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Suzanne Mellor

ACER, suzanne.mellor@acer.edu.au

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Australian 14-year-olds' civic knowledge and attitudes, and how teachers and schools might improve them

Suzanne Mellor

Suzanne Mellor has been a teacher in secondary and post-compulsory classrooms and has worked in teacher training institutions over many years. She was Chief Examiner in Australian History in Victoria for many years, coordinating curriculum writing for accrediting bodies and devising a wide range of professional development activities for teachers. She has published textbooks and courses through accrediting bodies, commercial publishing houses and subject and teacher organisations. She has been a Research Fellow at ACER since 1989, conducting and contributing to a range of projects in policy and evaluation and reports published by ACER. In 2002 she was joint researcher for the World Bank project, Promoting Social Tolerance and Cohesion through Education, in the South Pacific. Three reports and an educational framework were produced for this study.

Suzanne has undertaken substantial work in citizenship education for ACER.

As ACER's Project Director of Phase 2 of the Australian component of the IEA Civic Education Study she managed the survey of schools, teachers and students across Australia and wrote the national report, released by the Commonwealth government in March 2002. She is currently conducting the independent evaluation of the Discovering Democracy professional development programme.

The Australian context for the IEA Civic Education Study

The IEA Civic Education Study took place in Australia from 1996 to 2002 against a background of national questioning of civic institutions. At its commencement there was active debate among citizens and political leaders concerning Australia's constitution and British connection. The debate surrounding the republic referendum and preparations to celebrate the centenary of federation in 2001 was part of the political context as civic education gained a profile in the school curriculum in the late 1990s.

In Australia at the time of the study, civic education was only just becoming a policy priority for government. Successive governments in the 1990s had provided powerful impetus for the introduction of formal civic education in schools. In 1997 the federal government initiated a large-scale curriculum development exercise entitled 'Discovering Democracy' that resulted in resources being developed for upper primary and lower secondary students for use in programmes of civic education. Every school in Australia was provided with the first of these materials late in the decade.

As a complementary response, each government at state/territory level made civic education a non-compulsory priority in the school curriculum by the end of the decade. At the school level, Australian students had probably been exposed to civic issues and ideas, but neither in a systematic way, nor consistently across states or systems. The IEA Civic Education Study test and survey instruments were administered late in 1999, at which time the new Discovering Democracy curriculum materials initiative would have had little effect on student learning or staff professional development.

It was, however, an ideal time to find out what young Australians knew and valued about democracy and what their attitudes were to a range of issues that affect democracy. Government and the community regarded data about such matters as worth having. The Discovering Democracy materials had previously had little chance to impact on students' knowledge acquisition or teachers' practice, so the study took on a benchmarking role.

Given the slightness of the formal Australian civic learning context, it can be reasonably assumed that family, peers, informal school activities, the media and students' everyday activities in the community would have been at least as important in influencing students' civic understandings and attitudes as their in-class school experiences. This view of the sources of significant exposure is supported by the time estimated by principals to have been spent on civics in their schools. Approximately 70 per cent of principals indicated that students spent less than one hour a week on civics, 20 per cent of principals said their students spent between one to two hours, and 10 per cent put the figure as high as three to four hours. However the definitions of 'civic education' they used were very broad, and possibly problematic.

The conduct of the IEA Civic Education Study in Australia

The International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) carried out the study in two phases. In Phase 1 (1995–99), national researchers conducted qualitative case studies that examined the contexts and meaning of civic education in 24 countries.¹ In Phase 2 (1999), nationally representative samples of nearly 90,000 14-year-olds in

¹Torney-Purta, J., Schwille, J. & Amadeo, J. (1999). *Civic Education Across Countries: Twenty-four National Case Studies from the IEA Civic Education Project*. IEA and National Council for the Social Studies, Amsterdam and Washington.

28 countries were surveyed. The findings from the international study were reported in March 2001.² The Australian national report analysing and interpreting the Australian data collected during the study was released in March 2002.³

A two-stage stratified cluster design for sampling was employed. At the first stage, schools were sampled using a probability proportional to size. One hundred and forty-two Australian schools took part (a participation rate of 94 per cent). The sample structure ensured proportional representation of government, Catholic and independent schools, provided a good estimate for Australia overall, but did not enable comparisons between states.

The second stage of the sampling process consisted of selecting one 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 or social studies). The Australian cohort of Year 9 students was 3,331 (a participation rate of 92 per cent).

