

**ACER Research Conference 2008**

***Touching the Future: Building skills for life and work***

***The National Assessment Program-Civics and Citizenship:  
Reflections on practices in primary and secondary schools***

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**ABSTRACT**

Young citizens coming out of 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 the 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 an 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.

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

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 the 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 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).

*The main points to be examined in the presentation are the following:*

### **Core understandings about engagement and participation**

- What kinds of participation are available to citizens in a democracy?
- Civic/social participation and political participation?
  
- What motivates citizens to active 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 exercise?
- What explanations are there for these patterns?
  
- What civic knowledge do citizens need to know in order to be able to effectively participate? (Note dependence on governance system, and intended/possible participation)
- How do people learn to participate? (discussion of options)
- 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 to be described)
- What has Australia done over the last two decades?

## The Australian Approach to CCE

- Senate Standing Committee of the 1980s
- 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 Yrs 6 & 10, takes advice on 2 Key Performance Measures in C&C
- *Discovering Democracy* program - stage 2- commences: PD provision
- 2002/3 development of Assessment Domain for national assessment in C&C
- 2002/3 State and Territory commences curriculum mapping of C&C, undertaken, across KLAs, typically focused in curriculum areas such as SOSE/HSIE
- 2003: Trial for first cycle of national assessment in C&C
- 2004: First cycle of Civics & Citizenship Sample Assessment Program-Yrs 6&10
- 2005-7-National Statements of Learning in C&C (SoL) developed
- 2007 Second cycle of C&C national assessment
- 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.

Explore the implementation process here:

Investigation / Goal clarification / Resource development / National Assessment Program / PD / Curric mapping / SoL ...

Federal funding now reduced to a trickle and State and territory funding consequentially reduced... it was always a federal initiative. Why?

## Additional decisions that have constrained the Approach

- Adelaide Declaration takes a broad view of C&C
- *Discovering Democracy* resource development incorporated a paradigm which focused on formal governance institutions & civic knowledge
- Professional Development *after* resources ...
- Specific curriculum not conveyed, or consistently focused across jurisdictions (Mixed messages for schools ... low levels of varied implementation)
- Assessment Domain attempted a balance between C & C, with the 2 KPMs (To be examined in depth, via test units, with score guides)
- Instrumentation including item formats, and Student Background Survey

## What were some significant findings of pre-2004 research?

- The IEA study found that:
  - Teachers believed that CCE was of primary important 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/ 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 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.

### **What have the National Sample Assessments in C&C, 2004-7 indicated about Australian student C&C 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 C&C proficiency and engagement in civics-related activities
  - Opportunities to engage in decision-making/governance in school
  - General ability

### **Other related research indicates:**

- Other Factors found to be significant in student learning in C&C are:
  - Whole school programs with a C&C focus are the more effective in generating a school culture which 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.

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