



ACT Research Briefing 4

Knowledge 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

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 online activities. The positive news from our survey is that working-class and middle-class young people scored similarly, suggesting these schools are promoting inclusive education for all. The slightly worrying news is that there was very little difference between older and younger students.

How did we measure knowledge in the surveys?

To test knowledge and understanding, seven items from established international research were used. They include factual recall questions as well as applied tests of understanding. In total 1,126 students answered these questions.

The seven questions are reproduced below with the correct answer italicised and the percentage of students answering correctly at the end of each correct answer. There is not much variation in percentages of students answering correctly and type of question (factual recall vs applied tests of understanding).

Which of the following is an accurate statement about laws?

- a. *Laws forbid or require certain actions (53%)*
- b. Laws are made by the police
- c. Laws are valid only if all citizens have voted to accept them
- d. Laws prevent criticism of government

Which of the following is a political right? The right of...

- a. Pupils to learn about politics in school
- b. *Citizens to vote and run for election (48%)*
- c. Adults to have a job
- d. Politicians to have a salary

In a democratic country having many organisations for people to join is important because this provides

- a. A group to defend members who are arrested
- b. Many sources of taxes for the government
- c. *Opportunities to express different points of view (53%)*
- d. A way for the government to tell people about new laws

In a democratic country, which of the following ought to govern the country?

- a. Moral or religious leaders
- b. A small group of well-educated people
- c. *Popularly elected representatives (27%)*
- d. Experts on government and political affairs

Which of the following is most likely to cause a government to be called non-democratic?

- a. **People are not allowed to criticise the government (42%)**
- b. The political parties criticise each other often
- c. People must pay very high taxes
- d. Every citizen has the right to a job

The following question contains three statements of fact and one opinion. Which is an opinion?

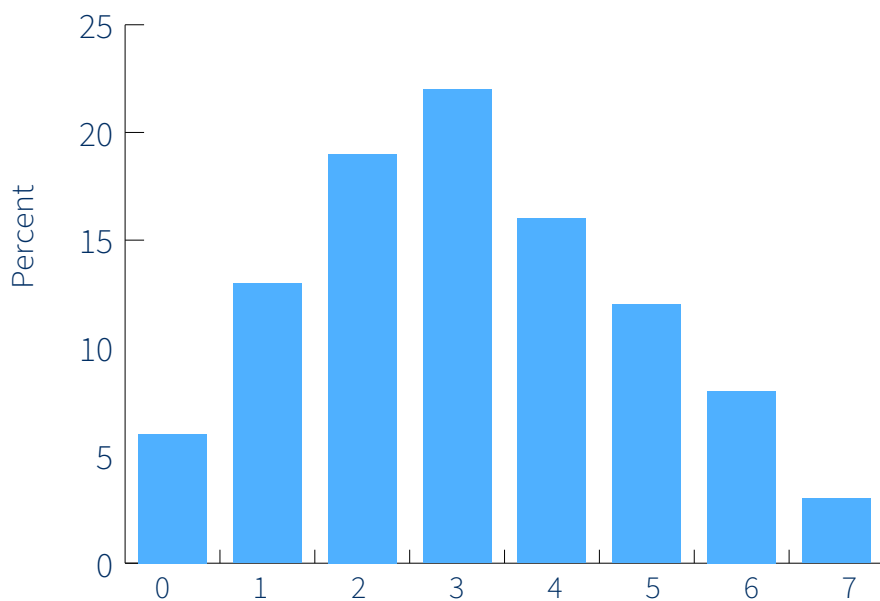
- a. **Actions by individual countries is the best way to solve environmental problems (45%)**
- b. Many countries contribute to the pollution of the environment
- c. Some countries offer to cooperate to reduce pollution
- d. Water pollution comes from several different sources

The following question contains three statements of opinion and one fact. Which is the fact?

