

# Study shows how writing helps young students engage more deeply with civics

May 12 2023, by Casey Kelly

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Recent results from an assessment known as the Nation's Report Card found scores in U.S. history and civics among eighth graders across the country declined compared to previous assessments. Among students

who took part in the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) in 2022, scores in history were the lowest on record while scores in civics dropped for the first time ever.

Although a variety of factors likely contributed to the declines—including the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on K–12 [students](#) and schools—Esther Enright, an assistant professor of educational leadership at the University of Maine, notes that civics education in particular tends to be marginalized in [elementary education](#).

"Civics is a distinct discipline that requires specialized knowledge and concepts that differ from other aspects of social studies, such as history. But it rarely gets separate attention, especially at elementary grade levels," says Enright, who helped lead a study published recently with colleagues William Toledo of California State University Fullerton and Katherine Landau Wright of Boise State University that looked at how discipline-specific writing can be used to get students to explore issues and topics related to civics.

"Students need the ability to write across a variety of subjects. Not just language arts, but social studies, science, math and more," Enright says. "What we wanted to do was examine what happens when teachers engage students in civic perspective-taking through writing, focused on locally relevant public issues."

As part of a larger four-year research collaboration across a state department of education, [school districts](#) and university-based researchers, Enright, Toledo and Landau Wright worked with district curriculum specialists and elementary teachers to collaboratively design units that would introduce students to civic perspective-taking.

Lessons covered ideas such as fact and opinion, public issues, public good, multiple perspectives and argumentation. For example, the

teachers had students practice presenting their own stance on an issue, as well as differentiating their stance from others using claims and evidence. Teachers also created opportunities for students to practice their arguments verbally before translating them into writing.

The civics writing study, which spanned two years of the four-year project (2018–20), examined three questions: How do second and third grade students engage with civic ideas and concepts in their argumentative writing? What differences exist between second and third grade students' civic writing and argumentation? And how does students' verbal and written argumentation in civics change between second and third grade writing samples?

Second graders were asked to take a position on whether the school district should move to a year-round schedule. Third graders considered whether the local city council should allow developers to build on wetlands.

The researchers' findings suggest that students' engagement with civic concepts became more complex and purposeful as they practiced argumentative writing. Both the sophistication of their civic perspective-taking and their writing developed from second to third grade.

The findings also indicate that students in both grade levels were more motivated to engage in argumentative writing when asked to take positions on issues of local importance, though Enright says additional studies are needed to fully assess the impact of local issues on motivation.

Although the study was conducted before the most recent NAEP assessment and focused on younger students, Enright believes there are implications for civics education at all grade levels.

"We think this research shows the importance of teachers embedding writing instruction in all disciplines and we argue that more [professional development](#) could help educators do so across the curriculum," says Enright, who notes that the study presents one model where a university-based research team collaborated with district curriculum specialists and classroom teachers on professional development.

The civics writing study was published in the *Journal of Writing Research*. A companion study examining the development of preservice teachers' civic identities, co-authored by Enright and Toledo, was recently published in the *Journal of Social Studies Education Research*.

**More information:** What Type of Citizen Am I? Examining the Development of Preservice Teachers' Civic Identities: [jsser.org/index.php/jsser/article/view/4685/607](https://jsser.org/index.php/jsser/article/view/4685/607)

Advancing Civics-specific Disciplinary Writing in the Elementary Grades: [www.jowr.org/index.php/jowr/article/view/1025](http://www.jowr.org/index.php/jowr/article/view/1025)

Provided by University of Maine

Citation: Study shows how writing helps young students engage more deeply with civics (2023, May 12) retrieved 23 June 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2023-05-young-students-engage-deeply-civics.html>

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