
Knowledge on political participation among basic school pupils

A look at the results from the National Assessment of Knowledge in the course Patriotic and Citizenship Culture and Ethics in the 2018/2019 School Year

Marinko Banjac

Conventional wisdom today holds that young people's participation in political activities is in serious crisis. Through media and policy-makers' statements, the youth are frequently depicted as alienated from politics. Moreover, many scholars also problematize the comportment and attitudes of young people towards politics. Furlong and Cartmel (2007), for example, argue that there is ample evidence of, compared to older citizens, young people having little interest or involvement in traditional political processes, such as party politics. They offer numerous research showing how politics is perceived by young people as "boring and as something which has little relevance to their lives" (Furlong and Cartmel, 2007, p. 124). However this is by no means a novel revelation. So in the 1990s, some studies (Putnam, 1995) pointed out how young people are politically apathetic and lack any political awareness. Looking even further back, over 30 years ago, Stradling (in Farthing, 2010, p. 182) argued already in 1977 that

there is something essentially paradoxical about a democracy in which some eighty to ninety per cent of the future citizens (and present citizenry) are insufficiently well-informed about local, national and international politics to know not only what is happening but also how they are affected by it and what they can do about it.

Obviously, this is a recurring problem that has not gone away. However, over the last decade, scholars have consistently and repeatedly shown that arguments about young people's abstinence from political endeavours and their overall political passiveness are rather short-sighted. Nov-

el contemporary attitudes of young people towards political processes are complex because there exists a plethora of other forms of political engagement besides traditional party politics and conventional modes of political participation.

But whatever form of political participation young people are inclined to, the idea of increasing youth participation is again (or still) part of the political agendas in many Western societies. As Bessant (2004, p. 387) points out,

most Western governments now advocate enhanced youth participation as part of a discourse about modern citizenship, so much so that it has become a policy cliché to say 'increased youth participation' will 'empower' young people.

In this context, education has been now and again put to the fore as a tool for the formulation and production of decisive socio-political outcomes, such as stronger political involvement in matters affecting the lives of the youth. Political scientists (Putnam, 2007) and policy-makers alike, commonly presume that education can decisively make young people more politically conscious, more engaged and supportive of formal political processes at the various levels, including local, national and international. Education is, therefore, they believe, suited to deliver knowledge and positive attitudes towards the immersion in the same political arena they feel detached from. Although education is predominantly seen as a necessary response to pertinent ills of democracy, several pieces of research have recently shed more critical and sceptical light on the unproblematic and straightforward relationship between education and political participation (Milligan et al., 2004; Dee, 2004).

It is precisely, but not exclusively, through such critical observations that already in the 1990s citizenship education as a concrete framework gained prominence within education as a paradigm and concrete tool through which young people can become knowledgeable citizens, citizens, in Bernard Crick's words, who are "interactive and publicly active" (Crick, 2004, p. 104).

In Slovenia, citizenship education also plays an important role within the formal education system, but is also addressed and implemented within other educational contexts (Banjac and Pušnik, 2015). Although citizenship education is a cross-curricular theme within the formal system, nonetheless, its most important implementation form is the subject in Year 7 and 8 of elementary school, that is, Patriotic and Citizenship Culture and Ethics subject.

The course addresses a number of topics, among others the political system of the Republic of Slovenia, social principles and rules of public and political, human rights, European Union and globalisation. In terms of political participation as a topic, the syllabus clearly states that the aim of the course is to raise the political literacy via equipping pupils with knowledge about basic principles of democratic decision-making and democratic institutions at local and national level and also in the European Union as well as at the global level (Ministrstvo za šolstvo in šport, 2011, p. 6).

Not just in the curricula of the above mentioned subject but also at the level of education policies there is a strong emphasis, among other things, on promoting active participation and learning for the democratic participation of individuals in political life within their local communities and in other wider socio-political contexts. That is why it is necessary to address, continually reflect and analyse, and by this, make sense of pupils' knowledge about these themes and skills connected with them (Kerr et al., 2010).

This article contributes to the above mentioned need by analysing and interpreting the knowledge of Slovenian pupils at the end of the lower secondary level of education (Year 9) about political participation via different means and at different levels.

The article offers the interpretation of pupils' achievements ($n = 3849$) in selected questions from the National Assessment of Knowledge (NAK; *Nacionalno preverjanje znanja – NPZ*) in Patriotic and Citizenship Culture and Ethics subject. The NAK is a special assessment of knowledge procedure within the formal education system, in which all pupils (Year 6 and 9) in the country, on the same day, complete the same tests under the same conditions. The basic purpose of the NAK is to provide pupils, their parents, teachers and principals an insight into achieving objectives and standards as determined by curricula, uncover strong and weak areas in pupils' knowledge and thus reflect the quality and efficiency of the primary education system (RIC, 2015b).

The Patriotic and Citizenship Culture and Ethics subject was selected for the NAK in 2019 as the so-called third subject and covered twenty tasks with a total of 43 questions. In this article's analysis, eight questions from five different tasks that tested pupils' knowledge and understanding of political participation were selected and included. The selection criteria for the inclusion of specific questions from the NAK 2019 test in the analysis is based on the understanding of conventional and unconvention-

al political participation as articulated by Barnes and Kaase (1979).¹ Conventional political participation pertains to different possible modes of participation embedded in legal institutional frameworks, or directly referring to the electoral process and representational system, such as voting and contacting politicians (Barnes and Kaase, 1979). On the other hand, unconventional political participation refers to all modes of political participation not formally linked to the electoral process such as petitioning, demonstrating or similar (Barnes and Kaase, 1979).²

The article firstly offers a broader reflection of the role of citizenship education (especially within formal education) in contributing in various ways to political literacy and knowledge of pupils about political participation. To this end, we critically interrogate some of the key prevailing available strategies and practices within citizenship education, especially with regard to fostering a more participation-inclined youth. Next, the article briefly presents how citizenship education is systematized within the Slovenian formal education system and reflects how political participation is addressed and presented in relevant documents, such as the White paper on education in the Republic of Slovenia and, more concretely, in the Patriotic and Citizenship Culture and Ethics subject curricula. In the third part of the article, the NAK is presented as a framework for pupil assessment, with an emphasis on its structure and methodology. The latter is also important because it represents the methodological framework of this article for analysing the knowledge of pupils, which is also explained in more detail. The fourth, central part of the paper presents and interprets the results of the pupils on selected questions that were part of the NAK in the Patriotic and Citizenship Culture and Ethics subject. In the conclusion, the article critically interrogates with and interprets the main findings.

