
Young people's civic attitudes and practices: England's outcomes from the IEA International Civic and Citizenship Education Study (ICCS)

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Introduction

In 2006 the former Department for Children Schools and Families (DCSF), commissioned the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) to coordinate the administration and analysis of England's participation in the IEA¹ International Civic and Citizenship Education Study (ICCS). The aims of the commissioning were for NFER to:

- act as National Research Coordinator (NRC) for the ICCS survey in England, providing the main point of contact between England and the ICCS study centre and overseeing the administration and management of the ICCS survey in England.
- provide national-level data to ICCS to enable its inclusion in detailed international and regional (European) study reports.
- provide detailed national-level analysis and reporting for the Department for Education (DFE), with the power to contribute to decisions about citizenship education and its future direction in England.
- disseminate the outcomes of the study as widely as possible, with a range of audiences.

Key findings

Civic knowledge and understanding:

- Pupils in England score significantly above average in the international test of civic knowledge and understanding when compared to all participating countries. However, when compared only to their European counterparts, their performance is average.
- Knowledge of the European Union (EU) amongst pupils in England is significantly below that of other pupils in Europe. Across many test questions, pupils' awareness is the lowest of all 24 participating countries.

¹ International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement.

- Pupils in England have comparatively greater knowledge of topics such as civic participation, civic identity and civic society than of civic principles such as freedom, equity and social cohesion.
- Although there is a reported fall in pupil civic knowledge in England between 1999 and 2009, this is also the case in many of the participating countries. Also, England has a large difference in pupil age between the two testing periods, meaning that these results should be treated with caution.

Value beliefs and attitudes:

- Pupils in England have views and attitudes that are broadly democratic and tolerant. However, their tolerance of immigration is well below the international average and their view of European migration is particularly critical.
- There is a high level of trust in the police, the armed forces, schools and national government, but low levels of trust in politicians and political parties, EU institutions and the media.
- Pupils in England have a strong sense of national identity. They also demonstrate a degree of European identity although their sense of British identity outweighs this.

Civic engagement:

- Alongside pupils in other countries, pupils in England have a low level of interest in social and political issues.
- Like other pupils across the globe, pupils in England are much more likely to participate within their schools than they are to take part in community activities.
- A large proportion of pupils in England expect to exercise their democratic right to vote in future. However, most do not anticipate taking part in higher intensity forms of civic engagement.

Background

ICCS is a large-scale study of pupil knowledge and understanding, dispositions and attitudes, which is administered across 38 countries worldwide². The results presented in this summary are based upon England's national dataset, with reference to international- and European-level findings, and to findings from the IEA Civic Education Study (CIVED), which took place in 1999.

² Countries participating in ICCS were: Austria, Belgium (Flemish), Bulgaria, Chile, Chinese Taipei, Columbia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Dominican Republic, England, Estonia, Finland, Greece, Guatemala, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Ireland, Italy, Korea, Latvia, Liechtenstein, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Mexico, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Paraguay, Poland, Russian Federation, Slovak Republic, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Thailand.

Research methods

ICCS examines the ways in which countries prepare young people to undertake their roles as citizens in the 21st century. It does this by considering the performance of 2,889 Year 9 pupils (aged 13-14) from 160 schools, in a test of citizenship knowledge and understanding, and through questionnaires that gauge their attitudes, values and dispositions towards citizenship and civic-related issues. ICCS also considers teacher and headteacher responses to questionnaires about school ethos, teaching and learning practices and civic and citizenship education. In total 1544 teachers responded to the survey. All tests and questionnaires were administered between February and April 2009.

ICCS is underpinned by an analytical framework that measures:

- Cognitive understanding – across two domains (knowing and reasoning).
- Affective-behavioural attributes – across four domains (value beliefs, attitudes, behaviours and behavioural intentions).

It considers pupils' outcomes across both these themes within the context of four 'content' domains – civic systems; civic principles; civic participation and civic identities.

Findings

Pupils' Civic Knowledge and Understanding

Pupils taking part in ICCS in England answered questions on two tests – an international test, which assessed pupils' knowledge across the cognitive, affective-behavioural and content domains outlined above, and a European test, which assessed their knowledge and understanding of EU practices and processes. Responses to these tests present a mixed picture of pupil proficiency in England.

International cognitive test

Pupils in England performed well in the international test. England falls within a group of 18 (out of 38) countries which achieved significantly higher scores than the international test average. It does not fall within the highest achieving cluster of countries (Finland, Denmark, the Republic of Korea and Chinese Taipei). Rather, England falls within the next cluster of countries, its closest scoring neighbours being New Zealand, Slovenia and Norway. However, when compared only with participating European countries, England is mid ranking, being in a group of four countries out of 24 (England, Slovenia, Belgium (Flemish) and the Czech Republic) scoring neither significantly above, nor below, the European average.

Additionally, pupil performance was not even across all areas of the test. Pupils in England scored much more highly, relative to other participating pupils, on items about civic participation, civic identity and civic society than they did on items related to civic principles such as freedom, equity and social cohesion.

European test

The performance of pupils in England in a specific test about the European Union (EU) was less impressive. Indeed, across many of the test questions, pupils in England had a level of awareness that was the lowest of all 24 participating countries. Pupils in England scored significantly below the European average in seven out of ten questions covering facts about the EU and its institutions. In questions relating to EU laws and policies, and to the euro currency, they fared a little better, although rarely significantly above the European average. Pupils in England also have lower than average confidence in these topics than their European peers and their teachers have particularly low levels of confidence in teaching about European issues and the EU.

