

# Civic engagement in early adolescence: a contextual view on the civic-oriented activities among Finnish 6th graders

Miikka Korventausta, Marjaana Veermans, Tomi Jaakkola & Tero Järvinen

**To cite this article:** Miikka Korventausta, Marjaana Veermans, Tomi Jaakkola & Tero Järvinen (19 May 2025): Civic engagement in early adolescence: a contextual view on the civic-oriented activities among Finnish 6th graders, Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research, DOI: [10.1080/00313831.2025.2506381](https://doi.org/10.1080/00313831.2025.2506381)

**To link to this article:** <https://doi.org/10.1080/00313831.2025.2506381>



© 2025 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 19 May 2025.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

# Civic engagement in early adolescence: a contextual view on the civic-oriented activities among Finnish 6th graders

Miikka Korventausta<sup>a</sup>, Marjaana Veermans<sup>a</sup>, Tomi Jaakkola<sup>b</sup> and Tero Järvinen<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup>University of Turku; <sup>b</sup>Tampere University

## ABSTRACT

This study examines the civic engagement of early adolescents through the lens of Social Cognitive Theory, focusing on the scope of civic-oriented activities they engage in, along with the spaces and social environments where these activities occur. The study is based on interview data from 6th-grade Finnish students ( $N = 20$ ; ages 12–13), which was analysed using thematic analysis. The findings indicate that civic engagement is already broad and diverse among early adolescents. The study identifies four main categories of civic-oriented activities that early adolescents perform: awareness and education, communication, community involvement, and formal participation. These activities take place across seven different physical and digital spaces and within seven distinct social environments, from those close to the individual to more distant and broader.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 31 October 2023  
Accepted 14 April 2025

## KEYWORDS

civic engagement; early adolescence; social cognitive theory; thematic analysis; political socialisation

## Introduction

Recent years have witnessed a substantial interest in research on youth civic engagement, exploring a variety of factors and contexts that influence youths' participation in civic life (Amnå & Zetterberg, 2010; Barrett & Pachi, 2019; Wray-Lake et al., 2017). Studies have delved into diverse areas, such as the relationship between youth civic engagement and social media (Loader et al., 2014; Lonkila & Jokivuori, 2023; Oden & Porter, 2020), mental health (Fenn et al., 2024; Wiium et al., 2010), and the personal and social identities (Lannegrand-Willems et al., 2018). Additionally, studies have considered the role of education in youth civic engagement from multiple perspectives (Desjardins & Wiksten, 2022; Lenzi et al., 2014; Neundorf et al., 2016; Pontes et al., 2019; Tzankova et al., 2023; White & Mistry, 2019), along with cohort and generational differences (Andersen et al., 2021; Grütter & Buchmann, 2022), and the development of civic engagement during the adolescence (Wray-Lake & Shubert, 2019). This surge in research coincides with the rise of socio-political movements led by children and youth, such as Fridays for Future and Extinction Rebellion (Biswas & Mattheis, 2022; Huttunen, 2021; Pickard, 2022).

In scholarly literature, civic engagement generally refers to individuals' behavioural and psychological aspects that relate to situations beyond their immediate environment of family and friends (Barrett & Pachi, 2019; Ekman & Amnå, 2012; Torney-Purta et al., 2010). The concept overlaps with political engagement, which refers more specifically to the individual's engagement with political institutions, processes and decision-making (see, e.g., Barrett & Pachi, 2019, p. 3). In this study, we use the term civic engagement, as we are interested in all civic-oriented activities the early adolescents perform. Even though the research in the field is rich, studies on youth civic engagement

**CONTACT** Miikka Korventausta  miikor@utu.fi  University of Turku, Assistentinkatu 7, 20500, Turku, Finland

© 2025 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

tend to focus on adolescents and young adults over 14, often overlooking younger ones. Consequently, there remains a notable gap in the understanding of civic engagement among early adolescents – those aged 10–13 years old who are transitioning from childhood to adolescence (Smetana et al., 2006). Moreover, recent scholarly discussions have highlighted the importance of research perspectives that focus on children's viewpoints (Biswas et al., 2024; Wall, 2022). These perspectives challenge the traditional adult-centred focus in social research and advocate for recognising children as active participants with their own political agency.

There are only a few studies that have delved particularly into the civic engagement of the mentioned age group. Oosterhoff et al. (2021) utilised social network analysis to examine the association of social connectedness and civic engagement among middle-school students in the United States. They found evidence that early adolescents' civic engagement is connected with their social position among their peers; however, the associations are highly nuanced and dependent on the dimension of civic engagement that is studied. In another study conducted among US middle school students, Voight and Torney-Purta (2013) employed latent class analysis to form a typology of civic engagement in early adolescence. They identified three groups of youth who varied based on their civic behaviours and attitudes: those who were not engaged (civic moderates), those who were both behaviourally and attitudinally engaged (social justice actors) and those who had strong civic attitudes but were less behaviourally engaged (social justice sympathisers). Despite these contributions, the field still lacks a broad understanding of where and with whom early adolescents engage in civic-oriented activities. Recent efforts to develop measures for children's civic engagement (McLoughlin et al., 2024) highlight the scarcity of comprehensive studies encompassing both children and early adolescents, resulting in a dearth of research focused on this age group.

In this study, we analyse, using interview data, the civic engagement of 12–13-year-old Finnish early adolescents at the end of sixth grade, when they are about to transition from primary to secondary school. We aim to draw a holistic picture of their civic-oriented activities and the related environments in which they engage during the period, which often involves changes in their social contexts, marking a passage from childhood to adolescence. Furthermore, at the end of sixth grade, Finnish students have completed two years of social studies, with the curriculum designed to impart the principles of civic participation (Finnish National Board of Education, 2016). Consequently, they can be expected to have a basic understanding of civic and political life, enhancing their capacity to reflect on these topics. This cohort, therefore, offers a compelling case for examining the topic.

