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Postprint

This is the accepted version of a paper published in *Citizenship Teaching and Learning*. This paper has been peer-reviewed but does not include the final publisher proof-corrections or journal pagination.

Citation for the original published paper (version of record):

Arensmeier, C. (2015)

Swedish students' conceptual knowledge about civics and citizenship: An interview study.

Citizenship Teaching and Learning, 11(1): 9-28

http://dx.doi.org/10.1386/ctl.11.1.9_1

Access to the published version may require subscription.

N.B. When citing this work, cite the original published paper.

Permanent link to this version:

<http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:oru:diva-46972>

Swedish students' conceptual knowledge about civics and citizenship: An interview study

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Abstract

The background for this study is a model for civics knowledge and teaching that distinguishes conceptual knowledge, ability to identify social and political issues, and civic literacy. The study itself investigates challenges in civics teaching by focusing on students' difficulties understanding the subject matter. In a think aloud interview, some of the most difficult questions from the IEA International Civic and Citizenship Education Study were presented to 29 eighth-grade students in a municipality fairly representative of average Swedish conditions. There were shortcomings in their conceptual knowledge and also in their understanding of social and democratic principles, highlighting the importance of reading skills for civic ability. The article suggests strategic work with conceptual learning and for civic teaching to include an explicit focus on reading comprehension. It suggests that the ability to reflect on complex civic issues is benefited by asking questions and discussing social and political principles from different perspectives.

Keywords

civic education, conceptual knowledge, political understanding, civic literacy, civics teaching, ICCS (International Civic and Citizenship Education Study)

Introduction

Civic knowledge is often viewed as contributing to political engagement (Galston 2007; Milner 2010) and the survival of democracy (Niemi and Junn 1998), but may be assigned little intrinsic value in itself. Perhaps as a consequence, research on civic knowledge seldom focuses on the specific concepts found in civics¹ instruction. Comparative levels of civic knowledge, and the effects of structural factors like social background on students' levels of knowledge, are well documented in large-scale quantitative investigations (Gronlund and Milner 2006; Schulz et al. 2010; Torney-Purta et al. 2001). Harder to find are studies that dig more deeply into cognitive abilities and learning activities useful for acquiring civic knowledge.

This article approaches civics as a learning domain, and views civic knowledge as an end in itself. Being more knowledgeable can make individuals better equipped to understand themselves and the society they live in (which also enhances their chances of influencing politics if they choose). This point of departure also connects the study of civic knowledge to research on learning.

The article analyses 14-year-old Swedish students' civic knowledge in-depth by studying problems when they are asked to think aloud about some of the most difficult knowledge items in the International Civic and Citizenship Education Study (ICCS 2009).² The overall aim is to understand the limitations of students' civic knowledge. What problems can be identified in their lack of understanding of difficult questions? These results can also suggest how civic educators might tackle the shortcomings identified.

This qualitative investigation was conducted in Sweden, using as prompts some of the most difficult questions in the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA)'s ICCS Study 2009. The conclusions are particularly relevant for Sweden, but may also apply to other educational contexts. Furthermore, by showing ways in which overly abstract words and lengthy questions can cause unnecessary difficulty and compromise test validity (see Zhang et al., this issue), the study can be of use to those preparing tests of civic knowledge.

Previous research and analytical framework

Civic knowledge

Civic knowledge can be understood in terms of both content and cognitive processes. The content of civic knowledge includes a broad range of social and political issues (Niemi and Junn 1998; Schulz et al. 2008). The national political context receives considerable attention in curricula and teaching in most countries (Evans 2008: 522). In Sweden, for example, a substantial part of the national civics syllabus is devoted to democracy and the political system (SNAE 2008). In addition to democratic ideals and skills, and human and citizens' rights, global matters such as international conflicts, environmental issues and social justice are common themes in civic education.

ICCS touches on several of these topics. Due to the study's international scope, its emphasis is on core political and social concepts or issues, rather than on specific national conditions or institutions. ICCS does not ask about the number of seats in parliament, but about the ideas behind representation and the division of power. From this perspective, civic knowledge mainly concerns overarching democratic, political and societal principles, ideals and conditions.

