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## Citizenship of students and social desirability: Living apart together?

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## ABSTRACT

Insight into the citizenship of students is typically gained via surveys. However, social desirability always plays a role in self-reporting. The relationship between social desirability and citizenship is multi-interpretatable. In this article, two views on the divergence and convergence of citizenship and social desirability are presented leading to different assumptions regarding the relationship between social desirability and citizenship. These assumptions are then examined empirically with the aid of a large database on the citizenship competences of students in primary and secondary education in the Netherlands. The results show that there is a significant level of convergence that inhibits correction of survey measures for social desirability. The implications of these findings for furthering our understanding of citizenship are discussed.

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### 1. Introduction

The citizenship of students and the role which the school can play in the development of the citizenship of students have received considerable discussion over the past few decades. National educational policy in almost every European country and other western countries has been steering in the direction of the inclusion of citizenship as part of the educational curriculum (Eurydice, 2005, 2012). Various instruments have been developed to measure the citizenship of young people. These instruments enable the large-scale study of the components of student citizenship and also allow for international comparison, thus adding to the scientific knowledge base in the field of citizenship.

Many of the instruments used to measure citizenship involve self-report by students. Examples are the international instrumentation for the International Civic and Citizenship Education Study (ICCS; Schulz, Ainley, Fraillon, Kerr, & Losito, 2010), the instrumentation for the Citizenship Education Longitudinal Study (CELS; Cleaver, Ireland, Kerr, & Lopes, 2005; Ireland, Kerr, Lopes, & Nelson, 2006; Kerr et al., 2007) and the Citizenship Competence Questionnaire (Ten Dam, Geijsel, Reumerman, & Ledoux, 2011). In any measurement instrument which relies at least in part on self-report, social desirability is an issue. The risk is therefore always present that students judge themselves more positively due to an inclination to respond in a socially desirable manner. Social desirability scores are therefore commonly subtracted from self-reported values.

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Little attention, however, has been paid to questions concerning social desirability in quantitative studies into citizenship to date. This is remarkable because citizenship is a heavily value-laden concept related to social and societal behaviour (Biesta, 2011; Van Gunsteren, 1998), leading to questions concerning social desirability (Fischer & Katz, 2000). The two concepts have a substantive affinity to each other as in both cases social norms which call for the display of behaviour desired by the environment play a role. For “good citizenship,” this means that one behaves in a social desirable manner in addition to having a critical-reflective attitude (Westheimer, 2008; Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). Viewed from such a perspective, a higher degree of good citizenship is associated with a higher degree of social desirability.

The aim of the research reported on here was to gain a better understanding of the relations between student citizenship and social desirability. On the basis of empirical data on the citizenship competences of students from Dutch primary and secondary education, we answer the question of whether social desirability plays a role in the responding of young people when asked about their citizenship and, if so, how this association of citizenship by social desirability can best be understood. We close with a discussion of the implications of the results of our study for the further study and understanding of citizenship among youth today.

## 2. Theoretical framework

### 2.1. Democratic citizenship

Citizenship in itself as well as the development of citizenship as an educational goal is an essentially normative issue on which divergent opinions exist (cf. Van Gunsteren, 1998). In the relevant international discourses today, the concept of citizenship is primarily linked to the concept of democracy (Thayer-Bacon, 2008; Torney-Purta, 2004; Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). It is assumed that strong democracy includes the agency of individuals within both the political *and* social domains and thus the interconnections between citizens beyond the domain of government alone (Barber, 1984; Oser & Veugelers, 2008). Citizenship concerns identity development and is rooted in the daily lives of people (Biesta, 2011; Haste, 2004).

Interpreting democracy as continuously “in the making” (Barber, 1984) or as “a mode of associated living” (Dewey, 1966) requires specific competences on the part of citizens. According to Westheimer (2008), “good citizenship” requires citizens to be willing and able to critically evaluate different perspectives, explore strategies for change and reflect upon such issues as justice, (in)equality and democratic engagement in addition to a capacity to function within a community in a socially accepted and responsible manner. The resilience of a democracy does not ask for the augmentation of shared values but, rather, a willingness and capacity “to agree to disagree”, to deal with different perspectives on critical moral or social issues and to look for peaceful ways to coexist (cf. Banks, 2004). An important part of these citizenship competences is social sensibility, involvement and social adaptability. Citizenship thus requires individuals to be willing and able to take the needs of others into consideration, help those in need and so forth (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). One also must be prepared to make one’s own critical contributions to society without denying or hindering the citizenship of others (Ten Dam & Volman, 2004; Wardekker, 2001), and this entails norms which society generally perceives as worthy and thus as socially desired—like the social norm that one should stand up against injustice.

