



MEASURING
WHAT
MATTERS

A PEOPLE FOR EDUCATION PROJECT



MEASURING WHAT MATTERS: CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION

WHY IS CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION IMPORTANT

People cannot take a full and active part in the affairs of their society, fulfill their obligations, or defend their rights or accord those rights to others if they do not understand the laws and institutions that govern them or the rights to which they are entitled. Low levels of voter turnout, indifference about difficult choices the society faces, intolerance, and political extremism are considered evidence that societies have failed to equip the young with the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that citizenship requires.

Across the democratic world citizenship education is affirmed as a key component of education. In Ontario, for example, the grade 9/10 curriculum for Canadian and World Studies says that “Citizenship education is an important facet of students’ overall education. In every grade and course in the social studies, history, and geography curriculum, students are given opportunities to learn about what it means to be a responsible, active citizen in the community of the classroom and the diverse communities to which they belong within and outside the school. It is important for students to understand that they belong to many communities and that, ultimately, they are all citizens of the global community.” But an international study of civic education in 24 countries reported that in almost all countries education for democratic citizenship was a high priority in terms of rhetoric but a low priority for mandating programs or allocating resources.

WHAT IS CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION?

In Canada and most other democracies, citizenship education is largely based on an assumption that that citizens should play an active role in civic affairs and that to do so, they must develop a core set of civic knowledge, skills, and values. Through citizenship education students acquire knowledge of historical and political facts and a nuanced understanding of social issues; develop skills to engage with the formal political system and civil society organizations; and establish the values and attitudes of democratic citizenship.

HOW DO SCHOOLS FOSTER CITIZENSHIP?

KNOWLEDGE ACQUISITION

Schools teach the key concepts of democratic citizenship. When they are successful, students are able to define each concept, list its critical attributes, explain how the concept has changed across time and contexts and describe the way the concept is demonstrated in their own society. This knowledge base is insufficient for the development of active civic engagement. For this to occur, students need to go beyond factual knowledge to develop an understanding of the tensions, positions, and possibilities for the concepts in their own context. They should be able to articulate a tentative position of their own regarding how the concepts or idea should be demonstrated in their time and context. Box 1 contains an illustration of the development of the concept *consent of the governed*, including an illustration of the contemporary tensions and possibilities that students might consider and an illustration of a position that they might adopt.

BOX 1. Concept Development

Key Concept

Consent of the Governed

Definition

The authority to govern is derived from the people who are governed.

Critical Attributes

Government representatives are selected by citizens. There are ways other than voting – Athenians choose representatives for councils and juries by lot; they weren't all that keen on voting

Changes Across Time And Context

In Ancient Athens women, foreigners and slaves were excluded from voting. In Canada, voting rights have been denied to women, non-landowners, Canadians of Asian ancestry, Aboriginal Canadians, prisoners, federal judges.

Contemporary Manifestation

Canada holds elections every 4 years or sooner if parliament is dissolved. Political parties nominate candidates to run for election in 308 ridings. Citizens vote for one candidate in their riding. The candidate winning the largest number of votes wins a seat in the House of Commons, the party with the largest number of seats forms government and the leader of that party becomes the prime minister.

Contemporary tensions and possibilities

Canada's electoral system often leads to the election of governments with much less than 50% of the vote. These election results arguably do not reflect the will of the people. Other jurisdictions employ a range of ways to try to better reflect the will of the people such as run offs, preferential ballots and proportional representation. The first two focus on making sure a candidate has the support of more than 50% of the electorate, the last is based on the percentage of the popular vote they obtain, which often leads to minority and coalition governments

Tentative position

Canada should adopt a proportional election system.

ENDNOTES

1 Torney-Purta, J., J. Schwille, and J. A. Amadeo. Civic Education across Countries: Twenty-Four Case Studies from the IEA Civic Education Project. Amsterdam: International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement, 1999.

2 Kerr, D., Keating, A. and Ireland, E. (2009). *Pupil Assessment in Citizenship Education: Purposes, Practices and Possibilities. Report of a CIDREE Collaborative Project.* Slough:NFER/CIDREE.

SKILL DEVELOPMENT

Schools help students develop the skills that students require for effective citizenship through other areas of the curriculum. For example, the language arts develop the capacities of reading, writing, speaking and other forms of communication that are absolutely essential for effective citizenship.¹ Schools also contribute to the development of skills uniquely oriented toward citizenship through civic projects in which students engage in civic writing and speaking. Writing and presenting to politicians and policy makers for a clear and genuine civic purpose enhances the development of the particular skills of persuasive writing and speaking.²

In a democratic and socially cohesive society, people must be capable of understanding the impact of their behaviour and decisions on others. In order to do this, they need to imaginatively take the role of another. They need to judge their own actions from the perspective of other people. They need to consider the consequences of the actions they advocate.

