

## CHAPTER 1:

# Students' and Teachers' Results in the IEA International Civic and Citizenship Education Studies in Flanders (Belgium): Implications for Cross-Curricular Approaches to Civic Education

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**Abstract** Belgium (Flanders) participated in IEA's International Civic and Citizenship Education Study (ICCS) 2009 and 2016. During that period of seven years, the Flemish educational approach to civic and citizenship education evolved, and research into the impact of civic and citizenship education at school played a role in guiding reforms. In this chapter, we give a short overview of the development of civic and citizenship education in Flanders. Furthermore, we discuss research that has monitored and guided this process. In this discussion, we mainly focus on students' attitudes toward immigrants and on teachers' beliefs about needs in civic and citizenship-related teaching.

## Introduction

Encouraging citizens, particularly young people, to actively participate in the social, political, and civil life has been seen as one of the major means to address issues like the lack of equity, solidarity, and social cohesion in societies (Sandel 1996). Democratic citizenship education, therefore, has become an essential part of school curricula in Western European countries over the last decade. In Europe, citizenship education in secondary schools is organized via three main approaches: as a stand-alone subject, as part of another subject or learning area, or as a cross-curricular dimension (Ranguelov et al. 2012). In Belgium (Flanders), it falls within the latter approach and has officially been a cross-curricular achievement for schools since 1997.

The cross-curricular approach in Flanders in the late 1990s and early 2000s meant that attainment goals regarding civic and citizenship education were formulated for secondary schools and teachers. The goals focused on making schools and all teachers in these schools accountable for the domain of civic and citizenship education. However, the goals were not formulated in a way that they could be measured at the individual level. School administrators and teachers only had to present evidence that they attempted to reach them in young people. A large number of goals, and the emphasis on knowledge rather than on civic skills and attitudes (combined with the non-obligatory process), led to results with little substance or influence.

In 2010 the goals were revised based on a study by the team of Mark Elchardus (Elchardus et al. 2008). Approximately 1000 teachers, 60 principals, 6000 students, and many other stakeholders were surveyed. The cross-curricular approach was positively evaluated. Teachers, stakeholders, and principals alike thought that cross-curricular work would become even more relevant in the future. Specifically, civic and citizenship education was considered necessary, together with learning of social skills. Citizenship education was also considered more important than, for example, health education, education for sustainability, musical training, and education about technology and ICT. Regardless of this agreement on the importance of civic education, the report also indicated that students reported that in their perception, little time was spent on civic and citizenship education at school. The researchers stated the implicit character of civic and citizenship education could be an explanation. Although indirect forms of citizenship education like an open classroom and school climate are relevant, effective civic education must also have a base in the teaching of content.

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Other research at that time and in the next few years such as the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) International Civic and Citizenship Education Study (ICCS) 2009 (De Groof et al. 2010) and the Belgian Political Panel Study (Hooghe et al. 2011) showed that Flanders scored poorly in comparison to other European communities and countries, especially on attitudes towards immigrants and active citizenship. Hence, from 2010 onwards, citizenship education goals were revised, taking into account these foci that were notably missing in citizenship education. Four themes were distinguished: active citizenship, human rights and fundamental freedoms, the functioning of democracy, and an international and European dimension (Dienst voor Onderwijsontwikkeling 1997; De Coninck et al. 2002). The theme of active citizenship concerned information about conventional ways of participating and respecting rules and agreements for peaceful coexistence, but also unconventional participation in organizations to work on democratic social capital. The second theme, human rights and fundamental freedoms, focused on a dynamic interpretation of human rights and freedoms within the school context. Furthermore, concerning the third theme, a minimal understanding of the characteristics and functioning of democracy was included as a fundamental condition for active citizenship. In this theme, the rule of law, the separation of powers, the (Belgian) state structure, and political decision-making were key elements. In addition to this factual knowledge, basic insights into the procedures and mechanisms of democracy and other institutions, such as the media, were taken into consideration. Finally, the cross-curricular final objectives also paid attention to the European Union (EU) and Europe, reflecting the European/international dimension. It was decided in the goals that it was a task of schools to engage students to pay attention to the global dimension of society. According to article 29 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child of 1989, this includes “The preparation of the child for responsible life in a free society, in the spirit of understanding, peace, tolerance, equality of sexes, and friendship among all peoples, ethnic, national and religious groups and persons of indigenous origin” (United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner 1989). This dimension also has a specific European significance for member states of the EU.

