




How Are Young Australians Learning About Politics at School?: The Student Perspective

Zareh Ghazarian¹  · Jacqueline Laughland-Booy²  · Chiara De Lazzari³ · Zlatko Skrbis² 

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Abstract

In order to confidently participate in the democratic process, citizens from liberal democracies require knowledge about how their nation's system of politics and government functions. For the past 30 years, successive Australian governments have endeavoured to educate school students about the political system via a civics and citizenship curriculum. Despite this, official data suggests that current approaches may not be providing young Australians with the level of understanding they require to be active and informed citizens. In this paper, we present a study of Australian school leavers who were interviewed about the civics and citizenship education they received while at school. The first-hand experiences of these young people have enabled us to highlight potential problems with how the curriculum is being delivered and identify ways of improving the political knowledge of young people.

Keywords Civics and citizenship · Political knowledge · Young people · First-time voters · Australia

The political knowledge of young citizens has received much interest from researchers, educators, and policymakers.¹ It has been suggested that young people may not be adequately informed about their rights and responsibilities as citizens nor have the confidence to participate in democratic processes (Furlong and Cartmel 2007; Torney-Purta et al. 2001). These concerns have often been underpinned by studies that have highlighted gaps in young people's understanding about how their nation's system of government is structured and how it functions (Laughland-Booy et al. 2018; Print 2007; Stockemer and Rocher 2016).

¹Hereafter, the terms 'young people' and 'young citizens' refer to individuals living in liberal democracies who are aged between 18 and 25.

✉ Zareh Ghazarian
Zareh.Ghazarian@monash.edu

Extended author information available on the last page of the article

There has been considerable discussion in Australia about whether schools are adequately preparing students to become politically informed, active, and engaged. Since the late 1980s, there have been attempts to establish a national approach to civics and citizenship education, whereby all Australian school students are taught about their nation's system of politics and government during the compulsory years of schooling (i.e. between the ages of 6 and 16). Despite these efforts, many young Australians continue to demonstrate low levels of political literacy (Joint Standing Committee on Electoral Matters 2007). This lack of knowledge is concerning because it impacts the ability of young people to understand the political debate and participate in the decision-making processes of their nation. As such, this has serious implications for the long-term operation of democracy in Australia (Tranter 2007).

Within this context, there have been calls for 'research that focuses on the unique experiences' of students (Arthur et al. 2008, p.9). This paper responds by presenting the voices of young people who are talking about their experiences of learning civics and citizenship at school. It seeks to better understand whether young Australians, who are now of voting age, felt they had been adequately prepared to participate in democratic processes. In doing so, we aim to contribute to the debates and practices to strengthen the political knowledge and confidence of young people. We commence with a discussion about the importance of political knowledge and explain how the civics and citizenship curriculum is delivered in Australian schools. We then present an analysis of interview data gathered from young people about how they learnt civics and citizenship at school. In doing so, we identify the challenges encountered by students and suggest steps that might be taken to help improve the political knowledge of young people.

Political Knowledge and Young Citizens

The operation of a democratic system is enhanced when its people possess political knowledge (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996). An understanding of the structure and processes of government, knowing the rights and responsibilities of citizens, and being able to comprehend the political debate all contribute to one's political knowledge (Kleinberg and Lau 2019; McAllister 1998). Political knowledge is different from possessing political values, attitudes, or opinions, as it focuses on the ability of citizens 'to effectively participate in politics' rather than engage in debates about political preferences (Stewart et al. 2008, p.404). Political knowledge also plays a role in enabling citizens to be competent and confident voters. As Kleinberg and Lau (2019, p.339) noted, political knowledge 'allows citizens to translate their political interests into effective political action'.

