

# Global Citizenship, Solidarity and Diversity in Preschool Age: An Educational Action Research

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## Abstract

Citizenship education is one of the most important issues in education around the world. In recent years, many organizations such as UNICEF and OECD have highlighted the importance of developing the necessary skills in children, so that they can become active citizens who participate in society and contribute to its well-being. However, citizenship education for preschool children is often neglected, as educators consider them to be young and incapable to fully understand the concepts involved. The present study focuses on the implementation of an educational action research in 16 children of a multicultural kindergarten in Northern Greece, in order to cultivate skills that will make them active citizens. More specifically, it examines in what ways the educational actions developed can contribute to citizenship education and what are the possible learning outcomes for global citizenship, solidarity, and diversity for preschool children. The educational action research method was chosen as the most appropriate method to conduct the research. The results of the research showed that when the educational actions are implemented frequently, they can have encouraging results in the cultivation of citizenship in children and that children can understand to a significant extent the concepts of global citizenship, solidarity and diversity. Finally, the results of the action research can provide useful information to educators for the implementation and design of similar educational actions.

**Keywords:** active citizenship, global citizenship, preschool, kindergarten, educational action research, solidarity, diversity

## 1. Citizenship Education and Preschool Age

In a democratic multicultural society, the concept of citizenship becomes particularly important as the different cultural, linguistic, and religious characteristics of each member affect their ability to function as a citizen in the society in which they live (Banks, 2012; Tsioumis, 2011; Bennet, 2007). In this context, the way in which society responds to and respects the multiple identities that people carry within nation-states also affects the extent to which they consider themselves to be citizens of that state (Bobek et al., 2009; Besson & Utzinger, 2008). Furthermore, the way individuals perceive their citizenship and their participation in the public sphere influences the power relations that characterize the various ethnic, racial, and cultural groups in a society (Banks, 2008; Jans, 2004). In this case, citizenship education is an approach that can contribute to creating a context of social justice when society characterized by multiculturalism (Banks, 2008; Grant & Sleeter, 2007).

More specifically, the issue of citizenship education is one of the most important objectives of the curricula in every country. Many researchers (e.g., Kayaalp, 2021; Roda & Wells, 2013; Souto-Manning, 2013; Geboers et al., 2013; Gimple et al., 2003) point out that it is essential in every society because children acquire knowledge about their own culture and others, solidarity and respect for diversity, justice, and democratic ideals. These elements are the foundations for social well-being and the development of responsible citizens (Bee, 2017; Hess & et al., 2017; Crick & Lockyer, 2010). Therefore, its purpose is to prepare and encourage students to participate actively in the political and social life of the community at all levels, in accordance with the fundamental values and principles of democracy (Bee & Pachi, 2014; Einasdottir et al., 2014; Lister, 2007; Hemm & Weinstein, 2006).

Although the way in which education systems approach citizenship education differs in each country, its objectives (i.e. knowledge, skills and attitudes) remain common and relate to four areas (Eurydice, 2012): (a) development of civic literacy (knowledge on issues such as: social and political institutions, human rights, cultural and historical heritage, justice, etc.), (b) development of critical thinking and analytical skills (evaluating social and political issues), (c) development of certain values and attitudes (respect, solidarity, ethics, etc.) and (d) encourage of active participation at school and at the community level (applying the knowledge, values and skills acquired).

Therefore, citizenship is a learning process (Drake, 2010; Delanty, 2007). It is not exclusively related to rights and is not in its entirety about simply being a member of the state. Instead, it is much more a matter of participation in the political community and begins early in life (Oberma et al., 2012; Perry & Southwell, 2011). It is about learning the capacity for action and taking responsibility, but it is essentially about understanding oneself and the relationship of self to others. Through this lens, citizenship is concerned with identity and action (Theis, 2010; Bessas et al., 2006). This implies the existence of both a personal and a cognitive dimension that extends beyond the personal to an extended cultural level of society. Therefore, it is important for children to understand the importance of political and social participation, such as voting, cooperating with local government and non-profit organizations, volunteering, accepting diversity, in order to become active and critical citizens (Tsioukou et

al., 2017; Harris & Manatakis, 2013; Westheimer & Kahne, 2004).