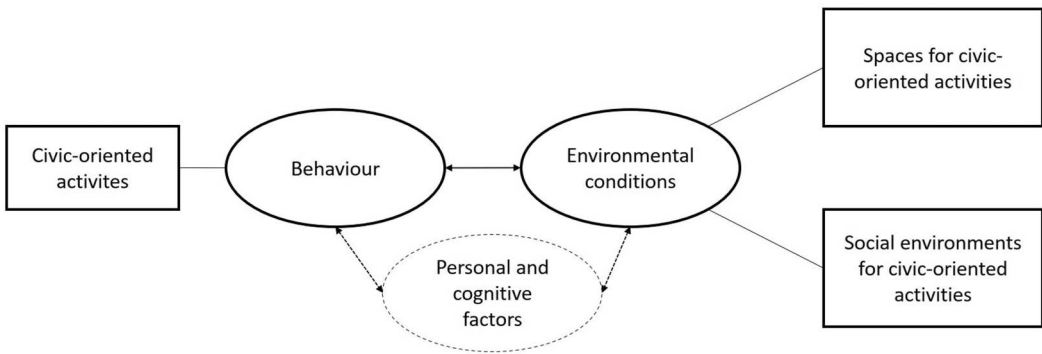
### **Objectives and theoretical underpinnings of the study**

The present study is guided by the following three research questions:

1. What is the scope of the civic-oriented activities in which Finnish early adolescents participate?
2. Where do they engage in these activities?
3. With whom do they interact while engaged in these activities?

The theoretical framework of the study draws on Bandura's (1986) Social Cognitive Theory (SCT), which posits that human behaviour and learning are shaped through the reciprocal interaction of individual behaviour, environmental conditions and personal and cognitive factors. In the context of civic engagement, behaviour refers to the *civic-oriented activities* that individuals perform, and the environmental conditions encompass the physical and digital *spaces*, as well as the *social environments* in which these activities occur. This study specifically focuses on these two dimensions – behaviour and environmental conditions – while excluding the personal and cognitive dimension, which has been thoroughly investigated in previous studies (e.g., Barrett & Pachi, 2019; Schulz et al., 2016, 2023), from the analysis to narrow the scope.

The theoretical framework drawing on SCT, illustrated in [Figure 1](#), also serves as the basis for the three empirical research questions. The first research question addresses the behavioural dimension



**Figure 1.** The theoretical framework of the study, drawing on the Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1986).

of civic engagement by examining the scope of actions that early adolescents undertake in relation to social, political or community issues in everyday life. These actions are referred to as civic-oriented activities, which can be manifested in various forms, including activism (Huttunen, 2021), media following (Wunderlich et al., 2022), participating in community events (Wray-Lake & Abrams, 2020), and engaging in discussions or debates about civic issues (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2016).

The second and third research questions examine the environmental conditions that form the context in which civic-oriented activities occur. These conditions are explored through two distinct lenses: the physical and digital spaces where activities take place and the social environments that reflect the interpersonal interactions within those spaces. Civic engagement is a process that develops through political socialisation, wherein individuals form their political identities, values, and behaviours (Neundorf & Smets, 2017). This process unfolds in various spaces such as schools (Rinnooy Kan et al., 2021), social media (Xenos et al., 2014), social organisations (Holecz et al., 2022), and public spaces (Kallio & Häkli, 2011b). The second research question seeks to identify and categorise these spaces where early adolescents engage in civic-oriented activities.

The third research question extends the investigation to social environments, exploring the groups of people with whom early adolescents interact during civic-oriented activities. While spaces answer the question of *where* civic engagement takes place, social environments address the question of *with whom* these interactions occur. Previous research has highlighted the significance of various social groups, such as school communities (Quintelier, 2010), parents (Gidengil et al., 2016; Kestilä-Kekkonen et al., 2025), friends (Koskimaa & Rapeli, 2015), and grandparents (Gidengil et al., 2021) in shaping adolescents' civic engagement. Furthermore, the rise of social media has introduced new opportunities for youth civic engagement, broadening the scope of both spaces and social environments (Andersen et al., 2021). By distinguishing between spaces and social environments, this framework provides a more structured understanding of the environmental conditions influencing early adolescents' civic engagement.

In conclusion, by answering the three empirical research questions, this study aims to advance the understanding of early civic engagement processes through the lens of SCT. Particularly, the study sheds light on the scope of civic-oriented activities and the environmental conditions that influence early adolescents' engagement in civic life.

## Methods

### Participants

The participants in this interview study were 20 sixth-graders (from 12 to 13 years old) from three ordinary urban schools in Southwest Finland. They were selected through a purposive sampling

strategy, based on their responses to a background survey on civic engagement, which was administered to a larger population of 6th-graders ( $N = 157$ ). The survey was conducted between January and March 2020. The aim was to acquire a diverse group of students with varying levels of civic engagement – characterised by differences in political knowledge, interest, efficacy, and willingness to participate – in order to obtain varied and comprehensive insights into the research questions.

The selection process involved identifying students who represented distinct civic engagement profiles, which were assigned based on the results of the k-means cluster analysis of their survey responses. The first profile ( $n = 5$ ) reported higher-than-average in all dimensions of civic engagement. The second profile ( $n = 7$ ) had a high willingness to participate in society, but the other dimensions were average. The third profile ( $n = 5$ ) reported average levels in all dimensions of civic engagement. The fourth profile ( $n = 3$ ) reported lower-than-average in all dimensions of civic engagement. No background information was gathered except age and gender, as the aim of the study was not to examine the effect of the background variables but to give a voice at the general level for adolescents.

### **Interview data and analysis**

Interview data were collected through semi-structured interviews (the interview agenda is provided in Appendix), which were conducted and audio-recorded in May 2020 by the first author during the final two weeks of participants' sixth grade. Interviews were chosen as the research method due to their ability to capture in-depth insights into the participants' opinions and experiences, which is particularly valuable for understanding the nuances of civic engagement. This is in line with recent scholarly discussions that have highlighted the importance of research perspectives that focus on children's viewpoints (Biswas et al., 2024; Wall, 2022). However, the method also presented challenges, as some participants were shy and reluctant to share their opinions, making it difficult to elicit detailed responses. It is important to acknowledge that participants had the right to choose whether or not to share their thoughts, which sometimes resulted in less detailed responses. On the other hand, by interviewing adolescents, they acknowledge to be seen and heard, compared to just answering a survey. It was also possible to ask some clarifying questions when it was not clear what was mentioned.

The interviews were implemented online and lasted approximately 20–35 min each. The interviews were scheduled to take place within the duration of one school lesson, which set the time-frame for each interview. The data were transcribed and analysed using NVivo 12 software, which provides extensive tools for coding and categorising text-based research data. Pseudonyms were employed in the analyses to avoid unnecessary use of personal data, and the personal information of participants was stored in a separate document. Coding and analysis were conducted using the Finnish language. However, English translations of the themes, categories, and interview excerpts are reported in this paper.

