

Motivating Youth Civic Engagement

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Abstract: The purpose of this article is to examine the relationship between youth civic engagement, motivation and the external environment, and to identify strategies that may motivate high school students to become more civically involved. This paper is based on the findings of a research study of the factors that may influence student motivation and, consequently, civic mindset throughout a school year. The research study's participants were eight Grade 11 students, who were interviewed at three different times during the 2015-2016 school year. The findings illustrate the interconnected and dynamic relationship between the environment and internal aspects of student motivation – suggesting that civic engagement may be improved through supportive and encouraging external factors such as student-focused teaching methods and consideration of the time of year, homework, student fatigue, school context and culture, peers, families and community, student goals, and civic recognition.

Key words: Youth; Civic Engagement; Motivation; Citizenship Education

Introduction

Youth civic engagement is a vibrant area of research and writing in a number of nations, fueled by concerns that youth are both apathetic and disengaged from civic or political life (Gidengil, Blais, Nevitte & Nadeau, 2004; Howe, 2010; Levine & Higin-D'Alessandro, 2010; Putnam, 1995). However, a research study conducted in seven nations found that the picture is more complex: Educated youth value democracy and democratic engagement and make decisions about their levels of involvement based on their self-efficacy and beliefs about the effectiveness of the democratic government processes in their nations (Broom, 2016). Thus, youth actively construct their level of civic engagement based on their perceptions of their contexts. As youth construct their civic attitudes and actions, schools and teachers may be able to influence youth's emerging civic mindsets.

This paper discusses how civic involvement may be increased through motivating contexts, based on the findings of a research study on high school students' motivation. The article concludes with recommendations that explore the relationships between students and their teacher, homework and fatigue, school culture, peers, family, goals, recognition, and temporal factors.

Literature review: Civic engagement

Democracy requires an educated population, and one of our most effective means of educating students is through schools (Dewey, 1916). Public schools have aimed to develop citizens since their foundation (Broom, 2015; Sherrod, Torney-Purta, & Flanagan, 2010; Yates and Youniss, 1999). Early work, however, had a simple, one dimensional view of citizens as formed by education. More recent work has theorized the complexity of how individuals' civic attitudes (or mindsets) and behaviours come to be formed through their lived contexts such as their SES, ethnicity and experiences

(Wilkenfeld, Lauckhardt & Torney-Purta, 2010; Yates and Youniss, 1999). Civic engagement, which we view as part of a person's general motivation, is understood to be living and dynamic, and can be shaped through a number of factors and contexts.

Motivation

Motivation is defined as “internal and external driving forces that provide individuals with an incentive and motive to initiate and engage in some form of behaviour” (Lee, 2016, p. 9). Within an educational context, the literature illustrates that increased student motivation may foster positive learning behaviours and emotions (for example, attentiveness and inquisitiveness) and improve youth's academic engagement (Bolkan, 2015; Martin, 2008; Ntoumanis & Blaymires, 2003; Reeve & Lee, 2014; Wylie & Hodgen, 2012). Therefore, furthering educators' understanding of student motivation may enhance the quality of education and student learning (Buijs & Admiraal, 2013; Peetsma & Van der Veen, 2013; Spinath, Eckert, & Steinmayr, 2014).

Motivation is an internal, context dependent, subjective experience (Lee & Reeve, 2012), which suggests that one's motivation can be influenced by the social and physical environment (Turner & Patrick, 2008). Based on these conceptions, the authors have theorized motivation using a Positive Youth Development (PYD) and strengths-based education model, and Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (EST) (1977).

PYD theorists postulate that maturation during adolescence is influenced by both biological and environmental factors (Larsen, 2006). Therefore, youth should have supportive external environments that promote positive social and emotional development. Goals of PYD include improving youths' competence, confidence, connections, character, and compassion (Gomez & Ang, 2007). Similarly, strengths-based education approaches suggest that educators should emphasize student effort and achievement, and recognize that all students possess strengths and positive qualities (Hammond & Zimmerman, 2012; Lopez & Louis, 2009).

The Ecological Systems Theory argues that both the immediate environment (one's family and school) and larger social contexts (one's neighborhood, the local government) influence human development (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). Additionally, the Ecological Systems Theory emphasizes the interconnectedness between various external environments – for example, one's home, friends, school, and neighbourhood – and how the context of one setting may influence a person's behaviour in another setting (Bronfenbrenner, 1977).

Drawing from these theories, the authors argue that a holistic view of youth's civic mindset is needed – one that views youth's civic mindset as constructed, dynamic and ever changing, and that is shaped and formed through the interaction with a number of internal and external factors, which we describe in more detail next.

