



USAID

# LIBERIA CIVIC EDUCATION EVIDENCE REVIEW

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## **ACRONYMS**

DI Democracy International

EDA Elections and Democracy Activity

USAID United States Agency for International Development

## I. INTRODUCTION: FOCUS OF THE REVIEW

This targeted evidence review of school-based civic education among primary-school children in emerging democracies aims to inform the impact evaluation of USAID’s Elections and Democracy Activity (EDA). EDA is a civic education program in Liberian primary schools to foster inclusive democratization implemented by Democracy International (DI) and UMOVEMENT, a local subgrantee. Research on the determinants of democratic consolidation has long argued that citizens with strong democratic values are needed to build and sustain a democracy (Almond and Verba 1963, Dewey 1916; Lipset 1959). Civic education has been specifically developed and delivered with this goal in mind, aiming to develop in students the civic knowledge, skills, attitudes, and behaviors that will allow them to actively engage in a democratic society (Carnegie Corporation of New York & CIRCLE, 2003; Torney-Purta et al., 2011). In post-conflict societies, civic education is often also expected to foster peace, stability, and social cohesion by building a collective civic identity (Levine & Bishai, 2010; Quaynor, 2012). While these aspired outcomes are relatively consistent across the civic education literature, program design and demands on implementers differ substantially. Civic education can be delivered through (1) in-class, lecture-based instruction, incorporated into the social studies curriculum or as a stand-alone topic; (2) participatory learning, both in and out of class, that can include such activities as role-playing a congressional hearing, taking part in a mock trial, or serving as a student poll worker; (3) service learning such as having students research and take action on a social issue; and (4) extra-curricular activities such as volunteering or participating in school governance (Campbell, 2019). With USAID’s EDA intervention in mind, this review limits its focus to civic education programs that include significant in-class instruction and lecture-style and/or participatory teaching. Even among these programs, there is important diversity.

This review primarily focuses on emerging democracies, but due to the limited evidence stemming from these settings, we also consider what may be learned from programs in established Western democracies. Given the unique realities of emerging democracies, all findings may not be generalizable to the Liberian context. The term “emerging democracy” generally denotes a democratic regime established since the 1960s or 1970s in which democracy is not yet fully consolidated (Huntington, 1991; Mainwaring & Bizzarro, 2019; Mason, 2009). Many of these regimes, including Liberia, continue to face setbacks to democratic consolidation, including institutional dysfunction, corruption, weak rule of law, marginalization of minorities, and limitations on the exercise of basic democratic rights (Freedom House, 2021; Mainwaring & Bizzarro, 2019). Teachers and students may also conceptualize democracy and citizenship in ways distinct from Western definitions (Hahn, 2010, Mason, 2009). Many are also post-conflict contexts that face additional constraints stemming from ethnic and social divisions. The contextual realities of emerging post-conflict democracies greatly impact the specific goals, design, and implementation of civic education programs.

Finally, the review concentrates on studies relevant for primary school students in Liberia. Notably, 47% of primary school students are over-age (World Bank, 2017); as of 2016, the average age of a first grader was nine and the average age of a sixth grader was 13. There were more 16-year-olds in grade six than any other age cohort (MoE, 2016), so studies of secondary school may also be relevant.

This review will first discuss the pathways through which civic education is expected to impact democratic outcomes, followed by the evidence from the literature on the effectiveness of in-class civic education programs. Lastly, it will offer recommendations to USAID and DI on the proposed civic education intervention.

## 2. CIVIC EDUCATION THEORY OF CHANGE

**How the intervention might work:** Diversity across programs means that there is no single theory of change, although civic instruction is consistently expected to impact civic **knowledge, skills, attitudes, and behaviors** (Donbavand, 2021). These outcomes are measured in varied ways. Civic knowledge is generally measured as factual understanding of civics material, but curricula vary across programs. Civic skills can include an increased ability to collaborate, communicate, and think critically, or can refer to more technical skills such as being able to read a ballot. The targeted civic attitudes can encompass feelings of tolerance, trust in government institutions, efficacy, belief in the political rights of minorities, and a sense of national identity. Civic behaviors similarly vary, including political engagement, such as voting, signing a petition, or contacting a representative, and broader civic engagement, such as volunteering in your community or participating in civil society.

