Chapter 26

Learning for Democratic Citizenship:
Exploring Patterns of Political Awakening in Scandinavian Youth

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ABSTRACT

This chapter investigates students' political learning by unfolding the dynamic patterns of political learning that can be explored among Scandinavian students. To serve this purpose, the following research question is forwarded: What dynamic patterns of political learning can be uncovered among various upper secondary students in relation to participation in political institutions? By the incorporation of theories of learning in the analytical approach, it is shown how students display a complex pattern of political attentiveness. School-based civics education programs to some extent seem to have failed to equip young people with the tools, knowledge, and experience needed for participation in political institutions. Research in this area has traditionally been interested in either the political awareness of youth or the sources of influence on the youth. However, there has not been a lot of interest in the various offsprings initiating the political engagement and political development. Summing up, some recommendations for citizenship education are forwarded.

INTRODUCTION: WHY STUDY POLITICAL LEARNING?

Democracy is founded on the idea of the right and the duty of individuals to engage and participate in the public realm. John Stuart Mill, along with later participatory democrats, like Carole Pateman (1970), pointed out that the community gains, when citizens take an active part. Also, that individuals grow and learn through their activity. Political participation builds individual capacities in several ways: Those who take part learn about their community and society, they develop civic skills that can be carried throughout their lives, and they often come to have a greater appreciation of the needs and interests of others, and of society as a whole (Schlozman, 2002). A long tradition in the social studies, like in the writings of

John Dewey (1916/1966), heralds the philosophic assumption that political knowledge and participatory skills needed by citizens in a democracy are learned through practice in school and community. The very idea of a democracy includes public participation in elections, decision-making, and public engagement. Democratic participation distributes power among ordinary people, serves to legitimize decisions in public affairs, and is a vital characteristic of a political culture. The term 'political culture' is often employed in this relation, as it refers specifically to political orientations, laymen's´ attitudes toward the political system and its various parts, and to attitudes toward the role of the self in the system (Almond & Verba, 1963). Participation, as evidenced either by voter turnout or by other forms of public involvement, is regarded as a barometer of the quality of democracy in a country and serves to characterize the political culture (Diamond & Morlino, 2005). The political culture of Scandinavia is the context of the present study. It is characterized by high levels of trust and participation (voter turnout) (Blais, 2008; Newton, 2008). Public debate is free, as are other forms of organizational and individual participation.

The chapter takes a learning approach to political awareness and participation and analyses the process as learning from external sources, as well as reactions to particular information, situations or stimuli. Early sources of influence often go back to differential impacts of family and school. However, this impact could be quite clear or quite diffuse. So, the question is where and when does the political interest start? I will use the term "learning politics" instead of "political socialization" to emphasize students as subjects in their own. Learning here means acquiring associations, learning of facts, processes and practices, as well as learning about oneself as a political citizen. The process of learning often takes place in institutional environments where people experience viewpoints, practices and build up own reactions to experiences. School is an institution, which carries out citizenship education and therefor has potentials for enhancing its role in political learning.

Though Denmark, Norway and Sweden are individual countries with many differences among them, they also share a lot in common, when it comes to state building and welfare state, political culture and institutional setups. Together, these countries are often labelled as "Scandinavian welfare states". Andersen & Hoff in a comparative perspective speak of the Scandinavian countries as coming close to ideal democratic participatory countries. Though they recently have been faced with serious challenges, e.g. related to economic crises and immigration, it is still relevant to speak of a coherent Scandinavian model. "The Scandinavian countries have been stable democracies with consensual politics and social peace, and they have been affluent countries characterized by strong egalitarianism and generous welfare states" (Andersen & Hoff, 2001:250). Hernes speaks of a certain model of "Scandinavian citizenship" that is activist, participatory and egalitarian, and with welfare policies characterized by a conscious attempt at democratization all areas of social life (Hernes, 1988). However, empirical findings do not always confirm a picture of engaged political participation by responsible and active citizens. Among the three countries, political interest is highest in Denmark, whereas political efficacy is highest in Sweden (Andersen & Hoff, 2001; Denk et al., 2015).

The upper secondary education in each country last for 3 years, and even at the institutional level there are many similarities. In Scandinavia, it is a formulated goal of the basic educational systems to provide children with a sense of civic competence enabling them to become active and participating citizens. Solhaug furthermore speaks of "democratic schools" - meaning schools, which are run according to democratic principles and values (Solhaug, 2018). Studies of the political engagement of upper secondary students are important, because institutions of education can be seen as political mini-arenas stimulating political participation. Besides, they can be useful when trying to gain knowledge of adolescents´ political learning and participation. Studies of political participation, however, traditionally have

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