

Accepted for publication in Strand, Torill (ed.) (2019): Here and Now. Dordrecht: Springer Verlag.

Young citizenship: Civic engagement and participation in four Nordic countries

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The project was supported by the Directorate of Education, Norway.

Words: 5900 including abstract, tables and references.

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Abstract

Since the beginning of the 2000s several studies have expressed a strong concern about young people's lack of interest in political issues and their low degree of political participation through traditional channels. This article aims to describe the civic engagement and participation of young Nordic people today by investigating the extent to which they participate in everyday civic activities and show signs of civic engagement. Participation in school democracy, local youth organisations and organisations with socio-political aims such as environmental issues, or engaging in discussions with family or friends on social and political issues shows how young people are active as citizens in their own right. At the same time, these activities and networks are important for the socialisation of youth for democracy. Young people's engagement as young citizens and seeing themselves as voters and active political participants in adulthood is important for the reproduction and renewal of democracy. In this article, we address the question of to what degree young people are passive or active citizens in school, leisure and family contexts. The analyses are based on the ICCS study in 2016 for Norway, Denmark, Finland and Sweden.

Keywords

Youth, citizenship, civic participation, civic engagement, ICCS 2016

Introduction

Young people's participation in democratic processes and their socialisation into competent future voters and citizens may be seen as essential for the future of democracy. Two of the basic functions of the civic and citizenship education of youth is thus to qualify and socialise them into citizenship (Biesta, 2009) in an effort to contribute to the reproduction of the democratic system that they will be part of as adults. To achieve this, the existing knowledge and truths about what it takes to sustain a living democracy need to be integrated with a sense of responsible citizenship in the younger generations.

One critique of the civic education of youth for instance in the United Kingdom, is that it is arranged in such a way that its focus is mainly on imparting facts and knowledge about the

established democratic institutions, standards and practices (Gholami, 2017) – thus preserving and strengthening the existing democracy, but also in a way teaching democratic *obedience* to younger generations. Paradoxically, the period of youth is often described as a time of life in which the individual is particularly sensitive to social change and may even act as a *driver* of social change. Generational change has often been described in terms of opposition to the previous generation or to the establishment (Mannheim, 1952, see also Ødegård, 2016 for a discussion). However, the current generation seems rather to be described as apolitical and disinterested in politics. In this article, we will discuss young people's civic engagement and participation today based on analyses of *The International Civic and Citizenship Study (ICCS) 2016*. Are youth in the Nordic countries active, engaged and participating as citizens in the ways that are available to them, or are they passive and disengaged?

Perspectives on young people's civic and political participation and engagement

Since the beginning of the 2000s, several studies have expressed a strong concern about young people's seemingly increasing lack of interest in political issues and their low degree of participation through traditional political channels (see, for example Furlong & Cartmel, 2007; A. Harris, 2009; Keeter, Zukin, Andolina, & Jenkins, 2002; Torney-Purta, Lehmann, Oswald, & Schulz, 2001). These descriptions of youth as apolitical or apathetic on one hand, are contrasted by other studies that portray this youth generation as having marginal but spectacular and oppositional youth cultures on the other (A. H. Harris, Wyn, & Younes, 2010). Harris, Wyn and Younes (2010) argue that neither stories may be telling the 'truth' about a whole generation of youth – 'normal' youth is rather to be found somewhere in the middle.

So, who could be to blame for young people's possible lack of engagement and interest in political issues? Perspectives that primarily relate young people's lack of involvement in social issues and politics to characteristics of the youths themselves – such as their lack of knowledge about democracy and citizenship – have been criticised for individualising the problem and making it the responsibility of young people to engage themselves (Bastedo, 2015; Cammaerts, Bruter, Banaji, Harrison, & Anstead, 2014; Edwards, 2007; Kimberlee, 2002).

