



ACT Research Briefing 1

School Ethos and Citizenship Education



In association with



**Middlesex
University
London**

Introduction

The National Citizenship Education Study (NCES) is a research project designed by the Association for Citizenship Teaching and Middlesex University as part of the Active Citizenship in Schools programme 2021-2025. More information is available at www.teachingcitizenship.org.uk/research.

In 2022-23 the NCES surveyed 1,264 secondary students across eight schools as well as collecting data from teachers in 75 schools. These research briefings share some of the findings from this first year's data that will be of practical interest to teachers.

In a nutshell

When students feel safe, respected and listened to in school, they are more likely to report high levels of trust and a commitment to participate in citizenship activities in adulthood. Citizenship teachers should therefore work on building a positive school ethos and establishing positive relationships with their students in addition to building a strong curriculum for Citizenship.

Why are we interested in school ethos?

Donnelly (2000) defines school ethos as including both the espoused values and beliefs supported by the school and the observed practices and interactions of school members. In our literature review of the evidence for the impact of citizenship education, we found several studies that addressed aspects of this definition.

- Finkel and Ernst (2005) found that 'when students perceived their teachers to be highly knowledgeable, competent, likeable and inspiring, they appeared to internalize attitudes and values supportive of democracy to a greater extent than students who received training from 'poor' instructors and those who did not have citizenship lessons at all' (Finkel and Ernst, 2005: 358).
- Wanders et al. (2020) found a positive relationship between good teacher-student relationships and 'societal involvement', which included positive attitudes towards others and citizenship participation. Teacher-student relationships were more significant than relationships between students and their peers, and the impact was bigger for students whose parents were less educated, or who were first generation migrants.
- Maurissen, Claes & Barber's (2018) international study concluded 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 intention to vote (Campbell, 2008).
- Jagers et al. (2017) found that when students perceived their school to be equitable and their homeroom (tutor group) to be democratic, there were positive citizenship outcomes but, where one of these factors was missing, the results were lower.
- Covell (2010) found that adopting a whole school approach to rights led to higher levels of children feeling that they were treated fairly and that the school cared for them and reduced levels of bullying. This also led to higher rates of participation in school clubs and activities.
- See et al. (2017) provide an interesting additional angle on the whole school dimension. They studied the impact of a uniformed-activity intervention involving some form of service. They found that schools with these programmes helped to develop students' empathy, civic-mindedness and happiness, even for those who did not directly participate in the programmes. This strongly suggests there is some whole school effect at work.

How did we measure ethos?

In our survey we combined the insights from the findings (above) to devise the following questions:

- In general, do you enjoy being at school?
- In general, do you feel safe at school?
- In general, do you feel the school takes students' views seriously?
- In general, do you have good relationships with your teachers?
- When you learn about Citizenship topics, would you say your teachers generally seem very enthusiastic about the content?

Each question is followed by this scale:

1. Not at all
2. Not very much
3. Quite a lot
4. Very much

The answers to each these questions are all closely associated with the others, which suggests they are measuring one underlying concept. These form a new measure of ‘student perceived ethos’.

There was some slight variation between schools, but the median for all of them was between 2 and 3. There was also a gradual decline as students got older (and spent more time in secondary school) from a high of 2.6 (mean) for year 7 to 2.1 for year 10.

What role does ethos play?

Student perceived ethos was positively associated with two important citizenship outcomes: intention to participate in adulthood and overall trust.

Intention to participate in citizenship activities

Obviously, the intention to participate is one very concrete measure of whether citizenship education is working. In our survey we asked questions about whether students felt they would be likely to vote, get involved in political parties, volunteer etc.

Our data showed that student perceived ethos combined with current levels of participation together account for 32% of the variation in students’ intentions to participate in citizenship activities as adults. This was one of the strongest findings in our data and is statistically significant. Whilst it is unsurprising that current participation predicts future participation, the insertion of school ethos into this model indicates that this is an important school factor to think about.

