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Does Context Matter? How the Family, Peer, School, and Neighborhood Contexts Relate to Adolescents' Civic Engagement

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INTRODUCTION

Competencies for civic participation are important for all young people just as competent citizens are important for successful democracies. The development of civic knowledge, democratic attitudes, and participation in civic activities requires constructive educational and out-of-school experiences. Many contexts provide the experiences that foster civic development. Parents provide models of civic behavior (McIntosh, Hart, & Youniss, 2007), peer groups maintain norms that support participation (Harell, Stolle, & Quintelier, 2008), and schools provide learning opportunities by teaching political topics (Niemi & Junn, 1998; Torney-Purta, Barber, & Wilkenfeld, 2007). Aspects of the neighborhood context also are related to youth civic engagement, including the level of poverty (Atkins & Hart, 2003) and the proportion of college-educated residents (Theokas & Lerner, 2006).[1]

Prior research has generally focused on one or two of these contexts, instead of examining a comprehensive model of youth civic engagement that includes predictors from all four contexts. Examinations of adolescent development in fields such as psychology, sociology, and education policy have found that the aforementioned contexts often converge in their relations with adolescents' psychological (Wilkenfeld, Moore, & Lippman, 2008) and academic outcomes (Pong & Hao, 2007). When examining adolescent civic development it is important to consider several contexts of influence, including the manner in which those contexts are related to each other. This study extends previous research by simultaneously examining the family, peer, school, and neighborhood contexts, including how contexts are interrelated in their influence on civic engagement. Further, instead of controlling for student demographic characteristics, these measures are specifically examined for their interactions with school and neighborhood variables.

Insufficient civic learning opportunities in schools and neighborhoods may prevent adolescents from disadvantaged backgrounds from being adequately prepared for citizenship (Atkins & Hart, 2003; Kahne & Middaugh, 2008). Indeed, groups that are the most socially and economically disadvantaged have the lowest levels of civic knowledge and engagement, and therefore are also politically disadvantaged (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996; Lutkus & Weiss, 2007). The irony is that it is students in disadvantaged schools, and adolescents in disadvantaged neighborhoods, who would especially benefit from being part of an informed and engaged citizenry.

In the current study I explored potential explanations for disparities in adolescent civic engagement through a comprehensive examination of context effects, including a

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[1] Although not examined here, it is interesting to note that features and policies of distal systems such as the school district, state, and nation are associated with adolescents' civic engagement as well (Campbell, 2007; Hart, Atkins, Markey, & Youniss, 2004; Torney-Purta, Wilkenfeld, & Barber, 2008).

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focus on the mechanisms by which schools and neighborhoods collectively facilitate civic engagement. Learning the specific characteristics, practices, and processes of schools that help or hinder diverse groups of adolescents can suggest best practices for enhancing civic engagement for young people of a particular demographic background or in a particular neighborhood environment.

METHODOLOGY

In this study the relationships between contexts of influence and adolescent civic engagement were analyzed using data from the U.S. sample of the 1999 Civic Education Study (CivEd; Torney-Purta, Lehmann, Oswald, & Schulz, 2001) merged with data from the 2000 U.S. Census.[2] CivEd is a cross-national study of approximately 90,000 adolescents in 28 countries, including nearly 3,000 14-year-olds in the United States. The U.S. Census provides information on the demographic, social, and economic composition of every zip-code in the United States.

Background

The CivEd was conducted in 1999 by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA), a consortium of governmental agencies and research institutions founded for the purpose of conducting comparative education studies. Two instruments were utilized: an assessment of students' knowledge of fundamental democratic principles and skills in applying such knowledge, and a survey of students' attitudes toward civic issues, conceptions of democracy and citizenship, and expected civic participation. The administration of the assessment and survey to a representative sample of 14-year-olds occurred in 28 countries in 1999-2000. In the United States the data were collected in October, 1999. Students were given two hours during class to complete the assessment and survey (school administrators and teachers were also given surveys to provide supplemental information, but those data are not utilized here).