### **ICCS in Flanders**

As mentioned in the previous section, research on civic and citizenship education can play a crucial role in guiding curriculum development. It is in this context that ICCS, in which Flanders participated in 2009 and 2016, was important. The study provides the most extensive international data collection of civic and citizenship competences with the student at its center, but also includes important information about other socialization agents, such as parents and other organizations outside the school important for young people (Torney-Purta et al. 2001). Furthermore, by including contextual data (i.e., questionnaires for country experts, principals, and teachers) using ICCS, one can examine the role of schools and teachers in promoting citizenship and democratic attitudes among young people. In ICCS 2009, a total of 38 countries participated; in 2016, a total of 24 countries participated. In Flanders, the study of 2009 was conducted by a partnership between the Departments of Sociology of the Free University of Brussels (VUB) and the University of Antwerp. A total of 151 Flemish schools participated, and data were collected from 2968 pupils from the second year of the first grade of secondary education, 1630 teachers, and 151 board members. In 2016, ICCS Flanders was conducted by the Centre for Political Science at KU Leuven. In this study, a total of 162 Flemish schools, 2931 pupils, 2021 teachers, and 149 board members participated. In the ICCS 2016, a total of 24 countries participated, namely: Belgium (Flanders), Bulgaria, Chile, Taiwan, Colombia, Croatia, Denmark, Dominican Republic, Estonia, Finland, Germany (North Rhine-Westphalia), Hong Kong, Italy, South Korea, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Mexico, the Netherlands, Norway, Peru, Russia, Slovenia, and Sweden. As an internationally recognized research organization, IEA imposes strict conditions of participation to ensure the high quality of the collected data.

Between 2009 and 2016, the Flemish education system took various initiatives to strengthen the role of citizenship education within the curriculum. As already mentioned, this came in part as a response to Flanders scoring below the European and international average concerning several indicators of social responsibility and citizenship in ICCS 2009 (De Groof et al. 2010). More specifically, the results showed that although Flemish students were situated around the European and international average with regard to knowledge about citizenship, institutional trust, and gender equality, Flemish pupils were, amongst others, less interested in fundamental democratic rights and future political engagement. Perhaps the most significant result of the 2009 study was related to the way Flemish adolescents deal with ethnic and cultural diversity. ICCS, therefore, measured students' level of tolerance towards immigrants and ethnic minorities. The results showed that in 2009 Flanders had the worst score in Europe regarding tolerance towards immigrants and took on the fourth-to-last position regarding tolerance towards ethnic minorities.

In what follows, we will compare the findings of ICCS 2009 and ICCS 2016 with regard to attitudes towards immigrants in more detail, and examine whether the initiatives taken to upgrade Flanders' international position have proved to be fruitful. A total of 18 countries participated in both the 2009 and 2016 surveys, making them our basis of comparison to assess whether the developments in Flanders deviate from those in other education systems. We therefore only use the scales that were included in both surveys to substantiate our reasoning. The participating countries were Bulgaria, Chile, Colombia, Denmark, Dominican Republic, Estonia, Finland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Mexico, Norway, Russia, Slovenia, Taiwan, Flanders, and Sweden. We refer to the international report of 2009 (Schulz et al. 2010) and 2016 (Schulz et al. 2018) for more general information on the international state of affairs.

## **Adolescents' Tolerance Toward Immigrants in Flanders**

As societies are more and more evolving into multicultural environments due to globalization processes, the concept of citizenship has been given a broader meaning. It no longer just refers to the role of the citizen in the nation-state. Within this notion of global citizenship, migration flows bring us into contact with people, practices, and experiences from across the borders (Brodie 2004; O'Sullivan and Pashby 2007; Reid et al. 2010; Schattle 2012; Torres 2002). Issues such as human rights, tolerance, and respect for cultural differences have therefore taken a more central position in the debate on citizenship education (Sampermans et al. 2017). Without tolerance, not all groups in society would be able to defend their interests in the same way. As tolerance decreases, intergroup conflict would become more likely, thus heightening its importance as a fundamental democratic attitude (Hahn 1998; Isac et al. 2019).

