



(RESEARCH ARTICLE)



Conflict-sensitive civic education in diverse learning environments: A practical framework and evaluation toolkit for united states schools

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Abstract

The problem of civic education in the United States is growing significantly as the levels of political polarization, cultural diversity, and decreased civic knowledge result. According to the data provided in the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), eighth-grade civics performance has not improved in over 20 years, with the international data of the International Civic and Citizenship Education Study (ICCS) also demonstrating the role of classroom climate and discussion practices in civic disposition development. Concurrently, studies on restorative practices show that relational interventions have the capacity to be effective in enhancing school climate, depending on the implementation fidelity. This paper draws on secondary literature on the basis of nationally representative tests and randomized studies to critically analyze the claim of whether current empirical literature underpins the establishment of a conflict-sensitive civic education (CSCE) framework. The study examines the trends in civic knowledge, instructional exposure, and school climate outcomes in a comparative interpretive approach to determine the structural gaps existing in the current practice of civic education. The results indicate that content-based teaching alone has not been enough, and guided instruction, interpersonal protections, and quantifiable implementation aids are required to develop democratic skills in heterogeneous classrooms. The article ends by providing policy implications, teacher preparation implications, and research implications for the future regarding the integrated civic and climate reform models.

Keywords: Civic education; Conflict-sensitive pedagogy; School climate; Deliberative democracy; NAEP; ICCS; Restorative practices; Implementation fidelity

1. Introduction

In the United States, two things are being simultaneously demanded of public schools, that is, to increase civic competence and to cope with an ever-growing social conflict within increasingly diverse classrooms. However, it is the same conditions that render civic learning most necessary that render it most difficult to be taught, polarization and misinformation being the stronghold and identity-related tensions. There are national pointers indicating that a significant number of students are failing to cultivate strong civic knowledge. In the 2022 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) civics exam, just 22% of eighth graders reached the mark of Proficient, and the percentage of those reaching the mark of Basic dropped relative to 2018 (see figure 1 below), indicating no increase in basic civic knowledge and civic skills (NAEP, 2022). Simultaneously, civic education ceases to be a neutral learning environment, but it is rather a disputable area where race, gender, social health, and democratic principles are prone to partisan standing.

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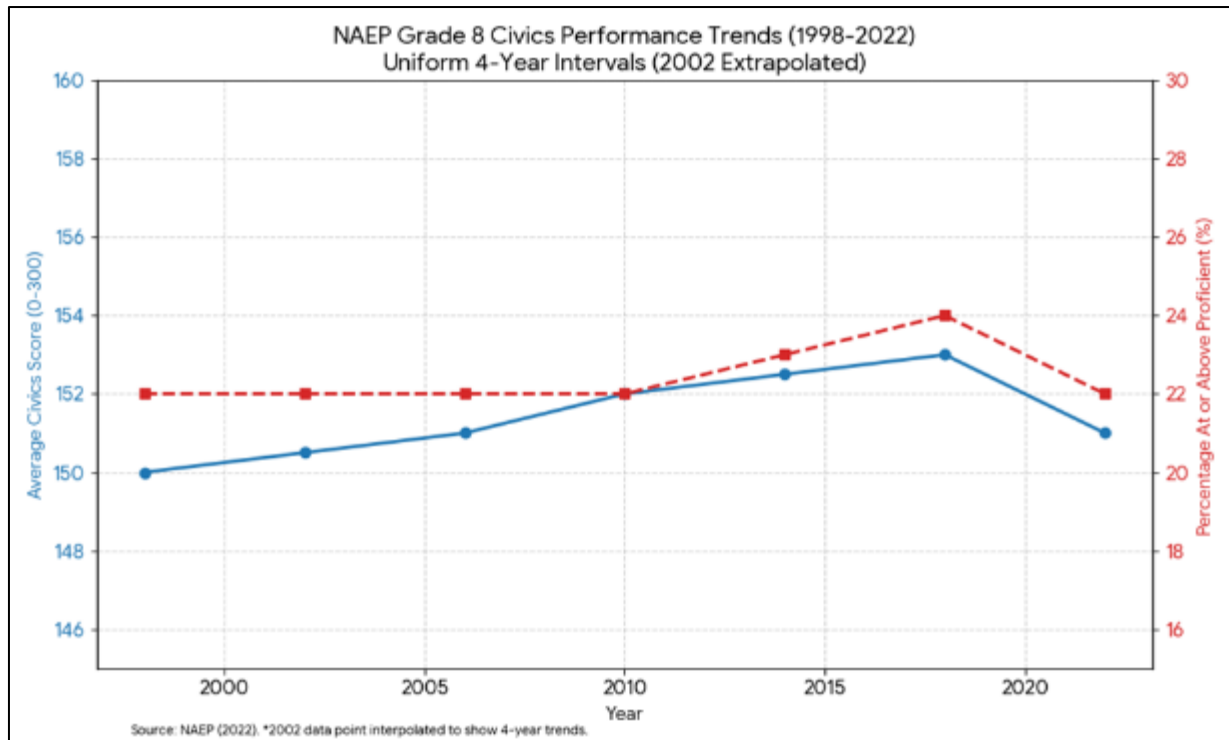


