

CULTIVATING ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP SKILLS AMONG YOUTH

Insights from a Three-Country Evaluation (Spain, France, Greece)

A civic education programme implemented through student-centred teaching methods cultivated students' sense of altruism and tolerance towards others. The intervention also improved students' academic achievement and school behaviour.

Featuring an evaluation by [Simon Briole](#), [Marc Gurgand](#), [Eric Maurin](#), [Sandra McNally](#), [Jenifer Ruiz-Valenzuela](#), and [Daniel Santín](#)



KEY RESULTS

Students' core civic values and attitudes became more aligned with democratic ideals; the programme also improved their ability to engage in democratic discourse at the end of the school year. The programme had a positive impact on students' altruism and improved their perception of their own ability to engage in political processes. These effects are driven by students with highly involved teachers or higher initial civic skill levels.

Students who participated in the programme developed more diverse friend networks. The programme increased the diversity of students' social interactions, driven by the higher likelihood of forming opposite-sex friendships in treated classes. Students' ability to engage with people from different social backgrounds and geographical origins also improved as a result of the programme.

In France, the programme also had a positive impact on students' behaviour and academic performance. Leveraging the availability of administrative data for participants in France, researchers found that students improved their school behaviour and average grades obtained during the last term of the school year.

Teachers played an important role in driving the programme's impacts. In all three intervention countries, the teacher training shifted teaching practices away from traditional pedagogies towards less vertical, more student-centred approaches. The programme's impacts on students' civic outcomes, friends network composition and behaviour were stronger in classes whose teachers were more involved in school life before the programme.

FIGURE 1. HOW DOES ACT WORK?



The teachers participate in a two-day training on student-centred citizenship education at the beginning of the school year.



In each class, groups of four to five students propose a civic project that the entire class will implement during the school year. A project must address one of the following themes: combating discrimination, social inclusion or cultural diversity.



In each class, students democratically choose the ACT project they will implement during the school year.

OVERVIEW

The sustainability of modern democracies is predicated on the presence of robust civic virtues among its citizens; cultivating such aptitudes among its youth is a longstanding objective for European Union (EU) countries.¹ Civic education is at the cornerstone of this ambition. Historically, public education has been an important transmission channel for a broad range of competencies underpinning active citizenship among students, such as tolerance or respect. As such, most European countries have incorporated civic education into their national curricula.

Despite these efforts, many European countries have witnessed an increasing prevalence of political and religious extremist sentiments and populist discourses, amidst a growing divide in political participation between social groups. This poses a challenge to democracy in the region and questions the effectiveness of civic education, especially as young people are particularly vulnerable to such discourses.² In 2015, following terrorist attacks in France and Denmark, EU education ministers signed the Declaration on Promoting Citizenship and the Common Values of Freedom, Tolerance and Non-Discrimination Through Education, to reinforce the teaching and acceptance of humanist and civic values amongst younger generations.³

In the context of this renewed commitment to civic education, Simon Briole, Marc Gurgand and Eric Maurin (Paris School of Economics), along with Sandra McNally (London School of Economics), Jenifer Ruiz-Valenzuela (Universitat de Barcelona) and Daniel Santín (Complutense University of Madrid), conducted a randomised evaluation in France, Greece and Spain to measure the impact of the Active Citizenship Program (or ACT). Funded by the European Commission, ACT is an Erasmus+⁴ initiative aimed at developing students' civic engagement and skills by introducing them to democratic procedures, such as voting and debating, through collaborative, student-centred teaching practices, and the implementation of civic projects.

1 European Movement International. 2017. "EU Education at School." https://www.netzwerk-ebd.de/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/EML_17_PolicyPosition_EU_Education.pdf.

2 Golubeva, Irina. 2018. "The Links between Education and Active Citizenship/Civic Engagement." NESET II Ad Hoc Question No. 1/2018. https://nesetweb.eu/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/NESET2_AHQ1.pdf.

3 Réunion informelle des ministres européens de l'éducation de l'Union Européenne. 2015. "Déclaration sur la promotion de l'éducation à la citoyenneté et aux valeurs communes de liberté, de tolérance et de non-discrimination." <https://epale.ec.europa.eu/fr/resource-centre/content/declaration-sur-la-promotion-de-leducation-la-citoyennete-et-aux-valeurs>.

4 Erasmus+ is the EUs programme for education, training, youth and sport in Europe.

EVALUATION

Civic education, as taught in French, Greek and Spanish public schools, promotes a similar set of civic virtues and aptitudes. However, its teaching often consists of imparting knowledge rather than guiding the students to take action. Such a pedagogy may be ineffective in building up students' civic skills, as civic education requires "active and experiential learning" approaches,⁵ which may not be consistent with traditional teaching techniques.

While the potential of student-centred teaching practices in improving student learning outcomes is well documented, there is little evidence on the applicability of such an approach in the context of civic education. The ACT programme was launched in 2017 to develop students' civic aptitudes (proxied by their altruism, tolerance and adherence to norms of equality) by fostering teaching practices that promote openness, inclusion and engagement.