In the ICCS survey of 2009 and 2016, one measure of tolerance used five items reflecting attitudes towards rights for immigrants. Students were asked to "strongly agree," "agree," "disagree," or "strongly disagree," with five statements. As the scale was part of the regional survey for Europe in 2016, we will only compare the results of the 12 European countries that participated in both studies and met the sampling requirements. These were Bulgaria, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Norway, Slovenia, Flanders, and Sweden. Table 1 shows that in 2009 the average of Flanders lied below the European average in four items. For example, 49% of Flemish Belgian students agreed that immigrants should have the opportunity to continue speaking their language, while in Europe, more than 70% agreed with this statement. Also, when it comes to the continuation of their practices and lifestyle, only 61% agreed with granting this right to immigrants, compared to 77% in Europe. However, in 2016, there is a significant increase in the percentage of students agreeing with both statements, when at the same time the opposite trend can be observed in Europe.

Nonetheless, Flemish students still scored below the European average in 2016. As these statements primarily concern the cultural aspects of immigrants, it appears that cultural diversity poses a challenge to Flemish students. Besides, when in 2009 Flanders scored significantly lower than the European average in granting immigrants the opportunity to vote in elections, the tables are turned in 2016. Furthermore, when it comes to equality of fundamental democratic rights, Flanders scored equally well as the European average in 2009 and even better in 2016. More specifically, in 2009, 92% of Flemish students agreed with granting the right to education to immigrant children, while in 2016, this percentage increased to 94%. Additionally, with regard to the general statement that immigrants should have the same rights as everyone else in the country, Flanders achieved the same score as the European average, both in 2009 and in 2016.

*Table 1: Percentage of students that agree or strongly agree with the statements measuring attitudes towards equal rights for immigrants.*

Item	Flanders		Europe	
	2009	2016	2009	2016
Immigrants should have the opportunity to continue speaking their own language.	49% ▼	58% ▼	71%	68%
Immigrant children should have the same opportunities for education that other children in the country have.	92%	94% ▲	91%	93%
Immigrants who live in a country for several years should have the opportunity to vote in an election.	73% ▼	77% ▲	78%	75%
Immigrants should have the opportunity to continue their own customs and lifestyle.	61% ▼	66% ▼	77%	73%
Immigrants should have the same rights as everyone else in the country.	85%	88%	85%	88%

**Notes:** The significant results are indicated with ▲ (= significantly higher than the average score) or ▼ (= significantly lower than the average score),  $p < .05$ .

Looking at the overall results of 2009, Flanders shared the last place with the Netherlands and the United Kingdom as worst of all participating countries in adolescents' willingness to grant specific rights to immigrants, especially the rights to maintain language and cultural practices. However, in 2016, Flanders improved its position moving from the last to the fifth-to-last place (nevertheless still scoring significantly lower than the European average). Latvia, Estonia, Bulgaria, the Netherlands, and Finland also scored lower. Higher scores were achieved by Lithuania, Slovenia, Croatia, Norway, and Sweden. Nonetheless, this positive trend in Flanders shows that substantial progress has been made concerning tolerance towards cultural diversity. It is also apparent that, in line with the curriculum reform of 2010, not only did Flemish students' tolerance levels improve between 2009 and 2016, but overall political knowledge levels did also. Moreover, this increase was slightly stronger than the average international growth, and hence, Flemish students (still) score significantly higher than the international average and somewhat higher than the European average on political knowledge. Hence, most Flemish youngsters can assess political processes and explain their function in society. However, the apparent political knowledge gap between students from general secondary education and vocational secondary education remains a challenge for educational policymakers.

In sum, although results concerning tolerance towards immigrants and democratic knowledge improved, the curriculum reform in 2010 did not reach the ambition of making Flemish students excel in these domains. Also, regarding parameters looking into active citizenship, Flemish students are still quite passive compared to European and especially Latin-American peers.

## Current Civic and Citizenship Education Policy and Practice

In Flanders, policy reform is a lengthy process, and it is difficult to track the effects of any specific study. Looking into the future, however, the results from 2009 and 2016 will be useful in looking at the impact of current and planned reforms.

