Civics and citizenship education in New Zealand: A case for change? (DRAFT)

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Introduction

The 2013 recommendation by the Constitutional Advisory Panel for a national strategy for civics and citizenship education (CCE) in schools and communities provided the opportunity for an important conversation about building civic knowledge in Aotearoa New Zealand (p. 8)[1]. However, few steps have been taken to explore practical options for implementing this recommendation.

This think piece is broken up into two parts: (i) A case for change, and (ii) How do we get there?

i)   A case for change

Three reasons why New Zealand needs civics and citizenship education

This think piece explores both civics and citizenship education. These are the two components of achieving broader "civic knowledge". Civics education addresses the formal institutions and processes of civic life, such as voting in elections. Citizenship education addresses how people participate in society, and how citizens interact with communities and societies.[2]

Civic engagement is not only expressed through voting. Civic engagement is broader, describing "how an active citizen participates in the life of a community in order to improve conditions for others or to help shape the community's future".[3] This includes voting, but also other activities such as volunteering, donating to charity or contacting a politician. Civic engagement is a fundamental part of building social capital, and for building and maintaining strong democracies.[4]

To safeguard democracy is not a worthwhile pursuit only on moral, philosophical grounds.[5] There is substantial international evidence that democratic polities enjoy better economic and social outcomes, leading to overall higher levels of wellbeing.[6] If we accept that democratic societies produced better social and economic outcomes over the long term, and if we accept that New Zealand is a well-functioning democracy worth preserving[7] - then there are drivers that, unless attended to, will in time, undermine the quality of our democracy.

1) Loss of a common platform for public discourse

The decline of 'slow media'

Declining revenue for traditional forms of 'slow' media has prompted a shift in the market to a stronger focus on communicating through digital channels, such as social media, where advertising revenue is increasing.[8] However, these digital forms of communication favour immediacy and entertainment value.[9] Such demands, in addition to the intensive pressure on resources in the industry, leave less room for high-quality, investigative public interest journalism.

Rise in lower quality and misleading information

It is becoming increasingly difficult for citizens to find and identify quality information. The problems caused by declining public interest journalism are exacerbated by an increase in the diversity of channels for news on the internet. While overall positive, this diversity can shift the balance of power away from professional journalism, which once held a monopoly over such content.[10] The confusion this can create has enabled a resurgence of 'fake news', fabricated news stories that can be shared widely online.[11] A recent survey by Pew Research Center, found that 64 percent of U.S. adults say fake news causes a great deal of confusion about the basic facts of current issues and events.[12]

Filter bubbles reinforcing bias

The growing reliance of citizens on social media for news is also causing issues in this space. Online 'filter bubbles' are an example. Because social media platforms such as Facebook determine what content users see based on their connections and what they have already 'liked' or interacted with, individual news feeds can become a bubble and echo chamber insulated from the perspectives of wider society.[13] Given that more than 60 per cent of millennials get their news from Facebook feeds, this undermines the utility of social media as a potential platform for balanced and constructive public discourse.[14]

2) Lack of knowledge and interest about how democracy works

Inequalities in civic knowledge

The first report of a series of publications based on the results of the International Civic and Citizenship Education Study (ICCS) undertaken in 2008, revealed that New Zealand has some of the highest international scores and some of the lowest scores for civic knowledge. No other country in the study had as wide of a distribution.[15] At the bottom end, Maori and Pasifika males were found to have the most limited knowledge in democracy. this indicates that the "civic empowerment gap" is prevalent, and appears to mirror the other inequalities in our society.[16]

Lack of interest

Knowledge alone does not constitute interest or intentions to participate in the democratic process. The third report of the ICCS study found no clear pattern of association between students' average knowledge scores and their level of interest in social and political issues, nor their intentions for future civic action.[17] These results point to a need for something other than content or more "academic" civic knowledge in the New Zealand curriculum.

