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Civic knowledge and tolerance toward immigrants in Europe

How similar is the relationship between young people's civic knowledge and attitudes toward equal rights for immigrants, across European countries?

SUMMARY

- Tolerance is necessary for the functioning of mature democracies where social cohesion is strong.
- Results from IEA's International Civic and Citizenship Education Study (ICCS) 2016 show that, on average, European young people tend to be tolerant, but their attitudes towards equal rights for immigrants vary widely within and across European educational systems.
- In each of the ICCS 2016 European educational systems, young people with higher levels of civic knowledge tend to be more tolerant, while, in contrast, young people with low levels of civic knowledge tend to be less tolerant.
- Grade eight ICCS 2016 data indicate that in each of the 14 European educational systems, civic knowledge shows the strongest association with tolerance toward immigrants relative to the impact of individual background variables.

IMPLICATIONS

- While, on average, European students tend to be tolerant toward immigrants, their attitudes vary widely. Educational policymakers and practitioners can have a more nuanced picture if they consider both average tolerance scores and their variability across countries.
- Across Europe, young people with higher levels of civic knowledge tend to be more tolerant. Policymakers and practitioners should strengthen their efforts to provide learning opportunities focused on fostering civic knowledge and high cognitive processes for the entire student population.
- Civic knowledge shows stronger associations with tolerance compared with several individual background characteristics. This finding gives further support to the relevance of educational policies aimed at promoting civic and citizenship learning in schools in Europe.
- Individual background characteristics such as gender, immigration background, and socioeconomic status should be considered when identifying characteristics associated with lower tolerance toward immigrants. Their relevance may be different in different educational systems and examining the factors specific to each context could provide information for creating tailored initiatives.

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INTRODUCTION

During the last decade, several terrorist attacks (e.g., attacks on London Bridge, in the Jewish museum in Brussels, and the white extremist attack in Oslo) are extreme examples of how polarization, populism, and anti-immigrant sentiment are challenging mature European democracies' social cohesion (see Norris & Inglehart 2019).

The levels of respect, acceptance, and appreciation of diversity, and openness to extend political and civil rights to immigrants (i.e., tolerance: see Côté & Erickson 2009; Gibson 2013; UNESCO 1995; van Zalk et al. 2013), seem to be diminishing. In response, educational policymakers are undertaking coordinated action (e.g., the EU Education and Training Strategy 2020 & 2030) aimed at promoting the core European value of tolerance in schools (European Commission 2019; European Council 2015).

Assessing whether these policies reach their goal of heightening tolerance in young people is therefore crucial not only to inform future approaches but also to predict how democracy will evolve. IEA's International Civic and Citizenship Education Study (ICCS) 2009 and 2016, and their predecessor, the Civic Education Study (CIVED 1999) (Schulz et al. 2010, 2018; Torney-Purta et al. 2001), are unique comparative sources of information regarding young people's beliefs about equal rights and opportunities for different groups in society (defined by immigration background, ethnic/racial status, and gender).

TOLERANCE TOWARD IMMIGRANTS AND ITS CORRELATES

Tolerance, defined as "an abstract ideological belief, based on understanding equalitarian principles and a political conviction that immigrants and nonimmigrants should be treated equally" (van Zalk & Kerr 2014, p. 1660) is necessary for the functioning of mature democracies. Without tolerance, not all groups in society would be able to defend their interests in the same way, which could challenge the existence of a mature democracy in Europe. Research shows that tolerance emerges in and is most malleable from early adolescence onwards while it remains rather stable in adult populations (van Zalk & Kerr 2014). Moreover, it is established that young people can become more tolerant when they develop abstract reasoning skills and they learn about tolerance in general and the characteristics and rights of other groups in society (Côté & Erickson 2009; van Zalk & Kerr 2014). Furthermore, individual background characteristics such as gender, socioeconomic status, and immigration background have also been linked to tolerance levels and therefore should be carefully examined when designing learning experiences aimed at promoting tolerance (Maurissen et al. 2018; Sandoval-Hernández et al. 2018).

In this policy brief, we want to shed light on the tolerance toward immigrants of young people in Europe. To do this, we are first going to examine how tolerance toward immigrants can be measured at a young age (referring to the operationalization in ICCS 2016). Second, using ICCS 2016 data, we will discuss the tolerance levels of young Europeans. Finally, we will shed light on the relationship between civic knowledge and tolerance toward immigrants reporting also on the role of individual background characteristics such as gender, socioeconomic status, and immigration background.