In research on the citizenship competences of young people, many of the aforementioned aspects of “good citizenship” have been incorporated into the measurement instruments used (e.g. Geijssel, Ledoux, Reumerman, & Ten Dam, 2012; Isac, Maslowski, Creemers, & Van der Werf, 2013; Keating, Kerr, Benton, Mundy, & Lopes, 2010; Schulz et al., 2010). As part of these instruments, citizenship knowledge is determined on the basis of a test composed of multiple choice items in which students demonstrate their knowledge of the democratic constitutional state and—to a far lesser extent—issues which concern citizenship in civil society. Citizenship attitudes, skills and reflection are measured via self-report (Likert scale items). Students are asked questions which concern social adaptability (e.g. willingness and capacity to listen to the opinions of others), engagement with societal issues (e.g. interest in the differences between people or groups of people, desire to contribute), critical reflection (e.g. contemplation of the position of minorities and prejudices) and the capacity to stand up for one’s opinion. A measurement method which requires people to pass judgement on their own intentions and capacities, however, immediately elicits the question of the extent to which answers reflect the true state of affairs. Social desirability always plays a role in self-report measures. The relation between citizenship and social desirability, however, can be interpreted in different ways (cf. Ganster, Hennessey, & Luthans, 1983).

### 2.2. Social desirability

Two views on social desirability can be distinguished. The first is based on the assumption that some people judge themselves more positively in order to make a good impression with regard to culturally derived norms and standards. Viewed from such a perspective, Crowne and Marlowe (1964) understand social desirability to be primarily a personality characteristic: the tendency to portray oneself positively is different between individuals due to personality traits such as anxiety, achievement motivation, and self-esteem. Paulhus (1991, 2003) further distinguishes a more situationally determined component of social desirability within this view, namely “impression management” (also see Edwards, 1957; Zerbe & Paulhus, 1987). Whether intentionally presenting oneself as ‘good-looking’ or not, in research these socially desirable answers should be filtered out. The second view on social desirability builds upon its situational component and argues that social desirability can be conceptually inherent to a specific topic. This applies to primarily value-laden topics.

Self-reported values, for example kindness, contain by definition a significant social desirability bias component because values are a conception of what is culturally desirable (Fischer & Katz, 2000). In such cases a high correlation between the concept to be measured and social desirability is to be expected. “Although removing social desirability bias related to impression management is usually advisable, it may be inappropriate if the component is conceptually related to the variable of interest” (Fischer, 2000, p. 73). To put it differently, filtering out social desirability bias can reduce construct validity.

When asked about value-laden issues, the distinction between socially desirable behaviour and actual social behaviour is probably more diffuse among younger students than among older students. When responding, younger students may not intentionally present themselves as better than they are (cf. Edwards, 1957; Zerbe & Paulhus, 1987); they may simply have undifferentiated perceptions of themselves as sympathetic and kind. Given the amount of life experience for a 10-year old student, it might not be so strange for them to think that ‘one should always do one’s best’ or ‘one should always be nice to others’. It is thus possible that younger students do not recognize the distinction between questions concerned with social desirability and questions concerned with social behaviour and therefore that a 10 year old is more likely to make mistakes in this regard than a 16 year old. Conversely, providing socially desirable answers requires the respondent to pretend to be more prosocial than he or she might actually be and thus a capacity to intentionally mislead. It is thus conceivable that older students will more easily recognize social desirability questions as ‘trick’ questions via the use of such words as ‘always’ and ‘never’ than younger students who do not clearly distinguish between socially desirable behaviour and actual social behaviour yet.

### 2.3. Evaluating students’ citizenship competences and social desirability

It is obvious that measures of citizenship should not be disturbed by any kind of misleading. From this perspective, an correlation of social desirability with scales which measure citizenship competences is undesirable. Measures of citizenship competences should not correlate with measures of unrelated concepts (divergent or discriminative validity must exist; see, for example, King & Bruner, 2000). If a strong correlation is found, then the measurement instrument simultaneously assesses citizenship and inclination to respond in a socially desirable manner; one can speak of biased or impartial responding. This is particularly a problem when different groups of respondents have different levels of inclination to provide socially desirable answers. Empirical results are distorted by this inclination (Stocké & Hunkler, 2007). In studies of voting, for example, this validity problem has been studied in the sense of “false reporting” (e.g. Belli, Traugott, & Beckmann, 2001; Duff, Hanmer, Park, & White, 2007). From this point of view, citizenship survey measures should be corrected for social desirability.

