

**Civic Development in Context:  
The Influence of Local Contexts on High School Students' Beliefs about Civic Engagement**

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edited by J. Bixby and J. Pace

Ellen Middaugh, M.A.  
Research Associate  
Mills College  
5000 MacArthur Blvd  
Oakland CA 94613  
emiddaug@mills.edu

Joseph Kahne, Ph.D.  
Abbie Valley Professor of Education  
Dean, School of Education  
Mills College  
5000 MacArthur Blvd  
Oakland CA 94613  
jkahne@mills.edu

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*Those who are white, older, affluent, homeowners, and highly educated have a disproportionate say in California politics and representation in the civic life of the state.*

–*S. Karthick Ramakrishnan & Mark Baldassarre; The Ties that Bind: Changing Demographics and Civic Engagement in California, PPIC, p. 81.*

Trends toward declining youth political and civic participation observed throughout the last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Putnam, 2000) have sparked renewed efforts to increase the presence and quality of civic education in American public schools. Social scientists called attention to what they felt was a "crisis of civic engagement" evidenced by shifts in patterns of social and political participation that suggested the members of the youngest generation were not engaged in public life. These shifts include declining voter turnout among 18-24 year olds, low self-reported interest in political participation, poor knowledge of democratic structures and principles, and reported lack of trust in government (Galston, 2001). Though some have called attention to recent increases in youth voter turnout in the 2004 and 2006, young voters remained roughly the same proportion of the total electorate (Lopez, Kirby & Sagoff, 2005; CIRCLE, 2006).

There is also substantial evidence that some groups of citizens are under-represented in the political process and have far less voice. As the American Political Science Association Task Force on Inequality and American Democracy (2004) reported,

The privileged participate more than others and are increasingly well organized to press their demands on government. Public officials, in turn, are much more responsive to the privileged than to average citizens and the least affluent. Citizens with low or moderate incomes speak with a whisper that is lost on the ears of inattentive government, while the advantaged roar with the clarity and consistency that policymakers readily heed (p. 1).

These inequalities are not only associated with income. As a recent study by the non-partisan Public Policy Institute of California documents, white Californians participate in electoral politics at a proportionally greater rate than do their African American and Latino counterparts (Ramakrishnan & Baldassarre, 2004). In California, this means one non-majority

group likely has a disproportionate influence over policy decisions, a situation which would threaten both the legitimacy and the effectiveness of our democracy.

In response to these concerns, educators and policymakers have urged schools to provide educational opportunities that extend beyond the standard single semester of instruction on the structure and function of government (Gibson & Levine, 2004). Instead they urge the creation of civic education curricula that discuss not only what the US government is and how it works but also why and how ordinary citizens can be involved and participate. These efforts have taken a variety of forms including the infusion of community service requirements, funding for professional development in US History and civics, teacher training in service-learning and civic education, development of civics curricula that target active engagement and civic skills, and efforts to increase youth voice in the high-schools. All of these strategies have been seen as a means to reverse general trends toward citizen disengagement as well as to increase relative youth representation in politics. The assumption is that the health of democracy in the US will improve if all students are exposed to more knowledge of democratic structures and processes, more opportunities to practice democratic skills (debate, working cooperatively, perspective-taking, analyzing and acting on social issues), and learn more about their rights and responsibilities as democratic citizens<sup>1</sup>.

A healthy democracy is one that adequately represents the interests of the populace as a whole. In a large and diverse country such as the US, this is no small task. As we saw in the 2004 Presidential election, there are considerable differences amongst US citizens in our concerns, beliefs, and needs. Creating a government that represents the common interests among these diverse perspectives *and* facilitates dialogue where interests diverge requires the active participation of a large and diverse group of citizens.

This paper examines and seeks to better understand the common features and social contextual differences of youth civic development. In this paper we define social context by demographic features of young people's communities—racial and ethnic diversity, socioeconomic status and population density. While conventional wisdom suggests these variables bear some relationship to youth civic development, the relationship has not been fully examined. Does local social context influence youth's views on politics and democracy? Their

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<sup>1</sup> What is not accounted for, of course, are the opportunities available for participation, which may differ, of course, non-citizens being the most obvious example of a group with fewer opportunities.

motivation for civic and political engagement? Their experiences with civic education? And if contextual variation does exist in these areas, what does it mean, if anything, for youth civic development and civic education?

Such questions are of great importance for both practitioners and policymakers as well as for members of the scholarly community. Currently, most advocates for civic education and most visions of “Best Practice” are relatively generic. Practices such as service-learning or the discussion of current events are promoted as good for all students. Will the same approaches and curriculum work in all settings or should policy and practice be tailored to reflect differences that may be tied to the characteristics of students and their contexts? Although there is widespread recognition that factors such as the ethnic and socio-economic demographics of the community in which a student lives often shapes the ways students experience many civic and political institutions and issues (Conover & Searing, 2000; Torney-Purta, et al, 2001), the consequences of such dynamics for civic development broadly and civic education, in particular, have not received sufficient attention from civic education advocates or educators.

### The Study

We address our questions regarding the relationship between social context and youth beliefs and experiences with civic education and civic engagement by drawing on 10 focus groups that we conducted with high school seniors from a diverse array of five schools in California. The students who participated in the focus groups were selected to represent a range of achievement levels and activity levels within the school and community. It should be noted that because all students who participated in this study were high school seniors, the perspectives represented in these groups exclude those who have dropped out or rarely attend school.

The focus group questions were designed to explore constructs that were part of a survey we administered to 200 seniors at each school (See *Educating for Democracy*, 2005 for a description). The survey was designed to assess high school students’ civic commitments, capacities, activities and school-based opportunities. The conversations we had with students following the survey administration were intended to allow them to expand on their answers and to discuss their personal experiences relevant to their answers. Students were asked to reflect on their own level of commitment to different forms of citizenship including the importance of

personal responsibility, participation in community improvement, working with local government, and working for social change. In particular, we examine the relationship between the social context in which youth live and their views on democracy, their attitudes about politics, their motivations for civic and political engagement, and their experiences with civic and political education.

Clearly, a study such as this should be understood as exploratory in nature. By speaking with roughly 50 students in ten focus groups it is not possible to fully examine the significance of social context for civic development or civic education. But that is not our goal. What these focus groups permit us to do is to explore and highlight dynamics related to the intersection of varied contexts, civic education, and civic development. Our hope is that such exploration will, first and foremost, help us to recognize and consider the potential significance of contextual factors. In doing so, we hope it will help us to theorize better, to identify hypotheses, and to illustrate dynamics that are worthy of continued attention.

