The School’s Role in Developing Civic Engagement: A Study of Adolescents in Twenty-Eight Countries

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Schools achieve the best results in fostering civic engagement when they rigorously teach civic content and skills, ensure an open classroom climate for discussing issues, emphasize the importance of the electoral process, and encourage a participative school culture. Schools whose students do not plan to attend college and have few educational resources at home face a special challenge. These are among the conclusions of the IEA Civic Education Study in which 90,000 14-year-olds in 28 countries were tested on knowledge of civic content and skills and were surveyed about concepts of citizenship, attitudes toward governmental and civic institutions, and political actions.

An ideal civic education experience in a democracy should enable students to acquire meaningful knowledge about the political and economic system, to recognize the strengths and challenges of democracy and the attributes of good citizenship, to be comfortable in participating in respectful discussions of important and potentially controversial issues, and to be aware of civil society organizations. Knowledge should lead to both skills in interpreting political communication and to dispositions favoring actual involvement in conventional citizenship behavior, especially voting on the basis of the candidates’ issue positions. Ideally, students would participate in organizations of civil society even before they reach voting age. Finally, in a democracy, schooling should result in equal levels of civic preparation and willingness to participate across social groups.

The school is not the only place where civic education goals such as these can be pursued, but it is frequently charged with these responsibilities. To be pragmatic, schools are the public setting in which young people spend the largest amount of time from age 6 until 17, and teachers are uniquely positioned to influence civic knowledge, attitudes, and behavior across socioeconomic groups.

Interest in research in civic education and political socialization has been characterized by ebb and flow. After considerable research in the late 1950s and early 1960s, which posited an indirect but nevertheless important role for schools (Adelson & O’Neil, 1966; Hess & Torney, 1967), a single study in the United States in the late 1960s concluded that civics classes did not enhance knowledge or engagement (Langton & Jennings, 1968). Over the next 3 decades, a few researchers investigated the potentially positive role of schooling (Hahn, 1998; Torney, Oppenheim, & Farnen, 1975), while others described the unintended curriculum as alienating to students (McNeil, 1986). The interest in political socialization research more generally also declined, a trend only recently beginning to reverse (Flanagan & Sherrod, 1998). In the past decade there have been serious attempts to look at the role schools actually play within the context of and in concert with other social systems (families, youth organizations, informal peer groups, and the mass media). One of the most extensive of these efforts, the IEA Civic Education Study, was conducted over 8 years in approximately 30 countries. This article includes a discussion of theories important in formulating this study, a description of the development of instruments and the sample, and a summary of analysis.

Framing Theories From Developmental Science and Political Science

Several developmental frameworks are appropriate to frame the study of young people’s civic engagement. Bronfenbrenner (1988) proposed an ecological model in which the individual develops and functions within a set of microsystems (the family, school, and peer group), exosystems (school boards or adults who organize youth activities), and macrosystems (including societal values and overarching institutions). Mesosystems link these systems. This model explicitly discusses societal values and institutions that are implicit in many other theories.
The role of discourse and discussion has been highlighted by Vygotsky (1978), who posited that understanding is first achieved on an interpersonal level and subsequently becomes a matter of individuals possessing knowledge. Erickson (1990), who conducts microanalysis of classroom dialogue in the United States, confirms that cognition must be seen as socially situated and transpersonal, rather than existing only within an individual. Lave and Wenger (1991) and Wenger (1998) have provided a way to conceptualize the social situation in which young people become peripheral and then more central participants in social groups. Everyday in these settings the adolescent acquires meaningful concepts, explores the identities valued by various groups, and interacts with others in “communities of practice.” Research (Hahn, 1998; Torney, Oppenheim, & Parnen, 1975) highlighted classrooms as settings for learning through discourse. However, Hess (2002) has demonstrated that adolescents often fear that other students will criticize their ideas. In the same vein, researchers on public opinion have found that adults who perceive dissimilar attitudes among potential discussion partners are unlikely to express an opinion (Glynn, Hayes, & Shanahan, 1997). These factors make it difficult to create a dynamic classroom discussion. This set of theories is important because it highlights challenges and strategies for the school in inducting young people into the political conversations that are essential in theories of “declaimative democracy” (Fishkin, 1991).