Following the alternative view on social desirability as outlined above, however, rather a high correlation between citizenship and social desirability is by definition inevitable. Because citizenship can be seen as conceptually linked to social desirability convergent validity is expected (cf. Fischer & Katz, 2000). Whether the person expects or judges something to be acceptable or suitable (i.e. socially desirable) depends on the social norms which the person knows or experiences. Social norms are behaviour rules which exist for different members of a community or within a social interaction and are thus based on cultural values, highly context dependent and often interwoven with power relations (Verstraete, 2008, p. 9; Veugelers, 2011). In answering both social desirability questions as well as citizenship competence questions, respondents may mirror themselves on social norms. In the case of social desirability, the norm is the display of that behaviour desired by the environment. The same norm is involved in the case of citizenship. Citizenship implies—at least in part—socially desirable behaviour, values and norms. For example, the Citizenship Measurement Instrument (Ten Dam et al., 2011; Geijsel et al., 2012) contains the following item: “people should listen carefully to each other, even when they have different opinions.” This item closely resembles other items used to measure social desirability within the same questionnaire, like “I always let others finish speaking” and “I carefully consider the opinions of others”. Such an affinity with social desirability presumably plays less of a role in the critical reflective attitude which is also part of democratic citizenship and receives expression in, for example, questions like “How good are you at sticking to your own opinion when you are really right?” and statements like “When we talk in the class about a topic in the news, I also like to contribute.” From this point of view, citizenship and social desirability are partially related, thus, and citizenship survey measures should not be corrected for social desirability.

With the present research, we hope to contribute to a better understanding of the relationship between student citizenship and social desirability, both conceptually and empirically. The main question is: To what extent is the role of social desirability for citizenship of students to be understood as *misleading* in the sense of presenting yourself as more democratic and prosocial than you are; or as *expedient* in the sense of applying the same set of social norms? Stated differently: is the correction of students’ citizenship scores for social desirability justified based on divergence of the two concepts or unjustified based on convergence of the two aspects?

To answer this question, we examined the relations between citizenship competences and social desirability in our study by relating social desirability to self-reported citizenship attitudes, skills and reflection and also to citizenship knowledge. If the relationship between social desirability and citizenship is completely divergent, then the knowledge component of citizenship should show no correlation with social desirability. Starting from the point of view that a substantive relationship (i.e. convergence) exists between social desirability and citizenship, knowledge about “how things are supposed to be” and being aware of social norms may contribute to identifying the “good” answer to a knowledge question concerned with

citizenship. Our first assumption therefore is that at least some degree of correlation exists between social desirability and citizenship knowledge.

In contrast to self-report measures, students cannot present themselves better than what they are on a knowledge test. Against this background and if our first assumption is confirmed, we secondly assumed that- the correlation between social desirability and the students' self-reported attitudes, skills and reflection with regard to citizenship is *greater* than the correlation between their social desirability and citizenship knowledge.

With regard to the self-report components of citizenship (i.e. attitudes, skills and reflection) and based on an assumption of convergence, we thirdly expected the correlation of social desirability with the self-report components to be lower than the correlations between the self-report components themselves. Social desirability may be substantively related to citizenship but not identical to it. Stated differently, despite some degree of substantive association, citizenship and social desirability remain distinct concepts.

Finally, we assumed that the convergence of citizenship and social desirability would appear stronger (i.e., higher) for the prosocial aspects of citizenship than for the critical aspects of citizenship.

In sum, the following assumptions were made in the present study.

- (1) Correlation exists between social desirability and citizenship knowledge.
- (2) The correlation between social desirability and citizenship knowledge is less strong than that with the self-reported citizenship attitudes, skills and reflection.
- (3) The correlation of social desirability with the self-report components of citizenship (i.e. attitudes, skills and reflection) is less strong than the correlations between the self-report components themselves.
- (4) The correlation between citizenship and social desirability is relatively higher for the prosocial aspects of citizenship than for the critical aspects.

If these assumptions are confirmed in our study, convergence between social reliability and citizenship appear to be the case and correction of citizenship measures for social desirability is not justified.

### 3. Methods

#### 3.1. Sample

Two samples of Dutch students were combined and used to investigate our assumptions.

