

# What Adolescents Know About Citizenship and Democracy

*International comparisons of adolescents' political knowledge and attitudes offer insights into the impact that schools have on civic education and how they can foster democracy.*

**Judith Torney-Purta**

**I**n this age of fragmented communities, rapid social and economic change, concerns about national security, and achievement gaps among schools, how can schools nurture students' respect for law and their participation in politics and civil society?

Educators have many opportunities to foster students' civic participation, knowledge of political institutions, and posi-

tive attitudes about law. Teachers of social studies and history have an explicit role in civic education, but teachers of all subjects, administrators, curriculum developers, and after-school program directors also play an important role in its development. Comparing the knowledge and attitudes of students from many countries can help inform the ways that schools foster civic awareness and engagement.

To ascertain what students in several parts of the world understand and believe about citizenship, govern-

ment, and the law, a research team studied 90,000 14-year-olds in 1999. The team worked under the auspices of the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA), the international consortium of education research institutes that has organized the Third International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS).

In the first phase of its study of civic education, the research team examined 24 countries' expectations for

what young people should know (Torney-Purta, Schwille, & Amadeo, 1999). On the basis of these national case studies and cross-national consultations, the second phase of the study started with the team developing a reliable, 38-question test to measure students' knowledge of democratic principles and their skill in interpreting political leaflets, cartoons, and short passages similar to those found in newspaper articles. To ensure that the data would be comparable across many countries, the test did not ask about particular government structures,



At Pavasario Secondary School in Lithuania, students work on a project to organize a school board (above) and perform traditional songs to celebrate Lithuania's independence (below).

Photo by Irena Zaleskiene

although some countries included national items in their test for nation-specific reporting.

In addition to the test of knowledge, the team also developed survey questions about the students' schools and homes, participation in voluntary organizations, plans for civic participation as adults, and attitudes about citizenship and government, including the justice system. In this phase of the study, nationally representative groups of 8th or 9th graders took the test and

### **Strong Civic Skills, but an Achievement Gap**

The overall mean score for U.S. students placed them above the international mean in civic knowledge. Other countries scoring high on the test of civic knowledge were Poland, Finland, Cyprus, Greece, Hong Kong (SAR), Italy, the Slovak Republic, Norway, and the Czech Republic. On the 13-item subscale that measured skill in interpreting political communication, U.S. students outperformed students in all

education past high school (Torney-Purta et al., 2001), and went to schools with high levels of poverty, where a large proportion of students receive free lunches (Baldi et al., 2001). In short, some U.S. students do not grasp important concepts of democracy and cannot interpret such materials as election leaflets and newspaper stories about political issues. Democracies are built on the assumption that all citizens possess knowledge as a key to civic power, so this gap in civic achievement among U.S. adolescents is troubling.

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survey in Australia, Belgium (French-speaking schools), Bulgaria, Chile, Colombia, Cyprus, the Czech Republic, Denmark, England, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Greece, Hong Kong (Special Administrative Region of the People's Republic of China), Hungary, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, the Russian Federation, the Slovak Republic, Slovenia, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United States.

The Department of Educational Research at Humboldt University of Berlin, Germany, and teams of researchers at the Department of Human Development at the University of Maryland managed the study and prepared the international volume (Torney-Purta, Lehmann, Oswald, & Schulz, 2001). A separate report analyzed data about the United States, adding information from nation-specific questions about school curriculums and socioeconomic status (Baldi, Perie, Skidmore, Greenberg, & Hahn, 2001).

other countries (see fig. 1 for an example of a test item). They were also more likely, for example, to understand the main message of a cartoon about national history (89 percent correct compared to 65 percent internationally) and to distinguish a statement of fact from three statements of opinion about taxes (69 percent correct compared to 49 percent internationally).