Bandura (1997) recognized the role of personal self-efficacy in the individual’s social functioning with parents, peers, and teachers. Recently he has studied “collective efficacy” (Bandura, 2001), which is similar to political scientists’ formulation of efficacy. Bandura’s theory is also used by researchers relating media exposure to political participation (Sotirovic & McLeod, 2001).

Hess and Torney (1967) posited a “cognitive-developmental model” as one of four ways of looking at age differences in political attitudes. Researchers have used Piagetian models to study children’s views of politics (Connell, 1972) or argued that political development shares characteristics with moral development (Haste, 1993). The delineation of cognitive schemas relating to social problem solving provided both methodological and substantive suggestions for analyzing expertise in political understanding among adults (Voss, Tyler, & Yengo, 1983) and adolescents (Torney-Purta, 1995).

Youniss and Yates (1997) used Erikson’s theory in studying political identity as an integral part of adolescent development. Ogbu (1987) pointed to oppositional identities expressing resistance to socialization by a dominant cultural group in general and school authority in particular. Epstein (2000) found that racial identities influence concepts of history and the role of government. An emphasis on identity highlights a point often overlooked, the adolescent’s lack of interest or even resistance to messages that the adult generation considers important.

Political scientists in the United States have recently shown renewed interest in research relating to political socialization. Niemi and Junn (1998) analyzed National Assessment of Education Progress data on civic achievement to take account of the influences of schools and homes. They found that student expectations about future education was a very powerful predictor of civic knowledge and that taking civic education classes and participation in activities such as mock elections made positive contributions. Conover and Searing (2000) studied young people in four communities and focused on the practices of citizenship. They expressed concern that students had difficulty seeing themselves performing the actions usually included in the role of a citizen. Many political scientists decry decreasing interest in politics and elections among young people, as well as low levels of knowledge of institutions and democratic processes (Galston, 2001; Milner, 2002).

There has also been a great deal of interest in civic education and engagement outside the United States. Entire educational systems changed in the post-Communist countries following regime changes a decade ago. In Western Europe, where perceptions of declining civic engagement are similar to those found in the United States, renewing the appreciation of democracy among young people and building social capital are priorities (Van Deth, Maraffi, Newton, & Whiteley, 1999).

This broad range of theories incorporating concepts such as self-efficacy, macrosystem values, resistance to socialization, schemata of social and political issues, political identity, and communities of discourse and practice has provided a new context for the study of political attitude development.

The IEA Civic Education Study: Background and Methodology

In the early 1990s, in response to concerns spanning countries and theoretical approaches, the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA), a consortium of educational research institutes in more than 50 countries, began to organize a civic education study conducted in two linked phases. When it began there was no content framework acceptable to all the interested IEA member countries on which to formulate the test methodology that is a central feature of IEA studies (Martin, Rust, & Adams, 1999). The first phase of the civic education study was thus designed to produce qualitative national case studies based on structured framing questions. Experts within participating coun-
countries were interviewed about what the average 14-year-old student was expected to know, understand, and believe about topics such as laws and lawmaking institutions or the nature of problems in the community. Curriculum guidelines were examined; the opinions of teachers and other experts were gathered. This process identified a common core of similar expectations for the content of student learning across countries and the importance of political engagement, as well as differences in the curricular structures and processes designed to ensure that young people could meet them. A model for the process of civic education was developed, similar to that of Bronfenbrenner (1988) but also using concepts such as discourse, role models, and situated cognition. The results of this phase were published by IEA in a volume entitled Civic Education Across Countries: Twenty-Four National Case Studies From the IEA Civic Education Project (Torney-Purta, Schwille, & Amadeo, 1999).

