

# **Civics and Citizenship Education in Australian Schools**

**A study of parent attitudes  
Part II: Quantitative Phase**

Prepared for

**The Australian Parents Council**

by

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in collaboration with  
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# 1. INTRODUCTION

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This report marks the completion of Stage II of a two-stage research project undertaken by Denis Muller & Associates, in collaboration with Irving Saulwick & Associates, for the Australian Parents Council (APC).

It contains an Executive Summary where headline results are given for all the main hypotheses as well as two additional issues studied. This is followed by a description of main findings.

Detailed tables are given in Appendix A, and the questionnaire in Appendix B.

The report is based on quantitative research conducted in all States and Territories of Australia between 9 and 15 February 1998. The research consisted of a telephone survey of 600 parents with children at school.

The sample of parents was selected at random and was distributed across Australia in proportion to the actual distribution of population. It included parents from non-government and government school sectors.

The proportions of parents from each sector in the sample accord with their proportions in the population as a whole, within the parameters of sampling variance for a study of this kind. (For a note on sampling variance, see Page 5.)

The actual proportions were:

| Sector         | Primary | Secondary |
|----------------|---------|-----------|
|                | %       | %         |
| Government     | 71      | 67        |
| Non-Government | 29      | 33        |

The purpose of the survey was to validate and quantify a number of key hypotheses which emerged from Stage I of the study.

Stage I consisted of focus group discussions with parents from all school sectors conducted across Australia in November 1997. The groups were conducted in Canberra, Sydney (two), Toowoomba, Darwin, Perth, Adelaide, Launceston and Melbourne (two) by Denis Muller and Irving Saulwick.

From the focus groups, a number of clear hypotheses emerged. Chief among these were that:

1. There is broad support among parents for the concept of a civics and citizenship education programme.
2. There is little argument about some of the central features of the proposed programme -- its Years 4 to 10 span, its parameters and objectives.
3. Many purposes are envisaged for the programme, including:
  - ◆ To prepare young people to be informed and responsible citizens;
  - ◆ To equip and encourage them to participate in community affairs;
  - ◆ To give them a sense of belonging to Australia, and inculcate a sense of quiet pride in their country;
  - ◆ To contribute to a stronger sense of national identity and unity;
  - ◆ To contribute to the advancement of the reconciliation process;
  - ◆ To contribute to the integration of disparate groups.
4. There is concern about possible bias in the way the subject would be taught.
5. There are major reservations about a citizenship ceremony, although a minority were quite attracted to it.

These hypotheses were tested in the national telephone survey, and in the main were unambiguously validated by it.

In addition to testing these hypotheses, the national telephone survey explored two further issues.

The first was the importance that parents attached to civics and citizenship education, relative to other major fields of study.

The second was whether parents thought the *Discovering Democracy* programme should be compulsory up to -- but not beyond -- Year 10.

When the results from this survey are looked at overall, two characteristics stand out. Firstly, there is a high level of consistency in attitudes to these questions across school sectors, regions of Australia, socio-economic groups, and men and women. Secondly, the attitudes expressed by the participants in the focus groups closely reflected the attitudes among parents in the community as a whole.

Finally, the consultants would like to pay tribute to the constructive and creative input by the leadership of the APC and the representative from DEETYA in the designing of the questionnaire for this phase of the study.

It is with pleasure that we now present our findings.

DENIS MULLER & ASSOCIATES

March 1998

**A note on sampling variance**

All surveys based on sampling are subject to sampling variance. The size of the variance is a function of the sample size, and with a random sample of 600 -- as in this survey -- it is plus or minus about 4 per cent. That is, one can be confident that in 95 cases out of 100, the results of a survey based on a random sample of 600 will reflect the results -- plus or minus 4 per cent -- that would have been obtained if everybody in the target population had been surveyed.

## 2. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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In this section of the report, we systematically summarise the headline results for each of the hypotheses described earlier, and for the two additional issues concerning relative importance of civics and citizenship education, and compulsoriness up to Year 10.

### Hypothesis 1

*There is broad support among parents for the concept of a civics and citizenship education programme.*

#### Result

Eighty-three per cent of parents support the introduction of a Civics & Citizenship programme.

### Hypothesis 2

*There is little argument about the parameters of the proposed Discovering Democracy programme.*

#### Result

97 per cent say that it is important to teach young people about the responsibilities of citizenship in Australia

95 per cent say that it is important to teach young people about people's rights in Australia

94 per cent say that it is important to teach young people about the history of Australia

92 per cent say that it is important to teach young people about how Australia is governed

86 per cent say that it is important to teach young people about what it means to be an Australian

86 per cent say that it is important to teach young people about current social issues

71 per cent say that it is important to teach young people about current political issues.

