Opportunities to learn about Europe at school. A comparative analysis among European adolescents in 21 European member states.

Abstract

In this article we investigate the relationship between different learning methods and the formation of European identity among adolescents. The analysis is based on the European module of the International Civic and Citizenship Education Study (ICCS 2009), with 70,502 respondents in 21 European member states. The results show that offering opportunities for cognitive learning is more strongly related to European identity than social learning opportunities, i.e. opportunities for interactions with citizens from other EU member states. The occurrence of an interaction effect between cognitive and social learning strategies, however, suggests that jointly offering both learning strategies can be considered the most effective tool for the formation of a European identity. The multilevel analysis reveals the impact of a more Eurosceptic climate on the country–level, suggesting that living in a Eurosceptic member state is related to a weaker European identity among adolescents. We close with some observations on how curricula can contribute to a strengthening of European identity.

Keywords: European identity, cognitive learning, social learning, adolescents, comparative analysis
Introduction

The education system is usually considered as an important resource for the formation of European identity, and this expectation can be found both in scholarly literature and in European Union (EU) policy documents (Heater 1992, Keating, Ortloff and Philippou 2009, Mulcahy 1991, Ross 2007, Ryba 1995). Several authors have claimed that more and better knowledge about the European institutions and about the other EU member states will positively correlate with more positive attitudes toward European integration (Directorate-General for Communication 2011, Gabel 1998, Inglehart 1970, Keating 2009, Ollikainen 2001).

While this might seem a plausible assumption, a number of case studies have highlighted the fact that not all education systems in Europe provide the same kind of information about the European Union (Georgi 2008, Philippou, Keating and Ortloff 2009). In some countries, the education system is expected to be supportive of the process of further European integration, while for cultural, historical or political reasons this is obviously not the case in other member states (Faas 2007, Philippou 2005). Previous studies have not only hinted at variations with regard to the importance attached to European identification, but also with regard to the definition of what it means to be a European. While in some countries European identification is defined within a narrow legal framework, Philippou et al. (2009) have shown how in other member states European identity is portrayed as an inclusive multicultural form of belonging, clearly stressing the attitudinal and cultural dimensions of European identity (Faas 2011).

Most of the available studies on how the European Union is being portrayed in school curricula have three things in common. First, they are mainly based on a document analysis of the formal school curricula that govern civic education on the European Union (e.g. Faas 2007, Ortloff 2006, Philippou et al. 2009), or even on European recommendations with regard
to these curricula (e.g. Keating 2009). By itself these documents constitute an important source of information, but there are also some caveats connected to using this kind of data source. We do not know, for instance, what effect a formal curriculum has on what goes on in the classroom. While teachers are expected to follow the formal curricula, empirical research has convincingly shown that not all of them actually do so, and that in practice there often is a large gap between the formal curriculum and real classroom interaction (Kelley 2009). Several authors therefore called for the consideration of different conceptions of ‘the curriculum’. In this article, we apply the term ‘formal curriculum’ when referring to the officially prescribed curriculum (Goodlad 1977). This often differs from the ‘enacted curriculum’ as experienced by both pupils and teachers, which is what actually takes place in a classroom (Eisner 1985). When referring to the perception of the curriculum by the pupils only, the term ‘experienced curriculum’ will be applied (Goodlad 1977). As we aim to address the caveat of the limited research about pupils’ perception of what they learn at school about the EU, our study focusses on the experienced curriculum.

A second note of attention we want to highlight is that in some countries, formal curricula are compulsory and education authorities have various control instruments at their disposal to ascertain whether schools and teachers actually follow the rules (Benavot and Resh 2001). In other countries, on the other hand, government curricula are rather meant as recommendations, and might for example not apply equally to public and private schools. A formal curriculum therefore does not need to have the same meaning in all European member states.

Third, most of these studies are limited to one or a limited number of member states, because of language barriers that prevent a more comprehensive comparative study of policy documents throughout Europe and because of the decentralized structure – and thus variations within the country – of education policy in many member states (Michaels and Stevick 2009).
Not only do these limitations constrain our knowledge of what actually goes on in European school systems, there are also questions with regard to the validity of a comparative approach that is based only on the study of official documents.