The data was analysed using thematic analysis, a method that involves identifying patterns, themes, and categories in the data and interpreting them in relation to the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019). This approach provided the possibility to capture a comprehensive understanding of the participants' perceptions and opinions, and attach them to the theoretical framework and research questions of the present study. The analysis was conducted in three stages, beginning with the first author reading through the transcripts several times to become familiar with the interview material and to gain an initial understanding of the data. After this, an inductive approach was utilised to code the data, ensuring that the initial codes were generated from the data rather than were predetermined by the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006). After the first round of coding, an inter-rater agreement with a second author was conducted for codes in 25% of the interviews, with 86% agreement. All the authors then collaborated to reach a consensus on a unified coding system, which was subsequently used to analyse the entire dataset.

To refine our analysis further, the emergent codes were organised into broader themes. These thematic categories were informed by existing literature on youth civic engagement, facilitating a

conceptual bridge between our inductively generated codes and the established theoretical constructs of civic engagement (Barrett & Pachi, 2019; Ekman & Amnå, 2012; Torney-Purta et al., 2010). This process of thematic organisation did not predetermine the coding but instead provided a structured lens through which the codes could be examined and grouped. This method allowed us to remain grounded in the participants' perceptions while gradually integrating theoretical perspectives. After multiple reviews, refining, and combining or separating the themes, all the authors agreed on the final thematic structure. Finally, the outcomes of the thematic analysis were aligned with the predefined theoretical framework, categorising each theme according to its relevance to the dimensions of the framework: civic-oriented activities, spaces, or social environments. This process ensured that the themes accurately reflected the data and were based on the participants' responses. The saturation of themes was reached after analysing all data, thus confirming that the sample of 20 participants adequately represented the scope of the study (Corbin & Strauss, 2015).

## Ethics

The research was conducted following the ethical principles for research involving human participants (see Finnish Advisory Board on Research Integrity (TENK), 2013), and it was approved by the Ethical Committee of the University of Turku (approval number: 31/2019). Informed consent was obtained from both the participants and their legal guardians. The study was voluntary-based, and the schools, classes, or individuals did not receive any rewards for participating in it. All the participants could withdraw from the study at any time without consequences.

## Results

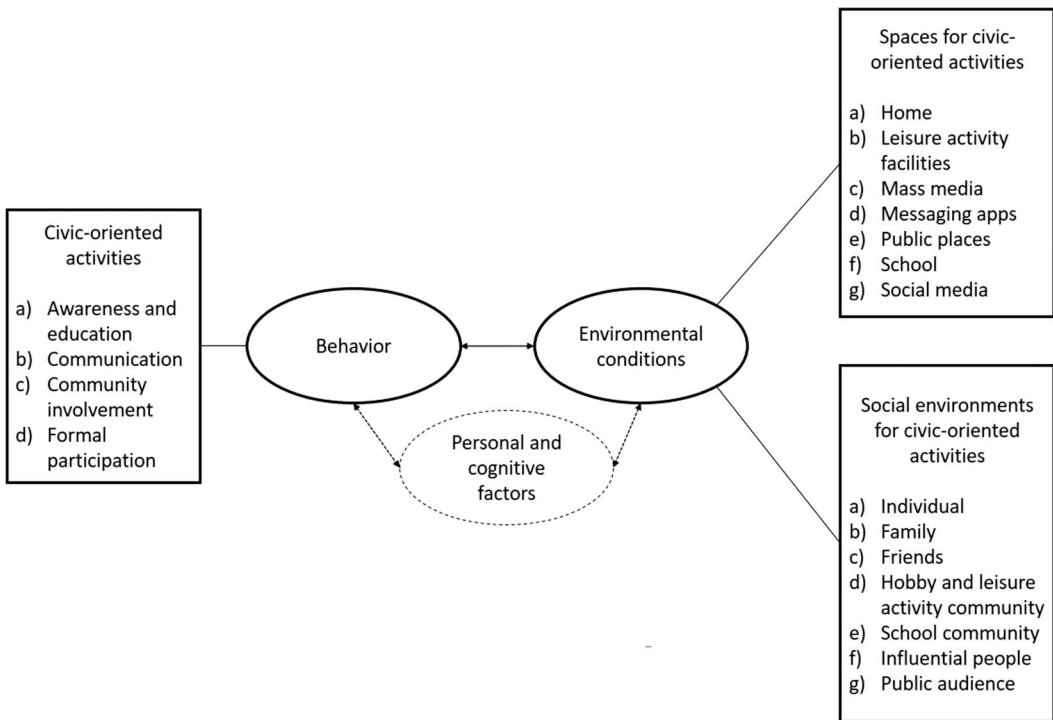
Figure 2 presents a comprehensive view of the 18 themes that emerged from the interviews. These themes are grouped into three distinct categories following the research questions of this study: civic-oriented activities, spaces and social environments. The themes are discussed in more detail in the following sections, which are organised according to the three research questions (RQ1–3).

### *Perceived civic-oriented activities (RQ1.)*

The analysis revealed four distinct forms of civic-oriented activities (Table 1). These activities encompass a diverse range of behavioural engagement forms, demonstrating how early adolescents can be involved in civic life.

The first category, **awareness and education**, primarily involves the cognitive process of learning and following social and political issues. Participants described having the opportunity to vote in mock elections organised by their social studies teachers or engaging in learning tasks during social studies lessons. Education, therefore, can be viewed as a formal means of practising engagement in social issues. Awareness represents a more informal or non-formal type of civic-oriented activity. Participants reported following various media channels based on personal interest or as a result of exposure to their parents' viewing habits, such as watching the news on television during morning routines. The participants also read articles and opinion pieces on political issues, reflecting their internal motivation to comprehend and engage with these topics. In addition, one participant reported that they watched the weekly televised question hour in parliament, where the opposition and government debate current politics.

During the research period, the COVID-19 outbreak occurred, and participants were required to watch official government information events and read articles about the situation. News-following activities included reading traditional newspapers, watching television, and engaging with social media. One participant described following the news through specific Instagram accounts that share the news. Participants also watched news that was especially targeted at children on the



**Figure 2.** Result of the thematic analysis: Contextual framework of youth civic engagement.

**Table 1.** The scope of civic-oriented activities.

Civic-oriented activity	Description
Awareness and education	Staying informed about current events and social issues through social and traditional media sources. Studying social issues formally in school and informally elsewhere.
Communication	Engaging in conversations and expressing opinions, both formal and informal, in digital and in-person contexts, verbally or through other communication methods.
Community involvement	Participating in sports, scouting and other leisure time activities. Taking initiatives to keep the environment clean. Participating in demonstrations and petitions.
Formal participation	Involvement in student councils or other elected youth participation bodies to represent peers and influence decision-making processes. Participating in polls, votes, and decision-making at the school or community level.

website of Finland’s largest newspaper, Helsingin Sanomat. One individual obtained news through Google, and other online newspapers were also mentioned.