Citizenship education and political participation

As indicated in the introduction, practically all democracies, old and new, are continuously searching for appropriate responses to challenges to youth disenchantment and disengagement in democratic participation and, more broadly, political engagement in its various forms. Hardly surprising, citizenship education is identified and targeted as a concrete framework that makes possible ‘education through citizenship’, which involves formal and informal learning opportunities that enable pupils to

1 Methodology of the analysis is explained in 4.2 section of this paper.

2 For additional discussion of Barnes and Kaase’s conventional/unconventional participation distinction and further updates of their definition see Pitti (2019).

acquire civic skills and knowledge through hands-on experiences (Keating and Janmaat, 2015).

Although various citizenship programmes (within and between different countries) have different theoretical and contextual backgrounds, they predominantly converge around one idea. They mostly concur that just the transfer of knowledge is not enough but rather the range of skills and competences and personal qualities should be fostered within citizenship education if citizens are to be willing and able to participate and exert influence in political life. As such, citizenship education is repeatedly regarded as an education instrument leading pupils to understand democratic principles and processes, identity politics, citizens' rights and responsibilities. As Print (2007) suggests, education for (democratic) citizenship in schools entails learning about being citizens in a democracy and having the opportunity to gain skills and values associated with political issues. Direct intention is therefore to prepare young people for active citizenship, which implies democratic participation. It is frequently stressed (see, for example, Crick, 2004, p. 61) that knowledge, skills and attitudes are mutually conditioned, while it is at the same time argued that citizenship education as an educational tool for political literacy should be conceived and practiced so that it meets the needs of the vast majority of young people. With this in mind, citizenship education as a framework to motivate pupils to participate politically is often based on the idea that not only abstract concepts are presented to them, but rather the opposite, to secure their understanding of concepts drawn from the everyday life and environment they are most familiar with. On the other hand, it is very crucial to highlight that participation skills are on their own not enough. Young people should also acquire all the necessary (basic) knowledge about forms of political participation, available participative tools within democratic arrangements to ensure their political engagement in wider democratic processes is informed, meaningful not just for them but for society as a whole.

Notwithstanding the importance of citizenship education in democratic societies, the current available frameworks for citizenship education in different countries have been criticized from many different aspects (Garratt, 2000). In order to grasp and understand how citizenship education can and does contribute in this or that way to political literacy and knowledge of pupils about political participation, it seems reasonable to identify and make sense of these critiques.

As Lawy and Biesta (2006) forcefully argue, one of the recurring problems of citizenship education is its focus on individual young people. In a variety of educational settings, citizenship education starts from

the premise that individuals lack the proper and sufficient knowledge to participate in public life. Because every individual pupil seems to be inadequately educated, they do not only lack knowledge, but also the corresponding skills and democratic values. This “individualizes the problem of young people’s citizenship” (Biesta, 2008) which has, as a consequence, the underlying idea of citizenship education that individuals are themselves responsible for their indifference for political matters and social malfunctioning in general. As a response to this, citizenship education is commonly organized and practiced from the perspective of an individual acquiring a necessary set of knowledge, skills and values that will transform their political literacy and political behaviour, comportment and conduct. This does not mean that community and groups are totally neglected or dismissed in entirety within citizenship education. However, they are predominantly understood and thought of in relation to an individual where it is the latter that precedes them (see Quicke, 1992).

Another detectable problem related to citizenship education concerns the role of citizenship education as a tool for the production of citizenship and (good) citizens. As Olson et al. (2015) succinctly capture, citizenship practice is still predominantly viewed and treated as the outcome of particular educational trajectories.

The idea of citizenship-as-outcome reveals a strong instrumental orientation in the idea of citizenship education. The focus is mainly on the effective means to bring about ‘good citizenship’ rather on the question what ‘good citizenship’ actually is or might be (Biesta, 2011, p. 13).

The discourse of instrumentalism presented in citizenship education programmes in schools treats education processes, the relevant curriculum and knowledge as a means to a particular end while the framework of citizenship education as an end in itself is quite often neglected. With regard to political participation as a topic within citizenship education, this instrumental discourse leads to contemporary education experts and policy-maker discussions on how a more participation-inclined youth is to be achieved instead of critically reflecting on what participation in current democratic societies mean.

In relation to the above, another contested facet of citizenship education is worth mentioning. Namely, citizenship education predominantly takes citizenship as a status that is comprised of specific legal rights and duties (see Osler and Starkey, 2006). Of course, there are a number of different approaches and understandings within citizenship education what these two mean and how they should be addressed and taught properly. Some would argue, for example, that rights come first and responsibilities

are only second to them. Others would preach the opposite (McCowan, 2009). But regardless of what the fitnesses and little (or substantial) nuances in the approaches might be, citizenship is still regarded, by and large, as a status that is to be learned and obtained. This view misses something very important that also Lawy and Biesta acknowledge, namely citizenship as practice:

Citizenship-as-practice not only encompasses problems and issues of culture and identity but draws these different dynamic aspects together in a continuously shifting and changing world of difference. Such a view of citizenship, as we [...] argue, provides a more robust entry point for understanding and supporting young people's citizenship learning in this area (Lawy and Biesta, 2006, p. 37).

This view or approach can be crucial especially in relation to political participation as one of the key topics within citizenship education. Political participation itself entails the activity of communities and individuals within them. Only through active engagement are people integrated into society and, by and through this, they are involved in a myriad of political, as well as economic and cultural practices. Only active subjectivities are engaged with the very contexts of their lives. And, as Isin (2009) contends, only if citizenship is understood as political subjectivity, our attention can be shifted away from passivising fixed categories to the actions through which these categories are critically interrogated and decomposed. As such, it "shifts our attention from already defined actors to the acts that constitute them" (Isin, 2009, p. 383).

For our purposes, it remains in this part of the paper to elucidate further the status of political participation within the citizenship education and why pupils' knowledge and skills connected with it are deemed as profoundly relevant in today's democratic societies, including Slovenia.