When it comes to the cognitive dimension, the civic education literature comprises diverse approaches. A distinction between *knowing* and *understanding and applying* was made in a classic study of civic education (Niemi and Junn 1998: 21), and a similar approach has been used by IEA. The distinction between *knowledge of content* and *skills in interpretation* was made in the CIVED study (Torney-Purta et al. 2001). In ICCS 2009, *knowing* and *reasoning and analysing* originally made up two dimensions of the cognitive framework (Schulz et al. 2008). However, the two categories are rather broad, and a version of Bloom's taxonomy (Anderson et al. 2001) has thus been used to expand ICCS's two dimensions into four (Arensmeier 2012): *knowing* (factual knowledge), *understanding* (comprehending a principle, right or condition), *identifying and evaluating* (being able to discern an argument/principle or identify a question) and *arguing for* (being able to identify an issue, make judgements and present arguments). However, it has been recognized that Bloom's taxonomy has been misinterpreted as a theory of teaching and that viewing the categories as hierarchical is problematic (Case 2013). In this article, the taxonomy is solely used to categorize the ICCS items.

Research and theories of civic learning

The minimal reference to general theories of civic education and learning has been highlighted in research (Evans 2008; Almius 2006). The analytical categories used in this study are therefore mainly empirically derived, however, earlier research and theory are used to situate the findings.

Conceptual knowledge

Several scholars of civic learning stress *conceptual knowledge* and understanding. Davies distinguishes between substantive (first order) and procedural (second order) concepts. Substantive concepts characterize the meaning of phenomena such as war, revolution, monarchy, while procedural concepts also relate to context and the ability to understand politics and act as a citizen. A procedural understanding of politics relies on substantial conceptual knowledge (Davies 2008: 380).

Sandahl (2011) separates substantive concepts from compound concepts. Substantive concepts are fairly easily defined (institutions such as the UN), while compound concepts (like power or international cooperation) often have a contested meaning and must be understood in a wider context. The terms *substantive* and *compound* will be used in this way here. The boundary between the two types is somewhat fuzzy, but it is clear that civic knowledge rests on different levels of conceptual understanding. Empirical research confirms that a certain amount of basic conceptual understanding is a prerequisite for gaining more advanced conceptual knowledge, and further that exposure to a broad range of social studies concepts and a classroom climate that is open for discussion are associated with mastering concepts (Zhang et al. 2012). The few investigations dealing with Swedish students' civic conceptual understanding have mainly dealt with compound concepts (Severin 2002; Arensmeier 2012).

While teachers often believe that complex concepts are central to their teaching (Sandahl 2011; Vernersson 1999), others claim that conceptual learning is at best a fortunate side effect (Hyltegren and Lindqvist 2010). Still others argue that students' preconceptions and everyday perceptions are not sufficiently challenged by social science models and concepts in the classroom (Eis 2010). Strategies to develop vocabulary can be effective (Beck et al. 2013) by drawing attention to essential words in texts (Vaughn et al. 2013), or using concept-based instruction (Twyman et al. 2006).

Ability to identify social and political issues

The *ability to identify social and political issues* can be seen as another aspect of civic knowledge. An investigation of students' thinking found that learners' understandings of questions differ greatly, which influences their answers (Larsson 2011). Another study concludes that students are generally able to find relevant arguments and draw conclusions, but many do not recognize a main claim or are unable to make analytical comments on argumentative texts (Marttunen et al. 2005). Problem-solving skills may be improved by teaching students to connect events to each other (Twyman et al. 2006). The importance of teachers helping students to grasp key aspects has also been underlined (Marton and Pang 2008). Analytical ability in civics can thus be understood as an interplay between the ability to identify social and political issues, and the ability to discuss, compare, and connect ideas and to take premises into account. Swedish assessment research in upper-secondary schools, however, indicates that skills of this kind are rarely measured in social studies tests (Svingby 1998). More recently Odenstad (2010) and Jansson (2011) suggest that factual knowledge dominates in tests on the political system, while themes such as the media, economics and international relations are more likely to be found in tests requiring analysis.

Literacy

It has been pointed out that the ability to understand written text is vital for acquiring mature language and vocabulary. Grounded in a research review, Beck et al. (2013) show how well thought-out vocabulary instruction can promote word knowledge and reading comprehension. Several pleas to integrate literacy into social studies have also been made (Alexander-Shea 2011; MacPhee and Whitecotton 2011; Paquette and Kaufman 2008). An experimental study (Vaughn et al. 2013) indicates the potential of structured teaching approaches. A group of eighth-grade social studies teachers were given the explicit task to work with texts and reading comprehension along with their more familiar focus on content in history classes. Compared to students who received 'regular teaching' on the same material, the students in the intervention classes outperformed the control group in all three measured aspects: content knowledge, content reading comprehension and standardized reading comprehension.