Research findings (e.g., Grasso, 2016; Greenberg, 2009; Henn & Weinstein, 2006) show that the predispositions concerning the political orientation of individuals are developed from the early phases of their socialization and have a complex and permanent character in their political personality. In particular, between the ages of 3-13 is the age period that has a decisive influence and forms the foundation for the political identity of individuals (Hicks, 2001). Discussions that take place in children's immediate environment, stereotypical phrases used by the family concerning political issues, institutions and people, and the way in which they are uttered, are deeply imprinted in their memory, and influence them. As they develop, children form feelings and ideas about the political community; first in relation to its objects and later about the political system itself (Sotiropoulou, 2019; Killen & Rutland, 2011; Jennings et al., 2009; Johansson, 2009).

Thus, during preschool age, kindergarten seems to play an important role in providing the initial stimuli for the acquisition of legitimate attitudes and behaviours towards concepts and principles related to equality, human rights, freedom, democracy, respect and, in general, the value system promoted in a democratic, free society (Wood et al., 2018; Shulsky et al., 2017; Nalbantoglou et al., 2015). The influence of kindergarten in the development of perceptions and attitudes towards the political phenomenon is a particularly important function, which develops in parallel with the transmission of basic knowledge, the cultivation of skills and the development of children's mental abilities (Kayaalp, 2021; Spellings et al., 2012). The cognitive process is accompanied by the transmission of common values and beliefs aimed at social cohesion and the full development of children's personality; a personality that becomes aware of the contents of democracy and can act as an active citizen (Phillips, 2011; Cogan & Derricott, 2000).

Finally, comparing the environment of the family and kindergarten in terms of their contribution to the cultivation of citizenship in children, we find that (Casey et al., 2019; Hess et al., 2017; Grasso, 2016; Rhodes, 2015; Johansson, 2009; MacNaughton, et al., 2007): a) in the family it takes place randomly, without program and organization, unlike in kindergarten; b) the family usually maintains the same political norms across generations, while kindergarten can lead to radical changes; c) it has been observed that individuals, regardless of their family politicization, when placed in a democratic school environment that provided them with lessons about politics and freedom to participate in debates, in adulthood became more interested in politics and more optimistic about their ability to influence government decisions; and d) kindergarten is a more representative environment of society than that of the family.

Considering the above, the present study focuses on the implementation of educational action research in 16 children of a multicultural kindergarten in Northern Greece, in order to cultivate skills that will make them active citizens.

More specifically, the survey aims through educational research action to identify:

- In what ways can the educational action research developed contribute to citizenship

education?

- What are the possible learning outcomes for global citizenship, solidarity, and diversity for preschool children?

In summary, the results of this research can provide useful information to educators on ways in which they can cultivate citizenship in preschool children. In addition, the results of this research can contribute to the scientific literature as a whole, which argues that preschool children, as future citizens, are able to understand and apply political and social values within the community to which they belong (e.g., Borg & Samuelsson, 2022; Elmersio et al., 2020; Sotiropoulou, 2019; Hancock, 2017; Kyridis et al., 2015; Nalbantoglou et al., 2015; Johansson, 2009; Bessas et al., 2006).

## 2. Method

### 2.1 Research Method

**Table 1.** Theoretical Framework of Educational Actions and Assessment Tools

Action	Description	Theoretical framework	Assessment
First Educational Action: Playground	Discussion, participatory actions, redevelopment of playground and local environment	Active citizen, local environment, natural environment, addressing common goal, target	Discussion (Pre-Intervention Questions, Exploratory during intervention, Post-Intervention Questions) Observation/Notes Recording Answers
Second Educational Action: Elections	Elections in the class, children's literature	Active citizen, election process, representativeness	Discussion (Questions– Answers, Observation before and after the intervention)
Third Educational Action: Diversity	Children's literature, audiovisual material, video	Intercultural understanding, diversity, dealing with the other/ foreign, empathy	Discussion (Questions – Answers, Observation before and after the intervention)

In the present study, educational action research was chosen as the method for investigating the research problem. Action research is defined as a collaborative research process, which requires the active participation of those involved in the field under investigation (Katsarou &

Tsafos, 2003). The stages followed are those proposed by Lewin and include: planning, action, observation and reflection, all of these moving in a spiral cycle.