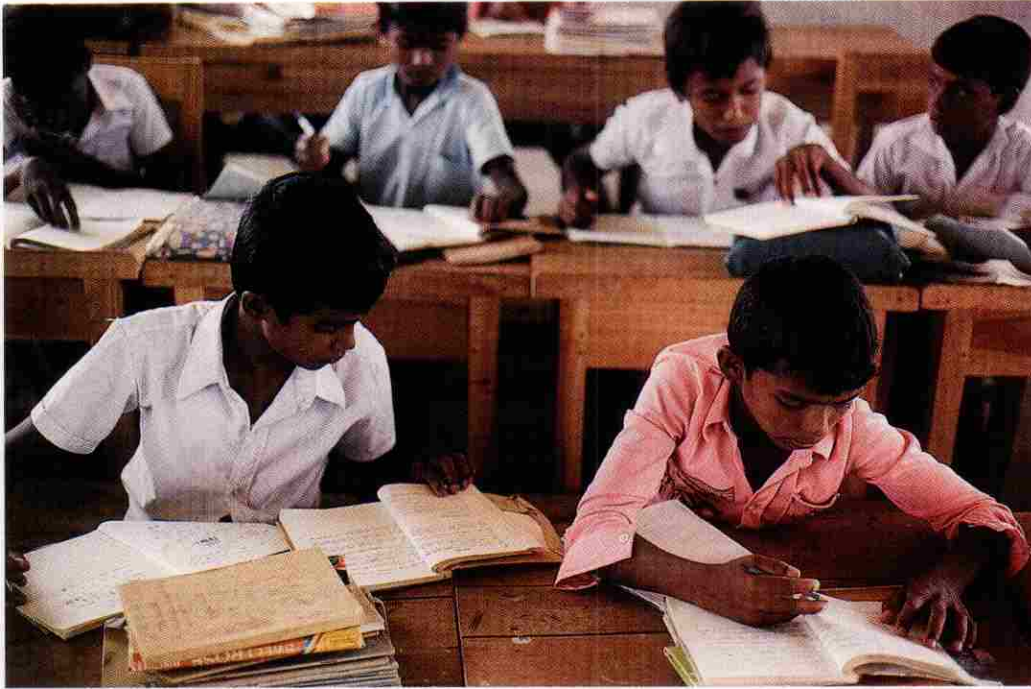
U.S. students did not perform as well on the 25-item subscale on political structures and democratic institutions, however. They were only about as likely as the average student internationally to understand the function of political parties or the types of actions that would lead to a government being called *nondemocratic*, for example.

The study's results indicated a sobering achievement gap in civic knowledge in the United States. A small group of U.S. students answered only about one-third of the questions correctly. Survey questions showed that these students had few books in their homes, did not expect to continue their

### **Willingness to Vote, but Gaps in Engagement**

A majority of students from all countries agreed that citizens have an obligation to vote and planned to vote when they became adults. In the United States and about half of the other countries, those who expected to continue their education beyond high school were more likely to say they planned to vote. In addition to the achievement gap, then, a gap in willingness to participate in elections also exists among adolescents from different education backgrounds.

Other research has confirmed the connection between voting and both civic knowledge and education expectations. An analysis of longitudinal data in the United States, for example, found that high school students who expected to attend institutes of higher education were more likely to report that they had voted when they were surveyed again as young adults than those who had said they did not plan to continue their education. This analysis also found an association between getting good grades in social studies courses in high school and later voting (Chapin, 2001). In a review of the relevant research, Galston (2001) found that adults who completed a greater number of years of education know more about politics than the less well educated. These studies suggest that better-informed



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changing. Although nearly 85 percent of U.S. students in the 1999 study rated voting as important for adult citizens, only around one-half rated joining a political party or engaging in political discussions as important. Students trusted political parties least among the government-related organizations rated in the survey. A large majority of students across countries did not intend to join a political party or write letters to a newspaper about political concerns. Fewer than 30 percent of U.S. students said that they planned to participate in these activities as adults. Even fewer considered

it likely that they would run for a local or city office.

In contrast, students across countries believed that adults should participate in activities to benefit people in the community and in organizations to protect human rights and the environment. More than 80 percent of U.S. students endorsed the importance of adults joining these organizations. The focus of young people's plans for civic engagement seems to be moving toward community rather than political involvement.