Social media accounted for a significant number of ways in which participants followed social and political issues. They passively followed athletes, social media influencers, politicians, and celebrities, mainly on Instagram. Interpreting memes was also mentioned, with one participant recalling reading articles and seeing memes (about Greta Thunberg) in a WhatsApp group of relatives.

The second category, **communication**, encompasses debates and discussions, expressing opinions in various ways, or sending messages to influential people about specific cases. The participants described how, if they wanted to act on some issue, it was possible to send a message or letter to a member of parliament, officials or social media influencers. Participants talked about current political and societal issues such as COVID-19, climate change and the selection of the new prime minister in Finland, with parents, siblings, friends, and teachers. They also provided suggestions for organising schoolwork in their school communities. The communication situations

generally took place at home, school, and during leisure time, as well as digitally through messaging apps, both one-on-one or in group chats with relatives and friends. Video calls were also mentioned.

Based on the interview data, schools can be considered a significant venue for participants' communication about civic-oriented matters. The communication situations included lessons, breaks, school lunches, or negotiations in student councils. The participants also communicated by designing and placing posters on the walls of schools. With these posters, the participants aimed to inform the school community about important issues, for example, to encourage people not to put food in the garbage.

While civic-oriented communication among this age group can be considered rather mundane, instances where issues are negotiated and reported due to something not functioning well or being perceived as unfair can be regarded as important opportunities for improving community issues. These activities are authentic situations of current civic engagement and not just a means to practice for future action. As an example, the below excerpt illustrates how the common practices are negotiated in the school environment with peers and the teacher:

I: If you think about your school day, in what situations do you discuss societal topics?

S2: Well, of course, in all kinds of lessons. Maybe sometimes, if something comes to mind, like something isn't working well in transition situations. Then we might think about how to improve it or if it's fair for everyone or something like that. Those kinds of things. [Note: By transition situations, the participant is referring to situations when moving between activities]

The third category, **community involvement**, encompasses participation in sports, scouting, and other leisure-time activities. However, only those activities where participants had a chance to organise their actions and decisions were considered civic-oriented activities within these communities. One participant described how they had autonomously developed specific practices for feeding hay and providing water at a horse stable, demonstrating how early adolescents can influence the daily lives of particular communities, and these also included animals. Many participants also mentioned participating in demonstrations as a form of undertaking civic-oriented activities as a community with others. Further, signing petitions and taking the initiative to keep the environment clean were mentioned.

One participant shared how they could express their opinions and ideas on various issues within their scouting group. They also visited the city hall, where the scouting group learned about the municipal decision-making process and had the opportunity to share their opinions with officials.

The fourth category, **formal participation**, included involvement in institutionally organised activities. While underaged youth are not allowed to vote formally in official elections, the form of work in student councils resembles the work of other representative decision-making bodies. The participants described how they could run for the student council, vote in the student council election, and, after the election, either give suggestions to the council members or act directly in the council meeting if they have been elected as members of the group. According to the participants, the older students in the school could also act in a city-level body called the youth council. This type of electoral participation was thus considered formal since it resembled the method by which electoral participation functions at a city, regional and state level.

The participants also discussed how they could participate in school by voting about small awards or what type of equipment should be available during the breaks. A regular "rector's question hour" was organised in one school, where the students could ask and give suggestions for school work. In addition, a specific school action group called the "environmental panel" was mentioned, which can campaign about environmental issues. However, membership to this panel was also determined through elections, limiting the participation to elected members and mirroring the adult electoral processes. The following example describes how one participant was interested in environmental issues and ran for a position on the school environmental panel but was not elected as a member:

I: Have you been involved in the panel, or how does it work?

S12: I haven't been a part of it, but I've seen and heard how they work. I applied once, but I wasn't accepted.

I: Okay. Is there a limit on how many students can be involved in the panel?

S12: I'm not sure about the exact number, but each class can elect a leader and a deputy leader.

### **Spaces for civic-oriented activities (RQ2.)**

In our analysis, seven significant spaces emerged as potential for early adolescents' engagement in civic-oriented activities (Table 2). These spaces were either digital, physical, or shared characteristics of both types.

**Home**, as a physical space where an individual lives, was an essential surrounding for civic-oriented activities. The primary civic-oriented activities that early adolescents mentioned as occurring there were related to awareness and education, together with communication. Within the home, conversations about societal and political issues often took place among family members, including parents, siblings, grandparents, and other relatives. The discussions were held especially during shared moments such as meals or watching television and news. As such, home can be seen as an important space for early adolescents to learn the language needed for discussing society and politics through observation and practice. It was also noteworthy that participants with younger siblings took the initiative to discuss societal issues with them, underlining the importance of the home for nurturing civic discourse.

Outside the home, **leisure activity facilities** emerged as a space for learning practical civic-oriented activities. While these were not directly named in the interviews, it was inferred that participants engaged in community involvement activities at locations such as horse stables, sports facilities, and scout organisations. In these spaces, the early adolescents had a voice in organising the activities with other community members. Furthermore, they described the possibilities they had to influence the actual physical conditions where the activities were performed. As an example, one participant described how, at the horse stable, they had developed stable routines with their sister, which can be considered as small-scale community involvement and acting in an everyday environment:

I: Have you somehow influenced the operations at the stable, for example?

S7: I have, I don't know if I've influenced, but maybe I've developed it more.

I: Yes. What have you been able to develop?

S7: Well, for example, in the past, like when you always have to bag the hay for the horses or, for instance, provide water. So, I've developed new methods for how I do those.

