

NURTURING RESPONSIBLE AND ACTIVE CITIZENS: THE NEED FOR CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION IN K–12 SCHOOLS

Dr. Fatima Maqsood

Postdoc Scholar, Faculty of Education, IIUI

Email: fatima.maqsood@iiu.edu.pk

Dr. Munaza Mahmood

Assistant Prof. Department of Educational Leadership and Management, FoE,

IIUI. Email: munazza.mahmood@iiu.edu.pk

Abstract

As a result of growing political polarization, fragile democracies, spread of digital disinformation, intolerance, and increased globalization; the demand for responsible citizens has become more critical than ever. Contemporary societies require young people who are not only academically competent but also socially responsible, ethically grounded, culturally responsive, and civically engaged. Through a critical analysis of the current state of citizenship education, this article evaluates the necessity of teaching citizenship at K-12 level. This analysis is based on a comprehensive review of the most recent literature on citizenship education and various educational frameworks used internationally. In addition to examining the ways in which citizenship education promotes democracy, peaceful resolution of conflicts, critical thinking, social cohesiveness, intercultural understanding, human rights awareness, and sustainable development; the article examines how schools can cultivate civic identity in young people. Using a qualitative literature review methodology, the study examined and synthesized evidence from recent academic research on citizenship education, UNESCO educational frameworks, and government policy documents. The findings indicate that effective citizenship education strengthens civic competencies, moral reasoning, participatory skills, and respect for diversity among learners. The review also highlights the importance of experiential learning, democratic school culture, and inclusive pedagogical practices in fostering active citizenship. The article concludes by emphasizing the urgent need to integrate citizenship education into K–12 curricula, teacher education programs, and educational policies, particularly in developing countries facing democratic, social, and educational challenges.

Keywords: *Citizenship Education, K–12 Education, Civic Competencies, Democratic Participation, Global Citizenship*

Introduction

Since the start of the 21st century, we have seen significant changes in politics, technology, economics and society around the world. Changes in globalization, digital communication, migration and climate crisis as well as increased polarization in politics have shaped how citizens view their roles and responsibilities in democratic and culturally diverse societies. In the changing environments of today's world, it is reasonable to expect educational settings to provide students with education that will not only help them succeed in employment and academics but being able to make decisions independently based on their own beliefs and values through active involvement as citizens. As a result, citizenship education has been recognized as having greater value in K–12 education systems for teaching democratic values, encouraging civic participation, social solidarity and the ethics of young learners (UNESCO, 2023; Banks, 2021) in addition to providing a basis for understanding rights and responsibilities, diversity, inclusion and the participatory nature of democracy. In recent years, declining levels of civic engagement among young people have intensified global discussions regarding the importance of citizenship education within school systems. Research conducted across different countries indicates decreasing political participation

among youth, weakening trust in democratic institutions, rising intolerance, and greater vulnerability to misinformation and social manipulation (OECD, 2022; Hoskins & Janmaat, 2019). These emerging societal concerns have underscored the urgent need for educational initiatives that cultivate critical thinking, civic awareness, empathy, democratic values, and responsible social participation from the early years of schooling.

Citizenship education provides learners with meaningful opportunities to understand social and political structures, appreciate cultural diversity, engage in peaceful conflict resolution, and contribute positively to their communities and society at large (Kerr, 2020). In response to these challenges, many countries have increasingly integrated civic and citizenship learning into national curriculum frameworks to strengthen democratic culture, promote social responsibility, and prepare students for active and informed participation in civic life. Due to the growing social divisions and cultural diversity of student, the significance of citizenship education has taken on additional significance. Today's classrooms are comprised of students who come from different languages, ethnic groups, religions and socioeconomic backgrounds. If no intentional educational strategies are employed to teach inclusion and respect for others, then these characteristics could potentially become causes for division and discrimination. By using citizenship education as a tool to foster intercultural dialogue, tolerance and respect for the dignity of all individuals, students are provided with the opportunity to establish a common identity or "we" feeling with other members of their pluralistic society (Sant et al., 2018). Researchers suggest that through civics education, students may begin to experience a sense of peaceful coexistence by gaining insight into multiple viewpoints and challenging prejudices; furthermore, civics education enables students to respond constructively to their social differences (Veugelers, 2021).

