

# **The Impact of Citizenship Education**


**A Review of Evidence for School Leaders**

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In association with



**Middlesex  
University  
London**



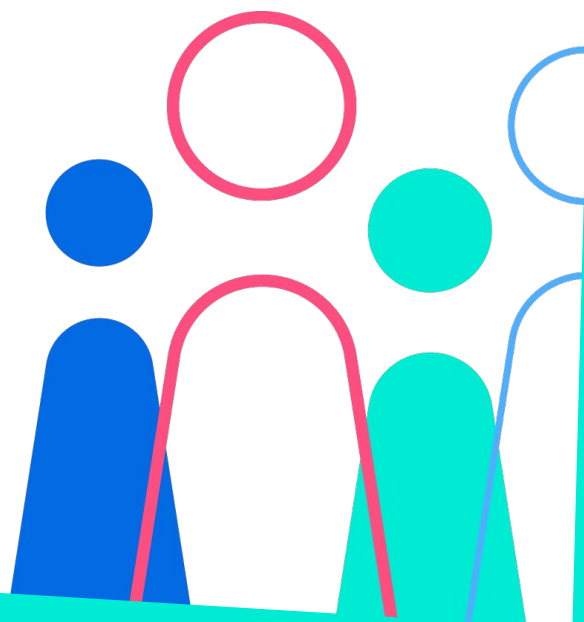
To cite this report use the following reference:

Jerome, L., Hilal, Y., Hyder, F. & Kisby, B. (2022). *The Impact of Citizenship Education. A Review of Evidence for School Leaders*. London: Association for Citizenship Teaching.

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# Introduction

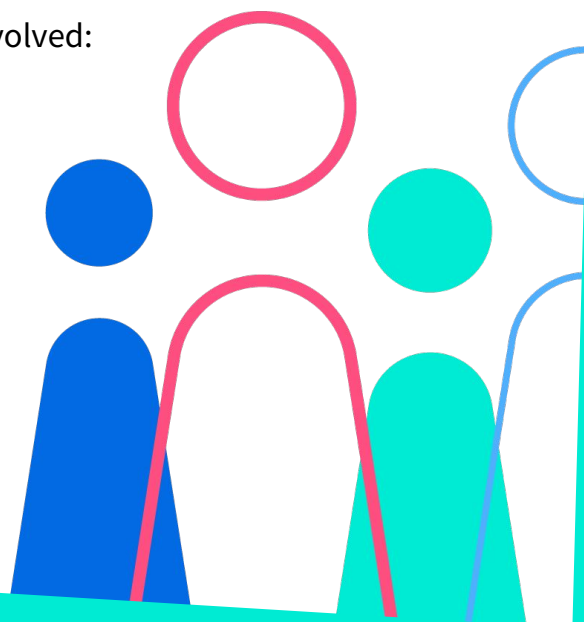
This summary report has been produced by the Association for Citizenship Teaching and Middlesex University as part of the research and evaluation of the Active Citizenship in Schools programme, that is running from 2021-25. The programme offers a strategic approach to embed social action and active citizenship within the school curriculum. It aims to identify models and practices that ensure pupils engage in and benefit from citizenship education in a sustained and impactful way.

There is also a companion report 'What Works in Citizenship Education' aimed at Citizenship subject leaders, and a full technical report available at: [www.teachingcitizenship.org.uk](http://www.teachingcitizenship.org.uk).

The evidence informing this report has been analysed following a systematic review of research journals. We looked for peer-reviewed academic journal articles which were concerned with evaluating the impact of citizenship education, specifically in relation to active citizenship outcomes. The review included 133 articles from around the world including 18 randomised control trials and large cohort studies, widely thought to be the most reliable form of evidence.

The on-going research and evaluation project includes a student survey, in which any school can participate. This offers you the chance to evaluate the impact of your own provision on a range of citizenship outcomes, including political knowledge, efficacy, trust, tolerance and attitudes towards democracy. Participating schools will receive school-level reports outlining their student responses which can be used as the basis of evidence-informed improvement planning.

