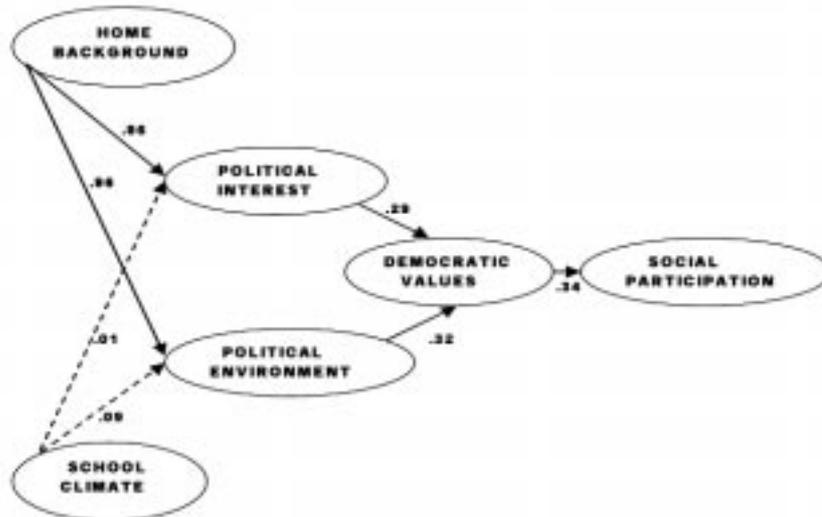
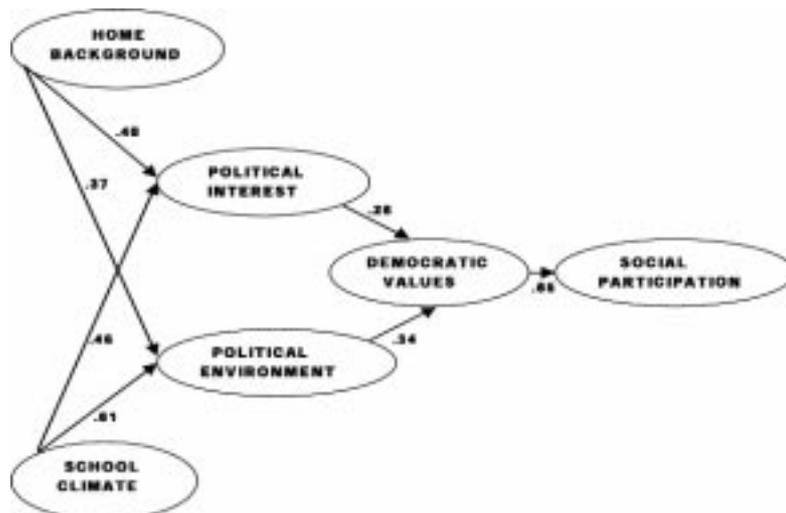


Figure 6, which is a joint model of the social participation process in Sweden, Norway, Finland and Denmark, reveals that democratic values (.65) exert the strongest direct influence on student participation in social actions. The next most important factors are school climate on political environment (.61), and home background on political interest (.48). Finally, there are statistically significant and direct influences on democratic values from political environment (.34) and political interest (.26).

FIGURE 6: Joint model of social participation process for Sweden, Norway, Denmark and Finland



DISCUSSION

For this study we began by posing a simple question: How can we best explain student social participation, based on the IEA Civic data, in relation to home background, school-class climate, political environment, political interest and democratic values? To answer this, we chose to elaborate on a model comparing various background factors, the home background and the class-school climate during teaching in terms of their effect on student social participation. It has been identified that an important element in values education is the school/class "ethos" (Halstead & Taylor, 2000), which indicates among other things the nature of relationships, the dominant forms of social interaction, the way that conflicts are resolved, patterns of communication and student involvement, discipline procedures, anti-racist policies, management styles.

The joint model seems to indicate that the democratic values have strongest direct influence on social participation. School climate also exerted a strong effect on political environment and political interest, and the political environment had a stronger effect than political interest on democratic values. All individual models have no any differences, although the strength of influences of the independent to independent latent variables have differences due to the home cultural differences and education. The models that seem to be closest are the Swedish and the Norwegian one.

The results of this study indicate that two exogenous factors – school-class climate and home background – define a second-order factor structure which includes three endogenous predictors - democratic values, political interest, and political environment. These results indicate that social participation is a multidimensional phenomenon.

Democratic values were found to be a very strong predictor of social participation, and because democratic values can be taught, could become important educational objectives. As with any modeling approach, cross-validation and replication are required (Bollen, 1989). Further investigation into the role of social participation, as well as into the compatibility of the present model with other models for different countries could be explored. Finally, the elements of the present model may provide empirical measures for a broad conceptualization of social participation in the developmental model.

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