

RESEARCH ROUNDUP

FROM YOUTH PROGRAMS TO POLITICAL SCIENCE, A BROAD INTEREST IN CIVIC SKILLS EXISTS

The literature review gives a wide-ranging synopsis of the most important research findings to date on civic skills. Covering the work of educators, experiential program leaders, psychologists, political scientists, and those who study youth development, Kirlin maps out how these experts connect civic skills to civic engagement. She finds that each discipline has made important first steps in documenting which skills young people need to develop in order to lead active civic and political lives.

For example, education researchers have investigated what students *should* know about civics and what students *actually* know. Their work formed the backbone of both the National Standards for Civic Education and the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). At the same time, political scientists such as Verba, Schlozman and Brady¹ conducted ground-breaking research that helped to define and measure the concept of civic skills. Finally, developmental psychologists along with experiential program leaders have documented how young people practice and develop civic skills through their involvement in local groups, organizations, and institutions. Approaching the subject from different angles, the various disciplines provide a rich yet dispersed discussion of the skills one needs to be active in civic and political life.

CREATING A COMMON FRAMEWORK FOR UNDERSTANDING CIVIC SKILLS

In addition to bringing together what different fields and disciplines know about civic skills, Kirlin organizes and synthesizes the many divergent findings. The result is a typology of civic skills (see page 6) made up of the four dominant skill categories that emerged in the research: organization, communication, collective decision-making, and critical thinking. While the typology was originally designed to help researchers examine the different environments in which civic skills are acquired, it can also be used by school and youth program administrators interested in a quick list of specific civic skills.

FUTURE RESEARCH NEEDS: MOVING BEYOND THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

According to Kirlin, “The literature about civic skills is very promising but leaves many unanswered questions.” Following is a sample of observations included in the literature review about the state of knowledge concerning civic skills as well as questions to be explored in future research.

1. Civic skills are not well defined. Verba et al provide a very good beginning for defining communication skills, and an acceptable start for identifying organization skills, but more remains to be done in the remaining categories of collective decision-making and critical thinking.
2. We need to better understand how to measure many of the items that are emerging as civic skills. For example, how do we measure whether an individual possesses the civic skills needed to effectively work in a collective decision-making arena?
3. The various disciplines have different ideas about how civic skills relate to broader questions of civic engagement, civic socialization, and political participation. A cross-disciplinary approach is likely to be the most fruitful for obtaining more complete answers, especially about the process of civic skill acquisition for adolescents.
4. Ultimately, this research is useful not only for understanding factors in political participation, but also for encouraging political participation. Thus, civic definitions must eventually be linked to pedagogical, curricular, and program design elements and subsequently made available to teachers and program developers. ★

EDUCATION AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT: DOES PUBLIC INVESTMENT PAY OFF?

Political scientists have long shown that people with higher levels of educational attainment tend to vote at higher rates, know more about how the government works, and overall are more civically engaged. In fact, a major reason for establishing public schools was the belief that education boosts citizenship. Two new CIRCLE

¹ Verba, Sidney, Kay Lehman Schlozman, and Henry E. Brady. 1995. *Voice and Equality: Civic Volunteerism in American Politics*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

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TABLE 2 SELECTIONS FROM THE TYPOLOGY OF CIVIC SKILLS

Author, year	Skills as defined by author(s)	Organization, communication, collective decision making or critical thinking	Empirical measurement if available
Battistoni in Mann and Patrick 2000, similar listing in Battistoni 2003	"achieve compromises and solve problems when conflict occurs" pg. 36	Collective decision making	
Boyte in Mann and Patrick 2000	Work in a team	Collective decision making	
Morse 1993	"practice in dealing with difficult decisions for which there are no right or wrong answers"	Collective decision making	
Verba, Schlozman and Brady 1995	Write a letter	Communication	Written a letter?
Verba, Schlozman and Brady 1995	Make a speech or presentation	Communication	Given a presentation or speech?
Torney-Purta 2002	Skills tested in 14 year olds include the ability to interpret political communication (leaflets and cartoons)	Communication	
Patrick 2003 and National Standards for Civics and Government (Center for Civic Education 1994)	Synthesizing and explaining information about political and civic life	Critical thinking	
Patrick 2003 and National Standards for Civics and Government (Center for Civic Education 1994)	Evaluating, taking, and defending positions on public events and issues	Critical thinking	
Patrick 2003 and National Standards for Civics and Government (Center for Civic Education 1994)	Thinking constructively about how to improve political and civic life	Critical thinking	
Boyte in Mann and Patrick 2000	Plan strategies	Organization	
Morgan and Streb 2001	Help to plan the project	Organization	
Patrick 2000	Implementing policy decisions on public issues	Organization	
Verba, Schlozman and Brady 1995	Attend a meeting where decisions are made	Organization	Come to a meeting where you took part in decision making?