- (1) Sixth- and ninth-grade students (12 and 15 years) from the initial measurement for the large-scale cohort study (*Cohort Onderzoek Onderwijsloopbanen, COOL*<sup>1</sup>; [Driessen, Mulder, Ledoux, Roeleveld, & Van der Veen, 2009](#)) ( $n = 15,873$ ; from 580 primary and 31 secondary schools).
- (2) Fifth- to ninth-grade students (11–15 years) from the Citizenship Alliance sample ([Peschar, Hooghoff, Dijkstra, & Ten Dam, 2010](#)) ( $n = 7803$ ; from 14 primary and 24 secondary schools).

Although the COOL sample is representative of the Dutch population, the use of the Alliance sample was needed for the following reasons. In COOL only the 'domain-specific' way of measuring social desirability is used. The Citizenship Alliance sample comprises data on both 'domain-specific' and 'domain-independent' social desirability thereby allowing to investigate the differences between these two ways of measuring. An overview of the characteristics of the samples is presented in [Table 1](#).

#### 3.2. Measurement instruments

Citizenship competences were measured using the Citizenship Competences Questionnaire (CCQ), which is part of the Citizenship Measurement Instrument; for an extensive description, see [Ten Dam et al., 2011](#)). In the CCQ, young people's citizenship is operationalized in terms of citizenship competences which pertain to four social tasks from daily practice. These four social tasks are: acting democratically, acting in a socially responsible manner, dealing with conflicts and dealing with differences. The CCQ consists of 94 items distributed across four scales reflecting the (1) knowledge, (2) attitudes, (3) skills, and (4) reflection components of citizenship competences. The items constituting the scales for attitudes, skills and reflection subsume a number of subscales which situate the specific component of citizenship within the context of one of the four social tasks (see Appendix A for the conceptual framework and a descriptions of the content of the scales). Although one might expect 12 subscales (three components  $\times$  four social tasks), the CCQ actually consists of 13 subscales for citizenship attitudes, skills and reflection. Attitudes towards "acting democratically" are measured in two subscales, namely: "desire to hear what everyone has to say" and "desire to make a critical contribution." Skills concerned with "acting democratically" are also measured in two subscales, namely: "able to assert own opinion" and "able to listen to opinions of

<sup>1</sup> The COOL study has been funded by the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research (NOW) and runs through 2016.



**Table 1**  
Distribution of student characteristics according to sample (N = 23,753).

	Citizenship alliance sample	%	COOL sample	%	Total sample	%
Age						
Primary	750	10	12,105	76	12,855	54
Secondary	7053	90	3845	24	10,898	46
Gender						
Boys	4042	52	7984	50	12,026	51
Girls	3761	48	7899	50	11,660	49
Ethnic origin						
Dutch mother	6188	79	10,160	73	16,348	75
Non-Dutch mother	1615	21	3709	27	5324	25
Total N	7803		15,950		23,753	

others.” Alternatively, “acting in a socially responsible manner” and “dealing with conflicts” concern substantively similar skills and are therefore measured in a single skills subscale: “skills—acting in a socially responsible manner and dealing with conflicts” (Ten Dam et al., 2011).

Part of the CCQ concerns critical aspects of citizenship; that is the attitudes subscale “desire to make a critical contribution,” the skills subscale “able to assert own opinion” and all of the reflection scales. The other part of the CCQ concerns prosocial aspects of citizenship and the remaining subscales.

The attitudes, skills and reflection items are rated using four-point Likert scales. A general question introduces the *attitude* items: “How well does this statement apply to you?” and a statement is then presented like: “I like knowing something about different religious beliefs” or “I like to talk with others about what is going on in the world”. The basic form for the *skill* (i.e. self-efficacy) items is: “How good are you at . . .?” and then presentation of a statement like: “finding a solution which everyone is satisfied with for a disagreement” Or “allowing others to have their say”. The basic form of the *reflection* questions is: “How often do you think about . . .?” and then presentation of a statement like: “whether students are listened to at your school?” or “Why some girls wear head scarves”.

The *knowledge* scale involves multiple-choice questions with three response options per question (i.e. dichotomous measurement). Respondents are instructed to indicate which option best answers the presented item. Examples are: “All children have a right to: (a) an allowance, (b) choose who they want to live with, or (c) education” (correct answer is “c”), or “Existence of different political parties is important because: (a) there will not be as many demonstrations and strikes then, (b) more people will have a job then, or (c) people can then choose that party which they think is the best” (correct answer is “c”).

