

Mothers' Perceptions of Citizenship, Practices for Developing Citizenship Conscience of Their Children and Problems They Encountered

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Abstract

Family plays an important role in the development of citizenship awareness of children. The purpose of the present study is to figure out the citizenship perceptions of mothers, their practices for developing citizenship conscience of their children and to explore the problems they have encountered. In this study, critical case sampling method has been employed to collect data. The study was conducted in 2008 in a primary school where children from low and middle socio-economic levels were educated. The data of the study were gathered from 29 mothers through semi-structured interviews. The findings revealed that the majority of mothers perceived "citizen" as a person who accepts the values and ethics of the society and defined this person as a good citizen. While most of the mothers declared that they taught the mainstream moral norms and values to their children at home, only a few mothers stated that they informed their children in political literacy at home. Additionally, mothers stated that they faced with some problems due to economic conditions, educational issues, social environment, and communication instruments while they were enriching their children's citizenship awareness. This study suggests that mothers ought to be educated about active citizenship and they should be encouraged to participate in the learning activities in schools.

Key Words

Citizenship, Citizenship Education, Family, Mother, Elementary Education.

Citizenship education is learning process which continues through whole life and in all aspects of life. Citizenship is learned not only at schools, but also at home, peer groups, and mass-communication environments.(Birz ea, 2000; Veldhuis, 1997). Individuals' capacity to become an active citizen mostly depend on their social and moral values that they have gained in the society, political literacy, and community involvement abilities (Qualifications and Curriculum Authority [QCA], 1998). Family is one of the most important institutions

where the perception of citizenship is developed and formed. Therefore, family has a vital role as a social model and as the source of information for children in their citizenship education (Halstead, 1999; Hess & Torney, 2006; Ichilov, 1988). Regarding this fact, the citizenship perception and citizenship awareness of the family plays a significant role in rising citizenship awareness of the children.

There are several studies in the literature which confirm that the citizenship perception and citizenship awareness of the family have effect on the formation of the children's citizenship awareness. The moral values of the children show a close similarity that of their parents in terms of children's social and moral development (Niemi & Jennings, 1991; Sears & Valentino, 1997). For instance, it is clearly observed in the societies that the children possess the value of welfare of the public if their families emphasize it, or they possess some skills such as empathy and altruism if their parents emphasize social responsi-

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bility in their families (Clary & Miller, 1986; cited in Flanagan, Bowes, Jonsson, Csapo, & Sheblonova, 1998). In terms of political literacy, it is confirmed that the political backgrounds of the children are well developed if their parents have awareness on the political issues and the children follow the agenda if their parents follow the news regularly (Niemi & Chapman, 1999). The attitudes or the opinions of the parents related to the political parties have an effect on their children's attitudes towards political parties as well (Jennings, Stoker, & Bowers, 2001; Niemi & Chapman, 1999; Sapiro, 2004). The political loyalty can be gained in the family during the early childhood period (Easton & Dennis, 1969 cited in Flanagan & Sherrod, 1998). In terms of community involvement, the socio-economic status of the families has a direct effect on the family member's active participation to the politics and voluntary activities (Foster-Rey, 2008). Several studies have revealed that the children are enthusiastic to participate to the voluntary activities if their family members have already taken part in such activities (Corporation for National and Community Service [CNCS], 2005; Fletcher, Elder, & Mekos, 2000; Papanastasiou & Koutselini, 2003; Yates & Youniss, 1998; Zaff, Malanchuk, Michelsen, & Eccles, 2003). It is known that the children with a high socio-economic status eagerly participate in the voluntary activities in the society more than the children with low socio-economic status (Rosenthal, Feiring, & Lewis, 1998). The children's incorporation into the decision making process in the family also enrich their participation competencies in general (Niemi & Chapman, 1999). Moreover, some studies on the citizenship education in schools have revealed that families could not support enough the citizenship education in schools as it is expected (Ersoy, 2007).