Factors that may influence motivation

Various internal factors may contribute to students' motivation to participate civically in their schools and societies. These factors include: Personality – a person's behaviour, thought-process, and feelings (McGeown et al., 2014); attitudes and values – an individual's guiding principles and beliefs (Parks & Guay, 2009); interest and enjoyment – feelings of “arousal, alertness, [and] attention” (Macklem, 2015, p. 39), and pleasure, excitement, pleasantness, or enthusiasm (Lumby, 2011); goals – objectives and

aims that individuals choose to pursue, often based upon their attitudes and values (Parks & Guay, 2009); self-determination – one's innate psychological needs, including competency (ability), relatedness (social acceptance), and autonomy (control) (Lam, Wong, Yang, & Liu, 2012; Wooley, 2011); and self-efficacy – one's belief about one's ability to perform or succeed at a task, or in relation to a set standard (Urdu & Schoenfelder, 2006).

External factors that may motivate a person's decision to engage civically include: Family (Bempechat & Shernoff, 2012); peers (Nelson & DeBacker, 2008); school culture (Elliot & Tudge, 2012); teachers (Montalvo, Mansfield, & Miller, 2007); and extracurricular activities, work, and volunteering (Marsh, 1988; Pitts, 2007).

Personality

Previous literature on personality suggests that conscientiousness can influence motivation, as conscientious students are often competent, dutiful, self-disciplined, and deliberate (De Feyter, Caers, Vigna, & Berings, 2012; McGeown et al., 2014; Spinath, Eckert, & Steinmayr, 2014) – qualities that may promote active citizenship. Other personality traits that may influence one's engagement in civics include curiosity, sincerity, and attitudes about fairness (Dinger et al., 2015). This suggests that youth's personality types may predispose them to participate (or to not participate) in civics. However, external factors such as youth's family and social contexts may influence their personality over a period of months or years (Asendorpf & Wilpers, 1998; McGeown et al., 2014).

Family and peers

Parents influence their children's values and attitudes about education and other aspects of life (Bempechat & Shernoff, 2012), indicating that students may participate more in civics if their parents value, are interested in, or participate in civics or government (Broom, 2016). In high school, however, parental influence often decreases, as youth begin to spend more time with their friends (Coe, 2003). As a result, the attitude and values of one's peers may become more influential (Coe, 2003). Youth are more likely to feel comfortable at school and enjoy academics if they have a strong and supportive peer group (Gorard & See, 2011). Additionally, students have greater learning goals if their peers have high educational aspirations (Cham, Hughes, West, & Im, 2014; Christofides, Hoy, Milla, & Stengos, 2015). This suggests that the attitudes, interests, and goals of students' peers may influence their own beliefs about civic engagement.

School community and teachers

A positive school environment – a relaxed atmosphere, student choice of courses, and small class sizes – may increase student interest and enjoyment of school (Gorard & See, 2011). A supportive school culture may also improve students' social and psychosocial well-being, and aid students in developing positive citizenship traits, such as a caring attitude and the desire to contribute to society (Gomez & Ang, 2007). Additionally, the values of a school's culture – for example, arts, athletics, or civics – can influence student attitudes towards various subjects or co-curricular activities (Elliot & Tudge, 2012). Thus, students may be more likely to actively participate in class and co-curricular activities if they have a positive affiliation with the school community, or if

their school culture emphasizes the importance of democracy and student participation. Additionally, a student's participation in extracurricular activities may lead to improved academic attitudes and self-competence beliefs, thus creating a more positive affiliation with school (Marsh, 1988; Pitts, 2007).

Effective teaching can improve student attitudes and values towards a subject, as students are more likely to set greater learning goals and apply more effort in classes where they like their teacher (Montalvo et al., 2007). This indicates the importance of developing positive teacher-student relationships (Gorard & See, 2011), which may potentially influence youth's civic attitudes and behaviours. Teachers can also improve student interest and enjoyment of school by creating situational interest – context-dependent enjoyment of an activity or task – in their lessons (Schraw, Flowerday, & Lehman, 2001) and by using a variety of teaching strategies (Gorard & See, 2011). This research suggests that teachers who create interesting civics lessons may foster student passion towards the subject, influencing youth's civic involvement.