DEVELOPING VALUES AND ATTITUDES

In addition to knowledge and skills, schools contribute to the development of the disposition to act in ways that are consistent with democratic values, such as recognizing and valuing different perspectives, distinguishing between a person and the argument the person is making, avoiding bias and distortion in the presentation of one's own argument. There are competing ideas about what constitutes democratic values, but there are some consistent themes.³ Approaches to citizenship education that allow for student voice and active engagement in schools and communities have a significant impact in fostering these kinds of democratic values and dispositions.⁴

There are concepts and standards of reasoning that students must learn in order to help them rationally address the decisions they must make as adult citizens. One of them is the ability to distinguish between facts and values, and to know the standards that apply in evaluating each. Another is the inclination and ability to gather factual evidence relevant to one's decisions. Related to this is the ability and disposition to reason accurately in making decisions. Respect for evidence and reason are essential both to personal decisions and the decisions one makes about the kind of society one wants.

In a democratic and socially cohesive society, people must be capable of understanding the impact of their behaviour and decisions on others. In order to do this, they need to imaginatively take the role of another. They need to judge their own actions from the perspective of other people. They need to consider the consequences of the actions they advocate. For this to happen, students need to be able to imagine the consequences of everyone taking the course of action proposed. And they have to be able to judge that proposed course of action in terms of those consequences.

STUDENT VOICE AND ACTIVE ENGAGEMENT

The explicit development of citizenship knowledge, skills and dispositions through the instructional process requires complementary effort to promote student voice and active engagement in school decision-making because the latter can and do have a significant impact in fostering democratic values. As Meria Levinson points out, "Research over the past forty years, across dozens of countries, has conclusively demonstrated that students' belief that they are 'encouraged to speak openly in class' is a 'powerful predictor of their knowledge of and support for democratic values, and their participation in political discussion inside and outside school.'"¹ In other words, the climate of the classroom and school must also be conducive to the active engagement of students and to the expression of their ideas. Without such complementarity, it is likely that students make be able to verbalize the concepts and ideals of democratic citizenship but unlikely to value them and put them into practice.

These capacities and dispositions are essential to maintaining a democratic society. They must be developed systematically under the guidance of teachers who have sufficient preparation and the resources needed to examine ideas and the implications of those ideas for action. And, if we are serious in valuing the development of these abilities and dispositions, skills and knowledge, they should be assessed in the same way that we assess reading, writing, and mathematics.

HOW IS CITIZENSHIP AND CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION MEASURED? ASSESSMENT AT THE CLASSROOM LEVEL

In classrooms there are numerous opportunities for assessing whether students have learned and can apply the key concepts of democratic citizenship. Are the students able to define the concept? Can they list the critical attributes of the concept and explain how the concept has changed across time and contexts? Are they able to describe the way the concept is demonstrated in their own society?

Once they understand the key concept and its critical features, can they apply what they have learned? Are the students able to go beyond factual knowledge to develop an understanding of the tensions, positions, and possibilities for the concepts in their own context? Are they capable of articulating a tentative position of their own regarding how the concept should be demonstrated?

PERFORMANCE STANDARDS

Standards by which student performance can be assessed are typically developed by a large number of educators. The standards help students, teachers, parents, and administrators to understand what students must be able to do when they apply the knowledge or skills they have acquired to situations they are likely to encounter every day.

Performance standards for democratic citizenship would support student democratic understanding. Teachers can use them to assess individual student performance or students who need additional support. Doing so, would make democratic citizenship goals and objectives in the curriculum concrete for students and their parents or guardians.

LARGE SCALE ASSESSMENT

Little is known on a pan-Canadian basis about the civic knowledge, skills and values of Canadian students or about citizenship education practices in Canadian schools. Outside of Canada, a number of jurisdictions mandate large-scale assessments of civic learning. In the U.S., civics is part of the National Assessment of Educational Progress; in Australia, the National Assessment Program includes civics and citizenship. Both assessments also include surveys for schools, teachers, and students about how citizenship is addressed in curricular, co-curricular, and extracurricular activities.

TAKING CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION SERIOUSLY

If we are serious about Canadians taking a full and active part in the affairs of their society, fulfilling their obligations as productive and contributing members of society, defending their rights and according those rights to others, they must understand the laws and institutions that govern them and the rights to which they are entitled. If we expect citizenship education to encourage high levels of voter turnout, to stimulate interest and ability to make difficult choices about the issues society faces, to promote tolerance, and diminish political extremism, students must acquire the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that active and engaged citizenship requires. Taking citizenship education seriously also requires thoughtful assessment.

ENDNOTES

1 Hughes, Andrew S. "Understanding Citizenship: A Delphi Study." *Canadian and International Education* 23 (1994): 13-26.

2 CSV. *CSV Reports on Citizenship in the Curriculum: One Year On*. London: CSV, 2003. CSV. *CSV Reports on Citizenship in the Curriculum: Two Years On*. London: CSV, 2004

3 George Schöpflin, Liberal Pluralism and Post Communism, in *Can Liberalism be Exported? Western Political Theory and Ethnic Relations in Eastern Europe*, eds. Will Kymlicka and Magda Opalski (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 110.

4 Levinson, Meira. "Diversity and Civic Education." In *Making Civics Count: Civic Education for a New Generation*, edited by David E. Campbell, Meira Levinson and Frederick M. Hess, 89-114. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2012, p. 97.

People for Education – working with experts from across Canada – is leading a multi-year project to broaden the Canadian definition of school success by expanding the indicators we use to measure schools’ progress in a number of vital areas.

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