

Educating for informed and active citizenship

One of the goals of Australian schooling is to prepare young people to participate in a democratic society. **Wolfram Schulz** describes the latest findings of the National Assessment Program – Civics and Citizenship, in light of this goal.



Dr Wolfram Schulz is the Research Director of ACER's International Surveys research program and was co-director of the National Assessment Program – Civics and Citizenship 2010.

Under Australia's National Assessment Program, every three years nationally representative samples of students are selected to undertake assessments of civics and citizenship. In October 2010, more than 7200 Year 6 students from 335 schools and around 6400 Year 10 students from 312 schools completed a test of students' skills, knowledge and understandings of Australia's system of government. This was the third cycle of the national assessment program, following surveys in 2004 and 2007.

ACER has conducted each of these assessment cycles on behalf of the Ministerial Council on Education, Early Childhood Development and Youth Affairs (MCEECDYA, formerly MCEETYA). ACER's work involved preparing the assessment framework, developing and trialling test and questionnaire items, implementing the assessment and the marking of test items, as well as writing the public report. The results were published by

the Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority (ACARA) in September 2011.

Assessing civics and citizenship education

Civics and citizenship education aims to provide young people with the tools required to participate responsibly in a democratic society. *Civic* education focuses on knowledge and understanding of formal institutions and processes of civic life, such as voting in elections, while *citizenship* education focuses on participation and engagement in both civic and civil society.

There are a number of different approaches to civics and citizenship education internationally. These approaches include providing a specific subject, integrating relevant content into other subjects and including content as a cross-curricular theme. At the time the National

Assessment Program – Civics and Citizenship was introduced, no state or territory in Australia had a dedicated key learning area for the subject matter, and curricula varied significantly across its jurisdictions.

The purpose of civic and citizenship education in Australia was expressed in the 2008 *Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians*, which states that 'all young Australians should become successful learners, creative and confident individuals and active and informed citizens'.

Student knowledge and understanding

Civics and citizenship knowledge and understanding were assessed through a test that included multiple-choice, true/false and constructed response items. Two Proficient Standards were established to denote the point that represents a 'challenging but

reasonable' expectation of student achievement at each year level.

Around half of the participating students met or exceeded the relevant Proficient Standard appropriate to their year level. At Year 10, 49 per cent of students performed at or above the Proficient Standard. This represented an improvement on the previous assessment cycle, as in 2007 only 42 per cent of students achieved at or above the Proficient Standard.

At Year 6, 52 per cent of students were able to demonstrate the knowledge and understanding required to meet the Proficient Standard. This was consistent with the findings of the 2007 assessment, when 53 per cent met or exceeded the Proficient Standard. However, although students' performance did not increase at the national level, both Western Australia and the Northern Territory showed statistically significant improvements in average performance.

Nationally, girls performed better than boys on the 2010 assessment, both at Year 6 and Year 10. Fifty-five percent of Year 6 girls performed at or above the Proficient Standard compared to 49 per cent of boys. At Year 10, 53 per cent of girls performed at or above the Proficient Standard compared to 44 per cent of boys. A similar gender difference was present in the 2004 and 2007 assessments.

With regard to student background, it was found that there was no significant difference between those students who mainly speak English at home and those who speak another language at home. However, at both grade levels Indigenous students had much lower levels of civic knowledge than non-Indigenous students.

Student engagement and behaviours

Student engagement and participation were assessed with a student questionnaire. The questionnaire sought to uncover the attitudes, values, dispositions, behaviours and

intentions of students in relation to civic issues. Specific questions determined the frequency and nature of current involvement in civic-related activities at school and in the community. It also collected information about students' trust in civic institutions and processes, attitudes towards Australian Indigenous cultures and Australian diversity, and prospective engagement as an adult citizen.

The findings of the 2010 assessment for the first time provide insight into young Australians' perceptions of civic society and their notions of citizenship. In the 2007 assessment, only information about student participation in civic-related activities inside and outside school was collected through the student questionnaire.

The responses to the student questionnaire revealed that at both year levels, the majority of students had participated in class elections, school-based community activities and had represented the school away from the classroom. However, the results also revealed a decline in active engagement at school from Year 6 to Year 10. There was a general tendency among Year 10 students to report lower participation than Year 6 students in activities such as participation in student parliaments, voting for class representatives and participation in peer support programs. Girls were more likely than boys to have participated in some of these activities.

There was also a noticeable decrease between Year 6 and Year 10 in the amount of trust placed in civic institutions. Girls expressed somewhat more trust than boys in civic groups and institutions. The civic institutions most trusted by students were the police (85 per cent in Year 6; 72 per cent in Year 10) and law courts (69 per cent in Year 6; 65 per cent in Year 10). These were followed by state or territory parliament (72 per cent in Year 6; 51 per cent in Year 10), federal parliament (69 per cent in Year 6; 51 per cent in Year 10), political parties (57 per

cent in Year 6; 32 per cent in Year 10) and the media (45 per cent in Year 6; 27 per cent in Year 10).

Only about one third of students at both year levels were found to be interested in Australian politics. Similarly, just 37 per cent of Year 10 students and 54 per cent of Year 6 students rated discussing politics as very important or quite important for being a good citizen in Australia. This suggests that aspects of political debate in Australia do not reach the attention of young people and also that 'politics' may have negative connotations for young people in general.

However, many students expressed interest in environmental issues (69 per cent in Year 6 and 68 per cent in Year 10 rated themselves as quite or very interested); what is happening in other countries (66 per cent in both Year 6 and 10); and global issues (64 per cent in Year 6 and 68 per cent in Year 10).

In order for individuals to actively engage in society, they need to believe that their engagement has value. Large majorities of Australian students at both year levels were in agreement with positive statements about the value of student participation at school. Among Year 10 students, 80 per cent agreed that citizens can influence government policies in Australia. Girls were found to express more positive attitudes regarding the value of civic engagement than boys.

Most Year 10 students held positive attitudes towards Australian diversity. Eighty per cent of students agreed that Australia benefits greatly from having people from many cultures and backgrounds. However, there were also relatively large percentages expressing agreement with some negatively worded statements. For example, almost half of the students agreed that immigration should be cut when there are not many jobs available and that Australia would become less peaceful as more people from different backgrounds came to live here.

The data from this national assessment program also suggest that students in their majority demonstrate positive attitudes towards Australian diversity and Australian Indigenous cultures, which are characteristics the Melbourne Declaration defined as goals for the education of active and informed citizens in this country.

Conclusions

The National Assessment Program – Civics and Citizenship seeks to determine whether the education system is successful in its endeavour to develop informed and active citizens.

The results show that, although gains have been made at Year 10 level, it still appears that there is work to be done in ensuring that students develop a more complete depth of content knowledge that should be expected of 'informed citizens'.

With regard to 'active citizens', the questionnaire responses showed interesting differences in behaviour between year levels and genders. Further collections of this kind of information about student engagement and values may help to elaborate further the degree to which the aspirations currently described in the Melbourne Declaration regarding student citizenship can be achieved in the near future.

In 2011 ACARA began developing the civics and citizenship education component of the national curriculum. It is envisaged that the next cycle of the National Assessment Program – Civics and Citizenship, due in 2013, will incorporate the desired learning outcomes of the national curriculum. Future assessments of this learning area should continue to provide valuable monitoring information about the degree to which Australian schooling is successful in supporting students to become informed and active citizens.

The National Assessment Program – Civics and Citizenship Year 6 and 10 Report 2010, published by ACARA, is available from <research.acer.edu.au/civics/11>