In order to equip young people with the knowledge and skills they need as citizens, many liberal democracies embed a civic and citizenship curriculum into their education programs (Shulz et al. 2008). Although family, community, and non-government organisations can play an important role (see Biesta et al. 2009; Walsh and Black 2018), schools provide an ideal environment to build the political knowledge of young people. As Ainley et al. (2013, p.20) explain, this is because schools are often 'a place where young people have their first experiences of participation as citizens, become

involved in the democratic process, and develop a sense of being members of a wider community’.

While it is widely accepted that schools are important for teaching civics and citizenship, there has been a variety in how the subject has been taught. One approach was to teach the topic by focusing on the institutions of government and political processes often in a ‘rote, pedantic, and expository manner’ (Print 2017, p.8). Typically, this institutional-oriented approach takes a process-driven perspective to teach young people about the electoral system and forms of political participation (e.g. standing for election) as well as the roles of key institutions (Kahne and Crow 2013). It can, however, be regarded as ‘oppressive’, as it may foster ‘conformity and passivity in learners’ (Sigauke 2013, p.127). This approach is also thought to minimise opportunities for young people to experience active citizenship (Tudball 2017).

Another approach to teaching civics and citizenship is linked to ‘social transformative pedagogy’ whereby the exploration of social and political issues by school students helps create ‘active and responsible participants’ (Sigauke 2013, p.128). This model is predicated on the idea that young people are ‘citizens now, not citizens in waiting’ and that programs needed to ‘move beyond’ building knowledge of institutions and processes in order to foster civic participation (Tudball 2017, p.32). This approach is thought to build young people’s understandings through experiential learning and practical application (Pontes et al. 2019). Active learning strategies allow students to relate to the issues being discussed which may, in turn, lead them to be more engaged and active in discussions and political activity (Kahne and Crow 2013). Exploring social and political issues also offers opportunities for a civics and citizenship curriculum to be embedded in other subjects rather than be taught as a distinct area of study (Ainley et al. 2013; Tudball 2017).

The ideal age at which young people should learn about politics has also been considered. An early strategy was to teach a civics curriculum to adolescents. The rationale was that this life stage is a critical time to develop political identity (Erikson 1994; Niemi and Sobieszek 1977). The trend more recently, however, has been to teach civics and citizenship to both primary- and secondary-aged students—an approach which has been adopted in many European, Latin American, and Australasian nations (Ainley et al. 2013).

The Australian Context

Australia is a federation, and its states have retained responsibility for delivering education. This means that there can be variation in what students are taught depending on the state in which the child lives (Krinks 1999). From the late 1980s, however, successive Commonwealth governments sought to enhance the delivery of civics and citizenship across the country (see Author). This was motivated by a report published in 1989 by the Senate Select Committee on Employment, Education and Training (SSCEET). It argued that the political knowledge of young people was so low that it was a ‘crisis which Australians cannot afford to ignore’ (Senate Select Committee on Employment, Education and Training 1989, p.6). The report also called for the government to make teaching civics and citizenship, especially in primary and

secondary schools, ‘a priority area’ (Senate Select Committee on Employment, Education and Training 1989, p.6). In the same year, all education ministers agreed to a set of national goals for schooling with one aim being to equip students with the ‘knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values’ to allow them to ‘participate as active and informed citizens’ (Education Council 2014). A subsequent report by the SSCEET in 1991 continued to call for greater efforts by the government to increase civics and citizenship education in Australia (Senate Select Committee on Employment, Education and Training 1991).

The Keating-led Labor Government responded by establishing the Civics Expert Group which was responsible for finding ways to increase people’s political knowledge. One recommendation offered by the group was to provide civics and citizenship education to all Australian school students (Author). While this recommendation never became policy during the Keating years, steps were taken by the newly elected Howard-led Coalition Government to improve the political knowledge of young Australians (Print 2017).