More specifically, Lewin's stages were applied in this survey as follows (Adelman, 1993):

- Design: the researchers identified through their professional experience the problem of absence for citizenship education among preschool children.
- Action: the researchers designed the initial actions according to the research objectives.
- Observation: during the implementation of the activities, the researchers used various assessment tools (Table 1) to observe and record the students' experiences, knowledge, concerns, and needs.
- Reflection: in each action the researchers evaluated the data that had been collected from the assessment and they proceeded to redesign.

## *2.2 Participant Characteristics*

The sample consists of 16 preschool children (7 girls and 9 boys aged 4-6) attending a multicultural kindergarten in Northern Greece. The majority of the children have Greek nationality, 2 had Slavic and 3 Albanian nationality.

## *2.3 Design of Action Research*

The action research was for one school year, September to June, and included three educational actions. The aim was to develop an integrated educational intervention for the development of the concept of active citizenship in preschool age children. Before the implementation of each intervention, children were requested to answer exploratory questions about their experiences in order for us to appropriately design the educational actions. As a result, the educational actions were formulated as follows:

(a) The first educational action research concerned the neighborhood playground. It focused on exploring the causes of a problem in their everyday life at the local level, discussing and negotiating it in the classroom and taking social action to solve it. The aim was to transform the classroom into a small community, and to enhance the cooperation between children to achieve a common goal in the context of the local environment, as it is an integral feature of active citizenship.

It includes the following phases:

- Phase 1: introducing the problem. Discussing with children about playgrounds and whether everyone can access them. Dividing the children into groups and search the internet for pictures of playgrounds. Discussing with children before the intervention.
- Phase 2: visiting the playground of the village. Dividing the children into groups and photographing the equipment for any damages, seeking if there are benches for resting. Each group presented their observations to the classroom. Discussing with the children during the intervention.

- Phase 3: posting on the board a large piece of cardboard for children to note down their suggestions for improving the playground. Discussing with the children after the intervention. Writing a letter to the Mayor of the village.

(b) The second educational action research involved holding classroom elections to elect a president and a board. The link to active citizenship is related to the current socio-economic situation, the democratic climate and process, communication and interaction with parents and the social context.

It includes the following phases:

- Phase 1: dividing children into groups and searching the internet for videos on how elections are held. Exploring children's experiences and knowledge about the election process and the reason for elections. Keeping a diary of the discussion and use these notes for the next phase, as the class is multicultural, and all the children have different experiences and knowledge about the topic.
- Phase 2: appropriate space and role allocation for children to conduct classroom elections. Each candidate for the election prepared a speech in cooperation with the researchers. Counting of votes by the children. Creating graphs of election results and sharing with parents.
- Phase 3: decision to have a classroom board. Search for a photo that will show the village's board. Observation of the photograph and appropriate arrangement of the classroom space to hold the board (e.g., oval-shaped tables). After each meeting, the children made a small poster relevant to the topic examined and posted it outside the classroom. The way the classroom meetings were conducted (e.g., the children's suggestions, the president coordinating the process, etc.) served as an evaluation of the overall process.

(c) The third educational action research on diversity aimed to connect with the reality of globalization, the multicultural classroom, multilingualism, and acceptance of others.

It includes the following phases:

- Phase 1: due to the multiculturalism in the classroom, discussions on equality and the rights of all people had been held during the school year. Thus, the children were aware of this issue. In this phase, a reading of a story related to diversity took place. During the storytelling, the children made comments about differences in their appearance and described their experiences. Then, they were divided into groups and drew their friends. They presented the drawings to the class, providing information about their friends in terms of their appearance, as well as their country of origin and the language they spoke.
- Phase 2: watching on video a story about a refugee child. Dividing the children into four groups and the story into four parts. With the researcher's guidance, each group dramatized the part of the story that they were responsible for. Finally, the children drew and wrote their views on how to address the problems faced by refugee children.