Considerable variation was evident in the number of 14-year-olds who already participate in civic organizations in different countries. For example, half the U.S. students—the highest figure in any of the participating countries—said that they were members of groups that undertake voluntary activities to better the community. U.S. students were also more likely than the average students in other countries to be collecting money for social or charitable causes or participating in environmental organizations, although such countries as Australia, Cyprus, Greece, and Norway stood out

individuals can use their knowledge to recognize and pursue their own political interests effectively.

The results of the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement's study indicate that 14-year-olds with low education aspirations have already fallen behind in the knowledge, skills, and motivation needed to understand the laws and political institutions that would enable them to be effective democratic participants. All countries in the survey show a knowledge gap associated with education level; a similar participation gap exists in about half the countries, including the United States (Torney-Purta et al., 2001).

An encouraging development is that the gender achievement gap found in many previous studies appears to have disappeared in most countries and narrowed in the others. Male and female students in the United States, for example, showed no difference in their civic knowledge scores. Gender differences did appear on some attitude scales. In the United States, for example, female students were more likely than male

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students to support rights for immigrants and to believe that the government's responsibilities include supporting basic health care and guaranteeing peace and order. In all countries, female students were much more likely to support women's political and economic rights than were male students (Torney-Purta et al., 2001).

### **Civic, but Not Political, Engagement**

The attractiveness of various organizations that might mobilize civic interest among young people seems to be

with the highest levels of participation in these types of activities. Students from a number of countries, including many of the post-Communist countries, were not involved in any organization, perhaps because networks of these associations are absent in many of these countries' schools or communities.

### Obey the Law, Trust the Justice System

Many observers argue that trust in the fairness of the justice system plays a vital role in promoting an individual's compliance with the law. Students across countries most frequently endorsed obeying the law as an important responsibility of adult citizens. About 65 percent of U.S. students reported trusting the police and the courts always or most of the time, about the same as the international average. About 70 percent of U.S. students reported trusting the local government, the U.S. Congress, and the national government always or most of the time (Baldi et al., 2001), compared with only about 50 percent across the 28 countries (Torney-Purta et al., 2001).

The 14-year-olds living in newly established democracies tended to trust the justice system and the government less than did students living in countries with longer histories of democracy. Students in such long-standing democracies as Denmark, Norway, and Switzerland may take democratic practices and government institutions for granted, believing that little investment of time or effort by citizens is necessary to maintain them.

U.S. students expressed positive feelings for the United States and were about as likely as the average students in other participating countries to believe that adult citizens should serve in the military. Cyprus and Greece stood out as having the strongest national feelings and the greatest belief in the importance of military service.

### The Impact of Schools on Civic Education

Families, neighborhoods, and friends are important influences on young people becoming participating adult citizens. According to this study, schools also play an important role. Teachers who foster an open climate

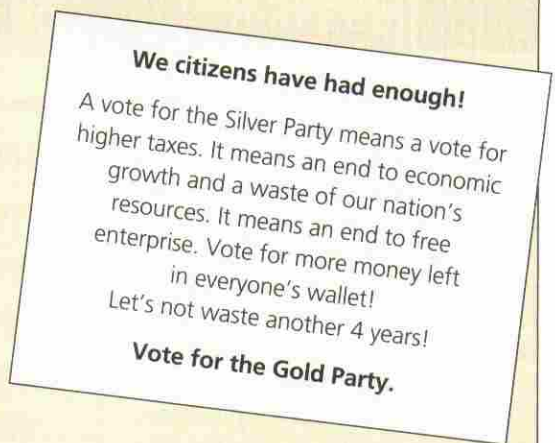
for discussion and explicitly promote civic knowledge and engagement by emphasizing the importance of voting have a positive impact on students' civic achievement and engagement (Torney-Purta et al., 2001). Teachers, especially in social studies and history classes, have opportunities to impart and

#### FIGURE 1

#### Example of Test Question to Measure Skill in Interpreting Political Communication

Country	Correct Answers
Australia	78
Belgium (French)	56
Bulgaria	47
Chile	54
Colombia	40
Cyprus	81
Czech Republic	66
Denmark	49
England	75
Estonia	54
Finland	85
Germany	81
Greece	73
Hong Kong (SAR)	76
Hungary	78
Italy	85
Latvia	44
Lithuania	55
Norway	57
Poland	58
Portugal	55
Romania	46
Russian Federation	45
Slovak Republic	66
Slovenia	75
Sweden	73
Switzerland	77
United States	83
International Sample	85

#### THIS IS AN ELECTION LEAFLET...



#### 23. This is an election leaflet which has probably been issued by . . .

- A. The Silver Party.
- B. A party or group in opposition to the Silver Party.\*
- C. A group which tries to be sure elections are fair.
- D. The Silver Party and the Gold Party together.

