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The Impact of The School on The Development of Normative Understanding of Citizenship: The Case of Latvia

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Abstract: Analysing the normative perceptions of citizenship in society - what is a good citizen–what are the civic virtues that influence political behaviour–attention is paid not only to what these perceptions are but also to the political socialisation process–when and how the views were formed. Traditionally, schools have been seen as one of the most important agents of political socialisation. This study aims to determine how the Latvian population describes the formation of their normative notions of citizenship and how they recall the influence of schools in this area. Qualitative methods were used to conduct the research based on 30 in-depth interviews that were conducted in the first part of 2022. Participants were selected by ensuring that people of different ages, genders, and ethnicities, as well as citizens with migration experience, were represented. The results of the study show that not only the Soviet past and the different approaches in Latvian and minority schools regarding political issues but also the changing curriculum and the lack of common standards have influenced the lack of a common understanding in this area. The study shows that the population is not used to reflecting on these topics, which suggests that it is necessary to activate discussions not only in school but also in society as a whole - what are the political values on which they want to base the future of the country?

Keywords: good citizen, education in comprehensive schools, Latvia

Introduction

The debate on citizenship and related normative notions has been ongoing since Ancient Greece and Rome: Plato, Aristotle, and others (Van Deth, 2008) have discussed the definition of a good citizen, but the debate continues to this day (Villalobos et al., 2021). One topic that inevitably attracts attention is the formation of normative notions related to citizenship. Consequently, children and young people and the educational process are inevitably the focus of attention (student surveys are conducted, teachers' perceptions are analysed, and teaching materials are analysed) (Kerr, 1999; Harwood, 2010; Anderson et al., 1997). In recent decades, researchers have also focused on the decline in civic virtue among young people (Dalton, 2008; Jennings, 2008), and the education system is often blamed for this decline (Stuteville and Johnson, 2016).

This is partly attributed to the political socialisation process, where for a given age group (Wasburn & Adkins Covert, 2017, Nieuwelink et al., 2018) the school system is one of the most important agents of socialisation (peers, formal curriculum, community service programs) (Jennings, 2008; Mills, 2013; Hammett, 2018), through which the state tries to internalise certain values (Janoski, 1998; Gutierrez, 2002).

This article will not analyse the content of the curriculum, but the impressions of citizens on how educational institutions influenced the formation of their perceptions of a good citizen and what exactly came to mind from their school life. Taking into account the age structure of the study participants (some of them went to school at the time of the USSR, and some of them after Latvia regained its independence) and the different places they lived during their school years (including outside Latvia), the study aims not so much to describe the Latvian education system and curriculum, but more the perceptions of the population about the influence of schools and teachers on this important sphere of life.

Methodology

This research was conducted to study in depth the perception of Latvian citizens as good citizens. The study covered a broader range of topics, but this article focuses on the role of educational institutions in shaping the perceptions of a good citizen.

In-depth interviews were conducted in this study. The interviews were conducted in the first half of 2022, in two waves. Thirty interviews were conducted in the first wave, and 28 of them were interviewed in the second wave (two refused to continue participating in the study).

Participants were selected through personal contacts, ensuring that interviewees were of different ages and genders and that some had migrated and lived abroad. The sample is characterised as follows: interviewees aged 19-83, 19 women and 11 men, 2 foreigners with long-term experience of living in Latvia, 15 Latvians born and raised in Latvia, 5 Latvians who themselves or whose ancestors went into exile after WWII, and 8 Russian speakers born or living in Latvia for a long time.

Most of the interviews were conducted in Latvian; however, if the interviewees had difficulties expressing themselves fluently in Latvian or wanted to speak Russian, the interview was conducted in Russian.

> Length of the interview in Wave 1: from 35 minutes to 2 hours and 19 minutes (average length 1 h 22 minutes).
>
> Length of the interview in Wave 2:55 minutes to 5 hours 15 minutes (average duration 2 hours 29 minutes). In two cases, the interviews were interrupted and resumed on another day. The interviews were conducted either face-to-face or remotely, using the Zoom platform. Interviews were recorded (face-to-face audio, mostly remote video).

In the first interview, interviewees were asked to describe their general perceptions of citizenship, being good citizens, and their personal experiences. In the second interview, targeted questions were asked about the relationship between different societal processes and institutions, and perceptions of good citizenship. The topic of this article, education, was mainly touched upon by the respondents in the first interview, both spontaneously and by describing how their ideas of a good citizen and civic virtues were formed, and by answering a series of questions about the curriculum. In the second interview, apart from education, the question was asked about a teacher or whether they remembered a teacher who influenced the kind of citizen they became and who determined it. The names used in the article have been changed; however, the ages of the interviewees have been retained.

