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Developing participation through simulations: A multi-level analysis of situational interest on students' commitment to vote

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ABSTRACT

While simulation has been a staple of Social Studies curricula since the 1960s, few current studies have sought to understand the mechanisms behind how simulations may influence students' learning and behavior. Learning theories around student engagement – specifically interest development theory (Hidi & Renninger, 2006) – may help explain students' commitment to future political action. To incorporate this theory into the democratic education literature, this study asks: Do situational interest and simulation frequency uniquely contribute to students' commitment to vote in the future? Data included 260 students from 19 classrooms, 9 teachers, in 9 schools, recruited as part of a larger mixed-methods study on Project Based Learning. Hierarchical Linear Modeling (HLM) techniques were used to examine the relationship between individual outcomes and predictors across different classrooms and teachers. Analysis of data suggests both frequency of simulations and situational interest directly predict students' commitment to vote but do not uniquely contribute to the outcome. Findings suggest situational interest may play an important role in influencing students' learning and future political behavior.

Introduction

The decline of political engagement[1] by young people in recent decades has prompted scholars to explore ways of encouraging youth to participate politically. Many scholars believe democratic education plays an important role in helping students understand and engage with politics, especially since a goal of education in the United States centers on creating citizens for a democracy[2]. At the same time, the democratic education literature asserts that certain classroom practices, such as political simulations and role-play, can foster students' commitments to civic and political engagement (Kahne & Middaugh, 2008b; Kahne & Westheimer, 2006; Torney-Purta, 2002). While simulations and role-play have been staples of Social Studies curricula since the 1960s (e.g. Cherryholmes, 1966; Guetzkow, 1963; Shaftel & Shaftel, 1967; Verba, 1964), few

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[1] I use the term political engagement throughout this paper to distinguish it from a broader term, civic engagement (Berger, 2009).
[2] See the collection of essays in Gutmann (1999) and Parker (1996).

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current studies have sought to understand the mechanism behind how simulations may influence students' proclivities toward political action. Current learning theories around student engagement – specifically interest development theory (Hidi & Renninger, 2006) – may help explain students' commitment to future action. Hidi and Renninger assert that 'interest' in specific subjects can be fostered and supported by classroom practices. The theory also suggests well-developed interest can help explain students' cognitive gains and future behaviors (Renninger, Ewen, & Lasher, 2002). To incorporate this theory into the democratic education literature, this study asks: Do situational interest and simulation frequency uniquely contribute to students' commitment to vote in the future?

While most democratic education studies measure students' political interest as an outcome variable, along with their commitment to political participation in the future (e.g. Kahne & Westheimer, 2006), few studies have sought to understand the development of students' interest around political engagement in the classroom and its influence on students' future political behavior. The democratic education literature does not often rely on theories from the learning sciences literature (e.g. Harackiewicz, Barron, Tauer, Carter, & Elliot, 2000; Hidi & Baird, 1986; Lipstein & Renninger, 2006; Mitchell, 1993) about how motivation and affect (the desire to return to a domain) may impact students' achievement and future behaviors in certain subject areas. This gap not only overlooks the individual motivations that may determine students' commitment to future political engagement, but also neglects how classroom practices may influence those motivations. To address this gap, I sought to better understand how classroom practices might influence students' future political behavior via the development of students' interest in the domain. Specifically, I used interest development theory to examine how classroom practices may support students' interest in politics.

Background

Why study youth?

The decline of political participation by young adults has fueled a resurgence of democratic education research, as scholars seek to understand and reverse the downward trend through educational means. The literature that came out of this revived interest in democratic education suggests, for adults, the more political knowledge and the more education a person has, the more likely she will engage in political activities such as voting and be interested in politics (e.g. Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996; Niemi & Junn, 1998). In order to better understand the eventual political participation of young adults, democratic educators have taken to measuring adolescents' commitment to vote in the future and their political interest (e.g. Torney-Purta, Lehmann, Oswald, & Schulz, 2001) since they are not yet old enough to cast a ballot. While adolescents are unable to engage in actual political processes, it is important to note that they have opinions about the rights and duties they will hold as adults in our civil society (Bogard & Sherrod, 2008). These opinions might influence how they perceive their roles as adults in the future. Because studies have shown that political knowledge and education can predict voting behavior in adults, recent studies in democratic education have emphasized the effectiveness of certain classroom practices in fostering students' knowledge of, interest in, and commitments to civic and political engagement (e.g. CIRCLE, 2013; Kahne, Chi, & Middaugh, 2006; Kahne & Middaugh, 2008b; Torney-Purta, 2002; Torney-Purta, Amadeo, & Richardson, 2007). These classroom practices include an open classroom climate, engagement in service learning, and the use of simulations (see Gibson & Levine, 2003 for a review). Ultimately, these practices have come to be known and lauded as "best practices" of Social Studies education (Kahne & Middaugh, 2008a).

Best practices in social studies education

One of the best practices outlined in Kahne and Middaugh (2008a)'s report is the use of simulations and role-play in the classroom; however, few current studies have sought to understand *why* simulations are effective democratic teaching tools. Simulations, as defined by Wright-Maley (2015), (1) reflect reality in a structured and limited way, (2) illustrate significant processes, (3) incorporate students in active roles, and (4) are pedagogically mediated. A brief search revealed that many recent articles on simulations in social studies coursework deal with history education and simulations as a way for students to better engage and obtain historical information/perspective (e.g. Corbeil & Laveault, 2011; DiCamillo & Gradwell, 2012; Schweber, 2003). At the same time, studies that deal with democratic education tend to involve legislative simulations and focus on students' political knowledge or efficacy at the end of the course (e.g. Baranowski, 2006; Bernstein, 2008; Ganzler, 2010; Parker et al., 2011). Overall, many of these studies examined the effectiveness of simulations as a classroom practice, but not as many looked for ways to explain why simulations may be successful. The study of Williams and Williams (2007) does present a framework for explaining how simulations might help change individual's behavior, however their study presents a specific simulation design, which may not explain how simulations work generally. Furthermore, studies that have examined students' political interest as it relates to simulations tend to use a more colloquial understanding of 'interest' that does not account for the various developmental phases of interest (e.g. Gehlbach et al., 2008). Given the status of simulations as a best practice of democratic education, it becomes worthwhile to examine how simulations work as a viable way to foster students' commitment to future political engagement.

One possible hypothesis, from interest development theory (Hidi & Renninger, 2006), is that students are more engaged in simulations and develop more interest in political topics as a result of political simulations. As students become engaged in the simulations, the simulations may help create an authentic learning environment around political and social practices