

**A Descriptive Review
of Research
on Law-Related Education**



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Overview and Methodology

This descriptive review of research relating to LRE is organized into three parts. The first contains research studies devoted to the impact or effects of law-related education on students in school settings. The second section contains descriptions of studies relating to the process of implementing LRE in classrooms/schools. The third section presents studies of LRE in non-school settings.

In developing this review of research, the Social Science Education Consortium staff tried to discover all research studies relating to LRE that had been conducted over the past two to three decades. The first line of inquiry drew on secondary research that has assessed the state of the art at several points in the past 10 years. In 1983, the National Law-Related Education Evaluation Program (NLREEP) produced an overview of prior research on the impact of LRE on students as part of the final report on a national evaluation of LRE. In 1991, Dorothy Skeel summarized the status of the research on LRE, one part of which concerned the impact of LRE on students. Both these studies used conventional scholarly sources—searching the ERIC database for every reference to LRE, searching Dissertation Abstracts and reviews of doctoral dissertations in the social studies, and reviews of scholarly journals in social studies and in education generally—to discover the state of the research.

The second line of inquiry consisted of a series of surveys of various organizations and networks involved in LRE. These surveys were conducted in early 1994. The first survey focused on the network of state LRE project directors. The second survey targeted U.S. Department of Education and U.S. Department of Justice LRE and National Diffusion Network program grantees. The third survey focused on other researchers we believe to be active in this area. The fourth targeted the juvenile justice community. Finally, SSEC staff has conducted extensive ERIC searches, secondary educational research literature reviews, and searches in Dissertation Abstracts to uncover research relating to LRE that may have been missed before or that may be of recent origin.

The Effects of Law-Related Education on Students

Everyone wants students to achieve some important learning outcomes as a result of their schooling—to **know** something, **to be able to do** something, and **to feel** one way or another about something when they complete their school courses. Evidence of the positive impact of LRE on students is therefore fundamental. If this evidence is lacking, then other research—how LRE programs are implemented, or how many school districts actually offer LRE elective courses, or to what extent LRE is infused into the ongoing curricula of the nation's schools—is largely beside the point.

We introduce this descriptive report on LRE impact research with several observations. First, the overall quality of the studies reported here varies considerably. Several have achieved scientific, experimental designs (i.e., using matched experimental and control groups with students assigned randomly to those groups). On the other hand, many use quasi-experimental designs: these often have had difficulty achieving true random assignment of students to control and experimental groups.

Second, whatever the research design and regardless of grade level, virtually all the research reported here shows that LRE has a positive impact on student knowledge. Those studies that also investigate changes in attitudes and behavior also report positive changes in these two areas when experimental (LRE) students are compared to control groups of students not exposed to LRE.

Third, when trying to assess the meaning of the findings of these research studies, one must bear in mind the fact that many national studies (not reported here) of civic education in the United States paint a rather gloomy picture of most students' (and adults') civic knowledge. A similarly gloomy picture emerges from studies of Americans' beliefs in democratic values and attitudes.

Fourth, the majority of the studies included in this survey have not been published. The inclusion of doctoral dissertations accounts for part of this situation. In addition, many of the studies reported here have been the result of particular LRE programs' conducting self-evaluations (or having contracted with outside researchers and evaluators for the same purpose). One result is that many of these studies—regardless of the intrinsic merit—go unpublished and therefore remain unknown to the vast majority of educators, administrators, and other decision-makers. This is a lamentable situation for obvious reasons.

Fifth, we feel compelled to reiterate Skeel's (1991) complaint that there is not nearly as much research concerning law-related education as one might wish. Certainly what Skeel found to be the case in 1991 continues to be true today. Although the research findings consistently favor LRE treatment groups compared with their control groups, skeptics often counter that (1) the studies are flawed in one or more ways; (2) that the research is old or dated; or (3) there are simply too few studies in too few contexts to be persuasive.

Certainly, these concerns have merit. But whatever their merit, we must bear in mind the observations of educational researcher N.L. Gage (1978), who stated:

The invulnerable piece of research in any field of the behavioral sciences is non-existent.... Thus the path to increasing certainty becomes not the single excellent study that is nonetheless weak in one or more respects, but the convergence of findings for many studies that are also weak, but in many different ways. The dissimilar or non-replicated weak-nesses leave the replicated finding more secure. Where the studies do not overlap in their flaws but do overlap in their implications, the research synthesizer can begin to build confidence in those implications.

The studies included in this section are arranged according to grade level. Within each grade level designation, the studies are arranged chronologically.