- a. People with very low incomes should not pay any taxes
- b. **In many countries rich people pay higher taxes than poor people (46%)**
- c. It is fair that some citizens pay higher taxes than others
- d. Donations to charity are the best way to reduce differences between rich and poor

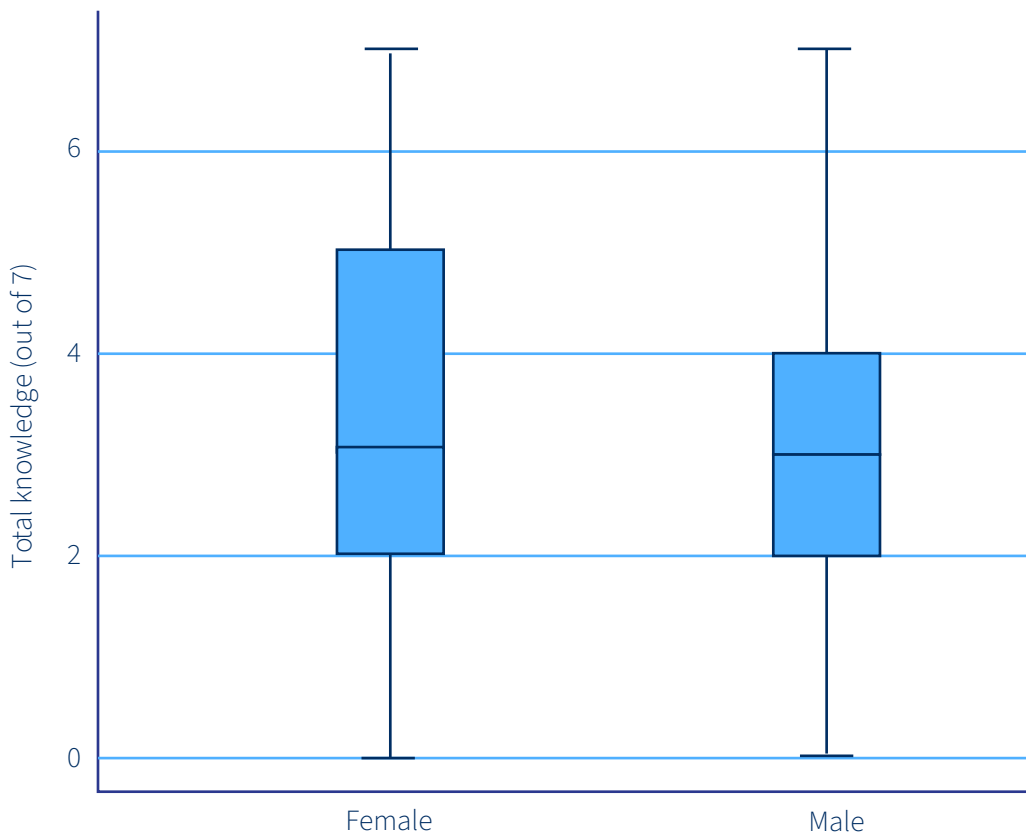
What did we find?

The following graph provides a summary of how many questions students answered correctly.