Wyn and White (1997) describe the youth phase as a gradual movement from the child's social position as vulnerable and dependent, to an increasingly socially meaningful position in

social structures and institutions, where their participation in political processes is seen as desirable and expected (see also Øia, 1995). In contrast to individualising perspectives, other contributions thus point to society's responsibility for enabling this process, and describe a wide range of social and structural barriers to their engagement and participation. A qualitative study of adolescents in Australia showed important barriers to be that young people perceived politicians as unresponsive and that they were excluded by the political language or the lack of practical knowledge required to be included in the political sphere (A. H. Harris et al., 2010). The gap between young people's everyday lives and their civic and political concerns on the one hand, and the 'adult' world of politics on the other, contributed to this feeling of marginalisation.

A claim to the same effect is presented by Gholami (2017) who contends that civic education at school tends to emphasise the types of civic knowledge mostly related to conventional citizenship and its institutions. Gholami (2017) claims that reducing civic education to information about for instance the national assembly and electoral arrangements, further contributes to demarcating young people's everyday citizenship and social policy activities from what counts as 'citizenship', and thus to define youth as 'non-participating'.

The sort of youth engagement described by A. H. Harris et al. (2010) and Gholami (2017) underlines the importance of understanding the involvement of young people in everyday citizenship activities, in a perspective of here and now. Rather than describing youth in line with the idea of youth's marginal status as *becoming* citizens who have the *potential* for participation ('human becomings', see Farthing, 2010), a youth-centred view acknowledges youth's status as citizens in their own right. In this article, we will use a youth-centred, everyday perspective on youth's citizenship, civic engagement and participation. This perspective is inspired by Thomson et al. (2004) who in their study took a 'subjective approach to citizenship in which participation is not deferred to some distant future in which economic independence is achieved, but is understood as constantly constructed in the present' (p. 218). Such an approach would interpret teens' intentions to participate in elections and political processes in the future as an expression of their socio-political self-esteem, interest and emotional commitment today, and their 'commitment to civic participation' (Kahne & Sporte, 2008, p. 738). From this perspective, young people are understood as independent actors who are *already* actively involved in claiming, resisting and negotiating a range of competing responsibilities and freedoms' (Thomson et al., 2004, p. 221). A parallel to this perspective on everyday participation can be found in Putnam's (1995) definition of civic

engagement as ‘people’s connections to life in the community, not only to politics’ (Putnam, 1995, p. 665).

In this article, we will depart from a youth-centred understanding of civic participation, engagement and commitment. *Civic participation* is operationalised as participation in school democracy and in civic organisations in line with Keeter et al. (2002) typology. *Civic engagement* is operationalised as youth having discussions about politics and community issues with parents and friends, as well as perceiving themselves as active future citizens through future electoral participation and active political participation.

Previous research on social policy participation and involvement among young people

The results of the ICCS 2016 test of civic knowledge showed that the level of civic knowledge and understanding of democracy and citizenship among students in Denmark, Sweden, Finland and Norway is significantly higher than the international average, and that it increased markedly in Norway and Sweden from 2009 to 2016 (Huang et al., 2017)(Schulz et al., 2018a). Several studies have also shown that there is a connection between knowledge and understanding of democracy and citizenship and participation in school democracy (Fjeldstad, Lauglo, & Mikkelsen, 2010; MCEETYA, 2009). A longitudinal study of teen minority students from poor neighbourhoods in Chicago (USA), investigated what characterised those who reported an increasing commitment to political participation over a two-year period. Students who received civic education in the classroom, who spoke with their parents about civic issues or participated in youth organisations, showed a trend of increasing commitment to future political participation (Kahne & Sporte, 2008). These studies seem to indicate that civic knowledge could contribute to higher engagement and participation among today’s youth.

However, research from a Swedish context questions this finding by showing that citizenship skills and knowledge rather seem to be related to family background (Ekman & Zetterbeg, 2010). Students that already are provided with a beneficial home background scored higher on the political literacy test *and* future active political citizenship than students with parents with lower levels of education (Ekman & Zetterberg, 2010). From a socialisation perspective, ‘recruitment networks’ (Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995) such as the family, schools and organisations play a central role in civic engagement and political participation. Moreover,

Ekman and Zetterberg (2010) claim that political socialisation is increasingly taking place in the family and outside of school. A study in Australia also showed that participation in the local community and social policy activities increased students' intentions for future political participation more than being taught civic issues at school (Reichert and Print 2018).

