



**ACT Research Briefing 3**

# **Pedagogy 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](http://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

Students' perception of the degree to which their classrooms encourage the expression and exploration of diverse opinions is correlated with improved knowledge, attitudes, and experience of active citizenship. Interactive teaching methods, or at least a blend of direct instruction and active learning, are most impactful for the majority students. This is the case for the acquisition of knowledge as well as attitudes towards democracy and intended and actual levels of participation.

## How did we measure pedagogic strategies in the surveys?

The survey for students consisted of two batches of questions to provide us with information about how citizenship learning takes place.

### Open Classroom Climate

This includes a widely used measure taken from international research on 'open classroom climate' (OCC). It tends to be associated with positive citizenship outcomes. The survey includes the following criteria, which students respond to on a 4-point scale:

- Students feel free to disagree openly with their teachers about political and social issues during class.
- Students are encouraged to make up their own minds about issues.
- Teachers respect students' opinions and encourage them to express them during class.
- Students feel free to express opinions in class even when their opinions are different from most other students.
- Teachers encourage students to discuss political or social issues about which people have differing opinions.
- Teachers present several sides of an issue when explaining it to a class.

Each question is followed by this scale:

1. Strongly disagree
2. Disagree
3. Agree
4. Strongly agree

The teacher survey consisted of the same criteria which was headed by the question: *To what extent do the following statements apply when Citizenship is taught in your school?*

### Curriculum activities

These questions reflect students' experiences of learning Citizenship. The survey includes the following criteria, which students respond to on a 4-point scale:

- Students undertake active citizenship projects in the curriculum / in class
- Students consider issues that affect their local communities within their lessons
- Students have a (real or virtual) visit to Parliament
- Students have a (real or virtual) visit from a politician / councillor / community leaders / outside speakers
- Students vote on a topical subject during form time or in a lesson
- Students discuss topical issues in the news
- Students discuss controversial issues (that people disagree over)

- Students participate in role plays and simulations
- Students make presentations to their peers about their research

Each question is followed by this scale:

1. Never
2. Once
3. Most terms
4. Most years

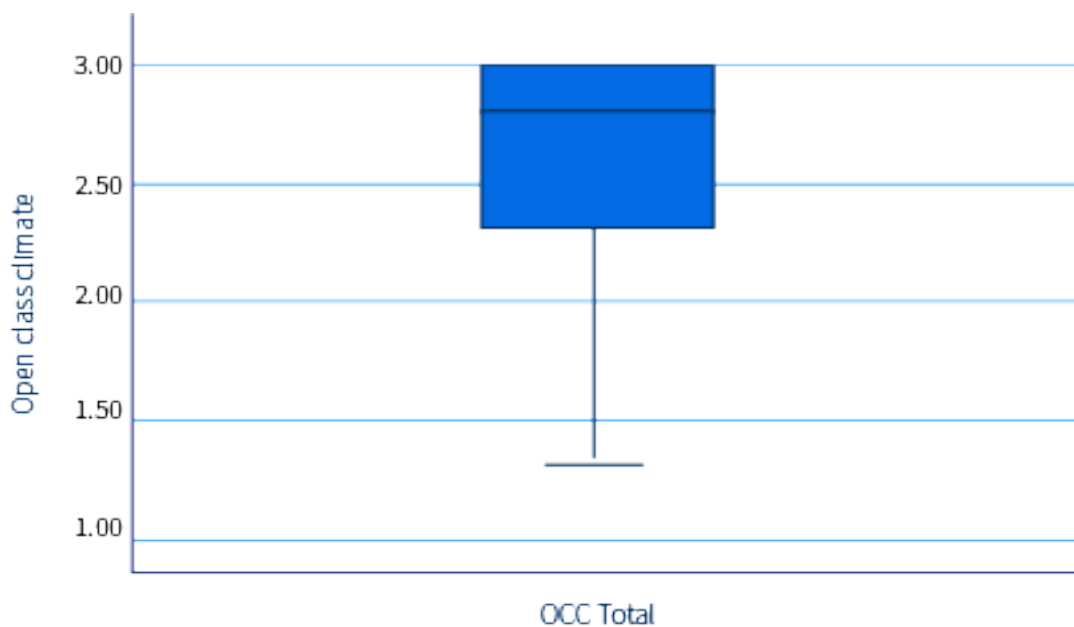
The teacher survey consisted of the same criteria which was headed by the question: *How frequently is Citizenship taught with these methods?*