## 2.4 Reliability and Credibility of Research

In this study, the reliability of the research is identified in the use of multiple research methods and tools (Discussion, Pre-Intervention Questions, Exploratory during intervention, Post-Intervention Questions, Observation/Notes Recording Answers) for data collection (Creswell, 2016; Cohen et al., 2012). Thus, each data source informed and confirmed the final data analysis and added reliability to the results (Creswell, 2016).

Also, in terms of the validity of the research, the researchers consistently described the study's findings, so that readers can draw their own conclusions as they read them (Siverman, 2020).

## 2.5 Ethics of Research

In order to conduct the survey and comply with research ethics, researchers (Creswell, 2016; Cohen et al., 2012): (a) informed parents about the purpose of the research, the data collection instruments and obtained their consent for their children's participation in the action research; (b) fully respected the children's rights and informed them about the whole process, (c) ensured that children's participation was voluntary and explained to them that they could withdraw at any stage of the research they wished; (d) ensured that there was no possibility of children being exposed to risk; and (e) committed to respecting children's anonymity.

## 3. Results

### 3.1 First Educational Action Research – Playground

The responses to the questions (before, during and after the intervention) provided by the researchers to the children were intended to record their views on the playground and the potential problems they identified. Children's responses also provided feedback for the design of the action research phases.

Thus, children expressed: (a) their wishes about the extra equipment they would like to have in the playground, (b) why we need the playground, (c) what we can do about broken equipment, (d) how can we protect the playground from damage, (e) who we can contact for help, (f) why it is important to have children design a playground and not adults, and (g) how can we communicate what we want for the playground, e.g.:

(a) *'A big train with windows that we will be able to see outside'* – P.

*'Lots of swings, trampolines and a big slide'* – S.

(b) *'To play more because it has swings and slides'* – L.

*'We need the playground to play in because it has more toys. We don't have a lot of toys in our yard'* – M.

(c) *'It's not a good feeling to go to the playground and everything is broken. They should*

*be scolded by the adults and our parents*' – K.

*'We need to protect the playground'* – I.

(d) *'It should have fencing and a lockable door. Also, it should have high lights and anyone passing by should be able to see those who do damage'* – M.

*'Everyone should mind the playground in the village'* – L.

(e) *'We should ask help from adults who know how to construct playgrounds'* – P.

*'We should tell this to the Mayor. He is responsible for the playgrounds'* – M.

(f) *'We can tell the adults what we want to do and they can design and build it for us'* – L

*'Because we're playing there'* – S.

(g) *'We should send a letter to the Mayor and suggest a plan for the playground'* – K.

*'Our parents should visit the Mayor and tell him what we want'* – R.

At the end of the first educational action research, the children wrote a letter to the Mayor. The purpose of the letter was the common goal of redeveloping the playground in their area.

### 3.2 Second Educational Action Research - Elections

Prior to designing the educational action research, children were asked (a) about their parents' right to vote and (b) whether they have ever attended a polling station with their parents in order for the latter to vote. The responses were noted in the researchers' diary. As expected, children of Greek origin responded positively in the first question, while the rest responded negatively (foreigners do not have the right to vote in Greece). However, all the children whose parents vote did not have the experience of attending with them the election process, e.g.:

(a) *'No, I don't know'* – P.

*'Yes. For political parties'* – M.

(b) *'No, but I saw on TV how it's done'* – S.

*'Yes, I have been with my parents'* – L.

After the completion of class elections and the appointment of the board, the children were asked to report issues that they would like to pose to the class chairman. The researchers found that the children responded mainly by referring to the current economic crisis, the lack of money and resources to be able to buy materials and equipment, and activities they would like to do. Several of the children placed particular emphasis on improving the playground area. In contrast, environmental sensitivity regarding the presence of litter outdoors was expressed by very few children, e.g.:

*'Ask for more toys and books'* – S.

*'To talk about our backyard'* – L.



