

GENDER AND CITIZENSHIP: ASSESSING STUDENTS' LEADERSHIP SKILLS

GÉNERO Y CIUDADANÍA: EVALUACIÓN DE LAS HABILIDADES DE LIDERAZGO DE LOS ESTUDIANTES

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ABSTRACT: **Introduction:** Whilst evaluating the skills, behaviors, and habits taught in civic education to young students, leadership skills present a key aspect to be observed. Usually, when children learn to have and show responsibility at an early age, they can further expand the range of their activities as adult citizens. Moreover, leadership skills are an important domain that needs to undergo further analysis, especially when exploring the gender perspective as identified by teachers towards their students. **Method:** This article expands on some of the values and skills that are displayed by children of fifth grade as group leaders, including several important components for citizenship education, such as leadership skills, empathy, and critical thinking skills. The students' habits and behaviors are carefully analyzed in the light of the assessment given by the homeroom teachers. By using self-completion assessment questionnaires by teachers on an equal number of male and female students, this research relies on a quantitative methodology. **Results:** The findings of this research stem from the teachers' evaluation of the habits of the students in terms of the leadership role in activities with friends. Although the gender difference resulting from the reported values is not as high as to be statistically significant, teachers usually report girls to have higher averages in various citizenship skills as compared to the same skills in boys. **Conclusion and Discussions:** The findings of this research contradict the dominant social and political reality, where women come second regarding leadership when compared to men. This fact highlights the reality of gender inequalities starting in childhood and later accentuating even more over time. Therefore, the required change for achieving gender equality in citizenship needs to start with primary education and continue throughout later stages in life in the course of gender mainstreaming.

KEYWORDS: citizenship; gender perspective; leadership skills; students; teachers.

RESUMEN: Introducción: Al evaluar las habilidades, comportamientos y hábitos que se enseñan en la educación cívica a los jóvenes estudiantes, las habilidades de liderazgo presentan un aspecto clave que debe observarse. Normalmente, cuando los niños aprenden a tener y mostrar responsabilidad a una edad temprana, pueden ampliar el abanico de sus actividades como ciudadanos adultos. Además, las habilidades de liderazgo son un ámbito importante que debe ser objeto de un análisis más profundo, especialmente cuando se explora la perspectiva de género identificada por los profesores hacia sus alumnos. **Método:** Este artículo amplía algunos de los valores y habilidades que muestran los niños de quinto curso como líderes de grupo, incluyendo varios componentes importantes para la educación ciudadana, como las habilidades de liderazgo, la empatía y las habilidades de pensamiento crítico. Los hábitos y comportamientos de los alumnos se analizan detenidamente a la luz de la evaluación realizada por los profesores de origen. Al utilizar cuestionarios de evaluación autocumplimentados por los profesores sobre un número igual de alumnos y alumnas, esta investigación se basa en una metodología cuantitativa. **Resultados:** Los resultados de esta investigación se derivan de la evaluación de los profesores sobre los hábitos de los alumnos en cuanto al papel de liderazgo en las actividades con amigos. Aunque la diferencia de género resultante de los valores comunicados no es tan alta como para ser estadísticamente significativa, los profesores suelen comunicar que las chicas tienen medias más altas en diversas habilidades ciudadanas en comparación con las mismas habilidades en los chicos. **Conclusiones y debates:** Los resultados de esta investigación contradicen la realidad social y política dominante, según la cual las mujeres ocupan el segundo lugar en cuanto a liderazgo en comparación con los hombres. Este hecho pone de manifiesto la realidad de las desigualdades de género que comienzan en la infancia y se acentúan aún más con el paso del tiempo. Por lo tanto, el cambio necesario para lograr la igualdad de género en la ciudadanía debe comenzar en la educación primaria y continuar a lo largo de las etapas posteriores de la vida en el curso de la integración de la perspectiva de género.

PALABRAS CLAVE: ciudadanía; perspectiva de género; capacidad de liderazgo; alumnos; profesores.

1. INTRODUCTION

In a properly functioning democratic society, all citizens need to be properly trained to support democracy through their actions as informed citizens that are concerned not only about the interest of their nation but also the region and the world at large. According to Print & Lange (2012), in this global context, two major issues that arise are: 1. Identifying key competencies that are required for the active citizenship of young people in the Europe of the future. 2. Finding ways to translate these competencies into school activities.

However, although the essence of learning the habits of citizenship is simultaneously planned and implemented for both girls and boys, reality has shown that there is something that happens during the teaching process that conveys the message of citizenship differently

for female and male students. This emphasizes the need to reflect on the curriculum and all the teaching and learning practices that transform girls' and boys' experiences of citizenship.

