

Civics and citizenship education in New Zealand: A case for change?

Think Piece 29: May 2018



Todd Kriebel and Danijela Tavich

Todd is a Principal Economist at the New Zealand Institute of Economic Research and a patron of the McGuinness Institute.

Danijela has a Masters in Public Policy from Victoria University and is currently working at the Ministry for the Environment.

INTRODUCTION

The 2013 Constitutional Advisory Panel recommendation for the creation of a national strategy for civics and citizenship education (CCE) in schools, kura (Māori-medium schools) and communities provided the opportunity for an important conversation about building civic knowledge in Aotearoa New Zealand.¹ This think piece explores possible next steps for implementing this recommendation. It is broken up into two parts: (A) A case for change and (B) Potential next steps.

A) A CASE FOR CHANGE

There are two components of broader ‘civic knowledge’: civics and citizenship education. Civics education addresses the formal institutions and processes of civic life, such as voting in elections, while citizenship education addresses how people participate in society and how citizens interact with communities.²

Civic engagement describes ‘how an active citizen participates in the life of a community in order to improve conditions for others or to help shape the community’s future’.³ This includes voting, as well as broader activities such as volunteering, donating to charity or contacting a politician. Civic engagement is a fundamental part of building and maintaining social capital and strong democracies.⁴

Three key trends

Safeguarding democracy is a worthwhile pursuit for reasons beyond moral and philosophical arguments.⁵ There is substantial international evidence that democratic polities enjoy better economic and social outcomes, leading to overall higher levels of wellbeing.⁶ If we accept this, and also accept that New Zealand is a well-functioning democracy worth preserving, then there are three current trends that, unless attended to, will eventually undermine the quality of our democracy.⁷ This section builds on these trends with an outline of existing research about CCE and its current conditions in New Zealand.

1. Loss of a common platform for public discourse

Traditional forms of ‘slow’ media such as high-quality, investigative, public interest journalism are subject to declining profitability and funding restrictions. This has prompted a shift in the market towards digital communication through channels such as social media, which offer greater potential for the generation of advertising revenue,⁸ and favour immediacy and entertainment value.⁹ These pressures are evident in the transformation of public broadcaster Radio New Zealand into an aggregate provider of radio, TV and online print journalism.¹⁰ Despite this transformation, and the recent increase in public funding for Radio New Zealand through New Zealand on Air, the decline of slow media remains an issue for citizens seeking to stay informed about their country.¹¹

The problems caused by declining public interest journalism are exacerbated by an increase in the diversity of channels for news on the Internet, making it increasingly difficult to identify quality information. While this diversity may be positive overall, it also represents another aspect of the shift away from professional journalism.¹² Additionally, it has opened the market to ‘fake news’: fabricated news stories that can be shared widely online.¹³

The growing reliance of citizens on social media for news is also causing issues such as online ‘filter bubbles’ that reinforce personal biases. Because social media platforms such as Facebook determine what content users see based on their connections and what they have already ‘liked’ or interacted with, individual news feeds can become echo chambers insulated from the perspectives of wider society.¹⁴ Given that more than 60% of millennials get their news from Facebook feeds, this undermines the potential of social media as a platform for balanced and constructive public discourse.¹⁵

2. Lack of knowledge and interest about how democracy works

A report based on the results of the 2008 International Civic and Citizenship Education Study (ICCS) revealed that New Zealand has some of the highest and lowest international scores for civic knowledge. No other country in the study had such a wide distribution.¹⁶ At the bottom end, Māori and Pasifika males were found to have the most limited knowledge of democracy. This indicates that a ‘civic empowerment gap’ exists,¹⁷ and appears to mirror the other inequalities in our society.¹⁸ This inequality

extends to voting engagement, in which Māori are consistently participating at a rate around 10% lower than non-Māori (see Table 1 below). Pasifika voters also consistently have lower turnout rates than Pākehā.¹⁹

Another report of the ICCS study found no clear pattern of association between students' average knowledge scores and their level of interest in social and political issues, nor their intentions for future civic action.²⁰ These results point to a need for something other than content or more 'academic' civic knowledge in the New Zealand curriculum that will encourage interest and participation.