In the present study, active and engaged citizenship is operationalised across the arenas available for students' engagement; we include peer networks and activities, family activities, school participation as well as indicators of individual identity as a future citizen.

Research questions

The overall aim of this article is to investigate the extent and character of civic participation and engagement among youth in four Nordic countries (Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden) based on analyses of the International ICCS Study 2016. By utilising a wide range of indicators of civic participation and engagement, we identify groups of youth showing particularly high degrees of engagement and participation. Absence of the same indicators shows a corresponding lack of involvement and participation. In this article, we address the question of whether there are differences between the four Nordic countries in the indicators and in the degree of active and passive civic engagement and participation? Lastly, we investigate the relationship between the educational aspirations of youth and their civic engagement and participation. Is active and passive citizenship more widespread in certain groups of youth?

Methods and analyses

The analyses for this article are based on survey data from the Danish (N=6254), Swedish (N=3264), Norwegian (N=6271) and Finnish (N=3173) youth included in the International Civic and Citizenship study (ICCS) 2016. The study is an ongoing, comparative research program investigating the ways in which young people are prepared to undertake their roles as citizens across the world (Schulz et al., 2018a, Schulz et al., 2018b). In 2016, 24 countries participated in the study. The respondents were students with a mean age of 14.3-14.7 years, and the response rates of these four countries were 91 to 93 percent. The rigorous sampling and data collection procedures used are described in the technical report from the IEA (Schulz

et al., 2018b). The data set was analysed using the *IDB Analyzer*, an IEA-developed program based on SPSS, as well as weighting variables as calculated by the IEA. The results therefore represent the population of Danish, Swedish, Norwegian and Finnish students aged 14-15 years in 2016. The description of the data set and the data collection procedures are described in the international technical report (Schulz, Carstens, Losito, & Fraillon, 2018b), and the main international results from the knowledge test and the survey material have previously been described by Schulz, Ainley, Fraillon, Losito, Agrusti and Friedman (2018a). The results of the test and the survey in the participating Nordic countries have been published nationally.

Twenty-four items were used to calculate the five indicator variables shown in Table 1. The analysis was built around a logic where the different indicators are used to construct two typologies, rather than scales or aggregates. A typology is a collective measure that implies that respondents are classified into categories based on their answers to first-order indicator variables (Babbie, 2007). The purpose of this is to capture various forms of engagement and participation by giving the indicators a theoretically equal value. Typologies for active *civic participation* and active *civic engagement*, respectively, were constructed on the basis of participation in civic organisations (6 items), participation in school democracy (5 items in addition to voting in school council elections), future electoral participation (3 items), future active political participation (5 items) and discussions about social/political issues with friends and family (4 items). Furthermore, students were categorised as very active, rather active, average, rather passive or very passive respectively, based on their scores on the two typologies. The procedure is described in further detail in Hegna 2018.

Independent variables are *gender* (boy/girl), *immigrant background* (two parents born abroad), *parents' highest completed education* (higher education vs not) and *students' educational aspirations* (secondary school or lower/short tertiary education/higher ed (BA, MA or PhD)). In addition, students' interest in social and political issues (not at all interested – very interested) is included to confirm the value of the composite measure of active and engaged citizenship (Figure 2).

Civic engagement and participation among youth in Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden

We started by conducting an initial analysis of the various indicator variables for civic participation and engagement. Participating in civic organisations, participating in school democracy, discussing civic issues with friends or family, seeing oneself as a future voter or a future active participant in political processes were all seen as indicators of civic participation and engagement among youth. The opposite, not participating in any types of organisations, not participating in school democracy, not discussing civic issues or not imagining oneself as a future voter, were interpreted as indicators of civic non-participation and disengagement. Table 1 shows the percentage of students for each of the 10 indicators for each of the four Nordic countries.