The second phase of the IEA Civic Education Study, which forms the basis of this article, began with an extensive process of developing a content framework built around three domains of content identified in countries’ case studies during the first phase. These domains were as follows: 

(a) Democracy, Democratic Institutions and Citizenship; (b) National Identity and International Relations; and (c) Social Cohesion and Diversity. This framework was the basis of the test and survey construction. The IEA National Research Coordinators in each country and a 10-member International Steering Committee contributed to the development, pilot testing, and selection of questions for the student instrument. This resulted in a multiple choice test of civic knowledge and of skills in interpreting civic-related information (38 items, each with a correct answer); a survey of concepts, attitudes, and behaviors (136 items without correct answers); and background questions asking about home literacy resources, expected years of further education, and membership in organizations and associations (as well as gender, age, and other demographic characteristics). In addition there was a school questionnaire and a teacher questionnaire. Scales were developed using Item Response Theory (IRT) methodology in a parallel way in the 28 countries. From the test, both a Total Civic Knowledge Scale and two subscales, measuring Content Knowledge (the ability to recognize fundamental principles and processes of democracy) and measuring Civic Skills (the ability to interpret a political leaflet or cartoon and to distinguish fact from opinion statements), were scored. In addition, IRT scaling yielded 11 other scales from the attitude survey. Results from 7 will be included in this summary: Belief in the Importance of Conventional Civic Activities, Belief in the Importance of Social Movement Activities, Trust in Government-related Institutions, Positive Attitudes Toward Immigrants, Support for Women’s Political Rights, Sense of Confidence (Efficacy) at School, and Open Classroom Climate for Discussion.

During 1999, nationally representative samples totaling approximately 90,000 students from the grade containing the majority of 14-year-olds were tested in the following countries: Australia, Belgium (the French-speaking community), Bulgaria, Chile, Colombia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, England, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Greece, Hong Kong (SAR), Hungary, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Russian Federation, Slovak Republic, Slovenia, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United States.

These countries represent a wide range of social, economic, political, and cultural contexts. Some of these countries have high levels of poverty and unemployment (e.g., Bulgaria, Latvia, Lithuania, Romania, the Russian Federation) or violence as well as poverty (Colombia). Others are stable and relatively wealthy countries (Denmark, Norway, Switzerland, the United States), some with relatively equal and others with relatively unequal distributions of income. In some countries, more than 15% of students age 14 reported they had not been born in the country (e.g., Germany and Switzerland), whereas in other countries this figure was 1% (e.g., Romania and Poland). Some countries had more than 35% of the seats in Parliament filled by women (Denmark, Finland, Norway, and Sweden), whereas in other countries this figure was close to 5% (Romania and the Russian Federation). Some have long and others short histories of democracy.

The IEA Civic Education Study provides a benchmark and a first step in forming a vision for civic education especially as it takes place in school. The data can be approached in many ways in answering the question, What role does formal schooling play in the civic education and engagement process? Many of the findings are relatively optimistic about the potential role of civic education in schools in the United States and other countries, but there are challenges as well.

Several types of analysis (including cross-national differences, gender differences, and single-level path models) related to these questions are reported in Citizenship and Education in Twenty-eight Countries: Civic Knowledge and Engagement at Age Fourteen (Torney-Purta, Lehmann, Oswald, & Schulz, 2001). Other sources for detailed reports of parts of the analysis are Torney-Purta (2001), for cross national analysis of the knowledge test; Losito and Mintrop (2001) and Torney-Purta and Richardson (2002), for details about schools and teachers; Torney-Purta and Stapleton (2002), for multilevel structural equation modeling; Amadeo, Torney-Purta, Lehmann, Husfeldt, and Nikolova (2002), for a report of 17- to 18-years-olds studied by IEA in 16 countries. Specifics of student item level responses for 14-year-olds in the United States are found in Baldi, Perie, Skidmore, Greenberg, and Hahn (2001).
yses of data across the 28 countries in a series of summary statements, giving special attention to the role of school curriculum and school culture.

