

**Assessing Citizenship Skills in Latin America.**  
**The Development of a Regional Module**  
**as part of the International Civic and Citizenship Study**

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This paper draws freely from a paper from the same author analyzing the impact of the  
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education when democracy is in flux:**

**The impact of empirical research on policy and practice in Latin America.**

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Interest in Civic Education in Latin America has grown since the second study of civic Education was conducted in 1999-2000. A growing number of governments in the region have included the development of citizenship skills explicitly as part of the education policy agenda. Six Latin American countries: Chile, Colombia, Dominican Republic, Guatemala, Mexico, and Paraguay are participating in the third study of civic education. In part this growth in interest on the topic of civic education reflects larger political developments and contention regarding democracy and the nature of democracy in the region. In part, deliberate attention to the civic purposes of schools reflect a gradual evolution of sustained attention to improving the quality of education during the recent past. This greater interest in civic education is also due to the impact that the second civic education study had in education policy discussions in the region.

In a separate study analyzing the impact of the civic education study I found that the second IEA Civic Education Study contributed to focusing attention on citizenship education as a purpose of instruction particularly in the two countries where students were surveyed in 1999-2000, Chile and Colombia. It also contributed to the expansion of understanding regarding civic education (Reimers 2007). Instead of a narrow definition focused on the acquisition of factual knowledge about the institutions and processes of government, civic education came to be understood more broadly incorporating the ability to utilize knowledge (skills), as well as to participate and engage in various organizations and the broader community. The study moved the field from a focus on the opportunity to learn in a single curriculum subject, to a more encompassing view of opportunity to learn through multiple subjects of instruction and school culture. This

emphasis was well summarized in one of the study's reports: "Schools that operate in a participatory democratic way, foster an open climate for discussion within the classroom and invite students to take part in shaping school life are effective in promoting both civic knowledge and engagement" (Torney-Purta, Lehman, Oswald, & Schultz, 2001, p.176).

The reports generated from the study directly contributed to curriculum revision and, in the case of Colombia, to advancing an interest in student learning outcomes (knowledge and skills) as essential to discussions about educational quality. The reports also contributed indirectly to regional policy dialogue about civic education. They were often cited in reports and conferences convened to discuss the civic purposes of schools as among the few empirical studies documenting students' skills and knowledge. The study contributed least to discussions of programs and pedagogies largely because the survey instruments were not designed to assess the relative effectiveness of modalities of civic education. A major contribution of the study was to set the stage for the next IEA international study of civic education (ICCS) in which six countries of Latin America are participating with testing taking place in 2009 and in which there will be a Latin American module with questions designed to address regional issues.

The study had its impact through two principal mechanisms. The first was the generation of comparative descriptive empirical knowledge. The second mechanism was the professional development and integration of key individuals into academic networks. These individuals then took a prominent role in reforms in civic education in their

countries. A series of contextual conditions in the region, including a growing emphasis on educational quality and student assessment, facilitated this process.

### **Political context and shifts in Latin America.**

During the last twenty years Latin America has experienced significant political change. The early 1980s marked a return to democratic rule for the majority of Latin American nations, which had experienced periods of military rule. Before 1978 only Colombia, Costa Rica and Venezuela elected their leaders through competitive and free elections. Between 1978 and 1990 democratic transitions took place in Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, and Uruguay (Payne, M. et al. 2007). With the exception of Cuba all Latin American nations have had competitive elections since this most recent democratic transition. Civil freedoms, human rights and democratic institutions have expanded since these transitions in most countries, with the exceptions of Cuba and Venezuela. The impact of recent presidential elections in Ecuador, Peru and Nicaragua on democratic institutions is still an open question.

Increased political participation and representation have brought new questions about the way to deepen democracy, in the sense of moving from electoral democracy to democracy as a way of life (UNDP 2004). This is particularly true in the Latin American context in which deep seated economic and social institutions reproduce high levels of social inequality and poverty. Public opinion polls in the region reveal high levels of dissatisfaction with democratic institutions, and limited support for democracy as a form of government. While slightly more than half of the population prefers democracy over

other kind of governments, such support has been declining. About a third of the population thinks either authoritarian government is better or that there is no difference between types of government. Of particular interest are the tradeoffs that Latin Americans make between freedom and economic security. In Mexico, for instance, 60% of the population prefers democracy over other form of government; however, 67% of the population would not mind an authoritarian government if it was able to address the economic needs of the population (Latinobarometro, 2004).