Each school in this study was in the process of planning programs to augment civic education as part of the *Educating for Democracy* initiative in California<sup>2</sup>. Each of the 12 schools participating in the initiative agreed to implement at least one of six recommendations identified in the *Civic Mission of Schools* report (Gibson & Levine, 2004) as particularly promising approaches for increasing civic and political engagement. These include recommendations for schools to provide increased opportunities for:

1. Instruction in Government, Law, History, Economics and other related courses.
2. Debate and discussion about current events and issues that matter to students.
3. Community service and service-learning.
4. Extra-Curricular Activities
5. Student governance and student decision-making in school.
6. Simulations of political processes (e.g. mock elections, mock trials, lobbying)

Our first phase of data collection served, in part, as a needs assessment process to aid schools in planning and to provide students with an opportunity to reflect on their own civic engagement in their schools and community to date. While the participating schools were in the process of designing new programs and new curricula to improve civic outcomes for students,

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<sup>2</sup> For more information about the Educating for Democracy initiative, go to <http://www.cms-ca.org/>.

some of the CMS recommended strategies for promoting youth civic engagement were already being used. In the 5 schools highlighted for this study, there were two practices of which students were particularly aware—community service and opportunities for debate and discussion of current events.

We will use our analysis of students' views on democracy and civic and political engagement along with their interpretations of their current school-based opportunities for civic engagement to consider some possible implications for civic education in our diverse democracy. We will also highlight ways future studies of civic education might help us better account for contextual variation.

### *Participating Schools:*

The current study is part of a larger study of youth civic engagement in California. For the purposes of examining contextual variation in youth's views on and experiences with civic engagement, we draw on data from 10 focus groups at 5 of the 12 participating schools. At each school, outside consultants who were working with the schools during the assessment phase of the civic education initiative were asked to consult with teachers to select 2 groups of 4-6 students each. They were also instructed to select students who represented a range of academic achievement and engagement in school activities<sup>3</sup>. Students were then interviewed by one or both of the authors in a room or area of school where their answers could not be heard by teachers or school officials. Students were also told that their answers would not be shared with identifying information. The conversations were audio-taped and later transcribed by a professional transcription service and then checked for accuracy by research assistants.

Schools were chosen to represent urban, suburban and rural communities as well as communities with high and low average socioeconomic status and communities with the three patterns of racial/ethnic composition noted as distinct regional patterns within the state—majority white, no clear majority, and majority Latino. Each school and its surrounding local context is described briefly below<sup>4</sup>:

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<sup>3</sup> While this method of selection runs the risk that highly engaged students were over-represented in this sample, students' comments throughout the focus group suggested that the groups were not uniformly highly engaged students. Students' comments about their own activities and post-secondary plans suggested a range of interest in school and community engagement.

<sup>4</sup> All numbers are rounded to prevent easy identification of schools.

*Sequoia HS* is located in a small (population 1,000) rural, middle class town. Residents of the town are mostly White Non-Hispanic (>90%) with a minimum of high school degree (>90%) and a substantial number of college graduates (30%)<sup>5</sup>. The median resident age in Sequoia is between 40-45, and the median income is a little over \$50, 000. The clear majority of students (90%) identify as white, and fewer than 5% identify as Hispanic or Native American. Approximately 15% of students qualify for Free or Reduced Price meals. Sequoia's state-wide rank on the Academic Performance Index (API) was 7 out of 10 in the year when the study was conducted.<sup>6</sup>

*Sunny Hill HS* is located in an upper-middle-class suburb (population >60,000) of a major metropolitan area in Northern California. White Non-Hispanic residents make up a clear majority of the residents in the city (>75%), followed by considerably small numbers of Hispanic (<10%) and Asian/Pacific Islander (approximately 10%) residents. Residents of the city also have higher incomes (median income > \$90K) and higher average education (90% high school graduates and 45% college graduates) than the state in general. The median age of residents in Sunny Hill is between 35-40. The school itself is similar with the majority of students (approximately 70%) identifying as white, a substantial minority (approximately 20%) identifying as Asian, and a small number (<5%) identifying as Hispanic. Less than 2% of the students qualify for free or reduced price meals and only 2.5% are English Language Learners. The school is high performing with a state-wide rank on the API of 10/10.

*Johnson HS* is a suburban/urban fringe school on the edge of a major California city (population >400, 000) from rapidly expanding middle-income neighborhood. Residents of both the city and school are ethnically diverse, a fact of which students in the focus groups were very aware. No single ethnic group accounts for more than 50%. In the city, the largest group identified as white, followed in group-size by Hispanic and African American. The median resident age is between 30-35 and the median income is around \$37, 000. At the school, the largest group identified as Asian (>30%), followed by African American (approximately 25%), Hispanic (approximately 20%) and white (<20%). Approximately 1/3 of the student body qualifies for

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<sup>5</sup> All city statistics gathered from [www.city-data.com](http://www.city-data.com).

<sup>6</sup> School statistics for the 2004/05 school-year were accessed through the Education Data Partnership web site. <http://www.ed-data.k12.ca.us/>.

Free/Reduced price meals and 13% of students are English language learners. In the year of data collection, Johnson's state-wide rank on the API was 6/10.

*Hartman HS* is located in a city (population >45,000) on the fringe of a major metropolitan area. The town is 93% Hispanic with 50% of the population reporting countries other than the US as their birth country. Residents of the city tend to be young (median resident age between 20-25) and to have incomes (median income a little over \$30, 000) and levels of education (30% report having completed high school and <5% college) lower than the state as a whole. The poverty rate for the surrounding city is just under 30%. Similarly, nearly all (>95% Hartman students identify as Hispanic with close to 60% of students qualifying for Free/Reduced price meals. Approximately 1/3 of students are English Language Learners with Spanish as their first language. At the time of data-collection, Hartman HS reported a statewide rank on the API of 1.

*James HS* is located within a major metropolitan area in Southern California (population over 3 million). The school is located in a middle class neighborhood within the city, but students are drawn from a variety of neighborhoods across the city. There is no clear ethnic majority in the city as a whole. The largest group identifies as Hispanic (>45%) with the next largest groups respectively identifying as White (approximately 30%), African American (>10%), Asian or Asian American (<10%). More than 25% of residents in the surrounding city identified as "other". The median age for the city is between 30-35, and the median income is just over \$36,000. The clear majority of students at James HS report as Hispanic (>65%) with significant representation of students who identify as white (10-15%), Filipino (approximately 10%) and Asian (<10%). Nearly 70% of students qualify for Free/Reduced price meals and >25% are English Language Learners with the majority of this group reporting Spanish as their first language. James HS reported a statewide ranking on the API of 3 during the data collection year.

#### *Why focus on social context?*

California is a well known for its diversity. No single racial group composes a majority of the population. A substantial and increasing percentage (>25%) of the state's residents were born in another country (Ralph and Goldy Lewis Center for Regional Policy Studies, 2001).