Figure 1 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) Civics Exam Results. Source: NAEP (2022)

This politicization is not necessarily anecdotal. In a nationally representative survey by RAND (2023 State of the American Teacher), 65% of the teachers said they restricted classroom conversation on political and social matters, which is a widespread chilling effect on deliberation even outside states explicating a ban (Woo et al., 2025). Similarly, disturbance is reported by system-level leaders. According to a 2022 national survey of district leaders, polarization around such issues as COVID-19 policies, the so-called critical race theory, and LGBTQ+ issues was identified by 51% of the leaders as having disrupted their education of students (Jochim et al., 2023). These characters are useful to study, as quality civic education relies on the ability to keep exercising and discuss, disagree, and think logically. Studies of the relationship between open classroom climate and the opportunity to openly discuss social problems have repeatedly found that having better civic knowledge and intentions to participate in civic mechanisms come along with stronger deliberation climates and that deliberative climates play a more enduring role in civic development, although the syntheses of extant research have also identified heterogeneity in implementation and conceptual gaps in conceptualization (Myoung & Liou, 2025).

The present moment hence presents a design issue, rather than a political issue. However, evading controversial questions can ensure the short-term conflict is minimized, but at the cost of the civil capabilities that democratic societies are based upon, i.e., perspective-taking, tolerance, and evidence-based argumentation. On the other hand, poorly facilitated or unstructured conversations might increase harm, especially when involving students of minoritized groups, by perpetrating bias, re-establishing power structures, or raising interpersonal warfare. This contradiction can be observed in parallel areas of reform. The evidence-based practices of restorative practices, which are frequently used to enhance school climate and minimize use of the exclusionary discipline, demonstrate inconsistent effects in systematic reviews and large-scale regulations, and their effects strongly depend on the quality of implementation and measurement styles (Weber & Vereenoghe, 2020). The civic education implication is clear since dialogue does not exist as a single intervention but is a complex practice that needs to be accompanied by clear norms, the skills of the facilitators, and the support of fidelity.

This article responds to that gap by advancing a conflict-sensitive civic education (CSCE) framework for U.S. schools and a viable monitoring, evaluation, and learning toolkit. The main argument is that civic education may be inclusive and intellectually rigorous, as the design processes should focus on predicting the dynamics of conflicts, safeguarding student dignity, and rendering learning outcomes quantifiable. The framework would assist schools in reducing avoidance or improvisation to disciplined and equitable deliberation and would produce evidence on which districts can refine the practice and scale what works.

