

The 2009 IEA International Civic and Citizenship Education Study (ICCS)

an interview with David Kerr
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1. Please name shortly the most significant results of the current ICCS study as well as the most significant differences compared to the study of 1999.

The new ICCS study assessed the civic knowledge, attitudes and behaviours of more than 140,000 Grade 8 students (age around 14 years old) in 38 countries, including 24 European countries. The main findings were that:

- students' civic knowledge scores varied widely worldwide. Students in European ICCS countries scored higher, on average, in civic knowledge than the international average. They also scored highly in knowledge of basic facts about the European Union (EU), but there was greater variation in their in-depth knowledge about EU laws and policies.
- an overwhelming majority of students endorsed fundamental democratic values, gender equality and equal rights for ethnic or racial groups and immigrants, as well as freedom of movement of citizens in Europe. However, there were also substantial minorities of students, in all countries, who had rather negative attitudes towards equal opportunities and freedom of movement.
- large majorities of students in European ICCS countries had a strong sense of European identity. Most students in EU countries expressed pride that their country was a EU member, though they did not feel an attachment to the EU themselves.
- the vast majority of students (about 80%) expect to vote in elections as adults, but few expect to actively engage in other political activities such as joining a political party or running for office. Students in European countries say they are more likely to vote in national elections than in European elections.
- civic and citizenship education is a policy priority in European countries. School leaders and teachers view the main aim of civic and citizenship education as developing civic knowledge, understanding and skills among young people rather than the promotion of active citizenship and participation.



ICCS builds from CIVED but provides a richer set of findings about civic knowledge, attitudes and behaviours. This is because: there are greater numbers of countries participating in ICCS, compared to CIVED; the ICCS instruments probe in-depth across a wider range of civic aspects and domains; and, ICCS has the new, innovative dimension of regional data on civic and citizenship issues that are particular to Europe, Asia and Latin America.

2. In how far is the research design for ICCS different from the IEA CIVED study of 1999?

ICCS took account of the considerable change in interest in civic and citizenship education that had taken place in the 10 years since CIVED. The study deliberately adopted the term 'civic and citizenship education' in recognition of the broadening of the concept, processes and practices that have occurred in this area since CIVED. The research design was built on an acceptance of this broadening and the need to focus on students' civic and citizenship knowledge, dispositions to engage and attitudes relating to civic and citizenship education in modern, 21st century, democratic societies. The ICCS assessment framework was based around three dimensions (content, affective-behavioural and cognitive) and four content domains (civic society and systems, civic principles, civic participation and civic identities). These dimensions and content domains addressed the broadening concept, processes and practices of civic and citizenship education and provided a conceptual underpinning for all the study instruments at both international and regional level.

3. What do you think is the reason that male students are more likely to become politically active as adult citizens, although female students gained higher scores in civic knowledge than males? Why do you think gender equality is still a challenge?

I am not sure that gender equality is as big a challenge as it used to be. ICCS provides some contrasting findings that suggest the equality gap in this area may be closing. For while it shows that girls had significantly higher civic knowledge scores than boys in the majority of countries, in contrast it reveals that boys had higher scores on the EU-related civic assessment than girls. This suggests that the issue may as much to do with motivation, interest and opportunity rather than just gender. With countries in Europe having increasing number of female politicians, particularly in Scandinavia, there are much greater numbers of potential role models for girls to encourage and motivate them to participate in greater numbers as adult citizens. While there is still work to be done to close the gap there are encouraging signs that progress is being made in this respect.

4. What do you think are the causes that Finland or in general Scandinavian countries are still top-performing countries in all the case studies (e.g. trust in national government, gender equality, high interest of students in political and social issues etc.)? Do you see these countries as role models for other European countries?

I don't live in Finland or the Scandinavian countries and it may be easier to ask your question direct to the National Research Coordinators (NRCs) from those countries who participated in ICCS. However, it is widely recognised that Finland and the Scandinavian countries have a long and distinguished history of support for democratic values and practices all the way from national to individual community and school level. Given what ICCS reveals about the influence of community factors (parents, peers), societal (media) and education (school ethos, classroom climate) on students' levels of civic knowledge and the nature and strength of their civic attitudes and behaviours it is, perhaps, not surprising that a long tradition of such influences rubs off on young people in these countries.

However, all countries face considerable challenges to their democracies and democratic society with the movement of peoples, global economic crisis, rise of nationalist factions and cuts in public spending, and Finland and the Scandinavian countries are not immune to such challenges. Rather than put Finland, Denmark and other Scandinavian countries on a pedestal the comparative nature of the ICCS study highlights how all countries have particular strengths in relation to civic and citizenship education, but also areas and aspects that can be improved. Therefore there is considerable opportunity for countries to learn from each other in terms of how they respond to the considerable challenges facing democracy and its institutions, culture and practices.

5. The analyses of the ICCS data has shown that immigrant or socioeconomic background had little influence on students' interest in political and social issues, whereas reported parental interest in politics and social issues were "somewhat" influential. How can this fact be utilised and re-connected to school in order to strengthen civic participation of young people?

ICCS shows that a range of influences, both in and beyond schools, impact on students' civic knowledge, attitudes and behaviours. It is important that school leaders and teachers are aware of this and build it into how they structure and approach civic and citizenship education in and beyond the curriculum. The finding about the influences on students' interest in political and social issues suggests that it is vital that schools teach young people how to discuss and debate about topical political and social issues. They give them the necessary civic knowledge and discussion skills. They can then use this civic knowledge and skills to discuss these issues with parents, peers and others beyond school. At the same time, it may be helpful for schools to make parents aware of the content and process of civic and citizenship education programmes in schools and to encourage them to discuss issues with their children at home.