These trends are more pronounced in California, but are by no means irrelevant to the US as a whole and are perhaps predictive of the future of the country. Data from the last US Census revealed that 11.1% of the U.S. population in the year 2000 was foreign-born, up from 7.9 percent in 1990 (Malone, Baluja, Costanzo, & Davis, 2003). Additionally, California is home to communities ranging from those marked by startling wealth to those with pervasive poverty. A recent report by the Public Policy Institute of California suggests that though the increasing diversity in California is a statewide phenomenon noted in 6 out of 9 regions, each region has its own unique demographic profile (Johnson, 2002).

If there were no systematic differences in patterns of civic and political participation among California's diverse citizenry, the motivation to examine the influence of social context would be minimal. Unfortunately, this is not the case. A 2004 study by the Public Policy Institute of California suggests that the voices and interests of some groups are more likely to be expressed and represented than of others (Ramakrishan & Baldassarre, 2004). The study found that California citizens as a whole vote and engage in other civic activities at about the same rates as citizens in the rest of the country, but that various groups within California participate at very different rates. For example, white citizens in California vote, sign petitions, write to elected officials, attend rallies, participate in partisan political work, contribute money to political causes, and volunteer at significantly higher levels than other racial and ethnic groups. Only in attending local meetings do whites lag behind Latinos and African Americans. While part of the explanation for lower voting rates may be an artifact of opportunity rather than motivation (e.g. not having citizenship status or disenfranchisement due to incarceration), these factors do not explain the discrepancy in other forms of participation which may influence elected officials or those who can vote. In a state that relies heavily on ballot measures<sup>7</sup> and direct voter participation to make decisions on a number of very important issues such as funding for public education<sup>8</sup>, affirmative action<sup>9</sup>, and access to public services<sup>10</sup>, there is reason to worry

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<sup>7</sup> For example, from March 2000 to November 2005, California voters have been asked to make decisions on 80 state ballot propositions covering a range of important political, fiscal, and social issues. In the year 2000 alone, local voters faced 559 ballot measures including 115 county, 297 city, and 146 community college and school district measures, (Educating for Democracy, 2005).

<sup>8</sup>For example, Proposition 13, which limited and reduced property taxes in 1978, reduced tax money available for public education (Carroll, Krop, Arkes & Morrison, 2005).

<sup>9</sup> For example, Proposition 209, passed by California voters in 1996, banned affirmative action based on race, sex or ethnicity in public institutions. <http://www.landmarkcases.org/bakke/impact.html> (Accessed July 31, 2006).

that that the lower rates of participation among citizens of lower income, immigrant and certain racial and ethnic groups will reduce the likelihood their interests will be represented in policies that directly affect them. Indeed, in his study of the relationship between income and influence in the country as a whole, Larry Bartels (2004) found that when it comes to the votes of US Senators, the policy preferences of constituents at the 75 percentile of the income distribution were almost three times as influential as the policy preferences of those at the 25th percentile. The policy preferences of those in “the bottom third of the income distribution had no apparent statistical effect on their senators’ roll call votes” (p.1).

Given that 1) racial and ethnic minorities, immigrants, and lower income citizens appear to be underrepresented in civic and political life in California, and 2) the fact that many of these groups tend to cluster in different areas of the state, we believe it is important for civic educators to understand whether and how these varying social contexts influence young people’s experience with democracy and civic and political life. While viewed by many as important, researchers are only just beginning to understand these dynamics. This chapter is an effort to support that conversation. We begin by discussing perspectives on the importance of context in the literature to date. We then describe findings from the qualitative component of our study. We conclude with implications for civic education research and practice.

### *Broadening the definition of civic maturity: Research on minority, urban and immigrant civic participation*

While the group differences in civic and political participation presented earlier in this chapter are well documented throughout the US, effective ways to interpret and respond to these differences in civic education programs has not received sufficient attention – indeed, discussions of best practice by educators and advocates often make no mention of the important role context plays in shaping students experiences of and perspectives on civic and political engagement. Fortunately, some recent scholarship is addressing these issues.

Hart & Atkins (2002) reviewed studies comparing minority and urban youth to white and suburban counterparts on a number of outcomes believed to be important civic competencies including civic knowledge, participation in civic activities, and civic skills (e.g. letter writing,

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<sup>10</sup> For example, Proposition 187, passed by California voters in 1994, denied public services such as public education and health care to undocumented immigrants. The proposition was later overturned by a federal court. <http://www.cnn.com/ALLPOLITICS/1998/03/19/prop.187/> (Accessed March 6, 2007).

public speaking). They conclude that urban and minority youth tend to “lag behind” in civic development compared to their white, upper-income, suburban counterparts. This conclusion is drawn from evidence that African American and Hispanic youth score lower on national assessments of civic knowledge<sup>11</sup>, that youth from neighborhoods with higher rates of poverty are less likely to volunteer or engage in community service<sup>12</sup>, and that urban youth the authors encountered in their own work are less likely to know some basic skills, such as letter-writing, that are useful for communicating with public officials. To explain these gaps in skills, activities and knowledge, Hart & Atkins look to the schools and community contexts and suggest that failing schools, fewer opportunities for after-school activities (such as little league) and fewer adult civic role models in urban contexts account for this lag. They conclude that investments at both the school and community level would be necessary to close the gap in civic engagement.

Conover & Searing’s (2000) study of the citizen identities of high school students from rural, suburban, urban and immigrant communities focused on outcomes such as students’ ideas about the rights and responsibilities of citizenship. They note several contextual differences in students’ ideas and behaviors related to citizenship. In particular, the authors highlight urban students’ low rates of endorsement of obeying minor laws as a citizen responsibility compared to suburban students and interpret this finding as a “failure of socialization” due to weak norms in their community (p. 291). They also note the tendency of students from the immigrant community (in San Antonio) to hold a conception of citizenship that is more patriotic and civically and politically participatory than their counterparts from other groups. However, based on the limited measures of activity (political discussions and acts of tolerance), they found rural and suburban students more likely to endorse these items. Conover & Searing emphasize the need to support the development of richer citizen identities for *all* students and suggest that contextual differences in the norms and practices of citizenship must be taken into account to provide higher quality civic education.

Other scholars who focus on minority, urban and immigrant youth civic engagement suggest the need for greater investment in engaging these youth as well, but caution against 1) identifying lower performance on tests of civic knowledge and differences in patterns in political and civic behavior as necessarily a “lag in civic development” rather than a rational difference,

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<sup>11</sup> Based on NAEP scores. This finding is also noted in Baldi, et al, 2001.

<sup>12</sup> Based on Nolan, Chaney & Chapman’s 1997 national survey of adolescents.

and 2) relying on previously established models of civic education to engage urban and minority youth.

