

Raising the standard



in Civics and Citizenship



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*The results of Australia's first national Civics and Citizenship Assessment program revealed surprising gaps in students' knowledge of key historical events and concepts of democracy and citizenship. **Suzanne Mellor** describes the assessment and suggests that more targeted teaching of civics and citizenship is required.*

In December 2006 the results from the *National Assessment Program – Civics and Citizenship* for years 6 and 10, prepared by ACER for the Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training, and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA), was released into a storm of media controversy when it was revealed most students could not answer questions about key democratic events in Australian history. Further, while students seemed to appreciate their democracy, their level of knowledge and understanding of civics and citizenship was considerably less than was expected by practitioner experts who contributed to the study.

The findings from the assessment, described and analysed in the project report, demonstrates to us that Australia has an urgent need for formal education in civics and citizenship if primary and secondary students are to increase their civics knowledge and understanding and improve their citizenship dispositions regarding participation in their civil society.

Implementing the study

ACER was contracted by MCEETYA to undertake the inaugural assessment of a national sample of more than 20,000 Australian Year 6 and Year 10 students. Work on the assessment got underway in 2003 with the development, trial and revision of assessment instruments. The assessment itself was conducted in October 2004. It involved 10,712 Year 6 students from 318 schools and 9,536 Year 10 students from 249 schools. The assessment comprised multiple-choice and open-ended response questions on concepts such as the rationale for the citizenship pledge, social responsibility, basic historical and political facts and the impact of influencing factors such as the media on democracy. The results obtained provide baseline data for future studies including the next round of testing for the National Assessment Program taking place this year.

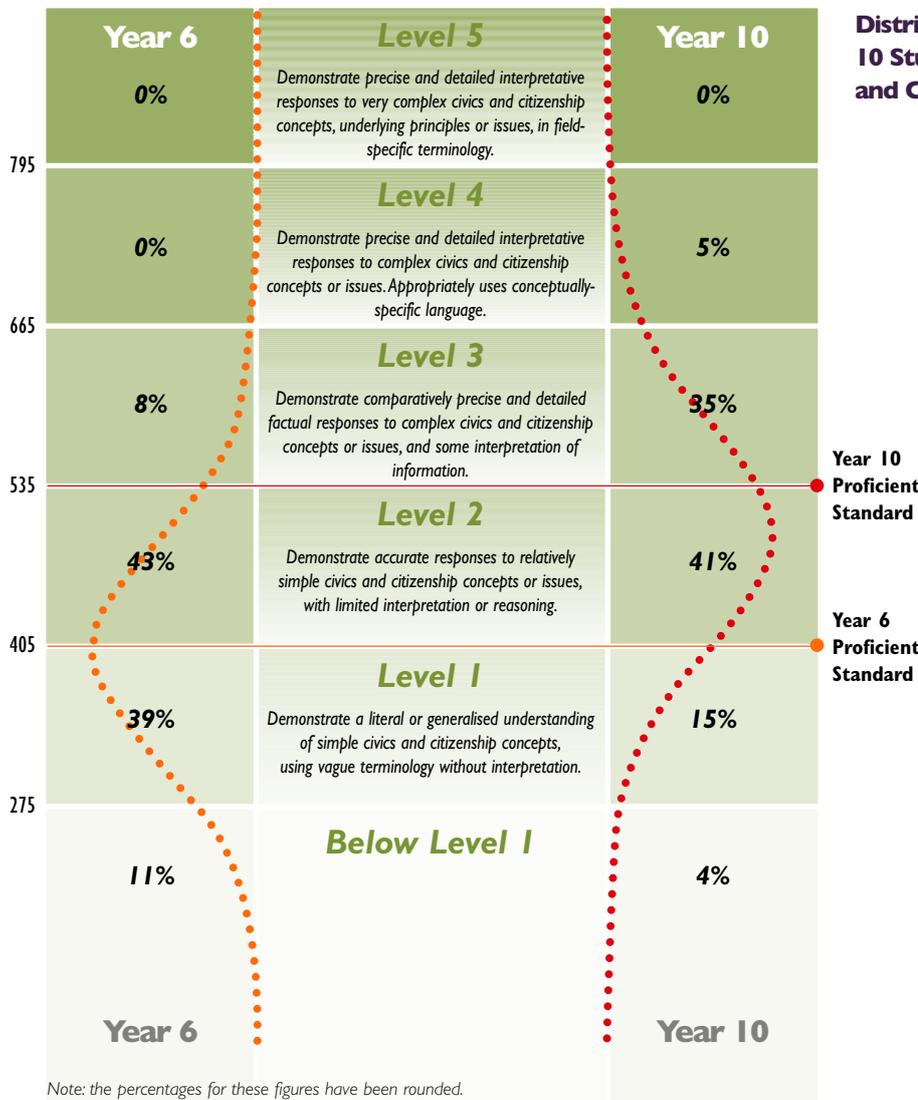
In order to measure student progress MCEETYA commissioned the development of an assessment domain, which incorporated two Key Performance Measures (KPMs) for civics and citizenship