		DENMARK	FINLAND	NORWAY	SWEDEN
Civic participation					
Participation in civic organisations	<i>Member in at least one civ.org last year</i>	17	9	22	15
Participation in school democracy	<i>Voted and otherwise active</i>	23	20	45	33
Civic engagement					
Future electoral participation	<i>'Certainly' will vote in the future</i>	28	23	48	36
Future active political participation	<i>'Certainly' politically active in the future</i>	29	8	17	19
Discussions about civic/political issues	<i>Frequent discussions</i>	20	11	13	17
Civic non-participation					
Participation in youth or civic org.	<i>Never a member in an org.</i>	41	67	36	56
Participation in school democracy	<i>Never voted nor been otherwise active</i>	20	38	18	19
Civic disengagement					
Future electoral participation	<i>'Most certain will NOT' vote</i>	4	8	6	4
Future active political participation	<i>'Most certain will NOT' be pol. active</i>	19	49	42	35
Discussions about civic/political issues	<i>Never/almost never discussions</i>	5	14	12	10

Table 1. Indicators of active and passive youth citizenship among youth in four Nordic countries. Percent. Students 14-15 years old. Highest figures in bold. (ICCS 2016, weighted).

Table 1 also depicts a large variation between the four Nordic countries. The students from Norway indicated more often that they were members of civic organisations and that they voted and otherwise participated in school democracy. They also more often saw themselves as future voters compared to students from the other countries. The students from Denmark more often saw themselves as politically active participants in the future, and more often had discussions with friends or family about civic and political issues.

The students from Finland indicated the least participation and engagement in all of these indicators, and also indicated most often to never have been a member of a civic youth organisation, never been involved in school democracy, to almost never discuss civic and political issues with parents or friends, and not to see themselves as voting or actively participating politically in the future.

In the further analysis, these five indicators were used to categorise the respondents into four categories based on their level of civic participation and engagement. These four categories identify groups that are characterised by either very low civic participation and very low civic engagement, or, at the other end of the spectrum, very high civic participation and very high civic engagement. In doing this, we found that the largest part of the youth population is characterised by neither of these, forming a middle group with average participation and engagement.

The specific indicators used in the study can exemplify the level of participation or engagement among the youth that are categorised as very active or very passive: Among the very active-group, 85 percent have participated in school democracy in more ways than just voting in a school election, 74 percent have participated in an environmental or human rights organisation or a political party youth organisation, 75 percent discuss social or political issues with their parents at least weekly, 94 percent will certainly participate in future local and central elections and 86 percent see themselves as politically active in the future. The very passive-group show very low levels of civic participation and engagement: 57 percent will 'probably not' vote neither locally nor centrally and 97 percent will not be politically active as adults, 69 percent have never discussed social or political issues nor "what is happening in other countries" with their parents or with friends and none of them have ever been members of any local youth organisation or participated in school democracy other than the obligatory school election¹. Figure 1 shows the percentage of students in ICCS 2016 categorised within these five groups across the Nordic countries.

Comment [KH1]: MÅ sjekkes med IDB!