Finally, one of the most compelling rationales for citizenship education is its potential impact on creating a more sustainable world and contributing to achieving global peace. Organizations like UNESCO and OECD consider citizenship education as key elements in establishing inclusive, equitable and sustainable societies. Specifically, United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4.7 recognizes education for global citizenship, human rights, peace and sustainable development (UNESCO, 2023). Citizenship education enables students to acquire the knowledge base, attitude base and skill base required to meet global challenges facing humanity such as climate change, inequality, violence/conflict and social injustices. In this light, schools are agents of transformation which enable socially-responsible citizens who can actively contribute positively to both local and global communities. Although there is growing international recognition of citizenship education as an essential component of K–12 education systems worldwide; however, citizenship education continues to be inequitably represented in the implementation of educational systems worldwide particularly those located in developing countries. Many places continue to treat citizenship education as a secondary subject with limited instructional time and inadequate teacher training and/or support from policies.

Additionally, traditional approaches focus primarily on students memorizing factual information about civic institutions rather than experiencing civic engagement through experiential learning processes (Westheimer, 2019); as a result, these methods limit the acquisition of authentic civic competences among learners. As such, there exists a strong need for researchers/educators to conduct an intensive analysis of the salience, obstacles/challenges and implications for citizenship education at the K–12 level. The purpose of this paper is to fulfill this need through completing an exhaustive literature review examining the current relevance and

necessity for citizenship education in preparing future learners as active engaged citizens living in democratic-inclusive-globally-interconnected societies.

Objectives of this Research

The key objectives of this paper were to:

- i. Explore the contemporary need for Citizenship Education in K-12 Schools.
- ii. examine the role of citizenship education in creating civic participation and democratic values.
- iii. assess the influence of citizenship education on enhancing social cohesion, diversity and global awareness.
- iv. identify obstacles that affect implementing citizenship education in the classroom.
- v. discover the ways to enhance and expand citizenship education in K-12 School Systems.

Significance of the Research

This study has significant implications for educational theory, policy, and practice. The findings of this research emphasize the urgency of including citizenship education in the contemporary K-12 school experience. As such, the results of this study will serve as both theoretical and practical guidance for policymakers, curriculum writers, educational administrators and educators wishing to promote greater civic knowledge and democratic culture in their schools. This study supports the idea that education serves a purpose beyond academics; it prepares young people to become morally accountable, ethically aware, and critically informed members of society. Curriculum developers find this study helpful when designing curricula which include civic competency, human rights education, digital citizenship, and inter-cultural education. Teachers and educational institutions may utilize this study to develop ways to create opportunities for active participation, dialogue, empathetic responses and critical thinking skills among all students. Because many developing countries do not give enough emphasis to citizenship education, this study is especially useful to those nations who face growing social and political problems. In addition to being beneficial for developing nations, this study adds to the current body of research related to global education priorities of sustaining democracy, creating peaceful societies, enhancing democratic participation, and achieving sustainable development. In synthesizing recent literature and international perspectives on citizenship education, this article creates a broad framework for understanding how citizenship education can help build inclusive societies and foster democratic participation among future generations.

Methodology

This study utilized a systematic literature review methodology to critically assess and analyze the current body of scholarly contributions, policy documents, and global educational frameworks addressing citizenship education for students at the K-12 levels. The use of a systematic literature review design allowed for an extensive analysis and evaluation of both theoretical perspectives and empirical evidence that exist within the context of citizenship education. The data collection process was based on a systematic review of peer reviewed journals, books, policy reports, and globally recognized organizations (such as UNESCO/OECD), as well as several prominent academic databases including Scopus/ERIC/Web of Science/Google Scholar. Relevant literature was identified by utilizing keywords such as "citizenship education," "civic education," "global citizenship," "k-12 education," "democratic education," and "civic competencies." Recent studies published after 2018 were prioritized so that this study would be relevant to today's climate.

Ethical Considerations

The study was undertaken in compliance with established ethical standards for conducting academic research. Accuracy, transparency and objectivity were upheld in both the review and analysis process. Sources that are considered scholarly were reviewed critically and referenced appropriately to protect the academic integrity and contribute to the intellectual work. The study sought a balanced view of different viewpoints on citizenship education as represented in the literature. Additionally, the research process placed an emphasis on original thought when interpreting, synthesizing and presenting new ideas, while continuing to uphold acceptable ethics in both educational research and scholarly writing.

