

## **LRE at the Junior High and Middle School Level**

Hoffman, M., and D. German. (1973). *Youth and the Law: An Evaluation of the Effects of the Introduction of Legal Materials on Youth Attitudes and Cognitions*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Law Enforcement Assistance Administration.

Hoffman and German studied seventh- and eighth-grade students who had been exposed to LRE (in the form of a booklet prepared by the North Carolina Attorney General's office). Their research indicated that these students became more knowledgeable about the state's laws than students who did not receive the LRE program. Hoffman and German also reported that students who received the booklet became more positive than comparison students in their attitudes toward police and the law, but **less** supportive of constitutional rights.

Johnson, G., and R. Hunter. (1987). *Using School-Based Programs to Improve Students' Citizenship in Colorado: A Report to Colorado Educators*. Denver, CO: The Colorado Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Council.

Following the national evaluation reported in Section A of this compendium, Center for Action Research staff provided training for teams from Colorado schools made up of building administrators, teachers, and police. These weeklong training programs focused on implementing a course that incorporated the features identified in the national study as providing more effective LRE.

Results at four of the five schools were favorable. In the cases of two schools in which students were randomly assigned to semester-long LRE classes and control (traditional civics) classes, the results both on attitude dimensions linked to delinquency prevention theory and on self-reported delinquent behavior were extremely positive. At a third school, fewer classroom hours were devoted to LRE; while results were generally positive, the differences between LRE and control students were smaller and observed on fewer variables than at the two schools mentioned above. At the fourth school, a shortened questionnaire was administered due to students' poor reading skills. LRE students had more favorable results than controls on five of seven theory-based dimensions; the LRE students also showed moderate reductions in their frequency of committing six of 11 types of delinquent acts assessed.

The fifth school implemented LRE as the result of a district-level decision and the district retained control of the LRE program during implementation; little positive effect resulted from the LRE course, which observations showed did not reflect the features identified as critical in the national study and presented at the weeklong training.

Hunter and Johnson concluded that the recommendations from the national study appeared appropriate. Where the features were verified by observers as being present in classrooms, the LRE courses produced measured improvements. They also noted that while district support for LRE was important, district control was a negative for program success. Further, they observed that when a specific topic was the focus of effective LRE lessons (e.g., vandalism), self-reports of that behavior decreased to a greater degree than in classes where the topic was not specifically covered. Finally, Hunter and Johnson concluded that “with suitable training, any school can do it [LRE] right. In Colorado, effective implementation of LRE has occurred in suburban, rural, and inner-city schools—including those serving a variety of ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds and at least one having a high proportion of slow readers.”

Fernlund, P. M. (1992). *Perspectives on Law and Government: A Study of Eighth-Graders*. Unpublished paper. Boulder, CO: Social Science Education Consortium.

Fernlund looked at how eighth-grade students relate information from formal study of the Constitution into their personal knowledge about society and government. Two instruments were used to tap political cognition at a deeper level than measured by survey instruments: conceptual maps and interviews based on a hypothetical scenario. Results of the study indicated that conceptual maps are useful tools for assessing conceptual understanding, although multiple measures are required to get a complete picture of student understandings. Students' conceptions of such concepts as democracy were influenced by prior experience; many students' conceptions did become more developed after instruction on the Constitution. However, Fernlund concluded that students need assistance in integrating the formal curriculum with their preexisting knowledge structures.

Avery, P., K. Bird, S. Johnstone, J. Sullivan, and K. Thalhammer. (1992). *Do All of the People Have All of the Rights All of the Time? Exploring Political Tolerance with Adolescents*. Unpublished paper. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota, Center for Applied Research and Educational Improvement.

Avery and her associates developed and tested a curriculum that had students explore the linkages among democratic values, legal principles, and their application to unpopular groups in U.S. society. Their analysis demonstrated a statistically significant increase in political tolerance and found those increases to be directly related to increases in student knowledge. Student responses to open-ended items suggested that increases in political tolerance are due to a greater awareness of individual rights, while decreases in tolerance may be attributed to concerns for public safety.

These findings are important, given that most prior research on political socialization had suggested that traditional formal civics curriculum has had limited impact on students' civic attitudes (e.g., Ehman 1980) and political tolerance—the willingness to acknowledge the civil liberties of those with whom one disagrees. Other researchers working in the mid-1970s (e.g., Zellman 1975; Goldenson 1978), however, suggested that civics courses treated democratic norms in too abstract a fashion, that those values were not sufficiently linked to real-world political situations to have any impact on student attitudes. They theorized that classrooms that linked democratic values to political realities might increase students' levels of political tolerance. This study helps confirm this notion. See Avery (1998) for an extended review of the research literature on political tolerance.

