

European Conference

## Closing the empowerment gap through citizenship education How to address educationally disadvantaged groups

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### Invisible political programme? Political interest of educationally disadvantaged 14 to 19 years old teenagers.

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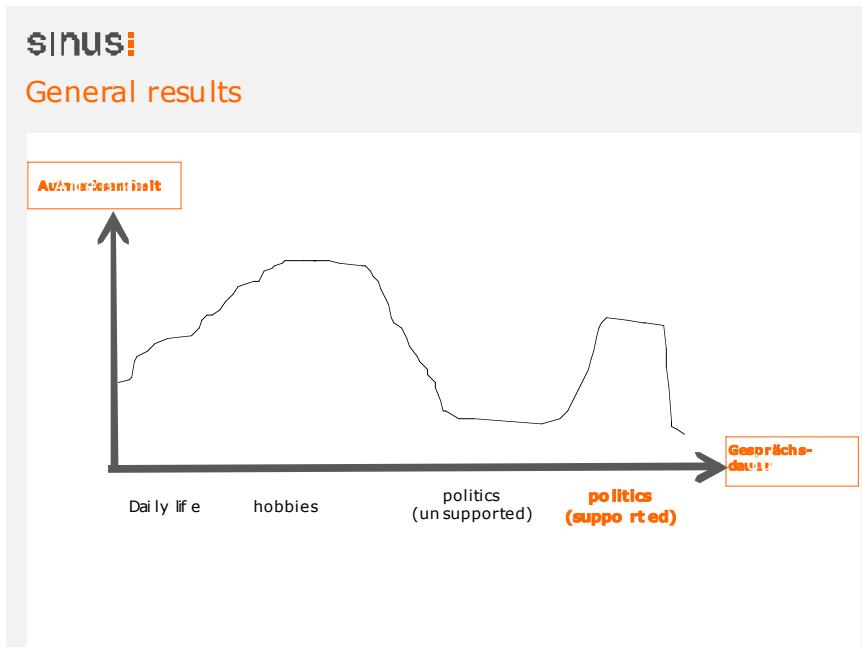
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„Apolitical“ is one of the common labels for so-called educationally disadvantaged people – especially young ones. This label communicates a certain negative image of these people and their interest in society. They are understood as citizens, who are not fully integrated into society, yet. People, who probably need help by those who are teaching Civic Education. That this kind of judgement is a rather limited perspective on so-called educationally disadvantaged teenagers is proofed by a new study that helps to understand the established definition of what is meant to be political. This definition is limited itself and the so-called educationally disadvantaged teenagers have their own political agenda. Civic Education can use this agenda to encourage young people to become part of a living democracy.

So-called educationally disadvantaged groups are often labelled „apolitical“. In fact, the civic education of the so-called educationally disadvantaged groups can be judged deficient under the condition that this judgement is based on an established understanding of civic education. An understanding that focuses on formal factors as

- To be able to name explicitly policies and politicians,
- To systematically observe political news coverage,
- To know about the relevant discourses of political think tanks,
- To have developed a consolidated party preference.

Briefly speaking, one can label the educationally disadvantaged groups apolitical if the word „political“ means to think in the same categories as today's political class does. According to the fact that this is still one of the main focuses of a common understanding of Civic Education the programmes for so-called educationally disadvantaged groups still often focus on how to explore new ways of teaching an established understanding of politics and the political system. This understanding of Civic Education aims to involve people into political discourses, but fails to uncover the specific political interests of the so-called educationally disadvantaged groups apart from already established discourses. Therefore, a new additional understanding of Civic Education needs to be established.



This new understanding of Civic Education was the main focus of a qualitative research project, called „The invisible political programme?“ by the Federal Agency for Civic Education in Germany and the SINUS-Institute in 2010. In one-on-one interviews so-called educationally disadvantaged 14 to 19 years old teenagers were asked about their daily life, their hobbies and their understanding of politics. One first clear result of the study is that the interviewees answered all questions related to their daily life and their hobbies very openly, whilst being unable to tell anything about politics.