Literature Review

Conceptual Meaning of Citizenship Education

Citizenship education, according to UNESCO (2023), means all the ways we teach people how to know, think, act and feel about being part of society so they will help make democracy work. Banks (2021) stated that scholars consider citizenship education to be multidimensional. It includes many aspects like:

1. Civic knowledge - what one knows about the world and government;
2. Participating skills - knowing how to participate in the process of making decisions;
3. Ethical reasoning - thinking through ideas ethically and fairly; and
4. Social responsibility - doing things for others and taking care of our community.

Most recently, scholars have included new dimensions of citizenship education including global citizenship, intercultural understanding and digital citizenship. Sant et al. (2018) showed that research has demonstrated that citizenship education is much more than just knowing the structure of your country's constitution or historical events. It means giving students the ability to critically evaluate current issues in society, talk with each other, and solve problems together. This expanded view fits well into larger educational goals which seek to prepare young adults to live in democratic societies with multiple cultures and global connections.

Citizenship Education and Democratic Participation

One reason that there is a need for citizenship education is to support democratic systems. Citizens who understand and take an active part in their own government and contribute positively to the democratic system are necessary components of these types of systems. Hoskins & Janmaat (2019) reported that when students are taught effectively through civic learning, they tend to have a greater understanding of politics and governance, actively participate in civic activities, and believe in the democratic system. According to Westheimer (2019), citizenship education gives students the tools they need to transition from passive citizenship to active democratic engagement. Some examples of how this type of engagement happens through the school experience include: class discussion on social issues, service-learning experiences, student council experiences, and experiential learning opportunities.

Additionally, Kahne & Bowyer (2019) indicated that when students receive civic education, they become more likely to want to engage in both social activism and political participation. The development of democratic citizenship among youth is primarily based upon the use of participative pedagogy (e.g., group projects, service-learning, etc.), critical inquiry (i.e., examining a topic from different angles), and creating a collaborative learning environment (Veugelers, 2021). Therefore, schools function similarly to mini-democratic communities. In addition to experiencing civic engagement and democratic decision-making, students learn how to

communicate effectively, resolve conflicts democratically, and develop a sense of shared democratic values.

Social Cohesion, Diversity, and Intercultural Understanding

In today's world we see increasing amounts of diversity in modern society. Additionally, due to globalization there are many more people living outside of their original countries than ever before. These changes create a unique opportunity for teachers and educators to foster social cohesion and inclusive citizenship education. According to Banks (2021), multicultural education provides an excellent way for learners to appreciate diversity but still promote shared values of democracy. Many research studies demonstrate that when students are educated on the value of inclusiveness and appreciation for diversity, this leads to a reduction in prejudice and discriminatory behaviors. Moreover, it fosters dialogue and perspective-taking.

Furthermore, if students grow up in areas where they are surrounded by conflicting identities and beliefs, civic learning can facilitate the establishment of a culture of peace-building and reconciliation. With the increased amount of migration occurring globally today along with the increased connectivity of cultures due to technological advancements (i.e., internet), there is now an even greater emphasis on implementing global citizenship education. The United Nations Educational Scientific Cultural Organization (UNESCO) defines global citizenship education as "a lifelong commitment to actions that build peaceful, equitable, sustainable communities" (UNESCO, 2023). Research suggests that educating students on global citizenship increases learner's awareness of international issues such as climate change, inequality, poverty, and human rights (Oxley & Morris, 2018).

Digital Citizenship and Media Literacy

Digital technologies continue to influence how we interact with one another in terms of civic engagement and communication. As a result of growing use of digital technology by young people to engage in online communities, share ideas, discuss social-political issues and advocate for causes digitally, educators need to provide them with the necessary tools needed for them to utilize digital technologies responsibly. Unfortunately, digital technology can expose learners to inaccurate information regarding issues and topics relevant to civic engagement; hateful language and ideologies; cyber bullying; and extremist ideologies. Therefore, Ribble (2020) states that digital citizenship education is crucial for promoting responsible and ethical online behaviors among learners. Learners need digital literacy competencies as well as competencies related to identifying misinformation and engaging in constructive dialogue regarding public issues on line.

Choi (2016) adds that digital citizenship education is important because it integrates critical media awareness and responsible digital engagement with traditional civic education. OECD (2022) studies indicate that learners who exhibit high levels of digital civic competences are able to critically assess sources for accuracy prior to using them as a source of information; thus, enabling them to engage productively in democratic discourse online. Schools are under increasing pressure to prepare their students to live responsibly in an ever-changing world and respond to global crises like climate change.