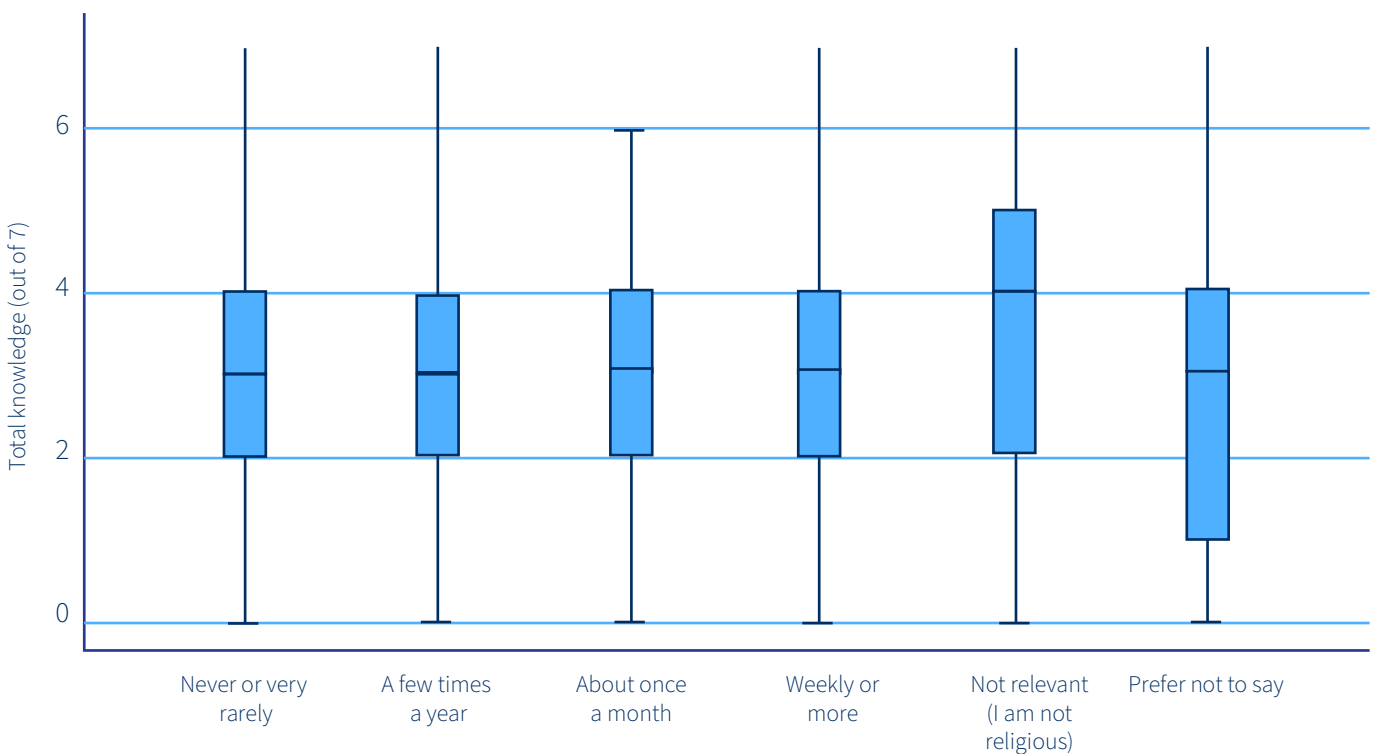
Knowledge and gender

Literature reports that girls tend to report greater impacts from participation in citizenship education (Andolina & Conklin, 2018; Blevins et al, 2021; Činčera et al., 2018; Maurissen, Claes & Barber, 2018). Our data highlights this, as there were differences between groups relating to gender. The graphs below are box and whisker plots. The thick lines across the centre show the median score and the blue boxes span the upper and lower quartile. The 