A gap in the literature and significance

Using Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (EST), the authors argue that motivation, which encompasses civic attitudes and behaviours, is living, fluid, and dynamic, and is influenced by both internal and external factors. Additionally, from a Positive Youth Development (PYD) and strengths-based education model, youth civic engagement may be improved through various positive external influences within the school community. Motivation (and citizenship education) has not been extensively examined through this conceptual framework and theoretical lens. By conceptualizing motivation using EST, PYD, and strengths-based education, students' motivation and engagement – and consequently their civic motivation – may be improved through positive external influences. Understanding the factors that influence youth motivation can provide recommendations for more effective civic education.

Research study

In the next section of the paper, we describe the findings of an interview research study that was conducted during the 2015-2016 school year. Interviews asked students to reflect on their levels of motivation over the school year, in addition to exploring possible connections between internal and external factors and youth's levels of motivation.

Objectives and methodology

The goals of this study were to identify: i) What factors influence student motivation throughout a school year? and ii) What do students suggest or identify that teachers and curriculum developers might do to improve student motivation? While the purpose of this study was to understand how students' academic motivation is influenced throughout the school year, understanding these factors may also assist educators in comprehending and recognizing the main factors that influence youth's civic mindedness and how teachers and curriculum developers may improve students' civic attitudes.

Eight Grade 11 students participated in this study. Data was collected through three sets of qualitative interviews (October, January, and May) during the 2015-2016 school year. Participants were from an independent school in British Columbia; the

school consisted approximately 550 students between kindergarten and Grade 12. Most of the school's students were Caucasian and from high socioeconomic families. The participants in this study were high achievers ('B' or 'A' students) who valued their education.

Ethical consent was obtained from the participating university. School ethics approval was obtained from the Head of School, while participant and parent or guardian consent was obtained through a formal letter. One researcher visited the two Grade 11 classrooms to explain the purpose of this study and all students were invited to sign up to participate; there was approximately a 20% response rate. Students and parents were informed of the duration of the study, student right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty to their academic standing, and of the honorarium for participating.

Interviews consisted of ten open-ended questions that were piloted and then refined based on peer feedback. This methodology was chosen because the researchers conceptualized students' attitudes and behaviours to be complex and multifaceted. Therefore, they wanted to allow participants to discuss their responses in detail and to be able to expand upon their answers. Each interview was recorded and then transcribed to ensure that participant responses had been recorded accurately (Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2012).

Five internal (personality, attitude and values, interest and enjoyment, goals, and self-determination and self-efficacy) and five external (family, peers, teachers, school culture, and extracurricular activities, work, and volunteering) were chosen to guide data analysis. These themes were chosen in accordance with significant motivational literature and with Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1977). Additional emergent themes were considered and constructed during data analysis (Charmaz, 2008; Glaser, 1992), allowing the researchers to incorporate an "inductive, indeterminate, and open-ended approach" to account for the dynamic nature of motivation (Charmaz, 2008, p. 155).

Significant participant responses and common themes were coded to identify how these themes may influence student motivation, and if student motivation changed throughout the school year. The number of times a theme was mentioned during each phase was recorded. However, the researchers acknowledged that the number of times a theme was mentioned does not necessarily equate to students' views of its importance, and that other factors may also be important. The aim was to begin an initial exploration of the connections between motivation and external and internal influences.

Research findings

The major findings of the study were as follows:

1. Teachers had significant influence on student interest and enjoyment of a subject. Participants explained that their teachers were "always super encouraging...and super passionate" (Participant C, Interview 1, 2015) which made "you wanna [sic] work harder" (Participant A, Interview 2, 2016). Additionally, participants gravitated towards teachers who possessed strong teaching skills, were respectful – one participant did not like teachers who acted like they were "the lord and [students] were their serfs" (Participant E, Interview 3, 2016) – and who took genuine interest in students' personal lives. Participants enjoyed the following teaching strategies: Project Based Learning, labs, research assignments, group or individual presentations, and using technology as a learning tool. Student choice of assignment type and the ability to be creative also

increased their academic interest and enjoyment. Similarly, appropriate academic challenge influenced student motivation, as did the relevance of a topic or subject.