HOW ICCS ASSESSES TOLERANCE TOWARD IMMIGRANTS

The ICCS student questionnaire for grade eight students features three sets of items that ask students about their attitudes toward equal rights for immigrants, their attitudes toward equal rights for all ethnic/racial groups,¹ and their attitudes toward gender equality.

Here we focus on students' reports regarding *attitudes toward equal rights for immigrants* captured by a set of four items (Table 1). In previous research, these items were found to form a scale (which was set to have an international mean of 50 and a standard deviation of 10) that is comparable across the 14 European

countries participating in the European module of ICCS 2016² (see Isac et al. 2019). The items (see Table 1) capture aspects of political tolerance such as endorsing civil and political liberties like equal rights to education and the right to vote, but also aspects of social tolerance such as rights to cultural expression (see Gibson 2013; Weldon 2006). From here on, we refer to this concept as *tolerance toward immigrants*.³ Information provided by these data allows researchers to compare average tolerance scores in the European countries, connect this information with the ICCS civic knowledge test scores and proficiency levels, and examine the relationship between civic knowledge (and individual background variables) and tolerance.

Table 1: Attitudes toward equal rights for immigrants, ICCS 2016

	RESPONSE CATEGORIES: 1 = Strongly disagree; 2 = Disagree; 3 = Agree; 4 = Strongly agree
ES3G04B*	<Immigrant> children should have the same opportunities for education that other children in the country have
ES3G04C*	<Immigrants> who live in a country for several years should have the opportunity to vote in elections
ES3G04D*	<Immigrants> should have the opportunity to continue their own customs and lifestyle
ES3G04E*	<Immigrants> should have the same rights that everyone else in the country has

Note: *Item reverse coded.

HOW TOLERANT ARE YOUNG PEOPLE IN EUROPEAN SOCIETIES?

Findings from ICCS 2016 provide the opportunity to compare average levels of tolerance throughout Europe as well their variability, demonstrated by the average score gap between the 95th and the 5th percentile (see Figure 1). These results provide an optimistic picture: across the 14 European countries, students' levels of tolerance toward immigrants are rather high. Countries such as Latvia and Sweden stand out with the lowest and highest average scores, respectively, when compared to the European

average. However, the results also show high variability within countries. For example, Swedish students have the highest average scores in Europe, but the gap between the highest and lowest average scores in Sweden is about 36 points. The data (see Figure 1) suggest that it is important to describe country differences both in terms of average scores and variability. In this way a more nuanced picture of results can be considered when improvement efforts are designed.

1. Please note that all the analyses conducted for this brief were also applied to the scale on attitudes toward equal rights for all ethnic/racial groups and the obtained results are almost identical. Further information is available from the authors upon request.
2. In contrast to previous studies (CIVED 1999, ICCS 2009), in ICCS 2016 these items were administered only to grade eight students in the 14 countries participating in the European module of ICCS 2016 (see the ICCS 2016 European report, Losito et al. 2018).
3. Please note that ICCS provides only a proxy and by no means an