### **Hypothesis 3**

*Parents envisage many objectives for the programme.*

#### **Result**

94 per cent of parents agree it is possible to prepare young people to be informed and responsible citizens

86 per cent agree that the programme should be designed to give them a sense of belonging to Australia

83 per cent agree that the programme should be designed to equip and encourage them to participate in community affairs

79 per cent agree that the programme should be designed to contribute to a stronger sense of national identity

70 per cent agree that the programme should be designed to contribute to the advancement of the reconciliation process

### **Hypothesis 4**

*There is concern about possible bias in the way the subject would be taught.*

#### **Result**

Sixty per cent are not confident that most teachers are already well-trained and professional enough to teach Civics & Citizenship without bias.

### **Hypothesis 5**

*There are major reservations about a citizenship ceremony, although a minority were quite attracted to it.*

#### **Result**

Forty per cent of respondents would welcome a graduation ceremony for students who had completed the *Discovering Democracy* programme. Fifty-four per cent would not welcome it.

Respondents were evenly divided over whether they thought students themselves would welcome such a ceremony.

### **Additional issues**

*How important is civics and citizenship compared with other fields of study?*

#### **Result**

Civics and citizenship is a second-order priority after the “three Rs”, but ahead of electives such as Art and LOTE.

*Should the programme be compulsory up to Year 10?*

#### **Result**

Fifty-six per cent of parents think the programme should be compulsory up to Year 10, and 41 per cent think it should not be.



### 3. MAIN FINDINGS

#### Question 1

It was a feature of the focus group discussions that parents were concerned to see their children inculcated with a sense of their civic responsibilities, even more than their rights, and this was borne out in the quantitative study.

It was also a feature of the focus groups that people felt their children needed to know more than the parents themselves had been taught about Australian history and how Australia is governed. This was seen as a necessary pre-requisite for assuming their rights and obligations as responsible citizens.

Respondents to the national telephone survey were asked to say how importantly they rated a number of possible components of a Civics & Citizenship programme. Table 1 summarises their responses.

**TABLE 1**

| IMPORTANCE OF POSSIBLE PROGRAMME COMPONENTS |           |               |      |
|---|-----------|---------------|------|
| Programme component                         | Important | Not important | Mean |
|   | %         | %             |      |
| People's responsibilities in Australia      | 97        | 3             | 3.60 |
| The history of Australia                    | 95        | 5             | 3.53 |
| People's rights in Australia                | 94        | 6             | 3.51 |
| What it means to be an Australian           | 86        | 12            | 3.38 |
| How Australia is governed                   | 92        | 8             | 3.36 |
| Current social issues                       | 86        | 14            | 3.20 |
| Current political issues                    | 71        | 28            | 2.93 |

Although all these issues are regarded as important, the last two are regarded as markedly less important than the others. We would speculate that the reasons for this are two-fold.

First, it was a feature of our discussion groups that parents were looking for unifying themes, for their children to be exposed to an education which would

strengthen national unity and identity. It was equally apparent that they were thoroughly disillusioned with the current standard of political behaviour, seeing it as unworthy of the democratic process and unreasonably divisive.

Second, as has been mentioned already, parents lack confidence in the ability of teachers to teach this programme without bias. If bias were to be present, many parents may suspect that there would be greater scope to express it in terms of current social or political issues, than in other parts of the programme.

### Question 2

In question 2, we sought to establish the importance that parents attached to Civics & Citizenship relative to other fields of study.

The results suggest that it ranks -- with a number of other subjects -- below the "three R's" but ahead of electives such as Art and languages other than English (LOTE).

The results also suggest that parents gave it a relatively high score for importance in its own right.

**TABLE 2**

| RELATIVE IMPORTANCE OF VARIOUS FIELDS OF STUDY |            |              |             |             |
|--|------------|--------------|-------------|-------------|
| Field of study                                 | Importance |              |             | Mean        |
|  | 0-3 (Low)  | 4-6 (Medium) | 7-10 (High) |             |
|  | %          | %            | %           |             |
| Reading & Writing                              | --         | *            | 99          | 9.75        |
| Mathematics                                    | *          | 1            | 98          | 9.45        |
| Technology                                     | 1          | 9            | 90          | 8.33        |
| Science  | 2          | 17           | 81          | 7.86        |
| Physical Education                             | 2          | 19           | 79          | 7.71        |
| <b>Civics &amp; Citizenship</b>                | <b>4</b>   | <b>21</b>    | <b>74</b>   | <b>7.38</b> |
| LOTE   | 9          | 34           | 57          | 6.64        |
| Art  | 7          | 44           | 49          | 6.39        |

\*Less than 1 per cent

### Question 3

Question 3 dealt with the issue of whether Civics & Citizenship should be compulsory for students up to -- but not beyond -- Year 10.

Respondents were more divided on this question than on most of the others, with a modest majority of 56 per cent saying it should be compulsory, and a significant minority of 41 per cent saying it should not be.

This pattern of response was quite consistent across the different demographic groups, although there was a tendency among people of higher education to favour compulsion more than others. The same was true of parents with children in government secondary schools.