The 352 respondents to the teachers' questionnaire (three requested from each of the 142 participating schools) were teachers of English, SOSE or were curriculum coordinators. Principals from 120 schools responded to the school questionnaire.

The IEA concept of civic knowledge and attitudes

Underpinning the IEA Civic Education Study was the concept 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. The model of civic education particularly addresses the issue of how students gain civic knowledge and develop civic attitudes, and it foregrounds active citizenship.

The proposed topics for examination were based on the three broad domains established early in the project as representing the core knowledge base of civic education. These were:

- democracy / citizenship;
- national identity / international relations; and
- social cohesion / diversity.

So there were items and questions on content knowledge, skills in interpretation, the understanding of concepts and attitudes, and expected actions.

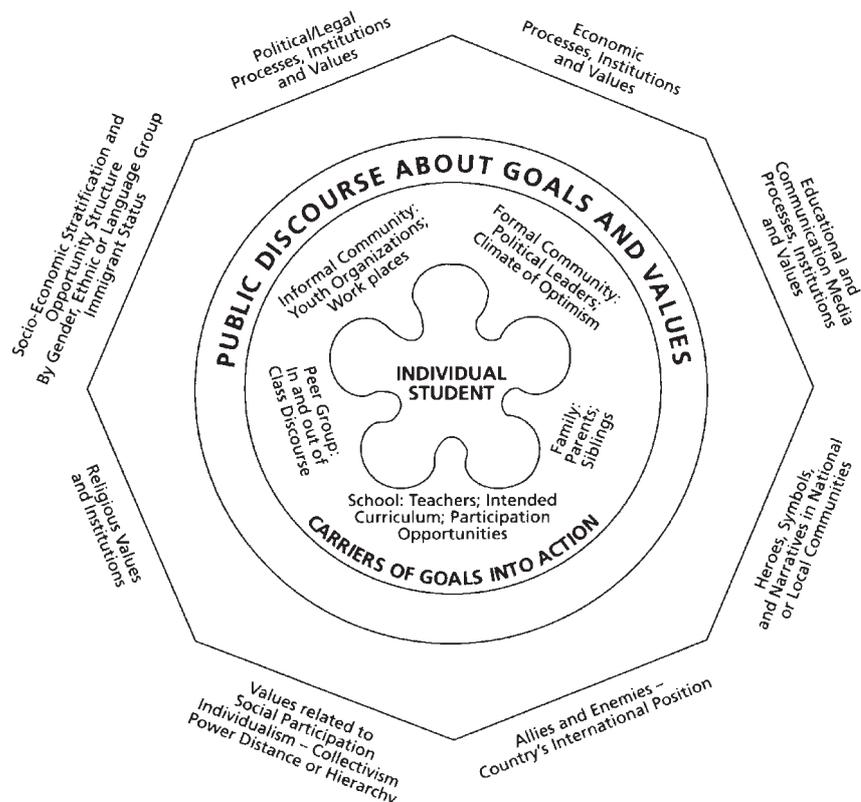


Figure 1 Model for IEA Civic Education

²Torney-Purta, J., Lehmann, R., Oswald, H. & Schulz, W. (2001). *Citizenship and Education in Twenty-eight Countries: Civic Knowledge and Engagement at Age Fourteen*, IEA, Amsterdam.
³Mellor, S., Kennedy, K. & Greenwood, L. (2002). *Citizenship and Democracy: Students' Knowledge and Beliefs: Australian Fourteen Year Olds and the IEA Civic Education Study*. [Online] www.dest.gov.au/schools/Publications/2001/iea/AustCivicReport.pdf www.acer.edu.au/mediacentre/AustCivicReport_2002.pdf

Australian students' civic knowledge and attitudes in an international context

Ten countries had scores measuring total civic knowledge that were significantly above the international mean. The United States was one of those countries. Eight countries were significantly below the international mean. Ten countries, positioned in between these two groups, had means that did not vary significantly from the international mean. Australia and England were two of those 'average' countries.

On the 11 attitudinal scales, Australia achieved an above average rate of support on only two, a below-average response rate on four, and an average on five of the scales. The devil is in the detail of course, and the illumination we seek from involvement in international studies derives from how comparisons can be drawn, on which scales and in which items there is significant agreement or disagreement. One also must ask of these comparisons what we may learn from them that could inform policy or practice in future planning or curriculum.

Some general trends in influences identified in the international data

The international data indicate that civic knowledge is not gender-based, though there were substantial gender differences on some of the attitudinal scales and differences between specific countries on specific scales.

