

How to Improve Active Citizenship Skills among Youth? A School-Based Experiment in Three Countries

A society's civic sense is commonly understood to mean the respect that its citizens show to the rules of collective life, their involvement in the definition of these rules, and the priority they give to the general interest over private ones. In modern democracies, good citizenship is also commonly understood to include tolerance for the diversity of religions and political opinions, as well as support for the idea of equal rights for all citizens, regardless of gender and origin. These civic virtues have long been identified as central to the stability of democratic societies and to their economic development (see Putnam, 1993; Tabellini, 2008; or Guiso et al., 2011).

From the time of the ancient republics, one of the main objectives of public education has been to cultivate the civic sense of younger generations. Although most modern school curricula include a civic education program (Heater, 2004), many modern democracies are nonetheless facing a rise in political and religious extremism, as well as fundamental distrust in their institutions (Carothers & O'Donohue, 2019). Forms of political participation are also becoming more diverse and individualized as political issues become more complex, resulting in a widening participation gap between social groups. This is far from the democratic ideal of equality among citizens in their contribution to political decisions (Armingeon & Schädel, 2015; Dalton, 2017).

Faced with these challenges, a broad movement to revitalize civic education has emerged, particularly in Europe. However, there is still much to learn about how best to teach civics in societies as diverse and polarized as today's (European Commission, 2017).

In a recent paper (Briole et al., 2022), we show that it is possible to foster altruism, tolerance, and respect for collective rules among young adolescents by helping their teachers implement a pedagogy based on student empowerment and the design and implementation of concrete civics-oriented projects.

These findings come from the evaluation of a large-scale randomized experiment conducted in a sample of more than 200 middle schools in three different countries (France, Greece, and Spain). The intervention was designed in the aftermath of the Paris terrorist attacks in 2015 and is part of a joint effort in several European countries to promote civic spirit, religious tolerance, and equal rights in the old continent.

In the 2018-2019 school year, about 320 teachers and 6,200 eighth- and ninth-grade students from these schools participated in the experiment (i.e., the students were around 13-14 years old). Half of the participating schools in each country were randomly chosen to implement the Active Citizenship Program (hereafter, ACT). These are the treatment schools. The other half served as control schools. Teachers from the treatment

This article reports the results of the evaluation of a randomised experiment in more than 200 secondary schools in France, Greece and Spain.

schools first attended a two-day training program at the start of the academic year and then implemented a concrete civics-oriented project with their students.

The ACT projects were designed and implemented by students in the treatment classes during the 2018-2019 school year, from October to April. The ACT mandatory protocol had two distinct phases: a preparatory phase and an implementation phase. During the preparation phase, students were first assigned to groups of 4 to 5 students. Each group was then tasked with identifying a possible project for the class. The project had to deal with one of three themes, namely, the fight against discrimination, social inclusion, or cultural diversity. Once this preparatory work had been completed, each group presented its project to the class. Students then voted to determine which project the whole class would do. Following the vote, the teacher helped the students develop an action plan and allocate tasks among themselves. The last mandatory aspect of the ACT protocol was the project's implementation. Teachers were advised to spend about 20 hours with their students on the project.

In practice, a majority of the projects selected were designed to show solidarity and empathy toward people and students in difficulty (e.g., performing a short play in a hospital or at a retirement home; organizing an event to raise awareness of the challenges faced by people with disabilities or migrants; helping students in difficult situations with their homework). Although projects often took place within the school, particularly in Greece and Spain, overall, 42% were implemented outside the school.

We identified the program's effects through pre- and post-intervention surveys that measured students' level of altruism, tolerance, and adherence to equal rights, as well as the size and diversity of their friendship networks. To measure the program's impact on student's civic

values, we constructed a brief Civic Attitudes index, synthesizing various measurements of students' altruism, tolerance, and support for equality. We also generated a Democratic Participation index summarizing students' political self-efficacy, interest level in politics, and participation in the March 2019 international youth strike for climate change.