More than half of the population in Latin America believes that politics are so complicated that they can't understand them (Latinobarometro 2005). Participation in political activities, beyond electoral participation, is infrequent. On average in Latin America only 27% of those surveyed talk about politics with friends, 19% work for an issue that affects them or their community, 17% try to convince someone of their political ideas and 6% work or have worked for a political party or candidate (Latinobarometro 2005). Of particular interest is that 29% percent of the younger generation (ages 16 to 29) have non-democratic orientations (UNDP 2004). Given that the great majority of the population is young, these attitudes toward democracy are particularly consequential for the future of democracy in the region.

Current issues with significant consequences for democratic citizenship include: first, persistent poverty and inequality, which constrain the opportunities for social and economic participation for large segments of the population; second, the reappearance of authoritarian forms of government in a few countries in Latin America, constraining open political competition; third, the fact that Venezuela, one of the States now espousing authoritarian socialism is using its oil resources to ensure political support domestically

as well as to support like-minded regimes; and fourth, the expansion of criminality and violence associated with drug trafficking, which undermines the rule of law and of democratic institutions in some countries in the region.

The overall results of the IEA study of Civic Education for 14-year-olds were released in March of 2001 (Torney-Purta, Lehmann, Oswald, and Schulz. 2001) and for upper secondary students were released in July of 2002 (Amadeo, Torney-Purta, Lehmann, Husfeldt, and Nikolova, 2002). These results allowed for comparison across countries of student knowledge and skills in a range of core concepts about democracy. Chilean and Colombian students were at the bottom of the distribution of scores from 28 countries testing 14-year-olds and the average scores in these two countries were significantly below the international mean (Torney-Purta, et.al., 2001). A detailed analysis of the data from Chile, Colombia, Portugal and the United States (including an examination of responses to individual items) was funded by the Organization of American States and conducted by Torney-Purta and Amadeo (2004). The deficits in civic knowledge were of approximately the same size among the lower secondary and the upper secondary students, suggesting that the problems may lie in the education provided before the age of 14 and may include deficits in reading comprehension of complex texts, as well as in democratic content knowledge.

To give one example, only half of the students in Chile correctly answered a question about who should govern in a democracy by choosing “popularly elected officials” (many students choosing instead the incorrect answer that experts in politics ought to govern). A reasonable proportion of students in Colombia were able to answer questions about the ideal features of democracy (on some questions a higher percentage

than in Chile). The Colombian students, however, performed very poorly when questions dealt with the rights of citizens to dissent, or with dictatorships and non-democratic government. Chilean also students scored very poorly when questions required understanding these threats to democracy (Torney-Purta, 2005, Torney-Purta and Amadeo 2004). The results of the IEA Study also showed that youth in Colombia and Chile did not trust their national government institutions, though they expressed a higher level of trust in their schools than students many of the other countries. The study found that, in spite of relatively low levels of knowledge and skill, the majority of young people in these countries participated in community and solidarity groups, even as they expressed distrust and detachment from formal political institutions (Torney-Purta and Amadeo 2004).

A survey including and augmenting the publicly released questions of the IEA study administered in Mexico in 2002 found that less than half of the respondents understood that in a democracy popularly elected representatives should govern (Guevara and Tirado 2006). Equally low was the knowledge of the Constitution, the function of civic organizations and of laws, the ability to identify corruption, the function of regularly held elections, political parties, or Congress. These authors found that nearly 90% of students confused the different levels of government and 64%. Further, 53% agreed with the statement: “if the law is against your interests it is legitimate not to abide by it”.

