

**CITIZENSHIP AND DEMOCRACY  
STUDENTS' KNOWLEDGE AND BELIEFS**

**Australian Fourteen Year Olds  
&  
The IEA Civic Education Study**

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

**The IEA Civic Education Study**

This Civic Education Study was carried out in two phases by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA). In Phase 1 of the Study, national researchers conducted qualitative case studies that examined the contexts and meaning of civic education in 24 countries. The case studies were published in *Civic Education across Countries: Twenty-four National Case Studies from the IEA Civic Education Project*. The observations from the case studies were then used to develop both a test of students' civic knowledge and a survey of their civic engagement whose results were suitable for rigorous statistical analysis.

In Phase 2 of the Study, nationally representative samples of nearly 90,000 students in the usual grade for 14-year-olds in 28 countries were surveyed on topics ranging from their knowledge of fundamental democratic principles and skills in interpreting political information to their attitudes toward government and willingness to participate in civic activity. The data-gathering was carried out in 1999 by teams in each country guided by policies and technical guidelines established by IEA. The findings from the international study were published in the report, *Citizenship and Education in Twenty-eight Countries: Civic Knowledge and Engagement at Age Fourteen*, in March 2001.

This Australian national report, *Citizenship and Democracy: Students' Knowledge and Beliefs. Australian Fourteen Year Olds and the IEA Civic Education Study*, analyses and interprets the Australian data collected during the IEA Civic Education Study. It references the international data from the Study and the international report as it was thought illuminative to understanding the Australian picture. The analysis of the full Australian data set was beyond the resources of this project, and much analysis could still be done to more fully explicate the Australian data.

**The 28 Countries Participating in Phase 2 of the IEA Civic Education Study**

Australia	Finland	Poland
Belgium*	Germany	Portugal
Bulgaria	Greece	Romania
Chile	Hong Kong (SAR)**	Russian Federation
Colombia	Hungary	Slovak Republic
Cyprus	Italy	Slovenia
Czech Republic	Latvia	Sweden
Denmark	Lithuania	Switzerland
England	Norway	United States
Estonia		

\* Only the French educational system in Belgium participated

\*\* Special Administrative Region of China

## **The IEA Civic Education Study in Australia**

A two stage stratified cluster design for sampling was employed. At the first stage, schools were sampled using a probability proportional to size. In Australia, 142 schools participated in the study, providing a school participation rate of 94%. The sample structure, ensuring representation of government, Catholic and independent schools, provides a good estimate for Australia overall, but it does not enable between-state comparisons.

At the second stage the sample consisted of one intact classroom per school from the target grade. The chosen class was not to be tracked by ability and was, where possible, to be in a civic-related subject (eg. history, social studies). The requirement to select students from a History or SOSE class was problematic in Australia because not all Year 9 students were experiencing a History/SOSE class during the testing period. Thus a range of procedures for class selection was employed. The Australian Project Manager and the IEA closely monitored the integrity of this sampling process.

Testing took place in Australia between September and November 1999, as it did in other southern hemisphere countries. The Australian cohort of Year 9 students was 3331, with a student participation rate of 92%. The Australian sample had a mean age of 14.6 years with a standard deviation of 0.5. 67% of the sample were 14 year olds, 55% of were females and 10% were not born in Australia.

## **The IEA Concept of Civic Knowledge and Belief**

The construction of test and survey instruments was based on data from the case studies collected in Phase 1. The Student Questionnaire was designed by experts from all participating countries and by members of the IEA International Steering Committee. The proposed topics for examination were based on the three broad domains which had been established early in the project as representing the knowledge base of civic education:

- Democracy/Citizenship;
- National Identity/International Relations; and
- Social Cohesion/Diversity

Underpinning this study was a conception of civic education as a complex enterprise involving a variety of cognitive, conceptual and attitudinal strands, each of which is important and open to independent evaluation. To cater for this conception, manifested in the matrix shown in Table (i), five different item types were devised:

- Knowledge of Content;
- Skills in Interpretation;
- Understanding of Concepts;
- Attitudes; and
- Expected Actions

## Domains and Item Types Used in the IEA Civic Education Study

Domains	Item Types				
	1. Knowledge	2. Skills	3. Concepts	4. Attitudes	5. Actions
Domain I <i>Democracy/ Citizenship</i>					
Domain II <i>National Identity International Relations</i>					
Domain III <i>Social Cohesion/ Diversity</i>					