Results and Discussion

In summarising the results of the study, it should be noted that they are based on qualitative research data, and quantitative research would be needed to draw representative conclusions about the impact of educational institutions on perceptions of good citizenship among different generations of citizens.

As already mentioned, educational institutions are often blamed for the decline in civic participation (Stuteville and Johnson, 2016; Peterson, 2011; Wilkins, 1999). This study shows that there are several reasons for this (lack of active behaviour models in society and passivity of close people), but it must be acknowledged that the contribution of schools to interest in, knowledge of, and participation in citizenship issues is uneven, and the majority of the interviewees admit that they have thought relatively little about citizenship and its normative aspects–what it means to be a good citizen. Although some do not relate their knowledge and views to what they have learned at school, the majority acknowledges the influence of the school and teachers (sometimes also pointing to its negative aspects).

Given the wide age range of the interviewees, the results also show the influence of the historical period - the USSR period (in fact, this period can also be divided into several periods, such as the post-war years, the period shortly before independence, and the period between), and the independence period.

Similar to other studies showing **the impact of educational programmes** on perceptions of citizenship, values, and citizenship behaviour (Nieuwelink et al., 2018; Tibbitts, 2001), this study shows that interviewees recognise and acknowledge the impact of what is taught in school.

> *In primary school, teachers always discussed this issue during the [national holiday] weeks. Very often, trips were organised (...) to memorial sites, soldiers were invited to go on excursions very often to the front lines of the battle in the Ķemeri swamp [events of WWI, the battles for independence]. Afterward, we had to analyse these battles, these situations, and our thoughts, what we experienced, and what we thought. (...) It was not only in the lessons of the social sciences*

but also in Latvian language classes. Each teacher tried to somehow involve the experience we got in this excursion in their lesson (Kaspars, 19 y.o.)

It was probably the first time outside the family, well, in a peer group, that we talked about "adult people issues," about political processes, about elections, about some kind of political structure, let's say, and how things work, what's going on in Latvia. (Guntis, 35 y.o.)

However, the interviews show different assessments of the relevance of what is taught about citizenship and its relationship to the normative aspects of citizenship (some do not even remember it), which is noted both by describing situations in different periods of schooling.

They did not teach you in school, but what a good citizen should be. [about politics], absolutely nothing. It was still a rural school (...) There was no politics at all (Lūcija, 83 y.o.)

Well, I do not know, I do not think anybody has educated us about that. They taught their subjects– that is, all. (Santa, 48 y.o.)

Maybe there was something at school, but nothing comes to mind (Jana, 34 y.o.)

It should be noted that changes in curricula also have an impact, not only regarding the knowledge received but also on the view of the importance of this knowledge–the instability of the programme suggested that this knowledge was not important.

[other subjects like literature] were taken more seriously because it was clear that everybody had it from grade 4 and it was easier to take it seriously compared to a subject that came out of the blue and people who are a few years older didn't have it at all (Pēteris, 24 y.o.)

The study also showed the interaction between **school and family**: although many people's primary memories are of their families (parents and grandparents), who taught them by example what to do and how to do it, perceptions of how much influence each of them has (and should have) differ.

I would say the very beginning is in the family and, at least in my case, in secondary school. In the first grades, I did not talk about it much, but in high school and university, these topics were touched upon in various subjects. It was discussed, and there was a greater understanding of it. It also explained what the point was, say, going to participate in something or something. It was also a kind of patriotism. (Guntis, 35 y.o.)

Interviewees emphasised that at this age, they spend a lot of time at school; therefore, a school is a place where they meet peers and friends, so the influence of school is very important in the socialisation of a person in general (and thus also in the political socialization and perception of citizenship) (Nieuwelink et al., 2018).

If you think about this, we spend more time at school than with our families. Therefore, all those people, that society, and that environment around us, shape us as people more than our family. That environment, not the family, nurtures us and shapes us two-thirds as human beings. The family puts one-third, which is the basic foundation. (Elīna, 21 y.o.)

It was also stated that educational institutions can provide better quality civic education than parents, explaining different terms and meanings of historical events.

[Who should teach citizenship?]... Our education system probably (..) They have a kindergarten curriculum, but not all parents can explain it comprehensively. A large amount of information should be poured into the child's head. However, parents, maybe at some point can say: let us go and watch the fireworks, let us go - yes, it's Latvia's birthday. Someone might not even say it; they say that they're shooting fireworks today, let us go and see. In kindergarten, they are told the information in a structured manner so that it is completely understandable at that age. (Linda, 48 y.o.)