Summary Conclusions From the IEA Civic Education Study

There are Multiple Modes of Engaged Citizenship, and at age 14, Students are Already Members of a Political Culture That Emphasizes Some Modes and Directions Rather Than Others

Modes of engaged citizenship extend beyond the responsibility to vote and possession of a knowledge base for an informed vote to include extending rights to others (especially disadvantaged or disenfranchised groups), a sense of political efficacy, at least a minimal sense of trust in one’s government, and participation with others in political discussion and in activities to benefit the community (to name only some). Knowledge of democracy or government and willingness to participate (by voting or by activities within the community) are the two outcomes most frequently highlighted as appropriate for the school to foster. Others are more likely to appear as implicit, not explicit, aims (especially interest in political discussion and trust in government).

Evidence about 14-year-olds’ membership in a political culture comes from analysis of the differences in attitudes between countries. The mean score on the scale measuring Trust in Government-Related Institutions was below the international mean in Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Portugal, the Russian Federation, and Slovenia. This average was above the international mean in Australia, Cyprus, Denmark, Greece, Norway, Switzerland, and the United States. In 1999, 14-year-olds in countries with fewer than 40 years of continuous democracy expressed low levels of political trust. These results for young adolescents are nearly identical to those reported from the World Value Survey with adult respondents in more than 30 countries (Inglehart, 1997).

The average 14-year-old in the United States (and across countries) grasps many basic aspects of the concept of democracy. They realize that free elections and the opportunity to voice one’s opinion without fear are part of a strong democracy, at the same time realizing that politicians giving government jobs to their families, courts that are influenced by politicians, and a limited press weaken democracy. Among the major differences observed between the 14-year-olds and the 17- to 18-year-olds is a more coherent structure of democratic concepts, probably the result of cognitive development. However, basic elements of the democracy narrative are understood by the younger group. These students have been influenced by the national history they have studied and, of course, by their families and media to find their place in the political culture of their country’s democracy.

What are the implications of this membership in the political culture on the part of adolescents? Until the eighth or ninth grade, most students in the United States receive civic education as part of their courses in national history. The traditional place in the curriculum for the study of government is Grade 10 or later. Although important at that level, explicit civic education could also begin earlier and be effective, especially if it were designed to be developmentally appropriate by taking an approach oriented to practices of citizenship. By the eighth or ninth grade many students are already aware of important narratives of democracy and hold attitudes toward government that are highly similar to those of adults in their societies. Many of them are ready for more intensive and motivating study of democracy and government than they are receiving.

The Average U.S. Student Shows a High Level of Skill in Interpreting Political Communication and a Moderate Grasp of Fundamental Democratic Principles When Compared to Those in Other Countries

In formulating the test of civic knowledge in the IEA Civic Education Study, a decision was made that two important types of achievement would be included, while a third would be excluded. Knowledge of fundamental democratic principles and institutions and skills in interpreting political communication (including political leaflets and cartoons) were included. Knowledge of the specific institutions and processes of the government of the student’s own country were excluded (since 28 different tests would have been required). Content knowledge and skills were examined as subscales (and also summed to form a total civic knowledge score).

Results show an interesting pattern for these two subscores. The average U.S. student performed less well (at the international average) in understanding fundamentals of democracy while performing at the top of the country distribution when asked to demonstrate skills in understanding political communication. The United States was not alone in showing a strong performance on the skills scale while showing only average grasp of democratic principles and understanding of associated concepts. Students in Australia, England, and Sweden also performed above the international mean on the skills subscale but at or below the international mean on the scale measuring content knowledge (that is, knowledge of fundamental democratic concepts and principles). This pattern was reversed in three of the post-Communist coun-
ttries—the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Slovenia—where the students performed above the international mean on content knowledge and at the international mean on skills. Academic rather than practical understanding of democracy was a prominent theme in the national case studies from these three countries, corroborating the test results.