(See Table 1.3 in this report: *Citizenship and Democracy: Students' Knowledge and Beliefs*, p. 23)

The domains and items types provided a matrix for test development, based on the conception of civic education developed for the Study. Items 1-2 were the 'test' items and Items 3-5 were the 'survey' items. Part One of the Student Questionnaire consisted of thirty eight Type 1 (knowledge) and Type 2 (interpretative skills) test items. Part Two of the Student Questionnaire sought background data. Part Three consisted of fifty two Type 3 items, sixty two Type 4 items and twenty two Type 5 items. The measures used to compare students' responses to the Type 3-5 items, within and between countries, were the degree of positiveness shown in the responses to the items. These measures were based on the conceptual model of citizenship developed for the Study.

A Teacher Questionnaire and a School Questionnaire were developed and administered at each site. These were to be completed by three teachers and the Principal (or delegate). The Australian response rates were 83% and 85% respectively.

### Highlights of Australian Findings

#### Australian Students' Civic Knowledge in an International Context

- Ten countries had Total Civic Knowledge average scores which were significantly above the international mean. Eight countries had averages which were significantly below the international mean. Ten countries, positioned in between these two groups, had means which did not vary significantly from the international mean. Australia was one of those countries. The ranking shows Australia to be in the upper part of that middle group, but this was not statistically significant.
- Three countries in the average group achieved above-average scores on the interpretative skill sub-score. Australia was the only country which scored above average on the interpretative skills, average on the content knowledge and average on the total score.
- In a majority of countries female students scored better than the male students. Such was also the case in Australia. The data suggest, however, that civic knowledge is not gender-based, as the differences were small.
- In the large majority of countries, the more books students reported in the home the better they performed on the civic knowledge test. Australia was a classic example of this pattern although the effect size was not the strongest when compared with other countries.

### **Australian Students' Civic Knowledge**

- Two per cent of the Australian students correctly answered every question. It is estimated that almost a quarter of Australian students had sufficient civic knowledge for a 65 percent chance that they could correctly answer all the civic knowledge items.
- It is estimated that 10% of Australian students could not answer any of the 38 cognitive items correctly.
- Australian students showed a substantially greater facility with the Interpretative Skills items than they did with the Content Knowledge items. This appears to reflect the emphasis given in Australian schools to the close reading of, and inference from, texts.
- Only half of the Australian students have a grasp of the essential pre-conditions for a properly working democracy. It seems that Australian students are not strong in their understandings of what constitute their civil rights. The Civic Knowledge items with which Australian students had the most difficulty were those which deal with the forms and purposes of Democracy. Australian students have a strong sense of 'natural justice' and equity, but they lack clarity about the theoretical precepts of democratic models and structures. (For example: the role of criticism in a democracy, civil rights, function of periodic elections, the content (and by implication the purpose of) a constitution, legitimate media influence in a democracy and problems in a government moving from dictatorship to democracy.) 60% of Australian students successfully inferred the consequences of a large publisher buying up many of a nation's newspapers.
- Australian students do not have a strong grasp of the impact of economic issues in the functioning of a democratic system. (For example: the role of trade unions in a modern economy, the key characteristics of a market economy, a range of issues associated with multinationals and globalisation.) Nor do they have a clear sense of where the inherent tensions between democratic ideals and economic exigencies lie.
- The television news is the preferred source of information for 80% of Australian students, though about two-thirds of them also read about what is happening in this country and in other countries in the newspapers, and 62% of them also listen to the news on the radio. Australia is one of the countries where the frequency of watching news is associated with higher civic knowledge, with a greater effect than the international average.

### **Australian Students' Civic Engagement**

The first group of the Attitudinal scales surveyed in Part Three of the Student Questionnaire was called the Civic Engagement Dimension and consisted of four scales. (Conventional Citizenship, Social Movement Citizenship, Expected Participation in Political Activities and Confidence in Participation in School)

- Australian students' scores are significantly below the International mean on three of the four scales which make up the Civic Engagement dimension. All the scales reference active participation. It appears Australian students do not endorse action by citizens. Only four of the twenty eight countries registered below international means on three of the Civic Engagement scales.
- On the Conventional Citizenship scale the Australian students only positively endorsed two of the five items. They do believe a good citizen votes and shows respect for government representatives. But they regard knowing the country's history and following political issues in the press, and, especially, engaging in political discussion as relatively

unimportant. With a mean of 9.3, they register as significantly below the international mean (set at 10 for all scales) on this scale.