The role of the family also appears in the curriculum - how important it is that the pupil learns about historical events not only from the teacher's narration but also from the family's memories (and does not contradict what the teacher says). Here, however, it is necessary to mention the phenomenon observed, as many at-home historical events have not been discussed. Some attribute this to the discrepancy

between official history and family memories in Soviet times, and the fear that sanctions may follow if a child speaks out in public.

> *I did not have such stories because, well, I say there was a tradition of not talking about things like that. Parents did not tell their children about such things either. My grandmother was sent to Siberia in 49 but why and for what I was not told. My parents thought that it was better not to know than to start protesting something. (Iveta, 59 y.o.)*

Several interviewees pointed out that they did not get their knowledge of history from family members, not so much out of caution, but because as a child, they were not interested in it.

> *You do not find your parents very interesting anymore, especially when you are young. (Iveta, 59 y.o.)*

Those who recalled historical events told in the family more often indicated that the initiators were the storytellers themselves, or that such stories were a tradition of family events. However, the influence of the school was also mentioned; for example, to learn the topic in history, the pupils had to find out what the parents did during the restoration of independence (in this case, the 1991 events–the barricades). The interviewee points out that this prompted her to discuss these issues with her parents.

As already mentioned, research often focuses **on the curriculum and its relationship to understanding citizenship** (Stuteville and Johnson, 2016; Kerr, 1999). This study also showed that the time spent at school has a direct and indirect impact. There are influences from changes in the curriculum (e.g., the way history is taught, whether and how social studies are taught), but there are also other aspects that influence the way these subjects are taught: teachers' experiences and society's agenda.

> *We had a history teacher who was a WWII veteran. (..) I do not like history - there's all medieval history, the history of the Latvian SSR, but he was so interesting. He told us of his adventures. (Irēna, 64 y.o.)*

> *Two years ago, we heard a lot about, let us say, the same sorting of waste, which I think is one of the issues now: Let us not pollute the environment. At home, we were told that we could not use plastic straws now because they would end up somewhere, I do not know, in the environment. I was angry; I said I am going to take them all to the forest and throw them out, and then you will see. At school, there was a lot about sorting waste. (Linda, 48 y.o.)*

> *It was much less talked about because it was different in Australia - freedom was not won there like in Latvia. Australia Day is just a big barbecue, where people go and roast meat. This is because the country is always free of charge. It's different. (Laura, 52 y.o.)*

Analysing the answers, it is noticeable that the interviewees attributed more influence to subjects such as Latvian language and literature (including foreign literature), history, and geography on the formation of their understanding of citizenship. Social sciences, as previously mentioned, are not taught to everyone.

> *Because it tells us what the past was like, through it we can inherit the mistakes and good things of previous generations, and second, it gives us a better sense of the spirit and values of the country. (Pēteris, 24 y.o.)*

> *The only time it [citizenship] was mentioned was in history lessons. However, at the same time, I am not interested in history. I was so bored. Well, it is nice that you told me, and then? You are already talking in the form of the past. They did not tell [about recent history] either. It went on for 40 minutes about all that and the next hour. (...) [In the social sciences], it was more about how to behave, how to be a lady and things like that. (Sigita, 27 y.o.)*

It should be noted that both Latvian and minority school pupils emphasised the importance of the Latvian language:

> *Before secondary school, we had a new Latvian language teacher. (...) Then, the teacher gave a lot of information about Latvian heritage: folklore and poetry (...). And then they also switched to teaching the history of literature in the context of not just Soviet books but using literature that had been banned (..), so we were given a pretty good basis in school for understanding our new*

country: how it is built, that it is not just a territory separated from the Russian province and now there is Latvia, but that it is historical - that Latvians have lived here and the old stories about the Latvian people and tribes and how it has gone, developed and, say, who has occupied us - Swedes, Russians, Germans, Poles and so on - but that this is how this country has been formed (Linda, 48 y.o.)

My Latvian language teacher influenced me as a citizen because she was interested in teaching and training us Russians in Latvian. She was so enthusiastic about it that she tried to do so in some kind of game and in a way that would be interesting for us or us in some lessons. Therefore, after the 9th grade, I decided that I would go to vocational high school and I would learn purely in Latvian. (Alīna, 38 y.o.)

However, many speakers considered **the way the subject was taught** to be more important than the content.

