

Practice Makes Participants: How Communication Skills Acquired in School Affect Political Engagement

Democracy requires that all people have the opportunity to advocate for their own interests and participate in collective decisions. Despite this ideal, inequality persists. Scholarly attention across disciplines has increasingly focused on American inequality: economic, educational, and political. But the relationships between these forms of inequality are only beginning to be understood. To date, political scientists have paid little attention to the democratic consequences of educational inequality. In this dissertation, I place the vast literatures on educational and political inequality into dialogue. I show that educational inequality matters for politics, and I demonstrate precisely how achievement and opportunity gaps in school translate into inequality in civic engagement and participation.

Using original field experimental data collected in middle schools and colleges, as well as quasi-experimental analysis of nationally representative observational data from numerous sources (NELS 1988; NHES 1999; NAEP), I show how educational inequality generates the patterns we observe in political participation: schooling provides young people with opportunities to practice and develop general, but politically valuable, verbal communication skills. These reading, writing, and speaking skills make youth more confident about their ability to successfully engage in related forms of collective action. This practice increases political efficacy about and motivation to engage in related civic activities; it also makes acquiring information about politics and political discussion easier, lowering the cost of behaviors like voting. When students have greater opportunity to practice communication, and when they develop higher levels of verbal skills through schooling, they are more engaged in politics and more likely to participate as adults. Thus, young people receive “voice lessons” in school – chances to develop their ability and motivation to speak up as adult citizens. Opportunity to practice and develop verbal communication skill is vastly unequal in American schools, meaning that exposure to the essential causal mechanism connecting education to engagement is different for children in different social groups.

Improving civic education and closing achievement gaps in core subjects like reading are often viewed as competing educational goals. My dissertation challenges this paradigm by bringing to light the political consequences of educational inequality across the curriculum. General communication skills, which can be practiced in any subject, have a role in determining whether students become active citizens. And, students in disadvantaged social groups, already underrepresented in the political process, get fewer opportunities to develop their voice in school by practicing these skills. As a result, these students are even less likely to participate as adults.

This insight has direct implications for education policy and practice. If education is to remediate rather than perpetuate political inequality, young people in disadvantaged groups need greater opportunity to actively practice communication in school. In the final chapter of this dissertation, I examine the school-level predictors of opportunities to practice politically valuable communication skills. Based on this analysis, I recommend that policy-makers begin by enhancing relevant teacher training and professional development, especially in high-poverty schools. Finally, because school poverty is among the strongest predictors of communication learning opportunity, I argue that

policy initiatives designed to decrease the concentration of high-poverty students in schools be even more powerful interventions for enhancing citizenship.