Schools are considered the primary environment and the most promising institution for imparting the concept and experience of democratic citizenship to the next generation. Trafford (2008) highlights the global concern for nurturing future democratic citizens among today's children, leading many countries to reevaluate their education systems. Claire and Holden (2006) assert that citizenship entails everyone's voice and participation in society, with schools employing active methods like debate and advocacy to teach and practice these principles. However, when considering gender dynamics in the classroom, exercising active approaches is unbalanced if teachers do not promote equality. Often, boys tend to dominate various aspects, potentially limiting girls' opportunities to voice their opinions. Girls typically favor collaborative learning methods and discussions, while boys may struggle with collaboration but excel in public speaking and confrontational situations.

Teachers play a central role in addressing these gender differences. Gender competence, defined as the teacher's ability to recognize and neutralize gender-biased behavior (Sanders, 1997), is a crucial skill they must possess. Teachers, as integral parts of the educational system, significantly influence the spread of gender-based ideologies (Stromquist, 1992). Unintentional gender-biased attitudes and behaviors by teachers can lead children to internalize the idea that they are fundamentally different from children of the opposite sex, especially when reinforced by societal and educational factors. This phenomenon, known as the «self-fulfilling prophecy», can lead to the development of characteristics encouraged or suggested by teachers.

Gender inequality becomes apparent when the same actions are evaluated differently based on the gender of the students. For instance, boys who spontaneously ask questions or answer without permission often receive immediate attention and are listened to attentively, while girls engaging in similar behavior may be reprimanded for not following protocol, such as raising their hands to gain the teacher's attention (Abrahams & Sommerkorn, 1995). Teachers, given their continuous interaction with students, hold a unique position in identifying and addressing gender inequality in the classroom, ultimately promoting gender justice. Their role is fundamental in creating an inclusive and equitable educational environment.

2. METHODOLOGY

This research was conducted through quantitative research instruments, using a questionnaire for collecting primary data. Adapted from a similar study conducted in the United States by the Center for Information and Research on Education and Civic Engagement (CIRCLE), the self-completion questionnaire addresses students' habits and skills from the teachers' perspectives. This research discusses three sections of this questionnaire that are related to leadership skills, empathy, and critical thinking skills. These skills mainly relate to children's values as group leaders and include several important issues for civic education.

The children evaluated by their teachers through this questionnaire are 5th graders of 10 urban and 10 rural schools in Elbasan.

Section A of the questionnaire assesses leadership skills and mainly evaluates the skills of each of the selected students in terms of leading his/her friends in group work and various activities. Also, this section assesses the extent to which children are able to help make decisions for the benefit of the group, the extent to which they support changes, etc. These alternatives are measured via a Likert scale (1- Almost never to 4- Almost always). Section B assesses students' empathy skills, which are measured by four statements that assess children's sensitivity to friends in cases when they are in difficulty, understanding of the feelings, ideas, or actions of others, self-awareness of the effect that his/her behavior has on others, etc. Section C assesses critical thinking, where some of the statements are: asks questions that help clarify understanding of the topic, is able to distinguish fact from opinion, demonstrates problem-solving skills, is able to predict the consequences of a certain action, etc. The research questions of this paper are: Are there gender-based differences in the citizenship habits and skills of students as reported by teachers? If yes, is there a gender difference?

3. RESULTS

3.1. ASSESSING LEADERSHIP SKILLS

Leadership skills are one aspect of evaluating the behaviors and habits of civic education among fifth graders. In this way, children are taught responsibility and can then expand the range of their activities as citizens. Like any other indicator of this study, leadership skills are also of interest for further analysis within the gender perspective identified by teachers towards their students. Expressions about leadership skills measured through the five main questions related to them result in the evaluations as follows: Taking on the leadership role in activities with friends almost always occurs in 32.5 % of children, where more than half of them, with 53.8 % of this leadership role is dominated by girls and 46.2 % by boys. For the rest, consisting of 30 % of the cases, the teachers state that they see this leadership role often evident, even more often this frequency is observed again in girls with 61.1 % of the cases.

The willingness to make decisions for the benefit of the group is evaluated with the alternative that it almost always happens to 37.5 % of students and often only to 29.2 % of them, where even in this case the largest percentage is girls, respectively with 51.1 % and 57.1 %. While for 25.8 % of students, this ability in decision-making is sometimes observed and another 7.5 % almost never participate in decision-making for the benefit of the group. The ability to support changes or make improvements is almost always evident in 36.7 % of children, often in 35.8 %, and sometimes in 25.8 %. Again, those students who do not agree with the changes or improvements in decision-making are highlighted, occupying a low value with only 1.7 % of them.