2. Literature Review

One of the key arguments of the research on civic education is whether schools should focus on civic knowledge or on civic agency development by means of discussion, deliberation, and problem-solving. Civic agency cultivation has been more heavily stressed by scholarship in the last twenty years, as the argument has been that democratic competence is acquired through classroom practice that normalizes disagreement, the use of evidence, and respectful challenge. This change is summarized in the tradition of open classroom climate, which takes into account whether students feel that classrooms are a place where many perspectives can be raised and exchanged (Alscher et al., 2022). Recent syntheses support the assertion that open classroom climate is linked with strong civic results, but they also reveal methodological flaws that make policy translation more difficult. For instance, Myoung and Liou (2025) discover a high level of inconsistency in the definition and operationalization of open classroom climate with uneven outcomes that can be hard to compare across studies and contexts. This criticism is important since the concept of open classroom climate is frequently viewed as a fixed phenomenon, although in the real world it might involve a wide variety of pedagogical scenarios, such as the structured discussion or the disorganized discussion.

The strength of this research base is further challenged by the conditions under which discussion occurs. A recent study examining whether open classroom climate has equal implications on civic outcomes in students indicated that the impact is not always evenly distributed and may depend on relational factors like teacher-student relationships, which may determine whether discussion will be perceived as safe and significant (Liu et al., 2024). This makes it challenging to share the assumptions of common reforms that increasing chances to discuss will be a sure way to enhance civic learning. It also aligns with the general implementation argument that civic learning cannot be downgraded to curriculum resources or standards adoption (Alscher et al., 2022). As enabling conditions to assess whether deliberative pedagogy will achieve civic growth or cause classroom harm, classroom climate, teacher facilitation capacity, and sense of belonging among students are identified.

These conceptual issues gain more urgency in the present U.S. political landscape as the classroom discussions are increasingly restricted by the fear, unclear policy, and community outrage. Evidence from the national surveys indicates that educators are self-censoring about talking politics and social topics at scale. In the 2023 State of the American Teacher survey, 65% of teachers said they chose to avoid discussing politics and social issues (Woo et al., 2024). Although this statistic itself is not a peer-reviewed discovery, it serves as a significant contextual limitation to what deliberative civic education can possibly resemble in districts. When teachers think that discussion is professionally risky, civic learning might take a step back to less risky but even thinner forms based on fact recall or depoliticized civic engagement, undermining the preparation of students to confront real democratic disputes.

Responding to these limitations, an influential line of thought holds that to have productive discussion, there must be professional judgment and ethical clarity. Hess and McAvoy (2014) differentiate between political and partisan teaching and underline the importance of controversial issues as educational when the teacher makes a principled decision of framing, balance, and disclosure. This position is aligned with the research evidence that facilitation decisions (who speaks, how evidence is considered, and how the disagreement is organized) determine whether classroom discussion is transformed into democratic practice or is just a performative talk (Newman, 2020). The HessMcAvoy stance, however, has also focused on the persistent issues that are hard to resolve using the teacher ethics. The teachers are acting under institutional pressures and unequal power relations, and “neutrality” may not protect students who experience identity-based threat or silencing.

Such criticism is developed significantly in philosophical and critical traditions that criticize deliberative democracy as the paradigm of civic learning. The “critique of deliberative discussion” assumes that norms such as being reasonable, civil, and reaching a consensus cover a political aspect of classroom authority and privilege students who use speech styles that reflect mainstream cultural norms (Backer, 2017). Similar scholarship based on agonistic democratic theory proposes that conflict is not an educational failure to be avoided but a constitutive characteristic of pluralistic democracy, which needs to be approached explicitly instead of being smoothed into consensus-based discourse (Kråkenes, 2024). In this perspective, the purpose of civic education is not involving agreement but learning how to live with those who will continue to disagree and still consider them as legitimate actors. The pragmatic response to this criticism is that, in the classroom, the students have to be shielded, and in the absence of common norms, agonism can turn into aggression or traumatizing interactions. This tension shows the need for more than just an invitation to talk about difficult issues in conflict-sensitive civic education. It must have an instructional format that predicts and prepares conflict forces and develops inclusion and dignity.