2. The attitudes and values of a participant's peers and family affected his or her motivation and academic goals. Participants were more likely to be focused and productive in class if they were situated with positive peer groups. For example, one participant explained that she tried "to surround [her]self with positive people [which] really helps...keep yourself motivated" (Participant D, Interview 1, 2015). Furthermore, the goals of one's peers may influence an individual's goals, as the participants in this study explained that they had ambitious educational goals because their friends had high aspirations. Participants' families were also an external motivator, as their families' encouraged their children to excel academically – parents "always supported [their] schoolwork" (Participant B, Interview 1, 2015) and pushed students "to go to university and to succeed in life" (Participant D, Interview 1, 2015) – and took interest in their education. Students valued their parents' support and wanted to have successful careers like their families.
3. Student motivation generally decreased as the year progressed because the pressure to obtain high grades led to feelings of stress and anxiety. Furthermore, participants experienced greater fatigue throughout the year, explaining that they were "getting quite tired...because there's always so much going on [in their] lives" (Participant G, Interview 3, 2016) – for example clubs, sports, work, and volunteering.
4. Excluding January (during midyear exams), students had low motivation during the winter months. Participants explained that their motivation was low in November, December, and February because of the gloomy winter weather and decreased sunlight. These factors limited students' abilities to participate in outdoor activities – for example one participant's soccer team ceased practicing during these months – which may have caused decreased academic interest. As a result, students were less likely to complete in-class activities and homework assignments to the best of their ability.
5. An extended break often reenergized students, thus positively influencing their academic motivation. Participants explained that they needed "a lot of breaks to refuel" (Participant E, Interview 3, 2016) and that "you need breaks or else you get tired of working so hard" (Participant C, Interview 2, 2016). They stated that it was difficult to stay motivated for long periods of time without an extended break – for example, from September to December. An extended break – the winter holidays, Spring Break, or a long weekend – often rejuvenated participants and decreased their fatigue.
6. Tests and assessments may increase student motivation, but this increase may be dependent upon personal academic goals and aims. Participants referenced quizzes, tests, and exams as positive academic motivators. For example, student motivation was mostly high in January and June because of midyear and final exams. One participant explained that her motivation was high "because it's before midyear [exams]" (Participant H, Interview 2, 2016) while another affirmed that "you have to do well on [midyear and final exams] to get a good final mark in the class" (Participant D, Interview 3, 2016). However, extrinsic forms of motivation, such as assessment, may not always improve student motivation. Low-achieving students may become frustrated due of lack of success while high-achieving students may become bored due to repetitive testing (Nichols & Dawson, 2012).

Emergent themes that had not been considered in the literature review included: The influence of one's boss or coach on students' goals, the influence of fictional television shows on students' career choices, and how lack of sleep could negatively influence in-class motivation and productivity.

Recommendations

The research study found that youth motivation was influenced by a number of external and internal factors, such as teacher behaviours, school context, and personal goals. In this section, we relate the study's findings to civic education by considering how motivation, theorized to be living and dynamic as civic education has also been theorized to be (Broom, 2016; Overton, 2010; Yates and Youniss, 1999), can be fused to motivate youth towards more active civic involvement.

1. More Effective Civic Education: The Significance of the Teacher

Youth civic participation may increase if they know more about it and if their interests are kindled. Thus, we suggest that citizenship education teachers continue to educate students about democracy, government structures and processes, and civic attitudes and actions. However, as this research study suggests, teachers can pay attention to teaching in a manner that engages their students through relationship building, attention to teaching strategies, and connecting class discussions to the world outside of schools. Teachers may consider incorporating relevant examples of community, national, and global civics and citizenship into their lessons. Additionally, teachers may wish to allow students to choose a civics topic that interests them (within a given parameter), while allowing some freedom in assignment type – for example, a case study, art project, or video presentation. Presenting civic education through these types of lessons and assignments may encourage positive youth civic attitudes, and therefore engagement.

2. Teaching Methods and Attention to Time of Year

Students appreciated teachers who used varied teaching methods and paid attention to the time of year. Thus, teachers are encouraged to include more inquiry, hands-on learning, or experiential learning in their classes at specific times of the year. This may be particularly important with respect to civic education and learning experiences that improve youth's understanding of contemporary societal issues, while connecting this knowledge to their own societies and contexts. For example, at particular times throughout the year, teachers may wish to organize field trips to civic sites such as City Hall, have guest speakers, or have their students develop action plans to create awareness of a societal issue. Through teaching strategies that motivate students to learn, students' level of civic motivation may also improve.

3. Teaching Content and Attention to Time of Year (Extended Breaks)

Students were more academically motivated at the beginning of the year and after extended breaks. Therefore, teachers and the school community should consider the most optimal times to emphasize civic engagement – for example, after Summer, Winter and Spring Break. Providing positive school and community civic learning experiences at these times may increase students' civic involvement.