Sanchez-Jankowski (1986), for example, examines survey and interview data from his 10-year longitudinal panel study of the political socialization of Chicano youth (conducted from 1976-1986) in 3 different cities. His study documents the influence of the different experiences of the various racial and ethnic groups in American history as well as of the local socio-political context on the civic and political priorities of youth (Sanchez-Jankowski, 1986, 1992, 2002). In particular, he suggests that civic socialization for youth who grow up identifying with groups that have historically been excluded from American public life--such as Latinos, African Americans, and Native Americans—is a process of learning knowledge and skills important to the advancement of their specific group as a whole. Thus while civic maturity or adequate civic development is typically measured by “official” political knowledge (e.g. principles of the constitution, structure of the US government, etc.) and general ability for and interest in participation in civic and political processes, Sanchez-Jankowski (2002) suggests that that civic maturity for youth in historically excluded groups is more typically marked by knowledge of how their particular group or community works (learned from community elders and local resources) and interest in participation that promotes the welfare of their own community. Thus, the lack of knowledge of the meaning of the 4<sup>th</sup> of July and the technical skills necessary for communicating with government officials identified as deficits by Hart and Atkins may not be a sign of developmental lag, but a sign of different priorities and models of civic maturity.

Bedolla’s (2005) more recent study of 100 1<sup>st</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> generation adolescent and adult Latino residents of Los Angeles also identified historical experiences of ethnic groups as an important component of political socialization. Her comparison of patterns of political engagement among residents of a working class community in East LA and middle-class Montebello suggested that nearly all participants from both areas, regardless of generation, identified primarily as Latino and viewed this identity as existing in tension with being American. Bedolla attributes this finding to the history of exclusion of Latino and Native American citizens and immigrants from American politics and other aspects of public life. Furthermore, nearly all participants in her study defined “politics” as something that happens at a national (rather than local) level and as the domain of Anglo Americans and distant from their own concerns.

However, among her sample, many participants engaged politically, in the form of voting and protesting (e.g. against Proposition 187) and civically in the form of community service. In these forms of participation, Bedolla found that the working class residents of East LA, who were also more likely to be first or second generation immigrants and to live in a more segregated community, were more engaged than the middle class Montebello residents. Based on this evidence and participants' discussion of their sense of ethnic identity, Bedolla concludes that among Latino citizens and residents, political engagement is more likely to be motivated by a positive group affiliation than by personal agency or identification of community or national problems alone.

Junn's (1999) analysis of the participation patterns of 3 generations of Mexican American and Asian Americans, African Americans and Anglo-Americans lends further support to Sanchez-Jankowski's (2002) assertion that patterns of participation for groups with more barriers to access to government might be different rather than absent. Using two survey data sets selected for their inclusion of greater numbers of minority participants and a greater variety of forms of civic participation than typically included in quantitative studies of civic and political engagement, she found that Latino and Asian American participants were more likely to report engaging in direct forms of political activity (e.g. protests, serving on local councils, and working with others on local problems) than system-directed forms of political activity (voting, contacting public officials, and working on political campaigns). Junn (1999) suggests that there is reason to believe perhaps for more recent immigrants, and to a lesser degree for minorities in general, that participation in the formal structures of the US government is seen as a less productive way of improving their communities. Rather than marking this as a problematic sign of civic disengagement among individuals, she suggests that this may be a more productive form of civic and political activity for groups that do not have the connections, modes of expression, or political cache that would make their votes or letters to congress-people yield influence on the decisions made that affect their lives.

Finally, Cohen, who is currently working to revive the study civic and political development of African American youth in this post-civil rights movement era, joins the voices urging us to consider the multiple pathways to civic maturity taken by youth who come of age in urban contexts. Drawing on her focus group conversations with young African American men (aged 18-21), Cohen (2006) notes that while this group is seen as relatively disengaged from the

kinds of participation associated with youth civic engagement (e.g. participation in community and extra-curricular activities), they represent a substantial presence in a number of social movements, from the Civil Rights movement to the anti-apartheid movement to the more recent movement against mass incarceration. Furthermore, she notes that African American youth in urban communities interact on a daily basis with a variety of representatives of the government including public schools, police, and social service agencies. She argues that the extent to which youth try to influence these organizations and control the influence of these representatives on their own lives, they are indeed engaged in political activity of a sort unlikely to be captured by most surveys of civic and political engagement (Cohen, 2004, 2006).

These studies of modern-day minority, immigrant and urban youth civic engagement share some common assumptions and raise interesting issues that shape our research questions here. Specifically, they suggest that youth who grow up in urban environments, as part of a group that has historically been or is currently excluded from public life, or in low-income communities may hold a more skeptical view of participation in the American political system. Furthermore, they raise questions about the effectiveness of civic education programs that stress an obligation to uphold “American ideals,” that focus on national issues without strong connections to issues about which these groups care, and that emphasize traditional modes of engagement and knowledge of the structures and functions of institutions. Finally, they encourage a broadened view of what it means to demonstrate mature civic development.

With this literature in mind, we address our broader questions about the role of social context in youth civic development by examining our data with 4 guiding questions. First, to what extent do youth see our current system of government as being truly democratic? Second, how interested in politics and government are they? How motivated are they to participate in civic and political life and in what ways? And finally, how do students perceive their experiences with civic education?

## **Findings**

### Beliefs about democracy: ideals vs. reality

Regardless of social context, students expressed appreciation for a democratic system of government and many of the associated ideals. At the same time, students differed by context in their belief that the current system of government approaches these ideals.

In the two schools with predominantly white middle/upper-middle class student bodies—Sequoia and Sunny Hill—the 20 young people in those focus groups nearly unanimously expressed faith in the basic fairness and utility of the system. Many of these students had critiques about specific policies (e.g. regarding the war in Iraq, gay marriage, funding for education) or current configurations of local and national administrations, but they expressed the belief that more participation by citizens will lead to better solutions for everyone.

The example below was typical of Sequoia students' responses to a question about their definition of democracy and the importance of democracy. They tended to emphasize the importance of rule by majority and expressed faith that the kinds of representatives and resulting policies that come from majority votes will be best for the country as a whole.

*Male Student #1:* ...I'd rather not have my entire life subjected to some maniac's whims. I don't know what one person's thinking. Okay, you've got one person, and one person can be extreme in either way, but if you've got fifty million people, it's going to be a balanced toward the center.

*Male Student #2:* Like what [he] said, the more people involved, the radicals are going to be way at the far edge. The majority's voice is going to be those who are more educated about the whole thing.

At Sunny Hill, where a number of students had taken a course with a social justice theme to fulfill one of their school requirements, the discussion was more nuanced. When responding to questions about the importance of working for social change, the students brought up and engaged in a discussion about a highly controversial issue—gay marriage.

*Male Student #1:* A lot of people do have problems with homosexuals. You can't just force that upon them. ...I think sometimes people say it's better for the country. But we're a democracy, right? We should stand up for the views of the majority. I think a lot of time we don't. The minority rules the country.

*Female Student #1:* I don't agree that the minority rules this country. I get what you're saying, but that's why we have elections. All the big issues, there are elections for.

*Male Student #1:* There are elections for them, but leading up to them, most people in campaigning don't put their foot down on the hard issues because a large chunk of the country is against them.