In 1997, the Howard Government launched the Discovering Democracy program (Davis 2003). This \$30 million program involved the Commonwealth developing civics and citizenship curricula and implementing a system of national testing (Ghazarian and Laughland-Booy 2019). Following the defeat of the Howard Government in 2007, the new Rudd-led Labor Government elevated the importance of civics and citizenship. The subject became a specific learning area in the new national curriculum. In the same year, all education ministers reaffirmed their support for learning goals that had initially been agreed to in 1989, namely, that young Australians should become ‘active and informed citizens’ so that they may ‘have an understanding of Australia’s system of government’ as well as have the skills to ‘participate in Australia’s civic life’ (Ministerial Council of Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs (MCEETYA) 2008). Yet, despite such advancements at a national level, responsibility for delivering civics and citizenship curricula remained with individual state governments.²

In 2015, during the first term of the Abbott-led Coalition Government, the current national curriculum was endorsed. This was intended to facilitate a consistent, yet still voluntary, approach to civics and citizenship education across all Australian jurisdictions. The civics and citizenship curriculum is delivered to students from year 3 to year 10. By the time they reach year 10, students are expected to have a sound understanding about their nation’s system of politics and government and their rights and responsibilities as citizens (Australian Curriculum Assessment and Reporting Authority 2019). In the final 2 years of secondary school (years 11 and 12), Australian school students will not learn about politics or government as part of the national curriculum unless they have enrolled in an elective subject such as Legal Studies, Politics, or History.

Since 2004, the National Assessment Program-Civics and Citizenship (NAP-CC) has been administered every 3 years to a sample of year 6 and year 10 students. This test identifies the rate of young Australians achieving the proficient standard when it

² While there have been a range of valuable resources produced by governments and authorities over recent years (such as the Parliamentary Education Office and state and national electoral commissions), it is still up to teachers to decide the extent to which these resources are used in class.

comes to civics and citizenship.³ As Table 1 illustrates, the proficiency rate of Australian students in year 6 has been over 50% and has been slightly improving over time. By contrast, the year 10 proficiency rate has never reached 50 per cent, and a gradual decline is apparent over the last two testing periods. Indeed, the 2016 result for students in year 10, which is the latest data available, is the lowest on record.

These figures suggest that the introductory elements of civics and citizenship in primary school are contributing to moderately effective learning outcomes. Based on the NAP-CC data, the challenge appears to be at the secondary school level. By year 10, almost two thirds of young Australians who are approaching voting age appear not to possess the knowledge expected of informed citizens. Furthermore, even though Australia has compulsory voting for citizens over the age of 18 years old, it seems that young people may not possess the skills needed to make an informed vote.

The purpose of our study was to speak to recent school leavers about their experiences of being taught civics and citizenship at school. We asked them what they could remember about learning the subject, if they thought the content had been informative, and if, as a consequence of the education they had received, they felt confident in their knowledge about the Australian system of government.

Methods

Interviews were carried out with 27 university undergraduate students attending a university in the Australian city of Melbourne in 2017. A callout for volunteers was made during classes, and interviews were conducted on campus either individually or in groups of two or three. The sample comprised 18 females and 9 males who were 18–20 years of age. All participants had attended school in the state of Victoria. Fourteen had attended a government school, and 13 had attended either an independent or Catholic school.⁴ Some had already voted in an election for the first time in the preceding year. The individual characteristics of the participants are summarised in Table 2.

The interviews were semi-structured. Participants were questioned on numerous topics surrounding their experiences of being taught about civics and citizenship at school. The interview typically began with the question: ‘How confident are you in participating in elections?’ and followed by ‘What did you learn about politics and government at school?’. Participants were also asked what they would have liked to have learnt to improve their political knowledge and confidence. Each individual was given a gift voucher in consideration of their time. The interviews were audio-recorded and later transcribed. The data were then coded and analysed using qualitative research software NVivo 12.

Several factors were considered throughout the data coding process. These included participants’ knowledge of the Australian system of politics and government, what they remembered learning about politics and government at school, and what they would

³ The proficient standard is defined by ACARA as ‘a challenging but reasonable expectation of student achievement at that year level (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority 2017, p.xv)’.

