Context Matters: An Examination of Differences in Civic Engagement in Economically and ethnically Diverse Youth
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Purpose of the Study
According to some researchers (e.g., Putnam, 2001), civic engagement is dropping in the United States, particularly among youth. To investigate the best means for fostering civic engagement, studies have typically examined contexts individually (i.e., families, school, and communities) (Albanesi, Cigocnani, & Zani, 2007; Atkins & Hart, 2003; Flanagan, Bowes, Jonsson, Csapo, & Sheblanova, 1998; McIntosh, Hart, & Youniss, 2007). Grounded in the theory that examining multiple contexts simultaneously provides meaningful insight into both the differences between those contexts and the interplay between them, this study examines the contexts simultaneously in order to foster the best means for civic engagement.

Methods
- N = 190, youth ages 14-19
- Sex: 93 girls, 93 boys
- Ethnicity: 78 African-American, 61 Latino, and 51 "Other" youth
- Youth all attended the same Catholic high school, with students from different communities and economically and ethnically diverse families, in New York City.
- 50-minute surveys were conducted during school, with parent and student consent.

Measures included demographics, family, school, and community context variables, as well as civic engagement variables. Civic engagement was measured as importance of voting and Social Cause Participation (volunteering; contributions of time, money, or goods to charities).

Findings
- Hierarchical linear regression found marginal and significant differences in civic engagement by gender and ethnicity, as well as family and school factors. Surprisingly, significant differences by community factors were not found.
- Being Black and female trend towards significance for how important an adolescent thinks it is to vote.
- Having family discussions about current events is significantly related to how important an adolescent thinks it is to vote. Also, family teaching and modeling of compassion towards significance for social cause participation.
- Having confidence in the efficacy of student engagement at school is significantly related to social cause participation.

Conclusions
- Optimal fostering engaged citizenship in youth requires exposure, knowledge development, and opportunities for discussion across multiple contexts, but creating such opportunities is challenging for all youth (Torney-Purta, 2002), and particularly for youth living in high-poverty, urban neighborhoods—where the development of civic-mindedness is most critical (Atkins & Hart, 2003). This study provides insight into the contexts, and the specific supports within them, that foster student engagement of civic engagement behaviors for this ethnically and socio-economically diverse group of NYC adolescents.

Particularly helpful are the findings that family discussions and modeling, as well as supported student engagement, are important to the development of civic engagement. It was surprising, however, to learn that community support was not predictive of greater civic engagement. While family and school are more proximal contexts for students, these findings raise questions for further research regarding community, namely whether community is simply too far removed from students’ daily experiences to have direct predictive effects, or whether community can be measured in ways that capture its more relevant aspects for students. Generalizability from study findings may be limited because of its recruitment from a single school, and the merging of multiple ethnic groups into the single overarching category of “Other.”

Citations
Torney-Purta, J. (2002). The school’s role in developing civic engagement: A study of adolescents in twenty-eight countries. Applied Developmental Science, 6(4), 203-