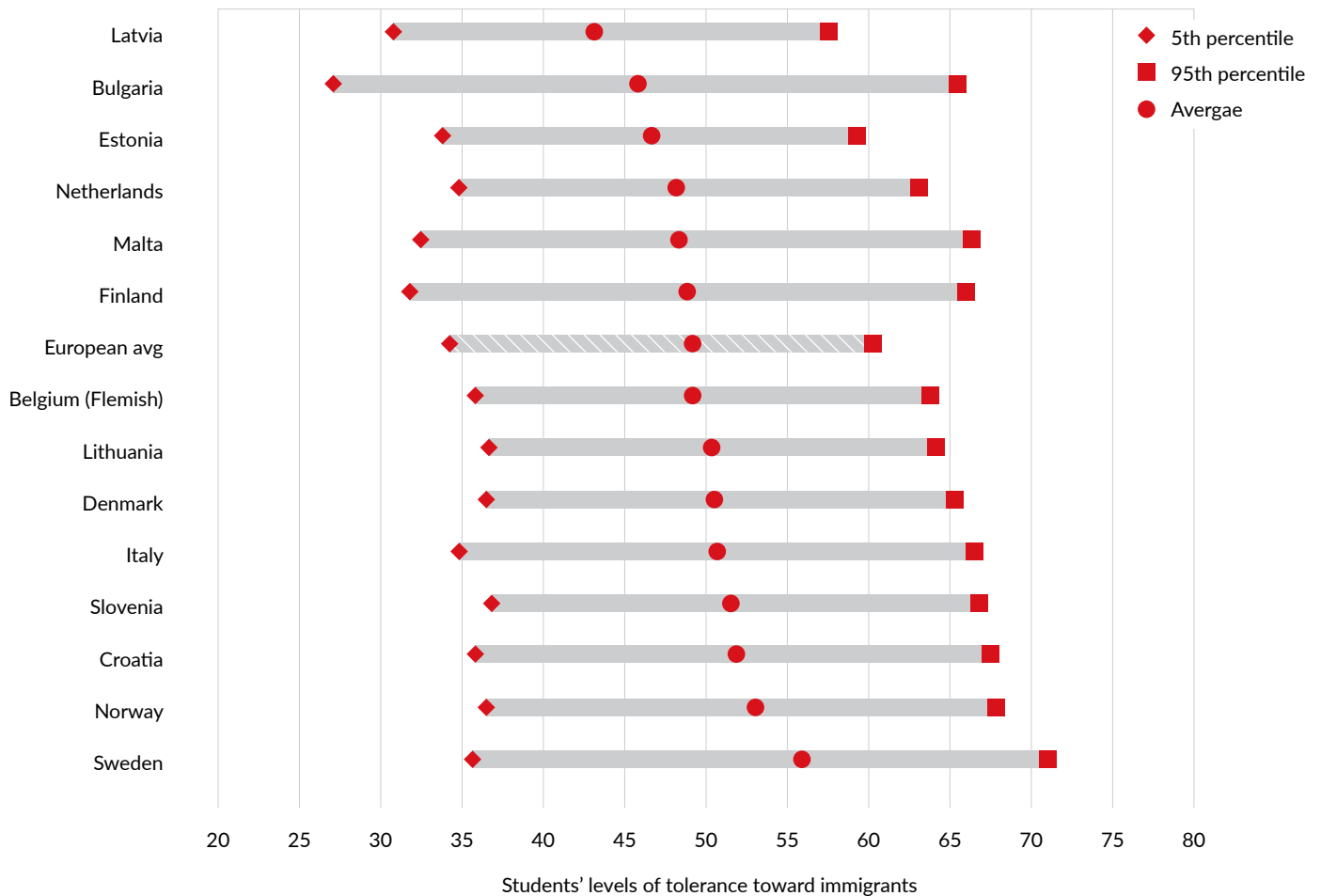
exhaustive measure of the concept of tolerance toward immigrants. The reader should keep in mind that the composition of immigrant populations may be different in different European countries. For example, countries such as Belgium and the Netherlands are long-standing immigration destinations in Europe while some countries (e.g., Bulgaria) are experiencing major humanitarian migration relatively recently. In other countries (e.g., Latvia) the immigrant population was shaped by border changes and by national minorities. These differences may affect the comparisons reported here.

ARE YOUNG PEOPLE WITH HIGH LEVELS OF CIVIC KNOWLEDGE MORE TOLERANT TOWARD IMMIGRANTS?

Tolerance requires a high level of knowledge and understanding (Peffley et al. 2001; van Zalk & Kerr 2014). The civic knowledge test administered in ICCS 2016 provides information about overall student achievement in terms of learning content and cognitive processes and also their progression across different proficiency levels. ICCS 2016 distinguished between four proficiency levels (for details, see

Schulz et al. 2018). We focus here on students situated at or above the highest proficiency level, level A, and on students at or below level C. The first group demonstrates the highest level of content knowledge and abstract understanding. The second group differentiates itself from the rest by “the degree of specificity in knowledge and the amount of mechanistic rather than relational thinking” (Schulz et al. 2018, p. 47).