The IEA Civic Education Study in Chile and Colombia has directly impacted the professional development of individuals who have subsequently played leading roles in advancing efforts to strengthen civic education in these countries. This increased

professional capacity resulted from the direct experience of organizing the research to meet IEA's criteria, but also from engagement in the international network of scholars that participated in the international study. In Chile, the national director of curriculum was an active participant in meetings convened by the IEA and other international organizations (Cox, 2003). He both contributed to and learned from this cross-national enterprise. He played a leading role in the design of a new curriculum of civic education, which was directly informed by the results of the study.

In July of 2004 Chile's Minister of Education established a committee tasked with reviewing and revising the curriculum of civic education. One meeting of this group was held in conjunction with the release in Santiago of the OAS report previously mentioned (Torney-Purta and Amadeo, 2004). The IEA reports were also among the inputs for this committee. In addition, the IEA assessment framework was used to review the national curriculum in order to identify important gaps, while the assessment data of 1999 has been considered a baseline to assess the impact of subsequent curriculum reform (Leonor Cariola, Director of Civic Education, National Ministry of Education. Personal communication. May 2007).

In Colombia, a senior national advisor to the Minister of Education on citizenship education, and a leader spearheading numerous initiatives to advance citizenship education in the country, was involved with the IEA team after 2001 and is involved in the design of the current ICCS. The most direct impact of the IEA CIVED Study in Colombia was in the development of the national system of assessment for civic education, rather than in the redesign of curriculum. When asked what impact the study had in Colombia, the current national coordinator of citizenship education reported:

“[The study] taught us how to assess and has influenced many of the assessments we have developed in Colombia. It is at the basis of how we defined citizenship competencies. However, few people talk about the study in Colombia... Those who know about the study include the professionals in the testing agency, but not the teachers.” (Rosario Jaramillo. Personal Communication. May 2007).

The impact of the study has been mostly at the policy level, and so in spite of growing interest in citizenship education in Latin America little has changed in classroom practice in this area. Challenges to the pedagogy of civic education exist in most countries in the region. In Mexico, a recent study of students in their senior year of high school showed that while 24 percent of the students indicate that they liked the Spanish language course very much; only 13 percent responded positively for the civics course (Guevara and Tirado 2006). Furthermore, several of the school and classroom factors that had a significant positive influence in most other countries in the IEA CIVED Study were not associated with achievement in Colombia (Torney-Purta and Amadeo, 2004), making it difficult to suggest ways to improve pedagogical quality in Colombia.

In addition to its direct impact in capacity building, curriculum revision and development of civic education assessment systems in the two participating countries, the IEA Civic Education Study provided empirical grounding to numerous policy discussions across Latin America about the need to explicitly focus on the civic purposes of schools. As the only study to have directly measured civic knowledge and skills using a comparative framework, the IEA study remains a singularly important referent in discussions about the cognitive dimensions of civic education (and to some extent about attitudes).

As would be expected, impact or interest in the study has been smaller in the countries which did not participate. The reports contributed more to establishing the case for explicit attention to civic education, and to underscoring the centrality of focusing on students' civic knowledge and skills, than to discussions about particular approaches to advance civic knowledge or engagement. The study was not designed to establish the 'value added' by teachers and schools in the civic knowledge and skills of their students, nor was it designed to assess the impact of specific programs of civic education or to capture the range of efforts that teachers might make to foster citizenship education. Thus its impact has been limited in stimulating specific interventions at the classroom level, and in closing the gap between policy and practice. Most of the impact of the study was with policy elites and with highly specialized education communities, not with the vast majority of teachers, teacher educators or the larger public. This may reflect the top down nature of institutions and processes of educational reform in Latin America. It may also be a result of IEA's emphasis on testing rigorous samples drawn on a national basis rather than sampling in a way to make it possible to contrast specific policies or pedagogies. Further, the Colombian coordinators were unable to administer the teacher questionnaire, meaning that data from teachers was available in only one Latin American country. As a result of this combination of issues, there has been limited observable impact of the study in teacher practice, and in teacher discourse about pedagogy or civic-related subjects.