Despite the diverse programs and ways civic outcomes are operationalized, some common pathways emerge across programs. In most descriptions, knowledge and/or skills develop first. Simple exposure to civic curricula through traditional teaching methods is expected to improve political knowledge (Finkel & Ernst, 2005), while more interactive and participatory methods are expected to improve civic skills (Finkel & Ernst, 2005; Soule, 2002). Attitudes and behaviors are typically theorized to follow from knowledge and skills, although the pathways are murkier. Greater civic knowledge may directly affect attitudes, encouraging democratic values and norms (Galston, 2004; Youniss, 2011). Gaining factual knowledge about democratic processes, learning civic skills that allow students to better engage in their communities, and developing attitudes that are supportive of democracy are expected to increase interest in political and social issues and to improve students' political efficacy, thus encouraging civic engagement behaviors (Finkel & Ernst, 2005; Niemi & Junn, 1998; Owen, 2015; Pasek et al., 2008). Generally, in education interventions, “head first” approaches aim to change knowledge and attitudes in order to change behaviors, whereas “feet first” approaches aim to change behaviors and then change attitudes (McCauley 2002). Another pathway includes interventions that endeavor to change people's perceptions of norms in order to encourage an individual to conform to those norms through their attitudes and behavior (Sonnenfeld et al. 2020; Tankard & Paluck, 2016).

**Cautions:** When theories of change are mentioned for civic education, the aspired outcomes follow a rough order (knowledge and/or skills, then attitudes and/or behaviors) and are typically thought to work together virtuously. However, attitudes or behaviors need not come after knowledge or skills; students may simply adopt democratic norms and values by being socialized in a democratic classroom and school climate (Finkel & Ernst, 2005; Galais, 2018; Torney-Purta et al., 2011). As we discuss in the next section, there are also a host of assumptions that underlie the actualization of these theories of change (high-quality teaching, regular attendance of teachers and students, an open classroom climate, etc.), which are unfortunately not common in many developing democracies. The content of the program matters too; sometimes history or social studies may contribute to conflict between groups (King 2014). In conflict-affected contexts especially, the effects from interventions to promote social change may be incremental and slow, work in non-linear ways, and invoke backlash (Sonnenfeld et al. 2020). Finally, some expected behavioral changes may be long-term effects of programming, prolonging the theory of change.

**Civic Education for Primary- Aged Children:** An important finding from research on political socialization is that many democratic norms, values, and understandings of citizenship may form quite early in life—as early as first grade—and be hard to shift as students age (Keating et al., 2010; Sears et al., 1979; Van Deth et al., 2011). Corroborating this finding, evaluations of adult civic education programs in

developing democracies have concluded that democratic values, such as tolerance and trust, are difficult to shift in adulthood (Finkel, 2014). For civic education to effectively influence attitudes, it may thus be important that instruction begin at a young age, and research suggests civic learning can successfully occur in primary school. Through interviews, focus groups, and activities with primary students in inner-city schools in the United Kingdom, Claire (2001) found that children are very willing and capable of engaging in discussions about democracy and politics, even on controversial topics, and are able to understand and learn democratic values and skills such as engaging in deliberative dialogue about the costs and benefits of various policies.

### 3. IN-CLASS CIVIC EDUCATION EVIDENCE FROM PRIMARY AND SECONDARY SCHOOLS

Has civic education effectively fostered students' civic outcomes? A number of large-scale survey-based studies across established and emerging democracies have found strong links between the level of civic education students receive and students' civic knowledge, skills, attitudes, and behaviors (Bachner, 2010; Callahan et al., 2010; Niemi & Junn, 1998; Keating et al., 2010; Saha, 2000; Schulz et al., 2010; Torney-Purta et al., 2001)<sup>1</sup>. While these prominent studies are often cited as indicative of civic education's effectiveness, their observational design limits our ability to draw conclusions on its causal effects. Nonetheless, a growing evidence base arising from program evaluations, mostly quasi-experimental in nature, bolsters evidence that civic education can improve knowledge. However, the evidence for its ability to impact skills, attitudes, and behaviors is weaker.

**Civic Education Increases Knowledge:** Quasi-experimental evaluations of civic education programs in the United States have consistently found that civic instruction improves students' factual knowledge (McDevitt and Kioussis, 2004; Owen, 2015; Pasek et al., 2008). These programs, however, often include elements of service learning and out-of-class experiential methods that may be uncommon in low-income countries. In a rare randomized experiment evaluating a solely classroom-based U.S. civics curriculum, focused on constitutional rights and civil liberties, Green et al. (2011) also found that treated students had significantly more political knowledge.