education. *KPM 1* focused on knowledge and understanding of civic institutions and processes while *KPM 2* addressed citizenship dispositions and skills for participation. Test items were constructed to map across the whole of the Assessment Domain.

Once the data was analysed, a scale or continuum was developed to describe students' proficiency in Civics and Citizenship. It was divided into five proficiency levels, ranging from '1' (containing the least difficult items) to '5' (containing the most difficult items). To establish the levels, a combination of experts' knowledge of the skills required to answer each item and information from the analysis of students' responses was used. The scale makes it possible to show what students in Year 6 and 10 knew, understood and could do in relation to the concepts, knowledge and dispositions outlined in the Civics and Citizenship Sample Assessment Domain for 2004.

Civics and Citizenship education experts from government, Catholic and non-government schools in all states and territories came together to set a proficient

Distribution of Years 6 and 10 Students on the Civics and Citizenship Scale



standard for each of Year 6 and Year 10. This proficient standard was a level of performance that would be expected for a student at that year level. To reach the proficient standard students needed to demonstrate more than minimal or elementary skills. The proficiency standard for Year 6 was set at Proficiency Level 2 and for Year 10 at Proficiency Level 3.

Outcomes from the study

What did the assessment show us about the level of understanding Australian students have about civics and citizenship? The results of the assessment revealed substantial gaps in students' knowledge and understanding of the key concepts tested. Only half of Year 6 students and 39 per cent of Year 10 students met the defined proficiency standards for their year level. The findings were met with horror by the national media and prompted vigorous debate about how this could have happened.

The Civics and Citizenship Assessment report provides details about the administration and the substance of the assessment. A wide range of the items are revealed and analysed by proficiency level, with student responses included. It identifies the concepts and understandings with which students appeared to have the greatest difficulty. They were of two types.

- Concepts such as 'the common good' and
- Key information about so-called 'iconic knowledge' about national events and nationally-representative symbols.

Students lacked knowledge of key facts and context about national events and nationally-representative symbols such as Australia Day, ANZAC Day and the role of the Governor-General. They also struggled with the concept of 'the common good' – and were unable to deal with strategies that refer to how individuals can influence civic institutions for the benefit of society. They didn't understand it, didn't believe in it, or couldn't see how they could exercise it.

Among the findings that particularly surprised researchers, one involved items about Australia Day. An open-ended question asked students to describe the event that is remembered on Australia Day. An accepted response required students to refer to the start of British settlement in Australia: for example, 'When the First Fleet arrived,' or 'The English coming to Australia.' Researchers found that only 16 per cent of Year 6 students and 23 per cent of Year 10 students were able to provide this basic fact in their responses. Further, only 17 per cent of Year 6 and 27 per cent of Year 10 students could articulate why Australia Day was sometimes called Invasion Day.

Which of the following is one of the Governor General's official responsibilities?



- to suggest new laws
- to sit on the High Court
- to swear in new Governments
- to control Australia's Government

The role of the Governor General was another stumbling block, with only seven per cent of Year 6 students and 23 per cent of Year 10 students able to correctly identify official vice regal duties. This item (see above) used a multiple-choice format. The incorrect response options described a political role rather than a ceremonial role. To get this question right students had to understand that the role of the Governor General is ceremonial rather than political. With just seven per cent of Year 6 students and 23 per cent of Year 10 providing the correct answer, the result suggests that students are not being taught about the roles of senior office holders.