Figure 1: Students’ levels of tolerance toward immigrants: average, 5th, and 95th percentile scores

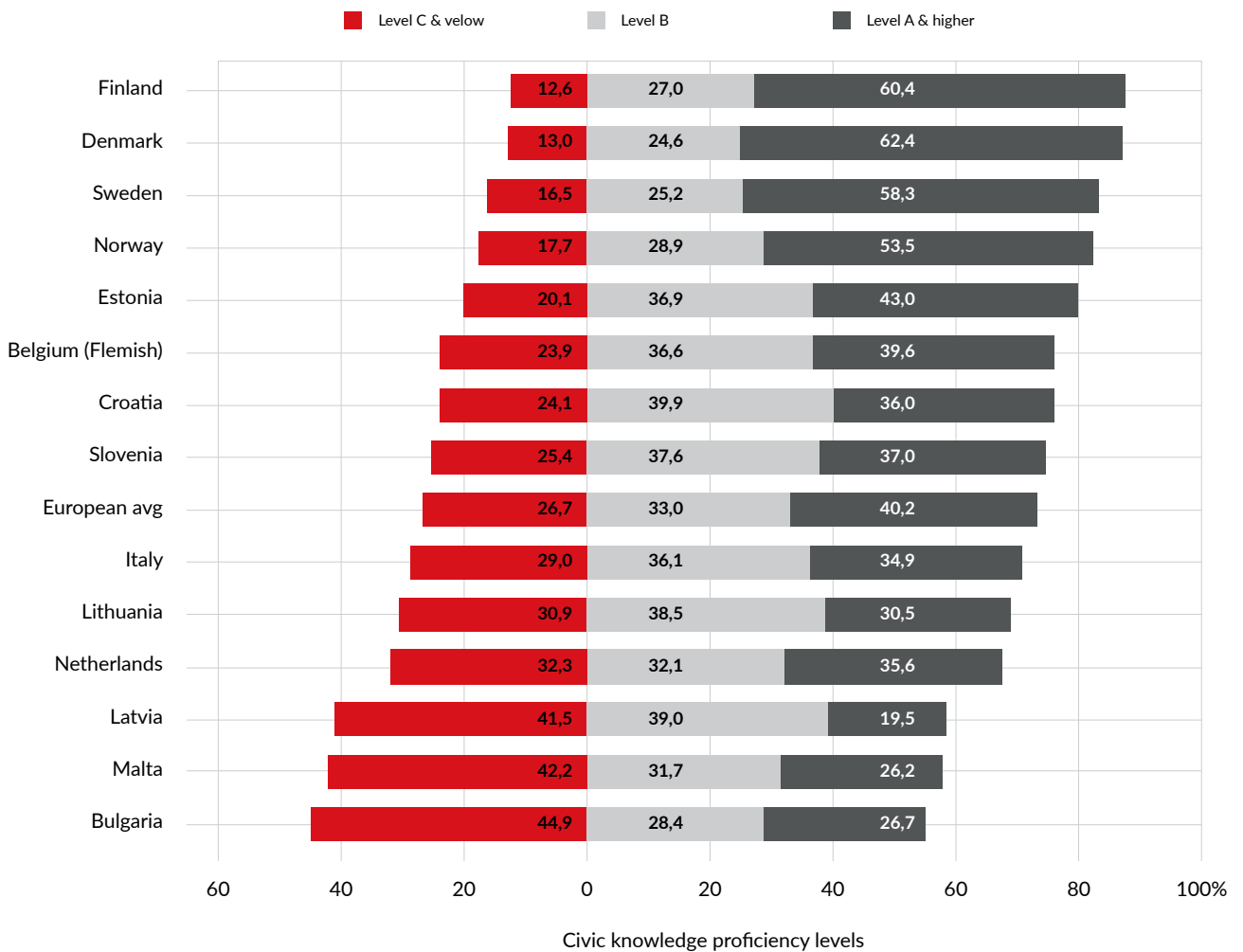


Source: Isac et al. 2019.

The percentages of young people situated at different proficiency levels in each country (see Figure 2) show that the 14 European countries succeed in educating many students at high content and skill levels. On average, about four in 10 students (40%) demonstrate the highest proficiency levels (level A and above). Nevertheless, across the 14 countries,

an important share of students (27%) is situated at level C or below. The results also show different rates of students belonging to these groups that depend on the educational system. For example, about six in 10 students in Finland demonstrate high civic knowledge proficiency while only about two in 10 students reach this level in Latvia.

