

Revista Interamericana de Educación para la Democracia

**RIED**  **IJED**

Interamerican Journal of Education for Democracy



**Citizens Not Research  
Subjects: Toward a More  
Democratic Civic Education  
Inquiry Methodology**

**Vol 3, No. 1**

April, 2010

Document available in:  
**[www.ried-ijed.org](http://www.ried-ijed.org)**

**ISSN: 1941-1799**



# Citizens Not Research Subjects: Toward a More Democratic Civic Education Inquiry Methodology

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## Abstract:

Research methodologies and conceptions of curriculum are not all equivalent in their moral, ethical, or socio-political consideration of individuals and communities. The purpose of this paper is to explore the consistency of research methodology used in civic education with the principles that we believe underlie civic engagement, participation and action, and, more specifically, those principles that relate to inclusion, dialogue, and deliberation (House & Howe, 1999). To do so, we analyze and offer alternatives to some recent research efforts in terms of their relationship to democratic educational practices and the extent to which research in civic education takes into account the local context and concerns of participants.

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Research methodologies and conceptions of curriculum are not all equivalent in their moral, ethical, or socio-political consideration of individuals and communities. The purpose of this paper is to explore the consistency of research methodology<sup>1</sup> used in civic education with the principles that we believe underlie civic engagement, participation and action, and, more specifically, those principles that relate to inclusion, dialogue, and deliberation (House & Howe, 1999). We assume here that the aim of civic education is to promote these principles in schools. If, however, the ways that we conduct research and evaluation in civic education do not fully reflect these aims, our understanding of civic education itself may be restricted by the limitations of the methodology being used. While important and valuable research has been conducted in the field of civic education, we believe that teaching and learning can be made

more generative and dynamic by using research strategies and methods that support and reinforce the fundamental purposes and ideals of civic education. Our ultimate purpose here is to provide some methodological alternatives to the approaches that have commonly been used in civic education research that are more reflective of the fundamental principles of democracy. To do so, we analyze some recent research efforts in terms of their relationship to democratic educational practices and in terms of the extent to which research in civic education takes into account the local context and concerns of participants. Given the changing definitions of citizenship from global, transnational, and cross-cultural perspectives, civic education, by its very nature, offers a prime arena for addressing the transaction between curriculum and inquiry methodology.



## Theoretical Framework

The analysis we present here draws upon scholarship on the nature of democratic citizenship as well as the fields of curriculum studies and educational research methodology. Before turning to a discussion of the curricular and methodological issues we will address, we will briefly explore some of the key issues and concepts related to democracy and citizenship that inform this investigation.

### *Current Perspectives on Democracy and Citizenship*

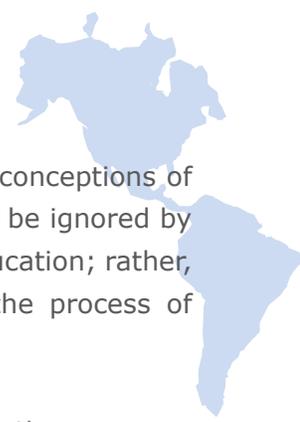
As a result of the sweeping political, social, and economic changes that have occurred throughout the world over the last decade or so, scholars in the social sciences are reexamining the concept of citizenship (Castles, 2004; Sassen, 2002, 2004; Lee, 2002). To begin with, the numerous interpretations of democracy itself make a clear definition of citizenship elusive at best. Among its various manifestations democracy has been characterized as:

- *direct* (Aristotle, 1943/c. 340 BC), wherein sovereignty resides in the assembly of all citizens who participate directly in decision-making on public issues;
- *traditional liberal* (Mill, 1958; Mill, 1965; Locke, 1965), where elected representatives exercise decision-making power on behalf of citizens according to the rule of law and a constitution which places constraints on the will of the majority and protects individual rights;
- *deliberative* (Gutmann & Thompson, 1996), where citizens and their representatives engage in discourse about public problems under conditions that are conducive to

reasoned reflection and acceptance of multiple viewpoints;

- *experiential* (Dewey, 1938), denoting a way of living with others characterized by social relations based upon equity, fairness, tolerance, and mutual respect;
- *participatory* or *strong* (Barber, 1984), focusing on inclusion, requires activity beyond merely voting, encourages reflection, incorporating conflict and dissent, and the views of those who are “on the margins;” promoting public spiritedness and action from the general citizenry, not just from elected officials and political leaders;
- *multicultural* (Banks, 1997; Kymlicka, 1995; Parker, 2003), explicitly incorporating socio-economic and cultural diversity into political diversity; concerned with those who are not participating in political discourse and activity and the means of access to participation for those on the margins;
- *critical* (Goodman, 1992) or *radical* (Trend, 1996), contrasting with liberal democracy and its focus on political institutions and ritualized practices (voting), thereby advocating a broader and more active role for citizens and the development of a critical consciousness to reassess the institutional arrangements that define social and political relations locally and globally, and arguing for new ways of thinking about diversity, liberty, and civic responsibility.

Each of these variations defines democracy in a particular way, placing different emphasis on the key concepts and beliefs that form the basis of democracy and implying different roles and responsibilities for citizens. To further complicate matters, the process of globalization has had a



significant effect on the nature of citizenship by undermining “the crucial link between the national and the citizen” (Castles, 2004, p. 22), suggesting that individuals may hold multiple civic identities simultaneously (e.g., a citizen of Latvia and the European Union). In some cases, competing civic identities may produce conflicts or tensions for individuals as they face the choice between adhering to a cultural identity that may be at odds with a political identity defined by the nation-state (e.g., identifying oneself as Albanian versus as a citizen of Macedonia). Increased migration worldwide and the emergence of transnational (European Union) and supranational (multinational corporations) entities have contributed to the reconceptualization of the nature of citizenship and the redefinition of the role of the citizen in society. Finally, recent discussions of *cosmopolitanism* have appealed to a form of global citizenship that transcends the boundaries of traditional national sovereignty (Appiah, 2006; Nussbaum, 2006; Rawls, 1999; Singer, 2002). Variations in the legal definition of citizenship and how one acquires it across countries makes understanding the meaning of citizenship and how individuals interact within political systems yet more difficult.