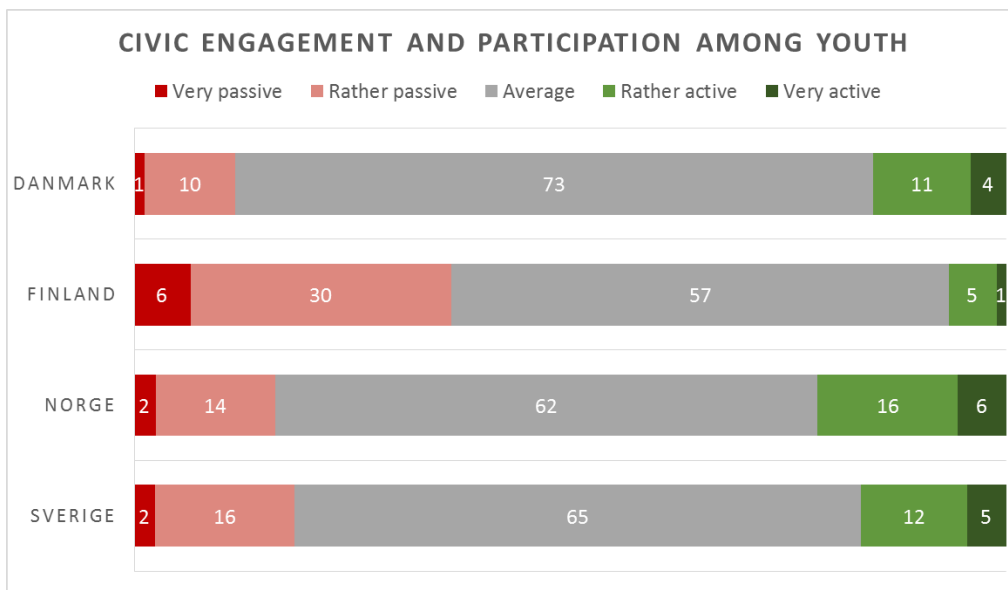


Figure 1: Categories of civic participation and engagement among youth in Sweden, Norway, Finland and Denmark. Percent. Youth 14-15 years old. (ICCS 2016, weighted).

First of all, Table 1 shows that the majority of the youth population – from 58 to 73 percent – is neither passive nor active citizens. Rather they form the ‘average middle’ that may vote when they get the chance and are engaged or participate on a medium level. Table 1 also clearly shows that the students in Finland were more often categorised as rather passive or very passive, compared to the other Scandinavian countries. These two categories comprise 36 percent of the Finnish students, which is more than twice as many as in the other countries. While 22 percent of the Norwegian students are categorised as rather or very active, only 6 percent of the Finnish students are in the same two categories.

Comment [KH2]: Rett tallene fra figuren. From 57 to 73 percent

In the ICCS-study, the students were also asked a question about their interest in social and political issues, which can be used to understand the level of interest reflected in their level of participation and engagement. Figure 2 shows the percentage of students who responded ‘very interested’ and ‘quite interested’ respectively, in each of the five categories of participation and engagement, for each country.

Comment [KH3]: Dette er riktig sml med figuren

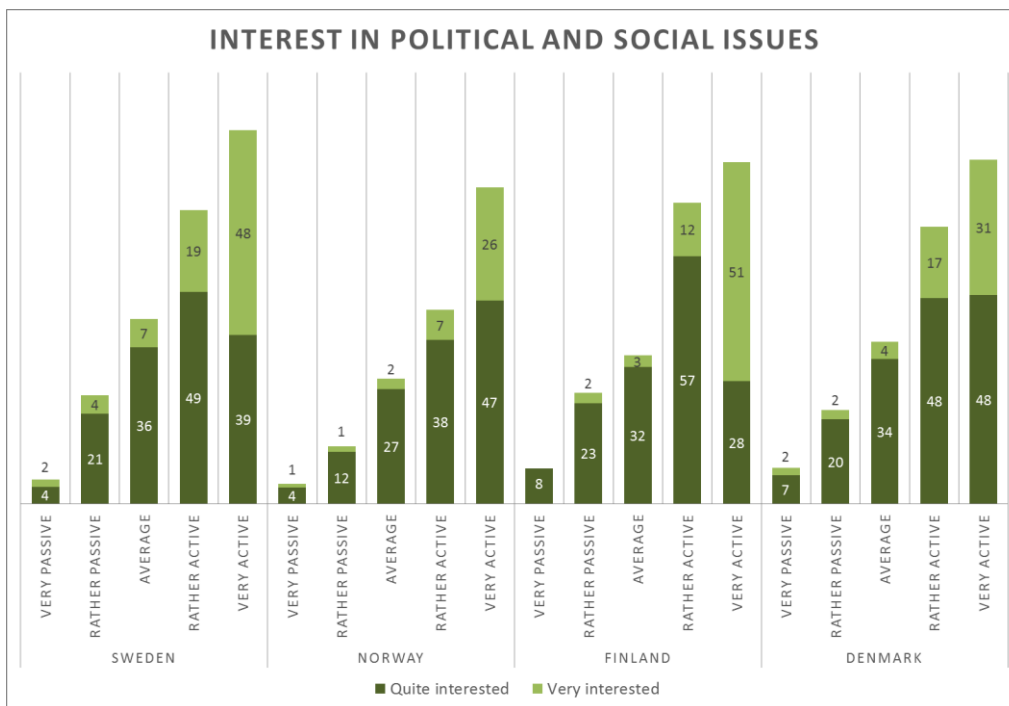


Figure 2: Degree of interest in social and political issues in different categories of civic participation and engagement among youth in Sweden, Norway, Finland and Denmark. Percent. Youth 14-15 years old. (ICCS 2016, weighted).

