

PEDAGOGICAL FACTORS IN DEVELOPING SOCIAL ACTIVITY AND CIVIC RESPONSIBILITY AMONG CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES

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Abstract

The development of social activity and civic responsibility among children with disabilities is an important component of their socialization, personal autonomy, and meaningful participation in community life. Contemporary inclusive education requires a transition from perceiving children with disabilities primarily as recipients of assistance toward recognizing them as active participants in educational and social processes who have rights, responsibilities, opinions, choices, and the capacity to contribute to society. This article examines the pedagogical factors that influence the development of social activity and civic responsibility among children with disabilities. The study is based on theoretical analysis, comparative analysis, synthesis, systematization, and interpretation of contemporary research on inclusive education, civic education, social participation, self-determination, and disability empowerment. The analysis identifies the following key pedagogical factors: an inclusive and psychologically safe educational environment; accessible civic education; opportunities for meaningful participation and decision-making; development of communication and self-advocacy skills; practice-oriented civic activities; pedagogical support for autonomy and self-determination; cooperation between school, family, and community; and reflective assessment of social experience.

Keywords: Children with disabilities, social activity, civic responsibility, civic education, social participation, inclusive education, self-determination, social competence, civic engagement, pedagogical factors.

Introduction

The transformation of modern education toward inclusion has significantly changed the understanding of the social role of children with disabilities. Contemporary educational approaches increasingly recognize that disability should not

automatically restrict a child's opportunities for participation, decision-making, social interaction, or civic engagement. Instead, educational environments should remove barriers that prevent children from participating meaningfully in school and community life.

This perspective is consistent with international disability inclusion frameworks. UNICEF's Disability Inclusion Policy and Strategy 2022–2030 identifies the full and meaningful participation of persons with disabilities as one of its strategic priorities and emphasizes the importance of creating barrier-free and inclusive communities for children with disabilities.

Social activity is especially important in this context. It reflects the learner's readiness and ability to communicate, cooperate, initiate actions, express opinions, make choices, participate in collective activities, and influence situations that concern his or her life. Civic responsibility, in turn, involves understanding rights and responsibilities, respecting social norms and the rights of others, participating in collective decision-making, and accepting responsibility for one's actions.

Therefore, social activity and civic responsibility should not be considered isolated personal qualities. They represent interconnected dimensions of social competence.

The relationship may be expressed conceptually as follows:

social awareness → social participation → independent choice → responsible action → civic responsibility. For children with disabilities, however, the development of these qualities may be complicated not only by individual developmental characteristics but also by external barriers. Limited opportunities for participation, inaccessible communication, excessive adult assistance, social stereotypes, low expectations, insufficient opportunities for independent decision-making, and exclusion from collective activities may restrict civic development.

Recent civic education research also indicates that students with disabilities may have fewer opportunities to participate in classroom discussions, develop self-advocacy skills, make decisions, or participate meaningfully in community engagement projects. At the same time, evidence from adapted civic education interventions suggests that students with disabilities can successfully develop civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions when instruction is accessible and appropriately designed.

Thus, the pedagogical problem is not whether children with disabilities are capable of developing civic responsibility, but what educational conditions enable them to acquire and demonstrate such responsibility.

The purpose of this study is to identify and theoretically substantiate the pedagogical factors that promote social activity and civic responsibility among children with disabilities.

MAIN PART

Social activity may be understood as a learner's ability and readiness to interact actively with the social environment rather than remain a passive recipient of external influence. For a child with a disability, this includes the ability to communicate needs, express preferences, participate in joint activities, initiate interaction, make decisions, solve socially relevant problems, and contribute to collective outcomes.

This interpretation is particularly important in special and inclusive education because traditional support models may unintentionally reinforce passivity. When adults constantly decide what a child should do, speak on the child's behalf, select activities without consultation, or complete difficult tasks for the learner, opportunities for developing social agency are reduced.