Current Study

The U.S. sample of the CivEd is the focus of the current study; the analytic sample contains 2,729 ninth-grade students in 119 schools nationwide. Because it is a nationally representative sample findings can be generalized to the national population of ninth graders (or 14-year-olds). Utilizing a large dataset with advanced statistical techniques (including hierarchical linear modeling [HLM]; Raudenbush, Bryk, Cheong, & Congdon, 2004) enables the appropriate examination of students within schools and students between schools.

Given the multifaceted nature of civic engagement, the current study considered context effects related to four distinct aspects of civic engagement: civic knowledge, support for the rights of ethnic minorities, anticipated voting behavior, and anticipated community participation. Predictors included adolescents' demographic

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[2] Census data were linked to CivEd data through school zip-codes, which were obtained by license from the U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics.

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characteristics (including gender, race, immigrant status, and socioeconomic status [SES]), political discourse with parents and peers, civic experiences in school (including student confidence in the effectiveness of participation in school processes, perception of a classroom climate that encourages open and respectful discourse, and a curriculum where students are exposed to democratic ideals), and the demographic composition and economic conditions of the neighborhood (including affluence, poverty, racial diversity, and the proportion of immigrant residents).[3]

In addition to examining main effects (i.e., statistically significant relations between individual predictors and the civic outcomes), I explored interactive effects on the civic outcomes. In a statistical interaction two predictors have a combined relation with the outcome, which provides a more nuanced understanding of adolescent development. A statistical analysis of interactions can indicate whether specific educational practices are more effective for particular groups of young people (for example, based on student demographic characteristics or neighborhood conditions). Therefore, I examined interactions between adolescents and their environment, as well as interactions between the school context and the neighborhood context. Examining how youth are differentially responsive to environmental influences can provide evidence for ways in which adolescents actively contribute to their own civic development. In the current state of the literature, studies typically do not distinguish whether there are aspects of the environment that are more beneficial for students of different demographic groups (often because the samples are not constructed in a way to allow this kind of analysis).

RESULTS

Four consistent patterns emerged from the analyses (across the four civic outcomes). First, 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. Although civic learning opportunities and experiences in multiple settings narrow some of these gaps, many still persist. Clearly there are groups of young people who are not adequately prepared to be functioning members of the polity and society. Additionally, there are likely to be cumulative effects for young people who are represented in more than one of the disadvantaged groups (for instance, low-SES black males). Other studies have identified group differences in civic engagement, however research on the demographic characteristics associated with civic outcomes typically has not examined characteristics and experiences beyond individual demographics that could explain the engagement gap. Therefore, the next reasonable line of inquiry was to examine whether specific experiences within contexts, as well as characteristics of different contexts, were related to the civic engagement gap.

Second, civic learning opportunities in many contexts are related to the civic engagement of young people. Parental discourse about national and international politics and civic experiences in school are learning opportunities that are consistently

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[3] See the appendix for a detailed list of items and scales.

beneficial. Through discourse with parents, adolescents construct knowledge and internalize civic values and beliefs. 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. For example, the gap between Latino and white students in civic knowledge becomes insignificant if individuals' civic experiences and schools' civic and socioeconomic environments are equalized.

Third, contextual effects for characteristics of the school such as school SES and school climate for open discourse are found over and above individual effects. For example, attending a school with a high-SES population is associated with higher civic knowledge even after the individual's own SES has been taken into account.