Although public participation and engagement are often addressed and delivered as content to pupils within the citizenship education framework, terms and concepts such as these two are prevailingly depoliticised. Pérez Expósito (2014, p. 230) argues that

the demotion of the political occurs by replacing political participation with less controversial categories, such as civic engagement, which are also theoretically less clear and well grounded. The depoliticisation of the forms of participation in which students are encouraged to be involved entails a view of adolescents as depoliticised subjects.

The depoliticisation operates in various ways, of which one is so-called societal depoliticisation (Wood and Flinders, 2014). It

involves the transition of issues from the public sphere to the private sphere and focuses on the existence of choice, capacity deliberation and the shift towards individualised responses to collective social challenges (Wood and Flinders, 2014, p.165).

Such a type of depoliticisation, it can be argued, is also often present within citizenship education where student's participation is understood in individualizing (following one's own desires, interests, etc. through participation) or in moral and altruistic ground. Because it is understood from this viewpoint, participation within citizenship education is frequently not rationalised and presented as a consequence of heterogeneous complexities of political processes, relationships and phenomena in which also young people are embedded in.

Keeping in mind some of the above mentioned dilemmas about political participation within citizenship education, it is important to maintain focus on the political dimension of participation in democratic societies. The relevance of a pupil's knowledge along with appropriate skills, values and behaviour oriented towards the political participation is of great importance because, as Crick (2004, p. 62) writes, a politically literate person is not only well informed about the politics but also capable of active participation and communication. They are able to critically reflect on positions of others and present their own arguments. Moreover, a persons' critical reflection enables analysis and awareness of the power relations that shape their subjectivity (Pérez Expósito, 2014). Under the heading of political participation within citizenship education, pupils are gaining key capacities to not only autonomously and efficiently practice formal democratic participation possibilities, such as voting, but also seek informal political means to counter-power, such as resistance, reciprocity and persuasion. As Pérez Expósito argues, political participation is a terrain of creativity on different levels and in different arenas, rather than a dogmatic adscription to fixed practices and must be therefore as such also treated, demonstrated and thought within citizenship education in schools and in formal educational school settings in general.

Political participation in citizenship education in Slovenia

When considering how concrete formal educational system, in our case Slovenian, grasps and employs certain relevant concepts, in our case political participation, we need firstly to entangle how it is addressed generally at the level of wider prevalent principles upon which national education/schooling system is built and enacted. Key orientation in this respect is the White paper on education in the Republic of Slovenia. From Slo-

venia's independence until now, two White Papers have been published. The first White paper, published in 1995 defined the fundamental cornerstones, principles and objectives of education in Slovenia and

served as the basis for the comprehensive reform which took place through the adoption of a series of legislative acts covering the organisation and financing of education and specific aspects of different levels of education (EURYDICE, 2019).

The currently valid White paper was published in 2011 to additionally define the guidelines based on "systematic review of the structure and functioning of the education system" (EURYDICE, 2019).

Therefore, how is political participation as a tangible knowledge (and skills) objective addressed in the last and currently valid White paper? Its first concrete mention appears under the section Strategic challenges and orientations of the education system. The White Paper states that

In public kindergartens and schools [...] the process of upbringing and education of young generations must be based on [...] shared values and train them to live independently, to work together and participate in political life (Krek and Metljak, 2011, p. 18).

The White paper seems to echo the argument of Lawy and Biesta (2006) who underline the importance of understanding citizenship as a practice (see above). The White paper insists that education must be oriented towards empowering young people for their active engagement:

Education, which will train young generations to live independently and face the challenges of the modern world, must therefore include the willingness to make the necessary changes and the ability to find new national and global solutions in ethics, in economics and politics [...] (Krek and Metljak, 2011, p. 18).

Another instance of how the White paper recognizes and addresses political participation can be identified under the heading "Principles and objectives for the further development of the primary school" (Krek and Metljak, 2011, p. 114). Here, the political participation appears under the broad principle of creating awareness of self-identity and active involvement in the formation of heritage communities:

In line with identity awareness, students need to develop the ability to actively participate in their local environment, take responsibility, inter-generational learning and cooperation (Krek and Metljak, 2011, p. 117).

As we can see, participation is clearly and generally acknowledged. However, the White paper additionally elaborates on the theme of political participation at the point where the explanation of the importance of citizenship education, ethics and religion within education is presented. The White paper explicitly deals with the problem of negative perception of politics and everything that is concerned with the political:

[...] negative perceptions of the political field emerge in the public and the negative labeling of “politics” and political engagement in general, stemming from the low level of culture of political dialogue (Krek and Metljak, 2011, p. 42).

One of the objectives of citizenship education within formal education must, according to the White paper, address and resolve this pertinent issue:

In schools, this could gradually be transcended and the perception of the idea of the political as an arrangement of common affairs, involving the sharing of knowledge (knowledge, norms and values) that citizens, as citizens of Slovenia and as part of the wider world, must have (Krek and Metljak, 2011, p. 42).

Now, the White paper obviously recognizes the importance of participation and at the same time offers the definition of the political and politics that goes beyond prevailing perceptions and hegemonic depoliticized discourse. Interestingly enough, it is precisely citizenship education that has an explicit role in changing the negative perception of politics into a more positive one, one that young people will understand as various ways of involvement and active participation in public matters affecting their lives. So the question that follows is how can citizenship education, as a separate school subject, address and conceptualise political participation and in what form should it be offered as a theme to pupils.

Citizenship education was introduced as a compulsory subject under the then newly adopted 1996 legislation, which laid down a formal framework for all levels of pre-university education, while making citizenship education and ethics, as it was then called, a compulsory subject in the level of primary education. The new formal legal framework also began the process of (re)adaptation of curricula, including citizenship education. During this period, from 1996 to the beginning of 1999, the Subject Curriculum Commission for Citizenship Education and Ethics prepared the first syllabus for this subject (Banjac, 2016, p. 72).

In the current syllabus, finally adopted in 2011, political participation is only indistinctly mentioned in the document's introductory sec-

tions. For example, in the definition of the school subject, the curriculum states that the pupils gain basic knowledge about “political system, social principles and rules of public and political life in Slovenia as a democratic, legal and social state” (Ministrstvo za šolstvo in šport, 2011, p. 5). Political participation is at least a little bit more concretely mentioned in the section about general objectives of the school subject. Here, the general aim of pupils’ active participation in social life is defined and, under this general aim, some specific aims related to the political participation are mentioned, such as promoting democratic procedures within the school and wherever possible, preparing for participation in electoral process and responsible and critical citizenship.