- For each of the items on the Social Movement Citizenship scale the Australian students' responses had the heaviest weight of opinion in the 'fairly important' response category, thus indicating a less than enthusiastic endorsement. However eighty per cent of the Australian students believe in the importance of a good citizen participating in 'activities to benefit people in the community'. Three quarters of the Australian students think taking part in the protecting the environment is important, and two thirds support the importance of promoting human rights. Only just over half of the Australian students think it important to participate in peaceful protest against a law they believe to be unjust. With a mean of 9.3, Australian students again register as significantly below the international mean on this scale.
- Australian students did not regard conventional forms of civic participation as important as did their peers from a range of other countries. Similar to the international cohort, Australian students do not intend to participate in conventional political activities, other than voting. Given that voting is compulsory in Australia, students' expectation by 86% of them that they will vote has a different significance than such a percentage would have in those countries where voting is optional.
- The Australian mean for the Expected Participation in Political Activities scale was 9.8 per cent, and thus once again the Australian cohort was significantly below the international mean. (Examples of items: Eighty nine per cent do not expect to join a political party, 76% do not expect to write letters to newspapers about social or political concerns, and 87% do not expect to be a candidate for a local or city office. Two thirds of Australian students reported that they expect to collect money for a social cause or charity. Only 40% said they would be prepared to join a non-violent protest march.)
- Participation in a school council or parliament is positively related to civic knowledge for Australian students, indeed even more so than for the international students. However, only one third of them has participated in a school council or parliament. Australian students appear to have a more positive view of what can be achieved by groups of students in schools than they have of what adults can achieve by active participation in the political process. Thus, on the Confidence in Participating at School scale the Australian mean, at 9.9, is lower than the international but is not significantly below that of the international group.

### **Australian Students' Civic Attitudes, and other Concepts**

The second of the Attitudinal scales surveyed in Part Three of the Student Questionnaire consisted of seven scales. (Economy-related Government Responsibilities, Society-related Government Responsibilities, Positive Attitudes towards Immigrants, Symbolic Patriotism, Trust in Government-related Institutions, Support for Women's Political Rights and Open Climate for Classroom Discussion)

- Australian students were less likely than the international cohort to support notions of governments having Economic-related Responsibilities, with the mean being significantly less than the international. The majority of Australian students did endorse the view that it is government business to 'keep prices under control' and 'to guarantee a job for everyone who wants one'. But they showed less support for the view that it is government responsibility to develop industry, re-distribute wealth and provide decent living standards for the unemployed.
- Australian students are more confident that governments have Society-related Responsibilities. (For example: Seventy per cent of students believe governments should definitely guarantee peace and order, 68% definitely ensure equal political opportunities

for men and women, and approximately two thirds believe governments definitely should provide basic health care and free education for everyone.) Their support was equal to that of their international peers.

- The attitudes of Australian students to immigrants are only moderately positive; similar to the international average. (For example: 89% of them agree that immigrants should have the right to equal educational opportunity, with only 77% agreeing immigrants should have the right to maintain their customs. Almost a quarter of the students think immigrants should not be able to continue their own customs and lifestyles.)
- In response to questions regarding Symbolic Patriotism, four in five Australian students are very sure they do not want to live anywhere else, and believe Australia should be proud of what it has achieved. The Australian flag is not important to a quarter of them. These levels of patriotism are average for the international cohort.
- Australian students showed average levels of Trust in Government related Institutions. Between two thirds and three quarters, of the Australian students trusted the police and the courts. (For example: only 6% and 7% respectively indicating they would 'never' trust them.) Two thirds of Australian students trusted local government. Similar to their international peers, the least trust was afforded political parties.
- Australian students' Support for Women's Political Rights was amongst the strongest of all countries. (For example: They reserve their greatest endorsement for 'women should get equal pay...' and 'should have the same rights as men in every way' and 90% agree.)
- More Australian students experience Open Classroom Climates than the quarter of international students who claimed they discuss in class. (For example: 34% say they are often encouraged to voice their opinion in class.) Nevertheless, similar to their international peers, a quarter of the Australian students say this rarely or never happens.
- As with the international response, only a little more than half of Australian students (55%) said they had learnt in school about the 'importance of voting in national elections'.
- There are substantial gender differences across the range of items and scales. (For example: Females students are more inclined to support Social Movement Citizenship, Confidence in Participating at School, Society-related Government Responsibilities, Positive Attitudes towards Immigrants, Support for Women's Political Rights and Open Climate for Classroom Discussion.) Males were not more positive than females on any of the two groups of Attitude Scales.