*Female Student #1:* Yeah, but before a bill is ever going to get passed, if gay marriage is ever going to be legal, it'll have to go through the whole process that, if the system is working, we'll have everyone's opinion. Is it working?

*Male Student #1:* I think so, mostly.

The students in this group articulately discussed a very controversial issue and expressed varied and conflicting personal opinions. There was also some critique of the ways in which the democratic process has currently handled the issue. In conversation, students grappled with the question of whether the majority decision is necessarily the best or most just decision. While they each came to differing conclusions about this, both students had faith that citizens could work through the government and the electoral process to arrive at a just solution in due time.

Students from the two schools representing communities with a clear Latino majority and relatively high rates of poverty viewed our current incarnation of democracy quite differently. When James HS students were asked, just as were the Sequoia HS students, to explain the meaning and importance of democracy to them, their responses suggest a belief in the ideal but greater skepticism about the reality. When asked to reflect on their definition of democracy, the responses below were typical of most students' responses:

*Male Student #1:* I don't know. It's supposed to be the people and stuff, that kind of rule, but not really. I mean to decide who takes care of the country for them, when they vote that's what they're kind of doing. But the decision is not always taken into consideration. I mean it's good that there is such a thing as democracy, but sometimes it's kind of abused. Like, they don't respect it, I think.

*Male Student #2:* I think about the government. The Democratic Party and the Republican Party, how the Republican Party always wins. And that just shows that-- because I think, but I'm not sure, that the Republican Party, they favor the wealthy people, right?

*Female Student #1:* Democracy is like the [middle] class.

*Male Student #2:* And so [when] they win, it says the people who have money are always dominant.

*Male Student #1:* That's why I don't think they take democracy seriously.

*Male Student #3:* It's not really a country for the people. Like, what do they call it, of the people.

Rather than invoking the construct of the majority, as did the Sequoia students in response to the same question about what democracy means, James students expressed the importance of representation of “the people” and a serious skepticism that, regardless of voter turnout, the government will achieve this representation. While students were not probed on what they mean by the “the people” their comments here and throughout the conversations implied that representation should include people like them. For students who arguably have at least some experiences and community concerns that are not shared or well-understood by the majority of American citizens, having a government “for the people” is unlikely, in their view, to be a simple matter of listening to the national majority.

Hartman students demonstrated a similar attitude of appreciation for democracy coupled with skepticism about the current system. When asked about the importance of working for social change, as in the example from Sunny Hill, Hartman students reject the system-directed electoral politics in favor of direct action.

*Female Voice:* I also agree ... that the best way is to go to try to make a change through politics, but I think that in this community we kind of see politicians in a negative way. So, sometimes it's hard to do it that way. So, we have to kind of like - - I don't know. I think the community itself, not so much through city politicians.

What's striking in this example is the explicit rejection of politicians as representing the community in any way. The student in this example went on to describe the ways in which the community could come together to provide services that are currently covered by the city and a belief that the community would be more supportive of its own actions than those of politicians. We will see in the next section that many of these students do not see their own participation in politics, one way that people assure that the government is representative of the community, as a desirable option.

Similarly, when asked to discuss the issues such as how they view democracy and the importance of challenging social inequalities, the Hartman students again raised questions about the utility of system-directed politics. In contrast to Sunny Hill students who debated *how* system-directed politics should be used to achieve more equality (either through majority

decision vs. government intervention), Hartman students spent more time discussing why system-directed politics do not achieve these ends.

*Female Voice:* I honestly don't think it's, not that we can't reach it, but I don't think we'll ever truly find it in a democracy. It's more like - - you like to believe that it's for the people, by the people, from the people. Will it ever be like that? We can get very close to it, but will we reach a perfect democracy, I don't think so. I mean just because we create systems, but the system will always have flaws.

One reason for some of these students' skepticism was the difficulty they noticed in identifying inequalities well enough to challenge them and make democracy work in a more equitable manner.

*Facilitator:* "I think it's important to challenge inequalities in society." What did you think when you saw that question?

*Female Voice #1:* It is, but it's difficult sometimes. Especially if you don't go out a lot from, like maybe Hartman, you don't realize there's inequalities. You think that's just the way it is. When you start going to other places, you're like, "Wow," there's all of these things that I didn't know about. But you didn't know about them because you don't know they exist. So, it kind of depends.

*Female Voice #2:* I don't think you could ever get rid of [inequality]. When I think of that question, I thought of Supreme Court cases. I thought of it as something very, very difficult because Supreme Court cases are very difficult to get up there. Like she said, we live in this little bubble and we think this is how life is and how it works, but it really doesn't. So we don't see that inequality until we step out.

These comments were among many where students expressed the belief that the government in their community was not responsive and that politics did not work well, yet at the same time expressed uncertainty as to whether the political system does work better in other contexts and whether that kind of benefit would ever be available to communities such as theirs.

In summary, the young people we spoke with from James and Hartman tended to show a similar appreciation for the idea of democracy but a different experience of the current workings of American democracy than did the students from Sunny Hill and Sequoia. Although they often described the logic of our democratic institutions and, at times, expressed belief in the practices of our current democracy (e.g. community solutions to social problems negotiated through politics, using the judicial system rather than force to challenge injustices, and the importance of

citizen participation in shaping the political world), they simultaneously (and to a far greater degree than students from Sunny Hill and Sequoia) expressed skepticism that the system treats all groups of people equally and that participation in the current system will achieve their ends.

These differences appear quite consistent with findings from the literature that low-income youth and youth of color are more likely to be involved in direct forms of civic activity than in system directed forms (see Cohen, 2006; Junn, 1999). Indeed, if experience has led these young people not to believe that the system will not be responsive, it is hardly surprising that they are less likely to anticipate engaging in system directed activity.

### ”It’s not made for me”—Views on Politics

Our prior analysis quantitative survey data on the interests and activities of youth across the state suggest that youth in California are strongly interested in helping others and report doing so through volunteer work, but they are much less interested in working with a group or through government to address community issues and are less likely to engage in activities that relate to formal politics (Kahne & Middaugh, 2005). This finding is consistent with the literature on youth civic engagement. Studies have demonstrated considerable and increasing youth volunteerism over the last 15 years, but very low and in some cases declining interest in system-directed political activities (Gibson & Levine, 2004).

Our focus group conversations with students revealed broad similarities in students’ views on civic and political participation regardless of context. In every group, they reported experiences with community service (either voluntary or through a school requirement) and were consistently positive about the importance of helping others and the community in general. A number of students in groups extended their hours after beginning their school-mandated community service<sup>13</sup>. Students’ reasons for enjoying community service tended to focus on the interpersonal rewards. As one student put it, it “makes you feel good inside”. A number of students made the point that it’s good to “think about other people”.

