Anticipated Political Engagement among Adolescents in Australia, England, Norway and the United States

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In the late 1980s and early 1990s massive changes toward democratization took place across the world, and leaders in many countries began looking for guidance about what this meant for their youth and for the systems that were educating them. Little evidence from the social sciences was available to guide this process, as the study of political socialization had declined from a high point in the mid-1970s (Cook, 1985), with little research taking place during the decade and a half after 1980.

The International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA), a comparative education association of nearly 60 member countries with headquarters in Amsterdam, typically initiates the exploration of topics for its massive surveys of student outcomes when several of its member countries suggest the need for information in a given area. In 1993 member countries suggested that IEA explore a Civic Education Study. Some of these countries had recently experienced massive political changes as the Communist order fell, and in other countries there was considerable dismay about declines in conventional political participation among young people. Country representatives proposed going beyond the study that IEA conducted 20 years before in Western European countries and the United States (Torney, Oppenheim, and Farnen, 1975) to develop a test and survey that could provide a current, comparative perspective on the ways in which young people are prepared to undertake their role as citizens in democracies. This was not to be limited to testing outcomes of the formal curriculum in any particular subject (especially since no course entitled ‘civic education’ was offered in most of the interested countries). The focus was to be on the school’s civic-related education in the context of family and community. The countries’ representatives...
were interested in how programs or policies relating to civic education were linked to knowledge, behaviour, and attitudes across democratic countries.

The IEA Civic Education Study was designed in two phases, one mostly qualitative and the other mostly quantitative. In the first phase (concentrated in 1994–1996) teams of researchers in each country outlined the expectations which experts had for adolescents in civic-related subjects. The major products of Phase 1 were a book of case studies concerning the expectations for learning about civic-related subjects by 14-year-olds within each participating nation (Torney-Purta, Schwille, and Amadeo, 1999) and a book looking at paradoxes in civic education as illustrated in the case studies (Steiner-Khamsi, Torney-Purta, and Schwille, 2002).

During this phase relevant theories were explored. One theory was that of Janoski (1998), who looked at citizenship and civil society, providing a sociological perspective. He differentiated between four domains in which participation might take place: the state sphere (e.g., executive, judicial and legislative), the public sphere (e.g., voluntary associations and privately owned media), the market sphere (e.g., business firms and unions) and the private sphere (e.g., family and relations of love and affection). Some issues of interest lie between sectors, such as the political parties between state and public spheres.

Janoski also explored ways of locating civil society within these domains. He argued that strong civil societies must have active debate and discussion within associations and organizations in the public sphere. Where civil society is weak, there is likely to be domination by the state or the market sphere. Others have noted that the public sphere has taken on new importance as organizations oriented to issues such as the environment or economic and social justice have increased in number. It is no longer true, as was assumed in early political socialization research, that the state sphere is of supreme importance. With new attention drawn to civil society, coupled with the prevalence of social movements and issue-oriented groups concerned with the environment or poverty that welcome youth participation, it is critical to consider the public sphere of activity (and perhaps parts of the private and the market sphere). Action in these spheres may also motivate a citizen to accept the responsibility to vote or exercise vigilance regarding the actions of elected officials because those acts have become more meaningful.

The situated cognition approach, which emphasizes the supports and expectations within the everyday lives of adolescents and groups