### What did we find?

#### Open classroom climate

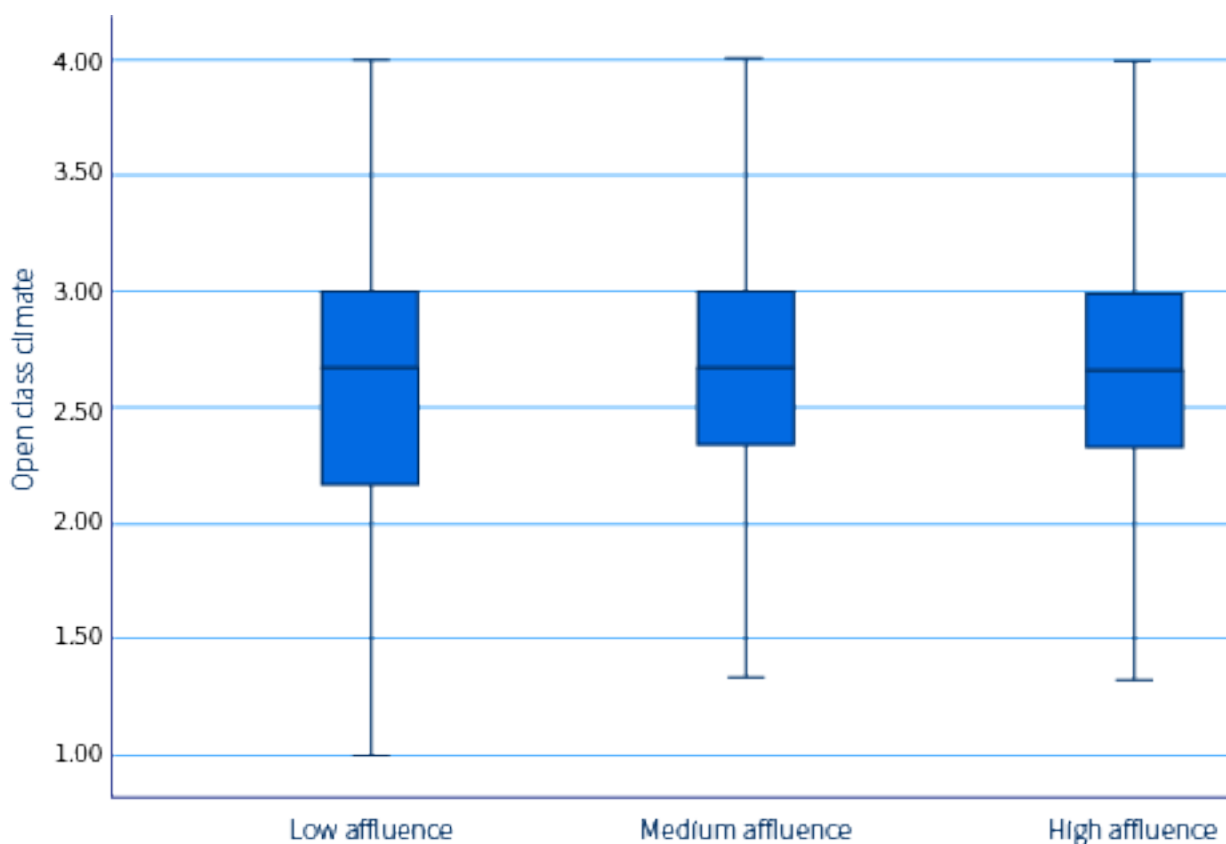
Teachers' ratings of 'open classroom climate' were very high across the sample, indicating they support the principles of free and open discussion. This is reflected in the most commonly used teaching strategies which include discussion of local issues, topical issues and controversial issues.