Since education for democratic citizenship occurs to a large extent in schools, the impact of these shifts on how citizenship is conceptualized must be considered as well as their implications for curriculum. Programs for preparing future citizens must be sensitive to the role of local circumstances and multiple civic identities as they seek to foster understandings and attitudes necessary for effective civic participation in the contemporary global context. The notion of a “program” itself may have to be reinvented in a much more dynamic way. While we do not intend here to explore the full range of issues associated with the relationship between conceptions of democracy and citizenship education, we will

argue that the fluid and evolving conceptions of democracy and citizenship cannot be ignored by researchers in the field of civic education; rather, they should be integrated into the process of inquiry itself.

### *Curriculum Theory and Civic Education*

Another important dimension of our analysis here concerns the conception of curriculum that is implied by research and evaluation studies in civic education. Traditional perspectives on curriculum theory and development (Bobbitt, 1924; Tyler, 1949; Popham, 1972) have focused on knowledge that exists independently of the learner and the context and, thus, emphasize curricula that articulate knowledge in discrete, objectively measurable forms that can be readily transmitted from the teacher into the mind of the student. As the field of curriculum has evolved from a largely technical-rational orientation toward one in which key elements of the learning context are considered as important influences on curriculum and instruction (Schwab, 1970), educational scholars have come to view knowledge as constructed through interactions between the learner and the learning environment (Dewey, 1902; Walker, 1971, 1990). More contemporary “reconceptualist” views on curriculum (e.g., Freire, 1970; Apple, 1979; Giroux, 1990; Doll, 1993) incorporate the role of the learner, the setting in which learning occurs, the social-context and personal history of the learner (gender, ethnicity, social class), issues of power, and the nature of the knowledge being addressed, among other elements to be considered when designing curriculum. It is evident to us that some conceptualizations of democracy are more compatible with certain perspectives on curriculum, teaching, and assessment. For example, *traditional liberal* democratic theories derived from ‘enlightenment’ philosophers such as Mill and Locke might be



more closely aligned with 'scientific' theories of curriculum and evaluation such as those of Tyler and other positivist theorists. On the other hand, *multicultural*, *deliberative*, and *critical/radical* conceptions of democracy would be most congruent with curriculum and assessment approaches that viewed knowledge as socially constructed and strongly influenced by specific contexts (e.g., Walker, 1971, 1990; Freire, 1970). We examine here the interrelationships between perspectives on curriculum and the concepts of democracy and citizenship that are articulated in some examples of research and evaluation in the area of civic education. In addition to the curriculum theories that inform our study, we also are operating from a particular orientation toward educational research and evaluation, to which we will now turn.

### *Methodological Issues in Civic Education Research*

Prevalent practices often conceive of curriculum, research, and evaluation as separate and independent activities that take place in a linear sequence. A curriculum is implemented and then research or evaluation is conducted, typically by outsiders, to provide feedback and draw conclusions about the working or benefit of the program. Here we want to address some of the research methodology issues that have major implications for how we represent research or evaluation claims (and ultimately the curriculum), as well as for the usefulness of these claims in informing policy and practice. First, let us remind ourselves that the development of understandings and practices of citizenship and democracy is complex and multilayered. To understand this process, researchers, therefore, need to take this complexity into account by also considering the context—the structures and conditions—in which these understandings and practices develop (Steiner-Khamsi, 2002).

A research methodology that does not take these into account may yield findings of limited usefulness.

A methodology that emphasizes comparisons is often used in civic education (Torney-Purta, 1991). Countries are compared to each other, and classrooms with a particular civic education program are compared to other classrooms without such programs, with the rationale that the study of differences may shed light on the conditions that bring about these understandings and practices of interest in particular contexts. Comparisons, however, require the use of fixed categories, or at least observational protocols that are similar across contexts. Narratives are difficult to compare, and therefore researchers will often resort to standardized observations or measurement instruments that appear to represent some common domain of interest or meaning across contexts. There are several critical issues with such methodological approaches. First, the need for comparisons often reduces the number of dimensions or factors on which we can compare, hence requiring a simplification of the phenomenon under study. Comparisons across groups or contexts derive from a methodology of experimentation or quasi-experimentation (Shadish, Cook, & Campbell, 2002), and the use of analysis of variance and covariance as a method of data analysis to support the statistical significance of differences between groups. Such research designs are conceived of as simple linear models that may be inadequate to study complex phenomena such as the development of understandings and practices of citizenship and democracy. Indeed, these models have been questioned for their inherent simplicity and flaws (Cronbach, 1982). Even Cook (2002), an active proponent of experiments in education, recognizes that these are best suited for very simple and focused questions only requiring



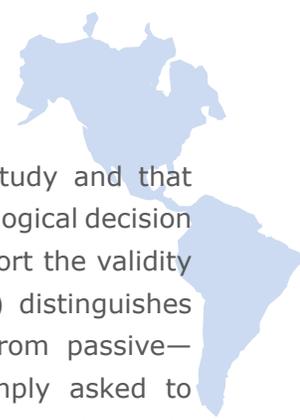
short treatments—a condition that does not characterize most important questions in civic education. Their logic indeed reduces complexity to a few narrowly defined variables, considerably limiting the meaningfulness and generalizability of research claims, and their usefulness to inform policy and practice.