In particular, following an overall educational reform process, in September 2019, citizenship education in secondary school became an obligation targeted at obtaining specific results on the part of the school, its teachers, and its students. This obligation is set out in transversal final attainment goals for all educational programs (general as well as vocational). These goals focus on knowledge, skills, and attitudes and apply to students enrolled in the first grade of secondary education. The final objectives of other grades will be developed, and come into force in 2021 and 2023. Contrary to the cross-curricular attainment goals, the transversal ones are minimum goals each student must reach when finishing a grade or high school. So, different than the cross-curricular approach in 2010, the transversal approach asks for an obligatory assessment of the goals related to civic education and peacefully living together on a student and school level, where before only the school had to prove it made an effort of reaching these goals in students. Schools can still choose, however, if they will aim to achieve these goals in a separate civic and citizenship education course, and/or through a cross-curricular approach, or even integrated into other classes (e.g., history, languages).

Several Flemish organizations have also started developing tools to meet the challenges regarding citizenship education and help Flemish teachers with this responsibility. One activity is the Citizenship Booster, produced by the GO! Education network in Flanders. This online questionnaire comprises a series of simple statements to help schools elicit insight into the citizenship-based values, attitudes, and behaviors of their students, to use this information to understand the effectiveness of school-level citizenship education approaches (for example, the policy towards bullying). Based on the results, schools can reflect on and change how they implement teaching and support learning for citizenship education. Moreover, they can opt to strengthen their focus on specific aspects, for example, democracy at school, global citizenship, or sustainability. The booster, therefore, provides school-based information to support teachers and schools in planning activities to achieve cross-curricular objectives. The project was launched in September 2016, and by the end of April 2017 11,000 students in 85 schools had used it. This shows that schools and teachers not only recognize that they require guidance on this subject, but are also willing to do the work, and take responsibility for their students' development into democratic citizens. Another project is the Citizenship Compass (Katholiek Onderwijs Vlaanderen n.d.) from the Catholic education network in Flanders, which was launched in September 2020. This tool also starts from a student survey, measuring students' socio-emotional abilities, "inner compass" (e.g., identity and values system), and their social responsibility and commitment to sustainable living. Although both tools are similar, the Citizenship Compass also provides an interactive feedback view, in which schools can be benchmarked against similar schools or the Flemish average.

## Teachers of Civic and Citizenship Education

Looking into the impact of educational reforms, it is clear that reform is in vain when there is no support of the teachers in schools to implement the change. Furthermore, according to the maximalist citizenship education view (Hargreaves 2008), teachers and the school are critical players in the provision of democratic values and hence especially important for citizenship education implementation. Therefore, increased emphasis has been placed on teacher-effectiveness and the provision of appropriate teacher training and guidance on pedagogies about civic and citizenship education. To assess the current state and evolution of these elements in Flanders, the ICCS studies are also valuable databases.

For example, ICCS 2016 asks teachers what they consider the most important aims of civic and citizenship education at school. The results (see Sampermans et al. 2017) show that more than 60% of Flemish teachers consider promoting students' critical and independent thinking as the most crucial objective. When it comes to conflict resolution skills and the ability to defend one's own opinion, the Flemish average is also significantly higher than the international average. Concerning the development of effective strategies to reduce racism, 16% of Flemish teachers consider this in the top three. Compared to the 2009 results (see De Groof et al. 2010), which show that only 11% believed this is an important aim, this indicates that Flemish teachers emphasize the importance of tolerance of diversity more. However, there is still some growth potential to join countries like Sweden and Italy, which place a higher emphasis here. Another striking result is the significantly smaller percentage of Flemish teachers acknowledging the importance of knowledge of citizens' rights and responsibilities, compared to the international average. The objectives concerning the encouragement of political participation and engagement score the lowest in Flanders. This is also in line with the results of the students' survey, in which students indicated receiving very few opportunities to participate in school.

In addition, as in Flanders, teachers of Flemish, history, geography, and religion are thought of as the ideal teachers to stimulate civic and intercultural educational competencies, this group of teachers was asked how well they felt prepared to teach 12 civic and citizenship-related topics and skills. In Flanders, more than half of the teachers indicate not feeling confident to teach about the EU, which is significantly higher than the European average. Also, almost two third of Flemish teachers lack confidence in teaching about the constitution and political systems, when internationally this is only 22%. On the positive side, Flemish teachers feel better prepared than their international colleagues in touching upon responsible internet use and helping students acquire critical and independent thinking skills. Internationally, we see that teacher confidence is relatively high in all 12 topics, especially in gender equality and citizens' rights and responsibilities. Issues such as the global community, international organizations, and responsible internet use generate the least teacher confidence.