Consequently, pedagogical support should gradually transform the child's position: "Others decide for me" → "I participate in decisions" → "I make choices" → "I act" → "I take responsibility."

Social activity therefore becomes a psychological and pedagogical prerequisite for civic responsibility.

Civic responsibility should not be reduced to knowledge of laws, national symbols, or formal civic duties. Such knowledge forms an important cognitive foundation, but responsible citizenship emerges when knowledge is connected with values and practical behavior.

For children with disabilities, civic responsibility can be understood through several interconnected components.

The cognitive component includes age-appropriate knowledge about rights, responsibilities, social norms, public institutions, and acceptable behavior.

The value-motivational component involves respect for human dignity, equality, fairness, cooperation, diversity, and social responsibility.

The communicative component includes expressing opinions, listening to others, negotiating, asking for assistance, defending one's rights appropriately, and respecting alternative viewpoints.

The behavioral-practical component involves participation in collective activities, community initiatives, school projects, volunteering, environmental actions, and decision-making.

The reflective-responsibility component concerns evaluating one's behavior, understanding its consequences, correcting mistakes, and accepting responsibility for decisions.

Thus, civic responsibility develops through the integration of:

knowledge + values + communication + action + reflection.

An Inclusive and Psychologically Safe Educational Environment

One of the central pedagogical factors is the creation of an inclusive environment in which children with disabilities experience belonging and social significance.

A child is unlikely to develop social initiative in an environment where mistakes are ridiculed, opinions are ignored, or participation is merely symbolic. By contrast, psychological safety allows learners to express opinions, disagree respectfully, ask questions, try unfamiliar activities, and learn from mistakes.

Teachers therefore need to create situations in which the learner experiences the following progression:

“I am accepted” → “I am heard” → “My opinion matters” → “I can contribute” → “I am responsible for my contribution.”

This progression is essential because civic responsibility cannot develop without a sense of belonging and personal agency.

Accessible Civic Education

The second pedagogical factor is the accessibility of civic education itself.

Students with disabilities should not be offered an unnecessarily simplified civic curriculum solely because of disability. Instead, the content, materials, communication methods, and learning activities should be adapted so that students can meaningfully access the same fundamental civic concepts.

Diana Owen's 2024 study of an adapted civic education curriculum reported that students with disabilities who participated in the intervention demonstrated gains in civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions compared with students receiving standard civics instruction. This suggests that appropriate curricular adaptation can increase civic learning opportunities rather than reduce academic expectations.

Accessibility can involve visual support, Easy Read materials, sign language, tactile resources, augmentative and alternative communication, simplified instructional

sequences, assistive technologies, practical demonstrations, and additional processing time.

The pedagogical principle is therefore:

common civic purpose + accessible learning pathways + differentiated support.

Meaningful Participation and Decision-Making

Social activity cannot be taught exclusively through verbal explanation. Learners need real opportunities to participate.

Schools can provide such opportunities through student councils, classroom meetings, collaborative rule-making, environmental projects, cultural events, volunteering, peer-support initiatives, school improvement projects, and discussions about issues relevant to students.

However, physical participation alone does not constitute meaningful participation. A child with a disability may be present at a school event without having any influence on decisions or performing a meaningful role.

Therefore, meaningful participation should include at least three conditions:

voice → choice → influence.

The learner should be able to express an opinion, choose among meaningful alternatives, and observe that his or her contribution can affect a collective process.

This principle corresponds with contemporary disability inclusion approaches emphasizing meaningful participation rather than symbolic representation.

Development of Communication and Self-Advocacy

Civic participation requires communication. A learner needs to be able to express preferences, communicate disagreement, ask for clarification, request assistance, explain a position, and defend personal rights appropriately.

For children with communication difficulties, these abilities may require specific pedagogical and corrective support.

Therefore, civic education should include exercises such as role-playing, problem-solving dialogues, social stories, simulations of everyday situations, discussion of moral dilemmas, group decision-making, and structured opportunities for self-advocacy.