Teachers were asked to rate a series of statements regarding open classroom climate on a 4-point scale, but the first option was scored as zero, meaning 3 was the highest score possible. The dark line is the median and the blue box spans the first and third quartile, indicating the majority of respondents rate their provision very positively. These self-evaluation scores are all generally high, indicating a high degree of buy-in among these teachers to the principles of OCC. There was a correlation between political position of the teacher and the level of open classroom climate reported. Respondents on the left of the political spectrum reported slightly higher levels of open classroom climate, although the small number on the right of the spectrum means we should be cautious in over-interpreting this difference.



The student results were also largely positive, although less so than teachers. As the literature suggests, students' evaluations of OCC are often quite different within the same classroom, and relative to their social-economic status, so their perception of OCC may also reflect their pre-existing attitude towards their relationship with their teachers (Campbell, 2019). However, the students that took part in our survey had similar experiences of Open Classroom Climate regardless of socio-economic status.

This is reflected in the data below.



### Why is this important?

- In our literature review several studies noted that high ratings of OCC (Open Classroom Climate) are generally correlated with a number of other factors, for example, 'critical consciousness' (Godfrey and Grayman, 2014), civic knowledge (Lin, 2014), political participation (Hoskins, Janmaat and Melis, 2017), good teacher-students relationships and positive student perceptions of school (Maurissen, Claes and Barber, 2018).
- Schuitema et al. (2009) concluded that groupwork and dialogic teaching enabled students to provide better justifications for their argument. They therefore advocate that (i) students should exchange views with others, (ii) they should engage with one another to co-construct ideas, and (iii) engage in some form of evaluation of suggestions.
- The small scale qualitative research project that investigated ACT's Deliberative Classroom resources indicated that students could use opportunities for classroom discussion to explore and deepen their accounts of controversial issues. It found that small group discussion could be fairly truncated, but often led to more elaborate responses in whole class discussions (Jerome, Liddle and Young 2021).

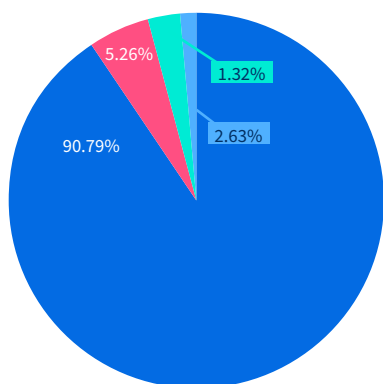
### Open classroom climate

Teachers' ratings of 'open classroom climate' were very high across the sample, indicating they support the principles of free and open discussion. This is reflected in the most commonly used teaching strategies which include discussion of local issues, topical issues and controversial issues.

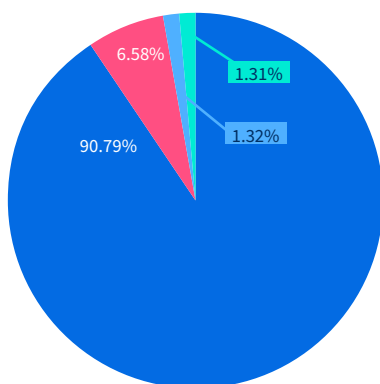
#### Key

- Never
- Once
- Once a key stage
- Several times across a key stage

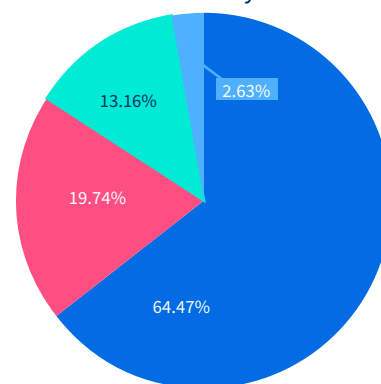
Discuss controversial issues



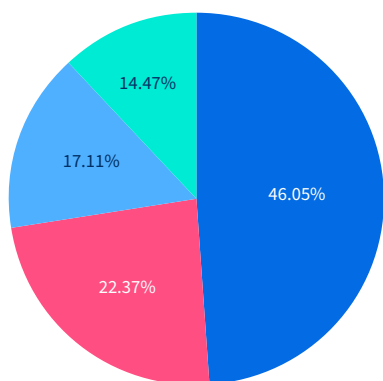
Discuss issues in the news



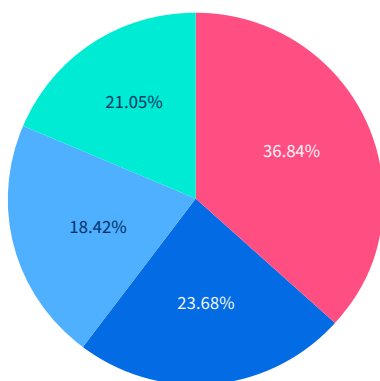
Consider issues affecting local community