Choosing to do what is right, even when peers make other choices, is another very special value that is directly related to children's leadership skills. Thus, referring to the opinion of

their teachers, it is observed that this phenomenon almost always occurs in 40 % of students, followed by another 35.8 % who often reflect this citizenship behavior. Less than ¼ of the students, or 23.3 % of them, make this choice rarely or sometimes, and only in one case, or in one student this is almost never reflected. Leadership skills, both in organization and decision-making, always require the consensus and support of other members of the group, which is why this is easily verified as almost always happening in 48 students, who make up 40 % of the total, followed by another 37.5 %, who often find this support. While the rest of the students were evaluated with the alternative sometimes and almost never, respectively by 20.8 % and 1.7 % of the students.

3.2. ASSESSING EMPATHY SKILLS

Citizenship also means the ability to put oneself in the place of others, so the following four test items were used by teachers to assess children's ability to express empathy during their everyday lives. In summary, to the alternative that: he/she is aware of the effect his/her behavior has on others, the teachers answered that it almost always happens to 49.2 % of them. This percentage is followed by 32.5 % of other children, who are often aware of their behavior. At the end, respectively, are listed those children who have been assessed that in their everyday life the awareness about the effects of their behavior sometimes or never happened as a phenomenon, respectively with 16.7 % and 1.7 % of the total.

The sensitivity expressed in cases when a friend is in difficulty is almost always reflected in 46.7 % of children, i.e. a little less than half of the total number of children, where the majority of sensitivity is reported to be observed in girls with 57.1 % and the another with 42.9 % is reported to be observed in boys. Meanwhile, this sensitivity is often observed in 35.8 % of other students. This means that these students feel the spirit of solidarity and empathy between them, which is not only taught in educational settings but also transmitted by family education. Meanwhile, there are also those children who have been assessed as being sensitive towards their friends only sometimes, who account for 14.2 % of the total, not excluding the few children who have never reflected this humane behavior or sensitivity to the extent of 3.3 %.

Also, 44.2 % of students are estimated to be almost always able to explain what others are trying to do and understand their goals, as well as another 35.8 % who often try to be able to understand what is happening around them. It is also interesting the fact that, according to the reported observations of the teachers, there are those students who do not always understand the situation around them, accounting for 18.3 % of the total, or they never understand it in 1.7 % of cases. Being able to show understanding towards the feelings, ideas, or actions of others seems to be possible almost always only in 42.5 % of these children, often in 45.8 % and almost never only in 1 case, or 0.8 %, while for another 10.8 %, showing understanding towards the ideas or actions of other friends does not always happen but only occasionally.

3.3. ASSESSING CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS

Citizenship in a democratic society requires intellectual engagement, so critical thinking skills are also a very important component of behavioral analysis of civic education. Referring to the values shown in the table below, it can be seen that almost all the alternatives that measure this habit have an almost equal distribution of responses. Thus, for 39.2 % of the students selected for assessment, their teachers say that they almost always ask questions that help them clarify their understanding of the topic, 25 % ask questions often and the rest is divided between those students who ask more rarely or never, respectively with 28.3 % and 7.5 %.

The ability to express and argument personal opinion is estimated to happen almost always in 38.3 % of children, for another 26.7 % it happens often, and sometimes it is estimated only in 29.2 %, while in the rest, although with a small number, reasoned opinion that they express almost never happens. For 36.7 % of the students for whom the teachers gave their opinions, they say that this part of them are always able to distinguish facts from opinions, while another 29.2 % manage to make this distinction often, and 29.2 % only on occasion, so sometimes. Meanwhile, only 5 % of them are unable to distinguish facts from opinions almost never.

Problem-solving skills is observed in most of them, where a total of 69.1 % of them demonstrate this habit during the lesson almost always or often. A significant percentage of another 23.3 % are estimated to express this skill only occasionally, and finally, 7.5 % are almost never skillful. Not very high, with 35.8 %, turns out to be the total number of children who have been assessed as being able to predict the consequences of a certain action almost always, a habit which is needed beyond academic performance in students. In 32.5 % of cases, this feature is often observed, and only in 5 % of cases, this assessed ability is almost never evident. The rest of them, i.e. 26.7 % of children, may rarely be able to predict the consequences of a certain action.