The programme was rooted in two key components:

- a two-day teacher training to promote student-centred teaching methods to facilitate collaborative work and promote active learning of students; and
- the implementation of a democratically chosen, student-led civic engagement project in each class addressing issues of discrimination, social inclusion or diversity.

The design and implementation of the civic engagement projects were led by students and guided by the teachers. The projects, implemented within or outside of school, were designed to benefit a specific group (other classes in the same grade, classes from lower grades, another school, community groups, the whole community) and encompassed various activities (events, services, videos, campaigns) related to at least one of the ACT themes.

CIVIC EDUCATION IN FRANCE, GREECE, SPAIN

In all three intervention countries, the teaching of civic education begins in primary school and continues throughout students' secondary education. In each country, teachers have at their disposal a set of tools to assess students' civic competencies, and students' performance in civic education can have an impact on whether they can progress to the next education level.

There are, however, differences in the intensity and duration of civic education across countries as well as across education levels within countries. Furthermore, beyond the acquisition of civic skills, the French and Spanish civic education curriculum also emphasises social, communication and intercultural skills as core competencies of responsible citizens, while the Greek curriculum does not formally define such skills.

The ACT programme was evaluated during the 2018–2019 school year, among a sample of 217 volunteer schools from all three countries, comprising 323 teachers and 6,211 students in grade 8 or 9. Researchers randomly selected 108 schools to implement ACT, while the remaining 109 schools served as the comparison group and did not participate in the programme.

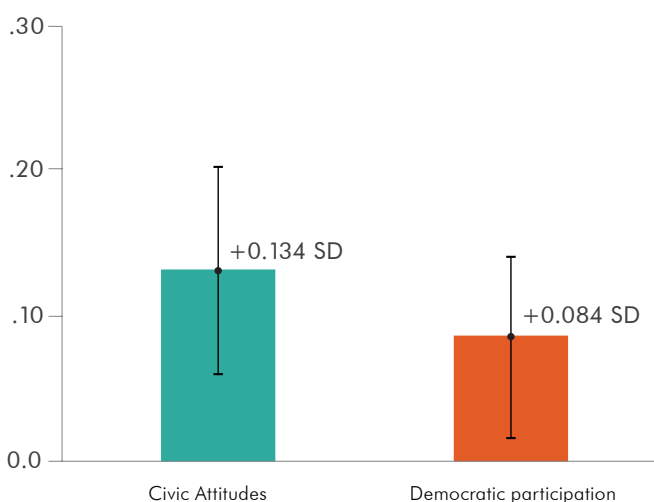
To measure the programme's impact on students' civic values, researchers constructed a summary Civic Attitudes index, synthesising various measurements of students' altruism, tolerance and support for equality. Similarly, researchers generated a Democratic Participation index summarising students' political self-efficacy, interest level in politics and participation in the March 2019 international youth strike for climate change. Moreover, in France, researchers used school-level administrative data to measure the programme's impact on students' school behaviour and academic performance.

5 Winthrop, Rebecca. 2020. "The Need for Civic Education in 21st-Century Schools." Washington, DC: Brookings Institution. www.brookings.edu/policy2020/bigideas/the-need-for-civic-education-in-21st-century-schools.

RESULTS

Students' core civic values and attitudes, as well as their ability to engage in democratic discourses, improved at the end of the school year. ACT increased students' civic attitudes score by 0.134 standard deviations relative to the comparison group. The improvement in civic attitudes was largely driven by students' enhanced levels of altruism, reflecting the fact that student-led projects were predominantly designed to support other groups of individuals. Moreover, the programme also improved students' democratic participation measures; this is largely attributable to changes in students' self-efficacy (i.e., their perception of their own ability to engage in political processes).

FIGURE 2. TREATMENT EFFECTS ON CIVIC OUTCOMES (SPAIN, FRANCE, GREECE)



The intervention was more impactful for students with highly involved teachers or high initial levels of civic skills. Higher levels of teacher involvement in school life were associated with larger impacts on students' civic skills, school behaviour and social networks. Similarly, improvements in civic skills were larger for those who displayed higher levels of altruism or political interest before the programme implementation.

Teachers adopted student-centred teaching approaches.

The teacher training component of the programme improved teachers' ability to foster an engaged, collaborative classroom environment. Teacher surveys revealed that group-work-focused civic education was more prevalent in programme classes than in comparison classes, suggesting that the teacher training was effective in shifting teaching practices away from traditional pedagogies towards less vertical, more inclusive approaches.

Students who participated in the programme developed more diverse friend networks.