In the present study we propose to build on previous research about the association between formal curricula and EU identity by addressing these shortcomings. First, our information is not derived from formal curricula, but directly from the pupils experienced curriculum. It might, of course, be argued that this constitutes a form of bias as well, as pupils might remember some information while other lessons are easily forgotten. However, the answering patterns of pupils do have an important face value. If the formal curriculum prescribes that specific goals should be met, but the pupils themselves do not even remember that they received this information, it is clear that the education system is not successful in reaching its professed goals. Therefore, it is important to study the experienced curriculum as this is what influences the personal development of the pupils (Erickson and Schultz 1992).

Second, the current analysis is based on representative information obtained in 21 European member states, jointly covering more than half of the total EU-population. The geographical scope of the data collection is thus much wider than would be possible in studies that are based on published formal curricula. By exploring these data, we can be much more confident that we actually obtain correct information about the way the future generation of European citizens learns about Europe and the European Union. We will take differences between and clustering within member states and classes into account by performing a multilevel analysis.

We start this article by conceptualizing the different learning methods that we distinguish. Subsequently, we explore the prevalence of these methods. Next, we present data and methods and in the multilevel analysis, we include both individual experiences, and class and country characteristics. We conclude by discussing the relationship between different learning methods and European identity.
Cognitive and social learning

(...)

Results

Since pupils (n=56,453) are nested in classes and classes (n=3,550) are nested in member states (n=21), we built a three-level regression model with random intercepts to account for the clustering (Hox 2010). We included the class-level because pupils in the same class are expected to have similar learning opportunities and the country-level is included because there are differences between member states when it comes to support for European integration.

We prepared our data by standardizing the (non-binary) variables. This allows for the comparison of the coefficients within the same model. In the null-model (Table 3) we find an intra-cluster correlation (ICC) of 5.20% for the country-level and an ICC of 4.77% for the class-level. Although these are relatively small figures, the likelihood-ratio test shows that adding these levels significantly improves the model in comparison to a single-level model. Figure 1 shows the country residuals with 95% confidence intervals. For a substantial number of countries, the 95% confidence interval does not overlap the horizontal line at zero, indicating that European identity in these countries is significantly above or below the survey average. Appendix B provides the absolute levels of European identity in the different European countries: Italy, Spain and Slovenia have the highest score, while Latvia, the Czech Republic, and Sweden have the lowest score.¹

- Insert Figure 1 about here -
The two learning methods – cognitive and social – are both standardized factor scales. Looking at model II we can thus conclude that the positive relation between opportunities for cognitive learning and European identity is significantly\(^2\) stronger (β=0.238) than the relation with opportunities for social learning (β=0.045). Both coefficients are highly significant (p<0.001).\(^3\) The more these opportunities are perceived by the pupils as available at school, the higher the level of European identity among the adolescents. The inclusion of these variables does not change the variance of intercepts between member states, but it lowers the variance on the class– and individual–level. This shows that an important part of the initially observed differences between pupils and between classes with regard to the level of European identity could be explained by including cognitive and social learning variables. This suggests not only that these two variables are important in explaining the adherence to a European identity, but also that these are among the elements that really differentiate classes.

We argued that it could be expected that pupils who indicate to have had the opportunity for cognitive learning at school in most cases also effectively did this, in contrast to pupils who had the opportunity for social learning. Therefore we included variables testing pupils’ actual cognitive learning (knowledge about the EU and language proficiency) and actual participation in a school trip to another European country in model III. The correlations presented in appendix E confirm that having more opportunities for social and cognitive learning is significantly associated with participating more in school trips to other European countries and with having more knowledge about the EU. This confirms our expectations and indicates the importance of these controls. All of these control variables are significantly and positively associated with European identity, although the coefficients are rather weak. The highest coefficient is 0.102 for participating in a school trip to another European country. Interestingly, the coefficients for social and cognitive learning opportunities do not decline noteworthy when these controls are introduced. The relationship between learning
opportunities and the strength of a European identity is thus not depending on the actual participation or outcome of this opportunity. The random part of the multilevel analysis shows that there is a small reduction in variance in European identity between member states and between individuals when we include these control variables.