Fourth, 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. Three of these interactions are discussed further below (note that the interactions control for individual demographic characteristics and all other predictors).[4]

Interaction 1: Adolescents' civic knowledge

Neither neighborhood poverty nor the average confidence in effective participation among students in a school directly related to students' civic knowledge, however the two predictors interacted to produce a significant indirect effect (illustrated with point estimates of students' civic knowledge in Figure 1). Student confidence in the effectiveness of participation was a measure of students' experiences of democratic processes within the school, such as student-elected representation and the experience of the collective making an appreciable difference through the organization of student groups and student action. The relation between the average level of student confidence in participation and students' civic knowledge differed according to the level of neighborhood poverty; in neighborhoods with high poverty levels, the school confidence in participation was positively associated with students' civic knowledge. Although the differences in student knowledge were not large, the interaction does indicate that this aspect of the school civic environment is particularly beneficial for students attending schools in high-poverty neighborhoods. In other words, schools in disadvantaged communities can have a larger impact on students by enhancing the schools' civic environments. The significance of the combined predictors' indirect effect demonstrates the importance of looking at interactions between contexts for their mutual influence on adolescents' outcomes.

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[4] A number of other statistically significant interactions are reported in the dissertation.

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Figure 1. **Interaction between neighborhood poverty and school confidence in participation on adolescents' civic knowledge**
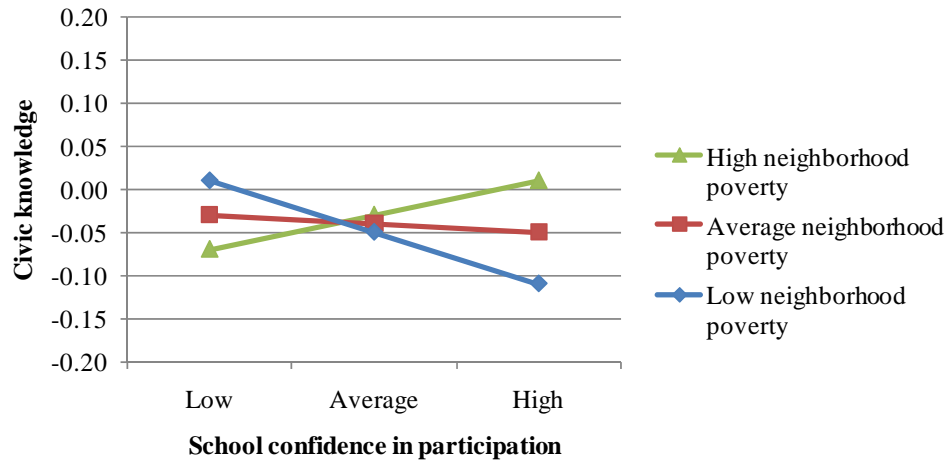
Interaction 2: Adolescents' anticipated voting

In schools where students experienced low levels of civic curriculum there was lower anticipated civic behavior regardless of the neighborhood poverty level. This main effect indicates that these structured learning experiences, such as learning to understand people who have different ideas and learning about the importance of voting, are important for future civic participation. Although higher levels of school civic curriculum related to increases in the civic outcome in all neighborhoods, the growth was most pronounced in high-poverty neighborhoods (illustrated in Figure 2). The school civic curriculum appears to be more beneficial to youth attending schools in high-poverty neighborhoods than to those attending schools in low-poverty neighborhoods. In low-poverty neighborhoods, students may have a large range of learning opportunities and activities during and after school hours. Therefore, when students learn about democratic ideals in classrooms (or experience democratic processes as with the previous interaction) it may not have a very substantial benefit because the students have already been exposed to these topics through other experiences. However, schools in high-poverty neighborhoods may only be able to provide a limited range of learning opportunities and activities so any increase in positive activities will be related to greater gains in students' civic outcomes.

