

CONSIDERING THE ROLE OF CONTEXT IN ADOLESCENTS' CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

A new CIRCLE Working Paper (#64) by Britt Wilkenfeld examines the effects of several systems of influence (schools, families, neighborhoods, etc) on civic outcomes. The author finds that there are processes inherent in each context that can account for the ways in which environments influence adolescents' development. The most important processes seem to involve aspects of interpersonal relationships with parents (especially the level of discourse), patterns of activity within schools, institutional resources within neighborhoods, and the collective socialization that occurs in neighborhoods. Schools, among other settings, matter.

THE MOST IMPORTANT PROCESSES SEEM TO INVOLVE ASPECTS OF INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS WITH PARENTS (ESPECIALLY THE LEVEL OF DISCOURSE), PATTERNS OF ACTIVITY WITHIN SCHOOLS, INSTITUTIONAL RESOURCES WITHIN NEIGHBORHOODS, AND THE COLLECTIVE SOCIALIZATION THAT OCCURS IN NEIGHBORHOODS. SCHOOLS, AMONG OTHER SETTINGS, MATTER.

CIVICS COURSES ESPECIALLY BENEFICIAL TO STUDENTS IN HIGH POVERTY NEIGHBORHOODS

The author finds that receiving a civics curriculum "appears to be more beneficial to youth attending schools in high poverty neighborhoods than to those attending schools in low-poverty neighborhoods." For instance, receiving better civics instruction makes by far the most difference to students' plans to vote if they live in poor neighborhoods.

CAUSES OF DISPARITIES IN ADOLESCENT CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

The study also explored potential explanations for disparities in adolescent civic engagement by examining different student experiences that may foster civic development. Four consistent patterns emerged:

1. *There is a civic engagement gap among adolescents in the United States associated with students' demographic characteristics.* The most disadvantaged groups are male, black, American Indian, immigrant, and low-SES youth, indicating that there are groups of young people who are not adequately prepared to be functioning members of the polity and society.
2. *Civic learning opportunities in many contexts are related to the civic engagement of young people.* For instance, civic experiences in school enable adolescents to learn through social and democratic processes. Once inequalities in civic experiences in school and the overall school environment are controlled for, the civic engagement gaps between racial minority and white students (and between low-SES and high-SES youth) are greatly reduced.
3. *Contextual effects for characteristics of the school, such as school SES and school climate for open discourse, are found, over and above individual effects.*
4. *Aspects of the neighborhood context influence adolescents' civic outcomes through interactions with the school environment, students' civic experiences, and students' demographic characteristics.* The interactive effects indicate that students who may traditionally be deemed at a disadvantage (either because of poor school or neighborhood conditions) experience more benefits from increases in civic learning opportunities than do more advantaged students.

In the working paper, Wilkenfeld finds systematic variations in the ways in which adolescents are being prepared for functioning citizenship. Parents and peers facilitate preparation by discussing political and social issues, challenging adolescents' construction of knowledge, and providing models of conscientious citizens. Schools provide opportunities for hands-on experiences of democratic processes, supportive environments for sharing different opinions, and learning environments in which democratic ideals are communicated to students. Neighborhoods facilitate civic engagement by enhancing positive experiences in other contexts, specifically in schools. Youth are differentially prepared for active citizenship, but civic experiences within different contexts help to reduce disparities in adolescents' civic outcomes.



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THE AUTHOR CONCLUDES, "...THE CIVIC ENGAGEMENT GAP CAN BE NARROWED WHEN THE LEARNING OPPORTUNITY GAP IS REDUCED. SCHOOLS, ALTHOUGH IMPLICATED IN THE EXISTENCE OF A CIVIC ENGAGEMENT GAP, ALSO HAVE THE POTENTIAL TO NARROW THE GAPS BETWEEN DIFFERENT GROUPS OF STUDENTS."

REDUCING THE LEARNING OPPORTUNITY GAP

The author concludes, "...the civic engagement gap can be narrowed when the learning opportunity gap is reduced. Schools, although implicated in the existence of a civic engagement gap, also have the potential to narrow the gaps between different groups of students." Students acquire meaningful concepts, knowledge, and skills through these civic experiences, and schools could better serve students by ensuring that such experiences are available. Effective school practices are especially important in schools located in high-poverty neighborhoods. Essentially, civic experiences in schools contribute to the preparation of youth for active citizenship and equal access to these experiences reduces civic engagement gaps between students of different demographic groups.

The author analyzed data from the U.S. sample of the 1999 Civic Education Study merged with data from the 2000 U.S. Census (including 2,729 ninth-grade students in 119 schools nationwide). The complete findings are contained in CIRCLE Working Paper #64 "Does Context Matter? How the Family, Peer, School, and Neighborhood Contexts Relate to Adolescents' Civic Engagement" which can be downloaded from <http://www.civicyouth.org/?p=342>. ★

