ELSEVIER

International Journal of
Educational Research 39 (2003) 525–537

International Journal of
Educational
Research

www.elsevier.com/locate/ijedures

Chapter 1

Australian Students' democratic values and attitudes towards participation: indicators from the IEA civic education study

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Abstract

In September 1999, over 3000 Australian students in 115 schools representing all schooling sectors participated in the Australian component of the IEA Civic Education study. In this paper, the focus in particular is on Australian students' democratic values and on their attitudes towards participation and social action. The results suggest that while Australian students have a well-developed set of democratic values, they adopt a passive rather than an active style of engaging in conventional citizenship activities. They will participate formally through voting and they will pursue issues where they see some community benefit but they do not see themselves exercising an effective presence in the formal political system. The implications of these results are discussed in relation to the characteristics of citizens needed in a democratic society and the role that schools can play in adopting curriculum and pedagogy that will engage young people in the development of their civic knowledge.

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0883-0355/$ - see front matter © 2004 Published by Elsevier Ltd.
doi:10.1016/j.ijer.2004.07.002

1. Introduction

The IEA Civic Education Study took place in Australia against a background of national questioning of civic institutions. There was amongst citizens, but particularly amongst political leaders, an active debate about Australia's constitution and new political structures. Largely because of this debate, the importance of civic education was being recognized. At the same time, preparations were also being made to celebrate in 2001 the centenary of Australia's becoming an independent, although not quite sovereign, nation.[1] It was 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.

The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to investigate Australian students' democratic values and their attitudes towards participation and social action by drawing on data from the IEA Civic Education Study (Torney-Purta, Lehmann, Oswald, & Schulz, 2001; Mellor, Kennedy, & Greenwood, 2002).

2. Australian sample in the IEA civic education study

A stratified cluster sample of schools was drawn resulting in a stratified random sample made up of 67.7% ($n = 96$) State/Government schools, 18.3% ($n = 26$) Catholic schools and 14.8% ($n = 20$) Independent schools. Each school in the sample contributed one Year 9 intact English or Studies of Society and the Environment (SOSE) class. This resulted in 2168 (65%) students from State schools, 660(20%) from Catholic schools and 503 (15%) from Independent schools. For the total sample, 1815 (54%) were female and 1516 (46%) were male.

3. Definitions of 'democratic values' and 'participation in social action'

The IEA Civic Education Study did not develop specific scales related to "Democratic Values" and "Attitudes to Citizen Participation in Social Action". For the purposes of this paper, student responses that allowed for inferences to be made about 'democratic values' and 'attitudes to participation in social action' were selected. Two issues need to be noted in this selection:

1. Following Hahn (1998), this paper has adopted the view that there is not a clear conceptual distinction between 'democratic values' and 'attitudes to participation in social action' since it might be argued that participation in social action is itself a democratic value.
2. This paper has identified two dimensions to categorize student views based on the kind of questions they were asked. 'What they believed now' has been classified as

[1] In 1901 the six Australian colonies came together in a political compact as the Commonwealth of Australia and had a measure of independence from Great Britain, although the Queen of England remained as the Australian Head of State and continues to do so.

Table 1
IEA items and scales selected to make inferences about Australian Students' 'Democratic Values' and 'attitudes to participation in social Action'

Real Items related to Concepts of Democracy	Ideal Items related to Concepts of Citizenship
What Students Believe and/or Do Now	What Students Believe about the Ideal 'Good Citizen'
Students' Current Involvement in Various Organizations	Social Movement Citizenship Scale
Confidence in Participating at School Scale	Conventional Citizenship Scale
Open Climate for Classroom Discussion Scale	Likelihood to Vote Item Expected Participation in Political Activities

'the real' and what they thought of as an 'ideal in the future' has been classified as 'ideal'. Table 1 uses this classification relating to the items and scales from the IEA data that have been used in this paper.

4. Identifying Australian Students' democratic values and attitudes to social participation

4.1. Democracy

4.1.1. The Concepts and Values of Democracy

Australian students rated 12 of the 25 'Concept of Democracy' propositions as Important democratic values. Five of the items identified positive characteristics and seven items indicated negative characteristics of democracy. In 11 of the items, Australian students endorsed the propositions at a level above the international mean, with a further one endorsed at the same level as the international mean. The rankings and related values are shown in Table 2.

4.1.2. 'Good and bad for democracy'

Australian students gave equal and very high levels of endorsement to two of the propositions: 'when citizens have the right to elect political leaders freely', and 'when everyone has the right to express their opinion freely'.