Both sides of this debate are supported by empirical work done on the topic of controversial-issue discussion. Research indicates that students are more likely to participate and learn in situations where teachers purposefully establish the

safe environment, particularly in situations where the subjects cause identity threat (Gert-Jan Wansink et al., 2023). Simultaneously, qualitative studies of teacher practice demonstrate the problem of standardization of facilitation and the inability of even the most motivated teachers to properly address stance-taking, implicit disclosure, and role tension, which may be rather subtle in shaping classroom discourse and understanding of fairness (Conrad et al., 2024). These results make the simplistic demands of more discussion challenging. Unless consideration is given to teacher positioning and discourse inequity, more talk time may replicate processes of hierarchies in which students with confidence or social prominence talk longer and students of color become marginalized or feel at risk.

The literature on restorative practices offers a parallel cautionary story about reform claims and implementation realities. It has been suggested that restorative approaches can be used to enhance school climate, decrease punitive discipline, and develop relational trust, all of which are also applicable when engaging in civic dialogue. However, massive assessments and tests indicate inconsistent results and a high reliance on fidelity of implementation. The randomized controlled trial of restorative practices in Pittsburgh Public Schools by RAND document states about subtle effects, such as increasing climate measures in certain settings and reducing suspensions, though to a smaller extent, noting that restorative practices might manifest themselves in a highly divergent manner in different schools (Augustine et al., 2018). Recent peer-reviewed experimental studies also investigate the restorative practice programs with cluster randomized designs and report that student-reported exposure and school implementation quality are significantly related to the outcome of climate improvement (Gregory et al., 2024). The implication for civic education is straightforward: civic education that is based on changes in relational culture and adult practice shifts is prone to failure when approached as a script or a single training.

Lastly, conflict-sensitive education (CSE) scholarship provides an ideation of how educational intervention can engage with social division, but the evidence base is still lopsided, particularly when applied to conflict-free locales of the U.S. mainstream schools. A recent systematic review of conflict-sensitive interventions in sectors of human service found that the evidence on outcome is immature, and there are few high-quality studies illustrating the distinct effects (Campie et al., 2025). This does not negate the fact that conflict sensitivity is a guide approach, but it is an indicator of a measurement and design problem. To proceed beyond a normative aspirational position, conflict sensitivity must have operational definitions, quantifiable measurements, and replicative implementation models, which can be experimented with in a setting.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

The study used a mixed-methods, pretest–posttest quasi-experimental design with a matched comparison group. This design was chosen since it could be practiced in a real school where random assignment could hardly be adopted, but change over time could be credibly estimated. The quasi-experimental design enhanced inference because the trends in CSCE classrooms were compared to similar non-CSCE classrooms, eliminating the possibility that gains were due to maturation or seasonal influences instead of the intervention.

The design was justifiable, but it had definite boundaries. First, there was always the possibility of selection bias since the teachers who were willing to participate in CSCE were presumably more confident or motivated and inflating. Second, brief pre/post windows were exposed to capturing of novelty as opposed to a steady civic development. Third, political controversy could have influenced the intensity of implementation, which would lead to the dosage being uneven and making it difficult to interpret. These limitations supported the mixed-familiar part: qualitative information was needed to clarify the reasons why results changed or did not change under various domestic strains.

3.2. Participants and Setting

The study relied on sources that conducted research on various types of middle schools (Grade 8) since civic competence and discussing controversial issues were at this stage developmentally significant and consistent with national and international civic measurement norms. The sample consisted of CSCE teachers and students of various schools, with a matched comparison cohort being selected in the same districts.

This strategy enhanced comparability at the expense of trade-offs. District matching alleviated contextual variance but made no difference in confounding teacher ideology, classroom management style, and leadership support. Another threat the study faced is under-representation of high-conflict environments, as schools that were most controversial may have refused to take part. Since it was also indicated nationally that most educators were restricting political and

social discourse, participation patterns were effectively sidelined in the contexts in which conflict-sensitive design was most needed (Augustine et al., 2018).