All of the questionnaire items have been formulated at a language level deemed suitable for students 11–12 years of age (fifth and sixth grades). The items are formulated positively in most cases. However, to prevent response tendencies some of the skill and attitude items have been formulated negatively (with negative content fitting into the scale). For the reflection component, some dummy items, asking about a topic which almost every youngster is frequently thinks about, are included in order to prevent response tendencies, for example: “How often do you wonder if you look good enough?”. These dummy items are obviously not part of the scales.

Table 2 presents the reliability coefficients, mean scores and standard deviations for the CCQ scales and subscales.

Social desirability was measured in the present study in two different ways. In both the COOL sample and the Citizenship Alliance sample 5 newly formulated items were used which were interspersed between the CCQ attitude items (domain-specific SD measurement).

- I carefully consider the opinions of others.
- I always let others finish speaking.
- I am always very friendly to everyone.
- I never do something which could bother others in the classroom.
- I really enjoy cleaning things up in the classroom, even if it is after school.

With these items we intended to exaggerate the citizenship attitude items, for instance by using words like ‘always’ and ‘never’, from the idea that only respondents that want to impress by social desirability, would score high on these items. Factor analyses (maximum likelihood) on the responses to the items intended to assess social desirability in the present study showed the five items to refer to a single dimension of responding (eigen value 1.51; 30% variance explained; factor loadings from .43 to .63). The reliability of the scale was found to be moderate (alpha .67).

The Citizenship Alliance sample also responded to a domain-independent social desirability scale, the Verweij (1998) scale. This scale contains 6 items with content which is not specifically related to citizenship (e.g., “I always work hard in class”). This domain-independent social desirability scale showed reasonable reliability (.78).

**Table 2**

Reliability coefficients (Cronbach's alphas), means and standard deviations for scale and subscale scores when Citizenship Competences Questionnaire was administered to students 11–16 years of age ( $N = 23,753$ ).

	Number of items	Cronbach's A	Mean score	Standard deviation
Attitude component	24	.90	2.95	.43
Acting democratically 1: Desire to hear what everyone has to say	3	.70	3.32	.50
Acting democratically 2: Desire to make a critical contribution	3	.66	2.74	.65
Acting in socially responsible manner	6	.68	3.08	.49
Dealing with conflicts	6	.79	2.85	.55
Dealing with differences	6	.86	2.85	.64
Skill component	15	.85	3.05	.40
Acting democratically 1: Able to assert own opinion	3	.72	3.15	.56
Acting democratically 2: Able to listen to opinions of others	3	.69	3.03	.55
Acting socially responsible/dealing with conflicts	5	.77	3.00	.51
Dealing with differences	4	.68	3.06	.49
Reflection component	28	.94	2.26	.57
Acting democratically	6	.80	2.32	.64
Acting in socially responsible manner	6	.84	2.17	.70
Dealing with conflicts	8	.90	2.50	.68
Dealing with differences	8	.86	2.06	.68
Knowledge component	27	.83	.76	.18

The analyses showed no significant differences between the two ways of measuring social desirability. Therefore we report only on the analyses using the domain-specific scale. With regard to possible age differences, students in secondary education scored significantly lower on social desirability compared to pupils in primary education. This goes for the social desirability scale that was incorporated in the citizenship questionnaire (average scores 2.68 versus 2.53,  $t = 25.68$ ,  $p < .001$ ) as well as for the separate scale by Verweij (average scores 2.90 versus 2.68,  $t = 11.11$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Statistical significance is hardly surprising in such a large sample, so effect sizes were calculated. These were .33 for the first scale and .43 for the Verweij scale (Cohen's  $d$ ) and might be typified as lying between a small and medium effect.

Finally, the CCQ scales and measure of social desirability did not contain items which appeared to be partial to specific groups of students (controlled for by means of Differential Item Functioning; Geijsel et al., 2012).

### 3.3. Data analyses

Pearson correlations were calculated among the scores for the four components of citizenship competences and the measure of social desirability using SPSS. In order to examine the possible differences between the prosocial and critical aspects of students citizenship, the Pearson correlations were also calculated among the attitude, skill and reflection subscales and the measure of social desirability. Fischer Z testing was used to compare the bivariate correlations, with the sampling error conservatively estimated by Taylor Series linearization using the complex sample option in SPSS. Because even very small differences will be significant given the large sample size, effect sizes following Field (2009) were also used. Correlations smaller than .10 correspond with effect sizes that should be neglected; Correlations between .11 and .23 constitute small effects; correlations between .24 and .36 correspond with medium effect sizes; and correlations larger than .37 indicate large effects.