Moreover, in France, we leveraged the availability of school-level administrative data to measure the program's impact on students' school behavior and academic performance. This allowed us to have some measures of the students' respect for the rules of collective life and school engagement. The main advantage of these administrative data, as well as the data on friendship networks, is that they avoid the social desirability biases that can affect survey responses.

For each of these outcome measures, we evaluated the impact of being assigned to the program. This means that all the estimates presented here are what, in the econometrics literature, is referred to as "intention-to-treat" estimates, that is, estimates that capture the effect of being randomly assigned to a treatment, regardless of the final uptake. However, before we can estimate the program's effects, it is important to (1) check that there is no differential attrition that could bias our results (i.e., differential survey non-response among treatment and control participants) and (2) identify the extent to which the program was actually implemented in the treatment group and the changes this implementation induced in teacher practices. With regard to the former, we performed some balancing checks to confirm that the treatment and control groups were balanced in terms of observable characteristics after randomization. Notwithstanding some attrition for both student and teacher questionnaires at endline (31% and 23%, respectively), we found no differential attrition between the treatment and control groups, and teacher and student characteristics were still balanced at endline.

In terms of implementation, we had a large uptake in treatment schools. A very high percentage (97%) of volunteer teachers in the treatment schools participated in the fall training sessions. Similarly, around 94% confirmed

The findings show that the civic attitudes of students in the treated schools improved by 13% of the standard deviation with respect to the control group.

that they actually oversaw the implementation of an ACT citizenship project during the academic year. These proportions were negligible in the control group. Moreover, the comparison of teaching practices in the control and treatment schools confirmed that teachers in treatment schools were indeed influenced by the ACT training. Using our Teaching Practices index, we showed that, on average, teachers from treatment schools reported practices that better fit the principles explained during the training sessions, by about 35% of a standard deviation (SD). For instance, teacher surveys revealed group-work-focused civic education was more prevalent in the treatment classes than the control classes, suggesting that the teacher training was effective in shifting teaching practices away from traditional pedagogies toward less vertical, more inclusive approaches.

As for the program effects, Table 1 shows the treatment effects on civic outcomes. As can be seen, students' core civic values and attitudes, as well as their ability to engage in democratic discourses, had improved by the end of the school year. ACT increased students' civic attitudes score by 13% of a standard deviation relative to the control group. This 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. The program also improved students' democratic participation measures. This was largely attributable to changes in students' political self-efficacy (i.e., their perception of their own ability to engage in political processes).

Table 1. Treatment Effects on Civic Outcomes

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
	C	TC	S.E.	Unad. P-val	Adj. P-Val	N
Civic attitudes index	0.000	0.134***	0.036	0.000	-	4244
Altruism	0.000	0.090*	0.041	0.028	0.084	4244
Tolerance	0.000	0.025	0.031	0.414	0.414	4119
Equal rights	0.000	0.059	0.033	0.074	0.111	4110
Democratic Participation index	0.000	0.084**	0.033	0.011	-	4294
Political self-efficacy	0.000	0.092***	0.029	0.002	0.005	4241
Interest in political life	0.000	0.003	0.032	0.923	0.923	4294
Participation in Climate strike	0.000	0.068	0.039	0.081	0.121	4244

Note: For each of the eight row variables, the first column (column C) displays the mean of the row variable in the control group. The second column (column TC) displays the coefficient from the regression of the row variable on a treatment dummy, controlling for strata fixed effects, as well as for a set of controls selected from the full set of baseline variables through a Lasso procedure. The third column shows the standard errors clustered at the school level. The fourth column shows the corresponding unadjusted p-value, while the fifth column shows the p-value adjusted for the false discovery rate. The last column displays the size of the analysis sample, namely, the sample of individuals who were observed at baseline and for whom the row variable was measured at endline. Each line corresponds to a separate regression.

In France, the programme also had a positive effect on students' behaviour in school and academic performance.