*'Let's say that we haven't got many scissors and the don't give us money to buy' -R.*

When the action research plan was completed, the following question was asked to the children: *'In our class we all had to vote to elect the board. Should only the children from Greece vote?'*. Children's responses were categorized according to their perception of the right to vote and the reason for the elections. Several children mentioned the right of all people to vote in the context of co-existence. Some children referred more to the concept of friendship which prompted them to behave fairly. One child argued that common goals and the need to work together were the main reasons why everyone should have the right to vote. Furthermore, one of the children expressed the view that it is everyone's right to vote, e.g.:

*'I want all to vote. I wanted my friend Ismail' – M.*

*'We all should. We are on the same class' – K.*

*'Of course, we should all vote' – R.*

*'We all should. We are all friends' - S.*

### 3.3 Third Educational Action Research - Diversity

At the beginning, children's attitudes towards diversity were assessed using visual material (photos of children from different countries; similarities and differences). Prior to the action research, children seemed to understand diversity and mentioned issues of equality and common rights for all, such as access to education, access to basic goods and the right to live with your family. After the intervention, children's development of arguments about their similarities and differences was substantial and they seemed to be able to understand diversity in a very significant degree, e.g.:

Before: *'Three different children (colour, style, height) and a smiling one, which says that all want to laugh and go to school' – D.*

After: *'We are many children, boys and girls. We are not the same; M is white like R, M and N are darker. These are younger and will not go to primary school. But we are a team and we work together in projects. We are happy all together' – D.*

Before: *'I made a lady waiting for different pupils. All the children want to have a teacher and go to school. We are different (colour, height, hair). What does it matter?'*- R.

After: *'There are all my friends and my company. I love them all. We are not the same. Only M and T look alike. We all want to be happy, to play, to come to school' –R*

The final intervention concerned the showing of a video on the history of a child refugee and the dramatization of this story by the children. The children were asked to answer the question: *'why didn't most people want Peace; how did this child feel and what they could do about it?'*. Children's responses showed a high degree of empathy, e.g.:

*'Because they were bad and only the good-hearted one wanted her. She was sad, she wanted to sleep. Let's call someone. Some guards should go around the world and watch*

*them*' – S.

*'She was poor. No food, no parents, no friends. She was sad and crying and frightened. If we saw her, we would tell mum to take care of her because she is a little child'* – D.

*'Because they didn't know her. Fear because she didn't have parents. Let's go and save her. Let's tell them: stop because they are all humans, and it doesn't matter to be different'* – P.

*'She was different. They didn't have the same colours. They didn't think, they didn't have a lot of brains. She was sad, unhappy. There is a lot we can do. Let's save them. We shouldn't send them away. I will tell my parents not to speak badly'* – M.

#### 4. Discussion

As previous studies have shown (e.g., Elmerjo et al., 2020; Hancock, 2017; Tsiougkou et al., 2017), the level of children's participation in actions related to their environment, determines the extent to which children are trained in democratic processes to become responsible and democratic citizens. In this study, the results obtained from the action research show that children were thinking critically about the world around them through their efforts, suggestions and active participation in issues related to the environment in which they live. The children evaluated situations and data and proposed their own ideas and solutions. This engagement of children contributes significantly to their education as active citizens (e.g. Borg & Samuelsson, 2022; Banks, 2012; Bobek, 2009), as they showed interest in understanding the social, economic and political systems of society; organising their environment better and seeking more information in order to make informed decisions and act to solve problems.

Thus, regarding the first research question, whether pedagogical action research developed on a daily basis may contribute to children being prepared and acting as tomorrow's active citizens, the data from the intervention seem to be positive. However, this hypothesis is under several limitations. It seems that the issues of education for preparing tomorrow's active citizens could not be addressed in a piecemeal approach through an intervention. A continuous flow through daily educational practice and the combination of action plans is required (Wood et al., 2018; Jans, 2004). Besides, the process followed in this research showed that when the actions are combined, they produce a deeper understanding for children on the dimensions of active citizenship.

In the context of the learning outcomes on "global" citizenship, the results presented are very encouraging, as the children acted as global citizens. Characteristics that demonstrate this behaviour are their attitude and concern for the local environment. Also, their willingness to participate actively to design their own playground in the village where they live and to make suggestions for its improvement. This finding demonstrates children's willingness to participate in the processes, but more importantly their belief that they can offer solutions to an 'environmental problem', just like global citizens (Theis, 2010; Westheimer & Kahne,

2004).