Secondly, the use of standardized measurements across very different contexts is not only problematic with regard to the meaningfulness of these measures but also with regard to measurement assumptions themselves. Measurement is based on the assumption of universality (Goldstein, 1994)—that is, the same question presumably has the same meaning for all research participants. The tenability of this assumption is difficult to imagine, particularly in an international context when questions are translated into many different languages to accommodate comparisons. How are terms such as “public policy,” “accountability,” and “common good” translated into languages that do not commonly use such terms? Even without accounting for differences in meaning due to translation, answers to the same question, presumably understood in the same way, also have problematic interpretations. So for example, how do we interpret the responses of students across different countries who are asked to indicate their level of trust in government on a scale of 1 to 5 (complete distrust to complete trust)? Do differences in ratings across countries reflect the fact that students experience different governmental systems, that they have different levels of trust, or some combination of both? What are the implications of such interpretations?

Thirdly, comparative methodology typically focuses on the most uniformly observable outcomes of civic education—that is, students’ knowledge, beliefs, and attitudes. While these are of course of prime concern, differences in these

measures alone are not terribly informative in the absence of attention to the conditions that might explain these differences. As we said earlier, the development of understandings and practices of citizenship and democracy is a complex endeavor that cannot be understood without consideration of the political climate, the school policies and culture, as well as the community culture and way of life. So, for example, why would we expect students to be favorably disposed toward civic engagement in a school system that is hierarchically organized and where policies are primarily controlling and punitive? In other words, what experiences of democracy and citizenship do students have in schools and in the community that would promote such civic engagement? These experiences, however, are not easily captured by standardized measures other than by questions about perceptions of classroom climate gathered through students’ and teachers’ questionnaires, which only provide vague indicators of the phenomena under consideration. Furthermore, an almost exclusive focus on student outcomes, combined with particular methodological choices, limits the participation of other important stakeholders in the study. Who is interested (e.g., parents, teachers, community leaders, political and civic organizations, minority groups) in civic education and its outcomes, and for what purpose? What are their understandings and practices of democracy and citizenship? These are important questions to consider when imagining a more inclusive research methodology.

Fourth, a fixed-design approach, such as group comparisons or large-scale surveys, requires the use of pre-defined (and often close-ended) measurement—that is, the questions or content of the measures are determined *a priori* with the assumption, as we mentioned earlier, that these questions have the same meaning for all participants. This is particularly problematic



in the field of civic education given the varied or changing definitions of such concepts as democracy and citizenship. By their form and content pre-defined measures indeed impose particular meanings on the participants without providing them the opportunity to question these meanings or express their own views. Participants' interpretation of the questions as a whole and individually is at the core of the meaningfulness of the research findings. How are questions relevant to their own lives? What questions are missing? What elements or concepts are absent from the questions? In other words, can the choices proposed in each question adequately represent the views of all participants? These questions all seem to reflect research opportunities that could be overlooked by making particular methodological choices. In the field of civic education, it is further problematic because of the way it positions research participants. The methodology we have described so far positions participants in a passive role; their function is to answer questions and provide information without the opportunity for more active engagement in critique, dialogue, and deliberation. So what might be an alternative to the approach to civic education research we have described thus far?

Here, we envision a model that is much more integrative and dialogical, where research and evaluation are considered an integral part of civic education curriculum. Consequently, methodological choices and strategies are more consistent with the democratic ideal that supports civic education and civic engagement. House and Howe (1999) develop a deliberative democratic conception of social research and evaluation, emphasizing the general principles of inclusion, dialogue, and deliberation. These principles are further articulated in a framework for democratic educational research by Howe (2003). Inclusion refers to insuring that all

stakeholders participate in the study and that their voices are heard—a methodological decision that seems indispensable to support the validity of research claims. Howe (2003) distinguishes different degrees of inclusion (from passive—when study participants are simply asked to answer questions—to active—when participants engage in discussion), and states that, “Passive inclusion is not enough to ensure that voices included will be *genuine*. This requires active inclusion, which shades into the requirement of dialogue” (p. 137). He also recognizes different forms of dialogue (from *elucidating*—when the purpose is simply to clarify the views of the participants—to *critical*—when the purpose is not only to clarify but also to rationally scrutinize the participants' views.). As he states:

Critical dialogue includes clarifying the views and self-understandings of research participants but also subjecting these views and self-understandings to rational scrutiny. This kind of dialogue is deliberative, where deliberation is a cognitive activity in which participants and researchers collaboratively engage and from which the most rationally defensible conclusions emerge. (p. 139)

From this perspective, the role of the researcher is to insure that the minority voices are heard by monitoring the deliberations to reduce inequality between the participants, and that “relevant and credible empirical evidence, both local and from the broader arena of social research, informs deliberation” (p. 140).

For our purpose this framework has important implications for how notions such as citizenship or engagement are represented and understood. It is no longer a matter of pre-defining these concepts and then verifying whether or not participants share these same understandings,



but rather a matter of developing understandings through deliberation with the participants from which defensible research claims can be made.

In this article, we use this general framework to analyze the methodological choices that are made in recent research and evaluation in civic education, and in the conceptions of curriculum, democracy and citizenship that these imply. In doing so, we emphasize an approach to civic education that is inherently critical and deliberative as a means of enhancing current practices in the field.

Our analysis here is primarily based on three prominent and widely cited studies of civic education. The cases were selected because they have made important contributions to the field of civic education and they are typical of research studies in the field that focus on both U.S. and international contexts.

#### *Data Source: Three Key Studies*

One of the studies that we will focus on is Carole Hahn's (1998) investigation of political attitudes, interests, beliefs and behavior among adolescents in five countries --England, Denmark, the Netherlands, Germany and the U.S. The purpose of this research was to examine adolescents' perceptions of self-efficacy, trust, and confidence in relation to political systems, their self-reported political behaviors, beliefs and attitudes, and their perception of whether classrooms were organized to encourage students to discuss controversial issues.

A second study we will refer to here was conducted by Richard Niemi and Jane Junn (1998) based on an analysis of data gathered from the 1998 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) Civic Education Study. Collecting data on a sample of 4,275 12th graders, this study focused on students' knowledge of the

American political system, including structures and processes of government and principles of American democracy.