Two other aspects of the findings are of interest. In all the participating countries, the single-level models show that the total score on civic knowledge is a significant predictor of whether a student believes that they will vote (Torney-Purta et al., 2001). Another important factor examined in the multilevel structural equation model in the United State is the perceived rigor of teaching in the classroom—also an important predictor (Torney-Purta & Stapleton, 2002). This becomes more meaningful in the context of findings from the U.S. report that taking a course in social studies every day or nearly every day was associated with higher scores on the knowledge test (Baldi, Perie, Skidmore, Greenberg, & Hahn, 2001).

Second, the composition of the IEA test (including items about general principles of democracy and skills in interpreting political communication but excluding items about the specifics of American government) helps to explain the discrepancy between the IEA study results (in which U.S. students performed well in comparison to those in other countries) and recent findings from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (in which the U.S. students performed below the standards set by those interpreting the test; Lutkus, Weiss, Campbell, Mazzeo, & Lazar, 1999). The NAEP assessment is heavily weighted with the type of item that was not included in the IEA test, that is, knowledge of the history and functions of governmental institutions in the United States. U.S. students appear to be deficient in understanding these specific facts about their government and only average in their grasp of basic principles. The majority of students, however, have the skills to understand political communication (to read election leaflets and understand simple newspaper articles about political issues). Even if this might be considered sufficient, however, a major problem remains—a gap between more and less economically advantaged students in civic knowledge and engagement.

Students From Homes With few Literacy or Educational Resources and who Have low Educational Aspirations Have Relatively low Levels of Civic Knowledge and Expressed Willingness to Vote

Many researchers have found that adults of high social status and education have more political knowledge than those who are less advantaged (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996). Political knowledge is important, among other reasons, because it allows individuals to understand the issues in an election and vote in line with their interests. For example, those of low socioeconomic status and education often have something to gain from government programs such as low-income housing and support for education that supplements property-tax funding. Without political knowledge it is less likely that these individuals will be able to recognize the candidates most likely to further their interests. Other researchers also have found diminished interest in voting among less educated adults.

In the IEA Civic Education Study the differences in civic knowledge and engagement (likelihood of voting) associated with education and home resources are substantial, especially in countries such as Denmark, Switzerland, and the United States (Torney-Purta et al., 2001). In fact, in the United States, by far the largest proportion of variance in civic knowledge scores between schools can be explained by a combination of the average number of years students intend to continue their education and the average literacy resources in their homes (Torney-Purta & Stapleton, 2002). A substantial proportion of variation between students is also explained by these and related variables, such as the proportion of children receiving free or reduced lunch in their school and whether they change schools frequently (Baldi et al., 2001). In summary, in the United States those who do not plan to attend college, who have few home educational resources, and who attend high-poverty schools have lower levels of knowledge and are also less likely to say they will vote. Further, low socioeconomic status also tends to be associated with fewer opportunities for discussion participation (Baldi et al., 2001). This socioeconomic gap is troubling, because it extends across civic knowledge, expressed likelihood of voting, and factors in school that are likely to enhance students’ preparation for citizenship.

The challenge to civic education posed by poverty is also reflected in the between-country differences. Six of the eight countries that performed below the international mean on the IEA civic knowledge and skills measures (Chile, Colombia, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Romania) are among the countries with per capita incomes of less than $5,000 (Torney-Purta et al., 2001).

Many developmental theories and studies of social development have focused on middle class students in the United States. Among the future needs in this area are studying oppositional cultures and resistance to politics, as well as developing and evaluating programs that give all students an opportunity to see their educational and political future including a citizen identity.
Students in the United States Stand out Both in Believing That Adult Citizens Should Participate in Activities to Benefit the Community and in Actually Participating, While Also Being Supportive of Some Conventional Political Activity

There has been ambivalence among political theorists about what should count as political participation. Until quite recently the large majority of studies looked at voting, engaging in political discussion, and campaign-related activities. Measures of students’ concepts of norms for good citizenship in both conventional political terms (voting, participating in discussions, and joining a political party) and in terms of participation in social movement activities were developed for the survey portion of the IEA Civic Education Study.