Evidence of the impacts of civic education solely focusing on primary-school children is rare, but a recent, yet unpublished, study offers promising results. Preliminary findings from a randomized intervention with primary school students in Canada show that civics instruction in class, accompanied by a card game that students play with parents at home, successfully increased students' and parents' civic knowledge, and parents' likelihood to discuss political issues with their children (Maheo, 2018 as cited in Campbell, 2019). While most studies focus on secondary school students, this is promising evidence of pre-adolescent civic learning.

Limited evidence from emerging democracies and post-conflict countries also suggest similar increases in students' knowledge. Through an extensive household survey and interviews with educators, government officials, university students, and voters in Mali, Bleck (2015) found that all forms of education, including public, private, secular, and religious, are linked to increases in political knowledge for all students, including primary students. Finkel & Ernst (2005) studied the effect of civic education in South Africa delivered through the regular secondary curriculum as well as through a specific USAID-sponsored program, "Democracy for All." When compared to nonrandom control groups that did not receive any

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<sup>1</sup> The ICCS survey conducted by International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (Schulz et al., 2010) has been leveraged by multiple studies focused on civic outcomes in Latin America in particular (see Caro & Schulz, 2012; Castillo et al., 2014; Castillo et al., 2015; Treviño et al., 2017), though there are few rigorous program evaluations to bolster the evidence base on program effectiveness (Bramwell, 2020).

formal civic instruction, the authors found that civic education had significant effects on political knowledge.

**Less Clear Impact on Civic Skills, Attitudes, and Behaviors:** A few studies have drawn conflicting results regarding civic education's ability to foster civic skills in emerging democracies. Soule (2002) studied seventh- and eighth- grade participants of the "CIVITAS Project Citizen" in Bosnia and Herzegovina, which encouraged students to research a public policy problem in their communities and propose a solution. Using a quasi-experimental design with matching control groups, she found students developed better research skills. On the other hand, Finkel & Ernst (2005) found civic education in South Africa did not improve students' ability to communicate, cooperate, solve problems, or lead a team.

The evidence on attitudinal change is similarly inconsistent. Slomczynski and Shabad (1998) studied a civic education program that exposed primary school students to pro-democratic values using participatory teaching methods in post-communist Poland. They found that treated students were less likely to hold strongly anti-democratic views when compared to a nonrandom control group. On the other hand, using quasi-experimental approaches, Soule (2002) found no effect on students' tolerance or interest in politics in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Finkel & Ernst (2005) found no effect on tolerance, civic duty, and institutional trust in South Africa. A randomized evaluation of a civic education program in Georgia, which combined traditional in-class civic curricula with NGO-supported service-learning projects, also found the intervention did not impact secondary students' civic, democratic, or pro-social attitudes (NORC, 2019).

Findings regarding civic education's impact on behavior are more varied and stem largely from the United States. Reviews of several programs that include in-class instruction on democratic institutions, processes, and values have found that such programs promote political engagement later in life, measured as increased likelihood to vote, volunteer for a political candidate, participate in a march or protest, or contact a representative (Center for Civic Education, 2005; Gill et al., 2018; Owen, 2015). However, not all programs show positive results in terms of behavior changes. A review of nine studies of various civics curricula concludes that there is little evidence that civic education can impact voting behavior, though there is some evidence that it improves political expression, such as signing petitions or volunteering for a political cause (Manning & Edwards, 2014). The aforementioned evaluation of civic education in Georgia also found no evidence the program had enhanced future political participation (NORC, 2019). While the program did find positive impacts on students' current civic engagement, these results may have been capturing student participation in the program's service-learning activities.

These studies of in-class civic education's impact on skills, attitudes, and behavior are based on varied program curricula and approaches and are mostly nonexperimental. While the current evidence beyond increases in knowledge is not encouraging, more research is needed to better understand the impact of civic education in low- income emerging democracies and post-conflict settings.

**Pedagogy Matters:** Numerous studies from established and emerging democracies confirm that learning civics in a climate that encourages students to openly express themselves and promotes discussions on controversial topics enhances the positive effects of civic education, particularly on skills, attitudes, and behaviors, where current research sees weak effects (Campbell, 2008; Claire, 2004; Finkel & Ernst, 2005; Hahn, 1998; Hoskins et al., 2021; Niemi & Junn, 1998; Torney-Purta, et al, 2001). Experimental evidence from similar educational interventions that do not explicitly study civic education, but rather aim to influence student political attitudes and behaviors, have indeed shown that classroom discussion of controversial topics can shape attitudes and behaviors related to gender equality, tolerance, social