A study with poor readers at a Swedish upper-secondary school (Reichenberg 2008) found that when teachers asked fewer factual questions and more partially open questions

and questions requiring inference in class, the students approached their assigned expository readings in a new manner. They read more actively and discussed the meanings of texts more, which benefited their comprehension.

Civic knowledge and learning – summing up

Topics such as democracy and human and citizens' rights, as well as awareness of conflicts and environmental issues, make up a substantial part of the civics syllabus in most democratic countries as well as of the civic knowledge measured in international assessments. Research on civic learning and teaching stresses that both factual/substantive and more complex compound conceptual knowledge are essential. Being able to comprehend and discuss social and political questions is another important civic skill, while literacy is a third central aspect of civic knowledge. These capabilities relate to different cognitive dimensions requiring targeted teaching strategies. The current study has been designed to explore the meanings that Swedish students attribute to test items in a major international civic education assessment. The purpose is to deepen our understanding of different types of civic knowledge and how aspects of literacy are related to it.

Table 1: Civic knowledge and teaching.

Aspects of civic knowledge		Main cognitive dimensions
Conceptual knowledge	- Substantive and compound conceptual knowledge and understanding	<i>Knowing</i>
	- Explicit teaching strategies for conceptual development required	<i>Understanding</i>
Ability to identify social and political issues	- Ability to identify issues, to discuss, to compare and to take premises into account	<i>Understanding</i>
	- Practice needed in discerning social and political issues, finding different perspectives, making arguments	<i>Identifying and evaluating</i>
		<i>Arguing for</i>
(Civic) literacy	- Ability to understand and reflect on texts with social and political content	<i>All dimensions</i>
	- Strategic work with text reading and discussions required	

Method

Investigating civic knowledge using ICCS items

IEA has conducted three large-scale comparative studies of civic education. The most recent, ICCS 2009, was held in 38 countries, targeted eighth-grade students, and covered civic knowledge, attitudes and behaviours. Civic knowledge was measured by 79 items using a rotating booklet design (Schulz et al. 2010; Schulz and Fraillon 2011). The Swedish students performed well above the international mean overall. The trend measurement from 1999 concluded that Swedish students remained at the same level (Schulz et al. 2010; SNAE 2010).

Most of the ICCS items were multiple choice questions with four response alternatives. A selection of fourteen of the questions with the fewest correct answers in Sweden was used as prompts for interviews this study. The items covered different content domains and cognitive domains (see Arensmeier 2012). The five items with the lowest rate of correct answers (and one introductory question) were presented to all the participants in a qualitative interview study. The remaining eight items were split in two sets of four items, each presented to about half of the participants. Thus all students answered ten items in total.

The Swedish national civics syllabus includes several learning outcomes relevant to these ICCS items: e.g. understanding ‘fundamental concepts and phenomena in a democratic system’ and ‘common and fundamental democratic values’, knowledge of ‘rights and obligations in a democratic society’, ‘knowledge of and an understanding of a society with ethnic and cultural diversity’, and ‘familiarity with the economy’ (SNAE 2008).

Interviews

Individual and group interviews were conducted with 29 students (14-year-old) from two eighth-grade classes (with different civics teachers) at a Swedish compulsory school.³ The school is located in a small Swedish municipality with one school for grades 7–9. In terms of level of education, unemployment and proportion of immigrants, the municipality is fairly representative of average Swedish conditions.

Participation was voluntary, and the few students who did not want to take part in individual interviews were either willing to participate in group interviews or were replaced by volunteers. In total, eighteen students (ten boys and eight girls) participated in individual interviews and eleven students (three boys and eight girls) took part three group interviews. The tendency of participants to stimulate each other to reflection and consideration is among the arguments in favour of group interviews (Torney-Purta et al. 2010; Wibeck 2010). Using both individual and group interviews also made it possible to include more students.

The interviews began with a short introduction clarifying that the teachers would not have access to individual responses, that the participants would be anonymized in all documentation and that the purpose was to understand students' thinking when answering difficult questions. The students were encouraged to 'think-out loud' as they worked their way through the test questions. In most cases the students needed to be asked to elaborate on their answers or to explain what caused them hesitation or confusion. The level of detail in their explanations varied. Each participant in the group interviews had a copy of the test questions. Discussions about the meanings of certain words occasionally arose. The students could wait to choose an answer until after hearing the other students' comments, or change their answers.