Changes in knowledge and understanding over time

There was a significant fall in knowledge across nine of the 17 countries that participated in both CIVED and ICCS (including England). It should be noted, however, that England had a large difference in average age between the pupils who participated in CIVED (14.7) and those who participated in ICCS (14.0). Statistical analysis estimates that much of the apparent fall in civic knowledge in England might be explained by the age difference between CIVED and ICCS pupils. This is not the case for other participating countries that witnessed a fall in pupil knowledge from 1999 to 2009.

Pupils' Value Beliefs and Attitudes

Attitudes towards democracy and equality

Pupils in England have views and opinions that strongly support democratic values and are highly tolerant, when compared to the international average, on matters such as equality for men and women and ethnic minority groups. However, support for immigrant rights is among the lowest of all participating countries and pupils in England demonstrate particularly critical views with regard to European migration (especially in relation to economic, as opposed to cultural, migration). Although pupils in England have liberal views on equal access for all ethnic groups to education, and on all ethnic groups having the same rights and responsibilities, they are less tolerant about ethnic minority rights extending to the realm of political office.

Trust in institutions

Pupils in England demonstrate high levels of trust in the police and the armed forces, in schools and in national government compared to pupils in all participating countries, but their levels of trust in EU institutions are the second lowest of all participating European countries. Whilst pupils believe in the importance of a democratically-elected national government, they have very low levels of trust in politicians and political parties. They are also cautious in their trust of the media. White indigenous pupils and those with secular or Christian beliefs are also more likely to trust state and civil institutions than pupils from other religious or ethnic backgrounds.

Sense of identity

Pupils in England have a strong sense of national identity. In contrast to pupils in other participating countries, there is no significant difference in the extent to

which pupils have this sense of identity according to whether they are of white British, ethnic minority, or immigrant background.

Pupils in England also demonstrate a degree of European identity, although they have a score that is lower than the European average on this measure, and their sense of British identity outweighs their sense of European identity. Whilst pupils in England are broadly in favour of harmonisation of social and environmental policy across Europe, they are much more sceptical about matters of economic or political unification and are opposed to the notion of a supra-national European state, as is the case for most pupils in other European countries.

Pupils' Civic Engagement

Interest in social and political issues

Like their peers across the globe, pupils in England are not particularly interested in social and political issues. They have a level of news media interest that is significantly below the international average, and they are particularly unlikely to engage with Europe-specific news. They also have low levels of confidence in their personal political efficacy (their perceived ability to influence political issues) at the age of 14. Although pupils demonstrate a low level of interest in conventionally political topics, and in European politics, they have higher levels of interest in a range of social and environmental issues and more interest in national than in international topics.

In-school and out-of-school participation

Pupils in England demonstrate much higher levels of within-school than out-of-school participation. This pattern is observed internationally. School seems to provide an ideal base for pupils to sample democratic decision making and to be involved in a range of proactive activities in a secure learning environment.

That pupils in England rarely participate out of school in their communities, or take part in activities involving collaboration with other European countries appears not to be a cause for concern for pupils of this age group. Multilevel analyses suggest that those who are most engaged in out-of-school activities tend to have the lowest civic knowledge scores.

Propensity for future engagement

A large proportion of pupils expect to exercise their democratic right to vote in national elections in the future. Although the proportion of pupils in England who intend to vote in national elections is significantly lower than the international average, at 72 per cent it is still high (albeit pupils in England are less likely to vote in European elections). Most pupils in England do not anticipate taking part in high intensity forms of civic engagement in the future (such as joining a political party or campaigning for political office).

Factors that Influence Knowledge, Attitudes and Engagement

Civic knowledge

Having a high civic knowledge score (as measured by the ICCS cognitive test) appears to be a strong predictor of a range of positive pupil outcomes such as:

having support for democratic values, gender equality and equal rights for ethnic minority and immigrant groups; being likely to vote in future elections; having interest in social and political issues; and having a high level of within-school participation. However, pupils with a high civic knowledge score are less likely than their similar peers to take part in out-of school activities.

Pupil-level factors

Pupils from ethnic minority backgrounds, girls, and pupils who believe that religion has an important role to play in society are more likely than similar pupils to have high belief in democratic values, and in equality for different groups in society. Conversely, there is a negative relationship between pupils having Christian belief and support for equal rights for immigrants, and between pupils of non-Christian faith, pupils being from an ethnic minority background, and pupils being female, and the outcome of having high levels of trust in national or cross-national organisations.

Home-level factors

Two key home determinants of positive pupil outcomes are: pupils having parents with an interest in social and political issues; and pupils coming from homes where there is a high level of literacy.³ Such factors are significant predictors of pupils having: high civic knowledge scores; a strong interest in social and political issues; a high level of trust in institutions; and a high level of in-school and out-of-school engagement.

School-level factors.

Two key features of the school environment are predictors of positive outcomes (such as support for democratic values, positive attitudes towards equality, trust in institutions, interest in social and political issues, in- and out-of-school engagement, and an intention to vote in future). These features are: an open climate of discussion and debate; and a school ethos that encourages active engagement in decision making. The only outcome where such factors have less clear predictive power is having a high civic knowledge score.

The school citizenship curriculum itself (measured by the nature of its focus, or its model of delivery) has no significant influence on pupil outcomes once other factors are accounted for. Rather school ethos appears to be a much more significant predictor of pupil outcomes.

³ Other measures of socio-economic-status, such as parental occupation, are found not to be significantly related to such outcomes, when all other variables are accounted for.

Additional Information

The full report can be accessed at www.education.gov.uk/research

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This research report was commissioned before the new UK Government took office on 11 May 2010. As a result the content may not reflect current Government policy and may make reference to the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) which has now been replaced by the Department for Education (DFE).

The views expressed in this report are the authors' and do not necessarily reflect those of the Department for Education.