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Working Papers by Dr. Thomas Dee of Swarthmore College take an in-depth look at this issue—considering factors ignored by previous research and providing new evidence that increased educational attainment indeed leads to increased civic engagement.

UNRAVELING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN EDUCATION AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

In “CIRCLE Working Paper 08: Are There Civic Returns to Education?” Dee questions the reliability of prior research findings, which show a strong correlation between educational attainment and civic engagement. To examine whether additional education has a *causal* effect on future civic engagement, his study takes advantage of two events that constitute “natural experiments.”

Dee first shows that these two events—the increase in the number of two-year colleges and the passing of child labor laws—led to substantial increases in educational attainment. Dee also presents evidence that neither of these natural experiments improved civic behaviors or knowledge independently of their effects on education.

However, taking advantage of the variation in child labor laws and the availability of two-year colleges, Dee does find that there is a

causal link between higher levels of educational attainment and civic engagement. Specifically, Dee examines how much more likely a person is to vote and volunteer if they have entered college. He also assesses whether additional schooling influenced attitudes toward free speech and the frequency of newspaper readership. He finds that additional schooling increases voter turnout, support for free speech and newspaper readership but not necessarily the propensity to volunteer.

The results provide strong evidence that the amount of education one attains indeed has independent effects on both the quantity and quality of civic participation. These findings have significant implications for education policy. According to Dee, “The apparent existence of these civic returns implies that much of the long-lived hyperbole about the important role of education in a functioning democracy may be true.”

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CATHOLIC SCHOOLS AND VOTING

In “CIRCLE Working Paper 09: The Effects of Catholic School on Civic Participation,” Dee explores whether public and private schools have different effects on adult voter participation and volunteering. More specifically, he questions *Continued on page 12*

CIRCLE FACT SHEETS

CIRCLE has produced a number of Fact Sheets which are brief documents with basic information and graphs on various topics. The following new Fact Sheets can be found on CIRCLE's Web site:

- ≡ ***Electoral Engagement Among Latino Youth*** (March 2003) is a quick reference for facts on Latino youth voting and registration rates. In addition, it contains information on Latino attitudes towards the political process.
- ≡ ***Volunteering Among Young People*** (June 2003) presents information on the frequency of volunteering, trends in volunteering, and the organizations for which young people volunteer utilizing data from many sources.
- ≡ ***Media Use Among Young People*** (July 2003) illustrates the different ways in which young Americans gather news and information about politics.
- ≡ ***Group Membership and Group Involvement Among Young People*** (July 2003) presents an overview of group membership among different generations along with types of groups to which young people belong.
- ≡ ***Characteristics of Group Membership Among Young People*** (July 2003) gives a detailed picture of group membership among young people. In particular, differences in political ideology, race and ethnicity, gender and educational attainment among young group members are examined.
- ≡ ***How Young People Express Political Views*** (August 2003) provides a quick summary of how young people express their political views through contacting elected officials, boycotting products, and writing letters to newspaper editors.

Continued from page 7 whether Catholic schools do a better job than public schools in preparing students to be actively engaged in public life.

The study finds that students who attended Catholic high school in the 10th grade were more likely to vote as adults. This was true even when controlling for a wide variety of factors such as socio-economic status. However, the analysis also shows that those who attended Catholic school were no more likely to volunteer as adults than those who attended public school.

Dee cautions that readers should be aware of several caveats when interpreting the results. First, the correlation between Catholic education and adult voter turnout may be partly due to self-selection. For example, students whose families choose to send them to Catholic schools may have an unobserved propensi-

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ty for civic participation. Dee finds that the conventional approaches for addressing the selectivity issue do not appear to be valid in this context. He also cautions that non-Catholic private schools may have very different effects on the civic development of their students. Copies of both papers can be downloaded from CIRCLE's Web site (www.civicyouth.org).

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