Gruenhagen, K., and B. Leslein. (1993). "Using Law-Related Education as a Lifeline for Rural At-Risk Students." In D. Montgomery, ed. *Rural America: Where All Innovations Begin*. Conference Proceedings (Savannah, GA, March 11-13).

Project NEXUS, a rural Appalachian program designed to address dropout prevention and pre-delinquent factors among students, was implemented in Ellijay (Georgia) Middle School. A group of 25 students, chosen because of discipline referrals or other risk factors, were invited to join the program. Fifteen to eighteen attended weekly meetings throughout the program's first year. Community resource persons participated in the meetings. The NEXUS program also featured field experiences, including such things as juvenile hearings in teen court and local court room observations. Teachers of the NEXUS students reported student improvement in classroom participation, cooperation with the teacher, and attendance. Virtually all students made positive comments about the program.

Center for Civic Education. (2000). *School Violence Prevention Demonstration Program. Year One: 1999-2000 School Year*. Calabasas, CA: Center for Civic Education.

In 1999, the Center for Civic Education began a multi-year project to investigate whether teaching civic knowledge and skills can influence attitudes that serve as early warning signs of violence among youth. The first year (reported here) was conducted in seven school districts across the country, primarily large urban districts. Participating teachers—mostly in the middle school—received training in use of three Center programs, We the People, Project Citizen, and Foundations of Democracy.

Pre- and posttests of knowledge and attitudes were administered to treatment and comparison groups of students at the beginning and again at the end of the school year. Attitudes examined include attitudes toward civic responsibility, authority and the law, social inclusion, and tolerance for the ideas of others. The data analyzed were from the classrooms of 21 teachers identified through classroom observations as being “high implementors.” A total of 1,033 experimental students and 607 control students were included in the analysis.

Results showed that experimental students in all districts with comparison groups (six) showed higher gains in knowledge than the comparison groups; the gains were statistically significant when preexisting differences in the groups were controlled for (some control groups scored higher on the pretest than the experimental groups). Results regarding impacts on attitudes were less consistent, with one district showing gains for experimental students in all four attitude clusters, and two showing no such gains. Overall, the program had a statistically significant and positive impact on attitudes toward civic responsibility, tolerance for the ideas of others, and respect for authority; it did not have a significant effect on attitudes toward social inclusion. Gender differences were seen with respect to both attitudes and knowledge.

Vontz, T.S., K.K. Metcalf, and J.J. Patrick. (2000). *Project Citizen and the Civic Development of Adolescent Students in Indiana, Latvia, and Lithuania*. Bloomington, IN: ERIC Clearinghouse for Social Studies/Social Science Education.

The researchers looked at the impact of Project Citizen, a Center for Civic Education program that engages students in public policy analysis and advocacy on an issue of their choosing. Originally designed for middle school students in the United States, the program has been used with other grade levels and in other nations. These researchers looked particularly at the program's effects on students from Indiana, Latvia, and Lithuania; a vast majority of the participating students were ages 13-14 (grade 8). The researchers looked at effects on civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions as measured by the Civic Development Inventory, administered pre- and post-instruction. The CDI assessed knowledge gain, students' perceptions of their civic skills, and five dispositions— propensity to participate in civic/political life, political interest, commitment to citizenship responsibilities, commitment to constitution-alism and the rights of citizenship, and political tolerance. A total of 102 classrooms and 1,412 students participated in the study, 51 Project Citizen classes (712 students) and 51 comparison classes (700 students).

The results indicated that Project Citizen affected students' civic development positively and significantly. Knowledge gains and perceived gains in civic skills were significantly larger for the Project Citizen students than for the comparison students. Project Citizen positively affected students' propensity to participate in civic and political life; Project Citizen did not have a statistically significant effect on the other dispositions. The positive effects were consistent across all three political units. Factors that were associated with greater gains in students' civic development included student's perceived level of participation in Project Citizen, mother's level of education, type of issue selected (in-school issues produced greater gains than issues in the larger community), curricular (as opposed to extra-curricular) use of Project Citizen, and implementation of students' action plan.