Trust

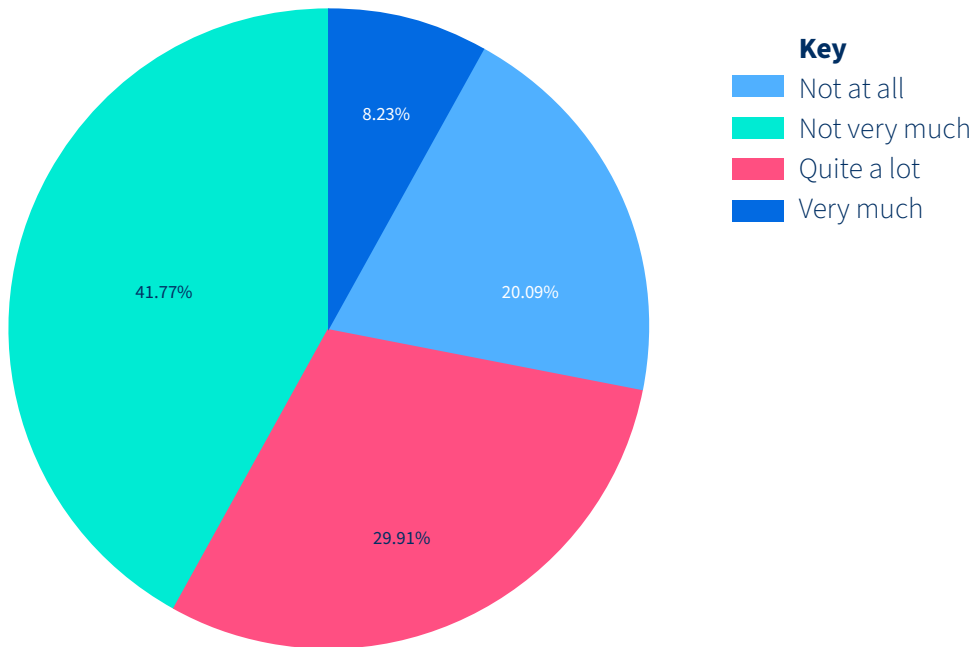
Levels of trust are also important as trust is seen as a vital component of social capital, as Putnam (2000) conceptualised it. On this view the more we trust people, the more likely we are to feel a bond of mutual interest, and thus the more likely we are to be interested and engaged in public life. Low levels of trust are associated with apathy and increasingly private lives. In our survey we asked students to tell us how much they trusted a variety of professions and institutions, ranging from teachers, the police, the government etc.

In a second statistical model we found that perceived school ethos also combined with open classroom climate and the variety of citizenship learning activities to account for 34% of the variation in levels of trust. This was our second important statistically significant finding. Open classroom climate refers to the degree to which students feel they are encouraged to discuss divergent opinions freely in class. Learning activities refers to the range of pedagogic strategies encountered, for example, undertaking active citizenship projects, doing role plays, studying local issues etc. This suggests that engaging students in a diverse range of learning activities, encouraging discussion and promoting a positive school ethos might be linked to promoting trust.