We also expected that individual variables as socio-economic status, interest in political and social matters and gender would influence the perceptions of both learning opportunities offered at school. Introducing these controls in model IV reduces the relationship between most variables already in the model. Part of the cognitive association is thus due to having higher educational expectations, being more interested in political and social matters and to gender. Parental education is not significantly associated with European identity. The effect of these individual–level controls variables is also reflected in the variance, which only declines at the individual–level. As expected, the citizenship status of the pupil and his or her parents too are related to European identity. There is a strong negative relation for immigrants ($\beta=-.211$), and we even find a negative relation for second generation immigrants ($\beta=-.096$).\(^4\)

Subsequently we observe a positive interaction effect between cognitive and social learning in model V. We thus conclude that when pupils experience opportunities for both social and cognitive learning, European identity is stronger than when only one of both learning strategies is offered. While this analysis shows that offering cognitive learning opportunities is more strongly related to European identity than offering social learning opportunities, it has to be acknowledged that presenting these learning opportunities simultaneously strengthens the relationship.

We included the mean level of parental education per class as an indicator of the aggregate socio-economic status of the pupils at school and of the resources of a school in
model VI. We find a significantly negative relationship between average parental education and European identity. The analysis tells us that in classes with a higher average parental education, pupils tend to feel less European. Here again, we have to remark that this effect is rather small ($\beta=-0.059$). It has to be noted, however, that contrary to our expectations this relation is negative.

Finally, we took note of the context in which pupils learn about the EU in class. Introducing these country–level variables leads to a drop of the ICC at the country–level to 2.1%. We can observe that on this level only a Eurosceptic climate has a significant relationship with the measured levels of European identity. Pupils in member states with a higher average level of Euroscepticism tend to feel less European. Neither the accession period, nor objective or perceived economic contributions to the European project seem to influence the extent to which adolescents feel European.

We decided not to include random coefficients in the model because our research question and theoretical assumptions do not require these tests. To assure our results, we did check for the variance (random coefficients) between classes and member states for the relation between learning strategies and European identity. However, the variance was not of substantive magnitude.

- Insert Table 3 about here –

**Discussion**

In this paper we analysed recent survey data from 21 EU member states in order to investigate the impact of different learning methods on the formation of a European identity. The analysis gives a clear answer to our main research question which learning method
contributes most to the formation of a European identity. Since the relationship between cognitive learning opportunities (and related actual skills) and the strength of a pupils’ European identity is clearly stronger, our hypothesis that social learning opportunities contribute more strongly to the formation of a European identity can be rejected. Cognitive learning opportunities are found to be more strongly related to European identity than social learning opportunities and actual experiences of school trips abroad. Even after including all necessary controls, it is clear that pupils who receive opportunities to learn cognitively about other European countries are much more likely to have a stronger sense of European identity. Although the results do not follow our expectation, it is striking to see that the more classic cognitive learning methods, which also proved to be more prevalent in classes, indeed are strongly related to levels of European identity. While there has been a tendency to focus on cross-border interactions in order to promote the formation of a common European identity, in the current analysis, the impact of this kind of opportunities and experiences remained rather limited. If education systems want to contribute to the formation of a European identity, it seems misguided to focus solely on exchange programmes and other opportunities for social interaction with citizens from other EU member states.