distance, and intergroup relations (Dhar et al., 2020; Neins et. al., 2013). Research also points to the benefits of such participatory methods as role-playing and dramatizations in improving all targeted civic education outcomes (Hoskins et al., 2021; Soule, 2002) and especially attitudes (Finkel & Ernst, 2005). Indeed, Finkel and Ernst (2005) find that role-playing methods such as mock trials, simulated elections, and playing games that illustrate democracy or human rights issues, significantly improved students' civic skills and attitudes supportive of political participation, tolerance and institutional trust. They find that these participatory methods have a stronger effect on civic outcomes than mere exposure to civic curriculum and are also more effective than open classroom discussion alone (Finkel & Ernst, 2005). A few scholars stress that civic education is most effective when delivered consistently (Finkel & Ernst, 2005; Keating et al., 2010) and by teachers whom students consider to be competent, credible, likeable, and interesting (Finkel & Ernst, 2005). The classroom approaches most linked to success may unfortunately not be common in many emerging democracies with authoritarian pasts (Levine & Bishai, 2010). Indeed, instruction in low-income countries generally emphasizes lectures and rote memorization, approaches which have consistently produced poor outcomes, even on reading and math (Pritchett, 2013).<sup>2</sup>

**Programs in Post-Conflict Settings Face Unique Challenges:** Students and teachers in societies with a history of violent conflict may avoid interethnic contact, avoid discussing controversial topics, have pre-existing mistrust for politics and government, and hold multiple civic identities (Levine & Bishai, 2010; Mason, 2009; Quaynor, 2012). For example, Russell (2018) finds that despite Rwanda's civic-education national curriculum including human rights discourses, teachers emphasize more traditional notions of citizenship promoting loyalty to the state, and avoid discussions around ethnic diversity, discrimination, multiculturalism, and other controversial topics. Also based on Rwandan experience, Freedman et al. (2018) argue that successful implementation depends on Ministry of Education buy in and support for teachers in their delivery of new curriculum and pedagogical approaches. Civic education in post-conflict settings may have to tackle such competing aims of creating a unified civic identity while accommodating ethnic identities and promoting respect for diversity (Quaynor, 2012; Russell, 2018).

**Programs May Have Differential Effects:** Studies have also found differential impacts of civic education based on socio-economic status, family background, gender, and minority status. The influence of these factors is, however, inconsistent. While a few studies find that students from lower socio-economic backgrounds, students whose parents have less education, and students from minority and immigrant groups tend to exhibit lower civic outcomes across all dimensions (Galais, 2018; Levinson, 2010; Niemi & Junn, 2005; Soule, 2002), other evidence indicates civic education may disproportionately positively impact lower-income and minority groups (Hoskins et al., 2021; Langton & Jennings, 1968; Neundorf et al., 2016). Studies have also found the impact of civic education may vary by gender, with girls often exhibiting lower civic knowledge, skills, and engagement in some contexts (Bleck, 2015; Soule, 2002; Torney-Purta et. al. 2001) though some studies find girls' civic outcomes were stronger (NORC, 2019). Given the prevalence of overage students in primary school in emerging democracies and post-conflict contexts, same-grade curricula may also be received differently according to students' ages.

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<sup>2</sup> Recent research has also studied online approaches to civic education with secondary students in the US (see for example Kahne et al., 2016; McGrew et al., 2018; Owen, 2014). A recent experimental study provides promising evidence for the potential of online approaches in emerging democracies, though the focus is on adult populations (Finkel et al., 2021). The possible implementation and impact of online learning with primary students in emerging democracies is yet largely unexplored, in part due to the lower online engagement of these groups.

The varied approaches, curricula, contexts, and outcome measures of predominant research, a dearth of experimental evidence from emerging democracies and post-conflict contexts, and particularly a lack of studies of primary-school students, limit the lessons about “what works” to improve civic outcomes that are directly applicable to USAID’s and DI’s civic education work with primary school students in Liberia. The findings of an evaluation of the Liberian intervention could help address significant gaps in knowledge.

Nonetheless, some lessons from the literature may help improve effectiveness, including:

1. Civic instruction should be consistently delivered, starting at a young age.
2. Teachers implementing civic education should be trained in, and use, participatory methods and the open discussion of controversial issues, and should be discouraged from employing a lecture-style approach.
3. The program should be sensitive to contextual realities such as potential preexisting mistrust of government and coexisting national and ethnic identities.
4. Implementers should be mindful of possible differential effects, due to age, gender, and ethnic background, and consider strategies to mitigate these differences.
5. Input and support from the Ministry of Education is essential for successful implementation.

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Campbell, D. E. (2019). What social scientists have learned about civic education: A review of the literature. *Peabody Journal of Education*, 94(1), 32-47.