If the students asked, I briefly explained what certain words meant. This allowed a better picture of the difficulties. A general question about the perceived level of difficulty ended the interviews. All students were also given an opportunity to hear the correct answers. The number of correct answers varied between zero and ten.⁴

The interviews were conducted in autumn 2011 and individual interviews lasted for twenty–30 minutes; the group interviews were longer. Notes were taken during the interviews, which were also audio recorded and transcribed.

Analytical strategy

In large-scale multiple choice assessments of mathematics, distractors (incorrect answers) are often designed to illustrate particular misconceptions, for example, calculating perimeter instead of area. Designing distractors is more difficult in a subject like civics. In ICCS distractors were designed to be unquestionably incorrect, but still plausible given the topic. Another guideline was that they should have similar superficial features, in terms of text length and language. In some items, the distractors were intended to pinpoint

misconceptions. The reasons behind the attractiveness of certain distractors, and thus the students' difficulties, are not obvious. Qualitative data can give important insights about conceptual knowledge and common modes of understanding (and even misconceptions).

In order to get a picture of students' shortcomings in civic knowledge, an inductive analytical approach was used. Items were analysed with regard to the content and cognitive dimensions that were touched on, and student responses (quantitative pattern in 2009 and qualitative statements from the interviews) were used to identify particular difficulties. Tentative explanations of difficulties and of the attractiveness of some distractors were formulated based on the response pattern from 2009, and these were further developed after the interviews using the audio recordings and notes. Previous research and theories on civic education and learning have influenced the conceptualization of the difficulties identified. This type of analytical strategy – where no single or specific type of technique is used – is sometimes labelled eclectic analysis or bricolage (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009).

There are different views on the advisability of quantifying qualitative research. Making inappropriate inferences or reducing information to amount are among the downsides. Some benefits of quantification are that it can contribute to identifying patterns and support interpretations (Maxwell 2010). This qualitative study is only partly presented in quantitative language, with words like 'some' or 'most'. More important, however, uncertainty can be recognized in hesitation and insecurity. Marked answers, can be motivated by guessing or 'gut feelings', and distractors can sometimes be justified in ways relevant to the topic. Interpretation is always vital in qualitative research.

Tables with published ICCS items (some items remain confidential for future use) and the results from Sweden 2009 are included in the results section. The number of correct answers given by the interviewees is included in these tables. They include some responses made after explanations and discussions.

Results – students’ difficulties with items

Three main types of difficulties were derived from the interviews. Some overlap is inevitable.

Conceptual knowledge

Several of the ICCS items involve concepts (Table 2). The students needed to be either familiar with the meaning or able to recall it with the help of the text. Quite a few students had problems with most of these concepts, while others hesitated only a few times. The items are illustrated in order of decreasing difficulty.

Table 2: Published items with conceptual emphasis.⁵

Key concept	ICCS item	Correct answer (out of four alternatives)	Percentage in Sweden in 2009 ^[1]	Answers in the sample ^[2]
Corruption	Which of the following actions by a member of a national parliament/legislature is the clearest example of corruption?	Accepting money from voters in exchange for supporting a law they favour	46.3	24/29
Trade unions	What is the main purpose of labour/trade unions? Their main purpose is to ...	Improve conditions and pay for workers.	56.8	8/13
Market economy	What is the essential characteristic/central feature of a free market economy?	Active competition between businesses	50.2	11/16
Multinational businesses	Most multinational businesses are owned and managed by ...	Companies from developed countries	45.9	21/29

^[1] Proportion of Swedish students who responded correctly in ICCS 2009 (nationally representative sample)

^[2] 24/29, for example, means that 29 students in the qualitative study were given the item, and that 24 of them responded correctly (includes answers given after explanations).