Not just a youth problem

The last three general elections have seen falling enrolment rates in all age groups between the ages of 18 and 39.[18] Voter turnout of the eligible population in 2014 was 72 percent, an increase from 70 percent in 2011, but overall there has been a general decline in voter turnout over time, with the lowest percentage of people voting occurring within the last two election cycles (2011 and 2014).[19] Voter turnout for Local Authority Elections is even lower, with national turnout at 42 percent in 2016.[20] Political disengagement is particularly prevalent for Maori and Pasifika voters, who have been shown to have consistently lower turnout rates than Pakeha.[21]

New Zealand an increasingly diverse society

Almost 60 percent of recent migrants did not vote in the 2011 General Election; this included people who said they were not eligible because

of visa status.[21] As New Zealand is becoming increasingly diverse, this high rate of non-voting among migrants could indicate possible issues for civic engagement.

The percentage of people living in New Zealand who were born overseas was 25.2 per cent in 2013, compared with 19 per cent in 2001, more than double the OECD average.[22] In 2015/16, 52,052 people were approved for resident visas, up 21 percent from 2014/15.[23] This growing diversity enriches New Zealand. But the speed and breadth of change could present some challenges in this space, if not attended to.[10] As many migrants come from countries with weak democracies,[24] it is important that knowledge barriers to engagement are reduced and that individuals are supported to access the civic institutions and exercise the rights they are entitled to as members of New Zealand society.[25]

3) Lack of consistency on what constitutes CCE

Teachers have significant discretion over how they teach under the New Zealand Curriculum (NZC) and Te Marautanga o Aotearoa, which are based on learning areas, principles and values.[26] The flexibility of the NZC seems to be for the most part advantageous, but can be challenging in the case of CCE. The problem is that there is no consistency about what constitutes CCE, nor is there any explicit requirement that CCE be taught.[27]

This approach disadvantages students of teachers who do not think CCE is important, or who choose to place varying emphasis on certain elements of CCE.[27] Considering that lower civic knowledge scores in the ICCS study were found to have a strong association with socioeconomic background, this issue becomes even more important for equality in our society, arming all students with the knowledge and skills to empower themselves.[15] Furthermore, when teachers do want to teach CCE, there is currently no clear, established programme or framework to look to, making CCE a less attractive option and creating more work for teachers. There is no shortage of CCE content online, but this content is fragmented and of varying quality.[1]

Figure 1: 3Cs framework for CCE
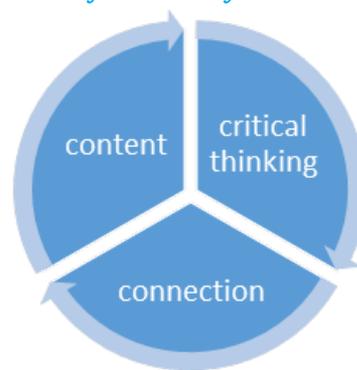
A framework for CCE

With the above drivers in mind, Figure 1 shows the 3Cs framework for CCE, adapted from Gault & Krieble 2016 (p. 32). This framework outlines three critical components that a comprehensive CCE programme would include to address the three key drivers that are threatening the quality of our democracy. *Content* refers to information about civics and citizenship, or "academic" knowledge; *Critical thinking* is the ability to critically assess and process news and information; and *Connection* is the application of information to problems in the world and everyday life. This is not to say that CCE is a panacea. However, CCE provides a means of ensuring New Zealanders are well-equipped for navigating and actively participating in our changing world. The importance of connection and critical thinking in CCE rather than just content draws from evidence of effective pedagogy for engendering civic engagement.[28] Considering this, a description of the international evidence and current state follows.

