Providing a Collaborative Civic Education Program to Students in France, Greece, and Spain

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Sector(s): Education

Location: France, United Kingdon, Greece, Spain

Sample: 323 teachers and 6,211 grade 8 and 9 students across 217 middle schools

Target group: Students Teachers

Outcome of interest: Attitudes and norms

Intervention type: Training Student motivation

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In increasingly divisive and polarized societies, there is a strong need to understand how to best teach civic values and skills to new generations. Researchers evaluated the impact of a civic education program involving learning-by-doing and student-centered teaching approaches in middle schools across three European countries. The program led to an increase in students' academic performance, altruism, and friendships with peers from different cultural and social backgrounds, and a decrease in absenteeism and disciplinary problems. Results were greater for students with the highest levels of altruism before the program began.

Policy issue

Civic virtues are commonly understood as key to the stability of democratic societies and their economic development. These virtues include tolerance and respect for others and for collective rules, equal rights for all citizens, altruism, and active involvement in society. To support new generations in becoming active citizens, most European education systems include civic education in their curricula. However, in most countries, civic education is mainly focused on the knowledge of political institutions and processes and is often seen as a non-priority subject, taught by teachers who primarily focus on other subjects, and thus rely closely on teaching from the textbook rather than cultivating engagement with students.

In the context of modern societies with growing divisive and polarized politics, populism, and extremist views, the relevance of these approaches has been questioned. Many extremist individuals, including those who have carried out terrorist attacks, have grown up and gone to school in Europe. Thus, intervening in school years by promoting civic education could contribute to fostering young people's civic values and skills and address the rise in polarized politics, populism, and extremist views in European societies. Overall, across countries, there remains limited evidence on what approaches may be best to teach civic values and skills to new generations. Can training teachers to run learning-by-doing and student-led civic education programs in schools improve students' civic values? What are the impacts of this on students' learning outcomes?

Context of the evaluation

France, Greece, and Spain have all had a long tradition of civic education programs for decades. In the three countries, civic education curricula put forward similar values and skills, such as critical thinking, tolerance, respect for others and for human rights, as well as respect for rules and participation. Over the past decade, Europe has seen a rise in divisive and polarizing politics, populism, extremist views as well as terrorist attacks. In the aftermath of the 2015 terrorist attacks in Paris attacks, the European Union promoted efforts to enhance young people's civic values, tolerance, and equal rights across its member countries. Among these, the Active Citizenship Project (ACT), an Erasmus+ project funded by the European Commission, aimed to foster students' acquisition of civic values and skills as well as promote student engagement in collective life.

The program was carried out in public middle schools in France, Greece, and Spain. Two thirds of the teachers included in the program taught History and Geography; about 20 percent were Foreign Language or Mathematics teachers. More than 70 percent of teachers were involved in at least one school council. Among students involved in the program, 35 percent had previously been elected as class representatives. Before the program started, female and high-socioeconomic status (SES) students had higher levels of altruism and tolerance, better school behavior, and showed greater support for equal rights than male and low-SES students, Male students were more confident discussing and participating in politics compared to female students.



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Details of the intervention

Researchers conducted a randomized evaluation to assess whether the ACT program, an alternative pedagogy based on student empowerment, learning-by-doing, and the implementation of citizenship projects, could promote students' acquisition of civic values and skills.

Researchers partnered with education stakeholders to implement the ACT program in the 2018-2019 school year.[1] Of the 217 participating schools, 108 were randomly assigned to receive the ACT program and serve as the intervention group, and 109 schools were randomly assigned to continue with the status quo pedagogy, serving as the comparison group.

As part of the ACT intervention, teachers received a two-day training that introduced the intervention, methodology, innovative assessment tools, and encouraged teachers to foster an environment of debate and student autonomy. In school, students were first assigned to small groups of 4 to 5 students where they proposed an idea for a collective citizenship project for their class. The projects could focus on the fight against discrimination, social inclusion, or cultural diversity. Out of the projects identified by students in small groups, each class voted on a project to implement collectively. Teachers then supported students in developing an action plan and implementing the project. Throughout the development and implementation of the collective project, students were encouraged to debate, exercise their autonomy, and make collective choices. They were also taught and tasked to engage in self- and peer-assessment exercises.