Civic engagement is commonly positioned as a youth issue. However, evidence suggests that youth are engaged, but that this engagement is occurring externally to party lines and conventional notions of participation such as voting, instead blurring such lines and focusing on activities like volunteering.²¹

The last three general elections have seen falling electoral enrolment rates in age groups between 18 and 39 (see also Table 1 below).²² Voter turnout of the eligible voting population in 2017 was 74%, an increase from 72% in 2014 (see Table 2). Voter turnout for Local Authority Elections is lower, at 42% in 2016.²³

New Zealand is becoming increasingly diverse, but the high rate of non-voting among migrants could indicate possible issues for civic engagement. The percentage of people living in New Zealand who were born overseas was 25.2% in 2013, compared to 19% in 2001,²⁴ more than double the OECD average.²⁵ In 2015/16 resident visa approvals increased 21% from 2014/15.²⁶ This growing diversity enriches New Zealand,²⁷ but almost 60% of recent migrants did not vote in the 2011 General Election.³⁰ As many migrants come

from countries with weak democracies,³¹ it is important that knowledge barriers to engagement are reduced and that individuals are supported to access the civic institutions and exercise the rights they are entitled to as members of New Zealand society.³²

3. Inconsistency in what constitutes CCE

Teachers have significant discretion over how they teach under the *New Zealand Curriculum* (NZC) and *Te Marautanga o Aotearoa* (the curriculum for kura/Maori-medium schools), which are based on learning areas, principles and values.³³ The flexibility of the NZC seems to be advantageous for the most part, but can be challenging in the case of CCE. The problem is that there is no consistency over what constitutes CCE, nor is there any explicit requirement that CCE be taught.³⁴

This approach disadvantages students who are not taught CCE, or who are taught CCE less comprehensively or with fewer opportunities for active citizenship experiences.³⁵ Considering that lower civic knowledge scores in the ICCS study were found to have a strong association with poorer socioeconomic backgrounds, this issue becomes even more important for equality in our society, as CCE is a way to equip all students with the knowledge and skills they need to empower themselves.³⁶

Equally, the quality and accessibility of resources available to support CCE requires attention. The recent Ministry for Culture and Heritage's Citizenship Education Resources Survey evaluated the current state of resources using criteria drawn from the outcomes of the Best Evidence Synthesis in Social Studies (BES), which examines effective pedagogy in social studies.³⁷ The criteria were grouped into five overarching categories: knowledge, skills, participatory, cultural identity and affective. It was found that, although there are many resources available for civics and citizenship education, they can be difficult to locate, lack coherence and are of varying quality.³⁸

Table 1: General election voter turnout statistics by age and Māori descent (includes the Māori roll)²⁸

* Note: The difference between the 'voters actual' figures shown Table 1 and the 'official turnout figure's shown in Table 2 is due to a combination of votes disallowed due to the voter not being enrolled, dual votes (i.e. where one person casts multiple votes), and clerical errors in the marking of the master roll.

Age	Descent	Estimated eligible population	Voters - enrolled	Voters - actual	Actual voters as % of est. eligible population	Turnout as % of total enrolled	Estimated eligible population	Voters - enrolled	Voters - actual	Actual voters as % of est. eligible population	Turnout as % of total enrolled
			2014	2014	2014	2014	2014	2017	2017	2017	2017
18-24	non-Māori	442,160	265,189	172,072	48%	65%	460,890	259,577	185,280	50%	71%
	Māori		73,080	40,132		55%		73,587	45,503		62%
25-29	non-Māori	299,880	196,666	125,304	51%	64%	338,720	215,360	148,811	54%	69%
	Māori		48,710	27,105		56%		55,807	34,398		62%
30-39	non-Māori	553,580	424,183	302,620	65%	71%	577,770	449,004	331,536	68%	74%
	Māori		86,064	55,135		64%		91,094	60,552		66%
40-59	non-Māori	1,197,160	1,011,506	817,201	78%	81%	1,216,200	1,019,799	836,346	79%	82%
	Māori		163,851	118,851		73%		173,192	130,013		75%
60+	non-Māori	898,320	801,381	695,265	84%	87%	976,250	877,471	764,901	85%	87%
	Māori		69,787	57,172		82%		83,118	68,514		82%
Total		3,391,100	3,140,417	2,410,857*	71%	77%	3,569,830	3,298,009	2,605,854*	73%	79%