Furthermore, the understanding of some children that they need to involve adults in order to achieve their goal and improve a situation, highlights the way of thinking and trying to solve a problem (critical thinking and citizenship) (Jans, 2004). An interesting aspect that emerges from the action research is the children's perception of the current and existing economic crisis in Greece. There are constant references to the lack of money, the financial situation and/or the inability to pay for the things they 'desire', as they may experience it in their family. Also, the children seemed to be particularly aware of the cost of the public goods which were offered to them. Thus, learning outcomes for global citizenship and solidarity are evident.

Additionally, in this study, the children expressed their ideas and specific suggestions, such as sending a letter to the Mayor of the village and made suggestions for the effective guarding of the playground. This process is important as children's decision making leads to the creation of a sense of responsibility, which is one of the key features of citizenship education (Elmersjo et al., 2020; Grasso, 2016; Grant & Sleeter, 2007). Moreover, it was found that the understanding of institutions, hierarchy and social gradations doesn't leave preschool children indifferent. On the contrary, children react and are willing to mobilize themselves by trying to understand the social and community roles of adults. Children's observations and responses showed willingness to change, willingness to participate and desire to cooperate with both their peers and adults. Therefore, it seems that through action research, their citizenship education is achieved.

Regarding the learning outcomes resulting from the second action research, the children seem to learn about democracy through experience (Hancock, 2017). In this case, the democratic environment in the kindergarten, where all opinions are heard, discussed, and recorded with the active participation of children themselves, is particularly useful for understanding democratic processes (Johansson & Emilson, 2016; Banks, 2012; Killen & Rutland, 2011). Moreover, the fact that the children's own proposals, which were voted by the class plenary, became act, was a powerful motivation for the children to practice in a democratic way of participating in the community. It was another way to learn that voting is a right of all citizens and practicing this right helps to change things in a democracy.

The fact that the multicultural character of the class gave the children the opportunity to come into contact with different languages and habits, in the third action research, is important. The children working in groups came into contact and interacted with each other. Through these interactions, they explored diversity and they gained cultural sensitivity and tolerance which are vital to create symmetrical cultural relationships and to stimulate self-esteem through the social recognition of their group (Roda & Wells, 2013; Crick & Lockyer, 2010). Therefore, the kindergarten serves as a place for recognizing differences and cultivating solidarity through opportunities for equal participation in the activities it offers.

The participation of children was expressed through the references made in their feelings, but also through the level of empathy that was brought out particularly for diversity. Many children, for example, showed a sensitivity to the right of all people to vote in the context of

co-existence. They brought out personal situations, the way they experience them, and the feelings of friendship that make them behave more fairly. Particularly after the completion of the diversity action, the difference in children's arguments about their similarities and differences was substantial. It seems that action research contributed significantly to the development of children's solidarity

Finally, preschool children, as derived from the intervention data, can develop political skills and can be seen as future active citizen. They seemed to comprehend and understand diversity, while at the same time they discussed issues of equality and children's universal rights, such as access to education, basic goods, the right to live with your family. The present research findings are in accordance with previous research (Borg et al., 2022; Elmersjo et al., 2020; Oberman et al., 2012; Perry & Southwell, 2011), that argue that the foundations for active citizenship are laid early in life, so kindergartens can act as a supportive factor in this direction. Thus, schools and classrooms can function as science laboratories where children can be trained in citizenship (Grant & Sleeter, 2007).

## 5. Implications for Practice

The findings from the educational action research showed that preschool children can understand the political and social values that exist in a community, participate in democratic processes, and demonstrate a high degree of empathy and solidarity towards diversity.

The action research presented in the current paper can be implemented in the classroom by educators and can be adapted according to feedback from children according to their needs. They can also be enriched with additional values related to active citizenship (e.g., volunteering, environmental protection, etc) and implemented for a longer period of time.

## 6. Conclusion

Citizenship education in kindergarten helps young children to acquire a personal, social, and political identity, so that they can become active members of society and respect each other without being affected by social, linguistic, religious or cultural differences. In order to become active members of society, children should develop their critical thinking, eliminate stereotypes and prejudices, participate in debates on various issues and express their views. All of the above can be achieved in the context of preschool education through appropriately organized educational action research which will be based on children's experiences and needs.

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