

Beyond voice: an agentic and agonistic perspective on youth citizenship in school

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Title

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Abstract

During the past two decades, citizenship education has become an educational priority across Europe and in the United States, in policy, practice and research alike. Often this educational priority is understood through the lens of education's contribution to the process of youth *becoming* citizens. In this theoretical study, the aim is to contribute to a growing body of studies seeking to reconceptualise youth as not just becoming citizens, but as being citizens and doing citizenship. This reconceptualization impacts the way the role of schools in light of citizenship education can, and should, be understood. We combine insights from Dewey's work on experiential learning and democracy as 'a mode of associated living' and Mouffe's agonistic model of democracy to further develop the understanding of the relation between the school context and youth citizenship. As an example of the implications of the reconceptualization of youth citizenship, we explore its relation with 'voice' in school. We conclude by reflecting on the implications of this conceptualisation of youth citizenship for researchers, educational practitioners and policymakers.

Extended summary:

Research aim

Much work in the field of education for democratic citizenship is based on positioning youth as 'becoming citizens'. Although citizenship education is a contested concept there is agreement that it is part of the formal, informal and hidden curriculum (Campbell et al, 2012). A growing body of research (Biesta, 2011; Lieberkind, 2020; Tryggvason, 2017; Olson, 2012) voices the need for change in youth citizenship education beyond conventional democratic activities teaching *about* democracy.

Recent studies (Sirevåg, 2023; Rinnooy Kan, 2024) support this and argue for understanding schools as a social context in which democracy can be 'lived' and experienced by students. This conceptual study aims to further develop this conceptualization of youth citizenship. We engage in a critical analysis of how the dominant conventional conceptualization of youth citizenship as youth *becoming* citizens (Kovac 2018; Schulz et al., 2018) limits our understanding of on the one hand relevant expressions of youth citizenship in the school context and, on the other, of relevant practices the school has to offer in terms of youth citizenship (Lawy & Biesta, 2006; Rinnooy Kan, 2024; Sirevåg, 2023; Wood, 2022).

Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework combines ideas from Dewey (1916) and Mouffe (2005). Dewey (1916) approached schools as practice grounds for the experience of community membership. Dewey refers to the civic nature of this experience through the notion of democracy as 'a mode of associated living' (p.93) in contrast to democracy as confined to formal procedures. Democracy, as a lived and communal experience, in the school context, is rooted in students' relationships in the school and acknowledges students' agency in their processes of political socialisation (Wood, 2022). To develop this conceptualisation of youth citizenship we work with Mouffe's (2005;2014) agonistic model of democracy. Mouffe argues that people are driven by passion as much as reason and insists the democratic project must recognise this. She argues that conflict must be the nerve in the democratic project

through agonistic struggles. The agonistic relation involves friendly enemies who engage in heartfelt disagreements, but share a symbolic space (Hirsch and Miessen, 2012). We employ this concept to explore how approaching children as becoming citizens may limit understanding of the school as a practice ground for the broad range of opportunities for youth to engage in disagreements, confrontations and conflicts of interest without becoming enemies as part of their citizenship.

Methodology

Through a hermeneutical approach, we analyse relevant literature and educational policy to gain insight into the research aim. We further activate ideas from Mouffe and Dewey before we work with voice as an example to investigate how current understandings can be limiting for youth citizenship in the context of education. Voice is a widely used term in education for democratic citizenship and it dominates conceptualisations of children's agency. This makes the concept relevant for informing our exploration of empirical studies based on the conceptualisation of youth citizenship that we develop in the first part of the study.

Results and theoretical and educational significance of the research

A reconceptualization of youth citizenship explores as well as clarifies what experiences and expressions of citizenship can be present within the school context. The example of student voice indicates that a narrow focus on student voice as an expression of their agency as citizens, risks reducing schools to an exclusive practice ground. By broadening the understanding of schools as practice grounds not only *for* citizenship but also *of* citizenship, teachers can expand educational practices for democratic citizenship. This involves a push beyond teaching *about* democratic citizenship, to communal engagement *through* active citizenship in school. Agency linked to reason and voice is supplemented with focus on affect and passion, and modes of associated living where agonistic struggles and conflict are embraced as valuable citizenship learning opportunities.

This in turn creates an invitation for researchers to reflect on how they research citizenship education. And for practitioners and policy makers to explore policy and

develop teaching that recognises the school as a social context where youth are not only becoming citizens, but also being citizens and doing citizenship.

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