**TABLE 3**

| SHOULD CIVICS & CITIZENSHIP BE COMPULSORY UP TO YEAR 10? |       |                           |          |                            |            |             |        |
|--|-------|---------------------------|----------|----------------------------|------------|-------------|--------|
|  | Total | Child in secondary school |          | Highest level of education |            |             |        |
|  |       | Govt                      | Non-Govt | Some sec'y                 | Comp sec'y | Trade, tech | Tert'y |
|  | %     | %                         | %        | %                          | %          | %           | %      |
| Yes  | 56    | 61                        | 51       | 50                         | 58         | 53          | 64     |
| No   | 41    | 36                        | 46       | 45                         | 42         | 44          | 34     |
| Don't know   | 3     | 4                         | 3        | 5                          | 1          | 3           | 2      |

### Question 4

In question 4 we explored parents' expectations of what a Civics & Citizenship field of study might achieve.

In the main, parents were optimistic about what the programme could achieve, and few had any doubts that it would be possible for it to prepare young people to be informed and responsible citizens.

The results reflect the wishes of the parents. Whether the programme can live up to these hopes remains to be seen.

**TABLE 4**

| <b>POSSIBLE OUTCOMES OF CIVICS &amp; CITIZENSHIP PROGRAM</b> |              |                 |                   |
|--|--------------|-----------------|-------------------|
| <b>Outcome</b>   | <b>Agree</b> | <b>Disagree</b> | <b>Don't know</b> |
|  | <b>%</b>     | <b>%</b>        | <b>%</b>          |
| Produce informed, responsible citizens                       | 94           | 4               | 2                 |
| Give a sense of belonging to Australia                       | 86           | 7               | 7                 |
| Equip for participation in community                         | 83           | 7               | 10                |
| Give sense of national identity                              | 79           | 12              | 9                 |
| Help advance reconciliation                                  | 70           | 16              | 14                |

### **Question 5**

There is widespread concern that teachers are either not well enough trained or professional enough to teach this programme without bias.

A number of implications flow from this finding.

One is that professional development will need to be seen to be offered. Another is that in promoting this programme among parents, the objectivity of its content will need to be emphasised.

However, from our focus group discussions it was clear that while many parents did not believe teachers would be unbiased in their teaching of this subject, not all of them were concerned about this.

Many in this category took the quite sophisticated view that everyone had biases, and that their children ought to learn -- if the education system had not already taught them -- how to recognise bias and make their own adjustments for it.

Many also said that to engage the students was the critical factor. The more they became engaged, the more likely it was that they would form their own conclusions anyway.

At the same time there was a residual concern that positive steps needed to be taken to prepare teachers to offer this course with fairness, factual accuracy and pedagogical expertise.

These views were common across all school sectors, age groups, and geographic areas. If anything, concern about bias was more often expressed among supporters of the programme than among opponents.

**TABLE 5**

| CONFIDENCE IN TEACHER OBJECTIVITY |       |               |          |                       |        |
|-----------------------------------|-------|---------------|----------|-----------------------|--------|
|                                   | Total | School sector |          | Attitude to programme |        |
|                                   |       | Govt          | Non-Govt | Support               | Oppose |
|                                   | %     | %             | %        | %                     | %      |
| Confident                         | 33    | 33            | 30       | 32                    | 38     |
| Not confident                     | 60    | 61            | 62       | 60                    | 55     |
| Don't know                        | 8     | 6             | 8        | 8                     | 7      |

### Questions 6 and 7

These questions sought to establish the level of support among parents for a graduation ceremony to mark the completion of a Civics & Citizenship programme by young people, and to find out how parents thought such an idea would be received among young people.

The answers to these questions should be treated with some caution, because respondents did not have much time to contemplate the pros and cons. However, the findings do closely reflect the attitudes expressed in the focus groups where participants had ample opportunity to debate the merits.

Generally the idea got a luke-warm reception, both in the quantitative and qualitative research.

**TABLE 6A**

| <b>ATTITUDES TO GRADUATION CEREMONY -- PARENTS</b> |              |                      |          |                              |        |
|--|--------------|----------------------|----------|------------------------------|--------|
|  | <b>Total</b> | <b>School sector</b> |          | <b>Attitude to programme</b> |        |
|  |              | Govt                 | Non-Govt | Support                      | Oppose |
|  | %            | %                    | %        | %                            | %      |
| Welcome  | 40           | 40                   | 40       | 45                           | 16     |
| Not welcome  | 54           | 52                   | 55       | 49                           | 81     |
| Don't know   | 6            | 8                    | 5        | 6                            | 3      |

**TABLE 6B**

| <b>GRADUATION CEREMONY -- PARENTS' VIEW OF LIKELY STUDENT ATTITUDE</b> |              |                      |          |                              |        |
|--|--------------|----------------------|----------|------------------------------|--------|
|  | <b>Total</b> | <b>School sector</b> |          | <b>Attitude to programme</b> |        |
|  |              | Govt                 | Non-Govt | Support                      | Oppose |
|  | %            | %                    | %        | %                            | %      |
| Welcome  | 43           | 44                   | 38       | 47                           | 27     |
| Not welcome  | 41           | 39                   | 46       | 39                           | 54     |
| Don't know   | 16           | 17                   | 16       | 14                           | 19     |