The very worst thing for democracy is 'when wealthy business people have more influence on the government than others'. The third most important democratic value is seen to be freedom from undue influence by the powerful.

The next group of five values were derived from a mixture of the 'good' and 'bad' items. There is significant endorsement for 'when political parties have rules that support women to become political leaders'.

Table 2
Ranked items measuring Australian Students' concepts of democracy and related values

Item Question: What is good and what is bad for democracy?	Australian mean	Democratic value referenced in item
When citizens have the right to elect political leaders freely	3.6	Freedom to vote openly and for whomever they wish
When everyone has the right to express their opinions freely	3.6	Freedom of expression
*When wealthy business people have more influence on the government than others	3.4	Freedom from undue influence by the powerful
When political parties have rules that support women to become political leaders	3.3	Political equity for women
*When political leaders in power give jobs in the government to members of their families	3.3	Freedom from undue influence by the powerful
*When one company owns all the newspapers	3.3	Broad-based ownership of the Press
*When people who are critical of the government are forbidden from speaking at public meetings	3.3	Freedom of public speech
*When courts and judges are influenced by politicians	3.3	Independence of the judiciary
When many different organisations exist for people who wish to belong to them	3.2	Freedom of association
*When immigrants are expected to give up the language and customs of their former countries	3.1	Cultural equity for immigrants
When people peacefully protest against a law they believe to be unjust	3.1	Freedom to protest against unjust laws
*When all television stations present the same opinion about politics	3.0	Freedom of expression in the press

Notes: Means of 3.00–3.99 indicate that the average respondent believes that the attribute is 'good for democracy'. The original items asked about 'good' and 'bad' for democracy. To simplify the table, responses to the 'bad for democracy' items (signified thus *) have been inverted, to align them with the responses to the 'good for democracy' items.
Source: Based on Mellor, Kennedy and Greenwood (2002, p.78).

The four items ranked next in this group were 'bad for democracy' items. They were: 'when political leaders in power give jobs in the government to members of their family', 'when one company owns all the newspapers', 'when people who are critical of the government are forbidden from speaking at public meetings' and 'when courts and judges are influenced by politicians'.

The last four items endorsed by Australian students as representing concepts of democracy which they considered important were (in descending order of importance): 'when many different organisations exist for people who wish to belong to them', when immigrants are expected to give up the language and customs of their former countries', 'when people peacefully protest against a law they believe to be unjust' and 'when all television stations present the same opinion about politics'.

5. Citizenship

5.1. Concepts of citizenship

Table 3 displays items that were used to seek students' views about 'good citizens'. The items asked about what 'an adult who is a good citizen' would do in relation to nominated areas of political and social action.

The most important identifier of good citizens is that they obey the law. Australian students agreed with the international cohort on this issue.

The second-most supported identifier of good citizenship is 'votes in every election'. Students seem to value this highly even though some of them do not anticipate voting when adults themselves.

The third most supported identifier is of one who 'works hard'. Australian students value this quality more highly than their international peers.

The fourth citizenship identifier is that it is not important for a good citizen to 'join a political party'. They are much more certain about the value they attach to this position than the international cohort.

Australian students agree, though less enthusiastically than their international peers, that a good citizen is one who 'participates in activities to benefit the people in the community'. For some the good citizen is one who 'is patriotic and loyal to the country'.

5.2. Conventional Citizenship Scale

Table 4 shows the six items in the *Conventional Citizenship* scale, the gist of each item's content, and the Australian percentages for each response category for each of the items. There were no significant gender differences on this scale. With a mean of 9.3, they registered as significantly below the international mean of 10.

Table 4 reveals the levels of support for the propositions. Australian students emphatically endorsed the importance of voting with a total support of 89%. Almost

Table 3
Ranked Items Measuring Australian Students' Concepts of Citizenship

Item Question: An adult who is a good citizen who !	Australian mean	Citizenship qualities referenced in items
Obeys the law	3.60	Law-abiding
Votes in every election	3.40	Exercise the right to vote
Works hard	3.22	Values personal effort
*Joins a political party	1.81	Not joining a party-political
Is patriotic and loyal to the country	3.14	Loyal to the country
Participates in activities to benefit the people in the community	3.00	Community participation

Notes: Means of 3.00–3.99 indicate that the average respondent believes that the attribute is 'important.' The one item strongly rejected as 'unimportant' has been integrated into the response sequence.
Source: Based on Mellor, Kennedy and Greenwood (2002, p.81).