4. Attention to Homework and Student Fatigue

Frequent homework throughout the year contributed to student fatigue, and participants explained that it was difficult to complete all of their school assignments because they often had nightly homework. Students who have difficulty completing their homework may be less likely to participate in school and community civic groups because

they may not have enough spare time or because their motivation may be generally low. Thus, teachers should remain cognizant of how much homework they assign. Additionally, they may consider providing homework that is potentially more engaging and motivating for students, and that builds and develops youth's civic attitudes, abilities and capabilities. An example of this type of activity includes experiential learning in the community.

5. School Context and Culture

Student motivation increased in positive, supportive contexts. Thus, attention to building a positive school culture through assemblies, spirit days, and leadership activities may help encourage youth civic engagement. Similarly, school-wide community projects may help to motivate and empower youth to further civic action. School administrators may also wish to use professional development days to educate teachers on strategies that can encourage civic engagement in their classes. This could promote civics education within the entire school community, thereby encouraging students to become involved. Furthermore, extracurricular activities can improve student attitudes towards school (Pitts, 2007). As a result, students involved in extracurricular civics programmes may develop a more positive affiliation towards their school culture, illustrating the dynamic relationship between engagement and the external environment. Certain extracurricular programmes may also further promote the development of a civic mindset that values democratic and civic participation.

6. Peers

In the study, participants' attitudes and actions were influenced by those of their peers. Encouraging students to connect with youth who are already civically involved may help to further youth civic motivation – for example, through peer mentoring or by connecting younger and older students together through school and community initiatives. Additionally, youth could connect with positive role models through distance education via Skype or another technological tool. Being privy to another individual's civic successes could motivate youth to become involved themselves.

7. Connecting to Families and Community

Students' personal goals and their family's attitudes and actions influenced their academic motivation. Having teachers and schools reach out to parents through newsletters and school-wide community events or initiatives may help to further youth civic motivation, and thus, youth civic action. Additionally, teachers may wish to assign homework in which students explore the purpose of active citizenship with their family members. As a result, parents could see their child's interest in civics and citizenship, and provide them with opportunities to become involved in their local community. Parents may also choose to participate with their children in community or civic initiatives, particularly if these occur at a school-wide level.

8. The Impact of Student Goals

In the research study, student goals often underlay motivation. It may be worthwhile for teachers and the school community to demonstrate the value of civic education, and how it can assist students in achieving both personal and societal goals. For example, teachers could explain how civic engagement may not only improve a student's curriculum vitae, but also society as a whole.

9. Civic Recognition

Participants in the study enjoyed sharing their learning with their classmates through presentations and oral discussions. Providing youth with the opportunity to share their stories about their civic involvement – in class or in an assembly – could encourage them

to continue to engage in civic activities, while also motivating other students to become civically involved. Additionally, recognizing the contributions of school civic groups – for example, the student parliament who put on a school lunch or dance – may improve student competence and confidence. It could also improve youth self-efficacy, as students may believe that they are capable of succeeding on similar future endeavors.

Limitations and considerations for future research

This study's eight participants were from a specific demographic and may not represent the values and beliefs of other students. Participants were high-achieving students in a school that encouraged academic excellence, influencing pupil academic motivation. Future research with a larger and more diverse sample size may help to expand upon this study.

This paper is an initial consideration of the relationship between motivational literature and research, and civics motivation. The suggestions deliberated are areas for educators to consider, as they may improve student civic engagement. However, not all strategies may be successful within different environments due to the dynamic and multifaceted nature of motivation and civic mindsets and behaviours. Teachers and researchers can continue to explore the complexity of interactions between environment and attitudes and behaviours.

Further research exploring teens' expressed levels of civic motivation and how these may relate to motivation and civic action is recommended.

Conclusion

The authors have examined motivational literature and research and considered how these findings may be applied to foster youth civic engagement. Both fields are underlain by the same theoretical perspective, which views youth's attitudes and actions as consequences of internal and external factors (Overton, 2010). The authors have also explored how interviews conducted with teens on the factors that influence their levels of motivation may relate to civic education. This paper ended with some possible recommendations based on these findings, such as teaching strategies and school-wide initiatives that pay attention to context and the complexity of youth's attitudes and behaviours. The authors provided an initial exploration on a topic of significant importance to youth civic attitudes and consequently their behaviours (youth civic motivation) – one that has not been extensively researched in the field of citizenship education. Hopefully, further research on this topic will provide additional recommendations for citizenship education teachers to consider within their pedagogy. Developing thoughtful and motivated citizens is essential for the maintenance of democratic governments and societies:

“As soon as any man says of the affairs of the State “What does it matter to me?” the State may be given up for lost.” Jean-Jacques Rousseau

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