

# The National Assessment Program – Civics and Citizenship: Reflections on practices in primary and secondary schools



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Suzanne Mellor, a Senior Research Fellow, joined ACER in 1990 and has worked on many policy and survey research projects, some of them evaluative of education policy and program implementation.

In 2002 she was joint-researcher for the World Bank project Promoting Social Tolerance and Cohesion Through Education, in the South Pacific.

Project management for ACER of civics and citizenship projects has included review papers for the Curriculum Corporation: The Pedagogy of Civics and Citizenship Education and School Ethos and Citizenship, the 1998 report 'What's the Point?': Political Attitudes of Victorian Year 11 Students. She was project manager of the national Australian component of the IEA Civics Education Study 1995–2002, and prepared the national report. In 2000–03 she conducted the evaluation of the Victorian Discovering Democracy Professional Development Program, resulting in Discovering Democracy in Action: Implementing the Program.

From 2003–06 she was ACER's Project Director of the inaugural National Sample Assessment in Civics and Citizenship of Year 6 and Year 10 students in 600 schools in Australia, for MCEETYA. Since 2004, as ACER's Project Director, she has directed the second cycle of the National Assessment Program – Civics and Citizenship, with testing of Year 6 and Year 10 students in 620 schools to be conducted in October 2007.

## Abstract

Young citizens leaving secondary school should be competent in decision making and knowledgeable about the processes of civic participation available to them as citizens. Across the world over the last two decades, concerns have been consistently expressed over a perceived lessening of interest by citizens, especially younger citizens, in active participation in the formal governance of their societies. A range of policies have been developed by governments to vigorously address this trend.

This presentation will explore assumptions underlying the current provision of Civics and Citizenship education (CCE) programs in Australia, and the conceptual and cognitive definition of the domain by education jurisdictions and the national assessment regime. It will demonstrate, through an examination of assessment materials and findings from the assessments, what is now known about the capacity of school-aged Australian citizens to participate in governance. It examines the role schools can play in better supporting their students. It argues that unless there is a greater improvement in Civics and Citizenship achievement than has been evident to date, Australia's young people will not have the necessary competencies or dispositions for citizenship participation in their future civic life, and all parties will be the poorer for it.

A central proposition for this paper and for the work associated with the National Assessment Program–Civics and Citizenship, is a belief that democratic societies need the active participation of their citizens to stay healthy. This view is universally endorsed in democratic societies, though there is debate about what form the active participation should take in any particular situation. Across

the world, over the last two decades there has been a perceived lessening of interest by citizens, especially younger citizens, in active participation in the formal governance of their societies. This trend has concerned governments in democracies and a range of policies have been developed to vigorously address the trend. Supporting the teaching and learning of Civics and Citizenship in schools has been one way of addressing this perceived lessening of interest. National assessment in Civics and Citizenship has been seen as a driver for increasing the profile of and providing a focus for increasing the provision of explicit Civics and Citizenship education (CCE).

## Introduction

The main points to be examined in the presentation will focus on core understandings about engagement and participation and are as follows:

- What kinds of participation are available to citizens in a democracy?
  - Civic/social participation and political participation?
- What motivates citizens to actively engage, to participate?
  - What might motivate young citizens to participate?
  - Are their motives different from those of other citizens in some significant ways?
  - What roles do attitudes and values play in these participations?
  - What kinds of participation are young people attracted to?
  - What explanations are there for these patterns?
- What civic knowledge do citizens need in order to effectively participate? (Note dependence on governance system, and intended/possible participation)

- How do people learn to participate? (discussion of options)
- What is the role of decision-making experience and civic knowledge in this learning?
- What role should or can schools play in this enterprise?
- Is, or should, it be a marginal or central mission for schools?
- How might curriculum and governance in schools be changed to assist students in their CCE learning?
- What motivates Western liberal governments' concern about the lack of interest?
  - How are they proposing to stem this trend? (several approaches will be described)
- What has Australia done over the last two decades?

## The Australian approach to CCE

- 1980s Senate Standing Committee established.
- 1994: Whereas the people ... published.
- 1996–2000: Australia participated in the IEA Civics Study (reported 2001).
- 1997: Discovering Democracy program launched – resource development.
- 1999: Adelaide Declaration: National Goals of Schooling endorsed by Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA).
- 2001: MCEETYA decides to implement triennial National Sample Assessment at Years 6 & 10, takes advice on two Key Performance Measures in CCE.
- Discovering Democracy program Stage 2 begins – PD provision.

- 2002/3: Development of Assessment Domain for national assessment in CCE
- 2002/3: States and Territories start curriculum mapping of CCE, undertaken across KLAs, typically focused on curriculum areas such as SOSE/HSIE.
- 2003: First cycle of national assessment in CCE trialled.
- 2004: First cycle of Civics & Citizenship Sample Assessment Program Years 6&10 implemented.
- 2005–7: National Statements of Learning (SoL) in CCE developed.
- 2007: Second cycle of CCE national assessment begins.
- 2006: National SoL released and incorporated into State and Territory curricula, with agreement that SoL to be implemented in all schools in 2008.
- 2008: Publication of 2007 assessment public report.