Table 4
Australian Students' Concept of Conventional Citizenship

An adult who is good citizen!	Totally unimportant	Fairly unimportant	Fairly important	Very important
Votes in every election	3	8	34	55
Joins a political party	42	41	12	5
Shows respect for government representatives	9	24	49	18
Engages in political discussions	18	48	27	7
Knows about the country's history	15	30	40	15
Follows political issues in the - newspaper, radio or TV	16	34	42	8

Note: The figures in each response category are percentages.

equally emphatic were the 82% of students who felt that being a good citizen was not associated with 'joining a political party'. No other item has such a negative weight in the Australian response.

The Australian attitude of the relative unimportance of conventional citizenship is indicated by the 'fairly unimportant' response category for the importance of a citizen to engage in political discussions. Half of the Australian students believe a good citizen knows about the county's history, and follows political issues in the press.

5.3. *Social Movement Citizenship scale*

Table 5 shows the four items in the *Social Movement Citizenship* scale, the gist of each item's content, and the Australian percentages for each response category for each of the items. The Australian mean at 9.3 was significantly lower than the international mean of 10. There were significant gender differences in the student responses with females having a slightly higher mean than males.

Eighty percent of the Australian students believe in the importance of a good citizen participating in 'activities to benefit people in the community'. Three-quarters of the Australian students think taking part in 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 is important to participate in a peaceful protest against a law they believe to be unjust.

6. Participating

6.1. *Confidence in the Efficacy of Participating at School*

Table 6 shows the student responses to the four items that made up the Confidence in the Efficacy of Participating at School scale.

Approximately 80% of the Australian students endorsed the four propositions. The weight of the student response rests in the 'agree' rather than 'strongly agree'

Table 5
Australian Students' concept of Social Movement Citizenship

An adult who is good citizen!	Totally unimportant	Fairly unimportant	Fairly important	Very important
Would participate in a peaceful -protest against a law believed to be unjust	12	31	40	17
Participates in activities to benefit people in the community	3	17	56	24
Takes part in activities promoting human rights	7	25	44	24
Takes part in activities to protect the environment	6	20	46	28

Note: The figures in each response category are percentages.

category, indicating a pattern of moderate endorsement. Approximately half of the students agree with each item, and approximately an additional quarter support the propositions with strongly agree, except for the last item, where an additional one-third show strong support.

Despite substantial levels of support by the Australian cohort as a whole, the Australian mean was below the international mean, except for the last, where the mean is the same.[2]

There were significant gender differences revealed in the student responses to the items on this scale. The female mean response for the scale was 10.1 and the males mean response was 9.6. The female responses were more positive on both the agree response categories for *every* item in the scale, though the bulk of the female responses are still in the moderate 'agree', rather than the 'strongly agree' category. The greatest gender differences occur on two of the items. Eleven percent of the males 'strongly disagree' with the first proposition (compared with female 4%), and only 24% support the 'strongly agree' category for the second proposition (compared with female 32%). Male students are more negative than females on every 'disagree' response category, for every item on the scale.

Each of these items is related to the perceived efficacy of student action in schools. The ways in which this action can be developed and implemented is broad but clear. student elections, students' forming their own opinions, making suggestions, working together, organized and in groups, *can* make a difference. students believe such actions *can* influence what happens in schools, can help solve school problems, can make lots of positive changes, thus making their schools better.

6.2. Expected Participation in Political Activities scale

The three items that made up the *Expected Participation in Political Activities* scale are shown in Table 7. Students were asked to rate the likelihood of their engaging in

[2]13-17% of responses were missing on these items.

Table 6
Australian Students' Confidence in the Efficacy of Participating at School scale

	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly agree	
Electing student representatives, to suggest changes to help solve school problems, makes schools better	7	11	53	29	These items reference values such as:
Lots of positive changes happen in this school when students work together	4	12	56	29	
Organising groups of students to state their opinions could help solve problems in this school	4	13	59	25	Loyalty, Participation, Exercising the right to act, & Personal effort
Students acting together in groups can have more influence on what happens in this school than students acting by themselves	3	9	50	37	

Note: The figures in each response category are percentages.

such activities when they were adults. There were no significant gender differences in student responses on this scale.

