

The findings of the IEA Civic and Citizenship Education Study (ICCS) and the challenges for educational practitioners in Europe

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### **What was ICCS 2009?**

The International Civic and Citizenship Education Study (ICCS) 2009 was the third IEA study on civic and citizenship education. The first was conducted in 1971 (nine countries participating) and the second one collected data in 1999 (28 countries) showing relatively increasing engagement of school systems in this educational domain. The second, CIVED study, thanks to its rich findings, played an important role initiating or contributing to the debate on education of future citizens and triggering education reforms in this area in a number of countries.

Not surprisingly, a few years after CIVED a new study was launched to help some countries evaluate their reforms, some others to clarify concepts and policy in preparation for reforms. The ICCS tests and questionnaires addressed student's civic knowledge and understanding, perceptions and attitudes, engagement and behavior as well as student's background. A separate European Module test and questionnaire investigated students' preparation for citizenship as Europeans. In addition, information was collected from policy makers, school principals and teachers on various aspects of educational systems, schools and classrooms related to civic and citizenship education.

ICCS gathered data from more than 140,000 Grade 8 (or equivalent) students in more than 5,300 schools from 38 countries. 75,000 students from 3,000 schools were coming from European countries. Students' data were related, where relevant, to the data from over 35,000 of teachers from their schools, data from school principals and the study national research centers.

European countries participating in the ICCS were: Austria, Belgium (Flemish Community), Bulgaria, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, England, Estonia, Finland, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lichtenstein, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, the Russian Federation, Slovak Republic, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden and Switzerland. Except Norway and the Russian Federation, all of them participated also in the European Module.

The ICCS contributed substantially to our knowledge about civic and citizenship education in schools and preparation of youth for citizenship. Its approach of collecting data at a number of levels and from different perspectives disclosed many issues important for policy makers and practitioners in this area. The major of the challenges are discussed below.

### **How education for citizenship is organized and conducted?**

While in all European countries participating in ICCS, civic and citizenship education was viewed as priority of educational policy, the approaches to delivering it were different. 11 European countries included a specific subject concerned with civic and citizenship education. Others provided civic and citizenship education by integrating relevant content into other subjects and including it as a cross-curricular theme.

The curricula for civic and citizenship education covered a wide range of topics, including knowledge and understanding of political institutions and concepts (such as human rights), as well as social and community cohesion, diversity, the environment, communications, and global society (including regional and international institutions).

Most of the teachers and school principals regarded the development of knowledge and skills as the most important aim of civic and citizenship education. This included “promoting knowledge of social, political, and civic institutions,” “promoting knowledge of citizens’ rights and responsibilities,” and “promoting students’ critical and independent thinking.” Fewer principals and teachers saw “preparing students for future political participation” and “supporting the development of effective strategies for the fight against racism and xenophobia” as among the three most important aims of civic and citizenship education. **The development of active civic participation was not among the objectives that teachers or school principals most frequently cited as one of the three most important aims of civic and citizenship education.**

From the students’ perspective, teachers were generally receptive to open student expression in classrooms, though they offered their students only limited input into the choice of civic-related topics and activities. Only “sometimes” a majority of them was engaging in discussions of political and social issues and in classrooms with an open (receptive to discussion) environment. Most students also reported having participated in class or school elections and about two fifths also reported involvement in debates, decision-making, and student assemblies. **School-based participation by students in civic-related activities in the local community focused primarily on sports events and cultural activities.**

**To summarize:** Further discussion among policy makers and practitioners is needed concerning goals of civic and citizenship education in school and possibilities to expand from knowledge and related skills to participatory skills and strategies. This requires changes in pedagogy and organization of students’ experiences.

### **Civic knowledge and understanding**

Students in the European ICCS countries scored more highly overall on the ICCS international cognitive test than the average for all participating countries. Students in two countries with the highest scoring demonstrated holistic knowledge and understanding of civic and citizenship concepts, and the ability to make judgments about the merits of policies and behaviors, justify positions and hypothesize outcomes. Most other European ICCS countries scored on average showing some specific knowledge and understanding of the most pervasive civic and citizenship institutions, systems and concepts. Some European countries however scored significantly below both the European and international average with a majority of students being able to deal only with fundamental principles and broad concepts that underpin civic and citizenship. **The results showed considerable variation in civic knowledge among and within European countries and big differences between high and low achievers.**

A number of home characteristics were positively associated with civic knowledge, such as economic background, higher educational qualifications and higher occupational status of parents, a larger number of books home. Also frequency of communication with others on social-political issues (discussion parents, peers) and media use also seem to be positive predictors of civic knowledge. **However, students’ school experiences such as perception of classroom as an open forum for discussions and voting experiences have stronger effects than home background factors.**

**To summarize:** There is a need of more detailed review of the outcomes of the civic and citizenship knowledge test of low performing students to understand better what the nature is of their deficits in this area and of planning for remedies. While the socioeconomic factors undoubtedly play an important role (though there were also considerable differences among countries in the strength of the relationship between socioeconomic factor and civic knowledge) there are also school experiences of democracy that definitely help students to get more interest and to learn more.