It was clear from the results that the large majority of young people surveyed in 1999 believed that citizens should obey the law and should vote (between 80% and 90% in the United States and most of the other countries thought these activities important or very important). In contrast, only 58% of these students believed it important or very important for the citizen to participate in political discussions, and the figure was 48% for affiliating with a political party. Students’ estimates of the likelihood that they would join discussions or affiliate with a party as adults provided a similar picture.

The scores on belief in the importance of Conventional Citizenship were above the international mean in about half the post-Communist countries, all of the countries in southern Europe (Cyprus, Greece, Italy, and Portugal), the United States, and both of the participating Latin American countries (Chile and Colombia). In contrast, in Australia and all the Northern European countries (Belgium [French], Denmark, England, Finland, Germany, Norway, Sweden, and Switzerland), belief in the importance of conventional citizenship for adults was below the international mean. As a group, adolescents in the countries from Southern Europe and the Americas appear to have relatively strong commitments to conventional citizenship norms, whereas those from Northern Europe and Australia are less strong in these beliefs. It may be that democracy and stability are taken for granted in some countries where there is a long democratic tradition and political institutions are highly trusted.

Two issues are posed by these findings. One has to do with the gap between the proportion of young people who believe it is important for adults to vote and the proportion who actually vote when they reach the voting age. A second, more philosophical issue is the extent to which conventional activities such as political discussion and affiliation with a political party are vital parts of participation. Some light can be shed on this by looking at the ways in which young people prefer to participate.

In addition to the items about conventional citizenship, a second set of items asked about norms for adult participation in social movement activities (such as community betterment, environmental, or human rights groups). Students were considerably more supportive of social movement activities than of conventional political activities, such as political party membership or participation in discussion of political issues (Torney-Purta et al., 2001). For example, in the United States, more than 80% of students thought it important or very important for adult citizens to participate in activities helping the community, promoting human rights, and protecting the environment (Baldi et al., 2001).

Support for both conventional citizenship and social movement citizenship was below the international mean in Northern Europe (except for Norway and Germany), with high scores in Southern Europe, Latin America, and the United States and some (but not all) of the post-Communist countries. Females were more likely to endorse social movement activities than were males in about one third of the countries (including the United States).

A readiness to participate in civil society or social movement groups is carried into action, according to students’ reports of the organizations they have actually joined. Students in the United States stood out in that 50% reported that they belonged to a group conducting voluntary activities to help the community (perhaps following the growth of community service programs in schools). That proportion was larger than in any of the other 27 countries. The average across countries was 18%, while in Finland, Poland, and the Slovak Republic only 5% to 6% reported such participation. Twenty-four percent of U.S. students reported joining environmental organizations, but Colombia was the highest, with 40% reporting such participation (perhaps responding to an environmental awareness campaign there). Forty percent of students in the United States reported participating in charities that collect money for social causes, but Norwegian students were by far the most involved, with 84% reporting such participation. Organizational participation of all types was low in many post-Communist countries.

This generation of young people appears ready to engage in practices of citizenship close to the everyday settings that are important to them. The settings that are more distant do not seem to attract them. They are creating for themselves a set of less hierarchically organized groups that seem poised to take the place of the political parties and voter-interest groups prominent among adults in the past. If we believe that conventional political engagement is important, programs should be connecting these school and community activities to conventional political
engagement. Alternatively, we may need to be content with the idea that young people may be encouraged to vote, but we resign ourselves to a decline in the other activities traditionally associated with adult citizenship.

**Experiencing a Climate in the Classroom That Encourages Respectful Discussions of Civic and Political Issues Is Associated With Both Civic Knowledge and Sense of Engagement**

The IEA measure of classroom climate for discussion assessed the students’ sense that they could safely disagree with each other and with the teacher, and also the likelihood that issues that might be controversial would be discussed. This classroom climate scale predicted civic knowledge in the single-level path model in about two thirds of the countries (including the United States, most of the western European countries, and some of the post-Communist countries; Torney-Purta et al., 2001). This replicates results from the first IEA Civic Education Study conducted in the early 1970s (Torney, Oppenheim, & Farnen, 1975) as well as more recent research (Hahn, 1998).