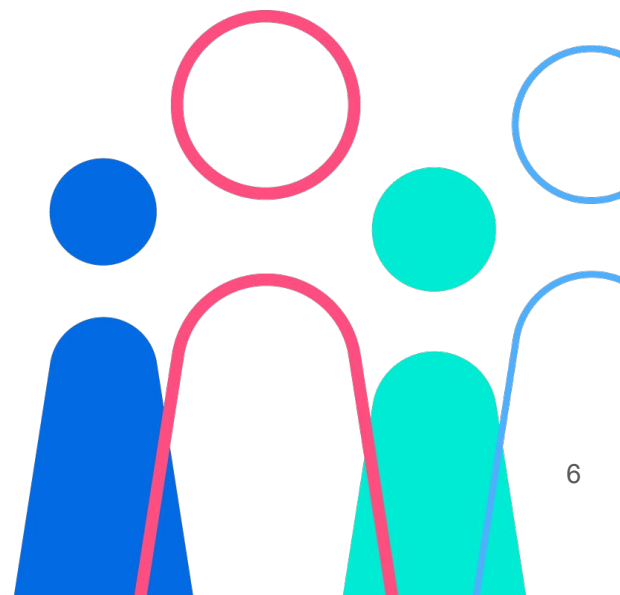
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# 1. Schools make a difference

Research in England demonstrates that citizenship education secures positive outcomes into adulthood in relation to attitudes towards, and actual levels of engagement in, various forms of civic participation. Continuing participative learning through key stage 4, for example through school councils, mock elections and debating, had the biggest impact. As with most aspects of cultural literacy, political knowledge and attitudes are generally correlated with family background – reflecting parental attitudes and education levels. Education itself tends to have a positive effect, with higher levels of education being correlated with citizenship knowledge, attitudes and participation, but this means there is a well-documented ‘civic gap’ which mirrors the educational attainment gap. However, there is a growing body of evidence that schools can tackle this gap, by providing relatively deprived children with compensatory experiences. Providing citizenship education in the curriculum is a first step to addressing this gap, but broader factors include: students’ perceptions of positive relationships with adults in the school, a school that listens to students’ concerns, and an open classroom climate where students feel they can express and encounter a range of views.