A large majority of students do not expect to join a political party as an adult. An equally large majority do not expect to be a candidate for any office. The responses indicate a lack of support for basic political mechanisms that keep a democracy orderly. International students do not come far behind in their condemnation of these political party processes. As in the civic knowledge democracy items, a deep understanding is lacking in the students about how these formal political processes and technical aspects of government protect democracy.

These responses (76%) also demonstrate a similar lack of intention to 'write letters to a newspaper about social or political concerns', a much less 'risky' social action than the other two actions. This is probably an activity that many students will have been encouraged to have already undertaken through some school class activity.

6.3. Likelihood to vote in national elections

Table 8 shows students' responses to the item, 'Likelihood to vote in national elections'. There was no gender difference on this item.

Eighty-six percent of Australian students see themselves voting in the future. To interpret the significance of such a level of support is difficult, given compulsory voting in Australia. Perhaps the more interesting figure is the 14% who indicate they will not do this. Under Australia's compulsory voting laws, they will be fined for not doing so.

Table 7
Australian Students' expected Participation in Political Activities scale

	Certainly will not do this	Probably not do this	Probably do this	Certainly will do this
Join a political party	48	41	7	4
Be a candidate for a local or city office	42	45	8	4
Write letters to a newspaper about social or political concerns	32	44	18	6

Note: The figures in each response category are percentages.

Table 8
Australian Students' likelihood to vote

	Certainly will not do this	Probably will not do this	Probably will do this	Certainly will do this
Vote in national elections	7	7	39	47

Note: The figures in each response category are percentages.

6.4. Attitudes to Open Classroom Climate

Table 9 shows students' responses on the six items that made up the Attitudes to Open Classroom Climate scale. There were significant gender differences on this scale.

The majority of students did not feel they were often encouraged to disagree openly with their teachers on social and political issues and only 50 percent of students felt that they were often encouraged to make up their own minds. About a third more students felt that these things happened sometimes. This pattern of limited endorsement for independent thought and discussion was continued across all the items in the scale.

Girls felt they had more opportunities for independent thought and action than did boys. students from many other countries felt they had many more opportunities for engaging in discussion and expressing their own view than did Australian students, particularly the boys.

Australian students have strongly developed sense of the positive contribution they can make to decision-making and problem-solving in their schools. Yet they do not feel free to exercise their opinions in their classrooms. It seems that from students' perspectives at least, participation in decision-making in schools is not actively supported.

Table 9
Australian Students' responses to open climate for classroom discussion

	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often
Students feel free to disagree openly with their teachers about political and social issues during class	11	18	37	35
Students are encouraged to make up their own minds about issues	4	13	33	50
Teachers respect our opinions and encourage us to express them during class	10	17	36	37
Students feel free to express opinions in class even when their opinions are different from most of the other students	7	18	41	34
Teachers encourage us to discuss political or social issues about which people have different opinions	14	31	42	13
Teachers present several sides of an issue when explaining it in class	8	28	45	28

Note: The figures in each response category are percentages.

6.5. *Students participating in clubs or organisations*

Table 10 shows by gender the organisations in which Australian students commonly participate.

The majority of Australian students indicated they were involved in a club or organization. The most common organizations students were involved in were a sports organization or team, an art, music or drama organization and charity collecting money for a social cause. About a third of students participated in a student council/school parliament, or in a group conducting voluntary activities to help the community.

Thirteen percent of students attended meeting or activities 'almost every day', and almost half the participating students attended 'several days a week'. A quarter of the participating students attended or engaged in the activity only a few times each month and almost a fifth indicated they never or almost never engaged in meetings or activities.

6.6. *Correlates of Civic Knowledge and civic participation/social action*

Participating in a school council/school parliament assumed considerable significance when it was analysed as a variable in a path analysis (Mellor, Kennedy & Greenwood, 2002, p.129). The effect size for the Australian sample was significant

Table 10
Students involved in various organisations by gender

Organization	Females	Males
A sports organisation or team	82	87
An art, music or drama organization	61	32
A charity collecting money for a social cause	55	37
A student council/school parliament	35	32
A group conducting voluntary activities to help the community	38	26

Note: Organisations have been ranked from the highest student percentages of participation.

and greater than the effect size for the international calibration sample (.13 compared to .09). Both participating in a school council/school parliament and experiencing an open classroom climate positively influenced the gaining of civic knowledge (which in turn influenced the likelihood of voting). But neither of these factors had an independent effect on the likelihood of voting. These are two variables that can play a central role in the development of civic education programs and that have positive effects on the development of civic knowledge.