There also appeared to be few contextual differences in students’ interest in working on community issues through political or community-based organizations. Most students, regardless of context, reported little interest in these kinds of activities, though there were

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<sup>13</sup> The only exception to this trend was in one group of students who were enrolled in a number of AP classes and were assigned a project midway through the year that they perceived as an added time pressure rather than an opportunity to participate.

individual exceptions. For the most part, students seemed to agree that political participation is a matter of individual propensity and individual choice. And most students did not see themselves as the kind of people who would become involved politically. Indeed, the same students who talk about their volunteer activities and how important it is to improve their communities often viewed politics as a completely separate sphere of activity.

This disinterest in politics in part may be due to what appears to be a narrow definition of what it means to be politically engaged. When probed as to why they were not interested in politics, students' answers reflected a stereotyped view of the kinds of people who are involved in politics. For example, as one young man at Johnson HS explained, he didn't see himself having anything in common with the politicians he had seen in the media because of how they present themselves.

*Male Voice:* It's not made for me.

*Facilitator:* Why not?

*Male Voice:* I just don't think I can be a politician. I couldn't do that.

*Facilitator:* What about politicians makes you think you couldn't be one? What do you think they're like?

*Male Voice:* I don't know. I just, by looking at them, by the way they talk, they're all like preppy and -- I can't do that.

In other places, where students were less likely to be concerned with preppiness, the image of a politically active person was still quite narrow. For example, the Sequoia student quoted below noted the ambitious or more assertive nature of the kind of person she believes it takes to be politically engaged.

There are those who are made for being interested in political issues. They're just more driven people. Not necessarily driven, but more opinionated, maybe. And that's other people ... that's just not my personality. —*Sequoia Student*

Finally, at Hartman, a student notes the potential for conflict and ruled out her own participation based on this.

No. I mean you know I don't like really like it. So I don't want to work with something like that. ... There's a lot of people you know you have to like please or be fair or whatever. It's too much to think about. So that's like why I don't like it. —*Female Hartman Student*

What these students held in common was a belief that being involved with politics takes a very specific type of person. Their various descriptions of that type of person, though focusing on different aspects, call to mind the type of image most immediately available to most of us—the highly polished, articulate, ambitious, and tough talking elected officials we see on television. The many political activists, campaign workers, local advisors among others who work in politics and never make it to television are likely more diverse in appearance, manner, and background and often never seen. Imagining that one needs to look, act and talk in a particular way to participate in democratic decision-making is likely much more of a disincentive for participation than many educators give it credit for.

Given this over-riding disinterest in the political realm, in the next section we examine in more depth what does or does not motivate youth for civic and political engagement.

### Influences on motivation for civic and political engagement.

While the last section highlighted a widespread similarity in students' general disinterest in politics and government, some of the factors contributing to their disinterest appear to be highly contextualized.

In the more affluent communities where Sunny Hill and Sequoia were located, students commented on how few problems there were in their community and that there was little need to get involved in organized efforts to improve or change the community. In the following conversation, Sunny Hill students were asked to reflect on whether it was important to work with CBO's or local government to improve the community. The over-riding sentiment was that there was little need for that type of activity.

*Interviewer:* Are there any particular issues in Sunny Hill and in your community that you think need to be addressed?

*Female Student #2:* We're all spoiled.

*Female Student #1:* There're not a lot of big problems around here that are big, like homeless people. But there are a lot of other problems that are just like teenagers being stupid, dumb stuff. Vandalism.

*Male Student #1:* In Sunny Hill, we expect the community to do the stuff for us. You go to a park and there's going to be everything you need there. It's kind of interesting to see the other side, like in other communities people might have to clean up the garbage themselves.

At Sequoia HS, the conversations were similar.

*Male Student:* Maybe if we lived up in [next city over] or something. Like, [the next city over] is one big ghetto, basically. I wouldn't walk the streets there at night. I mean, you said that you're going to go visit schools in [major urban area]. I'm sure there's something there that they could do, because [that city] has a lot of poverty-stricken areas and I think that it's easier to be involved in community service when there's a big problem facing you.

*Female Student:* We kind of look the other way because it's not hard. You can look anywhere else, you know? There's very little poverty here.

In both schools, the students saw little need to work with local government or community-based organizations absent the kinds of problems people face in lower-income and urban communities. At Sunny Hill, which is situated in a more densely populated part of the state, the students were more aware of the way other communities functioned and of the role their well-funded local

government played in keeping the community clean and safe. At Sequoia, a more rural community that conceivably provides fewer opportunities to see how surrounding communities function, students' analyses relied on more vague ideas that their community had fewer problems and therefore less need for citizen involvement in local government. In neither community did students mention the kinds of problems that they might face in their own communities. Eating disorders, drug abuse, depression and anxiety are all significant problems with a presence in affluent communities (Levine, 2006). Clearly, such problems could be the focus of political or community-based initiatives.

In the more urban environments surrounding James and Hartman HS, identifying needs in the community was not a problem. Throughout our conversations, students expressed concerns over a number of issues including gang violence, drugs, immigrant rights, racial tensions and funding for special education. However, they perceived government as inattentive to or ineffective in responding to these problems.

At James HS, students noted that they would be more interested in following politics if the topics addressed by politicians more obviously related to what was going on in their own communities.

[Following s conversation about not being interested in the Presidential debates...]

*Male Voice:* ...as long as they say something about trying to help the people out, like actually in the bad communities, that's something I would actually participate in.

*Facilitator:* Right, that makes it more interesting?

*Male Voice:* That's probably the only thing I would actually pay attention to in the speeches. How they were going to help the people. I would participate and actually see it there, what they were doing. Because most of the time, they say they want to help, but I don't actually see it happening.

This young man's view of politics and politicians as being removed from the concerns that face the local communities echo Bedolla's (2005) findings that, regardless of generation, her Latino participants defined politics as something that happens at a National level and largely divorced from community concerns. Unlike Bedolla's participants, our study participants did not raise the issue of Latino identity, race, or ethnicity in their discussion of politics. It is possible that these concepts are implicit in students' statements because the communities in which they live and refer to as being ignored by politicians are primarily Latino. However, students in our study

were more likely to spontaneously raise issues of class, referring to the influence of the rich and the neglect of lower income communities. These observations do not refute the importance Bedolla (2005) assigns to ethnic identity in political socialization, but do reassert the importance of the local economic context, which both Bedolla and Sanchez-Jankowski (1986, 1992, 2002) identify as interacting with ethnic identity in the formation of political attitudes and development of broader political identities.

At Hartman, students were similarly skeptical that politicians could or would adequately serve the interests of the community. Here, a local scandal that had happened several years before led several students to doubt the potential of political engagement. As one student put it, her family “realized change is not going to happen through politics. So why should I waste my time on it?” This same student, noted in an earlier section, recommended community-based rather than politically based solutions to the communities problems. In this case, the turn to direct action over political action appears rational and to be related to direct experience rather than ignorance of how the system works.