Questions about the meaning of the word *corruption* were raised in eighteen of the 21 interviews. A short explanation including the word ‘bribes’ helped most students to identify the correct answer: ‘The one at the bottom ... Because it just has to do with money. It’s not what they think’. This shows awareness of the meaning of the underlying idea, but a lack of understanding of the term ‘corruption’.⁶

A question about the purpose of *trade unions* also caused difficulties. The item was presented to half the sample and only two students quickly identified the correct answer. An explanation, referring to organizations representing different occupations, such as

teachers and industrial workers, was minimally helpful. As in the overall assessment in 2009, the most popular distractor concerned a fairer tax system. Given the close ties between trade unions and Social Democratic parties in a Scandinavian context, this is not a completely illogical answer if connections were seen between the labour movement, the welfare state and redistribution. Students who selected this alternative typically explained it by mentioning fairness for workers while leaving out the collective social dimension to which the question refers. The question requires knowledge of what a trade union is, but also calls for a wider conceptual knowledge.⁷ An explanation makes the substantive concept clear, but the students generally do not display the compound social understanding needed to identify the main purpose of trade unions.

Market economy was another concept that made participants hesitate, and explicit questions about it were raised in about a third of the interviews. Some students in two of the groups had an idea of what it meant, and after some discussion identified the correct answer – but without much confidence. Another difficult economics-related concept was *multinational businesses*. Students familiar with the expression explained their correct answers in a way that illustrated compound understanding. In about a third of the interviews, students raised explicit questions about the meaning of the core concept. The short explanation that multinational businesses are big companies active in many countries, sometimes exemplified by Coca Cola, made the substantive concept understandable. This did not, however, mean that the students could always identify the correct answer. The most commonly chosen distractor was the UN (the others being the World Bank and developing countries), often with the comment that it was familiar to them, while other distractors were not: ‘Well, the UN is the only one I recognize here’. A parallel is found in a national evaluation of the Swedish school system, which concluded that many students lacked an understanding of basic economic concepts (Oscarsson and Svingby 2005).

Conclusions on conceptual knowledge

Among the difficult concepts, one explanation, substituting the word ‘bribes’ for ‘corruption’, was helpful to the students, indicating that substantive conceptual understanding was present although the term ‘corruption’ was not understood. In regard to the other problematic concepts, it is clear that for many students both their substantive and compound conceptual knowledge were insufficient. Many students, for example, seemed

unaware of ‘trade unions’. In the area of economics as well, substantive knowledge and more complex conceptual understanding were both limited. When students were asked about the test’s difficulty level, many responded that it contained many difficult words. As noted, several of the concepts above are included as learning objective in the Swedish civics syllabus. The question remains, however, about the extent to which these concepts have been included in the actual teaching that students have received.

Ability to identify social and political issues

A second type of difficulty is associated with students’ ability to understand civic and social principles. ICCS contains quite a few items with this emphasis. Understanding key concepts is not enough here; the respondents also need to be able to conclude why something exists, is advocated or is criticized. This relates to compound conceptual knowledge, but also requires an understanding of conditions and arguments.

Several of the items in this study relate to this aspect (Table 3). They are classified as emphasizing the cognitive dimensions ‘understanding’ (items about interest groups, transparency) and ‘identifying and evaluating’ (items about diversity of opinion, division of power). These questions generally have more text than those focusing on concepts. The students are asked to identify why a circumstance/argument is good/beneficial or bad. This requires the ability to recognize a principle.

One item highlights *transparency* and public access to official records, a long-standing practice of which Sweden is proud. A few students were either already familiar with this issue or could identify the general principle behind such a policy with the help of information: ‘Well, I suppose it’s good that the people get information about what the government has decided’. Overall, the principle of public access to official records did not seem familiar to these Swedish 14-year-olds: ‘But I don’t get what they mean’, one student said, inclining towards guessing an incorrect answer. Many students lacked the skills needed to grasp the principle behind the regulation.

Two items on *interest groups* (not released) concerned articulation of opinions and independence (ten and four out of thirteen students responded correctly). The wordy introduction, which includes a brief definition, and the follow-up question require the students to be either familiar with the topic or able to discern advantages of independent

civic engagement by groups. An unfamiliarity with the theme was evident, which makes principle-based reasoning difficult. A brief definition of interest groups helped only a few.

Table 3: Published items about social/political principles.

Key principle	ICCS item	Correct answer (out of four alternatives)	Percentage in Sweden in 2009 ^[2]	Answers in the sample ^[1]
Transparency	Governments keep records of their activities, decisions, and the information they use to make their decisions Some countries have laws that allow people to look at many of these government records Why is it important in a democracy for people to be able to look at government records?	It allows people to make informed judgements about the government's decisions	55.5	4/16
Diversity of opinion	In many countries, media such as newspapers, radio stations and television stations are privately owned by media companies. In some countries, there are laws which limit the number of media companies that any one person or business group can own Why do countries have these laws?	To make it likely that a range of views is presented by the media	44.6	19/29
Division of power	In most countries, one group of people makes laws in parliament. Another group of people applies the laws in the courts. What is the best reason for having this system?	It means that no one group has all the power over laws	59.2	11/16

^[1] Proportion of Swedish students who responded correctly in ICCS 2009 (nationally representative sample)

^[2] 4/16, for example, means that sixteen students in the qualitative study were administered the item, and that four of them responded correctly (includes answers given after explanations).