Like their international peers, only a little more than half of Australian students (55 per cent) said they had learnt in school about the 'importance of voting in national elections'.

In the large majority of countries, the more books students reported in the home the better they performed on the civic knowledge test. Australian students' responses exemplified this pattern.

The television news is the preferred source of information for 80 per cent of Australian students (the international rate is 86 per cent). 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 also read newspapers and listened to the radio news more often than most international cohorts.

Schools that model democratic practice are the most effective in promoting civic knowledge and engagement in their students. Students who have experienced engagement in voluntary or school organisation participation are more likely to do well in

the acquisition of civic knowledge and to have positive civic attitudes. Such was the pattern of the Australian responses in the study. This finding is the most broad-ranging in its effect, because it impacts on civic learning regardless of curriculum provision.

The value of comparing student response patterns across like-countries

Twenty-eight countries of varying political development participated in the IEA Civic Education Study. They were all democracies, but they had adopted this model of governance in very different circumstances. The purposes their citizenry viewed as the legitimate goals of government and the learning outcomes they sought for their students in relation to civic education were wide-ranging. Thus the value of comparing the responses of the student cohort of ones' own country with such a range does not immediately present itself.

But the experience of engaging with such a range of views as to what is important for students who live in a democracy is valuable. The student questionnaire, like the other testing instruments, was designed by experts from all participating countries and by members of the IEA International Steering Committee. The construction of the items for the test and survey was a long, engaging and heavily consultative process that exemplified a passionate commitment to democratic values. The resultant items are ones that will stimulate discussion of the preferred learning outcomes in any society in which such matters are considered important.

The provision of civic education in Australia is closely comparable to some of the other 27 countries that participated in the IEA Civic Education Study, but in sharp contrast with others. At the time of testing, the case of civic education provision in England was very close to that of Australia, although England has since introduced a civic education program that requires (from 2004) the reporting of learning outcomes at several key stages of schooling. The situation in the United States was unlike that in Australia, in that formal civic education has a long history in primary and secondary levels, and all students would have experienced a range of civic curricula by age 14. Since England and the United States are two of the few other country participants in the study that have released their national reports, some comparisons with them are possible.

There are other reasons why comparisons of student civic understandings with those from England and the United States are illuminating to the Australian data. All three countries are long-standing representative democracies, with developed economies and value

systems. There is a shared history, and each draws on similar precepts as to how government and non-government institutions relate to each other and to the populace. The education systems of each country have significant similarities. There are differences too, and some of these are illustrated by the student responses to some of the items in the IEA Civic Education Study.

Australian students' total civic knowledge

The 'total civic knowledge' scale was composed of two sub-scales: content knowledge (made up of 25 items) and interpretative skills (13 items). You will recall that students in the United States were in the above-average group on the total civic knowledge scale, and Australia and England were in the average group.

However, if one regards the scores on the two sub-scales, an interesting comparative pattern emerges. We see the three countries have retained their position relative to each other and to the international cohort, but at two distinctly different levels. The United States' students gained a mean of 102 on the content knowledge items, Australia 99 and England 96. (On all these scales the international mean was set at 100.) But on the interpretative skills items the relative scores were, respectively, 114, 107 and 105. So the relative strength of the students' knowledge is similar on both sub-scales, but dissimilar to the rest of the international cohort. The items in the two sub-scales test different matters, and the students demonstrated a differential learning.

The bulk of the civic knowledge items have a regular multiple-choice structure. A proposition is put, four potential responses to it are offered and a choice is to be made. These are the content knowledge items. The interpretative items have a variety of formats. They all involve a level of 'reading', of text or picture, followed by the question, again four potential responses to it are offered and a choice is to be made. A sample 'interpretative skills' item follows:

Identify which party issued the leaflet

We citizens have had enough!

A vote for the Silver Party means a vote for higher taxes.

It means an end to economic growth and a waste of our nation's resources.

Vote instead for economic growth and free enterprise.

Vote for more money left in everyone's wallet!

Let's not waste another four years!

VOTE FOR THE GOLD PARTY

This is a political leaflet which has probably been issued by...

	Total %	Female %	Male %
the Silver Party.	6	5	8
a party or group in opposition to the Silver Party.*	79	83	74
a group that tries to be sure elections are fair.	8	6	11
the Silver Party and the Gold Party together.	7	6	7

The above response rates are those of the Australian students. The item references the importance of elections and of being able to interpret campaign materials before deciding on voting intentions. The response options allude to issues such as fairness in elections and the notion of coalitions, and requires the skill of identifying which voice is that of the author party. Students had to read the campaign leaflet and then decide which of the two parties mentioned had authored it. Australian students found this a relatively easy task, particularly the female students. The Australian mean (79 per cent) was lower than that of the United States (83 per cent) and above that of England (75 per cent).