#### Students’ experiences of formal civic education.

Given the wide-spread disinterest in politics across local contexts and the differences between contexts in how students’ view our government and their own motivations for political participation, it is also important to consider how students view the opportunities for civic and political engagement made available to them at school. Our initial round of qualitative data collection was intended to serve as an exploration of the relationship between social context and students’ conceptualizations of civic engagement. However, we did ask students to reflect along the way on such topics as where their attitudes about political and civic engagement came from, how they became engaged in the kinds of civic engagement in which they were currently active, and what kinds of school-based opportunities they believed would increase their interest in civic and political participation. The information we gained, while not a comprehensive examination of what opportunities are available at the school level, had implications for two particular recommended practices in the recent work on civic education—community service and debate and discussion about personally relevant current events.

As noted earlier in this chapter, in every group, students reported active participation in community service. At James, Johnson and Sunny Hill High Schools, community service was

either required or offered as an option to meet a graduation requirement. Sequoia and Hartman High Schools also had programs to facilitate community service involvement, though at Sequoia a district-wide community service requirement had recently been revoked. In every group, students reported involvement in some kind of community service. A number of students got involved in these kinds of activities through family, church or their community more generally and continued these activities as part of a school-requirement or on their own. For others, school requirements or school activities were the entry-point. In all cases, students viewed messages about civic engagement (“you have to get involved”) in a highly personalized way. For example, when asked what they believed it meant to “improve your community”, this James HS student drew on her experiences with school-based service activities:

*Female Student:* Also what's helped me is because I'm in “Leadership”....I have to do so much community service because Leadership also encourages you. And like, I mean, before, it was just okay, whatever, I didn't even know what's to help your community or stuff like that. But [here], around here, we went to the convalescent home for old people. We always go for Christmas. We go sing. You think singing to them is nothing, but they get so happy. It's like everything. It's like, wow, you know, they come and sing, they get happy, and I don't know. You just have to get involved.

At Sequoia High School, more than 500 miles to the North, students reflected on their service experiences in a similar manner. Students clearly connected these activities to a sense that it was their “civic duty” to be involved and help other people. However, they understood the call to fulfill their “civic duty” as being best fulfilled by individual activities or behaviors. Students’ visions of fulfilling their civic duty were very much linked to service, but somewhat divorced from politics or organized community involvement. Consistent with findings from other studies, community service and service-learning programs were interpreted by students as encouraging individual helping behavior and personal responsibility rather than participation in or work to change social systems (Barber, 1992; Boyte, 1991; Robinson, 2000; Walker, 2000, Westheimer& Kahne, 2004).

One school-based activity that students said did peak their interest in their civics or government classes were debates and discussions of current events. At Johnson High School, one group of students provided great detail when describing their disinterest in their government class and the fact that they did not talk about anything that mattered. This conversation continued until one student brought up debates that they’d had in class.

*Female Student #1:* We did have that one debate.

*Facilitator:* What was the debate?

*[Students identify pretending to be candidates and debating several controversial topics that were prominent in the most recent elections.]*

*Female Student #1* We got a little bit passionate.

*Facilitator:* Do you guys like having these discussions?

*[Several replies of yes]*

*Female Student #2:* I like debating. It's fun.

*Facilitator:* If you could have more of that in a class, would you want that?

*[Several replies of yes]*

*Female Student #2:* Yeah, more “now” and less “back then.” I don't care what the old ten-dollar bill looked like fifty years ago. I don't think that's relevant to our [lives].

*--Johnson HS Students*

These sentiments were echoed across contexts. These discussions often centered on recently prominent political and social justice issues, such as gay marriage and the legal status of abortion as well as civil rights issues such as women's pay and the glass ceiling. Youth repeatedly said things like, “I like debates better than just regular lesson plans.” They cited reasons such as getting to “speak your ideas” and “get more involved” in the discussions. However, as routinely positive as students were about the opportunity to be more actively involved in their class discussions, students did not appear to link such discussions to a notion of active citizenship. While they remembered that they liked doing debates, many students were foggy on the details of what it was they had debated.

*[Following a discussion where students explained that they preferred debates to other lessons and enjoyed having the chance to “speak out”]*

*Facilitator:* Were there issues that you guys were [discussing] when you did debates that people were particularly interested in?

*Male Student #1:* Well, when we do a debate, it's basically on something that's related to what the teacher was talking about.

*Male Student #2:* There was one talking about women's rights, what it was back then. Why did men get paid more than women? There was a debate about that.

*Facilitator:* Okay.

*Male Student #3:* Or, um, why women can't get the same position as other men. Like the glass ceiling, I think what it was. They'll never make it up there. There was a debate about that. There were some other debates, too, I just can't really remember.

*--James HS Students*

Considering students so strongly recommended these debate opportunities as interesting and engaging, one might ask how a classroom practice that so many students clearly enjoy and prefer can yield such faint memories of the related content. One potential answer is that, at least from

the students' point of view, the debates appear to stand as an anomaly or a break from what they normally are learning in the classroom. Students when praising the debates noted that they were more interesting than "regular" lessons and when asked if they have discussions about the causes of social problems, this Sequoia student's answer captures a similar disconnection between curricular content and the kinds of discussions that students' seem to find interesting.

Well, if we were, it would have to be when the teacher was done with his lesson, because we have to get done with his lessons before we can discuss anything else.

-- Male *Sequoia Student*

Those that prize civic education want students to have opportunities that integrate learning about how government works and about particular issues with opportunities to develop informed opinions and, at times, to act. To the extent that students recalled opportunities to discuss their opinions or to act, they described such opportunities as divorced from the course content. Such discussions were seen more as an engaging diversion than as part of course content. Moreover, the content of their government course was not seen as a means of developing informed opinion or of knowing how to successfully advance those values through governmental structures or other institutions.

Furthermore, active learning strategies alone may be insufficient to draw students' attention to course content. Most students, young or old, when presented with required course content will at some point ask (at least to themselves) the question, "Why do we need to know this?" Students in our sample expressed a desire to know more and be able to discuss more the issues currently facing their schools, communities and nation as a whole.

Yeah, I think that just giving us more information in school about things that are going on, especially in government. I know it's really important, especially for advanced placement classes where we have to take the AP test, that they learn the past information, but I think that even more would be way better if we actually had discussions about things that were going on, so at least, you know, the people who are now voting age would be informed about things that they're voting on locally and nationally.

-- Male *Sequoia HS Student*

The idea that students with a history of strong academic achievement do not leave their US government class feeling confident about their potential to be informed voters is noteworthy. While few would propose entirely replacing content on the history, structure, and function of the

US Government with analysis of current political issues, curriculum that helps students make connections between the past and the present as well as between the structure and function of government and the issues they care about and may need to vote on today does seem like a worthy goal.