Citizenship Education and Sustainable Development

The United Nations has identified education for global citizenship and sustainable development as one of its top priorities through Sustainable Development Goal 4.7. Scholars argue that schools need to educate students to be able to work together on environmental disasters, inequality and global issues. The research shows that teaching citizenship increases environmental awareness and moral responsibility among young people and encourages them to get involved in

their communities. When children learn about how they can contribute to improving the quality of life for everyone around the world, it helps them think globally; i.e., understand the impact of individual decisions made locally on broader societal levels. This kind of global thinking will help prepare future generations to collaborate in solving global problems such as climate change, pandemic responses, and economic inequality.

Challenges in Implementing Citizenship Education

Despite the growing acceptance of the idea of implementing citizenship education into school curricula, there are numerous obstacles to overcome. One of the most prominent is that teachers do not receive enough training and support to effectively engage students in discussing contentious issues such as democracy, global politics and civil society. Teachers typically focus on preparing students for exams rather than providing adequate instruction on civics. Some teachers simply assign students memory exercises so they can recite historical data rather than provide opportunities for students to explore and discuss these ideas critically. School administrators face challenges from both ideological and political differences over what constitutes good citizens. What counts as a "good citizen" in one country might differ significantly in another. Furthermore, poor resources at schools in developing countries prevent them from being able to implement this type of education. Successful citizenship education can only occur when entire schools develop a culture that fosters civic engagement, partnerships with the community, training of teachers and governmental support (Biesta, 2020).

Key Research Findings

Based upon the extensive analysis of existing literature, the following key findings are summarized as:

1. Citizenship education becomes even more important today because of globalization, democratic challenges, social fragmentation, and digitalization.
2. Effective citizenship education results in increased democratic participation, civic responsibility and political knowledge among students.
3. Citizenship education positively impacts social cohesion, intercultural understanding, tolerance and peace-building in multicultural and multilingual societies.
4. Citizen's education related to digital media literacy and digital citizenship is now a very important part of modern civic education.
5. Civic education is crucially important for sustainable development since it helps raise awareness about global issues and motivates students towards collective action.
6. The most difficult barriers to implementing citizenship education are the limitations imposed by curriculum requirements, teacher preparation, government interventions, and evaluation-based school systems.
7. In order to make citizenship education more effective, experiential learning methods, active pedagogical strategies, and whole-school based democratic approaches need to be emphasized.

Conclusions

Citizenship education has moved from being a discretionary part of the curriculum to becoming a compulsory element in K-12 education today. Global issues (i.e., democratic instability; social fragmentation; digital disinformation; growing levels of intolerance; global crisis) are requiring individuals with civic knowledge, ethical obligations, critical thinking, and intercultural competence. The literature examined within this paper clearly illustrates how citizenship education can play a transformative role in developing students' ability to participate

in democracy, coexist peacefully and engage responsibly globally. In addition, the literature demonstrated that successful citizenship education goes beyond instructional methods found in textbooks by requiring schools to implement participatory pedagogical practices and democratic school environments in which students have opportunities to experience authentic civic activities. As a result, citizenship education provides both individual developmental benefits to learners and supports the long-term viability of democratic and inclusive societies. Although important, citizenship education continues to be inadequately implemented within numerous educational systems throughout the world due to lack of supportive policies, inadequate professional development for teachers, and priorities based on assessment driven testing. To address these barriers will require substantial systemic reform to educational systems that allow civic learning to occur through curriculum integration, educator preparation programs, and school-based practice. Developing strong citizenship education is imperative to creating informed, ethically conscious, and socially active members of society who contribute positively to their local, national, or global communities.

Recommendations

Educational policymakers need to include broad comprehensive citizenship education in K-12 curricula and avoid relegating it to secondary status as an optional course. Teacher education institutions have to provide preservice teachers with training in civic learning; democratic pedagogy; digital citizenship; and intercultural education. School administrators may create classroom environments that utilize participatory/experiential teaching strategies (e.g., debates; simulations; community service; student-initiated projects). Digital literacy/media studies should be integrated into citizenship education programs so that students learn to recognize/distinguish between credible vs. noncredible sources of information on-line and learn to engage responsibly while using technology. Educational institutions have to foster democratic school climates that encourage student voice, inclusivity, dialogue, and shared decision making among students. Governments/educational organizations must commit adequate financial resources/policy support to ensure the successful implementation of high-quality citizenship education programs. Future research may focus on documenting the practical application of citizenship education and its effect in various educational/social/cultural settings

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