## **A growing regional interest in Citizenship Education**

A number of activities focused on citizenship education with support from governments and development agencies in the region suggest that the topic has come of age as a legitimate and important topic for policy attention. This contrasts with the situation a few decades ago, when education policy was principally focused on getting children to school or teaching them the basics. That these basics now include citizenship competencies indicates that times have changed. This is both because Latin America is more democratic than it was twenty five years ago, and also because there is more contention about what democracy means and more concern about the future of democracy in the region. That education systems are reflecting these larger conversations indicates that the institutions of education are also becoming more attuned to larger social goals and expectations.

In the early 1990's the United States Agency for International Development stimulated discussion of the relationship between education and democracy, including a study of civic education in the primary school curriculum of all countries in Latin America and a study of several educational innovations to improve the quality of education in high poverty schools. These studies and a review of existing empirical evidence found that civic education was largely an isolated subject in the curriculum, that it focused principally on factual knowledge about the political institutions of government and that school culture and teacher practice reflected authoritarian cultural values rather than democratic ideals (Villegas-Reimers 1993, 1994a and 1994b, Reimers 1994).

In 1999 the Inter-American Development Bank commissioned a review of research on civic education in Latin America, which was published by their education

unit (Tibbitts and Torney-Purta 1999). This report included recommendations for program officers in the region about promoting education for democracy.

Recent activities at the regional level have contributed to placing the study and practice of citizenship education more centrally on the education reform agenda. From 2002 (soon after the release of the IEA international findings) until 2004 the Organization of American States (UDSE) supported and published a reanalysis of the IEA data from the three participating countries in the region (Chile, Colombia, and the U.S.) and Portugal. A detailed examination of this smaller group of countries and of students' responses at the item level to all the cognitive test items and many of the attitudinal items was especially informative (Torney-Purta and Amadeo, 2004). A number of issues that provide challenges for a program of civic education in the region were identified: young people who lack basic literacy, teachers' preparation, societal violence, relations between the Ministry of Education and non-governmental organizations, and political traditions such as populism. These authors suggested that a Latin American study of civic education be planned to examine student outcomes, aspects of the school, policies and current programs (Torney-Purta and Amadeo, 2004, p. 142).

In 2004 one of a multi-year series of meetings of Deputy Ministers of Education commissioned a survey of the curriculum of secondary schools to serve as input for further discussion (Reimers and Villegas-Reimers 2004). This paper was presented in early 2005 to the vice-ministers of education, who decided to commission a strategy paper that would make the case for explicit attention to citizenship education and outline policy options. That paper, published by the Inter-American Development Bank (Cox, Jaramillo and Reimers 2005) together with the OAS report (Torney-Purta and Amadeo,

2004) served as the basis of discussion at a regional meeting of Ministers of Education in August 2005. Several Ministers decided to collaborate in setting up an observatory of citizenship education, which would coordinate a regional study. This eventually became a regional module of the ICCS civic education study being organized by IEA and received financial support from the Inter-American Development Bank. As a result six countries from Latin America (Chile, Colombia, Dominican Republic, Guatemala, Mexico, and Paraguay) are currently participating in the ICCS Civic Education Study. A network of scholars have agreed on a framework for the dimensions of democratic citizenship most relevant to the region and developed a regional module to assess both the knowledge, skills and attitudes of 15 year olds and the opportunities to learn these competencies in school. After pilot testing, these instruments will be administered concurrently with the international data collection instrument of the ICCS IEA civic education study in 2009 (in parallel with a European Regional Module). It is expected that this project will further stimulate quality programming in the participating countries and visibility for civic education in the region.

Concurrent with this activity, the Education Unit of the Organization of American States launched the Inter-American Program for Democratic Values and Practices in 2006. This is a three pronged initiative to support democratic citizenship education through research, professional development and exchange of information and dissemination of best practices. The program builds on ongoing initiatives and examines both formal and non-formal education. Twenty-three countries from the Americas (Central, South and North) as well as the Caribbean responded to a survey designed to provide a description of policies related to education for democracy in the region.

Respondents (most from Ministries of Education) indicated whether there was a national policy on the teaching of education for democratic citizenship, the extent to which the policies established national standards for students of different grades, as well as whether the policies promote a particular pedagogical approach.