Our third source for this analysis is a report on the IEA civic education study (Torney-Purta,, Schwille, & Amadeo, 1999; Torney-Purta, Lehmann, Oswald, & Schulz, 2001). This large-scale international study was conducted in two phases, the first being a series of case studies documenting the status of civic education in the participating countries. Based on themes and issues derived from these case studies, a survey of 14-year-olds in 28 countries was carried out. This survey, which eventually gathered data on nearly 90,000 students, focused on students' knowledge and interpretation of material related to civics, attitudes toward their government and its policies, level of civic engagement and political activity, perceptions of opportunities for civic engagement in classrooms, schools, and youth organizations, and teachers' views on the teaching of civic education.

#### *Analysis*

We begin our analysis by reviewing each study carefully and attending specifically to (1) the focus of the study, including the research questions, the target groups or countries, and the content or characteristics it considered; (2) the conceptions of democracy and citizenship which appeared to be informing it; (3) the conception of curriculum/instruction; and (4) the inquiry methodology and methods, including sample size, methods of data collection, type of analysis, and summary of findings. Although conceptions of curriculum and democracy often have to be inferred, the research methodology used is for the most part explicit and can be analyzed in terms of the assumptions made with regard to a number of important issues. Our purpose here is not to critique these studies, *per se*. In fact



we acknowledge that they have contributed in significant ways to our understanding of how students can learn civic concepts, skills, and values in school, and that these studies set the stage for research that will advance these understandings even further. However, we also see them as examples of how certain research methodologies may not fully support particular conceptions of curriculum, democracy, and citizenship that appear to be implied in these studies, and how these methodologies may limit both conceptual understanding and the scope of the studies' own findings. The analysis of these studies was guided by our framework with regard to varying understandings of democracy, citizenship, and curriculum, and the assumptions that underlie methodological choices, as well as by Howe's democratic research framework. We conducted both within- and cross-study analyses guided by the following three questions:

1. What conceptions of democracy and citizenship constitute the foundation for the curriculum, research, and evaluation designs employed in the studies?
2. What conceptions of curriculum are implicit in the studies?
3. To what extent are the research methodologies congruent with the understandings of democracy, citizenship and curriculum apparent in the studies, and how do they include the participants (and stakeholders) and position them in terms of dialogue?

The first two questions were essential to conducting our analysis, and responses to them are integrally connected to the last question, which is the main focus of our study. In presenting the results of our analysis, we therefore focus primarily on the question of congruence between conceptual and methodological understandings. To do so, we use a set of assertions resulting

from our analysis, and we support these with examples from the cases.

1. *A traditional liberal conception of democracy tends to be associated with the use of a pre-defined curriculum and a research methodology that uses fixed-design and pre-defined outcome measures.*

A liberal understanding of democracy and an approach to civic education that emphasizes knowledge of constitutional matters, the role of political institutions, and the mechanics of government, lends itself to a fixed curriculum defined independently of learners and context. Knowledge is fixed and pre-determined, and civic education inquiry consists of verifying whether or not such knowledge has been acquired and in what quantity, and of investigating the reasons for differences in individual knowledge acquisition. Such an objectified conception of knowledge tends to be aligned with a research methodology that relies upon objective standardized measures of knowledge and examines relationships between acquired knowledge, individual characteristics, and exposure to curriculum to explain differences in knowledge acquisition.

Such a scenario is illustrated in the work of Niemi & Junn (1998). Their study focuses on "knowledge of the foundational aspects of the American political system, including structures and processes of government and principles of American democracy" (p. 4). They continue, "...our premise is that one can be well-informed about the day-to-day aspects of politics only when one understands the context in which government operates" (p. 4). The authors do not explicitly articulate the conception of democracy and citizenship from which they work, and they claim that "there is no 'canon' that defines what students (or adults) should know" (p. 11) as citizens. However, an examination of the categories of



knowledge (i.e., Democratic Principles & Purpose of Government, Political Institutions, Political Processes, Rights, Responsibilities and the Law) represented by the 150 multiple-choice items (focusing on simple recall, comprehension of texts, and interpretations of charts and figures) used in the study seems to imply an adherence to *traditional liberal* democratic principles (e.g., popular sovereignty, majority rule, limited government). A national sample of 4,275 high school seniors was used for this study. The main research questions in this study concerned how much Americans know about politics and their government, and the sources of civic knowledge. To answer these questions, the researchers present percentages of correct responses for items in the different content categories. They also use regression analysis to study the relationship between the percentage of correct responses on the test of Knowledge of American Government/Civics and a number of curriculum and individual variables.<sup>2</sup> Analysis of the total sample yielded statistically significant results for all the variables, with the model explaining 31 percent of the variance in knowledge. The percentage of variance indicates the extent to which the variables included in the model explain differences in student scores on the test. When analyzing sub-scores for different categories of knowledge (see above) for differences in gender, and race/ethnicity, results indicate that these factors explain between 18 and 32 percent of the variance.

In this sense, the study's methodology is consistent with its conceptual assumptions (although implicit) about democracy and citizenship. It treats civic education as any other subject matter (disciplinary knowledge), where the types of knowledge to be learned are imposed from the outside. There is no attention to the democratic and citizenship practices that students themselves may have experienced

(or not), presumably because experience of citizenship is only possible if one already knows the workings of democracy. From such a perspective, the definition of citizenship is bound to a nation's political system and therefore cross-country comparisons would be difficult. Civic knowledge is defined as knowledge of the political organizations and workings of government and is regarded as a prerequisite to civic participation. A focus on the knowledge of rules—static or unchanging—is consistent with a methodology of "right answers"; it does not allow for consideration of changing notions of citizenship or of other civic understandings and experiences, such as engagement with environmental groups, human rights groups, "global" or "cosmopolitan" citizenship, and so on.