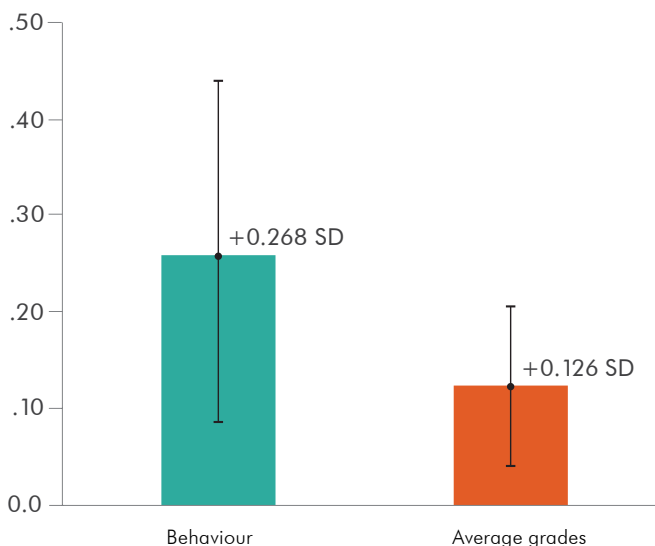
The programme increased the diversity of students' social interactions, driven by the higher likelihood of forming opposite-sex friendships in treated classes. Students' ability to engage with people from different social backgrounds and geographical origins also improved.

In France, the programme also improved students' at-school behaviour and academic performance.

Leveraging the availability of administrative data for participants in France, researchers found that students improved their school behaviour and average grades obtained during the last term of the school year. Improvements in in-school behaviour were primarily the result of a reduction in disciplinary problems (i.e., absenteeism, exclusions) and lateness, suggesting that experiential learning, as implemented in the context of ACT, can help students better abide by the school's "hidden curriculum (i.e., the set of rules, norms, attitudes and behaviours that are not part of the national curriculum but students learn as a kind of side effect of the schooling through living and learning in the community/institution)."⁶ Researchers noted improvements of varying magnitudes in almost all school subjects, in particular history-geography, French, arts, and sports due to similarities in the relevant skill sets.

6 Nosko, Andrej and Katalin Széger. 2013. "Active Citizenship Can Change Your Country for the Better." Open Society Foundations Voices. <https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/voices/active-citizenship-can-change-your-country-better>.

FIGURE 3. TREATMENT EFFECTS ON SCHOOL BEHAVIOUR AND ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT (FRANCE)



Note: All results are scaled so that a positive sign indicates a better outcome.



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POLICY LESSONS

Students' soft skills are malleable until late in their education journey and can be fostered within schools.

An increasing number of educational interventions implemented in different contexts show that students' noncognitive skills, such as altruism, are malleable and schools can play a role in this process.^{7,8} The evaluation contributes to this growing body of literature, suggesting that student-centred teaching practices can be an effective approach in developing such skills among adolescents.

It is important to invest in children's civic competencies early in their education journey.

Wide gaps in civic participation can lead to unequal contributions in political decisions, potentially posing a challenge to the sustainability of democracy. Within this framework, the programme's larger impact on students with higher initial levels of altruism and interest in politics implies that acting early to foster children's civic competencies may enhance the impact of subsequent educational interventions while mitigating the risks of widening inequalities in civic skills.

Teachers' involvement plays a key role in students' civic education performance.

The type of teachers that students are exposed to during their education journey is an important determinant of their future academic performance and progress. This is all the more important in the context of civic education given the importance of student-centred teaching practices in instilling civic competencies among students.

7 Alan, Sule, Teodora Boneva, and Seda Ertac. "Ever Failed, Try Again, Succeed Better: Results from a Randomized Educational Intervention on Grit." Working Paper, April 2016.

8 Alan, Sule and Seda Ertac. "Belief in Hard Work and Altruism: Evidence from a Randomized Field Experiment." Working Paper, November 2017.

OPEN QUESTIONS

Given the novelty of the ACT programme, future research can shed light on additional policy-relevant questions for educational authorities:

- **Resilience of the intervention's impact over a longer time horizon.** While the programme had an impact on students' core civic values and in-school behaviour, investigating the persistence of these effects beyond one academic year may yield insights around the optimal intensity and duration of the programme.
- **Addressing gaps in civic competencies earlier in students' academic journey.** The evaluation's results suggest that early investment in children's civic education is important to mitigate risks of widening inequality in civic competencies driven by educational programmes implemented at a later stage. Future research can determine the relevance of the ACT model (or alternative approaches) for developing civic competencies among younger students (i.e., in primary school).
- **Broader applicability and relevance of student-centred teaching practices.** The evaluation results indicate that the teacher training was effective in updating teaching practices in favour of less vertical, more student-centred approaches. There is an academic debate regarding the most relevant conditions for explicit teaching methods and constructivist-inspired teaching methods, and this may vary depending on the subject areas. Large-scale experimentation remains a reliable way to make progress in furthering this knowledge, by distinguishing situations and contexts.

Featured Evaluation: Briole, Simon, Marc Gurgand, Eric Maurin, Sandra McNally, Jenifer Ruiz-Valenzuela, and Daniel Santín. "The Making of Civic Virtues: A School-Based Experiment in Three Countries." Working Paper, October 2022.

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The Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab (J-PAL) is a network of affiliated researchers around the world who are united by their use of randomised evaluations to answer questions critical to poverty alleviation. J-PAL's mission is to reduce poverty by ensuring that policy is informed by scientific evidence.

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