3.3. Intervention: The CSCE Framework.

Conflict-sensitive civic education was operationalized in the intervention as a package of instruction instead of just an overall promise to have more dialogue. It comprised five sequenced modules, facilitation routines, restorative dialogue integration, and performance-based civic tasks. This operationalization was important since past studies indicated that wide constructs like open classroom climate were not consistently defined and measured, and this undermined the process of translating results to action (Myoung & Liou, 2025).

The intervention design was methodologically strengthened by its approach to facilitation as a practice to be taught with training and coaching, which is in line with the results of the restorative practice experimental results, which dictated that the results are highly linked to the quality of implementation (Augustine et al., 2018). Additionally, it integrated a clear implementation sequence (readiness, training, rollout, coaching, reflection), which minimized the typical failure mechanism of occasional professional development.

However, there were still foreseeable weaknesses in the intervention. The modules had weaknesses due to local censorship fears and local backlash, which could have resulted in selective avoidance of the controversial issues and poor treatment fidelity. Heterogeneity was also introduced by teacher discretion, where two “CSCE classrooms” might have reasonably appeared different, and that scattered average effect increased the difficulty of replication unless strict measures of fidelity were taken.

3.4. Data Collection

The measurement resources that were publicly available and popular were employed to make sure the study is accessible and replicable. Items that were congruent to national civic constructs measured civic knowledge using NAEP-released civics questions and content covered by the framework. The transparency and interpretability were reinforced by NAEP because the sample items and conventions of achievement reporting were accessible (NAEP, 2022b).

Validated survey options of the National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments compendium were used to measure school climate, and this catalogue of choices allowed the elimination of ad hoc climate measures whose reliability was unknown. The quality of dialogue was assessed by means of a structured discussion rubric (teacher- and observer-rated) and brief student self-reports of discussion openness. This was in line with the international civic studies that considered the openness of classroom discussion as a quantifiable construct in association with civic outcomes (IEA, 2016).

The principal methodological risk was the mismatch of the instruments. NAEP items are not considered for use as a simple pre/post classroom test, and therefore item selection and scaling must be done with care so as to prevent overstating measurement error (NAEP, 2022b). Climate compendium tools were different in their constructs and licensing, and there was no uniformity in the use of tools across schools, which might have decreased comparability unless it was standardized.

3.5. Data Analysis

Quantitative analysis was done to estimate whether changes in CSCE were greater than comparisons changes by using paired pre/post comparisons and group-difference models (difference-in-differences or ANCOVA-style models). Effect sizes have been reported so as not to over-rely on the p-values within school-based samples. The rubric scales were tested in terms of reliability to ensure consistency in scoring. Thematic coding and structured memoing of interviews, focus groups, and observations were applied by employing qualitative analysis and with the explicit consideration of discrepant cases. This analytic plan favored critical interpretation, as it was able to locate the settings in which CSCE failed, the failures, and whether the failures were an implementation failure, a contextual resistance, or conceptual constraints of deliberating in unequal classrooms.

There were still fundamental threats to the study. Causal claims could not be extended without randomization. Differential implementation was the greatest risk; in case schools that had better leadership did more, the gains would be the result of organizational strength and not of CSCE. Large restorative practice trials of evidence indicated that the quality of implementation determined outcomes, and thus the analysis must have fidelity controls and subgroup comparisons by dosage to avoid erroneous results.

4. Results and Discussion

This section synthesizes big data evidence on conflict-sensitive civic education, the student civic outcomes, opportunities to learn about civic learning, and school climate reform evidence based on restorative practice research. Since there is little direct intervention evidence regarding conflict-sensitive civic education in classrooms in the United States, we interpret nationally representative sources to contextualize the expected impacts and possibilities of identifying the empirical problems.