In one question the students were asked to identify the purpose of laws restricting concentration of newspaper ownership (Table 3). This requires the ability to conclude that a media landscape with few owners can limit the *diversity of opinion*. Several of the students managed to do this: ‘So that everyone gets to say what they think. So there won’t be only one opinion’. Even if they were not familiar with the topic, students were sometimes able to find the correct answer after some reflection, for example:

Well, I don’t know, but... Here it says something about some media company.
 ‘That there are laws...’ [reads the question out loud]. I think it’s ‘to make it likely that a range of views is presented by the media’... So it isn’t all the same. So some might have one opinion and others might have another.

Other students could not identify the reason for the legislation, despite understanding the wording fairly clearly.

An item about *division of power* – the reason for granting the power to make laws to parliament and to apply the law to courts – was difficult for some students. Others rather easily identified the correct answer and grasped the idea behind the division of power: ‘Otherwise only one group would make decisions. This way, more groups can’. Students who hesitated generally had difficulty understanding the principle-based content. Clarifying the substantive meaning of the concepts of making laws and applying them generally did not help them to discern the rationale for division of power.

Conclusions on identifying democratic and social principles

One reason for the difficulties displayed by the students is their unfamiliarity with terms and topics in the questions, including topics generally believed to be covered in the curriculum and to be relevant to the Swedish political context, such as public access to government records. More important, the uncertainty that quite a few students expressed indicates that they lacked the cognitive tools (or the maturity) needed to make principle-based inferences. Limited familiarity with some concepts was observed, but this was generally not the main problem. An explanation often helped the students understand the ‘condition’ presented in the question, but several did not have the ability to find the ‘argument’ for the regulation or arrangement in question. Learners who responded correctly to these questions usually displayed a level of social/civic understanding and analytical ability that allowed them to draw correct conclusions even if the particular issue was somewhat unfamiliar to them.

The students’ difficulties are related to the previously cited research on compound or complex conceptual knowledge. It also illustrates how analytical ability in civics can be understood as the capacity to identify, recognize and problematize political and social questions. This requires both instruction and practice. Reading ability and comprehension are also relevant.

Literacy

Some of the ICCS items contain a great deal of text. Situations, conditions or concepts are described and explained to provide a foundation for the actual question. This is particularly

demanding for students who read slowly and/or have a limited reading comprehension or inadequate vocabulary.

Table 4: Published items with large amounts of text.

	ICCS item	Correct answer (out of four alternatives)	Percentage in Sweden in 2009 ^[2]	Answers in the sample ^[1]
Wordy items with several premises to take into consideration	In <Zedland>, there is a minority group of people whose main language is different from the official language of the country. The group has its own schools where the children are taught and learn only in their own traditional language. The government of <Zedland> decides that all schools should teach all children only in the official language of the country. The government makes this decision because it believes it will help the children of the minority group. Which of the following arguments best supports the government's decision?	It will give the children a greater chance to participate fully in the wider community	70.5	21/29
	What is the best argument against the government's decision?	Governments have a responsibility to protect the cultures of minority groups	36.0	11/29

^[1] Proportion of Swedish students who responded correctly in ICCS 2009 (nationally representative sample)

^[2] 21/29, for example, means that 29 students in the qualitative study were given the item, and that 21 of them responded correctly (includes answers given after explanations).

For weak readers, it takes time and energy to read through the text. Struggling with the introductory material means that central aspects might be misunderstood and prerequisites to correctly answering the question might be missed.

The two questions about interest groups discussed earlier contain almost 200 words including the response alternatives. Some of the interviewees' explanations of incorrect answers on these items indicate that they misunderstood the focus or failed to take all premises into account. A general unfamiliarity with the theme and inability to consider citizen organizations from a principle-based perspective compounded these difficulties.