While curriculum is rather shy about political participation in its introduction, it is a theme more substantially and concretely developed in the curriculum’s presentation of the topics covered by the school subject. The topics are divided into seven distinct sections, four in Year 7 and three in Year 8 of the basic school. Political participation is more or less equally distributed in both years, but the complexity of the topic is increasing by year. So, in Year 7, pupils are acquainted with the political participation already from the very beginning, within the section entitled “Individual, Community, State” and especially “Community of citizens of the Republic of Slovenia” (Ministrstvo za šolstvo in šport, 2011). In the latter section, for example, pupils are acquainted with topics such as the political system of the Republic of Slovenia and possibilities of citizens to participate democratically in the political processes at the national level. Political participation is also addressed in Year 8, within the topic “Democracy at close range” where this topic is additionally expanded and comprehensively elaborated (Ministrstvo za šolstvo in šport, 2011). In Year 8, various types of possible participative actions of individuals and communities are also addressed in the sections that cover the European Union and international as well as global socio-political environment.

National assessment of knowledge – systematisation and methodology

The National Assessment of Knowledge: its systematization and implementation

The National Assessment of Knowledge (NAK) is now a well established process forming an indispensable part of the basic school system in Slovenia. It is a process implemented every school year in such a way that all pupils in the country complete the same tests on the same day under the same conditions. The NAK offers to pupils feedback on their specif-

ic subject knowledge during and at the end of primary education, including via comparison of their achievements with those of their peers and the national average. The NAK is not only intended for pupils to provide them with information on their achievements, but it is also designed to allow teachers and schools to evaluate the quality of their work. At the system level, the NAK can provide a basis for further decisions regarding the development of the education system, evaluation curricula, the development of teacher training and changes or revisions to teaching material (Gornik, 2013, p. 3).

Looking into the development of the NAK within the Slovenian formal education system, we need to underscore its relation to the introduction of great changes within basic schooling at the dawn of the 21 century. Based on the idea from the second half of the 1990s that the duration of basic schooling needs should be extended from Years 8 to 9, the so-called nine-year project (*devetletka*) started. The direct introduction of the nine-year basic school (single structure of primary and lower secondary education) began in the 1999/2000 school year, and the introduction process was completed in the 2008/2009 school year, when all Slovenian basic schools implemented the nine-year program. The basic school program in Slovenia is therefore systematized within three educational cycles, each of which comprises three classes (Taštanoska, 2015).

These three educational cycles of the basic schooling are a basis also for the systematization and implementation of the NAK. The latter is in its current full form along with its formative role has been implemented since the 2005/2006 school year. Each year, a national assessment is carried out at the end of the second educational cycle (Year 6) and at the end of the third education cycle (Year 9) (RIC, 2015c). In both cases, the NAK has a formative function, as already said, which means that the central objective is to obtain and disseminate information regarding pupils' knowledge and the implementation and effectiveness of education (the success of lessons, for example, in terms of the curriculum of a particular subject) (Slavec Gornik, 2013). Another relevant fact is that the National Examination Centre (RIC) organizes and manages the implementation and analyses the results and achievements (RIC, 2015c).

Both (Year 6 and 9) NAK iterations are compulsory for students in both public and private basic schools. At the end of Year 9 (pupils aged fourteen or fifteen), pupils' knowledge in Slovene (or Hungarian or Italian), Mathematics and the so-called third subject is tested. The Minister

selects the so-called third subjects each school year from the pool of compulsory subjects in Year 8 and 9 (RIC, 2015d).³

In the school year 2018/2019, the NAK at the end of the third cycle of education (Year 9), was implemented in May 2019. Besides examinations in two compulsory subjects, Fine Art, Physics, Foreign Language, Patriotic and Citizenship culture and ethics and Social Studies⁴ were selected as the third subjects.

In terms of the actual implementation of the NAK, the whole process can be divided into three consecutive phases. The first phase can be referred to as the preparatory phase, in which knowledge tests are designed, prepared and formulated into their final form. The second phase is the implementation phase. Year 9 pupils take a knowledge tests at their school at the same time as their peers in all Slovenian schools on a predetermined day. The pupils write each test for sixty minutes and after completing the test, the schools send the tests in sealed envelopes to the RIC, where the tests are scanned, digitally processed and thus ready for evaluation. Tests are evaluated by teachers with the use of a specific computer software, and the accuracy of the evaluation is monitored by the principal assessor and his assistants. Once the tests have been evaluated, the subject commissions, the RIC Information Unit and the R&D Unit participate in the preparation of the data, analysis and descriptions of pupil achievement at the NAK (RIC, 2015a). The final phase of the NAK process involves informing pupils, their parents, teachers and schools about pupils' results and achievements. Pupils, along with their parents and teachers, are offered the opportunity to see how well they have passed the test, and if they do not agree with the evaluation, they may request a re-evaluation. After the re-evaluation, the RIC informs the pupils, their parents, teachers and schools about the final results (RIC, 2015a).

The Methodology of the analysis

The NAK 2019 on Patriotic and Citizenship Culture and Ethics subject, from which we draw data for our analysis of pupils' knowledge on political participation, was conducted on 13 May 2019. Overall, 3849 pupils from 116 schools participated in the NAK on this specific subject.⁵ The

3 Since 2007, four so-called third subjects (2011 being an exception, when three have been selected) have been selected each school year.

4 The Social Studies subject was selected as a third subject for pupils who are schooled in the educational programme with the lower educational standard.

5 While pupils from all Slovenian basic schools sit Mathematics and Slovene or Hungarian or Italian, the situation with the so-called third subjects is different. Namely, which third subjects will be tested at each school is determined on the basis of the random classification of schools. In doing so, the aim is to follow the equal representation of all third

pupils had 60 minutes to answer 20 tasks with 44 different questions and assignments. Some of the questions were valued with more than just one possible point so the maximum possible points was 50. The tasks in the test were composed according to taxonomic levels (according to Bloom (1956): knowledge and recognition, understanding and application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation) and, of course, according to the content foreseen in the syllabus for this subject (RIC, 2015a). This means that the test in the subject Patriotic and Citizenship Culture and Ethics tested the knowledge that is foreseen or determined within the subject curriculum (Ministrstvo za šolstvo in šport, 2011).