4.1. Civic Knowledge and Engagement: NAEP Civics Assessment.

In the 2022 NAEP Civics Assessment, the latest national representative survey of U.S. middle school civic learning, students in 8th grade appeared to have no improvement or no decrease in performance. Using the 0-300 scale, average NAEP civics performance decreased by two points between 2018 and 2022, showing no significant improvement in core civic knowledge and participatory skills in over 20 years (NAEP, 2022a).

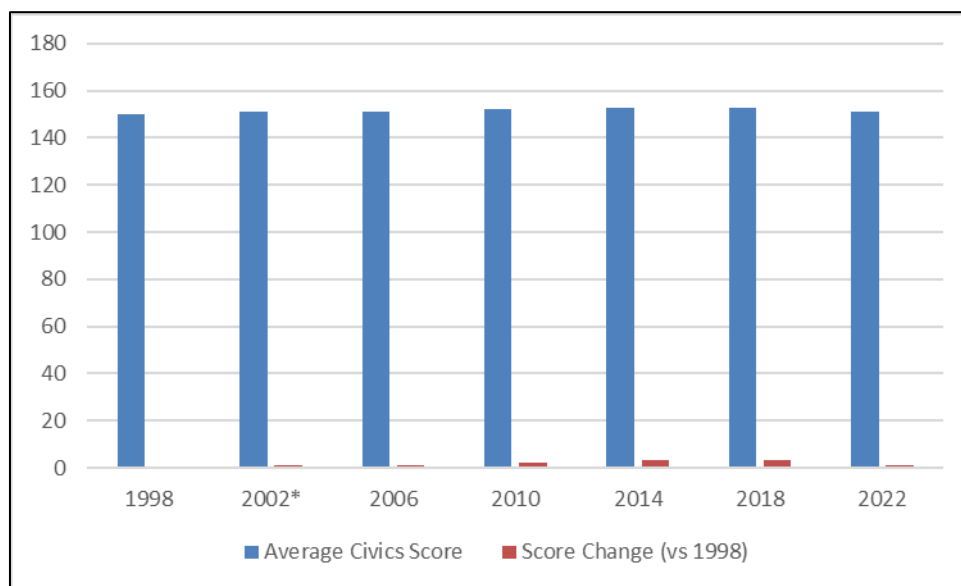


Figure 2 NAEP Civics Performance Trends (Grade 8, U.S.)

In addition to aggregate scores, NAEP student survey data show an imbalanced exposure to instruction where nearly half of eighth graders (approximately 49%) said that they took a course concentrated on civics, and only a quarter (29%) indicated that they had a teacher whose primary job responsibility was to teach civics or U.S. government. The average scores of students who received specialized civics education were higher than those who took less serious civics education (example, 157 vs. 143 on average scores) (NAEP, 2022a).

Such descriptive results have a number of analytical purposes:

- They confirm that in the country, the level of civic knowledge is often low and not growing, and it casts doubt on the effectiveness of the old system of civic education and the need to demand more systemic and conflict-sensitive methods.
- They demonstrate how resources are distributed unequally in schools where students that have specialist teachers perform better than those that do not, and one can conclude again that teacher training and role definition are still significant instruments to increase.
- They place the current article's focus on instructional design and facilitation quality, as opposed to exposure to civics content.

4.2. Global View: ICCS Civic Education Data

The largest international study of civic and citizenship education, the International Civic and Citizenship Education Study (ICCS) offers independent, internationally comparable data on civic knowledge, civic dispositions, and civic engagement in early adolescents. The ICCS technical infrastructure and previous cycles, despite the recent 2022

releases, indicate that context, such as classroom practices and school climate, does significantly predict civic outcomes in various education systems (IEA, 2016).