Figure 2. Interaction between neighborhood poverty and school civic curriculum on adolescents' anticipated voting
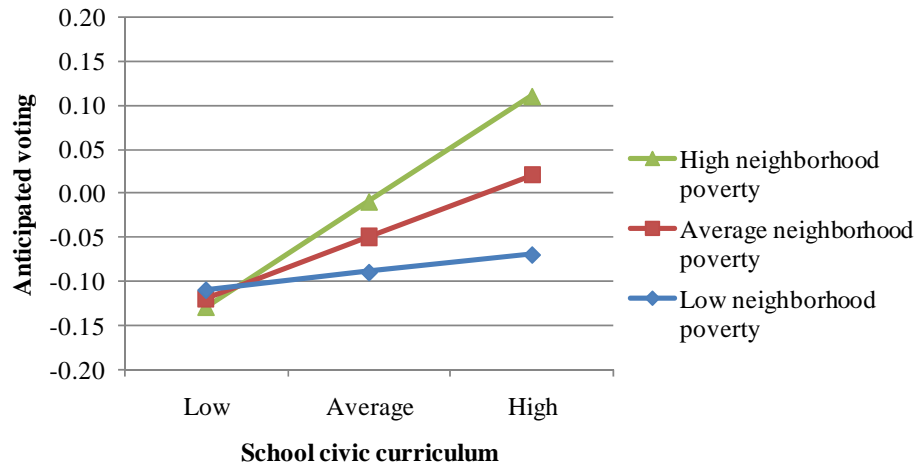
Interaction 3: Adolescents' anticipated community participation

Latino students were neither more nor less likely than white students to expect to participate in community and service activities (i.e., there was a non-significant main effect). However, white and Latino students were differentially responsive to the amount of racial diversity in their schools' surrounding neighborhoods (illustrated in Figure 3). White adolescents were less likely to want to participate in community activities in diverse neighborhoods, but Latino youth thrived in this context. This interaction suggests that neighborhood racial diversity may be related to different types of collective socialization for white and Latino youth. Perhaps in more homogonous neighborhoods, Latinos do not feel as comfortable participating in community activities and would hesitate to venture out into the neighborhood. Conversely, white students may feel more uncomfortable in racially diverse neighborhoods because they are more likely to be part of the minority group.

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Figure 3. **Interaction between neighborhood racial diversity and Latino ethnicity on adolescents' anticipated community participation**
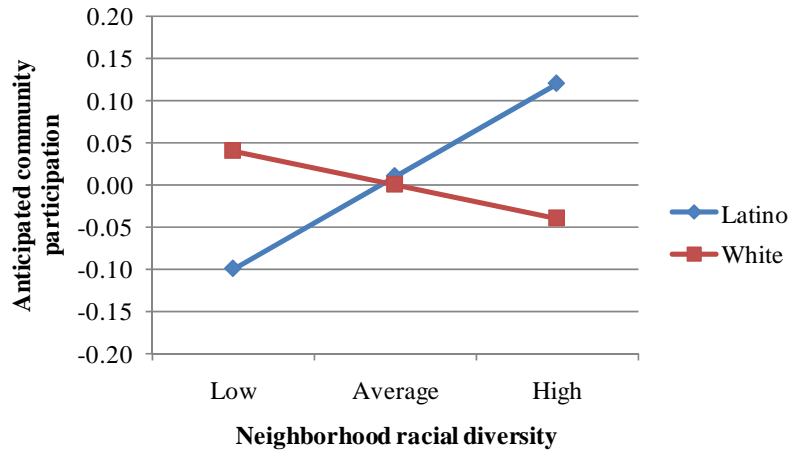
DISCUSSION

This study revealed systematic variation in the way 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, a supportive environment for sharing different opinions, and a learning environment in which democratic ideals are communicated to students. Neighborhoods facilitate civic engagement by enhancing positive experiences in other contexts, specifically in schools. In some instances, youth are differentially prepared for active citizenship, but civic experiences within different contexts help to reduce disparities in adolescents' civic outcomes.

The findings of this study have implications for the conceptual understanding of development within context, methodological considerations, and educational practice. Adolescents' civic outcomes varied as a function of characteristics of the person and of multiple systems of influence. In particular, there are processes inherent in each context that can account for the ways in which environments influence adolescents' development. Processes that seem to be most important pertain to 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. This study has provided empirical evidence for processes related to human development proposed by theorists such as Bronfenbrenner (1979), Lave and Wenger (2002), and Jencks and Mayer (1990).

The current study provides further support for the existence of distinguishable types of civic-related school experiences and the importance of examining multiple

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contexts of influence on development. Considering other evidence of a civic engagement gap (Levinson, 2007) and a civic learning opportunity gap (Kahne & Middaugh, 2008), the current findings indicate that the 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. In summary, 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.