### **Values and trust**

Most ICCS students endorsed democratic values. They agreed with a number of fundamental democratic rights as well as with the importance of a great number of the conventional and social-movement-related behaviors that are considered to support good citizenship.

However, in relation to specific aspects of society and its institutions, ICCS students' opinions differed, sometimes substantially. **For example, while in general there was a strong endorsement of gender equality and equal rights for ethnic or racial groups and immigrants, variation in this endorsement was evident across countries.** Students in some European countries were less supportive than their peers in other countries of equal rights for woman and/or immigrants. Most students supported the general right of free movement for citizens to live and work anywhere in Europe but despite this general acceptance of the principle, a number of students expressed support for restrictions on the movement of citizens in Europe. Interestingly, while many students do see contribution of free movement of people to cultural understanding, lower percentages perceived the value of migration for economic reasons.

**Expressing their general support for democratic rights and liberties, students in most of the ICCS countries, supported measures that increased the power of security agencies as a response to threats to society.** The examples were control of communications and detaining suspects in jail for relatively long periods of time or restricting media coverage during times of perceived crisis.

Trust in civic institutions also varied across ICCS countries. In some countries, students attributed relatively high levels of trust or support to political parties whereas in others only small minorities of students expressed trust in them or stated a preference for any one of them. In general however political parties were typically the institution least trusted. **Trusting civic institutions and preferring one or more political parties was positively associated with students' intentions to take part as adults in electoral and more active forms of political participation.**

**To summarize:** The ICCS revealed general positive attitudes of middle school students towards democratic values and human and citizen's rights and liberties. However, in all participating European countries number of students were in favor of restricting rights of some specific groups in the society or/and in some specific periods. This confirms that already on the middle school level young people reflect political culture of their societies, where issues of "how democratic freedoms should work" are subject of public debate. Also lower trust in political parties in comparisons to other public institutions and organizations is a more general problem in many countries. This creates a specific challenge for educators to identify students especially exposed to restrictive ideologies and to help them go beyond such limitations.

### **Interest in political issues and participation**

**Similar to students from other regions of the world, European students had a greater interest in domestic political or social issues than in regional and international politics.** Most of the ICCS students reported that they kept themselves regularly informed about national and international news from different sources, particularly television. Most students reported that their schools provided them with opportunities to learn about other European countries. However, on average, only a quarter of students stated that they discussed political and social issues with friends on a weekly basis. Student interest in politics and social issues appeared to be relatively little affected by socioeconomic background but was associated with students' reports of their parents' interest in these matters.

**Active civic participation in the wider community was relatively uncommon among the students; civic participation at school was considerably more common.** Majorities of students expected to become involved in legal protest activities, but few of them considered that they would engage in illegal activities such as blocking traffic or occupying buildings. **Most students said they intended to vote as adults in national elections, their intention to vote in European elections was much lower. Also, very few students expected to join political parties in the future.** Civic knowledge and interest in political and social issues were both positively associated with expected electoral behavior but not with active political behavior. Civic engagement at school also positively predicts students' expectations to engage in some conventional activities while past or current participation in the wider community was a positive predictor for expected active participation.

**To summarize:** The ICCS students had generally not many experiences of active citizenship beyond some activities within the school community. Such school experiences positively influence basic political engagement but not more active involvement in civic-related participation. The challenge for educators is to facilitate going beyond schools, for broader experiences that help increase interests and understanding of political and social issues.

### **Gender and immigration background**

**In nearly all ICCS countries girls gained higher civic knowledge scores than boys.** Gender differences were also apparent with regard to a number of affective-behavioral measures. **Female students had more positive attitudes than male students.** This was especially apparent in attitudes towards equal rights for gender groups as well as all ethnic groups and immigrants.

**Students from immigrant backgrounds were receiving lower civic knowledge scores than their colleagues from non-immigrant families.** However, those differences varied substantially across the countries and were strongly depended on two factors, use of test language at home and socioeconomic background. Especially this second factor seemed to be influential in decreasing the effect of immigrant background.

**To summarize:** The ICCS confirmed the outcome of many other studies that gender and background factors such as coming from immigrant families do play a role in educational outcomes. It has shown however some specifics, such as more positive attitudes of girls and the possible role of language of test proficiency and economic background in the case of migrant students. Those are factors to be taken under consideration by practitioners when planning pedagogical activities aimed on helping lower-achievers.

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