\* Correct answer.

Source: International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement Civic Education Study, standard population of 14-year-olds tested in 1999.

discuss this information and give students practice in interpreting and discussing material about politics and civil society. U.S. students who studied social studies daily scored higher on civic knowledge than those who studied social studies once or twice a week. Being asked to write long essay answers in social studies was another positive factor (Baldi et al., 2001).

The survey asked students whether their teachers encouraged them to make up their own minds about issues and whether teachers and other students respected their opinions. Nearly 40 percent of the students across countries agreed that these statements were always true for the classes that discussed social and political topics.

Fewer, however, said that teachers encouraged them to discuss controversial issues. On average, U.S. students reported more opportunities for discussion than did students from the other countries. Students in many of the post-Communist countries reported few such opportunities.

Variations in classroom experience among students within countries had consequences. Those students who experienced more opportunities for discussion and respect for their opinions had higher scores in civic knowledge and were more likely to say that they were going to vote than did those with contrasting classroom experiences (Torney-Purta et al., 2001). This international study provides concrete evidence of the importance of a democratic atmosphere for discussion in the classroom and suggests that a challenging future task is preparing teachers to conduct such discussions while maintaining a strong content focus in classrooms with



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**This international study provides concrete evidence of the importance of a democratic atmosphere for discussion in classrooms with students of diverse backgrounds.**

students of diverse backgrounds and opinions.

What civic-related topics did schools cover? The survey showed that more than 75 percent of U.S. students studied the U.S. Constitution, the U.S. Congress, and the making of laws. More than 85 percent of them read the textbook and filled out worksheets. Fewer than 45 percent reported such active student involvement as debating, discussing, and participating in role plays or mock trials (Baldi et al., 2001).

Explicit lessons and discussions about elections and citizens' roles as voters also had an impact. In all countries, the students who reported that they learned about the importance of voting and

elections in school were more likely to say that they expected to vote as adults (Torney-Purta et al., 2001). Although the norms of U.S. schools require that students discuss elections without favoring any one political party or candidate, placing explicit emphasis on the importance of elections and voting is crucial. Although about 75 percent of U.S. students reported such explicit instruction, 25 percent did not. Students study the history of voting rights or the functioning of elected bodies, but they are not necessarily prompted to make the important inference that all adult citizens should vote.

Students' and teachers' perceptions of classroom activities may be different.



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In the countries that provided survey data from teachers, large proportions reported that they had emphasized elections and voting in class, but much smaller proportions of students in these classes reported that they had studied these topics. Teachers may expect students to read between the lines. An analysis of national assessment data (Niemi & Junn, 1998) suggests that carefully designed assignments focusing on mock election participation are often effective ways to explicitly emphasize the importance of voting.

**In addition to developing  
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Participation in school activities with a civic content had mixed results in the United States. Membership on a school council was associated with the likelihood of voting (Torney-Purta et al., 2001), and other organizational activities also had a positive impact on civic knowledge and students' sense of confidence in the value of school participation. The results, however, suggested that these activities alone could not carry the full responsibility of preparing young people for citizenship.

#### **What Schools Can Do**

The achievement and participation gaps between students from homes with ample educational resources who expect to attend institutes of higher education and those without these advantages are of great concern in a democracy. In addition to developing students' mathematics and reading abilities, schools need to consider the civic

mission of education. Schools can foster civic knowledge and engagement when they teach fundamental democratic principles, respect students' opinions, discuss issues about which people have different opinions, and make the importance of elections and voting an explicit curricular theme. ■

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