David Campbell, professor of political science from the University of Notre Dame, reviews the existing literature on civic education stemming mostly from political science, while also drawing on fields such as psychology, economics, and sociology. The author highlights four aspects of schooling that have been shown to impact civic outcomes: classroom instruction, extracurricular activities, service learning, and school ethos. Most relevant to USAID’s and DI’s Liberia intervention is Campbell’s review of the research on classroom instruction, finding evidence that well-designed civic education can have long-lasting effects on student civic outcomes, especially through an open classroom climate. Campbell ultimately recommends that research on civic instruction emphasize randomized experiments to produce more evidence of causal mechanisms. While the article focuses on research in Western, liberal democracies, general lessons may be relevant to emerging democracies as well.

Finkel, S. E., & Ernst, H. R. (2005). Civic education in post-apartheid South Africa: Alternative paths to the development of political knowledge and democratic values. *Political Psychology*, 26(3), 333-364.

Steven Finkel, professor of political science at the University of Pittsburgh, and Howard Ernst, professor of political science at the United States Naval Academy, provide a rare rigorous evaluation of civic education in the context of emerging democracies. The authors examine the impact of civic education on South African secondary students as compared to a nonrandom comparison group. They measure the program’s impact on political knowledge, civic duty, tolerance, institutional trust, civic skills, and approval of legal forms of political participation, and find that civic education instruction improved levels of civic knowledge. They detect little impact

on civic skills and attitudes. They do find, however, that when teachers employ participatory teaching methods in an open classroom climate and when they are perceived by students as being credible and knowledgeable, civic education does improve democratic civic values and skills. While in the absence of random assignment we cannot be certain the causal effect was accurately isolated, this study provides convincing evidence of the importance of teaching methods and quality.

Green, D. P., Aronow, P. M., Bergan, D. E., Greene, P., Paris, C., & Weinberger, B. I. (2011). Does knowledge of constitutional principles increase support for civil liberties? Results from a randomized field experiment. *The Journal of Politics*, 73(2), 463-476.

Donald P. Green, professor of political science at Columbia University (Yale University at the time of writing), with a team from Yale University and Michigan State University, present the only known randomized evaluation of a stand-alone, solely classroom-based civics curriculum. More than 1,000 students in 59 U.S. high school classrooms were randomly assigned to receive a civics curriculum that stressed constitutional principles related to civil liberties, while control groups were not exposed to this specific curriculum. They find that exposure to civic education has a significant effect on knowledge of civil liberties, though this knowledge dissipated after two years. They do not find that treated students increase their support of civil liberties, such as free speech, dissent, or due process, questioning whether there is indeed a causal pathway between civic knowledge and civic attitudes. While the research was undertaken in the United States, the findings and methodological approach of the evaluation can be instructive for USAID's and DI's proposed Liberian evaluation.

Mason, T. C. (2009). Civic education in emerging democracies. *Center of Civic Education*.

Professor Terrence Mason of the Indiana University School of Education discusses different models and approaches of civic education efforts in emerging democracies and reviews key issues that civic education implementors may face when working in emerging democracies. The author draws on the literature as well as his own experience working in civic education in developing countries. He gives a few examples of civic education programs being implemented in emerging democracies, developed in the United States, which combine in-class instruction and participatory methods. Mason contends that little empirical research exists on the effectiveness of such programs in emerging democracies. He nevertheless cites some lessons from current work, especially the importance of culture and context. He stresses that teachers and students from emerging democracies may have different conceptualizations of democracy, may hold simultaneous cultural, ethnic, and national identities, and may hold cultural values and norms that are at odds with those held by program implementers from Western countries. Mason's discussion is particularly useful when considering how programs could be more sensitive to the specific contexts where they are being delivered.

Quaynor, L. J. (2012). Citizenship education in post-conflict contexts: A review of the literature. *Education, Citizenship and Social Justice*, 7(1), 33-57.

Laura Quaynor, assistant professor in the Doctor of Education (Ed.D.) program at Johns Hopkins University, reviews the literature on civic education, referred to as citizenship education in the review, in post-conflict societies. She summarizes 33 studies from 18 post-conflict countries,

mostly curricular analyses, quantitative surveys, and ethnographic studies. While the research presented is largely qualitative and observational, it may still offer useful take-aways for civic education programs in post-conflict settings. She finds some common trends among the studies that point to the unique challenges civic education programs may face in these settings. These challenges include the tendency to avoid controversial issues in the classroom, tensions between ethnic and national identities, high levels of distrust of political parties, and preferences for authoritarianism held by teachers and students.

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