Researchers conducted surveys before and after the intervention to assess students' civic attitudes and the size and diversity of their friendship networks. Researchers constructed indexes based on students' responses to questions related their pro-social behavior, democratic participation, altruism, tolerance, support for equal rights, and ultimately, a summary index of civic

attitudes. In France, researchers also used administrative data on student disciplinary sanctions, absenteeism, and academic achievement to assess students' respect for the rules of collective life and school engagement. To measure school behavior, researcher constructed an index based on four main outcomes: unjustified absences, punctuality, exclusions and smaller sanctions.

To assess teacher practices, researchers conducted a teacher survey before and after the intervention. Using questions in the teacher survey, researchers built a summary index of teacher practices to measure the extent to which teachers implemented student-centered approaches aligned with the principles exposed during the ACT training intervention.

Results and policy lessons

The ACT program increased students' academic performance, respect for school rules, and friendship networks with people with different social and cultural backgrounds. The effects were greater for students with higher levels of altruism before the program began.

Student and teacher participation: Around three quarters of students in intervention schools reported having participated in a collective project; less than one third of students in comparison schools did. Teachers in the intervention group were more likely to declare having used teaching practices in line with the principles exposed during the ACT teacher training relative to comparison group teachers.

Student behavior and academic achievement: In France, students in the program had lower absenteeism and disciplinary sanctions relative to students in the comparison group. Students in the intervention group also achieved higher academic outcomes, even in courses taught by teachers not included in the program. Students in the intervention group improved their school behavior by 0.27 standard deviations (SD)[2] and their average grades by 0.13 SDs relative to the comparison group. The effects on academic performance were stronger for female students and for students from higher socio-economic backgrounds.

Friendship ties: Student friendship ties with peers with different backgrounds[3] increased for students in the intervention group. Opposite-sex friendships were 15 percent more common in intervention classes relative to comparison classes. Additionally, friendship ties among students from different backgrounds were 0.09 SDs higher in classes included in the program compared to classes outside of the program. This was in line with the idea that a civic education pedagogy based on a collective project implementation could promote more interactions with diverse peers in the classroom.

Civic attitudes: After having received the ACT intervention, students had higher levels of values related to altruism, tolerance, and equal rights compared to students in the comparison group. Additionally, students in the intervention group participated at higher rates in student climate movements at the end of the school year relative to students in the comparison group, with a 0.08 SD increase in their democratic participation index. Overall, students in the intervention group had 0.12 of a SD higher civic attitudes relative to the comparison group.

Differential impacts by student and teacher characteristics: Overall, the program improved the levels of active citizenship of all students, irrespective of their gender or social background. The effects were stronger for students who had the best grades and were already the most altruistic and interested in politics before the intervention. Hence, the program contributed to increasing the citizenship gaps existing before the intervention. Additionally, teachers had a key role in promoting students' civic values and skills. The effects of the intervention were considerably larger when the ACT program was carried out by teachers who had the highest levels of involvement in school councils, and when teachers used more student-centered pedagogy practices.

Researchers suggest that implementing civic education programs before adolescence may be important given the higher results in civic values and skills for students who already showed higher pro-social behaviors before the program. The positive results of the ACT intervention also show that training teachers to carry out a student-led learning-by-doing civic education pedagogy can be implemented at low cost as the cost of training teachers per student ranged between 2 and 5 euros (between US$2 and US$6

at the time of the evaluation).

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1. The program was implemented in England, France, Greece, Spain. England was excluded from the evaluation due to problems linked to recruiting enough schools and resulting implementation issues.
2. For comparability, scores were converted to a common scale, the “standard deviation”, which expresses the extent to which students in the intervention group progressed relative to students in the comparison group. For instance, an increase of 2 standard deviations would move someone from being an average student to being in the top 5 percent of a class.
3. Gender, geographic origin, and socio-economic status.