Figure 2: Civic knowledge proficiency levels, ICCS 2016

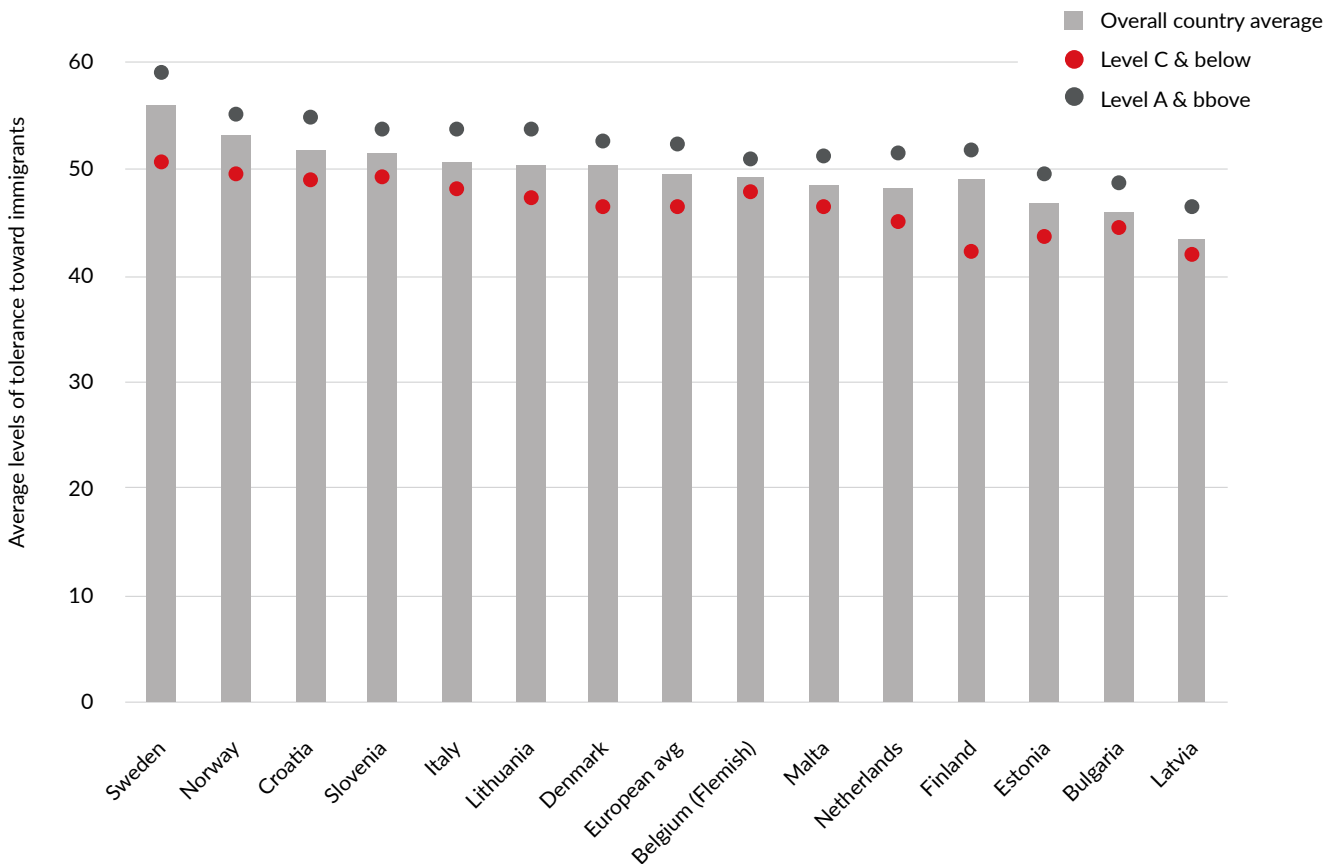


Once young people’s levels of tolerance toward immigrants are examined across civic knowledge proficiency levels (Figure 3), a consistent picture emerges. Across all 14 European countries, young people with high levels of civic knowledge

(proficiency level A and above) tend to hold more tolerant attitudes towards immigrants relative to the overall country average. In contrast, students situated at proficiency level C or below tend to be less tolerant, on average.



Figure 3: Average levels of tolerance toward immigrants across civic knowledge proficiency levels



Notes: Analyses performed with IEA's IDB Analyzer (IEA 2017). In all countries, averages for students at "level C & below" and "level A & above" are statistically different from each other and with respect to the overall country average (see Figure1).