In summary, to the extent that students could actively engage in conversations about issues currently debated by our politicians as well as those pressing in their own schools and communities, they believed they would more interested and engaged in their civics and government classes. However, connections between these kinds of discussions and experiences and the role that government plays in their lives and that they may one day play in the formal political system are not automatically made. Community service, debates about real issues, and opportunities to learn about current political issues in the nation and communities were held in students' minds as separate activities from the core content of the class. Students rarely spoke of them as providing illustrations of components of a larger curriculum that made sense to them.

### **Conclusions and Implications**

Any person who walks into schools in different communities can see that all educational settings are not the same. The abstract goals of parents and schools are often quite similar in nature—to support the development of young people so that they will be knowledgeable, self-sufficient, employable, and ultimately good parents, workers, friends and neighbors. However, the experiences people have, challenges they face, and supports and resources available for achieving these ends vary considerably. Knowing that different social contexts exist, however, is not the same as knowing whether and how these differences matter for education. The goal of this study was to explore whether and how social contextual differences matter for youth civic development and civic education. The rest of this section summarizes our initial insights about this relationship. Because this study is an early look at this issue with small groups of students, these conclusions and any resulting recommendations should be treated with caution.

*All the students in our study seemed to have an appreciation for democracy, but varied in the extent to which they believed the current system of government truly is democratic.* Students from lower-income, high minority environments were more likely to question whether the government represented the priorities of all groups of citizens. This skepticism lends support to

both Sanchez-Jankowski (1986) and Bedolla's (2005) assertions that both local context and ethnic group membership play a role in the political socialization of Latino youth. The youth in our study, as in Bedolla's study, did not see the government as representative of them or their needs and did not appear to believe that increased participation would necessarily lead to a more representative government. Furthermore, their motivations to engage were determined by whether or not it would actually help "the people" and seemed to focus on activities done within and by the community, though much of this was hypothetical.

*Students in very different contexts shared a relative disinterest in politics and political action.* Interestingly, in spite of differences in their view of the government, students across contexts were remarkably similar when it came to their relative disinterest in politics. Sanchez-Jankowski (2002), Bedolla (2005), and Junn (1999) all note that immigrant and minority youth and adults are likely to prefer direct action over system-oriented action, which this study reinforces. However, this phenomenon wasn't limited to those populations. In spite of considerable interest in issues related to education, senior care, medical care, and environmental causes, students in all contexts viewed politics as something for people who were not like them. Perhaps youth status serves as a temporary equalizer in this respect, but in our focus groups, nearly all students saw politics as an individual choice and one that they would be likely to skip over. They expressed a preference for engaging in service activities and more direct actions to improve their communities.

Beneath a widespread disinterest in politics, however, there appeared to be different kinds of reasoning among youth in different local contexts. In the communities that were affluent, suburban or rural, and majority non-Hispanic white, students were much more likely to note that there were few needs or local problems in their communities that would require an organized effort. In both the demographically diverse and in the lower-income, urban, majority Latino communities, students were more likely to note that they didn't see political solutions as a useful or accessible means for addressing the problems that concerned them. Youth from both contexts arrived at the same conclusion that political engagement was a matter of personal inclination rather than citizen responsibility, but these conclusions came from different experiences.

*Students experienced civic education in similar ways.* Given the wide-spread implementation of community service, it is not surprising that many youth have experienced this kind of activity as part of their curriculum or extra-curricular activities. Students in general were

positive about these experiences and the importance of helping others. However, as noted in the service-learning literature, these activities are often perceived as entirely divorced from politics or political engagement (Kahne & Westheimer, 2004). If schools are attempting to motivate students through community service to engage with government curricula in such a way that they understand it and their own potential as political actors, these connections are not being made in the minds of the students with whom we spoke.

Similarly, many students reported positive experiences with debates in their classrooms and expressed a desire to spend more time discussing social issues that face them in their communities and the country at large. These debates are often described as bright spots in class for even relatively disengaged students. However, students did not connect their enjoyment of these activities to any kind of interest in politics.

Promoting an integrated view of politics and society and course content in which students understand how policy decisions can have varying influences on their own lives, communities and the issues that they work on through volunteerism is one reasonable goal of government classes if schools are to play a role in preparing democratic citizens. Active learning strategies can play an important role in helping students connect to what is often seen as abstract or removed material in government classes. However, if the students in our focus groups are typical of (or perhaps more engaged than) many high school students, they need support in making these connections. Furthermore, making the relevant connections may require starting with and directly addressing the differing assumptions youth may currently hold about politics and democracy.

### *Implications for Civic Education*

As explained above, social context does appear to make a difference in youth civic development in some respects and not others. It is not our goal to create a prescription for how civic education should be implemented in one context vs. another. However, we do believe our findings may be worthy of consideration by educators who design and implement civic education curricula. Specifically:

*Exploring only the virtues of democratic institutions is problematic – for reasons that depend on context.* Approaches to civic education that stress only the virtues of the system appear likely fail to engage students like those at Hartman and James who were skeptical that their participation in the system would increase government responsiveness to the needs of their communities. In addition, exploration of critiques is also clearly central to supporting the intellectual development and the critical insights of students who, like those at Sunny Hill and Sequoia, might benefit from considering critiques of the ways institutions operate in this democracy. As the old saying goes, “Education should comfort the troubled and trouble the comfortable.”

*Forging stronger connections between government curriculum and civic and political engagement appears very important.* Our prior research examining civic education interventions as well as research by many others suggest that use of active learning strategies (such as simulations of civic processes, exposure to civic role models, and community service) and debates and discussions of personally relevant current events, if explicitly connected to politics, is related to increased interest in politics (see Kahne, Chi, and Middaugh, in press; Kahne and Westheimer, 2003; see Gibson and Levine, 2004 for a review). Our findings regarding students’ interpretations of their own community service and of their classroom discussions of social issues as being very separate from their government curricula suggest that considerable support is needed to help students make these connections.

*Attending to contextual differences may help build commitments to civic engagement.* If youth see politics as irrelevant to the pressing social issues in their communities, it may be useful to start with community issues and draw connections to the many ways in which policy and government relate to these issues. If youth see government as relatively unimportant because their communities have few pressing issues, it may be necessary to begin with national issues and see how they play out in their communities or to encourage youth to look more deeply into their own communities where problems (e.g. race, domestic violence, depression, etc.) may be less publicized. There is no one best curriculum – but fostering commitments likely requires attention to the ways students in different contexts do and do not connect to particular kinds of issues. That said, educators need not stop with those issues that students already recognize as

important. Rather, they can start with where kids are and try to help them broaden to include state, national, and local issues.

Indeed, there is much we have to learn about the influence local contexts on youth civic development and how to account for differences in civic education. What is clear, at this point, is the need for policy makers, educators, and practitioners to think carefully about context. To assume that on a given curriculum will be received similarly in a schools like Sunny Hill and Hartman fails to recognize the diversity of experience and priorities that can make democracy so challenging. If our goal is to equitably and effectively educate young citizens to be capable of sustaining and deepening democracy, understanding these dynamics is critical.

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