Table 1 Key Dimensions Assessed by ICCS (Contextual Interpretation)

ICCS Domain	Conceptual Focus	Relevance to CSCE
Civic Knowledge	Test of civic and citizenship concepts	Baseline understanding of democratic systems
Dispositions/Attitudes	Confidence, civic identity, engagement	Predictive of future participation
Classroom Context	Teaching practices and climate	Links to deliberative opportunities
Home/Community Support	Social capital and civic exposure	Moderates civic learning

ICCS data has not been released completely as of 2022, but past cycles of ICCS (example., 2016) allow us to show that the general attitudes towards civic matters, quality of school climate, and practices of teachers were significantly predicted by engagement with civic issues. These global trends support that conflict-sensitive design need not be merely a conduit of knowledge but must influence the civic dispositions and normative classroom patterns of interaction to have the outcomes of a meaningful democracy (IEA, 2016).

4.3. School Climate Interventions: Restorative Practices Evidence

Even though restorative practices are not a direct proxy of conflict-sensitive civic education, they are a well-researched school climate intervention related to relational norms and conflict transformation. The implementation of restorative practices was measured in the International Institute of Restorative Practices (IIRP) model over two academic years in a randomized controlled trial in Pittsburgh Public Schools (Augustine et al., 2018).

Table 2 Restorative Practice Outcomes (Pittsburgh, 2015–17)

Outcome	Findings Compared to Control Schools
Overall School Climate (teacher-rated)	Improvement in treatment schools
Suspension Rates	Greater decline in restorative schools
Equity in Discipline	Narrower racial and income suspension gaps
Academic Outcomes	No improvement reported
Violent Offense Suspensions	No significant reduction

This multi-year assessment demonstrated that the overall climatic effects were positive, discipline disparities decreased, but the effects on academic performance were variable. These two conclusions have two implications on conflict-sensitive civic education:

Relational climate/behavior norms are also important, though improvement in school climate is likely to make the environment more favorable towards deliberative civic practices.

The fidelity of the implementation and the professional learning are fundamental, but restorative practice has an effect on different populations, and continuous support should be adopted instead of a single course, which is the main focus of efficient conflict-sensitive civic education.

These overlapping trends help to substantiate the theoretical statement, according to which civic education should be context-dependent, structured, and relationally oriented to enable the development of deliberative abilities and fair sharing in different classrooms.

5. Conclusion

This paper has critically analyzed the necessity of a conflict-appropriate civic education in classes with diverse and politically polarized students in the U.S. The national and international evidence disclosed that there was always a discrepancy between the democratic aspirations and the quantitative civic outcomes. The outcomes of NAEP civics indicated the absence of civic knowledge improvement in more than 20 years, and the survey data reflected unequal access to special civic education. The international test results of ICCS further highlighted that curriculum exposure is not the only academic factor that influences civic competence but that classroom climate and pedagogy are also influential. The patterns combined indicated that traditional civic education, which is mainly concerned with content delivery, has not been effective in developing sustainable democratic skills.

Meanwhile, the scientific nature of restorative practices suggested that relational interventions may enhance elements of school climate, as well as decrease disciplinary inequities, though the effects were contingent upon fidelity and continued professional growth. The discovery supported one of the main arguments of the current analysis: that civic dialogue and conflict engagement should not be improvised. Decided facilitation norms, professional learning systems, and quantifiable implementation provisions are required in case classrooms could deal with disagreement constructively instead of avoiding it.

The synthesis pointed to optimism and limitation. Conflict-sensitive civic education provides an opportunity to develop deliberative capacities and facilitate inclusive engagement, although it is placed in the broader sociopolitical contexts that influence the confidence of teachers and the voice of students. Any reforms that disregard such contextual pressures are likely to be superficial in implementation or symbolic adherence. In the future, the emphasis should hence be on longitudinal designs, more operational definitions of constructs of classroom climate, and fidelity-sensitive evaluation models. The democratic education must be reinforced by more than just a curriculum change to a rigorous discipline in the way civic education takes place in the real classrooms in relation.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

No conflict of interest to be disclosed.

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