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APPENDIX: ITEMS AND SCALES USED IN ANALYSES[5]

Outcome Variables

Civic knowledge: An item response theory (IRT) scale comprised of 25 test items measuring adolescents' civic content knowledge (i.e., knowledge of fundamental democratic principles).

Support for ethnic minorities' rights: Four-item IRT scale assessing the extent to which adolescents support different kinds of rights, which indicate the internalization of democratic principles (e.g., "All ethnic groups should have equal chances to get a good education in this country").

Anticipated voting: Two-item IRT scale assessing adolescents' expectations for formal civic participation in adulthood (e.g., "Vote in national elections").

Anticipated community participation: Three-item IRT scale assessing adolescents' expectations for informal civic participation in the next few years (e.g., "Volunteer time to help people in the community").

Level-1 (L1) Predictor Variables

Student demographic characteristics: Gender (52% of the sample was female), Race (63% White, 14% Latino, 12% Black, 5% Asian, 4% Multiracial, 1% American Indian), Immigrant status (11% immigrant), and Socioeconomic status (a composite of maternal education, paternal education, and books in the home).

Political discourse with parents: Two-item scale measuring how often students discuss national and international politics with their parents.

Political discourse with peers: Two-item scale measuring how often students discuss national and international politics with their peers.

Evening time spent with peers: A single item measuring how often students spend time with peers in the evening outside the home.

Confidence in effectiveness of school participation: Four-item IRT scale assessing real-world experiences of democratic processes and participation in school:
1. Lots of positive changes happen in this school when students work together.
2. Organizing groups of students to state their opinions could help solve problems in this school.
3. Students acting together can have more influence on what happens in this school than students acting alone.
4. Electing student representatives to suggest changes in how the school is run makes schools better.

Openness of classroom climate for discussion: Six-item IRT scale assessing whether students have had opportunities to express and understand different sides of social issues in class:
1. Students feel free to disagree openly with teachers about political and social issues during class.
2. Students are encouraged to make up their own minds about issues.
3. Teachers respect our opinions and encourage us to express them during class.

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[5] All predictor and outcome variables are from the Civic Education Study except the level-2 neighborhood variables which are from U.S. Census data.

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4. Students feel free to express opinions in class even when their opinions are different from most of the other students.
5. Teachers encourage us to discuss political or social issues about which people have different opinions.
6. Teachers present several sides of an issue when explaining it in class.

Civic curriculum: Six-item scale assessing students' exposure to learning about democratic practices and ideals:
1. Learned to understand people who have different ideas.
2. Learned to cooperate in groups with other students.
3. Learned to contribute to solving problems in the community.
4. Learned to be a patriotic and loyal citizen of my country.
5. Learned to be concerned about what happens in other countries.
6. Learned tthe importance of voting in national and local elections.

Level-2 (L2) Predictor Variables

School SES (aggregate of corresponding L1 variable)

School confidence in participation: Average level of confidence in school participation (aggregate of corresponding L1 variable)

School open climate: Average perception of open classroom climate (aggregate of corresponding L1 variable)

School civic curriculum: Average level of school civic curriculum (aggregate of corresponding L1 variable)

Neighborhood affluence: Three-item factor comprised of the proportion of adult residents in the neighborhood with a high school or college education, in managerial or professional occupations, and with annual incomes greater than $75,000.

Neighborhood poverty: Four-item factor comprised of the proportion of residents in the neighborhood living below the poverty line, unemployed, receiving public assistance, and living in female-headed households.

Neighborhood racial diversity: Measure of heterogeneity within a neighborhood; computed by combining the proportion of White, Latino, Black, Asian, Multiracial, and American Indian residents using the fractionalization equation $(1 - [\ \Sigma\ s^2\ ]$, where s represents each groups' proportion of the population).

Neighborhood immigrant population: One-item measure of the proportion of foreign-born residents in the neighborhood.

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