For the purpose of the present analysis, we selected and included in the analysis concrete tasks and corresponding questions that were directly related to *political* democratic participation, be it through conventional or unconventional means, at local (including school environment), national or at the EU level. We underline again at this point that while we agree with many who argue that political participation of youth is radically changed and new means to express political action have broadened the definition and understanding of (civic) engagement beyond conventional participative procedures such as voting. However, on the other hand, we concur with the already mentioned arguments of Pérez Expósito (2014) that depoliticised notions of participation have problematic consequences. In line with this, we insist that knowledge of pupils on democratic *political* participation is crucial for them to be able to significantly contribute and have a say in the arena of politics.

Based on this, for the purpose of analysing the knowledge of pupils about political participation, we selected among 20 tasks those that directly concern political participation. In terms of the selection criteria, we decided to include those questions that explicitly relate to (1) institutional arrangement of political participation within a particular socio-political context (school, local, national, international level) and (2) concrete participatory action of an individual and/or group or community. According to this methodological selection criteria, we included five tasks with eight questions altogether in the analysis. With the objective of making the analysis as systematic and coherent as possible, we divided these selected questions into three different content clusters. The first cluster focuses on pupils' general knowledge about political participation and concrete democratic participation in school class. The second cluster pertains to political participation on national and local level within Slovenian po-

subjects within the statistical regions, and the size of the schools is implicitly taken into account, thus ensuring a more equal number of students writing each subject (Cankar, 2014).

litical system. The last cluster focuses on unconventional means of political participation. In this article's study, we analysed the percentage of correct answers to each of the selected questions and thus obtained the data on the knowledge of pupils on specific teaching objectives as defined in the Patriotic and Citizenship Culture and Ethics subject's curricula.

Pupils' knowledge about political participation: results and interpretation

For every individual in a democratic society, especially those young, it is crucial to be knowledgeable in various political processes and essential democratic procedures offered to them if they are to be an empowered person making meaningful interventions in the political life of the society. But it is not only the institutionalised and general set of rules and procedures that a young person should know about, but also the "sets of practices, to which the participation of citizens is key" (Forbrig, 2005, p. 13).

The NAK's 2019 test on the Patriotic and Citizenship Culture and Ethics subject second task addressed precisely the above mentioned issues. It included two questions, the first asking of pupils' more general knowledge about democratic political procedures, while the second was very specific and related to concrete possible democratic participative practices. The first question (Q₁) demanded pupils to recognise from the appended picture one rule of democratic voting procedure directly at a polling station. Possible correct answers to this question were either the secrecy of the ballot/anonymous voting or one person, one vote principle (each decides for himself/herself). The pupil's answer of "privacy" was also considered as correct. The second question (Q₂) was on democratic decision-making in the classroom demanding from pupils to explain the democratic procedure to reach a joint decision about the destination of their excursion at the end of the school year. The answer was marked as correct if pupils responded by one of the subsequent (or content-wise similar) argument: (1) The class reaches the decision democratically by conversing and sharing arguments about different destinations, thus jointly lowering the number of possible options and then voting on them; (2) The class reaches the decision by selecting (with the majority of pupils) a procedure through which they will decide upon their final destination; (3) They reach the decision by discussion/unanimously/with consensus that the decision will be taken by their teacher; (4) The class reaches the decision by casting a ballot and the proposal that gets the majority of votes is selected. It must be noted here that simple answers such as "draw" or "voting" was not accepted as correct; pupil's explanation of the consequence of specific procedure was required.

Table 1. Questions on general knowledge about political participation and concrete democratic participation in school class.

	Tested learning objective as defined by the syllabus	Assignment/question type	Percentage of pupils with correct answer (n=3849)
Q1 – Identify one rule of democratic voting at the polling station as visible on the photo.	In the analysis of situations, pupils recognize the norms and procedures of democratic decision-making.	A record of the short answer	70
Q2 – Describe the procedure how a class can reach a joint decision about the destination of their excursion.	In the analysis of situations, pupils recognize the norms and procedures of democratic decision-making.	A record of the short answer	79

The results of the pupils with regard to these two questions show that there is a slight discrepancy between general knowledge about democratic participation rules and concrete participatory practices in an environment familiar to pupils (e.g. classroom). Seventy percent of pupils correctly identified one of the rules behind democratic voting procedure at a polling station, while 79 percent of pupils successfully described the democratic procedure in the classroom. It may be true that the discrepancy is not big; however, it is interesting that more pupils answered the second question correctly which demanded not only knowledge but also the ability to devise a clear and structured democratic process (higher taxonomic level). What can be discerned from this is that pupils clearly recognize general rules of democratic participation, while at the same time they are clearly capable of finding participatory solution to joint issues in their classroom environment.

The second cluster of questions tested pupils' knowledge on political participation at the local and national level within the Slovenian political system. This kind of knowledge is crucially important if a particular democratic state wishes to have well-informed citizens that take political matters seriously and are prone to seize political decision-making opportunities offered to them. As already common wisdom would have it, it is an undeniable fact that education has a causal relationship with multiple forms of engagement, including voter turnout, group memberships, tolerance and the acquisition of political knowledge (Campbell, 2009). Not least important, a particular state needs strong democratic legitimacy in the form of citizens' commitment to the particular principles characteristic to democratic decision-making. As Topf writes, "elections are powerful symbols of the democratic legitimacy of

a nation-state” (Topf, 1997, p. 27). So clearly the knowledge of pupils at the lower secondary level of education is necessary to foster their trust in democratic institutions and democratic procedures as well as participative opportunities that they will have as future full members of a particular democratic state-polity.