It was also clear from the results that many of the Year 10 students did not even have the knowledge outlined in the assessment domain as being expected of Year 6 students, especially in relation to information about the constitutional and civic structures and processes of Australian democracy.



Despite the generally low levels of achievement being demonstrated by many students at both year levels, it also must be noted that some students were able to achieve at much higher levels than had been expected. Eight per cent of Year 6 students were able to perform at Level 3 – that is the level above that expected of Year 10 students - and 5 per cent of Year 10 students were able to achieve at Level 4. These students displayed specific knowledge and provided complex responses to a range of question types, about many aspects of civics and citizenship. Their results are the most positive outcome of the study. They clearly indicate that the concepts are not too difficult for students. It is simply that most students have not been made acquainted with the cognitive or dispositional concepts outlined in the assessment domain. They have not been introduced to those concepts by their schools, their parents or their society generally.

There was some indication that a student's background and level of interest in politics and social issues affected their performance on the assessment. The study included a student survey used to gather information on student background such as gender, Indigenous status, language background, geographic location and socioeconomic status. The greatest influence on student achievement was the occupation of parents, with the children of professionals performing best on the assessments.

There was also some advantage accrued to taking an interest in politics and social issues outside of school. Those Year 10 students who more frequently reported that they talked about politics and social issues tended to score higher than their peers. Likewise, Year 6 students who more frequently read about current events in the newspapers did better than other Year 6 students.

This finding suggests that students who participate in such activities out of school become familiar with civics and citizenship processes.

Conclusions

On the surface the results of this study are disappointing. A majority of the Year 10 and half of the Year 6 students did not meet the proficiency standards expected of them by the experts. It was believed by the researchers and jurisdictional experts that key information about national events and nationally representative symbols, had been 'taught to death' in Australian schools, as part of history and social education classes, and general knowledge. This appears to be not the case.

While the researchers and the experts from state and territory education authorities were somewhat surprised and disappointed at the results, they recognised that students could not have been expected to achieve the defined proficiency standard if they have not had sufficient formal, consistent curricular instruction in civics and citizenship.

Evidence that students are not receiving sufficient targeted teaching of this information can be found in the project report. Markers and experts noted that many lower performing students could select the correct answer in a multiple-choice question or were able to respond to an open-ended question only by using terminology that was minimal or somewhat vague. Their language was imprecise and generalised. Because they had not been taught the language specific to the concepts and understandings of the field, they floundered in attempting to explain their partly-formed ideas. This lack of specific and precise language with which to express the required levels of response is a sign of the low incidence of formal instruction in this curriculum area.

The Adelaide Declaration insists that Australian students need to develop a sound understanding of how Australia's government and democracy work in order to participate fully as citizens in their society and that it is school business to achieve this outcome. The results of this national assessment clearly indicate there is a need for a greater emphasis on civics and citizenship education in Australian schools. Formal consistent instruction in civics and citizenship has not been the experience of Australian students since the 1950s. Prior to 2004, there was very little in the way of formal Civics and Citizenship curricula being implemented in Australian primary and secondary schools but it appears that some students had received some instruction in some of the civics and citizenship concepts. To see improvement in future assessment programs there needs to be more consistent instruction in civics and citizenship by way of an appropriate curriculum, accompanied by professional development for teachers. By 2007 more formal curricular structures in civics and citizenship have been developed and implemented in all educational jurisdictions.

ACER is currently conducting the second cycle of the MCEETYA National Assessment Program - Civics and Citizenship 2007. The 2007 assessment involves a sample of around 14,000 students at Year 6 and Year 10 levels in over 600 schools. When results from the 2007 assessment are collected and analysed it will be possible to compare the 2007 results with those from 2004. ■

Further information

The *National Assessment Program – Civics and Citizenship, Years 6 and 10* report, published by MCEETYA is available online from www.mceetya.edu.au