⁴ In Australia, government schools are primarily funded by the states and territories. Private and Catholic schools receive funding from private sources (schools fees paid by parents, religious bodies etc.) and also receive government subsidies.

Table 1 Years 6 and 10 achievement on the National Assessment Program-Civics and Citizenship

Year	Year 6 percentage of students at proficiency standard	Year 10 percentage of students at proficiency standard
2004	50%	39%
2007	53%	42%
2010	52%	49%
2013	52%	44%
2016	55%	38%

Source: Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority 2017, pp.xv; xvii

Table 2 Individual characteristics of participants

Pseudonym	Gender	Secondary school type attended	Degree enrolled in at university	Age at time of interview
Bryce	M	Government	Arts	18
Veronica	F	Government	Arts	18
Tabatha	F	Government	Arts	18
Kiah	F	Independent	Arts	18
Steven	M	Government	Arts	19
Madeline	F	Government	Arts	18
Valerie	F	Catholic	Arts	18
Shashi	F	Catholic	Arts	18
Dani	F	Catholic	Arts	18
Renaë	F	Independent	Arts	19
Kyle	M	Independent	Arts and Business	20
Akram	M	Government	Science	18
Qadir	M	Government	Science	18
Chris	M	Government	Science	18
Charles	M	Government	Science	19
Ally	F	Government	Science	18
Flynn	M	Government	Science	19
Peta	F	Catholic	Arts	19
Carmel	F	Catholic	Arts	19
Isobel	F	Independent	Arts	18
Caitie	F	Government	Arts	18
Brooke	F	Catholic	Arts	18
Shannon	F	Government	Arts	19
Clair	F	Independent	Arts and Law	19
Skye	F	Catholic	Arts	19
Callum	M	Catholic	Science	19
Mel	F	Catholic	Arts	19

have liked to have learnt about politics and government before leaving school. The coding process included linking the findings to the theories on the teaching and learning of civics and citizenship education through axial coding (Strauss and Corbin 1998).

To put the responses of our Victorian participants in context, it is important to note that the state is the second most populous jurisdiction in Australia and has often performed above the national average on NAP-CC tests. As Table 3 shows, the results in Victoria follow the national trend as the proficiency rate in year 10 has been significantly lower than in year 6 in all tests since 2004. Furthermore, while states can offer their own programs, the Victorian civics and citizenship curriculum is based on the national curriculum with minor modifications (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority 2018, p.11; Hincks 2016).

Findings

We present the views and experiences of our participants in the following sections. We first explore the extent to which they felt confident in their ability to knowledgably vote at elections in Australia. We then examine their experiences of being taught civics and citizenship at school. Finally, we ask if they believed that the education they had received while at school was adequate for their needs and, if not, what else could have been done to improve their political knowledge and confidence. The data identifies possible problems with respect to how and when young people are learning about this topic in school. It also offers suggestions regarding how the content could be revisited and reinforced before young Australians leave school. Pseudonyms are used to maintain the anonymity of participants.

Confidence

Previous research has indicated that many young Australian citizens do not feel confident about participating in democratic processes such as voting. One study of 4700 year 12 students, for example, showed that half felt they did not have the ‘fundamental knowledge to understand the political parties and the key issues, as well

Table 3 Years 6 and 10 achievement of Victorian students on the National Assessment Program-Civics and Citizenship (national results in parenthesis)

Year	Victorian year 6 percentage of students at proficiency standard and national result (in parenthesis)	Victorian year 10 percentage of students at proficiency standard and national result (in parenthesis)
2004	58% (50%)	40% (39%)
2007	59% (53%)	40% (42%)
2010	56% (52%)	47% (49%)
2013	58% (52%)	48% (44%)
2016	56% (55%)	39% (38%)

Source: Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority 2017, pp.xv; xvii

as to make decisions about voting, and in general, to vote' (Print 2007, p. 334). This has implications for the maintenance of a democratic system as, Gibson and McAllister (2014, p.1) remind us, a 'rudimentary level of political knowledge' is regarded as a 'prerequisite to the exercise of democratic citizenship'. Despite our group being what might be described as a more 'educated' cohort (as they were all attending university), the broad consensus among our participants was that more could have been done while they were at school to better prepare them to understand the political system and vote with confidence.