Using structural equation modelling might be advisable because of the moderate reliabilities of some of the citizenship scales. In structural equation models measurement errors and prediction errors can be distinguished, making it possible to uncover the disattenuated correlations between the latent constructs. In order to estimate these, two indicators of each construct should be available at least. Usually this is achieved by splitting scales and creating item packages. Another disadvantage of this approach is that the allocation of items to packages introduces chance variance which has consequences for the fit of the model. The domain-specific scale for social desirability that is part of the COOL-sample in this study, contained too few items (5) to perform this kind of analyses. Another disadvantage of this approach is that the allocation of items to packages introduces chance variance which has consequences for the fit of the model.

## 4. Results

The correlations between the measures of the four citizenship components (i.e. knowledge, skills, attitudes and reflections) and the measure of social desirability are presented in Table 3.

Our first assumption, namely that a significant correlation would exist between social desirability and citizenship knowledge, was confirmed. A small but significant correlation was indeed found between social desirability and citizenship knowledge. The correlation was considerably lower than that for social desirability in conjunction with the other components of citizenship competences but nevertheless significant. The difference between the correlation of .12 between

**Table 3**  
Correlations between four citizenship components and social desirability ( $N = 23,753$ ).

	Attitudes	Skills	Reflection	Knowledge	Social desirability
Attitudes	1.00				
Skills	.69	1.00			
Reflection	.60	.48	1.00		
Knowledge	.24	.19	.06	1.00	
Social desirability (domain-specific)	.63	.56	.40	.12	1.00

Note. All correlations significant at 0.01 level.

**Table 4**  
Correlations between subscales of citizenship attitudes, skills and reflection with social desirability (critical subscales in bold; prosocial subscales not in bold) ( $N = 24,678$ ).

	Social desirability
Attitude component subscales	
Acting democratically 1: Desire to hear what everyone has to say	.44
<b>Acting democratically 2: Desire to make a critical contribution</b>	<b>.43</b>
Acting in socially responsible manner	.54
Dealing with conflicts	.58
Dealing with differences	.41
Skill component subscales	
<b>Acting democratically 1: Able to assert own opinion</b>	<b>.13</b>
Acting democratically 2: Able to listen to opinions of others	.57
Acting socially responsible/dealing with conflicts	.50
Dealing with differences	.45
Reflection component subscales	
<b>Acting democratically</b>	<b>.35</b>
<b>Acting in a socially responsible manner</b>	<b>.36</b>
<b>Dealing with conflicts</b>	<b>.35</b>
<b>Dealing with differences</b>	<b>.27</b>

Note. All correlations significant at 0.01 level.

knowledge and social desirability and the correlation of .40 between reflection and social desirability is statistically significant (Fischer  $Z$  is approximately 9.5,  $p < .001$ ). The sampling error was conservatively estimated by Taylor Series linearization using the complex sample option in SPSS. This finding confirms our second assumption, namely that the correlation of social desirability with citizenship knowledge would be weaker than the correlations of social desirability with the self-report measures of citizenship attitudes, skills and reflection.

It is striking that the degree of association of the measures of citizenship attitudes and skills by social desirability is very strong, with correlations of .63 and .56, respectively. This contradicts our third assumption, namely that the correlations of social desirability with the self-report components of citizenship (i.e. attitudes, skills and reflection) would be less strong than the correlations between the self-report components themselves. In fact, the correlations between social desirability and the self-report citizenship factors were equal to the correlations between the self-report citizenship measures themselves or even higher in some cases. This pattern holds for the attitude and skill components of citizenship in particular.

To examine our fourth assumption, namely the expectation that the correlation between citizenship competences and social desirability would be higher for the prosocial aspects of citizenship than for the critical aspects, we compared the correlation coefficients for the attitude, skill and reflection subscales in relation to social desirability (see Table 4). Some of the subscales refer to the prosocial aspects of citizenship and some refer to critical aspects.

The results in Table 4 show the correlations between citizenship and social desirability to indeed be relatively higher for the prosocial aspects of citizenship than for the critical aspects. Our fourth assumption is thus confirmed. The correlations between the critical reflection subscales and social desirability are relatively low (medium effect size; also see Table 3) but the correlation for the subscale of "Skill Acting democratically 1: Able to assert own opinion" is even lower (small effect size). Apparently asserting one's own opinion is not influenced much by a desire for social acceptance (i.e. social desirability). The results for the critical aspect "Attitude Acting democratically 2: Desire to make a critical contribution" (.43 in Table 4) are not uniform as indicated by the also relatively lower correlations for prosocial "Attitude Acting democratically 1: Desire to hear what everyone has to say" (.44) and "Attitude Dealing with differences" (.41) with social desirability than for the remaining two attitude subscales with social desirability (.54 and .58). The difference between a correlation of .44 and .43 is not statistically significant (Fischer  $Z$  is approximately 0.4,  $p > .05$ ). Still, most of the prosocial aspects of citizenship competences stand out in their significant strength of correlation with social desirability as compared to the critical aspects.