7. Discussion

The data presented in this paper pose a series of contradictions that are not easily resolvable. On the one hand, a majority of Australian students expressed their commitment to the traditional values associated with a democratic society. As Table 2 indicates, students value freedom in its different forms. Another indication of students' commitment to the system is the intention of the large majority of them to vote. Despite this commitment, students do not propose to join political parties, run for political office, or write to newspapers about social and political concerns. While students have some quite strongly expressed values, they do not see themselves engaging with the very political system that guarantees those values.

The students' reluctance to participate in the political system in the future might be more understandable if their views of participation in general were negative. Yet this was not the case. When asked about the value of participation in their own schools, students were very positive about what could be achieved. At the same time, they participated in a range of community groups. As Table 5 indicates, they also see the good citizen as one who undertakes political activities that support the community.

This reluctance to engage in conventional forms of political participation was not reproduced when it came to participating in broader social movements. The majority of Australian students agreed that the good citizen would do such things as participate in a protest against an unjust law and participate in activities to support human rights. It does not seem that it is participation in itself that Australian students reject. Rather, it is certain kinds of participation related to the formal

particular system. How might this be explained? There are two possible explanations and each will be considered.

One explanation is that Australian students do not have an adequate understanding of the relationship between the formal political system and their freely expressed democratic values. Their performance on the civic knowledge items addressing democracy in the IEA survey would support this view. The responses to those items that the Australian cohort found most difficult indicated that the students' basic understandings could not always deal with the precision demanded by the items. The students' lack of a clear set of theoretical principles that could be applied to a range of concepts of democracy was evident.

It seems that Australian students have a sound general knowledge of democracy and how it operates, yet it is only an average level of knowledge. Perhaps their level of knowledge was not enough for them to see the relationship between the values that they hold and the institutions that are needed to safeguard those values. Australian students appear to have a "democracy of the heart" rather than a "democracy of the mind". They believe in democracy even though their knowledge of its structures and institutions is not extensive.

There is a second possible explanation. Australian students currently have a positive view of participation in school life and for the future in relation to social movements. These represent spheres of their life over which they perceive they have some control or efficacy. Yet the political arena may be perceived as being too far out of their control for them to believe that they can ever successfully participate in it. Thus they reject it as an option, perhaps even feeling a sense of alienation because of a perceived lack of self-efficacy. Given the general political culture in Australia, it is not hard to believe that a sense of alienation could easily develop in young people.

Young people may also have a well-developed sense of where they can make a difference. Very few young Australians would aspire to grow up to become Prime Minister in the same way as their US counterparts may aspire to be President. Young Australians settle for democratic participation outside of the formal structures of government where their own efforts can hopefully secure their ends. They will participate — but on their own terms. Such a position is broadly consistent with the kind of independence and strong mindedness that is often associated with the Australian psyche.

If this analysis is correct, it raises issues about directions for the future. Australia has never experienced any real threats to its democracy. If such threats were to emerge, would the young people who responded to the IEA survey be aware enough to know what institutions needed to be protected? This is a crucial issue when the global context is so turbulent and so unpredictable. Citizens need to know what is worth protecting from either internal or external forces and they need to be able to discern an appropriate course of action (Kennedy, 2000). To do this requires both knowledge and values: mind and heart.

This is where schools can play a role. Students need to be engaged both in their classrooms and in activities outside their classrooms such as Student Councils. This study showed that the latter kind of participation has a direct, positive and significant relationship with civic knowledge. Yet so too does classroom climate even

though many Australian students reported that they did not always get the opportunity to express their views. Just as student participation outside of classrooms yields benefits in terms of enhanced civic knowledge, so too does their active participation within classrooms. Civic education cannot consist of the passive reception of decontextualised information. It must allow students to engage with both the knowledge they are expected to learn, and which is necessary to equip an active citizenry, and with activities that will give them experience with the practice of democracy.

8. Conclusions

Are democratic societies content that citizens value their system of government or should it be expected that citizens take a deep interest in the business of government, almost on a daily basis? This paper has suggested that Australian students adopt a passive rather than an active style of engaging in conventional citizenship activities. They will participate formally through voting and they will pursue issues where they see some community benefit but they do not see themselves exercising an effective presence in the formal political system. This may be because they do not adequately understand that system. 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 are also capable of modelling democratic processes. Such modeling can support a deeper level of understanding than at present seems to be the case. To pursue the twin goals of increased civic understanding and civic modeling seems a worthwhile objective for the future.

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