Table 2: New Zealand general election voting statistics 1987-2017²⁹

	1987	1990	1993	1996	1999	2002	2005	2008	2011	2014	2017
Voters - eligible	N.K.	N.K.	N.K.	3,367,308	3,619,442	3,738,343	2,990,300	3,138,000	3,276,000	3,391,100	3,569,830
Voters - enrolled	2,114,656	2,202,157	2,321,664	2,418,587	2,509,365	2,670,030	2,847,396	2,990,759	3,070,847	3,140,417	3,298,009
Voters - total votes cast	1,883,394	1,877,115	1,978,092	2,135,175	2,127,265	2,055,404	2,304,005	2,376,480	2,278,989	2,446,297*	2,630,173*
Total votes cast as % of total eligible	N.K.	N.K.	N.K.	63.4%	58.8%	55.0%	77.0%	75.7%	69.6%	72.1%	73.7%
Turnout - total votes cast as % of total enrolled	89.1%	85.2%	85.2%	88.3%	84.8%	77.0%	80.9%	79.5%	74.2%	77.9%	79.8%

Existing research

In addition to the three trends, existing research also supports the case for change in CCE in New Zealand.³⁹ The evidence indicates that the way in which CCE is taught determines whether such education will lead to increased engagement.⁴⁰ For example, a 2008 study of 52 high schools in Chicago found that 'active citizenship' approaches were most successful in leading to increased civic engagement in the real world.⁴¹ Active citizenship approaches link learning to real-world contexts and interests, for example, by following current events, discussing problems in the community and possible responses, talking about controversial issues and allowing students to study and think critically about social issues that matter to them.⁴² Other research shows the effects of CCE in community education for adults are similar to those effects of CCE in school education.⁴³

International evidence also shows that CCE is important for closing gaps in knowledge inequalities. A 2016 study in America and Belgium found that civic education can have compensation effects for missing parental 'political socialization'.⁴⁴ Schools were found to be able to compensate for the 'civic empowerment gap' between young people from privileged backgrounds who were more likely to have access to academic resources, political news and the public sphere generally, and those from impoverished backgrounds.⁴⁵ The ICCS study cited above also provides evidence to support this finding.⁴⁶

CCE and the New Zealand Curriculum (NZC)

CCE is not currently part of the NZC, but the NZC does include areas in which CCE could be incorporated. Notably, there are already some explicit references to 'citizenship': notions of citizenship are a key part of the 'future focus' principle. This principle aims to encourage students to 'look to the future by exploring such significant future-focused issues as sustainability, citizenship enterprise and globalisation'. The value of 'community and participation for the common good', with one of the key competencies for this value being 'participating and contributing', is also clearly consistent with CCE.⁴⁷

Specifically, social studies presents as the subject most compatible with notions of CCE.⁴⁸ Social studies teachers from secondary schools across the country are already working together to form ideas for how to implement the NCEA 'personal social action' (PSA) achievement standards for social studies in a way that can address the gaps in CCE in the NZC. These achievement standards were introduced in 2013 and encourage students from years 11–13 to take social action on an issue of their choice, providing an opportunity for active citizenship learning.⁴⁹

PSA approaches to date include a teacher who took students to Wellington to learn about Parliament and a teacher whose class visited the Beehive to make a submission at the select committee hearing of the Healthy Homes Bill.⁵⁰ A recent study on the implementation of these standards found that, when students were well supported and were tackling personally significant issues, the standards were valuable for learning about society and social issues as well as for developing civic and community engagement skills.⁵¹ While encouraging, these are only examples of individual teachers or schools actively exploring ways to teach CCE. Existing networks between schools and kura, such as the Ministry of Education's 'Communities of Learning' initiative, which encourages collaboration between kaiako/teachers, could provide an opportunity for encouraging consistency in CCE between schools.⁵² However, this requires further exploration.