Many reported that they had limited understanding of the structure and operation of the nation's political and electoral system. As a result, they were not confident in their ability to cast a well-informed ballot at an election. Callum, for example, said he did not 'have a good understanding' of the Australian system of politics and government and that he would 'be clueless' about how to complete his ballot paper when going to vote for the first time. Mel also expressed apprehension about voting as well as her understanding about the system of government. When quizzed about the roles of different levels of government in Australia, she exclaimed: 'I didn't know there were different levels of government!'. Likewise, Charles explained that he knew each party has their own policies and then people choose which party they want depending on which policies they want enacted', but not much else.

The result of this lack of knowledge was that many of the participants' voting confidence were low. Renae, for instance, spoke of feeling ill prepared to vote and found it 'a little bit shocking' that she had left school with such limited knowledge of politics and government, while Flynn described leaving school knowing little about 'how it (government) works or why the people (parliamentarians) are there'. Indeed, Steven said that it was only after leaving school that he had 'figured out how the paper (ballot) works', and Kyle complained that his first engagement with the electoral system was receiving a reminder from the electoral commission on his 17th birthday to ensure that his name was on the electoral roll. He added that he first saw a ballot paper when he went to vote for the first time. Summarising the feeling of many participants was Qadir who admitted that, even though he had completed 13 years of schooling in Victoria and was currently studying at university, he was not confident in engaging with politics and that his political knowledge had remained limited.

The Civics and Citizenship Experience: Primary Years 3–6

In Australia, school students are expected to start learning about politics, society, and government in year 3 when they are approximately 8 years of age. The syllabus introduces students to the broad values and principles of liberal democratic societies. By year 6, when they are typically 12 years old and in the final year of primary school, students are required to have developed knowledge about local, national, and global social and political issues. It is also expected that students will build their knowledge about democratic and government process through practical activities (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority 2012, p.13).

These aims and approaches align with international practice. The age at which students start civics and citizenship education in Australia is broadly consistent with many other countries (Ainley et al. 2013). The Australian curriculum also utilises active learning strategies that are regarded as being more effective in fostering young people's

civic participation (Tudball 2017). Furthermore, the emphasis on experiential learning in the curriculum can provide young people with opportunities to experience democratic processes in practical ways which can enhance learning outcomes (Print 2007).

Some of the school leavers we spoke to could remember learning about politics and government in primary school. Clair, for instance, recalled being taught about national politics in year 6, while Brooke recounted that in late primary school:

...we talked about the government and how people got elected and how bills and that went through and how it was structured with the federal, state, and local...
When we're doing all the government stuff, we had to make a poster or a book or something on a Member of Parliament...

It is common for Australian school children to visit the Commonwealth Parliament in Canberra in their final year of primary school (i.e. year 6). Over 100,000 school children visit parliament every year, and financial assistance is provided by the Australian government to help them travel to the nation's capital (Parliament of Australia 2019). Many interviewees recalled visiting Canberra but said that they could not remember much about the experience. For example, other than the travel, Valerie could not 'remember much' and was unclear as to the purpose of the excursion. From his trip, Steven could recall going through security screening, 'walking in and being told to be quiet, sitting there for maybe 5 min, and then leaving'. Madeline also remembered visiting Parliament House but described her visit as being more like a holiday rather than a learning experience.

A common complaint among the participants was that they felt that they had simply been too young to appreciate and absorb what they were being taught. As Charles explained, teaching a year 6 child about the workings of government was simply 'like teaching a 12-year-old how to drive a car'. As he argued, 'because of your young age, even if you've learned about it, ... you kind of forget about it'.

