

An Eye Opening Week To Citizenship In Liege's Schools: What Students Learn From It?

Bernard Fournier (Vrije Universiteit Brussel)
Florence Knapic (Université de Liège)
Jean-François Guillaume (Université de Liège)

We all know that young people – as the population in general indeed – are less and less interested in politics. However, as Annick Percheron recalls in *La socialisation politique*, we are not born interested in politics, we *become* interested in politics (Percheron, 1993). Proposing activities or experiences that open the youth to the world of politics is, in our opinion, the best way to change this lack of interest in politics or cynicism that we all observe regularly. Schools are certainly one of the best places to create a fruitful environment to understand and, eventually, to experience politics.

With the 'Missions' decree of 1997, four priority tasks were assigned to basic education and secondary education in the French Community of Belgium (*Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles*). This is, among others, to "prepare all students to be responsible citizens, able to contribute to the development of a democratic society, united, pluralist and open to other cultures" (art. 6). School education and civic participation must take place at this age: democratic practices of responsible citizenship should be encouraged as activities proposing democratic debates. In this context, a weekly schedule may be arranged to make possible the organisation of activities that contribute to the objectives set out in the Article 6. In this legal framework, the *Service de didactique des sciences sociales de l'Université de Liège* coordinates and leads seminars on "citizenship" for more than ten years for last year students aged (or close to being) 18, the threshold of majority. Depending on the institution, the seminars are taken by 20 up to 180 students. They cover 3 or 5 days of activities where the political and legal structures of the Belgian State are discussed in class as well as the mechanisms of the electoral system. Students are asked to solve an issue that can emerge in the real live, enabling them to discover the institutions involved in that matter (social or welfare legislation). In some schools, a political debate, prepared with students, brings together representatives of the four French-democratic parties (Socialist Party, Reform Movement, Humanist Democratic Centre, and Ecolo). Finally, some schools allow students to visit the Federal Parliament and attend a hearing in a criminal court. At the end of the training week, students participate in an assessment of their skills (multiple choice questionnaire on the section on the judiciary; an oral examination on the part devoted to the political organisation and system election).

This year, one of us will distribute a short questionnaire to measure the appreciation of students regarding this activity, their interests on political topics, the level of difficulties they encountered, and if they already knew the information given during the seminars (and where they would have learned it). We could also measure if the scheme of those answers is different between students who are already involved or not. Can we say that this kind of activities encourage the development of the interests in politics? How fruitful this interaction between school and politics can be? This research can provide some answers to those questions.

Percheron, Annick. *La socialisation politique* (textes réunis par Nonna Mayer et Anne Muxel), Paris, Armand Colin, 1993, Coll. U — sociologie.

Guillaume, Jean-François and Michel Xhonneux. « Susciter l'envie d'en savoir plus pour inciter à la participation politique », *Engagements citoyens et politiques de jeunes. Bilans et expériences au Canada et en Europe*, Bernard Fournier and Raymond Hudon (eds), Québec, Presses de l'université Laval, 2012, pp. 123-145.