## ***Summary of evidence***

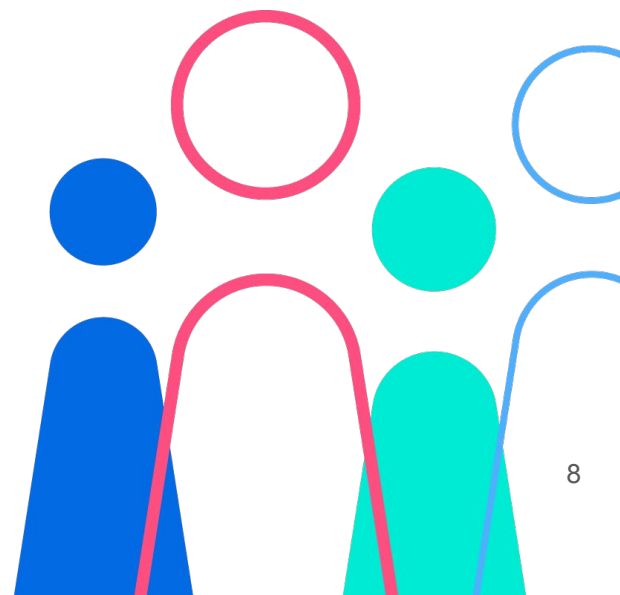
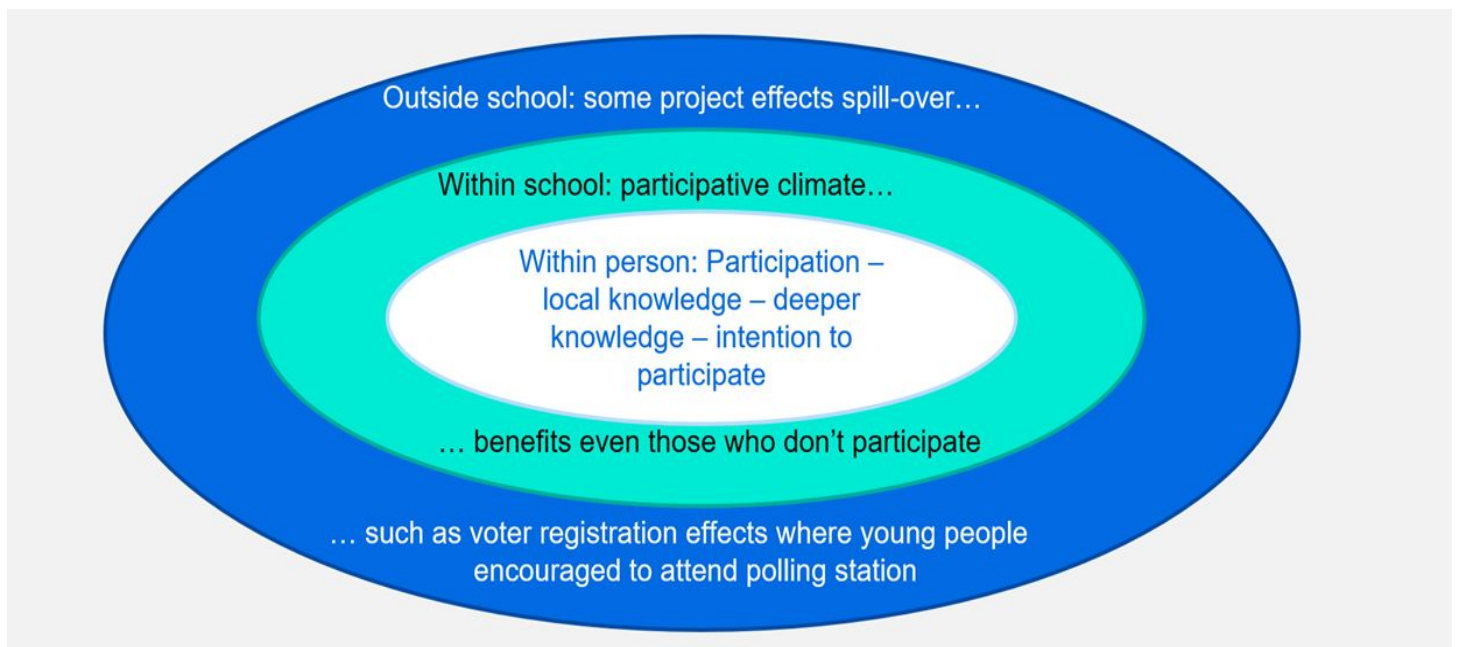
Keating & Janmaat (2016) collected survey data from 746 20-year-olds who had previously participated in a school-based evaluation of citizenship education in England. They found that participation in activities such as school councils, mock elections and debate clubs was positively correlated with levels of participation into adulthood. Young people reporting high incidence of such activities in year 11 were up to 14% more likely to participate in voting and other forms of citizenship (protesting, petitions etc) into adulthood, and the impact persisted independent of social class.

Hoskins, Janmaat & Melis (2017) analysed data from 6,155 secondary school students in England to demonstrate that young people from disadvantaged backgrounds benefit more from citizenship education than their counterparts from more privileged backgrounds. Deimel, Hoskins & Abs (2019) demonstrated a similar positive outcome for formal citizenship classes in Belgium, Denmark, Germany and the Netherlands. They speculate that this is because it merely reinforces the cultural capital advantage of privileged children but has a more novel compensatory effect for disadvantaged children.

Maurissen, Claes & Barber (2018) analysed data from 67,695 students from 3,212 schools across 22 European countries to conclude that in any school where students perceive they have positive relationships with teachers and the school is responsive to their demands, this is positively correlated with 'open classroom climate', which in turn is one of the most important predictors of civic knowledge and intentions to vote (Campbell, 2008). Deimel, Hoskins, & Abs (2019) warn that this effect may be undermined where classes are streamed by ability / vocational routes, but Hoskins & Janmaat (2019) note that in England in particular, schools working predominantly with students with low socio-economic status often provide more citizenship education.