Secondary Years 7–10

At secondary school, the civics and citizenship national curriculum builds on the knowledge students gained in primary school. In years 7 and 8, they should start engaging in deeper critical thinking and develop ways to conceptualise and solve broad social issues. They should also learn about political systems and the role of constitutions and the media in liberal democracies (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority 2012). In years 9 and 10, when students are 14 to 16 years of age, the curriculum is designed to further expand their capacity for critical thinking. The focus is to explore complex issues, as well as investigate the role citizens play in influencing government decisions. Developing an understanding of the parliamentary and judicial system is also part of the year 9 and 10 curricula (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority 2012).

The Australian secondary school level civics and citizenship curriculum reinforces active learning, using an issues-oriented approach. As Sigauke (2013, p.127) reminds us, this is regarded as better than adopting a 'passive' learning approach whereby students must memorise facts in a 'teacher-centred' environment. The curriculum also reflects the global trend of continuing civics and citizenship in high school (Ainley

et al. 2013). Some of the interviewees could recollect factual content about the system of government being taught in their Humanities classes during early to mid-secondary school. According to these interviewees, the content was rudimentary and little time was spent on the topic. As Veronica explained:

We had a compulsory unit in Year 9 where it was kind of like a commerce mash up of electives. So it included accounting, economics, business management, and legal and in the legal section of it they briefly started to talk about what is parliament, what do they do, what are laws, stuff like that.

Some felt that the civics and citizenship classes in secondary school were not effective in preparing them to be active and engaged citizens. Ally recalled that in early secondary school, she was told that ‘there was more than one party you could vote for’ but little else. By mid-secondary school, her knowledge of politics and government remained low. As Ally explained, she completed Legal Studies in year 10:

which had politics in it, but I still knew nothing about what we were actually supposed to do, what everything means, how it all works...they [school] didn’t tell us anything about how people...get voted in [to parliament], how you vote people in...about how the policies are made, nothing.

Those who said that their school offered active learning opportunities in civic and citizenship had mixed feelings about the experience. For example, Brooke felt that voting for their sports captains was a useful way of learning about democracy and electoral processes. Others, however, felt underwhelmed, especially about the role these activities played in equipping them with factual information. As Flynn explained:

We did have a civics and citizenship program [in Year 10], but it was one of the most useless things I’ve done because it did not teach me a thing...We learned nearly nothing about rights, responsibilities as political citizens...about how it [government] works or...why the people are there [in parliament]....One [component] was how to be a good citizen and what responsibilities we have as part of society, which was...fluff really. We had to do a certain amount of hours of community service over the course of the year, just do some stuff, like classes on...how to stand up to racism...

The Importance of Teachers

The role of teachers is crucial in the acquisition of civics and citizenship knowledge. Teachers who encourage open and informed debate, without appearing to be politically biased, are highly effective in engaging pupils (Print 2007). Furthermore, teachers who create a collaborative environment while exploring social and political issues are often able to raise ‘consciousness in learners, allowing them to be active and responsible participants’ (Sigauke 2013, p.128).

In our study, participants’ experiences of learning about civics and citizenship at school appeared dependent on their teacher’s preparedness to engage in political topics. In some

cases, we heard about teachers who utilised effective teaching approaches such as collaborative investigation of political issues and active learning strategies. These educators had engaged their students and demonstrated the value of participating in democratic processes. For instance, Clair described how her year 10 Humanities teacher had allowed his pupils to decide how he would vote at the 2013 election. As she explained:

We got to choose how his vote was cast. So he printed out mock ballots and everything. We did a full-on vote in class, so I had done a mock vote when I was 15. [...] Pretty much we did get to vote and he really did. It was awesome.