The implementation process is as follows:

- investigation
- goal clarification
- resource development
- National Assessment Program
- PD
- Curriculum mapping
- SoL.

Federal funding is now reduced to a trickle and State and Territory funding consequently reduces as it was always seen as a federal initiative. Why?

## Additional decisions that have constrained the Australian approach

- The Adelaide Declaration took a broad view of CCE. This view is explicitly referred to in goal

1.4, which states that Australian students, when they leave school, should:

*be active and informed citizens with an understanding and appreciation of Australia's system of government and civic life'*

and implicitly referred to in the types of knowledge, understandings values, judgments and decisions that are desirable student outcomes of Australian schooling.

- In contrast to this broad view of CCE, the *Discovering Democracy* resource development incorporated a paradigm which focused on formal governance institutions and civic knowledge. So some contradictory messages are apparent.
- Professional development after the development of CCE resources has made clear the experience of teachers working at the CCE coalface that may have usefully informed the development of the resources.
- A single specific CCE curriculum vision has not been conveyed, or consistently focused across jurisdiction. This has led to further mixed messages for schools and inconsistent implementation.
- The approaches to defining the scope and contents of the 'civics' element of curricula have been inconsistent and poorly conceptualised. This has contributed to a general misunderstanding and undervaluing of 'citizenship' that often takes the form of obligatory participation in 'feel-good' activities rather than as an active response to informed decisions about issues of social importance.
- The NAP-CC Assessment Domain attempted to address these problems by better defining content and providing an articulated balance

between civics and citizenship through the two KPMs (to be examined in depth, via test units, with score guides)

- The operationalisation of this can be seen in the instrumentation including item formats, and Student Background Survey.

## Significant findings of pre-2004 research

- The IEA (2001) study found that:
  - Teachers believed that CCE was of primary importance as a learning area.
  - Teachers did not feel competent to teach many of the concepts and content.
  - Australian students' civic knowledge was about median for the full cohort.
  - Australian students' were more inclined to engage in social/civic activities than in formal political activities.
  - Their attitudes and commitment to democracy were positive.
  - Australian students' disposition and motivation to political engagement were low (supported by Mellor, 1998).
  - Australian students appreciated their democracy and trusted some civic institutions, but not the politicians.
  - Participation in school councils had a positive effect on academic achievement.
- There was much to be done but there appeared, from student and from teachers' responses to be a willingness to engage in teaching and learning CCE.
- The Senate reports and the Civics Expert Group's Whereas the people ... report indicated the political willingness of the federal

government to raise the profile of CCE in Australian schools.

- Take-up of Discovering Democracy program focus on resources was low.
- New CCE program provision in schools as a result of Discovering Democracy professional development programs was also low.
- Discovering Democracy became involved in 'the culture debates', and in values education programs and these had a weakening (divisive/confusing) impact on specific CCE curriculum provision.

## Australian student CCE learning and proficiency

What have the National Sample Assessments in CCE, 2004–07 indicated about Australian student CCE learning and proficiency?

- Civics and Citizenship achievement is low at both year levels tested.
- Civic knowledge and citizenship dispositions are closely correlated.
- Factors found to be significant in student learning are:
  - SES (parent occupation)
  - Correlations between CCE proficiency and engagement in civics-related activities
  - Opportunities to engage in decision making and governance in school
  - General academic ability

## Other related research

Other factors found to be significant in student learning in CCE are:

- Whole school programs with a CCE focus are more effective in generating a school culture that is supportive of more active decision making by students. (Such data not

collected in NAP-CC, but available from other research, especially from evaluations of school-provided programs and related student learning outcomes.)

- Curriculum provision across KLAs is not generally conducive to high status or integrative sustained curriculum programming.

## Concluding comments

This paper has explored some of the history and assumptions underlying the current provision of Civics and Citizenship education (CCE) programs in Australia, and the conceptual and cognitive definition of the domain by education jurisdictions and the national assessment regime. It has demonstrated, through an examination of assessment materials and findings from the assessments, what is now known about the capacity of school-aged Australian citizens to participate in governance. It has also reflected on what has constrained the provision of CCE in schools and how 'capacity', in terms of levels of knowledge, understandings and dispositions, can be expanded to further enhance students' learning in the area.

It would appear from the national assessments findings that the policy initiatives in CCE over the last two decades in Australia have not had the desired result of creating well informed and engaged young citizens. Unless there is greater success deriving from some variants of CCE policies than has been evident to date, Australia's young people in the future will not have the necessary competencies or dispositions to actively participate in the civic life of their society. Their right to, and society's need for them, to be both civically competent and well disposed to actively engage in civic and political life, will have been denied. All parties will be the poorer for it and we allow it at our peril.