Tikanga ā Iwi, the *Te Marautanga* subject parallel to social studies, also appears to be compatible with CCE, with the subtext of Tikanga ā Iwi being a strong emphasis on the realisation of rangatiratanga through active citizenship.⁵³ However, it should be noted that Māori conceptions of citizenship are inherently different to Western perspectives. Consequently, CCE resources and strategies developed for Tikanga ā Iwi must align with the specific vision of Tikanga ā Iwi, *Te Marautanga* and the wider aspirational goals of te ao Māori, rather than being translations of English-medium resources that have different objectives.⁵⁴

The issue of consistency is exacerbated by the fact that existing notions of citizenship in the NZC are vague and provide little direction for teachers to implement principles or values consistent with citizenship.⁵⁵ This is evident in the findings of the final report of the ICCS study, which concluded that 'it is somewhat unclear whether there is a consistent view across New Zealand schools about what "civics and citizenship education" ought to involve and what means are effective in developing students' citizenship competencies'.⁵⁶

Given the evidence of the importance of CCE, and the literature detailing appropriate pedagogy, it is worth considering why CCE is not more prevalent or consistent in New Zealand. It has been suggested elsewhere that the pressure and narrow foci of National Standards and the top-down emphasis on literacy and numeracy have led to these being the subjects reported on and prioritised.⁵⁷ This has led to the marginalisation of social studies and can explain the inconsistency of the current approach to CCE.⁵⁸ Evidence of poor learning progress for social studies students in years 4–8 in comparison to other subjects suggests that such marginalisation is significantly affecting learning in this area.⁵⁹

Consequently, it seems that furthering CCE would entail not only addressing the above-mentioned issues such as consistency, but also some reconsideration of sector priorities. Such reconsideration may not necessarily require absolute policy trade-offs; existing priorities are not fundamentally incompatible with CCE and could be revisited with a view to reconciling them with CCE. CCE can provide rich content for literacy and numeracy learning through topics such as voting statistics or political speeches.⁶⁰

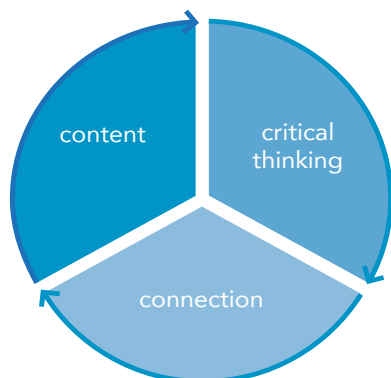
CCE in the community

In terms of community CCE, work is already underway, with resources developed by the Electoral Commission with input from Adult and Community Education Aotearoa (ACE) that provide a template for community groups to start learning about civics and citizenship.⁶¹ Additionally, the Commission piloted a community engagement programme to engage with and inform underrepresented groups about the 2014 General Election, particularly Māori, Pasifika, and other ethnic minority communities. The programme aimed to increase voter participation by connecting with community leaders and influencers, and achieved a wide reach.⁶² There are numerous other examples including civics education workshops run by ACE with a focus on prison inmates,⁶³ the work of Active Citizenship Aotearoa and the Civics Education Trust,⁶⁴ and the Victory Community Centre in Nelson: a community hub connecting the local school and wider community with a focus on building connection and engagement.⁶⁵ Despite the work already underway in this space, it will have little impact while there is no coordination between these efforts and few resources available for community CCE learning.

B) POTENTIAL NEXT STEPS

The Three Cs framework for CCE in Figure 1 outlines three critical components of CCE that would address the three key trends threatening our democracy.⁶⁶ The potential next steps outlined below are structured in accordance with the framework.