Other interviewees described some less effective teaching approaches. Some, for example, described how their teachers delivered the civics and citizenship curriculum by trying to use contemporary events but did not appear able to engage in a deeper analysis of the issues—a component which is often important in delivering longer lasting learning outcomes for students (Sigauke 2013). Steve, for example, recalled that some teachers in humanities-based subjects in high school would mention political issues but stopped short of engaging in analysis. As he described:

If something was happening in the political sphere, then obviously we'd discuss it, but not to the extent of debating it or uncovering the reasons behind something happening. It was just sort of like, 'This is what's happening'...[There] was nothing curriculum-based, nothing structured per se. Just general chitchat...I'm not sure where I figured out how the [ballot] paper works, but we never discussed voting at school.

As Shashi explained, learning about civics and citizenship was varied and 'just really came from the passion of the teachers and how vested they were in the topic'. Akram summarised how and what he learnt at school about politics was dependent on his teachers:

some teachers were knowledgeable in that area [civics and citizenship], especially if they were Legal Studies [teachers]. Sometimes in class there were tests about current events...But even then it wasn't that engaging so we didn't really get to know much about it

Others complained that their teachers were simply not willing to talk about politics in the classroom. Kyle remembered that some teachers would say that 'I can't actually talk to you about that' when political issues were raised. Similarly, Renae reported that it was common for her teachers to say 'I can't talk about that' when asked about current issues by students. Peta also recalled that her teachers would 'tippy-toe around certain issues or topics' concerning politics. While not appearing to be partisan is considered a positive trait for effective civics and citizenship teaching (Print 2007), it was considered by our participants to limit the breadth and scope of the knowledge they ultimately gained.

Consolidating Learning

A clear concern of many of our participants was that they felt they lacked the political knowledge required to vote with confidence. Many wanted to have gained a greater

understanding of Australian politics before leaving school. There was also broad consensus on how current approaches may be strengthened. Our participants felt that any deficit in their voting confidence might be overcome if they had been given a short civics and citizenship revision lesson at some stage during their final year of high school.

Although the last year of secondary school is often busy for students, there is still scope to deliver targeted learning opportunities. Having classes that refresh knowledge on practical matters is not uncommon in Australian schools. Many provide specific life skill-oriented lessons to prepare young people for when they leave school. These can, for example, include information on reproductive health and substance abuse (e.g. State Government of Queensland 2020; State Government of Victoria 2019). Our participants indicated that they would like to see a similar approach taken for civics and citizenship.

Akram, for instance, suggested ‘one-off mandatory’ lessons, and Ally proposed non-assessed revision classes in later secondary school to remind students of how the Australian system of government and politics operated. Brooke also argued for knowledge of civics and citizenship to be revised in late secondary school. As she explained, if this learning occurred just before young Australians reached voting age, the information would be considerably more relevant to students:

We did all the ‘how a government works’ and that in primary school. But to have that done again in later high school when we’re starting to get to the point where we’re actually interested in politics and we’re going to have to vote soon. Just do that again so it’s more fresh [and] we know what’s going on.

Discussion

The importance of political knowledge is often explored in the political sciences. More, however, must be done to better understand the individual experiences of young people in learning about politics, government, and their rights and responsibilities as citizens. In the following section, we discuss the two key factors our participants thought impacted their learning experience and their confidence in their capacity to vote knowledgeably at an election.

The first factor concerns educators. Teachers have a significant impact on the civics and citizenship learning experience of students. As Print (2007) and Sigauke (2013) remind us, the strategies teachers use can impact young people’s interest and engagement in the subject. The recollections of our participants show variation among the approaches of teachers when delivering the civics and citizenship curriculum. Some teachers appeared far more adept at employing active learning strategies which are an effective way of delivering civic and citizenship education (Tudball 2017). Others, however, avoided these approaches which could reflect an unwillingness to engage with the topic. This suggests that more could be done in Australia to better understand teacher’s experiences and their concerns about delivering civics and citizenship content. This would enable more targeted training and support for teachers.