For example, learners may discuss situations such as:

“What should I do if someone ignores my opinion?”

“How can I ask for accessible conditions?”

“What can our class do to make the school more inclusive?”

“How should we make a decision when group members disagree?”

Such tasks transform civic education from memorization into social problem solving.

Practice-Oriented Civic Activities

Another important factor is the organization of socially meaningful practical activity. Service learning is particularly relevant because it combines educational objectives with community-oriented action. Learners may participate in environmental projects, charity initiatives, accessibility audits, peer support, community events, school improvement projects, or campaigns promoting respectful attitudes toward diversity. Research on transformative citizenship education for persons with disabilities indicates that service learning and cross-sector collaboration can contribute to civic competence, leadership, empowerment, and inclusive community participation.

Practical civic activity enables the learner to experience an important transformation:

“I know” → “I can” → “I participate” → “I contribute.”

The last element is particularly important because children with disabilities should experience themselves not only as recipients of social support but also as individuals capable of supporting others and contributing to their communities.

DISCUSSION

The theoretical analysis demonstrates that the development of social activity and civic responsibility among children with disabilities requires a shift from a protective model toward a participation-oriented educational model.

Protection remains necessary, but excessive protection can restrict opportunities for autonomy. This creates the first pedagogical contradiction: protection versus independence. Effective education must balance safety with opportunities to make choices, take reasonable risks, and experience the consequences of decisions.

The second contradiction concerns assistance versus agency. Children with disabilities may require pedagogical, communicative, physical, or technological support. However, support should increase the learner's ability to act independently rather than replace personal action.

The third contradiction is between formal civic knowledge and authentic civic participation. A student may know definitions of rights, responsibilities, democracy, and citizenship without being able to express an opinion or participate in collective decision-making. Consequently, civic education should combine theoretical learning with authentic social practice.

The fourth issue concerns expectations. Low expectations can become an invisible pedagogical barrier. When teachers assume that a student with a disability cannot understand social issues, make decisions, or take responsibility, the learner may receive fewer opportunities to develop precisely those competencies.

Recent evidence challenges such assumptions. Owen's adapted civic education study found positive development in civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions among participating students with disabilities, although the work is currently presented as a preprint and therefore should be interpreted with appropriate caution. Research by Nanggala and colleagues similarly argues that citizenship education integrated with disability perspectives and service learning can strengthen civic engagement and empowerment.

Thus, civic responsibility should be treated not as an abstract quality that a learner either possesses or lacks, but as a competence that develops through accessible instruction, repeated participation, social interaction, guided choice, and reflective experience.

CONCLUSION

The development of social activity and civic responsibility among children with disabilities is a multidimensional pedagogical process closely related to inclusion, social participation, autonomy, communication, self-determination, and personal responsibility. The analysis demonstrates that civic responsibility cannot be effectively developed through theoretical civic instruction alone. Children need systematic opportunities to experience citizenship through meaningful participation in classroom, school, family, and community life.

The most important pedagogical factors include an inclusive and psychologically safe environment, accessible civic education, meaningful participation, communication and self-advocacy training, socially significant practical activities, opportunities for independent choice, school–family–community cooperation, and reflective assessment.

The central pedagogical principle can therefore be formulated as follows: a child develops civic responsibility when he or she is not merely taught about participation but is given accessible, meaningful, and progressively independent opportunities to participate.

Accordingly, pedagogical support should facilitate the transition from “I know my rights” to “I can express my position,” from “I participate” to “I make decisions,” and from “I act” to “I take responsibility.”

The proposed sequence — awareness → participation → choice → decision → social action → reflection → responsibility → independent civic engagement — can serve as a conceptual basis for developing corrective-didactic technologies, diagnostic criteria, instructional modules, and experimental programs aimed at strengthening active citizenship among children with disabilities.

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