## 2. The ripple effect of citizenship education

There is some evidence that school-based programmes can have a ripple effect beyond the curriculum. Some projects have an impact across the school, even on those students who do not participate directly in the project. This may be because such projects enhance the perception that the school has a participatory ethos. There is also some evidence that well-designed Citizenship programmes might have a wider impact on the families of students, by stimulating discussion and engagement at home. This family effect can amplify the impact of citizenship activities on students and have an independent effect on their parents.



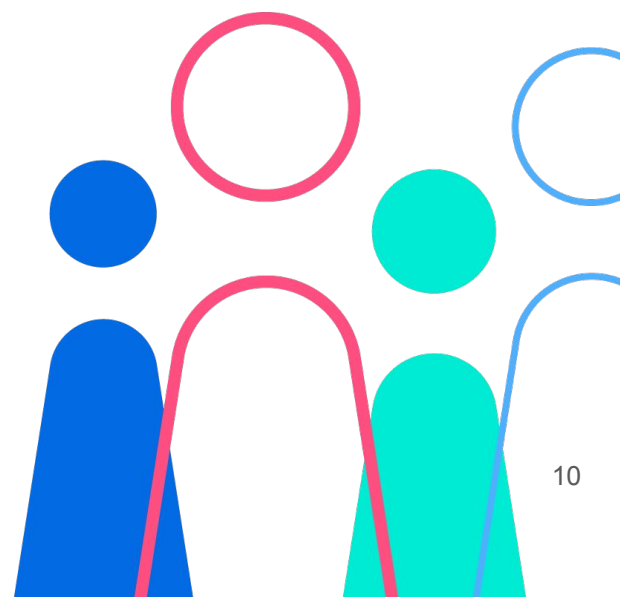


## ***Summary of evidence***

See, Gorard & Siddiqui (2017) conducted a randomised control trial for the Education Endowment Fund with 7,781 year 9 students in 71 secondary schools in England. The research measured the impact of being in a school that participated in one of four projects run by St John's Ambulance, the Scouts, Sea Cadets or Fire Cadets. These programmes included voluntary activities, including fund raising, as well as service specific skills such as first aid and life-saving training, fire drill and seamanship. The biggest effect size was 0.17 (usually interpreted as 'small') in 'civic mindedness' (desire to make one's local area a better place) for children eligible for free school meals. The authors concluded: 'just being in the treatment schools (regardless of participation) can have a positive effect'. Vercelloti & Matto (2016) worked with 361 high school students in New Jersey divided into a control group, a group who regularly read news articles and discussed them in class, and a third group who read articles, discussed them in class and at home. The third group demonstrated greater improvements in political knowledge and seeking additional information, and this effect was more sustained over time. The Kids Voting programme in Kansas involved hundreds of schools teaching about a forthcoming election, culminating in the students being encouraged to attend a polling station with their parents, where thousands of volunteers staffed mock election voting booths for young people. The programme was accompanied by an evaluation project which collected data on 24,976 students and analysed voter turnout across 105 counties. Analyses undertaken by Simon & Merrill (1998) and Linimon & Joslyn (2002) recorded an improvement in voter turn-out in participating counties of 2.2% and improved voting rates among participating students in the first election where they were eligible to vote.

# 3. Developing knowledgeable citizens

One of the most important roles for schools is to build students' knowledge and understanding of politics. Coherently planned Citizenship programmes generally lead to significant improvements in political knowledge and this is true of a range of approaches to presenting that information, for example, through timetabled Citizenship classes, regular engagement with the news, real-life active citizenship projects, attending educational exhibitions and on-line activities. Building a culture of open classroom discussion is more effective in building knowledge than lecture style teaching. However, knowledge does not necessarily lead to improved attitudes towards participation or actual levels of participation. Whilst it is useful in its own right, it is not sufficient on its own to secure attitudinal change or to promote participation.