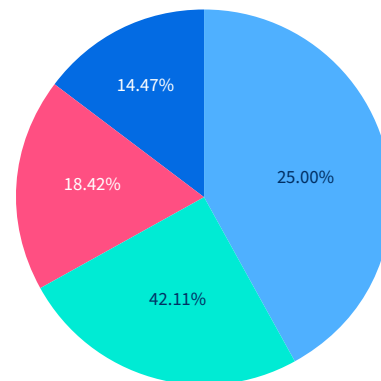
Students vote on topical issues



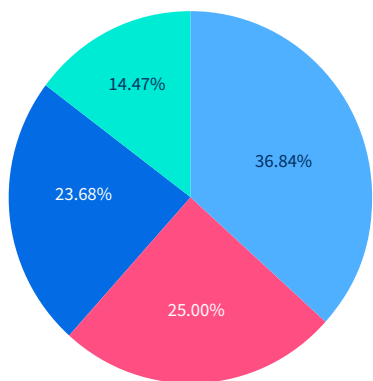
Students undertake active citizenship projects in class



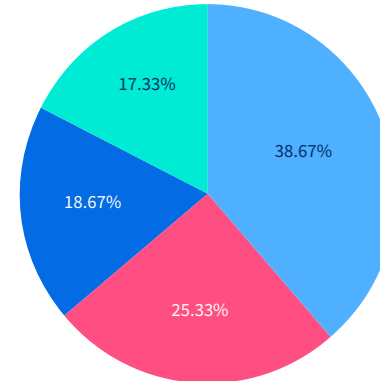
Outside speakers



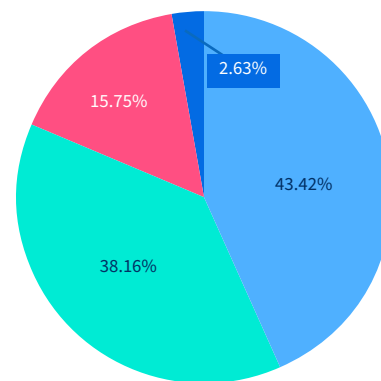
Role plays and simulations



Students make presentations to their peers

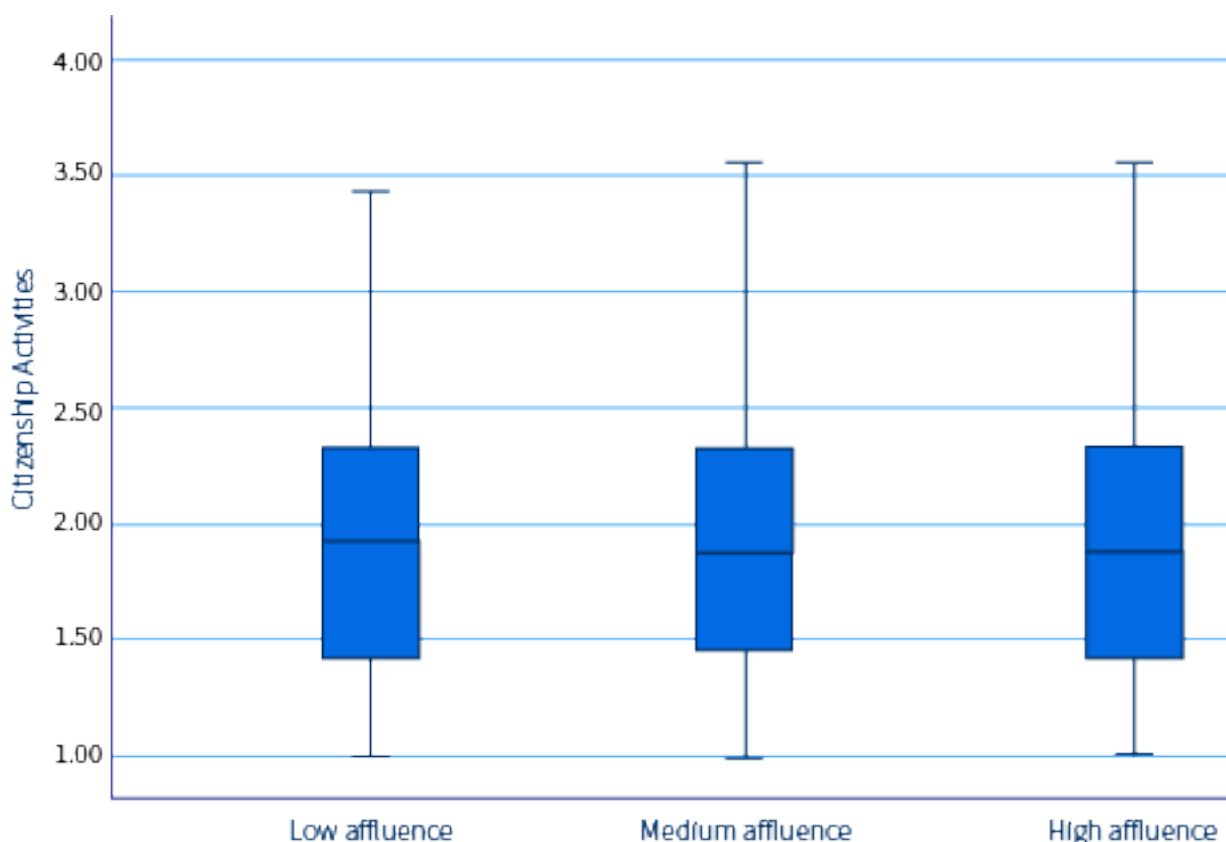


Real or virtual visit to parliament



Discussions about controversial issues were reported as one of the most common classroom activities, indicating teachers are confident to use this method. This was also one of the most common classroom activities for students, with discussions about issues affecting their local area the most common. Most of the students also indicated they had undertaken some form of active citizenship project in class.

Hoskins and Janmaat, 2019 suggest that students may experience a different diet of curriculum activities depending on their socio-economic status. This might happen through teachers developing different approaches in vocational / academic schools, or through streaming within schools. Our data below suggests that students in this study receive a very similar variety of teaching activities overall, regardless of their socio-economic background. This may suggest that these schools are achieving a strong core entitlement for all students.



### What's the case for more role plays and simulations?

- Finkel and Ernst (2005) found that experiencing a range of fairly familiar school-based activities, such as mock elections, school councils and debating leads to higher levels of political participation into adulthood.