2. *A fixed design methodology does not easily accommodate some conceptions of democracy and citizenship because it can reduce data to fixed categories of what is most easily observable—hence resulting in possible incongruence between conceptual and methodological choices.*

Working from an experiential (Dewey, 1938), participatory, or multicultural conception of democracy, for example, would imply a focus of inquiry on people's emergent understandings of democracy, their experiences as citizens, and the meaning they construct from these experiences, their beliefs and attitudes. In these perspectives, there would also be some consideration of the socio-cultural structures and values that may provide some understanding of people's affiliation or disaffiliation with government and political institutions, their interests and beliefs, as well as considerations of social and political diversity. These perspectives would be most consistent with theories of curriculum such as those articulated by Joseph Schwab (1973), in which consideration must be given to such



factors or “commonplaces” as subject matter, learner, teacher, and milieu, or Paulo Freire (1970), who emphasizes and validates the unique contributions of the learner’s cultural and life experience. From these perspectives, research on people’s understandings and experiences requires methodologies and methods that are flexible and open—methodologies that are inclusive of stakeholders, that allow people to express their own points of view (rather than checking fixed categories of responses) and explanations regarding whether and how they see themselves as engaged citizens, and to collectively engage in dialogues and deliberations about their experiences and understandings. In this case, it seems then problematic to impose on all research participants the same particular categories of responses.

At least two of the studies reviewed here seem to reflect some inconsistencies between the theoretical conceptualization of citizenship education and the methodological choices that were made in the studies. Hahn (1998) appears to be working from a Deweyan experiential conception of democracy and curriculum when she states that her study falls in the tradition of John Dewey’s (1916, 1966) theory that participatory dispositions needed by citizens in a democracy are learned through practice in school and community” (p. xi). She also draws from a political learning tradition “based on a cognitive developmental model whereby the focus is ... on how individuals construct meaning about the political world” (p. xi), thereby suggesting a constructivist, participatory, and experiential view of learning about democracy and citizenship. Further, she indicates that her study is influenced by feminist studies, and she also refers to giving attention to the concepts of political and educational cultures and “the relationship of global phenomena, such as the mass media, on education in cross national

perspectives” (p. xi). In other words, in this study there is a stated concern for how individuals construct their understandings of democracy and citizenship, as well as for some of the conditions, the socio-cultural structures, and the forms of discourse in which these understandings must be interpreted.

Hahn studies political attitudes (i.e., interests, efficacy, trust, and confidence), political behaviors and beliefs, and perceptions of whether school climates encourage students to discuss controversial issues in five countries (England, Denmark, the Netherlands, Germany and the US), targeting a school age population of 14 to 20 years old. Hahn’s research questions focus on differences in political attitudes between countries, gender differences, and on the relationship between students’ political attitudes and their reports on classroom environment. First, she uses classroom observations, interviews with students and teachers, and analyses of classroom documents and students’ work to portray the state of civic education in the five countries. She also uses this information in an attempt to interpret the results of her questionnaire survey (Lickert-type items) of students’ political attitudes.

Consistent with her stated theoretical orientation, Hahn’s use of key informants, of teacher and student interviews, and of classroom observations takes into account the conditions in which students develop attitudes toward politics and civic life, and her study generates important insights about this process. As a “comparativist” Hahn is naturally interested in examining similarities and differences in how education is carried out across cultures, contexts, and national boundaries. From our perspective however, some kinds of international comparisons have resulted in “horse races” between nations to see which countries out-perform others in terms of student achievement (the IEA and PISA studies



come to mind here). To her credit, Hahn uses international comparative data in her study to illuminate dilemmas that educators face in each of the five countries she studied, as well as how the social and educational contexts influence how and what students learn about citizenship. For example, issues of freedom of expression and civic tolerance pose challenges for schools in all countries, but Hahn points out that in Germany, where the political culture is affected by the recent memories of the Nazi regime, students' attitudes are shaped by laws that "restrict the rights of groups that might undermine the political order" (Hahn, 1998, p. 175). By contextualizing cross-country comparisons in this way, Hahn provides a way of interpreting differences between groups and using those interpretations to guide curriculum development in civic education.

Still, the apparent concern for comparison here pushes toward standardization and tends to disconnect the individual's experience and its relationship to the group's political attitudes. In other words, the interview questions get at the commonality of experiences between individual students (possibly belonging to different communities or cultures), but how the sum of these common experiences relates to the average political attitude remains somewhat unclear. Further, it is the researcher's interpretation of students' responses that are used to explain differences between countries, not students' own views or the representations that they have of themselves. Since it is difficult to meaningfully represent students' own life experiences (from which they presumably construct their own understanding and attitudes) solely by using a set of pre-defined questions (Hahn mentions using the same or similar questions in all groups of students) and then converting this information to average percentages of response by country, another approach might be considered here. One could imagine other ways to incorporate

the perspectives of participants into studies like Hahn's, such as asking them to offer interpretations of the quantitative survey results or to comment upon their meaning within the particular national context. Much can be learned from the results of Hahn's study, but the inclusion of study participants in this way could provide yet deeper insights into the phenomena under investigation. Such an approach echoes the suggestion made by Stevick and Levinson (2007) when they recommend that civic educators ask, "What does this practice mean to the people who are engaged in it?" (p. 6) rather than merely asking whether a particular instructional practice is more "effective" than another.