Their inability to answer questions on politics supports the classical thesis of an apolitical so-called educationally disadvantaged group, but, by contrast, the same teenagers showed clearly articulated political interests when they were supported by the interviewers. Consequently these teenagers cannot be labelled „apolitical“ but one needs to acknowledge their unique understanding of politics.

The unique understanding of politics among the so-called educationally disadvantaged teenagers is related to a semantic limitation of the word „politics“. Whilst declaring themselves not to be interested in politics, the whole group shows a great interest in

- Injustice within the society,
- Forming the own living environment,
- Finding advocates for their interests,
- Being ready to work voluntarily for something they value.

This invisible political agenda does not articulate political or abstract terms, but is based on concrete-materialistic experience. Therefore, Civic Education can be based on programmes that put these experiences into focus.

## Civic Education – Elections and so-called educationally disadvantaged teenagers

To empower young people to take part in elections is one topic of Civic Education. Therefore, elections are one example to underline how a new understanding of the so-called educationally disadvantaged groups can help to redesign Civic Education. These groups do almost not question elections. They still feel not ready to vote. They feel powerless and have a low self-confidence in being able to make an informed decision whom to vote for. Their knowledge on parties and their programmes is very limited, but still they think that this knowledge is needed to take part in elections. Experiencing impotence in face of elections does not motivate these teenagers to learn more about parties, but urges them not to vote. Therefore, Civic Education needs to find a way to empower these teenagers to become ready to vote. Instead of explaining formal mechanisms of elections and discussing party's programmes, one better starts working on the topic without directly relating it to the institutionalized political system.

A more vital approach is to raise awareness for voting in a more general way. A useful set of questions can be:

- Where and when can teenagers vote today? In what way are these elections organized?
- Whom are teenagers voting for today? Who are „representative persons“ for young people?
- Which elections do the teenagers (enthusiastically) observe, already (even though they may not vote)?
- How to produce an election in an attractive and emotional way?
- Is the voice of young people heard? What can young people change?

One can answer these questions in regard to (rather unattractive) national or local elections for parliament, but they also apply for elections in school or TV-shows like American Idol. Those examples show that not always a serious election is a starting point for a productive discourse on how to vote and whom to vote for, but sometimes also a commercial TV-programme offers opportunities.

## About the SINUS-Institute and its milieu-models

The interviewees of the study were recruited by the SINUS-Institute on basis of the milieu-model of the German youth that combines data on the educational background with data on different values young people have. This milieu-model is one of the so-called SINUS-Milieus®.

The SINUS-Milieus® are the result of almost three decades of social science research. The identification of target groups by SINUS is derived from ethno- anthropology and based on the analysis of everyday life within modern societies. The SINUS-Milieus® group unites people which share common values and attitudes to life and which have a similar way of living.

Today, SINUS and its partners offer the SINUS-Milieus® concept for almost all European countries as well as for the United States of America. The result is a unique instrument for identifying and describing target groups that illustrate cross-border commonalities without ignoring dividing factors.

Since the 1980s, the SINUS-Institute began to apply its everyday life and milieu research that had proven so successful in Germany to other European countries. In the 1990s, this was also extended to the post-communist transformation countries in Central and Eastern Europe.

It was clear from the beginning that this would not mean transferring findings gained from one country to another country, but that it was necessary to understand the specific, historically evolved everyday life cultures of each individual country. Yet, the same methodological standards should be applied, and then common features and differences between countries could be detected via systematic inter-cultural comparison.

Starting from the specific results for each country, it quickly became apparent that „groups of like-minded people“ did exist stretching beyond national borders, and more often than not people from different countries but „kindred“ milieus had more in common with each other than with the rest of their fellow countrymen. This led to the identification of broad, multi-national everyday life segment, which we call „Meta-Milieus“.