- The issue of 'dosage' emerges in several studies as being significant. Some projects are rather short-lived and therefore it might not be surprising that comprehensive change is not secured from a single experience over a few weeks or a term (Dallago, et al, 2009). Positive outcomes into adulthood are often associated with a longer duration of school activities (Gardner et al, 2008). Role plays and simulations enable teachers to provide more regular active experiences.
- Lin's (2015) review of existing evidence suggested that role plays were useful for rehearsing some of the early stages of active citizenship projects – researching, discussing and devising strategies for action. Those focused on mock elections, including opportunities to listen to hustings, compare manifestos etc. also introduce useful knowledge about formal citizenship. Bennion and Laughlin's study (2018) found that simulations where students model the process of parliamentary debates or enquiries leads to improved knowledge and interest in politics (Marianni and Glenn, 2014) as well as the development of skills related to critical investigation (Bernstein, 2008).

- Meya and Eisenack (2018) evaluated a climate change game that gave students the opportunity to make decisions which contributed to climate change or reduced it, and the evaluation data showed that all students benefitted equally from the game regardless of the in-game decisions they made. They argue that one important benefit of such simulations is that they create a safe space for students to try out solutions and learn from their success or failure.



<sup>1</sup> 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/](http://www.teachingcitizenship.org.uk/research/)

## References

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To cite this report use the following reference:

Hyder, F., Jerome, L. & Hilal, Y. (2024). *ACT Research Briefing 3: Pedagogy 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](http://www.teachingcitizenship.org.uk/research)