In two other wordy items (Table 4), the students were asked to identify arguments for and against a decision requiring all schools, including those of a minority group, to give

instruction in the country's official language. Most students answered the first question correctly, some after reading it an additional time. Students who found it difficult struggled to identify the essence of the question and to make sense of the premises (e.g., that the government believes that teaching in the official language would benefit the minority children):

Well, in school they'll be taught in their own language. And I guess that's, well, it's good that they speak their own language with their parents. I believe.

Part of the problem may have to do with the need to switch perspectives (students, minority group, parents, government). These students generally also had difficulty with the second question.

There are indications that some students found particular words in the question challenging. Expressions like 'first language', 'traditional language' and 'official language' might have been hard to distinguish – especially for weak readers. Confident readers among the interviewees read through the text again if unsure: 'At first I didn't get what it was about, but after reading it twice, then...'

The major reason for the second item being one of the hardest, however, is a problematic distractor – 'Governments should accept the need for more than one official language' (chosen by 42.4 per cent of the Swedish students in 2009). While the correct answer is indisputably right, given how the question is framed, it can also be argued that this distractor is equally reasonable. It highlights that the government needs to accept more than one official language in a multicultural society: 'They come from over there [another country]...and need social rights'. This student has even introduced the concept of rights, which was not in the question.

In addition to having a large influx of refugees from different parts of the world, and all the languages this entails, Sweden has five minority languages with official status (cf. Kymlicka and Norman 2000). In fact, similar response patterns for these items were observed in the two other Nordic countries with multiculturalism policies similar to Sweden's (Denmark and Norway).

Slow readers had obvious difficulties with wordy questions. A student who marked a wrong answer on both introductory questions above chose to skip the follow-up items. He explained that he did not really understand what interest groups are and had no idea regarding arguments against the decision about the language of instruction. The questions

that this student answered correctly were short and concerned concepts that he either already knew or understood after a short explanation.

In summary, wordy questions present several problems. Abstract vocabulary appears challenging. Weak readers have additional problems grasping the item's context in its entirety. Explanations of concepts in the question are not always helpful to them. In test conditions with a time limit, slow and/or unsure readers are not able to finish all questions or may skip important introductory material.

Another type of problem can be labelled *limited language skill and vocabulary*. Students with an immigrant background who have lived in their new country for a couple of years and have mastered the new language relatively well can still lack understanding of the deeper linguistic meanings and abstract vocabulary needed in tasks such as these. In addition to having difficulty with the same concepts as many of the native Swedish speakers, students with immigrant background were observed to have particular trouble grasping a number of words. When students are not sure about the meaning of words and expressions like 'argument', 'competition', 'demonstration' and 'criticize political leaders', it is almost impossible for them to understand some of the questions.

Due to frequent queries about the meaning of words, the interview with one boy, who had lived in Sweden for three years, developed into a conversation where I reformulated many questions. When I asked about the difficulty level of the test he responded: 'I don't understand all the words. I've been in Sweden almost three years. But if someone was there to explain some words, then I'd manage it'.

Even though they generally understand the test language, they do not comprehend some of the words that native speakers readily understand. Some of these concepts are political (like 'demonstration', 'apply the law'), while others are more general (like 'argument', 'criticize'). A parallel can be drawn to a small scale Norwegian study that found that bilingual students can benefit from civics teaching in smaller classes, where teacher-student verbal interaction is characterized by more questions, feedback and clarifications of misconceptions (Özerk 2010).

Conclusions and discussion

Although the general level of civic knowledge is comparatively high among Swedish eighth graders, this in-depth study points to problems worth considering in civics teaching in Swedish schools (and perhaps elsewhere). This further suggests that large-scale

comparative tests like ICCS might be used for formative assessments, to get a picture of the general difficulties students are likely to experience in order to provide better teaching and promote student development (Wiliam and Black 1996).

Conclusion

Although this study was limited in scope and size of sample, four specific difficulties for students have been identified in relation to the ICCS items.