International evidence

'Active citizenship' approach crucial for effectiveness

It is important to note that CCE in itself does not appear to be a "silver bullet".[27] Rather, the way that CCE is taught determines whether such education will lead to increased engagement.[29] In a 2008 study of 52 high schools in Chicago, Kahne & Sporte found that "active citizenship" were most successful in leading to increased civic engagement. "Active citizenship" approaches link learning to real-world contexts and interests, for example, following current

events, discussing problems in the community and ways to respond, talking about controversial issues and allowing students to study what matters to them.[30] Other evidence suggests the effects of CCE in community education for adults are similar to those effects on school students.[31] Further research indicates that citizenship education for adult migrants could aid in reducing barriers to civic engagement for new citizens.[32]

CCE and the civic empowerment gap

International evidence also shows that CCE has important effects for closing gaps in knowledge inequalities. In a more recent 2016 study on the US and Belgium, Neundorf, Niemi and Smets found that civic education can have compensation effects for missing parental "political socialization".[33] Schools, in other words, were found to be able to compensate for what Levinson calls the "civic empowerment gap" between young people from privileged backgrounds, who were more likely to have access to academic resources, political news and the public sphere generally, and those from impoverished backgrounds.[34] The ICCS study also provided some evidence reiterating this finding.[35]

Current State

The current arrangements in the education sector are largely compatible with notions of CCE, despite CCE not being a part of the curricula. Notably, there are already some explicit references to 'citizenship' in the NZC. Notions of citizenship are a key part of the 'future focus' principle. This principle aims to encourage students to 'look to the future by exploring such significant future-focused issues as sustainability, citizenship enterprise and globalisation'. The value of 'community and participation for the common good', with one of the key competencies for this value being 'participating and contributing', is also clearly consistent with CCE.[36]

Under the broader learning area of social sciences, social studies is the specific subject most compatible with notions of CCE. Social studies teachers from secondary schools across the country are already working together to form ideas for how to implement the NCEA 'personal social action' standards in a way that

can address the gaps in CCE in the NZC. Approaches to date include a teacher who took students to Wellington to learn about the way that Parliament works and a teacher whose class visited the Beehive to make a submission at the select committee hearing of the Healthy Homes Bill.[37]

Tikanga   Iwi, the subject parallel to social studies in M   ori medium schools, also appears to be compatible with CCE, with the subtext of Tikanga   Iwi being a strong emphasis on the realisation of rangatiratanga through active citizenship. However, it should be noted that M   ori conceptions of citizenship are inherently different to Western perspectives.[38]

Clearly, there are opportunities for teachers to deliver CCE under the current arrangements in the education sector, with emphasis on citizenship education. However, no formal CCE is mandated, and civics education is not even referred to in the curricula. The above cases of teachers actively exploring ways to teach CCE are cases when an individual teacher or school has undertaken to do so.

In addition, existing notions of citizenship are vague and provide little clear direction for teachers in implementing the principles and values consistent with citizenship. This is evident in the findings of the final report of the ICCS study, which concluded that, overall, "it is somewhat unclear whether there is a consistent view across New Zealand schools about what 'civics and citizenship education' ought to involve and what means are effective in developing students' citizenship competencies."[2]

CCE in the community

There is some work already underway at the community level in addressing disengagement. Resources for community CCE have been developed by the Electoral Commission with input from Adult and Community Education Aotearoa (ACE).[39] Additionally, the Commission piloted a community engagement programme to engage with and inform underrepresented groups, particularly M   ori, Pasifika, and ethnic communities about the 2014 General Election, aimed at increasing voter participation by connecting with community

leaders and influencers, which achieved a wide reach.[40]

ACE also deliver workshops on civics education, with a focus on prison inmates.[41] Though not necessarily through CCE, other organisations and hubs are also working in different ways to build civic engagement in their communities, such as in the case of Victory Community Centre in Nelson.[42] Despite the evidence that work has already begun in this space, there is no coordinated strategy for these efforts, few resources available for community CCE learning, and no clear guidance or support for groups that might want to establish or bolster CCE in their communities.

(ii) How do we get there?

The theme is now set for a conversation on what steps need to be taken to address this important issue. This section outlines some recommendations for what these next steps might be, drawn from the McGuinness Institute's latest CivicsNZ workshop.

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