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Cultivating a mindset of civic engagement among young adolescents

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ABSTRACT

This study explored early stages of civic engagement among 48 young adolescents by examining what they *think about* as a result of participating in various civic learning activities during a summer civics camp, and whether or not this thinking varied based on participants' entering civic profiles. Participant thinking was assessed through concept maps. Based on survey data, participants were classified into entering profiles of civic development: justice-oriented or participatory youth; civically purposeful or not, and civically involved or not. Findings show that, of the eight camp activities studied, interactions with guest speakers from various community agencies were most likely to generate thinking about knowledge and civic action. Participant thinking did not differentiate in any consistent ways based on whether or not they were justice-oriented. However, there were differences in thinking when participants were classified by presence or absence of civic purpose and civic involvement.

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Introduction

There is a dire need for more robust, equitable civic learning opportunities nationwide, both within and outside of traditional school contexts (Kahne & Middaugh, 2010). While research about civic education continues to grow (e.g., Berson, Rodríguez-Campos, Walker-Egea, Owens, & Bellara, 2014; Castro & Knowles, 2017), limited research exists about civic education for early adolescents prior to entering high school. Early adolescence is a critical time to explore civic thinking due to cognitive and social cognitive changes that take on particular significance between the ages of 10 and 14 (Blakemore & Mills, 2014; Eccles, 1999).

Youth engagement in extra-curricular programs has been shown to promote commitment to civic participation, particularly when such programs challenge students in settings where social bonds with adults and like-minded peers are formed (Kahne & Sporte, 2008). The present study was designed to add to existing research about civic education, and to address a gap in knowledge about civic education prior to high school by exploring diverse young adolescents' thinking as a result of participating in summer civics camp activities that are transferable to a classroom setting.

One tool for examining methods and outcomes in civic education is a developmentally appropriate practice framework. The primary professional organization for middle school educators emphasizes developmental responsiveness to the characteristics of young adolescents as a starting point for determining teaching practices (Association for Middle Level Education, 2010). Those who teach from a developmentally appropriate mindset do so by adjusting their instructional

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strategies to meet the typical, diverse, and contextual characteristics of students (Coppie & Bredekamp, 2009; Meschke, Peter, & Bartholomae, 2012). When considering civic education for early adolescents, thinking about the ways in which civic development is an aspect of overall identity development is developmentally appropriate.

While early adolescence is not likely to be characterized by the degree of identity exploration and commitment that occurs during the later adolescent and young adult years (Kroger, Martinussen, & Marcia, 2010), young adolescents are in the process of developing the cognitive and social-emotional skills (Eccles, 1999) that will be the tools they use to more actively construct their identities over the course of their lives. Ideally, the identities that they use these skills to construct will include examined and, possibly, internalized societal standards, as well as examined personal commitments (Erikson, 1968). In other words, early adolescence may mark the very beginning stages of more conscious efforts to understand both the self, and the self in relation to others. In terms of civic development, this search for self-understanding incorporates society's varying ideas about what it means to be a citizen, as well as the ways in which the individual adolescent is beginning to consider his or her most important goals in life.

Developmentally appropriate civic education should take into account what each adolescent brings into the learning context if desired outcomes are to be achieved, especially in terms of early adolescent efforts to understand the self and the self in relation to the community. In both positive youth development (PYD) theory and in an action civics framework, what the individual brings into his or her learning experiences in combination with the features of the learning experience are both important components for determining outcomes (Lerner, Dowling, & Anderson, 2003; Levinson, 2014). With this in mind, the theoretical framework utilized for the present study includes ways of understanding alignments between early adolescent conceptions of citizenship and various external models of citizenship available to them, as well as a way of considering the manner in which early adolescents may incorporate growing civic commitments with their most important goals in life. Each of these is conceptualized as a way to classify adolescents by existing profiles of civic development to better understand the interplay between the young adolescent and the different components of action civics learning experiences on the path to positive civic outcomes.

Theoretical framework

Two fields of research about civic engagement and education shaped the theoretical framework for the study described here. From the field of applied developmental science, particularly from those who utilize a PYD perspective in that field, we consider different ways of defining civic engagement and understanding what civic engagement may look like in young adolescents. Then, we integrate theory about action civics from the field of social studies education to describe possible ways in which civic education may be implemented. Taken together, we bring together the person-centered focus of developmental researchers with the pedagogical focus of social studies education researchers to make arguments for both why early adolescence is a key developmental window for civic education and why an action civics model is likely to be a developmentally appropriate pedagogical strategy.

The construct of civic engagement in the field of applied developmental science

Researchers in the field of applied developmental science, who seek to apply what is known about human development to create positive outcomes for individuals and the communities in which they live (Lerner, Fisher, & Weinberg, 2000), have studied civic development during adolescence for at least two decades. During this time, the construct of *civic engagement* has been the most common way to talk about civic development in youth, but there has never been a true consensus about what, exactly, is meant by this term (Malin, Ballard, & Damon, 2015). As Sherrod, Flanagan, and Youniss (2002) highlight, some of the different ways of defining the construct emerged as a result of the focal areas of the different disciplines of those who have studied civic engagement. Those coming from political science, for example, tend to focus on engagement with the electoral system in democratic societies, while developmental researchers studying the period of adolescence more typically seek to understand what may indicate civic engagement prior to the age of 18, when participation in electoral politics is likely to be limited. Others have written that civic engagement may be indicated by “a connection to one's community, a commitment to improving that community, and the act of helping one's community” (Zaff et al., 2011, p. 1208). Echoing additional ways in which Zaff et al. (2011) discuss civic engagement, in the study described here, we drew from an understanding of civic engagement that includes the behavioral, cognitive, and emotional processes that foster community involvement.

In an effort to categorize the varying ways that individuals may demonstrate civic engagement, Westheimer and Kahne (2004) have proposed three types of citizens: personally responsible, participatory, and justice-oriented. In another attempt to respond to the breadth of what is meant by the term *civic engagement*, Malin et al. (2015) have recently argued that no consensus about the construct of civic engagement has ever really been reached, and that it has been used to refer to civic action and activities ranging from volunteering to voting or protesting, civic attitudes, intentional goals for the future, and skills and capacities. As a result, Malin et al. (2015) propose that *civic purpose*, a new construct, may be a helpful construct for understanding civic development during adolescence. Both Westheimer and Kahne's (2004) three types of citizens and Malin et al.'s (2015) construct of *civic purpose* were foundational to how we investigated the ways in which students' existing profiles of civic engagement may relate to their experiences of civic learning opportunities.

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