6. Have you noticed any differences between the study result in European countries and Asian or South American countries? If so, what are the most remarkable ones and what are, in your opinion, the main causes?

Similarities and differences between Europe and the other regions will become clearer with the publication of the Latin American and Asian regional reports in early 2011. At the moment we only have the European regional report and overarching international comparisons. What is obvious to date is the differences in the ways that regions conceive and approach citizenship education, for example the strong moral dimension to this area in Asian countries. There is also evidence that students in European countries scored higher on the civic knowledge scale, on average, than students in other regions, but it should be noted that a number of Asian countries were among the top performers in ICCS alongside Finland and Denmark.

7. Why did Germany not participate in the ICCS study 2009?

Germany was involved in the initial planning stages of ICCS but you would need to ask the German representatives why they did not follow through with full participation in the study. I prefer to focus not on why certain countries did not participate, but more on the large number of European countries – 24 and 22 of them EU members – that did participate. ICCS provides an extensive evidence base for the civic knowledge, attitudes and behaviours of the next generation of European citizens. This is a rich and crucial baseline that should be used by policy makers and practitioners in moving civic and citizenship education forward not just in those countries that participated in ICCS but in all countries. I'm sure the results will be of as much interest in Germany as they are in other European countries.

8. Regarding the results of the study, which challenges and needs for action do you think to be necessary concerning civic and citizenship education? What are your personal recommendations for the future?

I could spend a long time answering this question given the range and depth of the ICCS findings and evidence base at international, European and national levels. However, to start the ball rolling for others to follow, I will limit my remarks to challenges and actions in relation to three aspects: **policy, practice and use of the evidence base.**

In terms of **policy**

- it is encouraging that civic and citizenship education is a policy priority in European countries. The challenge, with many European countries returning new centre right governments and focusing on the global economic downturn, is to ensure that civic and citizenship education remains a policy priority. It is more vital than ever in the current political, social and economic climate that societies protect and enhance their democratic systems and institutions and that they adequately prepare young people to be active and informed citizens i.e. that they provide real opportunities for them to learn about and experience democracy in practice.

In terms of **practice**

- **civic knowledge:** there is a pressing need to improve the civic knowledge of students, particularly their civic knowledge about the EU and its institutions, policies and laws. The challenge of deepening civic knowledge is crucial because the ICCS study highlights the interrelationship between civic knowledge and active participation. It shows that the students with the highest civic knowledge scores are the ones who say they will participate as adult citizens i.e. the more you know about how democratic society functions the more likely you are to participate.
- **civic attitudes:** it is vital to build on the positive support for democratic values and equality for all groups in society among young people. The challenge is to tackle those minorities of students in all countries who hold more negative attitudes towards such values and issues and to address the reasons/influences as to why they develop such views.
- **civic behaviours:** it is positive that young people say they will vote as adults. The challenge is to turn intention to vote at 14 into actual voting behaviour at age 18 (or 16 in some countries such as Austria). It is somewhat worrying, that students say they will not participate in other forms of political activity as adults and hold such low levels of trust in politicians, including the EU, and the media. The challenge is to encourage young people to participate in our communities and societies and to give them the confidence and belief – what is called 'political efficacy' – that their opinion and voice matters and that they can make a difference individually and collectively.

- **schools:** ICCS highlights the key role of schools in providing effective civic and citizenship education and helping young people to acquire civic knowledge and develop civic attitudes and behaviours. School level factors that encourage such acquisition and development include: having a classroom ethos that encourages discussion; having a supportive school ethos; providing real opportunities for young people to participate; and having school leaders who understand the aims of civic and citizenship education and teachers who have sufficient civic and subject knowledge. The challenge is ensuring that all schools provide and all young people have access to effective civic and citizenship education.

In terms of the **evidence base**

- ICCS is a fantastic evidence base for policy makers, practitioners and researchers within and across countries. We are only at the start of this evidence base and its findings being made available. The challenge is to spread the message about the existence of ICCS and to find innovative ways to encourage people to look, understand and use the ICCS evidence base to make informed, evidence-based decisions about policy, practice and research in civic and citizenship education. A lot of effort has gone into conducting the ICCS study and now is the time to take advantage of its rich and varied outcomes.

I would recommend that people look very carefully and closely at what ICCS shows at international, regional (particularly European) and national level in terms of the knowledge, understanding and skills that the next generation of citizens are developing and how this is influencing their attitudes and current and future participation. There is then the need to consider the implications of the emerging findings and messages for policy and practice.

One particular priority is to focus much more on what is meant by 'active citizenship', to make it a central aim of civic and citizenship education, and to provide real opportunities that enable young people to put their civic knowledge into practice and to recognise the interrelationship between learning and living democracy. This is one of the most potent ways to protect and strengthen democracy and to enable people, particularly young people, to respond positively to the challenges currently facing our communities and societies and to those to come in the future.

I hope that this interview has whetted your appetite to find out more about the ICCS study and its outcomes. There are still two further regional reports, an encyclopaedia of policy and practice in each of the 38 participating countries and the release of the international and regional datasets to come in 2011. So there is much to look at now and more to come in the near future.

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Further details about the ICCS study can be accessed at the IEA website at: http://www.iea.nl/iccs_press_release.html and also at the ICCS website under 'Reports' at: <http://iccs.acer.edu.au/>