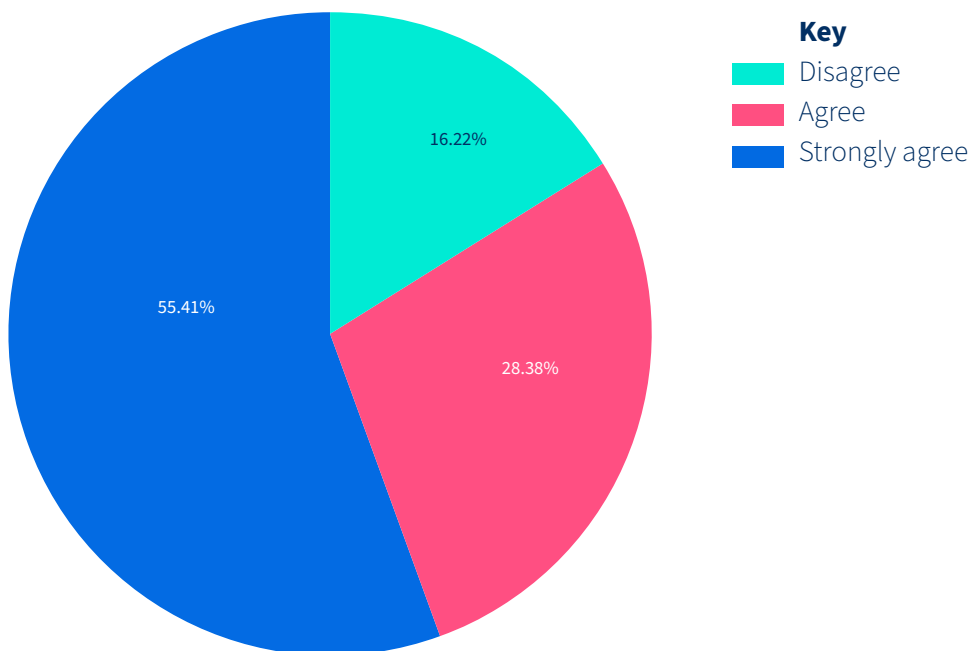
Perception of school environment

One element of school ethos refers to student voice. 84% of teachers said that they ‘agree’ or ‘strongly agree’ with the statement: ‘Student voice is developed across the school.’ But, when asked if ‘the school takes students’ views seriously,’ only 38% of students responded positively. There is, in other words, a difference in perception of school environment. One explanation for this is that students are not always aware of the opportunities available to them to make their views heard. If this is the case, teachers may need to seek ways to make these better known to students. We suggest that surveying students like this is a useful way to check whether teachers’ optimism is justified.

Students: In general, do you feel that your school takes your views seriously?



Teachers: Student voice is developed across the school



What does this mean?

We always have to be careful about over interpreting statistics like these as they only allow us to explore correlations rather than prove causation. However, given that citizenship educators have tended (understandably) to focus on the curriculum, this is interesting in that it draws attention to the whole school dimension.

In the light of the evidence we found in our literature review, our data supports the proposition that we should also focus on the power of positive teacher-student relationships, and fostering a sense of community in school so that students feel safe, respected, and listened to.

In addition, both our models incorporate measures of activity, and in our data these emerge as more important than what is learned. That does not mean that the curriculum content is insignificant, but it is a good reminder that we should heed the old cliché that ‘it’s not what you do but the way that you do it’.



¹ The National Citizenship Education Study (NCES) is a research collaboration between the Association for Citizenship Teaching (ACT) and Middlesex University. The NCES will continue to run for at least two more years and we are keen to grow to include many more school. For more details about our findings and how you can get involved visit www.teachingcitizenship.org.uk/research/

References

- Covell, K. (2010). School engagement and rights-respecting schools. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 40(1), 39-51.
- Donnelly, C. (2000). In Pursuit of School Ethos. *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 48(2), 134-154.
- Finkel, S. E. & Ernst, H. R. (2005). Civic education in post-apartheid South Africa: Alternative paths to the development of political knowledge and democratic values. *Political Psychology*, 26(3), 333-364.
- Jagers, R. J., Lozada, F. T., Rivas-Drake, D. & Guillaume, C. (2017). Classroom and school predictors of civic engagement among Black and Latino middle school youth. *Child development*, 88(4), 1125-1138.
- Maurissen, L., Claes, E. & Barber, C. (2018). Deliberation in citizenship education: how the school context contributes to the development of an open classroom climate. *Social Psychology of Education*, 21(4), 951-972.
- Putnam, R. (2000). *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- See, B.H. and Gorard, S. & Siddiqui, N. (2017). Does participation in uniformed group activities in school improve young people's non-cognitive outcomes? *International Journal of Educational Research*, 85, 109-120.
- Wanders, F. H. K., van der Veen, I., Dijkstra, A. B. & Maslowski, R. (2020). The influence of teacher-student and student-student relationships on societal involvement in Dutch primary and secondary schools. *Theory & Research in Social Education*, 48(1), 101-119.

To cite this report use the following reference:

Jerome, L., Hilal, Y. & Hyder, F. (2024). *ACT Research Briefing 1: School Ethos and Citizenship Education*. London: Association for Citizenship Teaching (ACT)

This publication is one of a series of outputs developed from the research study. For more information about ACT, the Active Citizenship in Schools programme and how to join the National Citizenship Education Study, please see www.teachingcitizenship.org.uk/research