Figure 2 reveals how the level of interest is clearly higher in the most active groups. Although the groups of very active and quite active students are very small in Finland, the students in these categories are far more interested in social and political issues than the comparable category in Norway and Denmark.

It is interesting to see whether male and female students, students from a different class or immigrant backgrounds or those with different educational aspirations show different patterns – both in general and between the countries. In comparing the two gender groups, we found that male and female students are equally active in all four countries. However, across countries, more of the male than female students are in the two passive groups. For instance, in Sweden 15 percent of the girls and 21 percent of the boys are categorised as passive ($\chi^2=42,8, p<.001$), whereas in Finland as much as 28 percent of the girls and 44 percent of the boys are in the passive category ($\chi^2=169,6, p<.001$). Students from immigrant backgrounds are more often categorised as active than non-immigrants in Sweden are, while

Comment [KH4]: Sjekk tallene med IDB!

there are no differences in the other countries. The students from immigrant backgrounds are more often passive than non-immigrants in Denmark.

In all four countries, the active groups are larger among those students whose parents have a higher education. In parallel, the passive groups are larger among students whose parents do not have a higher education. The difference in passivity is smallest among the Swedish students, and largest among the Finish students. The relationship between involvement in political engagement and education levels is a robust finding (Hillygus 2005), which is also evident in the differences in civic engagement and participation between youth from different parental education backgrounds. Figure 3 shows the differences between youths based on their educational aspirations for each of the four Nordic countries.