Some researchers, such as Sigauke (2013), have recommended specialised civics and citizenship courses for trainee teachers in light of the limited opportunities they have in developing skills to reinforce the principles of citizenship in the classroom. Furthermore, while 98 per cent of teachers in one study said that ‘teaching civic education makes a difference for students’ political and civic development’, many acknowledged weakness in their ability to teach topics such as institutions and constitutions was weak (Mellor et al. 2002, pp.xxi, xxii).

In the past, there have been attempts to improve the civics and citizenship skills of Australian teachers. Significant resources were allocated specifically towards teacher training as part of the 1997 to 2004 Discovering Democracy program (see Author 2019). Since that time, however, training support for teachers has been lacking. The situation is not unique to Australia. Internationally, as Arthur et al. (2008) note, there are very few opportunities for teachers to be trained in the subject either prior to or during their careers.

It is also important to acknowledge the broader range of challenges teachers face in trying to equip their students with civics and citizenship knowledge. One concerns a crowded curriculum that impacts on the time available to teach the subject (see Department of Education 2014). Furthermore, in recent years, civics and citizenship (as well as the broader range of subjects in the Humanities and Social Studies) has often been overshadowed by the focus on Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics subjects (Print 2019:18). It can also be particularly challenging teaching the subject in ‘low socio-economic schools’ (Black 2015:369). The problem, therefore, may not lie with the individual teacher, rather the system. This is why it is crucial that research be undertaken to understand the experiences of teachers and address the challenges they face.

The second factor that impacted the confidence of our participants to vote at elections concerns how students can retain the information they encounter as part of the national curriculum that runs from years 3 to 10. By the time they had finished school, participants said they had forgotten much of what they had been taught, despite becoming increasingly interested in political issues. The challenge, then, is to find ways to reinforce that learning. One way to achieve this is by responding to the participants’ suggestion that students should be given a politics refresher lesson close to the time that they leave school. Providing such opportunities would align with effective pedagogical practices that enhance learning outcomes. For example, the Victorian Department of Education and Training highlights the importance of consolidating students’ learning ‘through opportunities that engage and re-engage them with new content over a period of time’ (see Department of Education and Training, Victoria 2018, p.21). Furthermore, it would provide for innovative and experiential learning practices which have been identified as being highly effective in delivering learning outcomes (Sigauke 2013; Tudball 2017). These activities should focus on building procedural and structural competencies, rather than more critical thinking skills.

As our findings suggest, young people would benefit from a deeper understanding of democratic processes, especially voting. An example would be to elect student representatives by using the same voting method used in the Australian House of Representatives or Senate elections. Another might involve completing a dummy ballot paper and receiving feedback from peers. This would go some way towards equipping young people with knowledge of what to expect when they go to vote. We would

strongly suggest, however, that students be given the opportunity to work alongside course developers in order to determine what content is useful.

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to focus on the experience of recent school leavers about how they learnt about politics and government at school and whether they felt they could vote with confidence. While our sample may not necessarily be representative of all Australian students, our findings contribute to understandings about the political knowledge of young people. In particular, the findings highlight three key themes that contribute to many young people lacking the confidence to vote in Australia. First, many young people are not building an adequate awareness of the underpinning democratic principles and processes at school. Second, there is variation in the preparedness of school teachers to equip young people with political knowledge. Third, opportunities do not exist for students to revisit key civics and citizenship information before they leave school. These challenges, however, can be ameliorated through practical solutions and by taking the needs and opinions of young people into account.

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Compliance with Ethical Standards

Ethical Approval All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

Informed Consent Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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Affiliations

Zareh Ghazarian¹ · Jacqueline Laughland-Booy² · Chiara De Lazzari³ · Zlatko Skrbis²

¹ Monash University, Melbourne, Australia

² Australian Catholic University, Sydney, Australia

³ Australian Catholic University, Melbourne, Australia