The international picture was quite different. The response range was from 40 to 83 per cent, with a mean of just 65 per cent. The skills are based on textual comprehension, requiring a close reading for consistency of thought in the argument in the leaflet. These are the kinds of skills students in the three countries of comparison acquire in topic analysis and discussion, a pedagogic style that operates in many of their classes. Eight other countries (of the 28 surveyed) achieved a mean of 75 per cent on this item, so adoption of this pedagogy may be a factor in their success. But as most of them also did better on the civic knowledge sub-scale than the sub-cohort of three, the strength of their civic knowledge may have been the dominant explicator. Of course, decoding the four response options also requires some civic knowledge, as well as interpretative skills.

As a result of their relatively greater than average skill in interpretation and all that implies, the students of Australia, England and the United States were able to gain a better position relative to the whole cohort than they would have been able to achieve without them. It also indicates that this pedagogy is one suited to a range of content, and has positive effects on a range of learning outcomes. The study's designers did not anticipate the power of this factor in learning. It is just the kind of research outcome which international studies can gift to researchers.

Most of the civic knowledge items draw from Domain 1 and deal with aspects of democracy. Due to the secure nature of the items in the civic knowledge test, detailed description of the analysis, nationally and thus

between nations, is constrained. However, through the sample items one can observe some comparisons.

The civic knowledge items Australian students had the most difficulty with were those that dealt with the forms and purposes of democracy. Only half of the Australian students demonstrated clarity about the theoretical precepts of democratic models and structures, including: the role of criticism in a democracy; civil rights; the function of periodic elections; the content (and by implication the purpose of) a constitution; the legitimate media influence in a democracy; and the stages a government moving from dictatorship to democracy would need to undertake.

Sixty per cent of Australian students successfully inferred the consequences to democracy of a large publisher buying up many of a nation's newspapers, and 59 per cent in the United States and only 49 per cent from England (with the international average at 57 per cent).

In each of the three countries in the sub-cohort, 78 to 79 per cent of the students identified that having many organisations for people to join is important to democracy because it provides many opportunities to express different points of view (the international average is 70 per cent).

Students in all countries had difficulty recognising the distinguishing characteristics of a non-democratic government. The international mean was 53 per cent, as was that of the United States. Australians students achieved 51 per cent and the English 45 per cent. It is clear that this is a crunch concept, and the students have relatively similar difficulty in recognising the distinguishing characteristics. Key words are not grasped in their full context, even in the countries where formal civic courses might have been expected to create such knowledge.

Like their international peers, Australian students do not have a strong grasp of the impact of economic issues in the functioning of a democratic system. They do not have a clear sense of where the inherent tensions between democratic ideals and economic exigencies lie. Only a third could correctly identify the role of trade unions in a modern economy, the key characteristics of a market economy, or a range of issues associated with multinationals and globalisation.

The main conclusion that can be drawn from the strength of the Australian responses on the total civic knowledge scale, vis-à-vis the international responses, is that there are significant differences between them, and there are even smaller differences (of course!) between those countries that share the average mean. It is not unreasonable to hypothesise that the differences between Australia, the United States and England on the total civic knowledge scale result from the level of civic education provision in those countries. It appears that students do learn civic-related knowledge in

schools and that formal provision of civic education in schools can make a difference. Students don't acquire their civic knowledge solely from the society in which they live. Some of the similarities in the civic knowledge scores from the sub-cohort appear to indicate that similar pedagogic styles exist in classrooms across the three countries, and that this too makes a difference to civic learning outcomes.

Australian students' civic engagement

The first group of the attitudinal scales, called the 'civic engagement dimension', consisted of four scales. These scales reference active participation. Australian students' scores are significantly below the international mean on three of the four scales that make up the civic engagement dimension. It appears Australian students do not endorse action by citizens. England's results were the same as Australia's. In comparison, students in the United States achieved an above average mean in the first three and average on the fourth.

On the 'conventional citizenship' scale the Australian students showed they believe a good citizen votes and shows respect for government representatives. But, like their English peers, and unlike those from the United States, they regard knowing the country's history and following political issues in the press as relatively unimportant. All three cohorts register the least interest in the citizenship activity of engaging in political discussion, but the differences between the three is substantial. Only one third of students from England and Australia think it important, compared to nearly two-thirds of US students.