Within this cluster, we included three tasks from the NAK 2019 test, one with just one question, the second with two questions⁶ and the third with again just one question⁷. The first question (Q₃) addressed the more historical dimension of political participation in Slovenia in its period of state formation at the beginning of the 90s. Therefore, the question asked pupils through what kind of voting process Slovenian voters decided about Slovenia’s independence. Four possible answers were given among which only one was correct, namely the response “With the participation at the independence referendum (plebiscite) on independence for Slovenia” (response B). The second question revolved around the topic of political parties as a key representative organised group seeking through the election to exercise political power. The first question (Q₄) asked pupils about the possibility to establish a political party in Slovenia. Among four possible answers the correct one was the response C (“at least 200 adult citizens sign the party establishment statement and register the party with the competent authority”). The second question (Q₅) within this task included in the analysis addressed participation of political parties in Slovenian National Assembly elections. So the question asked pupils to explain why the party that received 3,8 percent of all the votes will be or will not be represented in the National Assembly in the next term. The correct answer to this question was if the pupil responded that the party will not be represented in parliament/National Assembly because it did not reach the parliamentary threshold of 4%. More simple answers were also allowed (e.g. “the party will not be represented because it received too few votes”), but the answer needed to clearly express that the party will not be represented and also explain why not. The fourth question (Q₆) that was included in this cluster addressed the possibility of political participation at the local level within the Slovenian political system. The question asked pupils to record one possibility of how individuals can exercise their right to participate in

6 Although this specific task had three questions, we omitted the last question from the analysis because it did not meet the methodological selection criteria for this particular analysis.

7 Again, this task had two questions, both addressing political processes and governmental arrangements at the local level (lokalna samouprava). While the first question did not meet the inclusion criteria, the second did and was thus included.

local government issues. Here, some correct answers were possible, such as participation in mayoral / local elections, participating in municipal council elections, participation in the assembly of citizens, participation in a local referendum, etc. The answer was marked as correct only if a pupil included both a concrete available participative local mechanism or process and activity of an individual. Thus, for example, an answer that stated only “local referendum” did not suffice, pupils needed to include (give a description of) an activity by an individual in the answer.

Table 2. Questions on political participation on national and local level within Slovenian political system.

	Tested learning objective as defined by the syllabus	Assignment/question type	Percentage of pupils with correct answer (n=3849)
Q3 – How did Slovenian voters decide in 1990 on the independence of the Republic of Slovenia? Select the correct answer by encircling the letter in front of it.	Pupils gain basic knowledge about the creation of the Republic of Slovenia.	Multiple Choice	63
Q4 – How can citizens of the Republic of Slovenia form a political party?	Pupils learn the difference between uniting citizens based on common interests (societies, associations, etc.) and common political goals.	Multiple Choice	74
Q5 – Political party participated in the elections to the National Assembly in the Republic of Slovenia and won 3,8% of the vote. Explain why or not a party will be represented in the National Assembly in the coming term?	Pupils learn about the procedures by which elected officials are elected.	A record of the short answer	37
Q6 – Write down one option, how can individuals exercise their right to participate in local authority issues?	Pupils learn the difference between uniting citizens based on common interests (societies, associations, etc.) and common political goals.	A record of the short answer	34

So, what do the results within this cluster show? One of the key findings is that pupils are considerably knowledgeable on facts with regard to democratic processes that lead to the independence of the Republic of Slovenia. Namely, 63 percent of pupils were able to identify an independence referendum as a concrete mechanism that allowed the citizens to decide on the independence of the country (Q₃). Although the percentage of pupils with the correct answer is quite high, one would still expect that this percentage would be higher still, not least because this theme is very much cross-curricular and is as such present also within other school subjects.

Perhaps more surprising is the result of the second question (Q₄) in this cluster. Almost three quarters of the pupils who sat the test knew how a group of citizens can form a political party. While pupils showed knowledge on the procedure of formally establishing a political party, they did much worse in explaining the requirements for a political party to enter the National Assembly (Q₅). Only 37 percent of pupils wrote the correct answer. It must be stressed that this task was quite complex since it demanded an answer composed of two interconnected parts (clearly indicate that party will not enter the National Assembly and explain the reason why not). Whilst a low percentage of the correct answer does indicate that pupils do not have enough knowledge on the key rules of national elections in Slovenia, on the other hand, the low percentage could also be a result, at least in part, of the superficiality of reading the task instructions. Because of this, many answers contained just one part of the answer, but not the other.

Another surprising result was also with regard to pupils' knowledge about political participation at a local level in Slovenia (Q₆). Namely, only 34 percent of pupils were able to correctly name one of the options of how individuals can exercise their right to participate in local authority issues. The curriculum of the subject clearly contains topics related to the functioning of local government and democratic participation opportunities at the local level. Clearly, pupils here have shown a lack of political literacy with regard to democratic participation at local level.

The third cluster we focused on in this analysis concentrates on the theme of non-conventional means of democratic participation. While conventional forms of political participation are practically indispensable in democratic societies, there are a number of other possibilities how citizens can contribute meaningfully and substantially to the society in which they live. It seems rather obsolete to repeat how current societies experience widespread young people's distrust in voting and other conventional democratic options. However, it is increasingly apparent also through re-

search-based evidence, that large numbers of young people are committed to unconventional and civic action in their respective countries:

Whereas, in the past, issues of concern might have mobilized them into voting for particular candidates or writing to their elected representatives, these same issues today might be tackled instead through consumer activism, protests and demonstrations, activity on social media, charitable fundraising or voluntary work in the community (Barrett, 2018).

Citizenship education in schools must as such necessarily include and deliver to pupils in an appealing manner not only the knowledge about standard and traditional participation possibilities but also new compelling and less conventional participatory attitudes and tools. This is important because otherwise the approaches to the curriculum that avoid democratic practices are “likely to negate its ability to produce active citizens and are only likely to exacerbate the apathetic zeitgeist” (Watts, 2006, p. 95).

Table 3. Questions on unconventional means of political participation.

	Tested learning objective as defined by the syllabus	Assignment/question type	Percentage of pupils with correct answer (n=3849)
Q7 – What are political demonstrations?	Pupils learn about citizens' political rights.	A record of the short answer	17
Q8 – A group of citizens signs a request to close a plant that pollutes the environment of a particular town. Circle the letter in front of a form of citizen action performed by a group of citizens. Select the correct answer by encircling the letter in front of it	Pupils learn about citizens' political rights.	Multiple Choice	70

So in the third cluster, just one task from the exam was included but with two distinct questions. The first question (Q7) included in the analysis under this cluster asked pupils about the meaning of the term political demonstration. The answers that were considered as correct had to be logically related to the basic definition of demonstration available in the official Slovenian dictionary (mass expression of mood, usually in protest, but also of support. The second question (Q8) in this cluster described a concrete non-conventional participatory action of a group of citizens: the signing of a request to close a plant that pollutes the environment of a

small town. The pupils were asked to correctly identify what kind of political non-conventional (civic) action was used. The correct answer among several given was “petition”.

