



RESEARCH REVIEW

Elizabeth Foster

PROGRAM INSPIRES STUDENTS' CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

► THE STUDY

Andolina, M.W. & Conklin, H.G. (2020, June). Fostering democratic and social-emotional learning in action civics programming: Factors that shape students' learning from Project Soapbox. *American Educational Research Journal*, 57(3), 1203-1240.

Elizabeth Foster (elizabeth.foster@learningforward.org) is vice president, research & standards at Learning Forward. In each issue of *The Learning Professional*, Foster explores recent research to help practitioners understand the impact of particular professional learning practices on student outcomes.

It is a longstanding goal of schools to educate individuals to participate in a democratic society. But recent events, including the storming of the U.S. Capitol and disinformation campaigns around the U.S. presidential election, have made it clear that we need to improve the way students understand history, government, and their roles in them. Civics education is more critical than ever.

A recent mixed-methods study offers information about how the features of a high school action civics curriculum and implementation support for educators helped students develop the knowledge and skills needed to participate in a democratic society. The researchers found that the curriculum structure combined with teachers' instructional decisions influenced student outcomes.

METHODOLOGY

The researchers examined the impacts of an action civics curriculum called Project Soapbox, a five-week curriculum that aligns to best practices in action civics and deliberately cultivates social and emotional learning skills. The curriculum is designed to develop students' knowledge about politics and current events as well skills related to civic participation through a structured process in which students develop and deliver speeches about community issues. Students ultimately presented those speeches to an audience of peers and community members during a citywide contest and were judged against a common rubric.

Action civics is a particular approach to civics education that focuses on eliciting student voice, developing and arguing a position or perspective, and engaging with relevant real-world issues. Research shows that youth who participate in civic education programs are more likely to participate in civic actions as adults and influence their families to participate as well.

The researchers conducted their study at nine public high schools in the Chicago area, focusing closely on nine classrooms. The schools served either majority Hispanic/Latinx or majority African American student populations; eight of the nine schools served 90% or more low-income students. The student sample was 41% African American, 48% Hispanic/Latinx, and predominantly low income. The researchers administered pre- and post-surveys, which were aligned to the Common Core State Standards and had been tested for reliability, to 204 students.

Student survey data was complemented by student focus groups and an analysis of student work, including watching the student speeches at a citywide competition. Student survey and focus group questions asked whether students felt they had improved in public speaking, confidence, and desire to speak up in class or when an issue in the community or politics inspired them.

Students were asked about their parents' or guardians' involvement in politics and current events as well as about classroom factors and teacher actions. Researchers also gathered data about which classes focused on Project Soapbox, how many class periods were spent on speech development and delivery, and how closely teachers adhered to the curriculum. Teachers also were interviewed about their experiences and pedagogical choices.

FINDINGS

The study found that students felt more confident about speaking in public and more likely to speak up and be civically engaged as a result of participating in Project Soapbox. Students'



likelihood of speaking up in the future was influenced by how much they felt that their teachers respected and encouraged their opinions.

One curricular structure that positively impacted student outcomes was that students chose speech topics relevant to their own lives and communities, such as immigration or gun violence. The more a student cared about an issue, and the more the classroom climate provided opportunities for student voice and agency, the more likely the students were to have positive reflections about participating.

The focus groups and interviews yielded student statements like: “That connection — it really meant something to me. That’s how come I was passionate about it and willing to share with everyone else, because it was something that I felt very strong about.”

Analysis of student survey data revealed that the home environment influenced student outcomes, as did the number of times students practiced their speeches and how comfortable students felt sharing their ideas and opinions in class. Students who came from homes where politics were discussed and where civic duties were practiced were more likely to say that they felt they were experts on their topic after participating in Project Soapbox.

The research also found that the more students practiced their speeches (a requirement of participation), the greater their confidence in their speaking skills and their belief that they had been heard. Success in the speech competition also helped contribute to students’ feelings of connectedness

and empowerment. Participation also impacted students’ social and emotional well-being, having a positive impact on students’ sense of agency, their sense of empathy, and their feeling of belonging.

Teachers in the study observed that the curriculum’s emphasis on students listening to one another and providing supportive feedback improved students’ active listening skills. Teachers observed that this created a sense of community as students came to know each other better and understand what is important to their peers. The research also revealed that students developed skills related to respectful disagreement with both peers and teachers.

The fact that students chose and became expert speakers on a topic important to them also helped teachers know and understand their students better.

This is an important aspect in building positive relationships and increasing student engagement. One teacher noted, “Through Soapbox, I find out what they care about, and it often ... directs my course for the rest of the year.” The pedagogical decision to create a classroom climate that encourages student voice improves a teacher’s ability to make learning more personalized and engaging for students.

The researchers found that aspects of the curriculum, as well as teachers’ instructional decisions and classroom climate, work together to positively impact student outcomes. And while the written curriculum provided the opportunities, the data revealed that teachers’ choices shaped the students’ experiences.

The variations in implementation depended on the teachers’ experiences and goals for using Project Soapbox.

Teachers appreciated the curricular supports, such as video links, sample speeches, handouts to help students analyze speeches, and organizers to help students move from brainstorming to structured speeches. The curricular scaffolding allowed them to integrate the curriculum into a range of courses and adapt the curriculum to varying degrees.

IMPLICATIONS

This study speaks to the importance of well-designed professional learning for achieving high-quality curriculum implementation and ultimately student success, as Learning Forward outlines in the Standards for Professional Learning. The **Outcomes standard** establishes the importance of linking educators’ and students’ learning, and the Project Soapbox research shows how closely tying these goals leads to impact.

To provide the opportunity for students to develop the knowledge and skills needed to become participatory citizens, teachers had to learn to create a classroom climate and appropriate supports for student choice and development of listening and collaborative skills.

The curricular scaffolding helped teachers to varying degrees in creating space for student voice, an important pedagogical skill that teachers often do not have the opportunity to develop or practice. The combined impact of structured curricular supports and educator decision-making speaks to the importance of good **learning designs** in professional learning that focus on the close tie of educator goals to student goals. In that way, the project can be a model for other classroom interventions, including but also beyond civics education. ■