'whisker' shows the top and bottom results in each group. In the first diagram you can see that boys and girls have the same median score (3 out of 7) but girls' results are distributed more widely at the top, meaning they are more likely to score higher.



Knowledge and religiosity

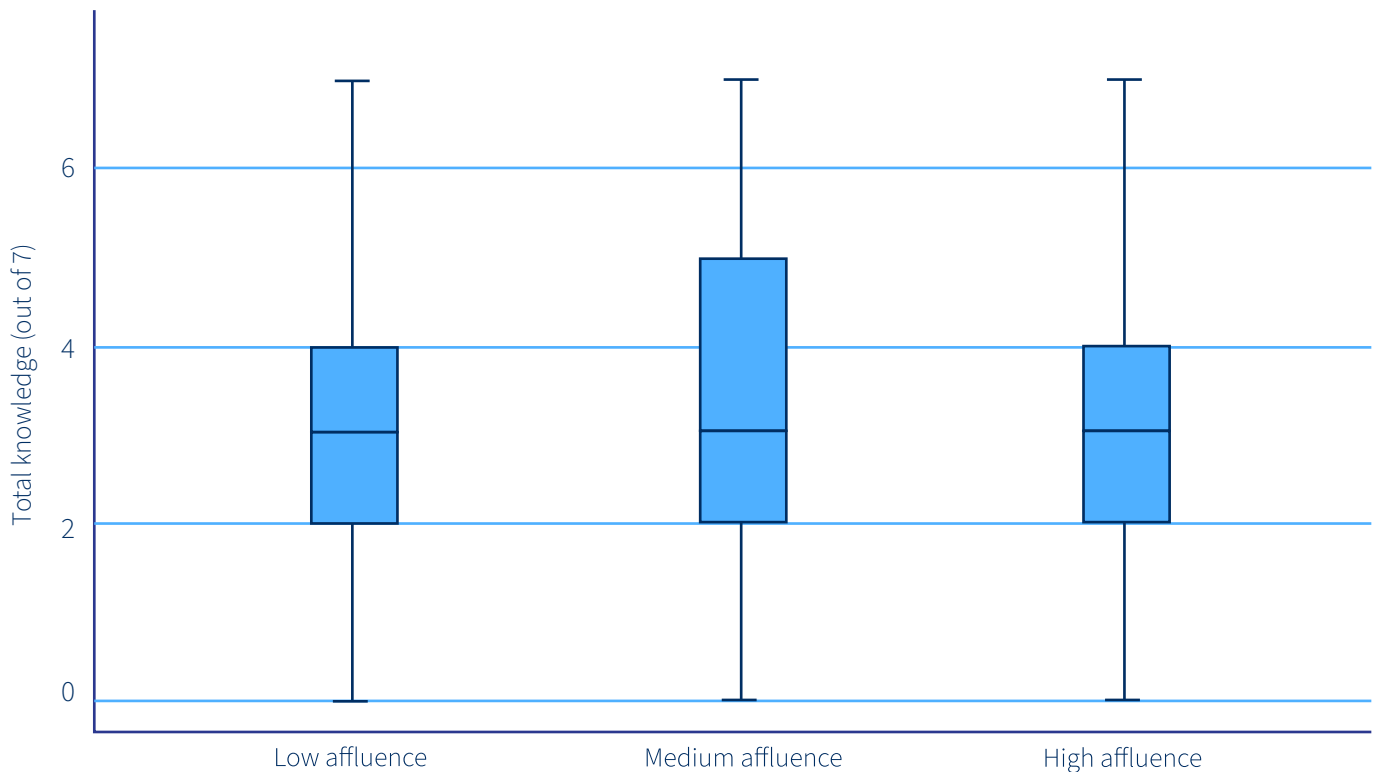
There was some variation in relation to our measure of religiosity. Those who said they were not religious at all scored an average of 4, whilst all other groups scored an average of 3.



