



**Under what conditions
policy-oriented citizenship
education is an effective
approach to foster young
people's political attitudes
and reduce the political
socialization inequalities?**

Key messages

- 1** The crisis of democracy has hit the Brussels youth particularly hard: young people in Brussels have limited political interest and trust, and perceive that political actors are not responsive to their needs.
- 2** An experimental set-up showed that citizenship education can be an effective approach to foster the political attitudes and engagement of young people.
- 3** Different pedagogical approaches should be combined to generate multiple positive outputs.
- 4** Citizenship education can compensate the inequalities in political socialization of young people.
- 5** The ready-to-use pedagogical toolkit 'Debagora' is freely available for the schools and could be enhanced through the event 'When young people get involved in politics'.

Introduction

There is a general context of **political disengagement** in many western democracies, and young people are particularly affected. They show limited interest, trust, and political efficacy. Furthermore, the social cohesion is undermined by a lack of mutual understanding between young people from different social backgrounds, resulting from residential and educational segregation, which are both particularly present in Brussels. In this context, the current digital revolution also affects social categories differently and its integration into the school environment poses many problems.

Citizenship education programs are often seen as a solution to this disengagement, or at least, as a partial solution. However, there are still many blind spots about the effectiveness of such activities on young people. The primary objective of the project Jeunes et Enjeux Politiques was to analyse to what extent and under what conditions citizenship education could help address the challenges of youth's relationship to politics, social cohesion, and the digital revolution.

Methods, approaches and results

The project was structured in two steps. First, we set up a learning activity that implied the use of a collaborative online platform and we tested it through two rounds of experimentations (a pilot and a large-scale experiment). Secondly, we evaluated the learning activity and the collaborative web platform and adapted them to propose a pedagogical toolbox for citizenship education in schools.

The main experiment was organized between November 2018 and May 2019, and consisted of the implementation of a pedagogical learning tool in 60 classes (1200 pupils) in upper secondary education and in both general and vocational educational tracks. The classes (52 French-speaking and 8 Dutch-speaking) were selected from 24 schools to match Brussels's educative landscape. Ten other classes were recruited as a control group. The learning activity aimed to engage the pupils over a policy issue of the Region through three steps: (1) gathering knowledge about political issues and the related diversity of opinions using the collaborative platform 'WebDeb'; (2) the participation in one meeting with other classes and political actors; (3) the public expression of analyses and opinions of the pupils about the issue through a diversity of media and public events.

The experiment was analyzed in two steps. A first analysis concerns the appropriation of the pedagogical tool by the teachers. It is based on 18 interviews, pupils' contribution to the collaborative platform, and on-site observations. It shows that such ready-to-use tools are always appropriated and adapted when implemented, in particular when the teachers are little involved with its design. A second analysis relies on a quantitative longitudinal study to test the effect of the different parts of the activity over different categories of pupils. The results show that the learning activity had positive effects for the level of political interest and sense of political efficacy, while the results regarding political trust are nuanced and vary according to the activities. **It clearly shows that citizenship education can compensate the pre-existing political inequalities between the pupils.** A pedagogical toolbox based on these results is now accessible to the schools and to youth associations.

Conclusions

A learning activity of citizenship education that addresses a particular political issue and that combines various types of pedagogical approaches (to foster knowledge, to meet with political actors, and to provide space for public expression) had clear positive results on young participants' political attitudes (political interest, sense of efficacy, and partially political trust). These attitudes are of importance as they deeply influence the type and the intensity of future political participation. Furthermore, this kind of activity compensates initial inequalities of political socialization existing between the least favoured and the most favoured pupils.

The activities dedicated to the expression of opinions appear to be particularly positive for the pupils in vocational education. Finally, the research shows the pertinence of providing a pedagogical toolkit to the teachers as they feel little equipped to deal with citizenship education and policy issues in the classroom.

Policy recommendations

1 Support policy-oriented citizenship learning activities

Citizenship education for young people is still too rarely done in the school setting and only reaches a small fraction of the population when it is done in a non-school setting. However, as the research has shown, a citizenship education program such as Jeunes et Régionales 2019 can have positive effects on young people's interest in politics, their feeling of understanding and being able to act in the political arena, and their feeling that politics responds to the demands of citizens, even if the effects are more mitigated in terms of trust in political actors. These positive effects also appear to be more pronounced among students from disadvantaged social backgrounds or enrolled in vocational options.

Citizenship education is more effective when:

1. it is designed for **the long term** and is not limited to a one- or two-hour activity carried out by external speakers;
2. it is not limited to debates and verbal jousting, but involves a process that is as close as possible to a political issue, including at least an in-depth analysis of this issue (its context, its stakes, the arguments and positions of the actors, etc.);

3. it involves the whole class or group and not just volunteers, and ensures that each member of the group has an effective role;

4. it involves interaction between different classes or groups, because these are often not sufficiently heterogeneous in terms of social or ethnic origin, and therefore poorly represent the diversity of interests and representations that coexist in the population;

5. it does not take on the appearance of a simple academic exercise but is linked to the concerns of young people and **leads to a real public dissemination** of the analyses and positions of young people.

The Brussels Region can actively contribute to the application of these principles of citizenship education when organizing activities addressed to young people (e.g.: visits of the parliament, public consultations, etc.).

The creation of spaces dedicated to the **expression** of the pupils in a clear bottom-up logic that effectively permits to those who have fewer opportunities to interact with the political sphere could significantly contribute to reducing the gap between political actors and young people. The Region can also increase the amount of interaction opportunities to allow more pupils to take part in such activity and on a more regular basis.

Policy recommendations

2 COCOF & VGC could promote the use of the toolkit 'Debagora' in the schools

Debagora is a pedagogical toolkit based on the results of the research project and is freely and immediately available for the schools and for youth associations. As organizing authorities, the Cocof and the VGC are competent for education-related affairs in Brussels.

- It is therefore possible to promote the Debagora toolkit to the educational teams of these schools and associations.
- Training in this tool can also be envisaged in consultation with one of the research centres or organizations that have developed the tool.
- Some of these schools could join the event 'When young people get involved in politics' if it is implemented.
- The Debagora tool could also be used in some of the adult education courses offered by organizations in the Region.

Since we have insisted on the importance of carrying out citizenship education work with audiences that are less segregated than classes generally are, in order to encourage dialogue and inter-knowledge, to combat

stereotypes and to learn to build agreements that take differences into account, Cocof could promote, for such political education projects (but perhaps also for other projects or courses), groupings of different classes within an institution or even transversally to several of the institutions it organizes. The requirement is to prepare the teachers who should manage this greater heterogeneity as well as possible, while avoiding that these activities degenerate into unmanageable conflicts or stigmatization.

3 Promoting a recurrent large-scale educational event

As a political authority, the Region could, beyond the involvement of the Parliament (partner of the research project), contribute to the financial support of the operation '*When young people get involved in politics*', which we wish to set-up, but which requires the annual payment of at least one full-time coordinator and an operating budget, a total of about €100.000. In our view, such an operation is the most efficient way to design a citizenship education that meets the five criteria defined above.

List of publications

Dumont R. et Delvaux B. (2021),
*Processus d'appropriation par les enseignants
d'un dispositif d'éducation au politique,*
Les Cahiers de recherche du Girsef, 126.

5 publications are in progress: the doctoral dissertation of Robin Lebrun, three papers from this thesis and an article signed by Bernard Delvaux and Robin Dumont.

About

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Prospective
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