**Mass media** encompassed both physical media outlets, such as newspapers and magazines, and digital platforms, like online news services. Based on the interviews, mass media served mainly

**Table 2.** Spaces for civic-oriented activities in early adolescence.

Spaces	Description
Home	A physical space where an individual lives.
Leisure activity facilities	Physical environments which serve as spaces for hobbies and recreational activities.
Mass media	Media sources and channels which provide information for a broad audience in digital or physical format, e.g., newspapers, television, and online news platforms.
Messaging apps	Digital applications, such as video calls and instant messaging apps, which provide possibilities to interact privately with defined groups of other people.
Public places	Public places where people are free to gather together, such as parks and streets.
School	A physical or digital space where individuals attend for educational purposes.
Social media	Digital and online platforms which provide opportunities to interact with undefined audiences of other people.

the purpose of raising participants' awareness of current issues. The early adolescents followed news and information from television channels and newspapers. They also watched other programmes about current issues (e.g., about COVID-19). Media can be considered a specific public space in which young people can also become engaged and follow the debates so as to obtain information about societal issues. Even though the participants in this study had not personally written for any newspapers, they described that it would be possible for children and youth to write opinion pieces in newspapers.

Digital **messaging apps** were prominent in facilitating intimate and private discussions on social or political issues. Participants mentioned WhatsApp to discuss these issues privately within group chats in family circles or with friends. The participants' role was more active in the messaging apps compared to the more general social media platforms. The active role of the participants in communication, and the nature of this space as more private compared to the public social media, formed the reason why messaging apps were considered as their own theme.

**Public places**, such as parks, streets, and public buildings, provided another space for early adolescents to act in a civic-oriented manner. In these locations, participants described how they can, or could, join in larger civic activities, like demonstrations, or engage in grassroots advocacy like putting up posters. Of the other public places, a city hall was particularly mentioned when one participant described a visit with their scout group. Furthermore, the environment, in general, was considered a public place and "keeping the environment clean" was mentioned as a way for children and youth to participate in society.

**The school** had a multifaceted role as a space for civic-oriented activities, and it served as a location for all four types of civic-oriented activities: awareness and education, communication, community involvement, and formal participation. Traditionally, schools have been understood as physical spaces of learning and interaction. Nonetheless, during the COVID-19 outbreak, schools were practically transformed into digital environments. This duality became visible during the period when the research interviews were conducted. Primarily, schools are seen as physical environments consisting of classrooms, lunch halls, corridors and break areas; however, due to COVID restrictions, they were also discussed in the context of digital environments, where interaction was mediated through virtual learning platforms and communication tools. Regardless of whether education was taking place in a physical or digital space, schools could be interpreted as forming a significant environment where participants engage in various civic-oriented activities.

Finally, **social media's** influence on the participants' civic engagement was highly important. These digital services served as platforms for general awareness and communication about political and societal discussions. During the interview data collection period, Instagram was the primary social media platform among the study participants, with information about COVID-19 being the most followed topic. Participants mentioned that they followed different accounts that posted content on political and social issues. While the majority of participants consumed content passively, some mentioned that they occasionally reacted to posts by liking them.

### ***Social environments for civic-oriented activities (RQ3.)***

The analysis identified seven distinct social environments in which early adolescents can engage in civic-oriented activities (Table 3). These environments range from individual and close-knit groups to broader community-level settings and interactions with public figures and audiences.

The most immediate social environment was the **individual**, where participants engaged in civic activities independently, without the presence of others. These included activities such as reading news articles and studying social issues. In the context of school, the following excerpt provides insight into how one participant describes acting there both independently and as part of a group, depending on the situation, albeit struggling to specify the type of activity:

I: Do you feel like you've tried to influence things at school in other ways besides through the student council?

**Table 3.** Social environments for civic-oriented activities in early adolescence.

Social environment	Description
Individual	Activities performed individually without other people
Family	Parents, siblings and relatives
Friends	Friends and peers
Hobby and leisure activity community	Communities for sports and other recreational activities, such as scouting
School Community	Students, teachers and other members of the school community
Influential people	Social media influencers, politicians and public officials
Public audience	Public audience at large, not defined to any specific people groups or communities

S16: Well, in some ways, yeah. I've been involved in the student council [board] myself, but also, I've always tried to ... It's hard to explain, but yeah, I do try to influence things.

I: Yeah. Do you have any specific ways that you try to make a difference? How do you usually act if you want to influence something at school?

S16: Well, I just kind of ... I don't know, I just start doing whatever it is I want to do, and then I, yeah.

I: Do you act alone, or do you usually work in a group?

S16: Well, it depends on the situation, but sometimes I work alone, and other times, usually in a group.

Beyond this, other environments involved interactions within close groups of individuals with whom the individuals are well-acquainted and interact daily. These included **family** and **friends**. Family members formed the most influential social environment for civic-oriented activities. Participants often interacted with their parents, siblings, and other relatives on civic-related topics. For instance, one participant highlighted a strong intergenerational civic engagement with their grandparent, engaging in weekly discussions about governmental question sessions and politics in general:

I: So, do you speak often about these issues?

S17: Well, with my grandpa, maybe once a week, but not too much with my parents, though we do talk about it occasionally.

(...)

I: Alright. Who do you think has inspired you to follow these governmental question sessions, for example?

S17: It's our grandpa.

The next set of social environments involved broader interactions, including structured community groups and the school community. The **hobby and leisure activity communities** comprised of groups of people in sports teams, scouting and hobby clubs. Participants found opportunities to discuss and influence the community and social issues within these communities. **The school community** represented a structured environment comprising various sub-communities: the class community, including the teacher, peer groups, the student council, and environmental panel groups. One communication activity mentioned was raising awareness of essential issues within the school community through posters targeting the entire school community.

The final set of social environments included interactions with **influential people** and a **public audience**. Here, participants do not personally know the people they interact with, and the interaction is limited. However, they can still contact individuals at this level of social settings. The influential people included athletes, politicians, and social media influencers with whom participants believed they could interact or whose messages they already followed. Additionally, as shown in the following excerpt, the participants often referred to contacting "some people" on multiple occasions, reflecting that they may know it is possible to contact someone if they want to:

I: Do you feel that you have political or societal opinions that are worth being heard?

S1: Not really. I don't have any opinions about anything at the moment.

I: Well, if you had one or if you will get opinions in the future, do you think you could participate and make a difference? Do you know ways to do that?

S1: Maybe one way – if you write something, like a text or something, and then send it to someone.

More broadly, the participants referred to activities such as participating in demonstrations or signing petitions, and these were considered collaborative efforts with a public audience – an undefined group of people.

## Discussion

The aim of this study was to analyse the environmental conditions of early adolescents' civic engagement and to promote an understanding of the range of civic-oriented activities in which they perceive themselves to be able to participate. More specifically, the goal was to explore how, where and with whom early adolescents may engage in civic activities. The interview data were gathered among Finnish 6th-grade students ( $N = 20$ ) who were 12–13 years old at the time of the interviews.

