

# School opportunities for the development of European citizenship

## The perspective of students



Iana Tzankova, Cinzia Albanesi, Elvira Cicognani  
Department of Psychology, University of Bologna, Italy



### Background

School civic education has been identified as pivotal in fostering young people's civic and political sense (Niemi & Junn, 1998; Torney-Purta, 2002). Experiences in school can provide **opportunities for participation and reflection** in a supportive and challenging environment, which has been shown to lead to positive development of political attitudes (Ferreira et al., 2012).

Evidences of **inequalities in civic education opportunities** for youth from disadvantaged backgrounds (Kahne & Middaugh, 2008). Special attention should be given to the different **school tracks** offered in educational systems, which in Italy seem to maintain a vertical hierarchy of prestige and quality (Triventi, 2014).

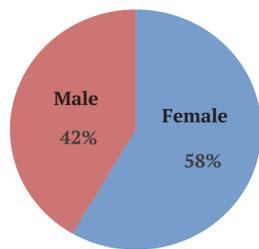
### Research Questions

What are young people's understandings of their sociopolitical development as active European citizens?

What are the educational opportunities students feel are crucial in this process and are there differences in function of the type of school that is attended?

### Sample

**10** focus groups **101** students **5** upper secondary schools (Emilia Romagna and Lazio, Italy)  
(16 - 19 years old)



Track	Percentage
General academic track 2 schools	40.6%
Technical track 2 schools	38.6%
Vocational track 1 school	20.8%

### Method

The data was collected within the European-funded H2020 research project CATCH-EyoU. The schools were chosen to represent different tracks, in order to consider diverse educational contexts in terms of resources and quality.

In **focus group discussions**, students were asked to talk about: their ideas and experiences of civic and political participation; their interest and views on EU matters; the role played by the school in promoting these experiences.

The data was analyzed through **thematic content analysis** (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

### Results

#### Ideas of active citizenship

- a **process of civic activation**, which begins with knowledge and awareness, necessitates an active interest and can finally lead to participative engagement

*Getting informed about politics, about what's happening in your country is already a step forward to not getting subdued. Being informed and not being ignorant. (tech, M, 19)*

*I need to get involved in expressing my opinion, in order to improve what isn't acceptable around me, to have a better future... and to have your say, build it yourself the better future, because it doesn't just come about to us. (voc, M, 18)*

- two fields of action: 1) **political**, mainly linked to the pursuit of social change; 2) **civic**, aimed at helping those who are worse off. Prevailing importance of **collective justice-oriented action**.

#### School opportunities

- active teaching practices**: integration with active methods and practical activities (e.g. field research), allowing to exercise civic skills and knowledge. Observed generally passive educative approach.

- opportunities for discussion and reflection**: teachers who addressed current affairs, stimulated debate and free expression, as well as treated students as equals, were seen as crucial, but this was often avoided in order to shun potential conflict and digressions to the curriculum

*Teachers often don't want to address politics at all. If they do, they do it superficially... you can't think that a student will have sense of citizenship, if their educators don't stimulate them. (gen, M, 17)*

- opportunities for involvement**: very few opportunities related to the EU (ex., MEP); events and internships with organizations lead to out-of-school involvement; school councils and extra-curricular activities important within school, but institutional recognition was necessary to avoid frustration with tokenistic participation.

Students in academic tracks reported more involvement with organizations, as well as greater requests for agency within their schools.

*This is my school, I represent something and I don't even know what I represent, I have no power to do anything... all these organs that have been established are only skin deep, because they are good for nothing - we have no power at all and there's nothing we can do. (gen, F, 17)*

#### Students and the EU

- detachment**: abstract and complex institution, which is felt as distant
- feeling of being uninformed**, especially as to how the EU can impact youth personally, except for experiences of **mobility** and traveling
- difficulties in identifying **channels of expression** available to adolescents at the EU level, except for rare experiences in school and in organizations

*I feel far removed from the context of the EU... I mean, yes, we see it every day on television, we hear about it, but we don't delve into it much. (tech, F, 17)*

*... Now, consulting an EU official would be impossible: who would listen to kids who attend a hospitality training institute here? (voc, F, 17)*

### References

Ferreira, P. D., Azevedo, C. N., & Menezes, I. (2012). The developmental quality of participation experiences: Beyond the rhetoric that "participation is always good!" *Journal of Adolescence*, 35(3), 599-610.  
Kahne, J., & Middaugh, E. (2008). Democracy for Some: The Civic Opportunity Gap in High School. *CIRCLE Working Paper 59*.  
Niemi, R. G., & Junn, J. (1998). *Civic Education*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.  
Torney-Purta, J. (2002). The school's role in developing civic engagement: A study of adolescents in twenty-eight countries. *Applied Developmental Science*, 6(4), 203-212.  
Triventi, M. (2014). Le disuguaglianze di istruzione secondo l'origine sociale. Una rassegna della letteratura sul caso italiano. *Scuola Democratica*, 2, 321-341.

### Discussion

Our findings confirm the importance of providing opportunities for open and respectful discussions in the classroom, as well as promoting students' decision-making power within the school governance (Torney-Purta, 2002), for the development of EU active citizenship. Moreover, school participation experiences need to be supported in the quality of the process and the outcomes, in order to provide meaningful involvement, interaction with others, and opportunities for personal integration (Ferreira et al., 2012)