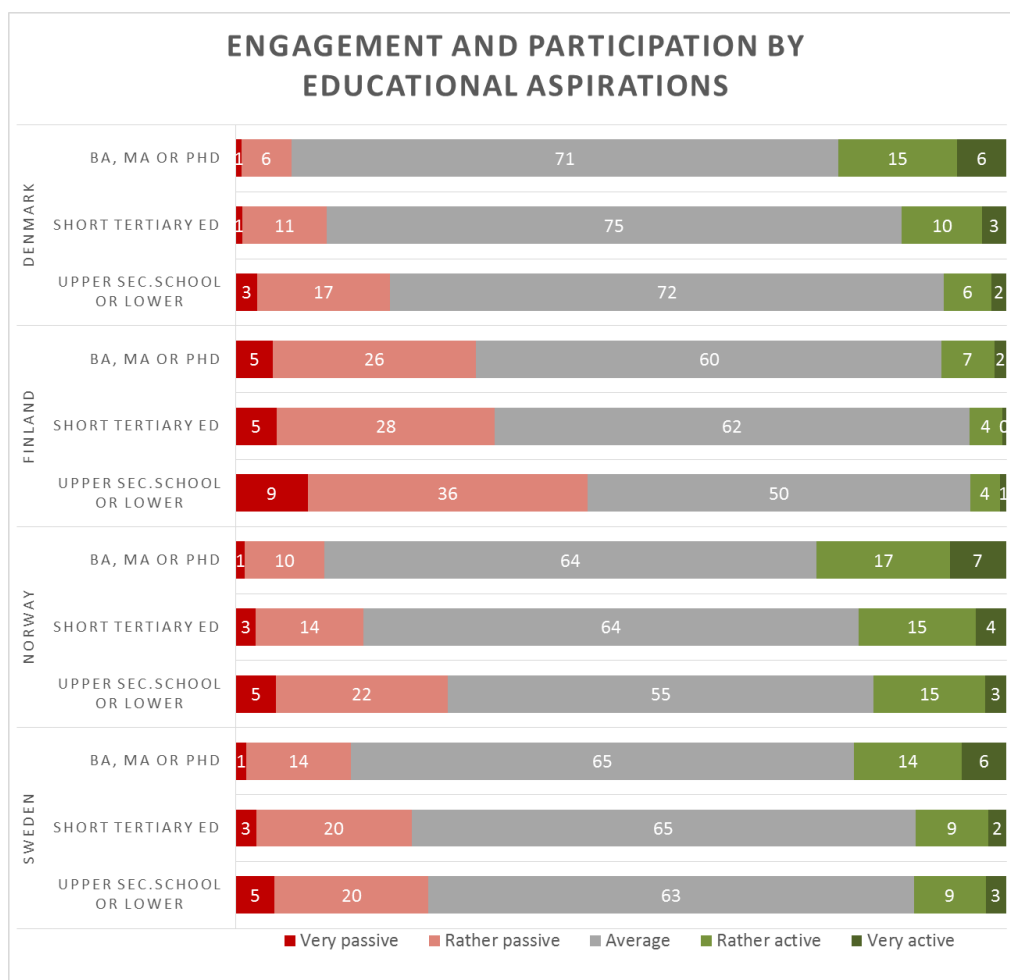


Figure 3: Degree of active and engaged citizenship in different groups according to their educational aspirations. Percent. Youth 14-15 years old. (ICCS 2016, weighted).

Figure 3 shows a pattern where the shares of active citizens is higher among those with higher education aspirations in all of the four Nordic countries. The students aspiring to complete a 2- or 3-year tertiary education (less than a bachelor degree) are rather similar to the students aspiring to complete secondary level education in Norway, Finland and Sweden. Among these students, we found that the largest percentage of students were categorised as rather or very passive citizens.

Young citizenship or citizens in the making?

Civic and citizenship education in the Nordic countries shares some of the same characteristics; civic education is normatively considered to be a result of the school experience as a whole, although this is not always the case, as can be seen from the school principals' point of view (Schulz et al., 2018a). The aims of civic and citizenship education most frequently listed by school principals in all four Nordic countries are to promote knowledge of citizens' rights and to promote students' critical and independent thinking (Schulz et al., 2018a, p. 34). In reaching this goal however, classroom activities are just one part of the lesson. In Norway, The Ministry of Education's Committee on *The School of the Future — Renewal of subjects and competences* (Ministry of Education 2015) states that schools should be expected to 'be a place that gives pupils experience of various forms of participation in democratic processes in its daily activities and representative bodies' (p. 33). This is also emphasised in the Norwegian parliament white paper on the renewal of school subjects (Ministry of Education, Science and Culture, 2016) where democracy and citizenship are prioritised and established as an interdisciplinary theme across subjects; its content being described as 'learning *about* democracy, learning *for* democratic participation and learning *through* democratic participation' (Stray 2014, referred in Ministry 2016, p 38).

In this study, we acknowledge the socialising potential of young people's activities at school, but include activities outside school, as well as participation in social networks and organisations (Hyman 1952, Verba et al. 1995). However, rather than seeing this as merely a preparation for adult citizenship or as a development stage, young people's everyday social and political activities are included as expressions of citizenship in its own right. In doing this, we are able to see past the powerful, albeit marginal, images of spectacular youth cultures and

opposition or radicalisation and describe the political engagement and participation of the average youth.

The findings of this study confirm that most Nordic youth are involved in some activities or are somehow engaged in social and political issues, but also that only a minority of 6 to 22 percent are truly active citizens. One study of youth civic engagement have previously found that their participation in volunteer groups or school committees was related to their fear of missing opportunities to strengthen their resume (Friedland & Morimoto 2006). Success in education and “resume padding” were seen as an investment for the reduction of later risks of unemployment or failure, and this worked as a motivator in addition to intrinsic motives like ‘helping people’. If a deeper engagement should be an important aspiration for civic practice (Zaff, Boyd & Lerner 2010), the results showing a strong interest in social and political issues among the active youth seem reassuring. The students in Finland seem to stand out as less active and more often passive, but at the same time the active youth in Finland show a stronger interest in social and political issues.

