

RESEARCH ROUNDUP

A TEACHER'S PERSPECTIVE ON CLOSING THE CIVIC GAP

Meira Levinson, a teacher and a scholar, documents evidence of a growing civic achievement gap between students of different races and socioeconomic and immigration status in her new "CIRCLE Working Paper (#51) The Civic Achievement Gap." She maintains that this gap will lead to serious political disadvantages for many young immigrants and students of color. The Working Paper is drawn from a forthcoming book by the author.

Using previous research and her own experience as a teacher in urban schools in Boston and Atlanta, Dr. Levinson shows that poor non-white students demonstrate lower levels of civic and political knowledge, skills, positive attitudes toward the state, and participation, than their wealthier and white counterparts.

TWO PERSPECTIVES ON KNOWLEDGE: TEACHER AND STUDENT

Levinson begins her paper by illustrating an obstacle faced by civic educators when teaching students from poor, urban neighborhoods: economic and social inequality colors reality for both the teacher and the student. She notes, "One challenge my students and I face in learning from each other about [civic] engagement is that our lived experiences, and thus in part what we think we 'know' about how the world works, diverge so widely."

An example of this gap in knowledge can be seen in a proposed experiential learning project. Each year, Levinson requires her students to work on "citizenship projects" in which they address a problem of concern to them through community and/or political action. The top issue of concern her students cited was the growing gang violence in their neighborhoods, but they protested studying this issue because they felt it would be "literally suicidal" for them to work visibly to reduce the gang problem in their neighborhoods. Levinson states, "I know this [project] would empower them and their communities – but my students can be eloquent about the dangers of visible power." As a teacher, Levinson believes that students need to learn to solve community problems by learning to work within the existing community and political structures. However, her students believe that taking such action could be dangerous to their own lives. Both are likely right.

INEQUALITIES IN CIVIC AND POLITICAL KNOWLEDGE, SKILLS, ATTITUDES AND PARTICIPATION

In addition to describing her own teaching experience, Levinson summarizes existing evidence of a civic achievement gap. She cites numerous studies showing consistent gaps in important civic measures (knowledge, skills, attitudes, and behaviors) between students of color and poor students and their white and wealthier counterparts.

Looking first at knowledge and skills, she notes that many poor minority students lag behind their wealthier, white counterparts. For example, she summarizes research that shows, "As early as fourth grade and continuing into the eighth and twelfth grades, African-American, Hispanic, and poor students perform significantly worse on the civics test of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) than white, Asian, and middle-class students."

Levinson finds that there are large and important differences between the races and socioeconomic groups when it comes to the attitudes that correlate with civic participation. For example, several studies show the more one feels politically efficacious (or feels one can influence government), the more likely a person is to participate. Levinson cites research that shows, "individuals' political efficacy increases in direct relationship to their income, with the poorest individuals expressing attitudes almost a full standard deviation lower than the wealthiest; it is also significantly correlated with race/ethnicity, with Latinos at the bottom, African-Americans in the middle, and white respondents at the top."

The paper ends with a call for creative solutions to closing the civic achievement gap. Levinson's proposal is not only on behalf of the students that she teaches, but also on behalf of democratic governance. She concludes, "In sum, the civic achievement gap is a significant and measurable threat to democratic ideals and practice. I suggest that it is important for both the civic and political empowerment of poor, minority, and immigrant individuals, and for the health of the polity as a whole, that we develop means of closing the gap." ■