On the 'social movement citizenship' scale, the Australian students' responses indicate a less than enthusiastic endorsement, but 80 per cent did believe in the importance of citizens participating in 'activities to benefit people in the community'. Three quarters of the Australian students think 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. In comparison, students from the United States have a 15–20 per cent higher support rate. The English support is rate lower, across all the items, by about 10 per cent.

The Australian mean for the 'expected participation in political activities' scale was also significantly below the international mean. Given that voting is compulsory in Australia, students' expectation that 86 per cent of them will vote is less significant than for those countries where it is optional. Eighty-nine per cent do not expect to join a political party, 76 per cent do not expect to write letters to newspapers about social or political concerns, and 87 per cent 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 per cent said they would be prepared to join a non-violent protest march. Students in the United States are twice as likely to join a political party than either the Australian or English students.

On the 'confidence in participating at school' scale, the Australian mean is 'average'. 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. 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. The United States details of results to this scale are not published (they were in the average band), and the support rates from the students in England are about 10 per cent less than in Australia.

Another scale that I believe draws on the same aspects of civic and citizenship learning as the above four scales is the 'open classroom climates' scale. Students from Australia and England registered an average mean and those in the US expressed an above average experience of the open classroom. Students in eleven of the 28 countries had a negative response, claiming they rarely discuss things in class. Thus, the pedagogic experience is again linked with learning outcomes. Two thirds say they are often encouraged to voice their opinion in class. Nevertheless, similar to their international peers, a quarter of the Australian students says this happens rarely or never.

About three-quarters of the Australian students had generally positive responses to the open classroom items, with the response rating from England being about two thirds. Those from the United States were consistently in the high 70 per cent to low 80 per cent range. Once again the pedagogy and the content are inter-twined in providing positive learning outcomes. In addition, the three cohorts share a much lower support for one item, that which asked students whether 'teachers encourage us to discuss political or social issues about which people have different opinions'. In each country the support rate for this item went down by almost 20 per cent. Students in each country are telling us that controversial issues are not encouraged as subjects for discussion; that teachers stay with safe topics.

All three national patterns on the items on these five scales indicate that more positive civic attitudes about engagement co-exist with greater civic knowledge. It may be that students are demonstrating society-wide attitudes here, though the levels of engagement, by voting and other measures, would not suggest that

such differences exist across the three countries. These results indicate that formal provision of civic education makes a difference to civic attitudes.

Conclusions: what we learn from these comparative data

The IEA Civic Education Study demonstrated the relative civic knowledge of students in 28 countries. It also illustrated the civic attitudes of the students. By virtue of the combination of all these scales we have a set of understandings of both the learning outcomes and also some indication of how they can be acquired. The study reminds us also of the pervasive nature of civic learning. Civic knowledge does, after all, relate to the engagement of the individual with significant groups in that individual's life, so it is not surprising that it generates questions about how and where one learns, not just what one learns. The contested nature of all these civic and citizenship domains is part of what schools need to unpack when planning their classroom and non-classroom civic curricula.

The most important finding of the study is that schools that model democratic practice are the most effective in promoting civic knowledge and higher levels of engagement in their students. The inter-country comparisons lend some support to this proposition. Providing students with a climate of engagement in classrooms is important to civic learning, but insufficient to generate civic learning or positive civic attitudes in the majority. As other studies have indicated⁴, real issues, ones that concern students, must be available as serious areas of academic work and assessment. The IEA international (and Australian) path analyses show that students who participate in school councils do better than those who do not have that experience. It is not by chance that the students who know the most (within and between countries) are those who also care about participating. Such students are the most positive about their capacity to make a difference.

Schools need to provide all students with opportunities to actively participate, in classrooms and in school governance. Teachers need to model good citizenship and schools need to provide models of, and practice in, good democratic decision-making. Formal civic education will then be seen to be more relevant to students. Their belief in the value of their democratic institutions will rise as their knowledge increases. The study and the sub-cohort comparisons demonstrate this. If citizens of the future are to be fully engaged in the democratic process they must have a solid understanding of the democratic institutions that underpin that process. Schools can both teach and model such learning. We cannot afford, as a democratic society, for schools to fail to encourage such learning outcomes.

⁴Mellor, S (1998) *What's the Point? Political Attitudes of Victorian Year 11 Students*, Research Monograph 53, ACER, Melbourne