If you have a religious belief, how often do you attend a religious service / ceremony?

Compensatory effect of Citizenship Education

There was very little difference between categories of affluence as all three groups scored a median average of 3. The middle category was slightly more widely dispersed with more students scoring higher, but the highest and lowest groups had the same profile. This result is promising as it provides some evidence about how citizenship education can help to close the civic gap.

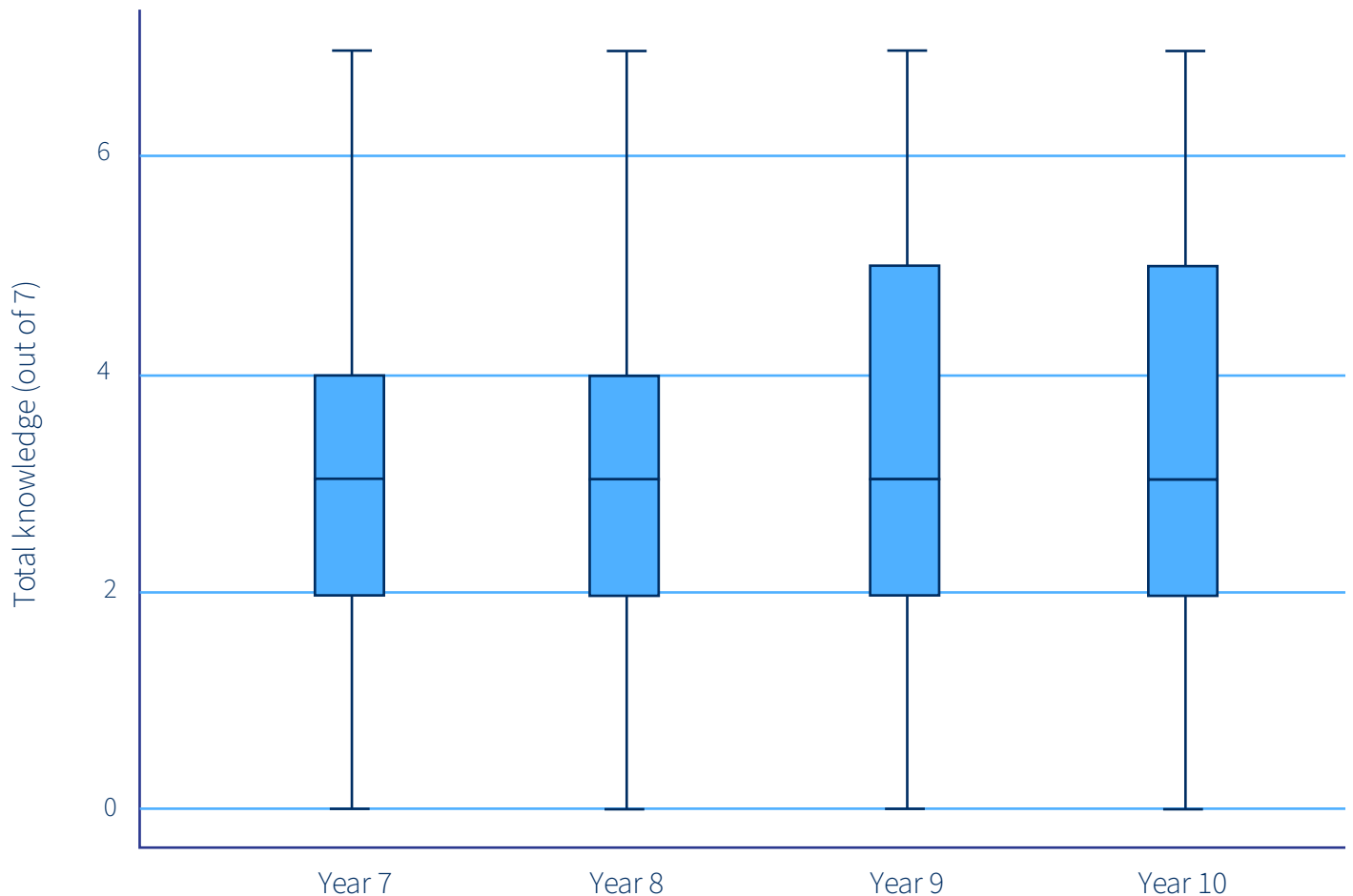


Why is this important?

- The literature suggests that for students who are from low socio-economic backgrounds, schools may be well placed to have a significant compensatory effect, by introducing young people to knowledge and experiences they do not encounter at home or in their local community. There is good evidence that many aspects of citizenship education, for example, open classroom climate and active citizenship, have a bigger impact on relatively deprived young people (Hoskins et al., 2017; Godfrey and Grayman, 2014; Maurissen et al., 2018; Rutkowski et al., 2014; See et al., 2017). However, one significant problem seems to relate to access, as poorer students tend to access these opportunities less frequently (Hoskins et al., 2017).
- It is generally accepted that a diverse range of interactive teaching approaches leads to better outcomes than traditional instruction, but there may be good reasons to include a phase of direct instruction to help the most deprived young people to build a foundation for activities involving discussion and the application of knowledge (Torney-Purta & Wilkenfeld, 2009).

Knowledge and age

Finally, and somewhat unexpectedly, there was very little variation by age. This seems quite significant given that year 10 students have received 3 additional years of schooling in general, not to mention 3 years of citizenship education. Whilst there were more students gaining higher marks in years 9 and 10, the median score remained 3 and the mean average rose from 3.05 to 3.28 between year 7 to year 10.



This result does reflect the literature, which state that younger students (age 12) tend to experience the biggest impacts from active citizenship projects, whilst it is much more difficult to affect change by the end of secondary education (Blevins et al., 2014; Wanders et al., 2020). Evidence from Gainous and Martens (2012) suggests a wide variety of teaching activities may lead to gains in political efficacy but also potentially to a reduction in knowledge, perhaps due to the possibility that students may be overwhelmed by the variety of activities.

What does the wider evidence suggest about the impact of regular citizenship education on knowledge?

- 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.
- Campbell (2019) states that civics education in the classroom has an impact on students' civic knowledge and intention to participate, especially for those students who may not encounter politics elsewhere.

- 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.
- Zhang et al. (2012) analysed data from 2,811 14-year-old students in the USA and concluded that citizenship education helped build basic knowledge which in turn enabled students to achieve higher levels of conceptual thinking about citizenship. However, they found that for many students there was no link between this knowledge and their citizenship skills. This suggests that teachers need to address both aspects explicitly in their planning, rather than assume knowledge would lead to preparedness to participate.
- Wanders et al. (2020) analysed data from over 10,000 Dutch school students and found a positive relationship between good teacher-student relationships and ‘societal involvement’, which included positive attitudes towards others and citizenship participation. In turn, societal involvement led to higher levels of citizenship knowledge.



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/

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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