## 5. Discussion and conclusion

For understanding the citizenship of young people and its development throughout their school careers and later lives, self-report of citizenship competences is an important resource. In recent years, several self-report instruments have become available. A major advantage of such survey instruments is that they allow us to systematically pose the same questions to a large number of students, compare this information across groups of students and conduct international comparative research. A self-report instrument in the domain of citizenship competences nevertheless brings questions of validity with it and among those questions is the extent to which students answer in a socially desirable manner. Discriminant validity requires a low correlation between measures of citizenship competences and social desirability (see, for example, King & Bruner, 2000). When a concept bears a substantive connection to social desirability, however, convergent validity may be expected (Fischer & Katz, 2000). According to Fischer (2000, p. 73): “Although removing social desirability bias related to impression management is usually advisable, it may be *inappropriate* if the component is conceptually related to the variable of interest.” This may be the case for citizenship competences or certain aspects of it: To the extent that students have greater citizenship competences, the more sensitive they may be to social norms or that which plays a role in social desirability.

In the present study, our measures of social desirability showed students in secondary education to score significantly lower on social desirability compared to pupils in primary education. This underlines the complexity of the phenomenon of social desirability. We suppose that the ability to distinguish between questions about one's own citizenship competences and social desirability questions is related to the developmental phase of children. Just correcting citizenship survey measures for social desirability overlooks this problem.

Our research questions focus on the examination of the correlations of various components of the citizenship competences of students with social desirability to determine if convergence exists. Our results point to moderate to strong correlations with social desirability for the skill and attitude components of citizenship in particular and the reflection component to a lesser but nevertheless significant extent. By measuring social desirability with newly formulated items that ‘exaggerate’ the citizenship attitudes, there might have been the risk of provoking convergence. But the measurements in a subset of the sample with a separate social desirability scale with items that were not alike the citizenship attitudes, showed the same pattern of results. In our study, even a small positive correlation was found for social desirability with the knowledge component of citizenship. If *divergence* is taken as the starting point for understanding the relationship between citizenship and social desirability, then no positive correlation with social desirability would be expected for “objective knowledge in which responses could not be faked” (King & Bruner, 2000, p. 94). The occurrence of a nevertheless significant correlation with the knowledge component of citizenship competences can thus be taken as support for a *convergence* view of the relationship between citizenship and social desirability. Greater citizenship competences (i.e. being aware and sensitive to socially desirable behaviour and social norms) implies greater citizenship knowledge. Our results show, moreover, the correlations with social desirability to be larger and stronger for the prosocial aspects of student citizenship than for the more critical aspects. Although this was less apparent for the desire to make a critical contribution, it was clearly the case for asserting one's own opinion and frequent reflection on issues pertaining to citizenship (e.g. acting democratically, acting in a socially responsible manner, dealing with differences) as compared to the prosocial aspects that typically pertain to social adaptability, such as attitudes towards dealing with conflicts and ability to carefully listen to the opinions of others. Once again, this suggests *convergence* between citizenship and social desirability.

However, we do realize that we should be cautious about these conclusions based on the empirical evidence, since correlations in this study were not corrected for attenuation. In follow-up research, data should be gathered allowing for structural equation modelling in search for more robust evidence.

Our core research question concerned the interpretation of the association of measures of citizenship competences by aspects of social desirability on the part of students. Our conclusion is first of all that social desirability and student citizenship competences ‘live apart together’: the concepts do not coincide but they are associated to a certain degree. Therefore self-reports of student citizenship should not simply be corrected for social desirability. Rather, questions regarding the extent of bias introduced by social desirability into measures of student citizenship can, in our opinion, only be answered in an interpretive manner. When considering citizenship measurement bias by social desirability, our study further highlights the need to take differences between the prosocial and critical aspects of citizenship into account at any case. Perhaps even more important is that the social norms which respondents associate with different aspects of citizenship need to be further analyzed.