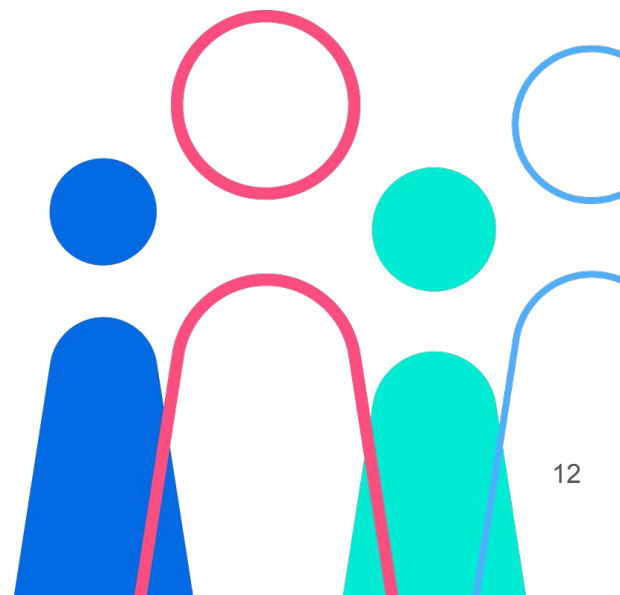


## ***Summary of evidence***

Niemi & Junn (1998) provide the classic account of the impact of citizenship education, based on a nationally representative survey of over 4,000 high school students in the USA. They demonstrated that routine citizenship education with regular class discussions of citizenship topics led to an 11% gain in basic knowledge. Finkel & Ernst's (2005) study of 600 students in South Africa reported similar gains simply by having timetabled Citizenship classes. Torney-Purta & Wilkenfeld (2009) analysed data from 2,800 ninth grade students in the USA and concluded that interactive teaching methods or a combination of interactive and lecture-style inputs resulted in higher levels of knowledge and related citizenship skills (such as media literacy) compared to students who predominantly experienced lecture-style teaching. In addition to the valuable role of classroom discussion, research has noted the positive impact on knowledge of a range of teaching strategies. Vercelloti & Matto's (2015) study with 361 high school students concluded that regular engagement with the news (at school and at home) led to significant improvements in knowledge. Ballard, Cohen, & Littenberg-Tobias (2016) studied 617 students from 26 schools and reported a 14% difference in levels of knowledge between those participating in an active citizenship project and a control group. Feddes et al. (2019) conducted pre & post evaluation surveys with 453 secondary students attending an educational exhibition ('Fortress Democracy') and found an 18% improvement in knowledge. Blevins, LeCompte & Wells (2014) studied the impact on 256 students of using an online interactive civics game for 6 weeks and found a moderate effect size of (0.6) with bigger impacts on younger students. However, knowledge does not necessarily lead to improved attitudes towards participation or actual levels of participation. Geboers et al. (2013) undertook a review of evidence in relation to a range of citizenship education projects and approaches and concluded that, whilst it is useful in its own right, knowledge is not sufficient to produce other citizenship outcomes.

# 4. Building a ‘can do’ mentality

For some young people the journey to active citizenship has to start by overcoming negative attitudes. There is some evidence that active citizenship projects, where young people have leadership roles, can lead to reduced feelings of political alienation. Alongside the reduction in negative feelings, citizenship education can also nurture students’ sense of their own efficacy, which is to say their sense that people like them can have an impact. This is the beginning of developing political agency. This has been shown consistently through secondary school level teaching, extra-curricula activities such as Model United Nations simulations, and community-based enrichment projects, such as summer camps.