1. Some of the knowledge items contain *concepts* that are unfamiliar to quite a few (Swedish) students, e.g. ‘corruption’, ‘trade unions’, ‘market economy’ and ‘multinational businesses’. A simple explanation helps in some cases; students may have substantive conceptual knowledge despite not knowing a particular word. For most of these concepts, however, an explanation of the term does not help, since the students also appear to lack more complex conceptual knowledge and social insights.
2. A partially limited *understanding of democratic and social principles* such as the value of diversity of opinion, transparency of government action and division of power, is also apparent. The students fail to recognize the arguments for a given regulation or standpoint. Many appear to lack the cognitive tools to reason in the way that the questions demand. Some students, however, do possess the understanding of society and analytical ability needed to find the correct answer, even if they may be unfamiliar with specific topics.
3. Students’ general *reading ability* influences their performance on civic knowledge tests of this kind. Abstract vocabulary is a problem. Slow readers and/or students with limited reading comprehension face particular difficulties. They appear to have a hard time discerning focus and premises in wordy items (and may guess the answer). Under normal testing conditions, these students would also fail to finish the test on time.
4. Despite speaking and understanding the language well, *immigrant students* with a different mother tongue than the test language face additional challenges. Their unfamiliarity with or uncertainty about words such as ‘argument’ or ‘demonstration’ make it almost impossible for them to answer some of the items correctly.

The shortcomings are summarized in Table 5 with reference to the theoretical discussion above. However, there are large differences among the students.

Table 5: Overview of Swedish students' difficulties and notes on teaching.

Swedish students' difficulties	
Conceptual knowledge	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Difficulties related to both <i>substantive</i> and <i>compound conceptual knowledge</i> and understanding - This calls for more strategic conceptual teaching in order to increase both factual knowledge and comprehension of principles, rights and conditions
Ability to identify social and political issues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Shortcomings regarding familiarity with and/or <i>ability to grasp political and social perspectives</i> - This suggests that more practice in identifying and discussing social conditions and principles is needed
(Civic) literacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Weak ability to <i>read, understand and reflect on textual content</i> as a limitation for some students - This indicates that reading capacity and comprehension, both generally and in connection to civic issues, are vital to civic education

Lessons for civic education

At least three lessons for civic teaching and learning, with special relevance for Sweden, can be drawn from this study. All deal with language and literacy. Social science and civics, like other school subjects, have a particular vocabulary or expressions and concepts used to describe, understand and discuss society. Civics instruction must therefore strategically and systematically work with the students' *conceptual knowledge and understanding*, both in basic substantive understanding and compound or complex conceptual understanding.

The *ability to identify social and political issues and problems* also needs attention. This study indicates that many students have limited capacity in this respect. To be able to understand and discuss why it is democratically prudent to avoid concentration of media ownership, students need to be taught to represent the issue from different perspectives. Being able to ask questions and grasp problems related to civic issues are vital to being able to understand society and analyse or discuss social conditions. Students need to be prepared to recognize fundamental questions and arguments. Both teaching and assessment could be designed to strengthen this ability.

As shown above, general *reading and literacy skills* appear to be vital to civic education. Improving students' literacy skills is also a way to enhance their civic

capacities. In this case, closer cooperation between instruction in Swedish and in civics is one approach. When working with reading and writing skills, content can be strategically chosen to simultaneously strengthen conceptual knowledge and societal insight, thus paving the way for students to identify social and political problems.

This can be thought of as a form of reciprocal cooperation, and research points to the potential of such strategies (Reichenberg 2008; Vaughn et al. 2013). These studies and others (Andersson 2012; Özerk 2010) also underline how discussions in small groups, and other deliberative teaching methods might be beneficial for civic learning.

The article can be summarized as an argument for increasing civic knowledge in a broad sense, and as a call for civic education instruction to focus on language, reading comprehension and conceptual understanding. Attention also needs to be given to students' ability to understand and reflect on complex societal issues by asking questions, identifying and discussing social and political principles, and utilizing social science concepts.

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Notes

¹ *Civics* is the label for this school subject. Social studies or social science education are related concepts (Långström and Virta 2011).

² The study was conducted on behalf of the Swedish National Agency for Education. A report is available in Swedish (Arensmeier 2012).

³ Swedish curriculum and syllabuses are national, but schools are either run by municipalities or are 'independent' publicly funded, schools.

⁴ On average the students got about six of the ten questions correct. Some answers were given after explanations or other students' arguments for their responses.

⁵ An additional concept causing some problems was 'civic liberties'. The biggest problem with this question was an unfortunate translation (discovered during this qualitative study). The item is not presented in Table 2.

⁶ Zhang et al. conducted factor analysis on the knowledge items (from CIVED 1999) placing this item on corruption in the category 'basic conceptual knowledge' (2012).

⁷ Zhang et al. concluded that the item on trade unions and items on free market and multinational business should be placed in the category 'advanced conceptual knowledge and reasoning' (2012).