

# Participation in non-formal education and community education

## Implications for civic and political capital

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This issue of the JSSE aims to address how non-formal and community education experiences might contribute to the civic and political identities and experiences of children, youth, adults and seniors. Even if education is for long recognized as a key predictor of civic and political engagement and participation (e.g., Almond & Verba, 1963; Amadeo et al., 2002; Quintelier, 2010; Stockemer, 2014; Verba, Scholzman & Brady, 1995), it is also true that both educational policy and research seem to privilege the impact of formal education.

This discussion is even more important today. All too often, society is described as being at a crossroads – in a European context this rings true at the moment. The results from the UK 2016 referendum (together with the recent victory of the Conservative Party), the political tension in Catalonia with the imprisonment and recent condemnation of the political leaders who organised the 2017 referendum, the intensity of demonstrations in France ...all challenge the existence of the European Union (EU) as we know it. Often, speculation about these events tends to blame citizens for being in some way unsophisticated and of not understanding what is best for them, or particularly prone to manipulation and populism or subject to (irrational) political emotions. Research shows that we must acknowledge the role of contextual factors such as, in the case of the UK referendum, the adequacy of public domestic services, unemployment and poverty rates, and human capital in terms of age, education and life satisfaction (Becker, Fetzer & Novey, 2017). Studies on Catalonia also show a complex interface between the Eurozone economic crisis, pro-independence attitudes and Euroscepticism (Wagner, Marin & Kroqi, 2019), as well as the need to go deeper in the analysis of the role of education (Miller & Garvía, 2019). As such, it is important not to dismiss the logic of those who voted or demonstrated in a particular way, and rather ask why do people hold these attitudes towards the EU and/or their national governments? As Magrath and Fitzsimons point out in this special issue, the promises of neoliberal prosperity have not materialised.

This special issue seeks to shine a light on practices of non-formal and community education, by exploring whether and how they relate to civic and political participation.

Robin Busse, Julia Lischewski and Susan Seeber's paper, "*Do non-formal and informal adult education have an impact on adults' political participation?*", uses data from the German National Educational Panel Study. The goal is to consider the influence of different types of non-formal and informal education (voluntary courses, mandatory courses, reading books or magazines, attending conferences or special lectures, and computerized learning programmes) in several political activities, controlling the effects of formal educational background and

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other socioeconomic factors. Their findings show that such an impact exists, and that it works differently for different political activities and different groups (e.g., greater impact on adults of low socioeconomic status).

In the case of *“The Young Mayor project in Portugal: The effect of the Quality of Participation Experiences on perceptions of the project’s impact”*, Mariana Rodrigues, Andreia Caetano, Teresa Ferreira, João Silva and Norberto Ribeiro consider the impact of a non-formal municipality program on young people aged between 12 and 18 years. Participants who perceived their participation as having higher developmental quality (i.e., with effective and meaningful opportunities for action and reflection) tend to be more involved in civic and political participation experiences in their communities. Although no causal inferences can be made, their findings suggest that non-formal education should provide a balance between action and reflection in contexts where both (positive) conflict and support are available for participants.

In *“Funding community Education in Ireland – making the case for a needs-based approach”*, Magrath and Fitzsimons research funding patterns for non-formal community education providers in the Republic of Ireland, concluding that a shift from more stable state funding has led to a situation where independent civil society organizations who historically held a politicised agenda, are hamstrung in the type of programs they are able to deliver. Whilst staff in these centres often continue strive for a way of working that seeks to enhance civic engagement, this isn’t always possible and the impact on staff in terms of burnout are palpable.

Carolina Jardim and Sofia Marques da Silva explore the role of immigrant associations in the paper *“The role of immigrant associations in the social inclusion of young people with migrant background”*, based on a qualitative study with individual and group interviews with associations’ leaders and participants. As in other studies, they conclude that immigrant associations can simultaneously foster integration in the host culture and promote the cultural heritage and sense of belonging towards the homeland, in a balance between inclusion and identity. While the authors detect a tendency for a stronger bonding type of social capital, some of these associations also promote young people’s agency and empowerment, by providing opportunities for community volunteering and civic and political participation.

Finally, the paper *“Transforming rural education in Colombia through family participation: the case of school as a learning community”* by Marta Soler, Teresa Morlà, Rocío García and Rosa Valls presents the outcomes of the involvement of families in a rural school through the creation of learning communities. A learning community involves the openness of schools as educational contexts for the whole community, and this is described for the case of the Monteloro school in San Luis, where families were actively engaged in the management of the school. A longitudinal analysis shows improvements in important educational outcomes for children, but also for teachers, parents and the community as a whole.

Despite much discussion about the quality of democratic life and whether (and how) citizens are involved in it (Barrett & Zani, 2015; Berger, 2009; Putnam, 2001), many believe civic engagement and participation in democratic structures is on the wane. In part, this might be because European policy has prioritised an employability agenda when funding community based education historically organised to promote citizen engagement (Caramelo & Santos, 2013; Fitzsimons, 2017) even though the actions of trade unions, some political parties, religious organizations and community groups often lean towards citizens’ development and actual engagement in the democratic life of their communities (Kerrissey & Schofer, 2013; Malafaia, Menezes & Neves, 2018). Collectively these papers celebrate the diversity of new ways and topics that generate citizens’ commitment in contemporary societies (Ekman & Amnå, 2012; Norris, 2002). We hope this JSSE’s issue can be a stimulus for research to expand the analysis of the impact of non-formal and community education in the revival of democratic living.

Beyond the topic of this issue, Liia Vijand’s presents a paper on the rare school subject of archaeology and its interdisciplinary approach. In her Estonian case study *Archaeology goes to high school – Practical approach to archaeology teaching in high school*, she highlights the contributions of archaeology to the understanding of human evolution and behavior over time, the development of a constructivist approach to history, of social empathy and of context awareness. Moreover, she argues that doing

archaeology not only provides students with a rich field for the application of school knowledge in complex settings but also offers an opportunity of service learning.

With his country report *Yhteiskuntaoppi, Social studies in Finland*, Jan Löffström presents a success story of the introduction of an independent school subject which is taught throughout from primary to upper secondary schools. Its learning objectives are more ambitious than before, students' analytical skills and critical thinking is encouraged as well as the discussion of controversial issues. The country reports informs on teacher education and students' knowledge, skills and orientation and the state of the art of research on social studies in Finland. The changes in the curricula can be read as a double emphasis on "constructive societal engagement and intellectual growth". Löffström's paper does not only provide valuable information on Finnish social studies but it is also a joyful anticipation of the next JSSE issue which is dedicated to country reports of social studies and citizenship education.

Finally, this issue includes a review of the anthology *Citizenship Education and Global Migration: Implications for Theory, Research, and Teaching*, edited by James Banks.

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