About patriotism (...), it all depends on who is going to teach there and who is going to teach there. It is just as in health teaching, where the teacher cannot teach anything because she blushes at the mention of the word condom, the same here. Well, if it's very formal like that, then I do not know if it has any meaning or significance. (Maria, 80 y.o.)

There was ambivalence about the impact of **teachers' enthusiasm** on pupils' reactions. As previously mentioned, some were inspired by this enthusiasm, while others were repelled.

[Was there patriotic education?] Maybe there was something in the history lessons, but we had such a good teacher who didn't exaggerate (Kārlis, 39 y.o.)

My history teacher was a super-patriotic person, and she imposed her ideologies on us. And when they talked about Latvian history, I was like, no, it's cool that you tell us, but do not impose your ideology, your opinion on us. (Sigita, 27 y.o.)

It should be noted that several interviewees, when analysing the impact of school and teachers, emphasised **the personality and attitude of the teacher** more than the curriculum and activities.

If I believe that a good citizen is someone who respects the law and is interested in certain topics, then I believe that (..) if the teacher treats you as equal. Yes, of course, he is a teacher, and he cannot be treated badly, (..) but teachers also must not treat the pupil disdainfully, because then they will also feel the social inequality since their childhood, from their youth, they will realise that if an adult can afford it and they have nothing to say against it, then they can form a link that - when I am an adult I can do the same and there won't be any consequences too (Alīna, 38 y.o.)

The period during which the interviewees attended educational institutions also had an impact on their various activities: during **the USSR period**, those attending school pointed to their involvement in organisations of the time - the children's organization (oktobrēni), Pioneers, Komsomol, attitudes to which differed from time to time, but none of the interviewees identified themselves as enthusiasts of these organisations and this was also said to be relatively rare among classmates and acquaintances. However, one interviewee pointed out that these organisations did not admit those who were bad students or misbehaving, so there would be pressure on those who, for whatever reason, did not want to join. It was evident from the interviews that attitudes towards these organisations changed over time

I was encouraged to join the pioneers at the beginning, but my class teacher was very good because her brother had been exiled like my father and she understood. I wasn't hardened much there, and that's how I stayed, that I was neither a pioneer nor a Komsomol member (Lūcija, 83 y.o.)

I thought, well, that it is about discipline; it is compulsory. One has to go to school and one has to join the organization (oktobrēni). And you do. To be honest, oktobrēni did not matter. (Santa, 48 y.o.)

Later, however, other arguments for joining appeared - for example, that membership in the Komsomol was necessary to be able to go to university later.

It was the beginning of the end of the Soviet Union; for example, in grade 8, when the whole class joined the Komsomol, I decided that I was not going to join. And I was treated for a very long time, by my mother, by the class teacher, by other teachers, by everybody, that I had to join the Komsomol because otherwise, I would not have a life, I would not have a career, I would not have anything. If I did not publicly demonstrate my loyalty by taking part in some mass organisations, ideological organisations that could either spoil my life or develop it. This is common knowledge. Maybe it was not spoken about loudly and you could not read it anywhere, but at the whispering level, it was everywhere. You might not want to join, but you ended up being pushed in so to speak. You were treated until ... well, you want to go to university, join the Komsomol (Iveta, 59 y.o.)

Apart from their involvement in these organisations, students who attended school during the USSR period mentioned activities related to them, such as marching, pioneer organizations, and political information lessons. However, not only directly political activities were mentioned, but also being a good pioneer was related to activities such as collecting waste paper, working in a factory, and helping to harvest potatoes. Several studies have also indicated that cultural activities (including folklore-related ones) are common.

Yes, but they were collective [activities]. For example, there were school marchings. They were not like this at an individual level. (...) Some outstanding pioneers went to the camps in Artek that were not offered for me; the rest of the mass was quite well you had to wear that scarf. (Iveta, 59 y.o.)

Well, there was patriotic education for preparing for the atomic war, pulling gas masks, and going to the shelter, which was somewhere in the basement of the school. But in the middle of all that, once a year for Christmas we had folklore events (...) We prepared some kind of performances for Christmas, there with folk songs and things like that (Santa, 48 y.o.)

For participants who attended school during the independence period, social activities were less centralised. The most unifying feature appears to be the celebration of national holidays, although it has also been pointed out that these were celebrated less in minority schools. Other activities mentioned are the Scout movement, the youth guard, volunteering - both compulsory (e.g., within certain curricula) and voluntary–and the involvement of pupils in discussions on local government decisions. Entrepreneurship was also mentioned as a citizenship-related activity, noting that not all of these activities were charitable but that a good citizen must also be an active participant in the national economy.