This does not imply, however, that social learning opportunities would be superfluous. First of all, it has to be remembered that to some extent the comparison between both methods might not be fair. While on average, pupils receive numerous opportunities for cognitive learning every week, the number of opportunities for social learning in a school context inevitably will be much more limited. One of the elements explaining the stronger association with cognitive learning, might therefore be that cognitive learning simply occurs much more often than social learning. Second, social learning experiences do have a modest effect, and more importantly interact with cognitive learning strategies. European identity is stronger when both learning opportunities are offered simultaneously. Just sending pupils to another
European country is less effective than combining this experience with the provision of information about Europe and the European Union. The results of the current analysis therefore should not lead to the conclusion that interaction does not have an effect, but it should be noted that this effect will only materialize if the pupils receive information about Europe and the European Union. This is in line with some initiatives like the Comenius program for exchange and visits (Education, Audiovisual & Culture Executive Agency 2012). The results of our study support curricula based on a combination of both learning methods. Schools can, for instance, ask students to do their own research about the place that they will visit before the school trip and discuss experiences afterwards. Part of this interaction effect might be explained by the fact that in practice social and cognitive learning are not always fully distinct. Schools might, e.g., combine social events with cognitive learning experiences. This again, however, strengthens our conclusion that ideally both forms should be combined in some way or another. Future research should enable us to determine what specific kind of combination is most effective in this regard.

However, the results of the present analysis also support the scepticism prevailing about the impact of one of the most widespread social learning programmes, the Erasmus exchange program. Participating in Erasmus does not require any prior knowledge about the EU, nor are participants targeted with information (Kuhn 2012, Sigalas 2010, Wilson 2011). Although Erasmus is targeted at an older age group than the respondents in the ICCS survey, transposing our findings would suggest that the total lack of information being given in the Erasmus exchange program certainly does not contribute to reaching its professed goal. Second, Allport (1958) made the important remark that mere contact between members of different groups is not sufficient for stereotypes and prejudice to erode. The positive impact of social interaction depends on several conditions. The contact should occur between individuals of equal status with common interests, who work on a shared task, towards a
shared goal, and institutional support for the initiative significantly increases the effect of the contact. Pettigrew (1998) even extended this theory with a fifth condition: friendship potential with members of the out-group is needed. As the ICCS data do not provide detailed information about these aspects of social learning, it is possible that some of these conditions were not being met in the reported social learning opportunities and actual participation in school trips. This could be an explanation for the limited relationship between social learning and European identity. It is therefore highly recommended for future research to gather more information on the content of and framework within which social learning takes place.

One of the main advantages of the current study, compared to previous research, is the information this study provides about the experienced curriculum, as reported by the pupils themselves. However, most questions about the different learning methods did not address the actual experience and the frequency of these experiences. Pupils were asked whether they experienced the opportunity to learn about other European countries in different ways. The difference between opportunities and actual experiences is supposed to be larger for social learning than for cognitive learning. We did build in controls for actual participation in school trips and for learning outcomes to address this limitation, however, in future research more specific questions about both the content and the frequency of actual learning experiences are recommended.

Another advantage is that we could include data from 21 member states, showing considerable variation between them. However, the length of membership and subjective and objective evaluations of the benefits of EU membership were not related to the strength of European identity. Country–level differences could be explained mainly by the level of Euroscepticism in the general population. Utilitarian considerations, based on the (perceived) economic benefit of the EU membership, on the other hand, did not seem to play a role. In future research, therefore, it is important not only to include formal curricula, enacted,
experienced curricula or policy documents, but also to take into account the fact that pupils receive signals and information about the functioning of the European Union from day to day interactions. Learning is not just a matter of textbooks and curricula; it also entails being socialized into the prevailing culture of a country.

1. The average level of EU citizenship in Latvia is significantly lower than in all other European countries (~0.525). All models were also run without including this outlier, but this did not lead to different results. In the final analysis, therefore, Latvia is still included.

2. The 95% confidence intervals do not overlap: [0.206; 0.223] for cognitive learning and [0.029; 0.047] for social learning.

3. These results should not be taken to imply that informal exchanges with other Europeans and visits to other member states outside the school context do not have an effect. We therefore tested the effect of the inclusion of leisure visits to other European member states on the analysis. However, we see that if we include all measured leisure activities (full results available from the authors), the effects of cognitive and social learning do not change, thus further supporting our initial findings.

4. We also tested for the interaction effect between citizenship status and the two learning opportunities. As these interactions were non-significant, we did not include them in the model. The results are available upon request by the authors.