The use of quantitative data from the questionnaires in Hahn's study allows for comparing students from different countries, which requires fixed categories of answers. But again, these categories are only fixed in appearance, since the same questions may have different meanings across different political and cultural contexts. Yet these data are analyzed and reported with descriptive statistics by country and by gender, under the assumption of universality of meaning, and analysis of variance results are reported for comparisons between means and effect size. Most differences between means are less than half a point on a scale 1-5, with a few reaching up to a .88 point difference. Interpreting the meaning of these small differences is, at best, difficult, particularly in light of qualitative data that portray somewhat different political cultures across countries. The strength of Hahn's study derives more from its careful analysis of students' development of political attitudes and beliefs within each of the five countries she studied than from the comparison of questionnaire results across countries. In the future, studies building upon Hahn's work may want to reconsider the fixed design methodology and data categories that do not always reveal



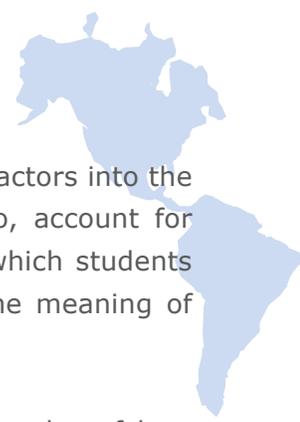
the subtleties lying just beneath the surface of quantitative survey results.

Another example comes from the juxtaposition of Phase I (Torney-Purta et al., 1999) and Phase II (Torney-Purta et al., 2001) of the IEA study. In Phase I, case studies were conducted independently by researchers in 24 countries. Since the study was to include countries with widely differing histories and traditions, no explicit conceptualization of citizenship or democracy is articulated. However, based upon the issues raised in the 18 framing questions (e.g., knowledge of national history and government, relations between their country and other countries in the world, the role of ethnic, religious, and linguistic minorities, the influence of gender on civic participation, the meaning of democracy in their country, etc.) used to develop the study, the conceptual foundation for the study reflects elements of *traditional liberal*, *critical*, **and** *multicultural* perspectives on democracy. Some of the case studies are, in their own right, interesting accounts of the political and socio-cultural dilemmas the countries are currently facing. Further, the researchers explicitly state that they are working from a “theoretical framework based on the theory of ecological development (Bronfenbrenner, 1988) and situated cognition (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998)” (p. 20). “Learning about citizenship involves engagement in a community and development of an identity within that group. These ‘communities of discourse and practice’ provide the situation in which young people develop progressively more complex concepts and ways of behaving” (p. 20). Phase II of the study focuses on international comparisons of 14-year-old students’ knowledge (multiple-choice items) and attitude (Lickert-type items), and therefore reduces the focus to a common domain of objectified knowledge and attitudes. The content of the knowledge test

primarily emphasizes a *traditional liberal* view of democracy (i.e., characteristics of democracy, institutions and practices of democracy, and citizens’ rights and duties constitute 30 out of 38 items), while issues of national identity, international relations, and social cohesion and diversity are deemphasized. The *traditional liberal* content may be more emphasized because the principles that underlie it are thought of as more universal—hence accommodating more easily fixed categories of responses—than those associated with national identity or diversity. The imposition of these presumably universal categories of understanding, however, on 14-year-olds in 28 countries as different as those included in the study does not seem consistent with the initial conceptions of democracy which framed Phase I of the study, nor with the various democratic practices described in some of the case studies.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, such an imposition is inconsistent with the theories of ecological development and situated cognition that were invoked in the theoretical framework of the study.

The methodological choices made in these studies reduce what initially appear as broad and open conceptualizations of democratic and citizenship understandings to some “essentialist” categories of knowledge and attitudes/dispositions that presumably cut across all definitions. As such, they provide a general level of understanding about the political knowledge and attitudes of 14-year-olds in 28 countries but little information to explain subtle but important differences among those participating in the study.

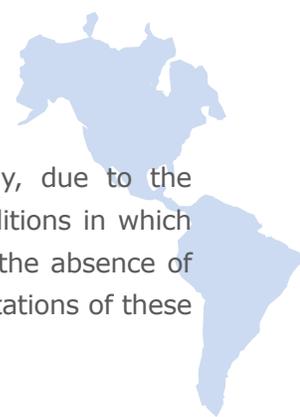
3. *A fixed design methodology limits research claims, explanations, or understandings because it is not often inclusive of all stakeholders and does not take into account the conditions in which people develop their understanding.*



Large-scale fixed-design studies typically focus on outcome measures (here, student knowledge, beliefs, and attitudes) with some superficial attention—a few questions related to students’ background variables and experience with the curriculum, or teachers’ characterization of their teaching methods—to the process by which these outcomes developed. As a result, the range of findings generated, and their meaningfulness for those involved, are restricted to the categories of responses pre-defined by the researchers. Questions related to the community or school’s values and interests, or the school structures and policies with regard to democratic practices and opportunities for civic participation, are rarely addressed. This omission reflects the fact that relevant stakeholders in the area of civic education are not included in the investigation of its outcomes. The potential use of the explanations or interpretations of the results of such studies to understand how a political culture develops within distinct countries or communities will therefore be limited because they only provide a very partial representation of individuals’ and groups’ experience of civic education. Findings are typically limited to the current state of affairs with regard to student outcomes, but with very little information to draw from in order to formulate explanations or interpretations of these findings. Merely describing students’ particular knowledge, beliefs or attitudes is necessary but not sufficient to inform further development of civic education curriculum. Such research practices can represent lost opportunities for the enhancement and practice of civic engagement and participation when they do not incorporate participant perspectives. Research practices and methodology that aim at integrating the research and practice of citizenship in school would seem to us more useful and meaningful. Such an approach would offer an opportunity

to integrate relevant contextual factors into the inquiry process and, in doing so, account for the particular circumstances in which students develop understandings about the meaning of democratic citizenship.