Although the analysis was data-driven, the research questions and findings were structured around a theoretical framework based on Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory (SCT). Drawing on this framework, the study identified four main categories of civic-oriented activities, as well as seven spaces in which these activities occur and seven social environments where they take place. While the results of the study were presented in distinct sections based on these dimensions, it is important to recognise that, from the perspective of SCT, behaviour and environmental conditions are dynamically interconnected. These interactions are also further shaped by personal and cognitive factors, which were outside the scope of this study.

By focusing specifically on early adolescents aged 12–13 years, the study has been able to provide novel insights into the patterns of civic engagement within this particular age group. Overall, the results paint a relatively rich and varied picture of early adolescents' civic engagement. When we look beyond conventional political participation such as involvement in political parties and elections – activities that are often restricted for this age group due to legal and practical limitations – the civic behaviours of early adolescents are quite similar to those of older youth, as outlined by Barrett and Pachi (2019). Besides conventional political participation, their opportunities for financial participation, like boycotting or buycotting, are also naturally limited. Given these insights, the civic potential of early adolescents should not be underestimated or overlooked, and future studies and practical educational and social interventions should be carefully designed to cater for the civic engagement possibilities of this age group.

While recent studies have highlighted the significance of new media environments in shaping civic engagement among young people (Boulianne & Theocharis, 2020; Ohme & de Vreese, 2023), the present results indicate that the “traditional” socialisation environments – such as family, school, and leisure activity communities – still play a notable role in shaping civic engagement among early adolescents. In this study, even though the impact of social media was important, it did not outweigh the influence of traditional settings like schools and community activities. It is also important to note that the traditional settings for political socialisation could be especially important for this particular age group, as in many social media platforms, such as Instagram and TikTok, the minimum lawful age for users is 13 years. However, this restriction may be at least partially theoretical since, in practice, such restrictions can be circumvented with relative ease.

## Limitations

There are some limitations to the study, which are important to highlight. Firstly, the study does not report how much or how often early adolescents engage in the civic-oriented activities described in this study. Instead, the study provides information on and contributes to the knowledge of what civic engagement entails or could entail for early adolescents transitioning between childhood

and adolescence. It is important to acknowledge that our research questions, methodology and analysis predominantly highlight civic-oriented activities and their contexts. The study focused primarily on the participants' reported activities and engagement, and it did not aim to report civic *unengagement*, which has been studied in the previous research literature (Ekman & Amnå, 2012; Tzankova et al., 2022). As such, the study does not focus on the reasons or forms of passivity in civic engagement among early adolescents, even though not all participants in our study displayed active behaviour towards civic life.

Secondly, even though the interview material was rich, it was still obtained from a sample of participants living in the same geographical area. Therefore, the applicability of our findings to different contexts should be approached with caution and researched further. This limitation implies that certain activities, spaces, or social environments significant to early adolescents in other locations might not be represented in our results. Similarly, the forms of civic engagement identified in this study may not manifest in other contexts. The intensity and nature of youth civic engagement can vary between different countries, regions, municipalities, and schools, and the results may vary when studying the phenomenon at different times (Barrett & Pachi, 2019, p. 19). This underscores one of the study's conclusions: civic engagement is intricately dependent on environmental conditions.

When interpreting the results, it is also worth noting that the interview data was collected in May 2020, when the world was adjusting to the changes brought about by COVID-19. During this time, the role of politics in guiding and shaping everyday lives became evident. Usually, adults have more freedom in their actions in society than underaged youth. However, with the COVID-19 restrictions set by the government, everyone, both young and old, faced similar rules and changes. This led, for example, to a lack of formal contact teaching because education was ordered to be organised remotely. This rapidly changed social reality fostered a fruitful landscape for people to talk about society and its rules, and we saw that this was often raised in our interviews. However, this also raises the question of to what extent the exceptional situation is reflected in the results of the study and how well the results correspond to the normal situation. One might assume, for example, that alongside social media, the family and the more traditional news media were exceptionally prominent during the pandemic.

Another potential limitation is that we did not specifically analyse which types of attributes of social environments or spaces promote civic engagement. Thus, future research about SCT and civic engagement should further focus on the underlying conditions of different spaces and social environments and how they influence the development of civic engagement. Since the study focused on environmental conditions of civic-oriented activities, we did not include any personal and cognitive factors of civic engagement in the framework; however, future research could supplement the framework by including themes such as political efficacy, interest and knowledge as elements influencing civic engagement. Additionally, it would be important to explore further how personal and cognitive factors are interconnected with the behavioural and environmental conditions of early adolescents' civic engagement.

## Acknowledgements

We thank the participants for giving their time to participate in the interviews and for openly sharing their thoughts and experiences with us.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Funding details

This work was supported by the University of Turku Graduate School (Turun yliopiston tutkijakoulu), Turku University Foundation (Turun Yliopistosäätiö) under Grant number 081190

Doctoral Dissertation Grant, and The Finnish Cultural Foundation (Suomen Kulttuurirahasto) under Grant number 85222201 Varsinais-Suomi Regional Fund.