With reference to the findings of the previous studies related to the citizenship education, it is confirmed that both formal and informal education settings play a vital role in enriching the citizenship awareness of children, since mothers intimately take care of the educational demands of their children in addition to the basic cares of them. Although there are plenty of studies (Can, 2007; Üstün & Yılmaz, 2008; Yeşil, 2002) related to effectiveness of parents' democratic attitudes and other features such as educational and socio-economic status on their children's democratic attitudes, there are not enough studies which directly focus on the perceptions of the parents related to the citizenship development of their children. Therefore, defining the citizenship perceptions of the mothers and examining their effects on citizenship awareness of their

children at home is very important. The review of the studies on this issue in Turkish context (Arikan, 2002; Ersoy, 2007; Güven, 2002, Özbek, 2004) reveals that these studies are generally focused on the citizenship education practices in school settings. However, there is a gap in the related literature in terms of studies which examine the process of children's citizenship development with respect to their parents' viewpoints. The present study aiming to examine the citizenship perceptions of mothers, the reflection of their perception on the development of the citizenship awareness on their children at home and explore the problems they have faced during this process.. It is hoped that the findings of the present study might shed light on the formation of the policies in citizenship education, on the development of educational programs, and on the practices of the teachers in the field.

Method

In the present study, a qualitative research design has been employed and the participants of the study are selected via critical sampling technique, which is a kind of purposeful sampling approaches (Collins, Onwuegbuzie, & Jiao, 2007; Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2005). The rationale of conducting the study in low socio-economic environment can be defined as firstly; the research focus on families' perception of citizenship suggests that families in low or middle socio-economic level have lower involvement in community activities and political literacy skills (Foster-Rey, 2008), secondly; majority of the population in Turkey has low or middle income (Türkiye İstatistik Enstitüsü [TÜİK], 2010), and thirdly; mothers' involvement in school work, in students' performance in school, and in parent-school cooperation are high in Turkey (Balkar, 2009; Chao, 1996; Genç, 2005; Miriam, 1998; Özgan & Aydın, 2010; Russell & Russell 1987). With respect to its sampling technique, the study has been conducted in a primary school where the parents of the students have low and middle socio-economic levels in terms of their socio-economic status. 29 mothers whose children enrol in various classes ranging from 1 to 8 grades voluntarily participated in the study. The data of the study have been gathered through semi-structured interviews (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Marshall & Rossman, 1999) with the mothers in May, 2008. Each interview has lasted about 20-30 minutes which in turn has made around 9 hours of interview in total. The interviews have been held in the school and they have been recorded with an audio tape recorder. The following questions have been asked

to the mothers during the interviews as “What does good citizenship mean to you?”, “What have you done to educate your children as good citizens in the society?”, “What are the problems that you have faced during this process?”, and “What are your suggestions to others?”. The data of the study have been analysed through constant comparison method, which is a qualitative data analysis technique and the findings of the study have descriptively been interpreted (Marshall & Rossman, 1999; Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Results

The Mothers’ Perceptions Concerning the Citizenship

Almost all of the participant mothers emphasize the social and moral aspects of the citizenship, whereas some of them touch on the political literacy and community involvement aspects of the citizenship. Concerning the findings, the mothers believe that a person who was socially and morally appreciated by the society and who adopted such values as personality is a good citizen in the society. Additionally, it is found that mothers do not pay enough attention to other features of citizenship such as dealing with political issues, community involvement and participating to the social works. The mothers continually emphasize the most fundamental values that a good citizen should have are honesty, responsibility, respect, and fidelity to the nation. The mothers who have touched on the political literacy state that a good citizen should know and use his/her rights should know the fundamental values of the country and follow the recent agenda of the society. However, only one of the mothers has emphasized that citizens should involve in the volunteer social organizations and participate in the nongovernmental organizations, and citizens should be sensitive to the problems of their nations and try to do their best to provide solutions to those problems.

Citizenship Development at Home

The majority of the mothers state that they have tried to teach their children the fundamental moral values which are appreciated by the society; however, only a few of the mothers state that they have tried to teach political literacy to their children at home. None of the mothers state a viewpoint related to the activities that might enrich community involvement abilities of their children. While teaching fundamental moral values at home, mothers generally have employed

formative activities such as talking about the target moral value, being a role model, exemplifying the case from their close environment or showing sample cases from their social life. Most of the mothers state that they have tried to teach basic social values such as honesty, respect, tolerance, effective communication, responsibility, consideration of the public interest, and obeying the rules. A few of the mothers state that they have encouraged their children to participate the decision making process at home, have informed their children about citizenship issues, and have encouraged their children to follow the agenda of the society that they live in.

