

NEW RESEARCH ON THE EFFECTIVENESS OF POLITICAL DISCUSSION IN K–12 CIVIC EDUCATION

Research shows that systematically incorporating news media into school curricula improves standardized reading and math scores. A new CIRCLE Working Paper (#72) addresses whether these efforts to incorporate media into school curricula could also increase several elements of civic engagement, including students' media use, political knowledge or their sense of being able to understand and influence politics (internal political efficacy). In this working paper entitled "The Classroom-Kitchen Table Connection: The Effects of Political Discussion on Youth Knowledge and Efficacy," authors Dr. Tim Vercellotti and Dr. Elizabeth C. Matto find that reading news articles and discussing them, especially at home, has a beneficial effect on students' civic development.

THE STUDY DESIGN

The study took place in four suburban public high schools in central New Jersey with similar sizes and socioeconomic profiles. A total of 27 social studies classes with approximately 350 students participated. Over the period of about four months, students completed three separate surveys in the classroom which measured news consumption, political knowledge, and levels of internal political efficacy as well as a set of demographic questions. Students were randomly assigned to one of three groups: (1) a treatment group where students were assigned weekly articles from *Time* magazine and discussed them in class, (2) a different treatment group where students received the same treatment but in addition were required to discuss the articles at home with their parents, and (3) a control group that received no treatment.

The treatment lasted for two months and all participating students completed three surveys (pre, during, and six weeks after the treatment). Finally, the researchers conducted telephone surveys with parents of about one third of the students to measure the relationship between parent and student levels of media use, political knowledge and political efficacy. Multivariate analysis was conducted to control for the effects of students' gender, race, year in school, and whether the student was in an advanced placement or honors class.

A CURRICULUM INVOLVING NEWS MEDIA WORKS BEST WHEN IT'S NOT A "ONE SIZE FITS ALL" DESIGN

Overall, the researchers found that incorporating news media into the curriculum had positive benefits, but those benefits varied by type of student. According to the authors, "A theme that recurs in these findings is that, even with random assignment in an experiment, all students are not created equal, and therefore the benefits of the intervention varied along an important dimension." Among all study participants, those who were not in an AP or honors class were most likely to increase their level of information-seeking and political knowledge as a result of reading the articles and discussing them at home and in class than their more advanced counterparts. However, the students in the AP and honors classes were more likely to show increased internal political efficacy as a result of reading and talking about the material at home and in school.

OVERALL, THE RESEARCHERS FOUND THAT INCORPORATING NEWS MEDIA INTO CURRICULA HAD POSITIVE BENEFITS, BUT THOSE BENEFITS VARIED BY TYPE OF STUDENT.

The researchers caution that the findings may be impacted slightly by the location and timing of the experiment. The experiment took place in four high schools in the Northeast region of the country and therefore generalizing should be done with caution. They also note that the experiment took place during the 2008 primaries and therefore students may have been paying more attention to politics than during another time of the year. Bearing in mind these qualifications, the authors conclude that, "Assigning students to read and discuss articles about politics had a beneficial effect, especially when parents were involved. The more educators can do to build and maintain that connection between school and home, the greater the likelihood that educators and parents can work together to create a more knowledgeable and efficacious citizenry."

To download CIRCLE Working Paper #72, please visit http://www.civicyouth.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/09/WP_72_Vercellotti_Matto.pdf. ★