Figure 1: Three Cs framework for CCE



Content

1. Bolster social studies and consider policy trade-offs

CCE could be made an explicit learning outcome of the NZC to address issues of consistency and learning targets for CCE could then be met within social studies. Bolstering social studies might take the form of professional development and guidance for teachers, as has been available in the past.⁶⁷ Further consideration is necessary regarding whether and how CCE might fit with the vision of *Te Marautanga o Aotearoa* and Tikanga ā Iwi in kura. However, it may also be necessary to reconsider the current priorities of the education sector and the policy trade-offs associated with these. Arguably, subjects like social studies will remain second-best until these priorities are revised.⁶⁸

During the 2017 TVNZ show *What Next?* Wendy McGuinness (founder and Chief Executive of the McGuinness Institute) suggested extending electoral terms to four years and lowering the voting age to 16. This would create a legitimate incentive for the education system to support enrolment processes as part of the curriculum.

2. Connect curriculum objectives

There is scope to consider how CCE might be connected to other areas of the curriculum beyond social studies, as in the earlier example of using topics like voting statistics in mathematics. Prospective and practising teachers could be supported by the Education Council and teaching colleges to connect curriculum objectives and subject knowledge. This would serve to further embed concepts of civics and citizenship in everyday life.⁶⁹

3. Coordinate existing efforts with CCE hubs

A single point of coordination and online CCE hub would make it easier for educators and communities to identify and access CCE content and resources. The BES method for assessing the quality of citizenship resources could be used to select resources for inclusion in this hub and to guide the development of future resources.⁷⁰ The idea of CCE hubs is also viable in a community context. The networks within the Ministry of Education 'Communities of Learning' model could be used to link schools with their communities in ways that foster a sense of connection, inclusivity and learning, with CCE extending into the community experience.⁷¹

Critical thinking

4. Active citizenship and news sources

Critical engagement with current affairs is part of active citizenship. In an era of instant social media and the ability of nearly anyone to produce and distribute 'news', critical thinking skills are essential. This highlights the importance of active citizenship approaches to CCE, which entail critical thinking and assessment, as a way to support learners to develop these essential critical thinking skills and help individuals to seek out and recognise reliable news sources.

5. Role for public interest media

The role of public interest media for informing public debate becomes particularly important when the capacity to critically appraise news and its sources is limited. The 2017 budget increase for Radio New Zealand partially recognises the importance of a trusted public interest media outlet. However, rather than being part of the budget for New Zealand on Air, Radio New Zealand should have a stand-alone budget so that budget trade-offs are transparent and its crucial role for democracy is recognised.

Connection

6. Civic engagement is more than voting

There may be value in beginning a national conversation about what we mean when we talk about citizenship, civic engagement and participation. The above-mentioned evidence that people may be participating in civics and citizenship in little-acknowledged ways indicates that citizenship and engagement are not straightforward, static concepts. Thus, there is a need to democratise their definitions and to coproduce CCE to ensure that it is useful and accessible, even for the disenfranchised.

7. Engage the disaffected

We know that Māori and Pasifika, particularly males, are missing out educationally, economically and democratically. Working partnerships between Māori and Pasifika communities and government agencies may be able to turn civic engagement figures around by appealing to the issues that matter most to disaffected groups, and by coproducing CCE approaches that are relevant and relatable for these audiences. It is also worth noting that probably the most disaffected group in society, people who are incarcerated, are excluded from the eligible voting population, restricting our democracy from being representative.

CONCLUSION

CCE is broadly compatible with the existing structures of the education and community sectors, and there is already work happening at the government, school and community levels to address the issues raised here around CCE and engagement. However, there is room for coordinating and bolstering efforts that are already underway. To this end, we have suggested some next steps that could be taken to continue building on a promising foundation. It is important to keep in mind that these steps can be undertaken by actors other than government. There is a strong case that CCE could serve as an effective intervention to safeguard democracy in New Zealand.

This publication forms part of a set along with *Working Paper 2018/02* and the 2017 *Policy Quarterly* (vol 13, no. 4) article 'Civics and citizenship education in New Zealand: a case for change?'. For complete references and to find out more, visit our website: www.mcguinnessinstitute.org



The McGuinness Institute is a non-partisan think tank working towards a sustainable future, contributing strategic foresight through evidence-based research and policy analysis.

McGuinness Institute, Level 1A, 15 Allen Street, PO Box 24222, Wellington 6142

Phone: (04) 499 8888 Email: enquiries@mcguinnessinstitute.org Website: www.mcguinnessinstitute.org