Across countries, there were substantial numbers of classrooms where such discussion was relatively infrequent, however. And in many countries, although students were encouraged to respect others’ opinions, controversial issues were rather rarely the topic of discussion. For example, nearly 90% of U.S. students reported that the most frequent instructional methods when studying civic-related topics were reading textbooks and studying worksheets, the more rote types of learning activities. Only about half as many students reported the more actively involving debates, discussions, or role-playing exercises.

A sense that one is a member of a classroom community engaging in the practice of discussion as a mode of learning is an important facet of educational experience according to the IEA results. This finding speaks to the importance of “communities of practice” discussed by Wenger (1998). In this view, learning means mutual engagement, taking the opportunity to try out one’s knowledge in interpersonal situations, and making experience more meaningful by discussing it with others. Discourse theories and sociocultural theories make a similar point. They lead to the following suggestion for improving schools’ contribution to civic engagement: Prepare and support teachers to combine content-rich instruction with opportunities for discussion of issues in a climate of respect.

**Explicit Focus on Learning About Voting and Elections has a Positive Effect on Youth Willingness to Vote**

Students were asked about the topics emphasized in their schools’ curriculum to get a picture of their opportunities to learn. Rating of the emphasis placed on voting and elections was included in the single-level path model. The extent to which the students reported that elections and voting were emphasized in school classes and curriculum was a significant predictor of the likelihood of voting. A sample of teachers was asked whether they believed that they emphasized voting and elections in their classrooms; in most countries more teachers than students thought this topic was covered. This suggests that teachers may expect students to infer that voting is important from studying electoral history or the jobs that elected officials perform. Students, however, may learn the explicitly taught facts of history or government structure without inferring that it is important to vote.

**Confidence in the Effectiveness of Joining With Their Peers to Improve the School and Actual Organizational Participation are Important Aspects of Many Students’ Civic Engagement**

Spending time with peers can have either positive or negative consequences for civic engagement and knowledge. A peer culture in which educational pursuits are devalued and students spend many evening hours outside their homes with friends is problematic for civic knowledge achievement in the United States and a majority of the European countries according to the single-level path models (Torney-Purta et al., 2001). Spending evening hours with peers is not a significant predictor in Cyprus, Bulgaria, or the Slovak Republic, however, where youth culture opportunities may be less available, or academic pressure and parental expectations may be especially powerful.

Many types of peer interaction have positive effects on civic engagement, however. Participation in a school council is a predictor of civic knowledge in nearly half of the countries. Participation in a school council predicts the likelihood to vote only in the United States. The proportion of students who belong to school councils is also relatively high in most of these countries.

The idea of political efficacy in relation to the national government has been important in political science, whereas the ideas of self-efficacy and collective efficacy have been important in Bandura’s theory. In the IEA study, the sense of efficacy at school was measured with questions about the extent to which students believed that they could collaborate with their peers in solving school problems and that the student council
made a difference in how the school functioned. Here the Nordic countries of Denmark, Norway, and Sweden along with most of the Southern European and some of the post-Communist countries showed high efficacy or confidence.

It is interesting that single-level path models show little relation between this measure of sense of efficacy at school and the educational resources measures that were so powerful in predicting knowledge and voting. In other words, enhancing the extent to which students feel that participation within the culture of the school makes a difference is one route to civic engagement that has potential effectiveness in the schools of communities where few students are college-bound.

This analysis of school participation emphasizes the potential power of face-to-face experience in everyday communities of practice. However, there seems to be considerable reluctance (seen in the national case studies of many countries) to give student councils effective power in schools.