## References

- Amnå, E., & Zetterberg, P. (2010). A political science perspective on socialization research: Young nordic citizens in a comparative light. In *Handbook of research on civic engagement in youth* (pp. 38–48). John Wiley & Sons.
- Andersen, K., Ohme, J., Bjarnøe, C., Bordacconi, M. J., Albæk, E., & de Vreese, C. (2021). *Generational gaps in political media use and civic engagement: From baby boomers to generation Z*. Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.
- Bandura, A. (1986). *Social foundations of thought and action: A social cognitive theory*. Prentice-Hall.
- Barrett, M., & Pachi, D. (2019). *Youth civic and political engagement*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429025570>
- Biswas, T., & Mattheis, N. (2022). Strikingly educational: A childist perspective on children’s civil disobedience for climate justice. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 54(2), 145–157. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2021.1880390>
- Biswas, T., Wall, J., Warming, H., Zehavi, O., Kennedy, D., Murriss, K., Kohan, W., Saal, B., & Rollo, T. (2024). Childism and philosophy: A conceptual co-exploration. *Policy Futures in Education*, 22(5), 741–759. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14782103231185178>
- Boulianne, S., & Theocharis, Y. (2020). Young people, digital media, and engagement: A meta-analysis of research. *Social Science Computer Review*, 38(2), 111–127. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0894439318814190>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp0630a>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2019). Reflecting on reflexive thematic analysis. *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health*, 11(4), 589–597. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2159676X.2019.1628806>
- Corbin, J. M., & Strauss, A. L. (2015). *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory* (4th ed.). Sage.
- Desjardins, R., & Wiksten, S. (2022). *Handbook of civic engagement and education*. Edward Elgar Publishing.
- Ekman, J., & Amnå, E. (2012). Political participation and civic engagement: Towards a new typology. *Human Affairs*, 22(3), 283–300. <https://doi.org/10.2478/s13374-012-0024-1>
- Fenn, N., Sacco, A., Monahan, K., Robbins, M., & Pearson-Merkowitz, S. (2024). Examining the relationship between civic engagement and mental health in young adults: A systematic review of the literature. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 27(4), 1–30. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2022.2156779>
- Finnish Advisory Board on Research Integrity (TENK). (2013). *Responsible conduct of research and procedures for handling allegations of misconduct in Finland*. <https://tenk.fi/en/advice-and-materials/RCR-Guidelines-2012>
- Finnish National Board of Education. (2016). *National core curriculum for basic education 2014*.
- Gidengil, E., Lahtinen, H., Wass, H., & Erola, J. (2021). From generation to generation: The role of grandparents in the intergenerational transmission of (non-)voting. *Political Research Quarterly*, 74(4), 1137–1151. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1065912920971715>
- Gidengil, E., Wass, H., & Valaste, M. (2016). Political socialization and voting: The parent–child link in turnout. *Political Research Quarterly*, 69(2), 373–383. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1065912916640900>
- Gil de Zúñiga, H., Valenzuela, S., & Weeks, B. E. (2016). Motivations for political discussion: Antecedents and consequences on civic engagement. *Human Communication Research*, 42(4), 533–552. <https://doi.org/10.1111/hcre.12086>
- Grütter, J., & Buchmann, M. (2022). Cohort differences in the development of civic engagement during adolescence. *Child Development*, 93(4), e427–e445. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cdev.13743>
- Holecz, V., Fernández, G. G., & Giugni, M. (2022). Broadening political participation: The impact of socialising practices on young people’s action repertoires. *Politics*, 42(1), 58–74. <https://doi.org/10.1177/02633957211041448>
- Huttunen, J. (2021). Young rebels who do not want a revolution: The non-participatory preferences of Fridays for future activists in Finland. *Frontiers in Political Science*, 3(May), 1–11. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpos.2021.672362>
- Kallio, K. P., & Häkli, J. (2011a). Tracing children’s politics. *Political Geography*, 30(2), 99–109. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2011.01.006>
- Kallio, K. P., & Häkli, J. (2011b). Young people’s voiceless politics in the struggle over urban space. *GeoJournal*, 76(1), 63–75. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10708-010-9402-6>
- Kestilä-Kekkonen, E., Sipilinen, J., & Söderlund, P. (2025). Mummy’s girls, daddy’s boys: The gendered transmission of political engagement in families. *West European Politics*, 48(2), 297–322. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402382.2023.2275447>
- Koskimaa, V., & Rapeli, L. (2015). Political socialization and political interest: The role of school reassessed. *Journal of Political Science Education*, 11(2), 141–156. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15512169.2015.1016033>
- Lannegrund-Willems, L., Chevrier, B., Perchec, C., & Carrizales, A. (2018). How is civic engagement related to personal identity and social identity in late adolescents and emerging adults? A person-oriented approach. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 47(4), 731–748. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10964-018-0821-x>

- Lenzi, M., Vieno, A., Sharkey, J., Mayworm, A., Scacchi, L., Pastore, M., & Santinello, M. (2014). How school can teach civic engagement besides civic education: The role of democratic school climate. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 54(3), 251–261. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10464-014-9669-8>
- Loader, B. D., Vromen, A., & Xenos, M. A. (2014). The networked young citizen: Social media, political participation and civic engagement. *Information Communication and Society*, 17(2), 143–150. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2013.871571>
- Lonkila, M., & Jokivuori, P. (2023). Sharing and liking as youth nano-level participation. Finnish students' civic and political engagement in social media. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 26(6), 803–820. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2022.2049731>
- McLoughlin, S., Polizzi, G., Harrison, T., Moller, F., Maile, A., Picton, I., & Clark, C. (2024). Measuring civic engagement in young children. *Journal of Psychoeducational Assessment*, 42(1), 14–28. <https://doi.org/10.1177/07342829231205070>
- Neundorf, A., Niemi, R. G., & Smets, K. (2016). The compensation effect of civic education on political engagement: How civics classes make up for missing parental socialization. *Political Behavior*, 38(4), 921–949. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11109-016-9341-0>
- Neundorf, A., & Smets, K. (2017). Political socialization and the making of citizens. In *Oxford handbook topics in politics* (vol. 1). Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/OXFORDHB/9780199935307.013.98>
- Oden, A., & Porter, L. (2023). The kids are online: Teen social media use, civic engagement, and affective polarization. *Social Media + Society*, 9(3), 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051231186364>
- Ohme, J., & de Vreese, C. (2020). Traditional and “new media” forms and political socialization. In J. Bulck (Ed.), *The international encyclopedia of media psychology* (pp. 1–9). John Wiley & Sons, Ltd. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119011071.iemp0167>
- Oosterhoff, B., Alvis, L., Deutchman, D., Poppler, A., & Palmer, C. A. (2021). Civic development within the peer context: Associations between early adolescent social connectedness and civic engagement. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 50(9), 1870–1883. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10964-021-01465-5>
- Pickard, S. (2022). Young environmental activists and do-it-ourselves (DIO) politics: Collective engagement, generational agency, efficacy, belonging and hope. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 25(6), 730–750. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2022.2046258>
- Pontes, A. I., Henn, M., & Griffiths, M. D. (2019). Youth political (dis)engagement and the need for citizenship education: Encouraging young people's civic and political participation through the curriculum. *Education, Citizenship and Social Justice*, 14(1), 3–21. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1746197917734542>
- Quintelier, E. (2010). The effect of schools on political participation: A multilevel logistic analysis. *Research Papers in Education*, 25(2), 137–154. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02671520802524810>
- Rinnooy Kan, W. F., März, V., Volman, M., & Dijkstra, A. B. (2021). Learning from, through and about differences: A multiple case study on schools as practice grounds for citizenship. *Social Sciences*, 10(6), 200. <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci10060200>
- Russo, S., & Stattin, H. (2017). Stability and change in youths' political interest. *Social Indicators Research*, 132(2), 643–658. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11205-016-1302-9>
- Schulz, W., Ainley, J., Fraillon, J., Losito, B., Agrusti, G., & Friedman, T. (2016). *Becoming citizens in a changing world. IEA international civic and citizenship education study 2016 international report*. Springer Open.
- Schulz, W., Ainley, J., Fraillon, J., Losito, B., Agrusti, G., Valeria, D., & Friedman, T. (2023). *Education for citizenship in times of global challenge. IEA international civic and citizenship education study 2022 international report*. Civics and Citizenship Assessment. <https://research.acer.edu.au/civics/37>
- Smetana, J. G., Campione-Barr, N., & Metzger, A. (2006). Adolescent development in interpersonal and societal contexts. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 57(1), 255–284. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.psych.57.102904.190124>
- Torney-Purta, J., Amadeo, J.-A., & Andolina, M. W. (2010). A conceptual framework and multimethod approach for research on political socialization and civic engagement. In L. R. Sherrod, J. Torney-Purta, & C. A. Flanagan (Eds.), *Handbook of research on civic engagement in youth* (pp. 497–523). John Wiley & Sons. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470767603.ch19>
- Tzankova, I., Albanesi, C., Prati, G., & Cicognani, E. (2023). Development of civic and political engagement in schools: A structural equation model of democratic school characteristics' influence on different types of participation. *European Journal of Developmental Psychology*, 20(6), 1060–1081. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17405629.2022.2094362>
- Tzankova, I., Prati, G., & Cicognani, E. (2022). Profiles of citizenship orientations among youth. *Young*, 30(1), 57–79. <https://doi.org/10.1177/11033088211008691>
- Vaccari, C., & Valeriani, A. (2021). *Outside the bubble: Social media and political participation in western democracies*. Oxford University Press.
- Voight, A., & Torney-Purta, J. (2013). A typology of youth civic engagement in urban middle schools. *Applied Developmental Science*, 17(4), 198–212. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10888691.2013.836041>
- Wall, J. (2022). From childhood studies to childism: Reconstructing the scholarly and social imaginations. *Children's Geographies*, 20(3), 257–270. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14733285.2019.1668912>