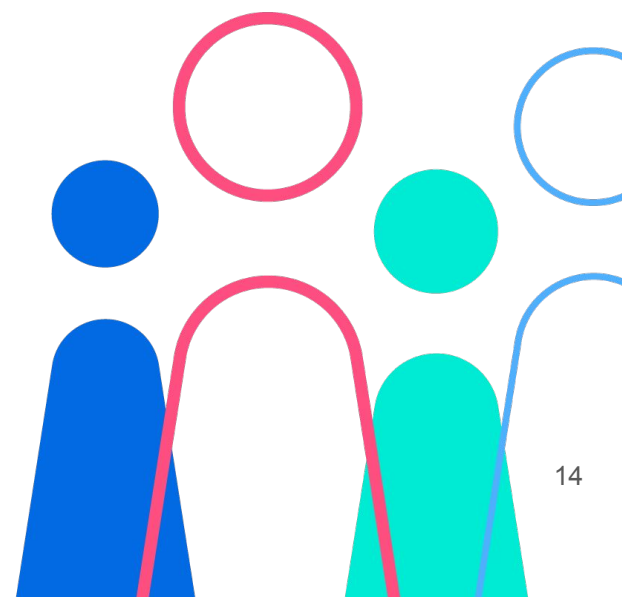


## ***Summary of evidence***

In relation to reducing the negative feelings that block participation, one small scale evaluation with 69 young people showed that those involved in active citizenship projects experienced reduced feelings of political alienation compared to a control group (Prati et al., 2020). In relation to building positive forms of efficacy, Ballard, Cohen, & Littenberg-Tobias's (2016) study with 617 students showed significant improvements in civic self-efficacy following participation in an active citizenship programme. In England, Keating et al.'s (2010) longitudinal evaluation of citizenship education between 2001-2010 included 24,353 students and showed a moderate effect size of 0.4 in relation to personal efficacy for year 9 students who reported receiving 'a lot' of citizenship education compared to those receiving 'a little'. There were smaller effect sizes for other age groups, but all were positive. Levy (2017) conducted a very small scale evaluation of 36 students' participation in Model United Nations simulations and found positive impacts on political efficacy. Blevins et al. (2021) have conducted a number of evaluations of civics summer camps in the USA. These are fairly small scale (less than 100 participants each year) and relatively short (3-5 days in duration). This means that various measures of efficacy do not show significant improvements, but qualitative data from participants routinely demonstrates students feel more empowered to undertake specific forms of civic action.

# 5. Boosting student well-being and feelings of connectedness to others

Whilst well-being tends to be seen through the lens of PSHE, there is some evidence that Citizenship also has beneficial effects in relation to building happiness and well-being. In part this seems to be related to how young people feel connected to others through meaningful relationships linked to participation opportunities. Citizenship education also contributes to positive attitudes towards others, for example, by boosting levels of trust (a core component of classic 'social capital' theory), developing empathy, and promoting tolerance towards others.



## ***Summary of evidence***

Prati et al's (2020) small scale study demonstrated small but significant improvements in well-being for those students participating in an active citizenship project. This reflects an established relationship in the research on human rights education (HRE) and well-being. Lloyd & Emerson (2017) conducted a study of 3,000 children in Northern Ireland, which confirmed a correlation between children's subjective well-being and their perceptions that their participation rights were being respected in school and the community. Covell (2010) conducted research with 1,289 key stage 2 students in Hampshire, including a sample attending schools implementing a Human Rights Education (HRE) programme and a control group who were not. The students in the HRE schools were more likely to report feeling safe, feeling the school cared for them, and feeling they were treated fairly. Montague and Eiroa-Orosa (2017) undertook a small-scale qualitative investigation with young human rights activists in Amnesty International UK and concluded there was a virtuous cycle in which young people's experience of activism led them to build stronger social bonds with their fellow activists, which reinforced their sense of efficacy. Rutkowski, Rutkowski & Engel (2014) analysed survey data from 15,449 13–14-year-old students from 24 European countries and found higher levels of institutional trust in schools where students felt listened to, where they had good relationships with their teachers, and were more involved in school and community activities. Lauglo (2013) analysed data from 140,000 13–14-year-old students from 38 countries. He found a positive correlation between students' level of civics knowledge and positive attitudes towards equal rights between men and women and for all ethnic groups, strongly suggesting that citizenship education contributes to all three outcomes.

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