Let us examine some examples of how methodological choices place limitations on the results and conclusions of the studies we are considering here. In Phase II of the IEA study, the authors explain, “The differences between countries in mean performance on this test are generally not large. Twenty-five of the 28 countries differ by less than half a standard deviation from the international average” (Torney-Purta et al., 2001, p. 44). Given the wide differences in the political culture of some of these countries, one is left to wonder about the meaning of these differences. The authors attempt to group high and low performing countries by categories of items. Groups of countries with similar student performances often include a mixture of long standing democracies as well as a number of emerging democracies, but there is no or little available data to make sense of these differences. The authors also report findings about, for example, the “concepts of democracy” held by the 14-year-olds participating in the study. For this part of the study, participants were asked to rate a series of statements as to whether they would be ‘good’ or ‘bad’ for democracy such as when citizens have the right to elect political leaders freely. The analysis focuses on whether or not consensus across countries was obtained on these survey items. Not surprisingly, a number of items did not yield a consensus. Differences in responses to these items presumably reflect differences in how young people from different countries view particular aspects of democracy such as when government leaders are trusted without question or when there is a separation of church and state. Simply reporting a lack of agreement on these issues (as measured by



a mean difference of more than 1 point on a 4-point scale) does not provide much insight into the practice of democracy and citizenship in the countries surveyed.

Other findings are equally puzzling. For example, 85% of the 14-year-old US participants report that they expect to vote in national elections (compared to a 36% voter turn-out at the latest election at the time of the study), while 69% of the Belgium (French) sample report that they expect to vote (compared to a 91% voter turn-out, since voting is mandatory). How are we to interpret these differences? The authors then use regression analysis to examine the relationship between Civic Knowledge and a number of variables.<sup>4</sup> The overall explained variance in Civic Knowledge is 20%, and “ranges from 10 percent in Colombia and 13 percent in Romania, to 33 percent in Hungary and Slovenia and 36 percent in the Czech Republic.... The only significant predictor in every country is students’ expected level of future educational attainment” (Torney-Purta et al., 2001, p. 151), a variable that has little to do with civic learning.

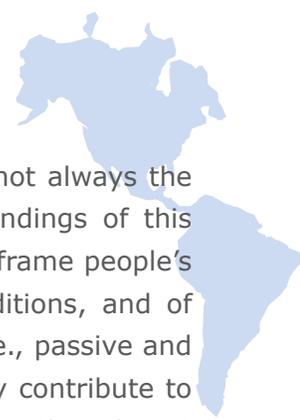
In a similar way, the Niemi and Junn NAEP study reports results in terms of the percentage of correct responses, and relates these to a number of variables<sup>5</sup> that might relate to learning in general but are not specific to the conditions in which democratic and citizenship understanding develop. A number of regression analyses were also conducted to investigate the relationship between knowledge of American Government/Civics, attitudes about Government Responsiveness, and these general variables. Results from these analyses yield statistically significant findings and presumably explain between 5 and 33% of the variance in knowledge and attitude. As another example, they report statistically significant differences between Whites, Blacks, and Hispanics on a measure of political knowledge, controlling for other possible

contributing factors<sup>6</sup>. Unfortunately, due to the limited information about the conditions in which political knowledge develops, and the absence of other stakeholders’ views, interpretations of these differences are very difficult.

Overall, the meaning of these findings is limited since statistically significant results could be easily obtained given the large samples used in these studies, but differences between means are, for the most part, small, as well as the percentage of variance explained. At best, these findings provide a description of differences between countries or between groups on a fixed set of items representing a particular conception of knowledge, beliefs, and attitude. Even assuming the importance of these differences, meaningful information regarding the political culture and democratic practices in schools and communities, which might provide a context for these differences, is missing. Furthermore, if civic understandings and practices are learned through discourses in school and the community, and participation in communities of practice, one must question the usefulness of cross-context (e.g., international) comparisons. Instead, these comparisons are made based on static definitions of citizenship at a time when the very definitions of this concept have become elusive.

Fixed-design methodologies provide few opportunities for active participation, dialogue, and deliberation, and therefore may yield research findings that represent people as passive citizens—a representation inconsistent with most conceptions of democracy.

The practice of constructing and administering surveys as a means of data collection invariably leads to a separation of those being studied from those doing the studying. This is, of course, such a common and ubiquitous practice in social science research that it is rarely questioned



or challenged from within. It is indeed possible to shed light on important questions or phenomena using such a methodology<sup>7</sup>; and the studies we have reviewed here certainly accomplish that. Trends of responses within particular school structures, for example, or patterns of relationships can only be established using large samples and fixed categories of observation. But the problem here resides with the very nature of the object of investigation: education for democratic citizenship. Referring to a distinction raised by Alexis de Tocqueville (1969), we should regard those who participate with us in our work as *citizens*, not *subjects*, as we conduct research about civic education. Their knowledge, experiences, values, and perspectives should be given greater voice. It would seem particularly appropriate here to use a research methodology that emulates a democratic process and that allows for the active participation of all involved. In other words, the research strategies that we use should themselves be an opportunity to teach and learn about democracy and civic engagement. This argument is what made Howe's (2003) democratic educational research framework appealing to us because, as he states, the principles of inclusion, dialogue, and deliberation "weave together methodological and moral-political considerations" (p. 136), which are most relevant to the field of civic education.

Our last assertion here derives from our reading of the three studies (and many others), but it rests more on what we did not find in these studies than on what we found. In that sense, this is an assertion by default, since the studies that we analyzed are characterized by *passive inclusion* of the participants, with little evidence of opportunities for dialogue or deliberation between researchers and participants. Research findings in these studies are the researchers' explanations or interpretations of what they have observed, which are, as we already mentioned, only one perspective on the issue

being investigated, and perhaps not always the most important one. Research findings of this nature also have the potential to frame people's representation of their own conditions, and of how they perceive themselves (i.e., passive and unknowledgeable). They also may contribute to reproducing the status quo because they do not offer the explanations necessary to gain deeper understanding that may lead to change. One of the reasons for this is because most research findings remain unexplained or uninterpreted by the research participants themselves, whose point of view would provide great insight into the meaningfulness of the research findings, and strengthen their validity. This would also constitute an important point of entry for reconceptualizing civic education curricula.