Within this cluster, there was a high discrepancy between the percentage of correct answers on two different questions. While pupils had many difficulties in explaining what political demonstrations are, they did well in correctly identifying an unconventional type of political participation. Of course, the immediate question is why such a difference, given that both questions addressed the same topic (unconventional forms of participation). One of the possible answers to this is the type of task given. The task Q7 demanded a short written answer, while Q8 was a multiple-choice task. As already said, pupils usually solve the latter more successfully. Having said that, it is striking that pupils are so limited in finding the correct descriptive answer to a question at the first taxonomic level, which means that their political literacy in unconventional political participation is at least questionable.

Conclusion

With regard to the issue of the youth’s political participation, citizenship education, within formal education system, is in, one can say, a turbulent and contradictory position. On the one hand, democratic states still predominantly, if not exclusively, rest on the representative political system that cannot do without traditional participatory mechanisms such as voting. On the other, heterogeneous voices, including young people, exhort dissatisfaction with conventional liberal democratic participatory means and frequently resort to novel democratic forms of participation, including those that are now classically identified as unconventional (Pitti, 2019). As has been suggested,

political action is changing in form, from consisting of mainly election-based activities to encompassing a wide repertoire of both these more traditional, institutionalised activities and extra-institutional, direct forms of political action [...] (Rooij and Reeskens, 2014, p. 185).

And schools never operate in vacuum. Biesta (2008, p. 170) reminds us that schools are as such continually mandated to revitalise citizenship, “often fuelled by concerns about decreasing levels of civic participation and political involvement”.

This article suggests that although citizenship education within formal education is in the context of its mandate to raise the youth’s interest in participation frequently submerged into depoliticised discourse where any kind of public activity of individuals or groups is deemed active cit-

izenship, indeed (still) the relevant framework for raising young people's knowledge and skills about political participation. However, as we have discussed, citizenship education in the education system and concretely in schools must grasp and deliver political participation not as a docile and fixed category but as an enabling activity through which young people's subjectivities are shaped and through which pupils are gaining capacities to critically approach and use formal democratic participation means while also seeking unconventional political options to make their voice heard.

The White Paper on education in the Republic of Slovenia addresses, albeit understandably very broadly, the above-mentioned challenge. As we have shown, it does this by highlighting the problematic widespread negative portrayal and labelling of politics while also explicitly recognising the need to change this perception by enabling young people with political participation with the awareness that their involvement in political matters means contributing to the arrangement of common affairs. The currently valid Patriotic and Citizenship Culture and Ethics subject curriculum seems to correspond to the vision and aim in the White Paper. The curriculum is, as we have shown, quite rich with the themes that are directly related with political participation. It is well structured in terms of upgrading the level of knowledge about political participation that pupils receive from Year 7 to Year 8. However, as is possible to see, the curriculum itself could contain more of an emphasis on the various forms of political participation, including unconventional forms, so pupils would recognise and be acquainted with the diverse possibilities of political participation available in today's various socio-political contexts.

The NAK 2019 on the Patriotic and Citizenship Culture and Ethics subject tested also pupils' knowledge about political participation. The evidence from the analysis of the questions that addressed political participation from a variety of angles shows that the youth who took the test at the end of compulsory education (lower secondary education) are able to recognize basic rules and norms behind democratic procedures of conventional forms of participation. They are also competent in conceiving democratic decision-making in an environment familiar to them. The latter is especially important because participation does not occur only in institutionalised formal settings but most frequently precisely in everyday situations that have the biggest impact on their lives. Having said that, engaged attitudes towards conventional forms of political participation should also be taught and supported within citizenship education. With regard to this, as the analysis showed, the knowledge of pupils who took the test about political parties (concretely, about establishing them) is very

good, but on the other hand the knowledge about national electoral systems is lower than expected. The analysis revealed that a large majority of pupils cannot appropriately explain the National Assembly Elections threshold, which indicates that they are not able to comprehend the consequences of attending the elections and casting a vote. While one cannot expect that pupils of this age will know all the details about the Slovenian electoral system, they should be familiar with its key characteristics such as threshold and be able to explain it on a concrete case (such as given in the question).

Similarly, there was low knowledge among the pupils who took the test regarding the possible political participation means available to citizens at the local level, e.g. at the municipality level (Q6). Be it on the national or local level, pupils should have more knowledge on the available conventional means of participation, but that in itself is not enough. They must comprehend and be able to critically reflect on the consequences of their political action. If they do not have the ability to do that, then their involvement does not lead to informed actions. It is not enough for them to attend the elections, they must also make informed choices at elections, including with regard to knowledge of the basic procedures within the electoral system and clearly also regarding political party programs.

In conclusion, it seems reasonable to once again underline the fact that citizenship education within the formal system is not obsolete. It can and should make a contribution to the political literacy of pupils and prepare them to understand the benefits of their political engagement. Citizenship education in the formal schooling system, in Slovenia as well as everywhere else, is of course not a magic wand that would immediately solve issues pertinent to youth. But with the continuous fostering and support of learning process that emphasises real-life situations in which young people democratically utilize various political participatory tools, citizenship education can contribute to empowering pupils for their future engagements.

Literature

- Banjac, M. (2016) *Demokratično državljanstvo med mladimi: znanje slovenskih osnovnošolcev s področja demokracije in človekovih pravic. Razprave in gradivo: revija za narodnostna vprašanja* 76, 67–86.
- Banjac, M., and Pušnik, T. *Citizenship Education in Slovenia*. <http://www.bpb.de/veranstaltungen/netzwerke/nece/206029/citizenship-education-in-slovenia?p=all> (22.9.2019).
- Barnes, S. H., and Kaase, M. (1979) *Political action: mass participation in five Western democracies*. Beverly Hills, California: Sage Publications.