### **Australian Teacher and School Approaches to Civic Education**

The 352 teachers who responded to this questionnaire were teachers of English, a range of SOSE subjects and were also Curriculum Co-ordinators. These teachers agreed on most issues. Some findings from the 120 Principal respondents to the School Questionnaire were also reported.

- Although only a quarter of the teachers surveyed had had initial training in Civics Education, almost three quarters of them have since undertaken professional development.
- The great majority of principals and teachers (between 70 and 90 per cent) agreed that their students learn the civic competencies of working together in groups with other students, how to act to protect the environment and understanding people who have different points of view.

- Over three quarters of the teachers thought knowledge of the society needs more attention in civics education.
- Teachers think civic-related topics rest easily in SOSE as well as other subjects.
- Teachers acknowledge weaknesses in their capacity to teach economic issues, judicial systems, international organisations, trade unions and national constitutions and state political institutions. Explicit training and curriculum materials are needed to support learning in these areas.
- The resource teachers defined as the *most important* they used was cited as being ‘Media: newspapers, magazines, television’, followed by ‘original sources, such as constitutions, human rights declarations’.
- It appears that teachers are reluctant to have a curriculum imposed, because they have strong views about what students should learn in civics, and their preferred way of teaching civics requires an open agenda of topics, to catch the current affairs issues which develop during a course.
- The key learning outcomes for teachers, of civics education are certain values. (For example: teachers most want their students to learn to develop a consciousness about the needs of the whole world, to develop honesty, as well as to fight against social injustice, to stand up for one's opinion, to ensure opportunities for minorities to express their own culture and to recognise the value of Australia as a nation.) Over ninety percent of teachers viewed each of these goals as important or very important.
- Ninety eight per cent of the teachers thought that ‘teaching civic education makes a difference for students’ political and civic development’ and that ‘it matters a great deal for our country’. A similar percentage of teachers thought that schools had a very important role in developing student attitudes and opinions.
- Significant gender differences apply to many issues and conclusions, with female teachers feeling more strongly about the importance of the preferred learning outcomes, but generally being less confident in their ability to teach them effectively.

### **Future Directions for Civics and Citizenship Education in Australia**

For the first time, as a result of this Australian report, *Citizenship and Democracy: Students' Knowledge and Beliefs: Australian Fourteen Year Olds and the IEA Civic Education Study*, we have a complete picture of what young Australians understand, what are their skills and attitudes, and how they feel about civic issues. The data from this study will be invaluable for policy makers, teacher educators and teachers themselves in planning future directions for civics and citizenship education.

It should be noted that the survey of students and school staff was conducted late in 1999. There had not been time for the new *Discovering Democracy* initiatives to have had their full effect on student learning. There had been time for some effect on teachers however, and this is reflected in some of the study's findings in relation to professional development and related matters. As civics and citizenship education initiatives are being implemented, there has been much debate about content, pedagogy and related issues. The Australian report has been written in 2001 and the authors are conscious that they are reporting on the situation as it was eighteen months earlier. However the data and analysis identifies and provides strategies for many of the civic education issues which need addressing. Thus the report provides useful guidance for the ongoing debates and decision-making in systems and schools.

On the one hand *the report indicates* there should be some confidence that young Australians already know a good deal about their democracy. Programs of civics and citizenship

education can assist them to understand in more depth what their roles might be in the future, and how they can participate in an active way. At the same time *the report demonstrates* that there is also a need to support teachers in their roles, so that civics education can be a rich and engaging experience for students.

Perhaps the most significant of all findings identified by the Study is that students need to be convinced that conventional forms of democratic engagement are worthwhile. Our elected representatives have much to contribute to this process. The future of Australian democracy belongs to, and with, our young people. We need them to be engaged in Australian democracy. As a result of the IEA Civic Education Study we now have the foundation on which to build programs that will not only enhance individual understanding and commitment, but also support practices of social inclusion and the development of a real sense of community. This is the challenge for the future.

**References:**

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