The studies that we have reviewed here are valuable because they have identified some important dimensions of civic learning and have provided an assortment of measures that could be used or adapted for future studies. Let us, then, imagine how it could be if research, drawing from the work of these studies, was conducted with attention paid to the principles of *inclusion, dialogue, and deliberation* recommended by Howe (2003). Surveys of student knowledge, beliefs, and attitudes were used in the studies that we analyzed, and results were typically reported using percentages of correct responses or endorsement by categories of items. So for example, the IEA study (Torney-Purta et al., 2001) reports that only 40% of the 14-year-olds surveyed in Estonia trust the national government, and these results are interpreted by the researchers as being significantly below the international average. Results such as these could be used with groups of students who participated in the study to engage them in a dialogue about the meaning of these results. They could be asked to respond questions like these; Why do they think their trust in the national government



is so low? Are there differences among them with regard to their level of trust? What role do they think their school, their community, their family experiences play in shaping their trust? What evidence do they have for the explanations they provide? What evidence exists to support or challenge their explanations? How could these students conduct inquiries into their own lack of trust in the government? These are research questions in their own right, but they also constitute inquiry questions that can serve as the basis for the civic education curriculum in these groups. Answers to these questions would be documented and analyzed to become an integral part of the research report. This is also, we believe, a more integrative model of civic education, where research would be an integral part of the curriculum, as it would serve to inform and define it. From a research perspective, engaging in dialogue and deliberation with the participants about these questions would also inevitably and actively include other stakeholders in civic education. Some of the researchers' roles would be to ensure that all stakeholders are included, to monitor the deliberations to ensure that all voices are heard, and to make existing evidence available to inform these deliberations.

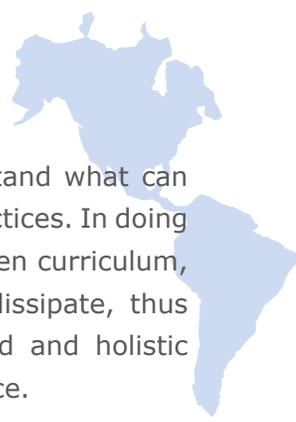
From this example, we can see how a research methodology that provides opportunity for active participation and deliberation is more consistent with the principles that underlie most conceptions of democracy. We also believe that it would yield more meaningful and dynamic understandings of democracy, citizenship, and civic education curriculum.

## Conclusions

By making explicit the connections among assumptions about democracy, citizenship, curricula for educating citizens, and the research strategies used to study civic education,

researchers can conduct inquiry that will reflect greater coherence and adherence to the goals of education in a democracy. Through our analysis here, we have attempted to demonstrate that fixed designs tend to narrow the focus of research studies in civic education, leading to limited meaningfulness and impact on the field. By reducing the range of responses to questions available to participants through the use of fixed-choice survey items, and by not engaging participants in substantive dialogue about the issues that underlie the survey questions asked, the value of research findings from these studies is considerably diminished. While this represents a methodological weakness that could be attributed to designs in any field of study, we believe that this issue is of particular importance in the field of civic education. If one of the aims of educating citizens for democratic participation is to promote enlightened dialogue on important public issues, then we should seek ways to model this in our approaches to inquiry. One way to move beyond vague generalities in the conclusions we reach about the civic understandings, skills, and attitudes that students are developing in school is to employ more context-sensitive and dialogic methods in our research efforts. Such inquiry approaches can provide opportunities for collaboration among researchers, students, teachers, parents, and other stakeholders, and lead to more useful understandings about civic education.

We have focused our critique here largely upon quantitative studies, but it may also prove beneficial to examine similar questions regarding qualitative studies in civic education. It may be the case that qualitative studies do not provide opportunities for engaged dialogue and deliberation among researchers and participants, or that the perspectives of researchers tend to dominate the inquiry process as well, a point convincingly argued by Mintrop (2002) in relation



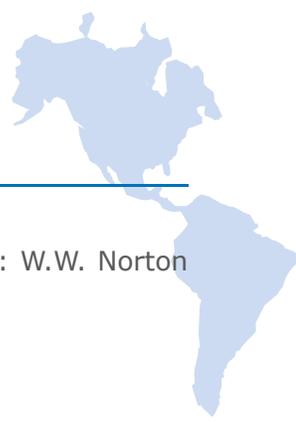
to the IEA Phase I civic education study. If this is so, then adjustments to qualitative methods similar to those proposed here for quantitative research should also be made. At the very least, we believe that the field of civic education research needs to produce more examples of diverse research methodologies, including those

presented here, to better understand what can be learned from such research practices. In doing so, the artificial boundaries between curriculum, teaching, and assessment may dissipate, thus leading toward a more integrated and holistic approach to civic education practice.

## Endnotes

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1. We will use the term “research” in this paper to include evaluation studies as well as other forms of educational inquiry.
2. These variables include: amount and recency of course work in civics, variety of topic studied, discussed current events in class, participated in mock elections or government, likes to study government, four-year college planned, reading and reference materials at home, only English spoken at home, two-parent household, educational level of parents, amount of television viewing, being male, being Hispanic, being African-American.
3. It should be noted that the International Civic and Citizenship Education Study currently being prepared by IEA will attempt to address some of these shortcomings by providing region-specific cognitive tests and student questionnaires (see <http://iccs.acer.edu.au/uploads/File/IEA%20ICCS%20Framework.pdf>).
4. These variables include: gender, home literacy resources, expected years of further education, open classroom climate, participation in school council, evenings spent outside home, frequency of watching TV news, having learned about voting.
5. These variables include: type of school, community and region, per pupil instructional expenditure, amount of TV viewing, participation in some instructional activities, interest, gender, race and ethnicity.
6. These other factors include amount of reading material available in the home, educational level of parents, and number of hours per day watching television
7. An excellent recent example of this kind of research is a longitudinal study of the predictors of high school students’ attitudes toward civic engagement conducted by Joseph Kahne and Susan Sporte (2008).



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