### **The Preparation of the Regional Module**

The Inter-American Development Bank tasked a Unesco affiliated regional center for the promotion of books in Latin America (CERLALC) to develop a regional system to evaluate and develop citizenship skills. This organization put together a team including a specialist from each of the countries participating in the study and a regional technical advisor. This team was asked to theorize democratic citizenship and to develop a model that could be used to provide feedback to the international survey. The model was also used to design a regional module that would complement the international survey. The preparation of this model involved extensive dialogue among the regional and country specialists over a series of meetings that took place during the summer of 2007. This team also interacted with a team of test developers that, under the direction of Dr. Eugenio Gonzalez from ETS, developed the test items for the module that were field tested in the fall of 2007.

This team theorized that the core dimensions of citizenship included knowledge, attitudes and skills. Based on the low performance of students in Colombia and Chile in the 1999 Civic Education Study and on other assessments the team concluded it was not

warranted to assume that students in the region had the basic knowledge about democracy and democratic institutions that is implicitly assumed, and thus not directly tested, in the third International Civic and Citizenship Study. For each of the core dimensions of the model (Knowledge, Attitudes and Skills) the team identified those that related to allowing people to live together peacefully, those that allowed democratic participation, and those that supported pluralism and diversity.

Once these knowledge, attitudes and skills were identified, the team developed a framework to assess the opportunities to learn these knowledge, attitudes and skills in school, family and other groups.

## **1. Knowledge**

### **1.1. Peaceful Living Together**

What is peaceful coexistence

What is violence

What is peace

### **1.2. Democratic Participation**

What is democracy as a way of life

What are the characteristics of democratic governments

What is a State

What are the rights and responsibilities of citizens in a Democratic State

What freedoms are guaranteed in a democracy

What are economic freedoms

What are the risks for democracy of authoritarianism, populism, nepotism, monopoly of the press, corruption of justice, administrative corruption.

What is freedom of speech

What is accountability

What is representation

What are the formal mechanisms of representation in a democracy

What is the purpose of free elections in a democracy

What is the rule of law

Historical experience in the region with the consequences to individual freedoms and human rights under authoritarian rule

What are the differences between dictatorship and democracy

When did the last dictatorship in this country end?

Knowledge of the impact of organized crime in democratic and political institutions and in individual rights

### **1.3. Plurality and Diversity**

Knowledge of indigenous people and culture

Institutions of indigenous people

Concept of Gender

What are stereotypes and prejudices

## **2. Attitudes and Beliefs**

### **2.1. Peaceful Living Together**

Attitudes towards other Latin American Countries and to other countries and regions  
Attitudes towards the use of violent means to achieve peace  
Attitude towards regional economic integration  
Acceptance of regional governmental institutions and economic agreements (regional economic markets)  
Attitudes towards shared responsibility with the State  
Attitudes towards different means to influence a government decision  
Trust in other people  
Trust in social organizations  
Solidarity with others, altruism and orientation to cooperate with others  
Attitudes towards consensus, disagreement, majority rule, respect to minority rights  
Attitudes towards actions to reduce poverty and promote social inclusion  
Attitudes towards the tension of balancing justice and peace in societies that have experienced recent military-civilian conflicts.

### **2.2. Democratic Participation**

Attitudes towards democratic forms of government  
Attitudes towards political activities  
Attitudes towards democratic institutions  
Attitudes towards social and political organizations  
Attitudes towards government accountability to citizens  
Attitudes towards voting  
Attitudes towards the use of force or violence to achieve individual or group objectives  
Pluralism and Diversity  
Attitudes towards equality and diversity  
Tolerance towards all people and their rights

### **3. Skills**

#### **3.1. Living Together in Peace**

Skills to resolve interpersonal conflicts peacefully

Aggression experienced

Skills for peaceful conflict resolution (interpersonally and group)

Assertiveness

Communicative skills

Perspective Taking

Skills to manage emotions

Empathy

#### **3.2. Democratic Participation**

Skills to participate in group decision making processes

Skills to communicate ideas to groups

Skills to recognize and communicate self-interests

Skills to influence and lead groups

Skills to represent others in groups

Skills to advocate for the interests of others

#### **3.3. Plurality and Diversity**

Confront discrimination and exclusion with democratic means