4. DISCUSSIONS

First, it is important to say that the quantitative indicators of this research are a product of the judgment and recognition of the homeroom teachers of the boys and girls who study in their classes. Also, these indicators are a product of subjectivity shown by the teachers, which is not only understandable but also necessary for the realization of a qualitative discussion of these indicators. Secondly, it is necessary to explain that the completion of self-administered questionnaires by the teachers for six students in their classes was a process that took a relatively long time. While thinking about the specific student before giving the appropriate evaluation about them, the teachers were free to express additional evaluations or real episodes about these children, exposing in this way even more information about them. At the same time, unconsciously, the teachers also expressed their «gender competence», or on the contrary, their lack thereof. As stated in the theoretical framework, gender competence is the teacher's ability to decipher gender-biased behavior in order to neutralize it (Sanders, 1997).

In this case, what happened was a materialization of the gender stereotypes that the teachers strongly believed in, as they constantly displayed their judgments of the children by measuring them against their gender and the expected behaviors of that gender. For example, many teachers started the assessment of a child with the phrase: «... Being a boy, this student...», or: «Even though she is a girl, this student...», dividing children into different expectations according to gender for any behavior or habit evaluated in them. What stands out as a prominent expression of the mindset of gender inequality among the majority of teachers is the language with which the articulation about boys and girls begins. Boys and their actions are justified (being a boy, this student...), while girls are prejudiced and tolerated (even though she is a girl, this student...).

Unfortunately, this mindset proves that, as Kimmel put it, «Schools are like cotton factories, producing individuals divided by gender. Both in the official curriculum –textbooks and so on– and in the parallel ‘hidden curriculum’ of our informal interactions either with teachers or with other students, we are gendered» (Kimmel, 2004). This division, in addition to reinforcing inequality and male hegemony, limits the abilities of boys and girls and does not allow them to acquire knowledge, values, and habits, or, through active participation, to put their knowledge, values, and habits into practice across situations and different aspects of life.

Naval, Print, and Veldhuis (2002) state that democratic citizenship education aims to develop students' capacity to engage responsibly and thoughtfully in political, economic, social, and cultural life, which cannot be achieved if girls and boys are not allowed to develop their full potential because of the gender stereotypes they constantly encounter.

Are there significant differences between students in terms of leadership skills? If so, who are assessed by the teachers as more capable in leadership, boys or girls? The findings of the research question are related to the evaluation that the teachers have given to the habits of the students in terms of their leadership role in activities with friends, the ability to help in making decisions for the benefit of the group, support for changes or improvements, the ability to choose to do what is right, even when friends make other choices, as well as finding support from friends for the ideas that the evaluated student has. This fact shows that gender inequalities started in childhood are emphasized even more over time, so the change in the direction of gender integration cannot be isolated only to the years of citizens' schooling. If today's reality shows that the number of women in leadership positions is many times lower than that of men, this does not mean that over the years, girls growing up lost the leadership skills that they had almost equal to boys. On the contrary, «the small number of women in politics does not demonstrate the lack of capacities, but the presence of barriers» (AGJZH, 2008, p. 160). These barriers, no matter how big and ubiquitous, can be broken down only if gender integration started in the basic education curricula could be followed and extended to all social, economic, and political spheres.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The first conclusion that emerges as a result of the teachers' evaluations is related to the gender differences that are reported between boys and girls in terms of some civic habits and behaviors. Mainly, the differences are in a positive direction for girls and less positive for boys, as long as habits and civic behaviors as a whole are evident to a slightly higher extent in girls than boys. These gender-based differences can be accepted as such, which reinforces the idea of girls as more obedient and responsible citizens, or can be critically analyzed by thinking that teachers themselves view boys and girls with stereotypical traits, and year after year they nurture and turn these differences into self-fulfilling prophecies. However, it is essential to challenge gender stereotypes in teaching, especially in terms of acquiring citizenship habits in children. For today's society to progress, we need to have boys and girls who benefit equally from formal education in every direction, but mainly in terms of gender equality and civic education.

The second conclusion of this paper concerns the lack of statistically significant gender differences between boys and girls in many aspects of citizenship habits. As discussed above, there were no huge differences between boys and girls reported by the teachers regarding their leadership skills. This conclusion serves as a starting point for an important consideration: the need to compare and discuss the great gender differences that are evident between men and women in exactly the same directions of citizenship in society, seeking to understand why gender roles in individuals are reinforced over time under the influence of other social factors and to encourage interventions in the relevant directions.

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