HOW SIMILAR ARE THE RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN CIVIC KNOWLEDGE AND TOLERANCE TOWARD IMMIGRANTS ACROSS EUROPEAN COUNTRIES?

We found that high levels of civic knowledge are relevant for tolerant attitudes of European young people. This finding is important because it highlights the impact that school systems can have in promoting tolerance toward immigrants by providing learning opportunities focused on fostering civic knowledge and high cognitive processes. Nevertheless, academic research has also consistently highlighted the role of individual background characteristics such as gender, socioeconomic status, and immigration background.

ICCS 2016 allows analyses of the relationship between civic knowledge and tolerance toward immigrants while taking into account individual background characteristics such as gender,

immigration status, and socioeconomic status. Such analyses can show if there is a statistically significant association between these background variables and tolerance and whether this association is similar in all the countries considered.

The findings from this exercise (Figure 4) confirm that in each of the 14 European educational systems, young people with low levels of civic knowledge are more likely to be less tolerant toward immigrants over and above other background characteristics. Moreover, civic knowledge shows by far the strongest association with tolerance relative to the impact of the individual background variables (i.e., gender, socioeconomic status, immigration background).

Figure 4: Associations between individual student characteristics and tolerance toward immigrants



Notes: Analyses performed with IEA's IDB Analyzer using the Regression option (IEA 2017). The model tested the association between civic knowledge and tolerance toward immigrants while controlling for the other background characteristics such as gender (girls=1), immigration status (immigrant=1) and socioeconomic status (national index of socioeconomic background). Statistically significant associations are listed in the order of the strength of their association (standardized regression coefficients) with tolerance toward immigrants.

The analysis (see Figure 4) also shows the importance of the individual background characteristics across countries and specific to each educational system. These findings can be analyzed to identify specific groups when designing curricula aimed at heightening tolerance toward immigrants (e.g., developing different civic education materials for civic education classes tailored to student needs). In particular, in most countries, young people with lower levels of civic knowledge, boys, and native-born students tend to be less tolerant.

Nevertheless, when examining the relevance of these factors in each country, discernable patterns are also apparent. In all the Nordic countries (Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Finland) as well as in some Western (The Netherlands) and Southern (Malta) European countries, all aspects (i.e., having lower levels of civic

knowledge, being a boy, being native-born, having a lower socioeconomic status) seem relevant for tolerance toward immigrants.

In other educational systems, such as Belgium (Flemish), Croatia, Estonia, Italy, and Lithuania, socioeconomic status does not seem to make a difference, and differences in young people's levels of tolerance are mainly driven by their civic knowledge, gender, and immigration status. Moreover, in two countries (Bulgaria and Latvia), a notably different pattern emerges with lower tolerance levels being related to holding a high socioeconomic status next to having lower civic knowledge achievement and being a boy. All these differences are worth consideration and further exploration when initiatives to heighten political tolerance are undertaken.

CONCLUSION

Tolerance is a core European value and school systems in all European countries are making notable efforts to promote this student outcome in schools. When designing curricula aimed at heightening tolerance, educational policymakers and practitioners should consider and reinforce the important role of fostering civic knowledge and high cognitive processes for the entire distribution of the student population. These knowledge and skills must enable young people to understand the importance of equal rights and responsibilities for different groups in a democracy as well as to identify potential threats to democracy. Moreover, a careful and contextualized examination of other student characteristics such as gender, immigration background, and socioeconomic status could provide information relevant for pinpointing potential groups at risk of being less tolerant in different educational systems. In this endeavor, other successful practices, for example, enabling school environments where students of different immigration backgrounds can interact and exchange points of view in an

atmosphere of equality and respect, should be considered (see Maurissen et al. 2018; Sandoval-Hernández et al. 2018).

The ICCS study, as well as the results of research applied to these data, can be an important resource for all the stakeholders involved. However, ICCS findings are just an initial source of information. It allowed us to identify important associations and patterns but due to the cross-sectional nature of ICCS, we must acknowledge that no causal inferences can be drawn from the findings reported here. Therefore, we advise the reader to interpret the findings as starting points for discussion and to seek out and encourage in-depth quantitative and/or qualitative country-specific studies that further explore factors relevant to promoting tolerance, and aim to identify educational policies and successful teaching and learning practices of particular relevance for the context of each educational system.



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FURTHER READING

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