As Table 2 shows, students' friendship networks became more diverse in schools that participated in the intervention. The program increased the diversity of students' social interactions, driven by the higher likelihood of forming opposite-sex friendships in the treatment classes. Students' ability to engage with people from different backgrounds also improved as a result of the program. These findings are in line with the idea that project-based pedagogy is associated with increasingly heterophilic (or diverse) interactions within classrooms, especially when the focus is on tolerance and equal rights.

In France, the program also had a positive impact on students' at-school behavior and academic performance (see Table 3). The improvement in

the School Behavior index reflects a significant decrease in absenteeism and in school exclusions, as well as an improvement in punctuality. We also detected a decrease in less serious disciplinary sanctions than exclusions, although the effect of the treatment is not statistically significant at standard levels. These results are consistent with the idea that interactive project-based teaching can improve students' relationship with the school and the rules of school life. Furthermore, contrary to the hypothesis that the intervention could negatively affect students' performance in school subjects other than civic education, we found improvements of varying magnitudes across almost all school subjects, in particular, history and geography, French, the arts, and physical education. We attribute this to similarities in the relevant skill sets between civic education and these other subjects.

We hypothesized several dimensions of potential heterogeneity in the pre-analysis plan. In particular, we hypothesized that treatment effects might be different across the three experiment sites and depending on gender, family background, and previous student experience as a school representative. We found no significant differences along most of these

Table 2. Treatment Effect on Social Interactions

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
	C	TC	S.E.	Unad. P-val	Adj. P-Val	N
Number of friends	3.650	0.194	0.130	0.134	-	4299
Friendship Heterophily index	0.000	0.099**	0.043	0.022	-	4299
Nb of friends of different gender	0.892	0.126*	0.056	0.025	0.076	4299
Nb of friends fo different geographic origin	0.543	0.071	0.042	0.088	0.132	4299
Nb of friends of different social origin	1.534	0.093	0.066	0.154	0.154	4299

Note. See Table 1 notes.

Table 3. Treatment Effect on School Behavior and Academic Achievement

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
	C	TC	S.E.	Unad. P-val	Adj. P-Val	N
School behavior	0.000	0.268***	0.089	0.003	-	2251
Absences	0.000	0.249**	0.104	0.017	0.034	2227
Punctuality	0.000	0.188*	0.100	0.059	0.079	2227
Exclusions	0.000	0.190***	0.062	0.002	0.009	2186
Less serious disciplinary sanctions	0.000	0.047	0.092	0.612	0.612	2241
Average Grade	0.000	0.126***	0.040	0.002	-	2251
History-Geography	0.000	0.196***	0.056	0.000	0.001	2251
Physical Education	0.000	0.118**	0.055	0.032	0.032	2250

Note. See Table 1 notes. This data is only available for France.

The results of the evaluation indicate that early investment in citizenship education is important to mitigate the risks of increasing inequality in civic competencies.

dimensions or for most of the outcomes. The main exception was between students with previous experience as student representatives and students without such experience. The impact of treatment on school behavior, academic achievement, and civic outcomes tended to be stronger for the representatives than for the other students. Although none of the impact differentials were statistically significant at standard levels in this traditional analysis of heterogeneous effects, these results were confirmed by a data-driven exploration of heterogeneous effects. The latter method further showed that the most important source of treatment heterogeneity came from a variable indicating the extent to which the teacher in charge of the program is involved in school life (as measured at baseline by the number of school councils in which s/he participates). The effect of the program on school behavior, civic outcomes, and friendship networks was strong and significant for the students of the most involved teachers, while it was much weaker and not statistically significant for the students of the least involved teachers.

Thus, our results showed substantial heterogeneity in the effects of the intervention, with a concentration in students initially endowed with civic skills. So, while the program improved average outcomes, it also increased inequality between students. This was true across all three countries. These results are consistent with a model whereby skills acquired in the early school years and school investments made later in adolescence are complementary inputs in the education production function (Cunha and Heckman, 2007). The evaluation's results therefore suggest that early investment in children's citizenship education is important to mitigate risks of widening inequality in civic competencies driven by educational programs 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).

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