

RESEARCH ROUNDUP

EXPERIMENTS TEST THE POWER OF EXPERIENTIAL CIVIC EDUCATION

Schools across the country are implementing experiential civic education programs designed to help young people understand politics and elections. From mock elections to online debates, there are many opportunities for young people to practice real life politics in their classrooms. While general evidence from national surveys suggests that such experiential programs improve students' civic engagement, little experimental research exists that test what types of experiential programs are most effective. However, two CIRCLE-commissioned studies provide evidence, based on controlled experiments, about the impact of experiential education programs on students' political knowledge.

Including Politics and Elections in Civics Classes Helps

The first study was a quasi-experiment conducted in 2002 and 2003 by Kenneth S. Stroupe, Jr. and Larry J. Sabato of the University of Virginia Center for Politics. The experiment compared classes across the country that used the National Youth Leadership Initiative (YLI) curriculum to a control group of similar classes that did not.

The YLI is an ongoing national civic education program and its curriculum consists of five teaching resources that are designed to explicitly teach about politics and elections in an experiential manner. The program resources are: a student mock election, a Web-based "E-Congress," "A More Perfect Union" CD Rom, a community program called "Democracy Corps," and a series of online social studies lesson plans geared toward political education.

According to the study, "the YLI programs have substantial, positive effects on students' level of political knowledge" and, to a lesser degree, some "positive effects on students' political efficacy, pride in politics, and propensity for future political participation." Using several statistical tests, the researchers determined that increases in knowledge were likely caused by the program.

Findings also suggest that increasing the amount of time students spend participating in YLI mock elections can have a positive impact on their attitudes and behaviors. According to the authors, "The more exposure students have to the political participation exercises involved in the mock election aspects of the YLI program, the more likely they were to show increased positive outcomes."

Challenge: Translating Civic Engagement into Political Activism

Another experiment conducted by John A. Phillips, a doctoral student at Yale University, tested the effects of two different civic education programs on minority students in Long Beach, CA. Phillips looked at whether inviting students to participate in school clubs would indeed increase their likelihood of joining, and also whether participation would have an effect on their civic knowledge and attitudes. Additionally, he assessed whether students who participated in a one-hour seminar on voting procedures and neighborhood activism had increases in civic knowledge, attitudes, or behaviors.

While invitations to join clubs did increase membership, he found that these two experiential civic education programs had little overall effect on students' civic knowledge, attitudes, or behaviors. Results suggested that five more attendances in school clubs resulted in one more question answered correctly on a nine-item civics test and a half-point increase in political understanding (measured on a four-point scale). In the second experiment, Phillips found that students who participated in a one-hour seminar on voting procedures and neighborhood activism showed no statistically significant relationship between the lessons from the seminar and subsequent changes in civic knowledge, attitudes, or behaviors.

While these experiments did not trigger political activism among the participating students, they did reveal that these students were civically engaged in their community. For example, nearly two-thirds of the students participated in some type of student organization and half were regular attendees. Moreover, over 80 percent of the students took part in some community association or event during the academic year and almost 70 percent did so on a regular basis. According to the author, "Inner-city Long Beach is rich in social capital – the challenge remains for us to translate this civic engagement into political activism." ■

Both reports, "CIRCLE Working Paper 18: Politics: The Missing Link of Responsible Civic Education" and "CIRCLE Working Paper 14: The Relationship between Secondary Education and Civic Development: Results from Two Field Experiments with Inner City Minorities," can be downloaded from CIRCLE's Web site at http://www.civicyouth.org/research/products/working_papers.htm