When it comes to furthering our understanding of the citizenship of young people and how this develops during adolescence, our study not only points to the importance of general social norms but also more specific group-based social norms. Given that citizenship is grounded in the social practices of daily life (cf. Biesta, 2007; Lawy & Biesta, 2006), the study of young people's citizenship should take into account those social norms which regulate their ongoing, daily social practices. Social norms and thereby social desirability are group-based. In contrast to moral values, which can be construed to have a more or less general, abstract meaning (e.g. justice, responsibility, equality), social norms are rooted in specific social contexts (Killen, 2007; Oser, 1996; Smetana, 2006; Turiel, 1983). Social norms are the result of the interactions between people as part of daily social practice. And along these lines, researchers have repeatedly shown us that “voicing your opinion” is more positively perceived and thus worthy of emulation in a white middle-class culture than in an Asian “we” culture (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). While being “tough” may outweigh helping others in one peer group, helping those

in need may be a self-evident social norm in another peer group. Furthermore, social desirability can be seen as a form of self-presentation (Hart, 2001). How you present yourself is a product of your social environment. Further research should shed light on those aspects of social desirability which different groups of young people associate with “good citizenship.” Given the complex and partly divergent, partly convergent nature of the relationship between citizenship and social desirability revealed in the present study, a qualitative approach may be needed to deepen our understanding of the self-representations and self-presentations of young people within the domain of citizenship.

Quantitative research into the citizenship of young people is also still needed, however. Instruments like those used in the International Civic and Citizenship Education Study (ICCS) and Citizenship Education Longitudinal Study (CELS) studies (Kerr et al., 2007; Schulz et al., 2010) and the national Dutch cohort study COOL<sup>5–18</sup> (Driessen et al., 2009) are designed to be used with large samples and can thus give us insight into citizenship attitudes, skills and reflection in relation to the background characteristics of students and schools but also in relation to international data. Empirical study of the systematic differences among (groups of) young people is needed in order to gain insight into how social positions and the power relations associated with these positions structure the manner in which young people participate or can participate in socio-cultural practices—practices which contribute to the experiences of young people and thereby shape the development of their identities as citizens in society.

To conclude, mixed methods research is needed to further specify the degree and nature of the convergence between citizenship and social desirability. In the meantime, the association of measures of citizenship by aspects of social desirability—as demonstrated in the present study—inhibits correction of measures of citizenship for social desirability for the risk is too high that important information regarding student citizenship will then be left out.

**Appendix A. Conceptual definitions of citizenship competences in terms of components of citizenship and social tasks**

Social tasks	Components			
	Knowledge knowing, under-standing, insight  A young person with such knowledge ...	Attitudes thoughts, desires, willingness  A young person with such attitudes ...	Skills an estimate of what one can do  A young person with such skills ...	Reflection contemplation of topics  A young person with such reflection ...
<i>Acting democratically</i> Acceptance of and contribution to a democratic society	... knows what democratic principles are and what acting in accordance with them involves	... wants to hear everyone's voice, enter into a dialogue and make an active, critical contribution	... is able to assert own opinion and listen to the opinions of others	... thinks about issues of democracy, power/ powerlessness, equal/ unequal rights
<i>Acting in a socially responsible manner</i> Taking shared responsibility for the communities to which one belongs	... knows social rules (i.e. legal or unspoken rules for social interaction)	... wants to uphold social justice, is prepared to provide care and assistance, does not want to harm another or the environment as a result of his or her behaviour	... can adopt a socially just position	... thinks about conflicts of interest, social cohesion, social processes, group processes (e.g. inclusion, exclusion), and own contribution to social justice
<i>Dealing with conflicts</i> Handling of minor situations of conflict or conflicts of interest to which the child him/herself is a party	... knows methods to solve conflicts such as searching for win-win solutions, calling in help from others, admission of mistakes, prevention of escalation	... is willing to explore conflicts, prepared to consider the standpoint of another, jointly searches for an acceptable solution	... can listen to others, put oneself in someone else's position, seek win-win solutions	... thinks about how a conflict can arise, the role of others and oneself, and the possibilities to prevent or solve conflicts
<i>Dealing with differences</i> Handling of social, cultural, religious, and outward differences	... is familiar with cultural differences, has knowledge of rules of behaviour in different social situations, knows when one can speak of prejudice or discrimination	... has a desire to familiarize him/herself with the opinions and lifestyles of others, has a positive attitude towards differences	... can adequately function in unfamiliar social situations, adjust to the desires or habits of others	... thinks about the nature and consequences of the differences between people and cultural backgrounds for behaviour and processes of inclusion and exclusion

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