Students Develop Political Identities Around Their Core Attributes, Such as Gender and Being Native-Born or an Immigrant

Wenger's (1998) discussion of communities of practice also suggests that learning within groups creates identities or personal histories, linking experiences in families with experiences with friends in school, in neighborhoods, and in youth organizations. The IEA Civic Education Study included a measure of Support for Women's Political and Economic Rights (e.g., running for political office, receiving the same wage for the same job) as well as a measure of Positive Attitudes toward Immigrants (dealing with rights and opportunities). Students on average were positive about women's holding political and economic rights, and overall only about 10% of students tended to see extensive gender-related job discrimination. Students in the post-Communist countries and especially countries with high levels of unemployment (e.g., Latvia, Romania, and the Russian Federation) on average had less positive attitudes of support for women's rights than students in countries where the unemployment rate was relatively low in the 1990s (e.g., Denmark, Norway, Switzerland, and the United States).

There were substantial gender differences in both Support for Immigrants' Rights and Support for Women's Political and Economic Rights, with the largest differences for women's rights. Being female in a political world that is largely controlled by males seems to serve as a salient focus of identity for female students and intensifies their support for rights. In contrast, there were relatively small gender differences in civic knowledge (and most of the other attitude scales) in the IEA results (Torney-Purta et al., 2001).

The influence of role models can be inferred from another relationship. Support for women's rights among adolescents tends to be stronger in countries where many women hold positions in the national legislature than in countries where there are few women in these positions. Women legislators may serve as role models for female adolescents. Other factors, such as established practices to balance the number of male and female candidates or visible women's movement organizations may be related to both support for women's rights and the election of women to parliament. Being an immigrant also appears to be a salient identity for many of these students. Those not born in the country were more supportive of immigrants' rights than were native-born students.

On average, students in the United States are highly supportive of women's and immigrants' rights. However, the differences by gender and immigrant status suggest that students do not shed their group identities at school's door. Teachers are not always well prepared to deal with diverse identities in their classrooms, especially at the same time they are attempting to hold students to rigorous expectations about knowledge and develop a sense of citizen identity as conventionally defined.

Conclusions

Three elements of schools are important in civic education: the formal curriculum, the culture of the classroom, and the culture of the school. The IEA Civic Education Study's results suggest that schools can be effective in preparing students for engagement in civil society by teaching civic content and skills, ensuring an open classroom climate for the discussion of issues, emphasizing the importance of voting and elections, and supporting effective participation opportunities such as school councils.

In the United States, as in most of the countries that participated in the IEA study, there are high points and low points of student performance. However, much of what currently happens in schools in the United States appears not to be optimal. The factors of importance that the IEA study identified parallel some of the issues raised in more general reviews. For example, Zemelman, Daniels, and Hyde (1998) examined the school reform literature to identify “best practices” in several subject areas, including social studies. These reviews suggest that narrow instruction restricted to facts from textbooks and covering few topics in depth leaves students with disconnected knowledge and a lack of excitement about the real world of social practice outside their school and classrooms. They also la-
ment that substantive content is postponed to the later years of high school and that students are assumed to learn passively rather than by being engaged in practice. Building collaboration, professional preparation, linkage between practice in different domains, attention to students’ identities, community and youth organizations, and assessment are all elements of an agenda for the future to address these issues.

No single psychological theory emerges as preeminent in framing study of the schools’ role in civic education. Many of the theories reviewed at the beginning of this article could contribute to studies and action initiatives consonant with the results presented, however. Bandura’s theory, some of the sociocultural theories, and the cognitive theories have particular potential because they present natural collaboration points between political scientists and psychologists. Erikson’s work can help keep a focus on identity, while Bronfenbrenner provides ways to understand how linkages between system levels might be built.

Whatever the theoretical base, however, two practical points emerge from this analysis. First, the challenges faced by schools that serve groups of students who have low educational expectations for themselves and few educational resources at home must be dealt with if there is not to be a substantial part of a generation left behind in its preparation for democratic citizenship. Second, building links between schools and other organizations—family advocacy groups, organizations formed by youth, teacher professional organizations, the media—are essential in moving toward an ideal civic education.

References


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