- Barrett, M. (2018) Young People's Civic and Political Engagement and Global Citizenship. *UN Chronicle*, LIV, 4.
- Bessant, J. (2004) Mixed messages: youth participation and democratic practice. *Australian Journal of Political Science* 39(2), pp. 387-404.
- Biesta, G. (2008) School for citizens: civic learning and democratic action in the learning democracy. In Ranson, S., Lingard, B., and Nixon, J. (eds.), *Transforming Learning in Schools and Communities: The Re-making of Education for a Cosmopolitan Society*, pp. 170-183. London: Continuum.
- Biesta, G. (2011) *Learning democracy in school and society: education, lifelong learning, and the politics of citizenship*. Rotterdam: Sense Publishers.
- Biesta, G., and Lawy, R. (2006) From teaching citizenship to learning democracy: overcoming individualism in research, policy and practice. *Cambridge Journal of Education* 36(1), pp. 63-79.
- Campbell, D. E. (2009) Civic Engagement and Education: An Empirical Test of the Sorting Model. *American Journal of Political Science* 53(4), pp. 771-786.
- Cankar, G. (2014) *O izbiranju tretjih predmetov na nacionalnem preverjanju znanja*. <https://www.ric.si/mma/O%20izbiranju%20tretjih%20predmetov%20na%20nacionalnem%20preverjanju%20oznanja%202014/2014091014582884/> (28.10.2019).
- Crick, B. (2004) *Essays on citizenship*. London: Continuum.
- Dee, T. S. (2004) Are there civic returns to education? *Journal of Public Economics* 88 (9), pp. 1697-1720.
- EURYDICE. (2019) *Fundamental Principles and National Policies*. https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-policies/eurydice/content/fundamental-principles-and-national-policies-77_pt-pt (25.9.2019).
- Farthing, R. (2010) The politics of youthful antipolitics: representing the 'issue' of youth participation in politics. *Journal of youth studies* 13(2), pp. 181-195.
- Forbrig, J., (ed.) (2005) *Revisiting youth political participation: challenges for research and democratic practice in Europe*. Strasbourg: Council of Europe Publishing.
- Furlong, A., and Cartmel, F. (2007) *Young people and social change: individualization and risk in late modernity*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Garratt, D. (2000) Democratic citizenship in the curriculum: some problems and possibilities. *Pedagogy, Culture & Society* 8(3), pp. 323-346.

- Inis, E. F. (2009) Citizenship in flux: The figure of the activist citizen. *Subjectivity* 29(1), pp. 367–388.
- Keating, A., and Janmaat J. G. (2015) Education Through Citizenship at School: Do School Activities Have a Lasting Impact on Youth Political Engagement? *Parliamentary Affairs* 69(2), pp. 409–429.
- Kerr, D., Sturman L., Schulz W., and Burge B. (2010) *ICCS 2009 European Report: Civic Knowledge, Attitudes, and Engagement Among Lower-secondary Students in 24 European Countries*, Amsterdam: IEA.
- Krek, J., and Metljak, M. (2011) *Bela knjiga o vzgoji in izobraževanju v Republiki Sloveniji 2011*. Ljubljana: Zavod RS za šolstvo.
- Lawy, R., and Biesta, G. (2006) Citizenship-as-practice: the educational implications of an inclusive and relational understanding of citizenship. *British Journal of Educational Studies* 54(1), pp. 34–50.
- McCowan, T. (2009) *Rethinking citizenship education: a curriculum for participatory democracy*. London: Continuum.
- Milligan, K., Moretti, E., and Oreopoulos, P. (2004) Does education improve citizenship? Evidence from the United States and the United Kingdom. *Journal of Public Economics* 88(9), pp. 1667–1695.
- Ministrstvo za šolstvo in šport. (2011) Program osnovna šola: Državljska in domovinska vzgoja ter etika. Učni načrt, Ljubljana: Ministrstvo za šolstvo in šport.
- Olson, M., Fejes, A., Dahlstedt, M., and Nicoll, K. (2015) Citizenship discourses: production and curriculum. *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 36(7), pp. 1036–1053.
- Osler, A., and Starkey, H. (2006) Education for democratic citizenship: a review of research, policy and practice 1995–2005. *Research Papers in Education* 21(4), pp. 433–466.
- Pérez Expósito, L. (2014) Rethinking political participation: A pedagogical approach for citizenship education. *Theory and Research in Education* 12(2), pp. 229–251.
- Pitti, I. (2019) *Youth and unconventional political engagement*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Print, M. (2007) Citizenship education and youth participation in democracy. *British Journal of Educational Studies* 55(3), pp. 325–345.
- Putnam, R. D. (1995) Tuning In, Tuning Out: The Strange Disappearance of Social Capital in America. *PS: Political Science & Politics* 28(4), pp. 664–683.
- Putnam, R. D. (2007) *Bowling alone: the collapse and revival of American community*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.

- Quicke, J. (1992) Individualism and citizenship: some problems and possibilities. *International Studies in Sociology of Education* 2(2), pp.147-163.
- RIC. (2015a) *National Assessment of Knowledge in 9-year Primary Education - Activities*. http://www.ric.si/national_assessment_of_knowledge/activities/ (20.9.2019).
- RIC. (2015b) *National Assessment of Knowledge (NAK) - Assessment*. http://www.ric.si/national_assessment_of_knowledge/assessment/ (20.9.2019).
- RIC. (2015c) *The National Examinations Centre - Brief History*. http://www.ric.si/ric_eng/general_information/ (20.9.2019).
- RIC. (2015d) *Navodila za izvedbo nacionalnega preverjanja znanja 2015/2016*, Ljubljana: Državni izpitni center.
- Rooij, E. A. de, and Reeskens, T. (2014) Conventional and Unconventional Political Participation. In Arts, W. and Halman, L. (eds.) *Value Contrasts and Consensus in Present-Day Europe*, pp. 185-212. Leiden: Brill.
- Slavec Gornik, A. (2013) National Assessment in Primary Education in Slovenia: Is it Possible to Implement E-marking in One Year? In *IAEA Annual Conference*. Tel Aviv.
- Taštanoska, T. (2015) *The Education System in the Republic of Slovenia*. Ljubljana: Ministrstvo za izobraževanje, znanost in šport.
- Topf, R. (1997) Electoral Participation. In Klingemann, H. D., Fuchs, D. and Roberts, K. G. (eds.). *Beliefs in Government, Volume 1: Citizens and the State*, pp. 27-51. Guildford: Butterworth Scientific Ltd.
- Watts, M. (2006) Citizenship education revisited: policy, participation and problems. *Pedagogy, Culture & Society* 14(1), pp. 83-97.
- Wood, M., and Flinders M. (2014) Rethinking depoliticisation: beyond the governmental. *Policy & Politics* 4(2), pp. 151-170.

DOI: [https://www.doi.org/10.32320/1581-6044.30\(5-6\)37-62](https://www.doi.org/10.32320/1581-6044.30(5-6)37-62)