Other studies have painted quite a different picture, with several indicating that teachers believe they have not received adequate training to teach citizenship education. They either do not feel confident to explain it or feel insecure about choosing the right teaching approaches (Barr et al. 2015; Chin and Barber 2010; Willemse et al. 2015). To analyze if training in citizenship education meets the trainees' demand, ICCS 2016 asks teachers if they have attended any courses addressing the same 12 topics and skills. The results show that in all areas, Flemish teachers attend less training than the international average. This is especially problematic for issues concerning human rights, gender equality, voting and elections, citizens' rights and responsibilities, the constitution and political systems, and emigration and immigration, where consistently more than 60% of teachers indicate not having attended any pre- or in-service training. In 2009, the same findings were recorded; this means that seven years later, little has changed in teacher training to provide teachers with the necessary knowledge and skills to teach core topics of citizenship education.

However, it is also important that we, besides improving civic and citizenship teacher education programs, also adhere to what Flemish teachers currently need to promote civic and citizenship education in their school. According to the ICCS 2016 results, almost 40% of teachers say they want to have more pre-service training in civic and citizenship education, which is significantly higher than the international average (26%) and need more instructional time, which aligns with the international trend. Moreover, almost one-third of Flemish teachers asks for more cooperation between teachers in different subject areas, thus recognizing that cooperative efforts are of particular importance. Lastly, the international results show that better materials and textbooks, more opportunities for projects related to civic and citizenship education, and more instructional time are needed the most to improve civic and citizenship education in schools.

In summary, in Flanders, teachers place relatively little emphasis on knowledge about institutions and rights, and the participative element of democracy. However, this is what is expected of students if they are to become active critical citizens, and is a clear objective within the current cross-curricular curriculum. The results concerning the promotion of cultural diversity by teachers have improved compared to 2009. As the results of ICCS 2016 show that students also enhanced their tolerance towards immigrants, teachers' perception of citizenship education objectives can explain the progress in this domain.

## Conclusion

Modern citizenship education should create engaging and interactive learning environments to help students become active and socially responsible citizens. In Flanders, several civic and citizenship education initiatives have already been introduced in recent years. The ICCS results show some other possibilities for future educational policies.

First, as Flemish students' tolerance towards immigrants showed a significant improvement between 2009 and 2016, and Flemish teachers have also started highlighting strategies to reduce racism and xenophobia as important aims of civic and citizenship education more, both are moving in the right direction with regard to (cultural) tolerance. However, there is still a long way to go if Flanders wants to occupy a leading position. Future citizenship education in Flanders could, therefore, include more initiatives promoting cultural diversity, starting with greater emphasis on the importance of diversity in languages, customs, and lifestyle.

Second, attention to the active participatory aspect of citizenship education in school remains very limited in Flemish schools. Teachers consider political participation and engagement less important as objectives of citizenship education, which aligns with students' perception of participation opportunities at school. According to Sampermans et al. (2017), this may partly explain why Flemish young people estimate their future voting behavior as low. Initiatives promoting participation at school can thus contribute to greater future societal involvement. Furthermore, although significantly less Flemish teachers than the international average consider the knowledge of citizens' rights and responsibilities an important aim, Flemish students, and especially students in general secondary education, still belong to the international top regarding political knowledge. Closing the knowledge gap between general and vocational secondary education, however, remains a point of attention in Flanders.

Thirdly, since Flemish teachers not only show significantly less confidence than the international average in teaching civic and citizenship education-related subjects but also indicate having attended significantly fewer training programs, Flanders should attach greater importance to giving teachers the training they need and want. The necessary growth potential lies within pre-service teacher programs. Moreover, guidance and support materials, such as the Citizenship Compass and the Citizenship Booster, have the potential to help schools and teachers determine both the core civic and citizenship education content to include in their teaching and which learning activities to use, while also embedding new curriculum reforms within the schools' institutional contexts. Although in Flanders each school has pedagogical freedom, and schools don't receive mandatory guidance materials to support the implementation of citizenship education, these tools have been very popular since their first launch. Making these materials and other related information freely available to schools should, therefore, remain a priority in Flanders' educational policies. Additionally, teacher cooperation is another area where improvement is necessary, and which should be structurally facilitated. Lastly, as Flemish teachers are significantly more confident in teaching critical and independent thinking skills than the international average, and also assess this skill as one of the most important objectives of civic and citizenship education, Flanders should aspire to keep this position.



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