It should be noted that the participants in the study who grew up abroad also pointed to the scouting movement as an important activity in their view of building citizens.

I went scouting, and I joined the Latvian organization, but there was also a wider scouting movement in Australia and the world in general. What was it like there? A Scout is honest, and a scout is a friend of animals. All that kind of stuff. It was, very, I think, worldwide. Well, something like the pioneers - a similar idea It was certainly a valuable way of setting up structures in society to bring people together around some common denominator of what was normal behaviour and what wasn't. (Pauls, 49 y.o.)

The fact that these are the activities that interviewees can recall is also in line with references to the need to use different methods - to discuss citizenship concerning the environment in which they live, their own and their teachers' experiences, and to practice formal and informal engagement in different civic activities (Pykkett, 2009; Mills, 2013).

It should be noted that Latvians whose parents were forced to flee Latvia after WWII and who grew up in the West as a result recognised Latvian community activities as a very important factor in the development of citizenship, where not only the Latvian language and history were learned, but also practiced in civic and political activities - for example, taking part in protests. It should be noted that it was Latvians from abroad who took part in the protests against COVID-19 restrictions, but here we have to take into account the sample limitations.

Some interviewees pointed to **the negative impact of the school** on their formation as citizens - hypocrisy and concealment of their attitudes not only concerning political activities but also concerning learning and even thinking (see also Wilkins, 2010). It should be noted that this phenomenon was pointed out by both the interviewees who attended school during the Soviet period and by the interviewee who had done so recently.

> *I really did not like her, not only because I was a bad student, but also because I challenged her. When she started saying that you could not have same-sex relationships, it really offended me, and I started riding her high. I asked her why, and then she kept saying, that's not right, then immediately she started pushing religion. She then started to mention Latvia. (..) She sat especially for these people (..) whom she saw as super-good and patriotic, she sat in front, closer to herself. These are the people she unites. And people like me, she put at the end and forgot about them [the privileged readiness to intervene] No, they did not care. If they see that it would be bad for them, why should they intervene? (Sigita, 27 y.o.)*

> *Well, we had intrusive Soviet upbringing here, you know. We learned very well to say one thing and think about how not to say it to anybody and what we do. We thought (...) Yes, we have had a parallel life. We were still small, but we understood very well that you have to say this and that, but you have to keep quiet about what you think if you do not want any trouble. That was normal, that was how we learned to write those compositions, the way we have to, and not what you think. It was an art to learn. (Jelena, 50 y.o.)*

> *I would say human nature is the same to some extent and somewhere it is, but I would like to say that it is not so much at the national level, when we - as there was that famous saying - think "Party," say "Lenin," think "Lenin," we say 'party' and so on all the time - we think one thing, we say another, nowadays - if only because we have this multiplicity of parties, well, then you always have some eyes watching your fingers - opposition to the position, position to the opposition, then that hypocrisy, to a certain extent, is highlighted. I do not want to say that it is not there, but it is being highlighted more than in those days. (Iveta, 59 y.o.)*

Conclusions

Citizenship and its normative aspects are a topic that some people do not think about, nor do they remember what and how they were taught about it in school. The understanding of citizenship and the traditions of teaching it at school are changing. This is primarily due to the stability of the political system but is also influenced by changes in the curriculum and societal agendas.

However, given the amount of time spent at school and the fact that many friends are there, it is acknowledged that school has an important influence on the formation of perceptions of citizenship.

The subjects most frequently associated with perceptions of good citizenship are history, the Latvian language, and literature. Social sciences are also mentioned, but not all participants have been exposed to them due to curriculum changes, or their content varies between interviewees. However, the participants stress that the influence of the school and the teacher is not so much related to the content of the subject as to how it was taught or even to the personality of the teacher.

The role of the school and the teacher overlaps with the contribution of other agents of socialisation, such as the family, which may support or reject what is taught at school about citizenship and its normative aspects (e.g., differences in understanding of history or family apoliticism, disinterest in history, not discussing or silencing family history).

Differences in views and the atmosphere in the educational institution may contribute to behaviour that is not related to the understanding of a good citizen: instead of defending one's own opinion, the pupil learns to be hypocritical (this was most often associated with the Soviet era, but has also been observed in recent times).

The participants had ambivalent attitudes toward social activities at school. Some of them support the involvement in social activities and associate it with the school's contribution to their civic skills (discussions, helping others, interest in politics) (they remember the initiatives that go beyond the

minimum), while others criticise the school and teacher initiatives if they consider them to be exaggerated.

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