- White, E. S., & Mistry, R. S. (2019). Teachers' civic socialization practices and children's civic engagement. *Applied Developmental Science*, 23(2), 183–202. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10888691.2017.1377078>
- Wiiium, N., Kristensen, S. M., Årdal, E., Bøe, T., Gaspar de Matos, M., Karhina, K., Larsen, T. M. B., Urke, H. B., & Wold, B. (2023). Civic engagement and mental health trajectories in Norwegian youth. *Frontiers in Public Health*, 11, 1214141. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpubh.2023.1214141>
- Wilkenfeld, B., Lauckhardt, J., & Torney-Purta, J. (2010). The relation between developmental theory and measures of civic engagement in research on adolescents. In L. R. Sherrod, J. Torney-Purta, & C. A. Flanagan (Eds.), *Handbook of research on civic engagement in youth* (pp. 193–219). John Wiley & Sons, Inc. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470767603.ch8>
- Wray-Lake, L., & Abrams, L. S. (2020). Pathways to civic engagement among urban youth of color. *Monographs of the Society for Research in Child Development*, 85(2), 7–154. <https://doi.org/10.1111/mono.12415>
- Wray-Lake, L., Metzger, A., & Syvertsen, A. K. (2017). Testing multidimensional models of youth civic engagement: Model comparisons, measurement invariance, and age differences. *Applied Developmental Science*, 21(4), 266–284. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10888691.2016.1205495>
- Wray-Lake, L., & Shubert, J. (2019). Understanding stability and change in civic engagement across adolescence: A typology approach. *Developmental Psychology*, 55(10), 2169–2180. <https://doi.org/10.1037/dev0000772>
- Wunderlich, L., Hölig, S., & Hasebrink, U. (2022). Does journalism still matter? The role of journalistic and non-journalistic sources in young peoples' news related practices. *The International Journal of Press/Politics*, 27(3), 569–588. <https://doi.org/10.1177/19401612211072547>
- Xenos, M., Vromen, A., & Loader, B. D. (2014). The great equalizer? Patterns of social media use and youth political engagement in three advanced democracies. *Information, Communication & Society*, 17(2), 151–167. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2013.871318>

## Appendix. Interview agenda

### Definitions and warmup

If you think about your school's social studies teaching, what has it been like this spring after transitioning to remote teaching?

What things do you think are related to the word “society”?

What things do you think are related to the word “politics”?

### Interest

If you think about the past year, do you remember being interested in a particular societal or political issue or topic?

Do you remember discussing any societal issues with your friends in the past year?

If you think about a school day, in what situations do you discuss societal topics? For example, in social studies classes, other classes, during breaks?

If you think about life outside school, in what situations do you discuss societal topics?

Do you follow any individuals or accounts on social media, or the internet in general, that occasionally cover societal topics? Have you participated in such discussions?

Now that we've been in the coronavirus era, do you notice that your interest in society has changed from before?

Now that we've been discussing this, would you like to clarify any of your previous responses or express any of your own thoughts related to this topic?

### Making a change and participation

Do you feel that you have tried to make a change to certain things at school?

How about in your hobbies?

Or in some ways in the municipality or in society more broadly?

What ways and opportunities do students generally have to influence your school?

And what ways do children and youths have to make a change in society in general?

What ways are there to make a change and participate in society, in general?

How do you feel that you could participate and influence in society or politics in the future?

### Political efficacy (internal / external)

Do you feel that you have political and societal opinions worth hearing?

Do you trust that you could somehow participate politically or socially?

What things should one generally know or be able to do to participate in society or politics?

In what way do decision-makers consider children's and youths' matters when making decisions?

Should children and youths have more opportunities to participate in society or politics? What could these ways be?

Now that we've been discussing this, would you like to clarify any of your previous responses or express any of your own thoughts related to this topic?

**Social studies**

If you think about your social studies lessons: what topics do you remember from them?

And what kind of working methods do you remember from your school's social studies lessons?

Have you visited outside the classroom during social studies classes to learn or has anyone visited your school?

What things should be taught in social studies?

Is forming one's own opinions practiced?

Has making a change been practiced?

In what ways do you think you could best learn to make a change at school or in society more broadly?

Now that we've been discussing this, would you like to clarify any of your previous responses or express any of your own thoughts related to this topic?