The Problems Faced During the Citizenship Development Process at Home and Suggestions

The mothers state that while trying to enrich their children’s citizenship awareness at home, they have faced with several problems due to economic conditions, educational issues, social environment and communication instruments. The mothers in the study declare that they have experienced difficulties in providing necessary requirements for their children such as home, food, and education due to the economic conditions. The mothers believe that the most significant obstacles in educating their children as good citizens are their lack of qualified education backgrounds and the inadequacy of the citizenship education at schools. Claiming that their children are not well educated at schools, mothers state that their children have been not supported enough socially and the exam system in schools prevent their children’s development of citizenship awareness. The mothers in this study also state that their children might easily adopt unwelcomed behaviours either from their peers or from other people in their social or immediate surroundings. Emphasizing the negative power of the social environment, mothers state that a collaborative cooperation of people in the society should be established in order to grow the children up as good citizens and as independent individuals in the society. Some of the mothers blame the media of affecting their children negatively through displaying violence and wrong role models on the screen. Moreover, the mothers claim that media does not provide constructive programs that might contribute to the development of citizenship awareness of their children.

Discussion

The findings reveal that the mothers’ perception of good citizen is equal to the individuals who are socially and morally appreciated by the society

and it naturalizes the social values such as honesty, responsibility, respect, and fidelity to the nation as his/her personality. Meanwhile, it is found that mothers try to raise their children with social values such as honesty, responsibility, respect and fidelity to the nation in order to make them gain characteristics of good citizenship in the society. In this respect, it can be claimed that the perceptions of the mothers are in line with their target citizenship awareness that they desire to teach their children at home. With reference to this finding, it is clearly seen that mothers deal with the concept of good citizenship from its moral aspects and therefore they try to bring up their children as well-educated on the moral values. The fact that only a few of the mothers mention the political literacy and community involvement aspects of the citizenship indicate that mothers who have participated in the present study are not equipped with the required knowledge to educate their children on this aspect of the citizenship development at home. This finding shows similarities with the findings of Holden's (2004) study which confirms that families provide more support to the social and moral aspects of the citizenship education rather than to the political literacy and community involvement aspects of the citizenship education. Similarly, McBride, Sherraden and Pritzker's (2006) study reveal that the community involvement ratio of the families with low socio-economic status is also very low. Ersoy's (2007) study also reveals that teachers have difficulties in teaching citizenship issues to the students who are members of families with low socio-economic status. The mothers' emphasis on the social and moral aspects of citizenship development in the informal setting might be resulted from a variety of reasons. The first of them which was also affirmed by some of the mothers in the interviews, might be "the decrease in the importance of moral values in society". Secondly, the educational backgrounds of the mothers which reflect an educational policy anchored in educating "passive citizens who simply fulfil their responsibilities" might cause their lack of knowledge on the political literacy and community involvement aspects of citizenship development (Üstel, 2004). The third reason might be the fact that mothers do not want their children to deal with politics or they do not want their children to participate in political activities, since the political events in Turkey between 1970s and 1980s have been effective in reducing the interest of the younger generation in politics. In order to establish a sustainable democracy in addition to the individual values such as moral responsibility and

self-discipline, citizens should also develop some common citizenship competencies such as obeying the rules and compromising. Although citizenship and values education may seem overlapping issues, the difference between those issues were confirmed by several studies in the literature (Branson, 1998; Center for Civic Education [CCE], 1995). Another fundamental problem that mothers faced while educating their children on the citizenship development is the inadequacy of their socio-economic conditions. The mothers have found themselves inadequate in enriching their children's citizenship development in terms of their educational background as well as in terms of financial aspects. Moreover, the mothers declare that they have insufficient knowledge about raising good citizens and they need guidance on this subject. An additional problem that the mothers emphasize in the present study is that their children do not have opportunities to monitor good citizenship models neither from their peers nor from other people in their social or immediate surroundings. Such unwelcomed behaviours and wrong role models also affect the children negatively in terms of citizenship development. Finally, the mothers in the study believe that the exam-oriented education systems in schools are an obstacle in raising children who are able to criticise, solve problems, and participate in the activities in the society. This study suggests that mothers ought to be educated about active citizenship and they should be encouraged to participate in the service learning activities in schools.

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