Comment [KH5]: OK sml med figuren

A previous study analysing the changes in active and engaged citizenship from 2009 to 2016 showed that the proportion of active or very active citizens among Norwegian students increased from 19 percent to 22 percent (Hegna 2018). In the same period, the proportion of Norwegian students that was very or rather passive decreased from 20 percent in 2009 to 16 percent in 2016, thus indicating that there were no signs of polarisation in participation and engagement. In addition, the international comparisons of the test scores of ICCS 2009 and 2016 also showed that the level of knowledge and understanding of democracy, civic and citizenship issues increased in 11 of the 18 countries that participated in both studies (Schulz et al., 2018). The increase was significant and above average for Norway and Sweden, and positive but insignificant for Denmark during the same period. Thus, given the theory that these results are cohort effects that will be of importance for these young people’s participation as adult citizens, they are positive signs for the future democracies of these countries.

Young people’s families, friends, schoolmates and teachers as well as organised leisure activities have the potential to fulfil a function referred to by Verba et al. (1995) as ‘recruitment networks’; that is, social institutions that can play a decisive role in stimulating youth to be active citizens, and to participate in politics by ‘cultivating psychological engagement in politics and by serving as the locus of recruitment to activity’ (p. 17). When Verba and co-authors wrote this in 1995, they concluded that such networks of personal

contacts between acquaintances, friends and family members—so-called social capital—were more important than ‘electronic communication’. The face to face social relationships would contribute to exposure to political signals and further networks, but most importantly, they provide ‘organisational and communications skills that are relevant for politics and thus can facilitate political activity [...] activities that are not in and of themselves political. Yet, they foster the development of skills that can be transferred to politics’ (p. 18), which in turn increases the likelihood of political participation and commitment in the future. It is therefore reassuring to see that 70 to 80 percent of the 9th grade students participate in at least one such socialising context. The importance of ‘electronic communication’ in general has of course changed enormously since 1995. The ICCS 2016 study included few indicators about the role of social media, virtual networks and electronic communication for young people’s civic engagement. About one in three Danish or Swedish youth, one in four Norwegian youth and only one in five Finnish youth used the internet to find information about political or social issues at least once a week. Furthermore, only 3-5 percent of these Nordic youths reported to post something related to social or political issues on social media on average once a week (Schulz et al., 2018a). This may indicate that social networks and relationships are still of importance for political socialisation. An important question, however, is the extent to which civic and citizenship education in school is able to bring the students’ civic experiences into the classroom and how to make this education relevant for the students. It is important for schools to continue their efforts to expand and develop school democracy as well as to include community activities.

Harris, Wyn and Younes (2010) addressed the tendency of youth citizenship studies to miss the opportunity to describe civic engagement and participation among ordinary youth. The ICCS 2016 shows that young people in the four Nordic countries today endorse ideals related to the “conventional citizen” (Westheimer, 2015) as more important than young people did in 2009 (Schulz et al., 2018a). This could be interpreted as an indication that students have moved towards becoming more ‘moral’ and ‘duty oriented’. This contrasts studies of youths’ political engagement, which portray today’s youth as a ‘new nation of critical citizens’ who are interested in politics and social issues and engage in political activities, but are strongly critical of the political system and do not want to participate in conventional political activities (Hooghe & Dejaeghere 2007). By using concepts such as the ‘monitorial citizen’ (Schudson 1996) and ‘standby citizen’ (Amnå & Ekman 2014), others discuss the development of a ‘postmodern citizenship’ where young people more freely construct their

own citizenship tools. Although ICCS 2016 cannot be used to investigate the existence of such postmodern citizenship directly, based on these results it seems reasonable to doubt whether this type of citizenship is on the rise among average youths. Rather, it appears that conventional participation has been strengthened.

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¹ In Denmark, Sweden and Finland, the students have a right to form a student council and to vote in elections for that council, in Norway however, students have a *duty* to participate in elections for the student council. Due to this, to be active, participating in school democracy *above* voting was set as a criterion.