

# How School can Teach Civic Engagement Besides Civic Education: The Role of Democratic School Climate

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**Abstract** Civic engagement, defined as involvement in community life, is influenced by reciprocal relationships between individuals and contexts and is a key factor that contributes to positive youth development. The present study evaluates a theoretical model linking perceived democratic school climate with adolescent civic engagement (operationalized as civic responsibility and intentions for future participation), taking into account the mediating role of civic discussions and perceived fairness at school. Participants were 403 adolescents (47.9 % male) ranging in age from 11 to 15 years old (mean age = 13.6). Path analysis results partially validated the proposed theoretical model. Higher levels of democratic school climate were associated with higher levels of adolescent civic responsibility; the association was fully mediated by civic discussions and perceived fairness at school. Adolescents' civic responsibility, then, was positively associated with a stronger intention to participate in the civic domain in the future.

**Keywords** Civic engagement · Democratic school climate · Adolescence · Positive youth development · Path analysis

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## Introduction

Understanding the bases of youth civic engagement is a critical focus of research in community psychology, and is strongly related to the positive youth development framework (PYD; Sherrod et al. 2010). Broadly defined, civic engagement includes attitudes, behaviors, knowledge, and competencies related to an interest in improving the local community and the wider society. According to developmental systems models (Bronfenbrenner 1979; Overton 2010), individuals' degree of civic engagement is a result of the reciprocal relationships between individuals and contexts that constitute the main process of positive youth development (Lerner et al. 2011; Sherrod 2007). Research has demonstrated that involvement in community life nurtures psychological, social, and cognitive growth for adolescents (Fredricks and Eccles 2006; Johnson et al. 1998; Ludden 2011; Vieno et al. 2007); moreover, youth civic engagement contributes to the effective running of society by providing additional services to the community (Flanagan and Sherrod 1998). The significant decline in the civic and political interest of youth in Western societies characterizing the end of the 20th century (Frazer 1999) is reducing the positive contribution that adolescent civic participation can provide to society. For this reason, scholars, practitioners and policy makers are strongly interested in identifying the contextual resources that promote civic involvement in adolescence. Specifically, there has been an increasing effort in research and practice to analyze the role of different social contexts on the development of civic engagement, such as school, family (Jennings et al. 2009) and neighborhood (Lenzi et al. 2013).

In this study, we investigate the role of schools in introducing youth to the civic arena. Past research has investigated different characteristics of the school environment in

relation to adolescent civic engagement, such as civic education (e.g., Perliger et al. 2006), school climate (e.g., Lenzi et al. 2012a), demographic composition (Jacobsen et al. 2012) and service learning (e.g., Henderson et al. 2007). However, evidence about the role of civic education and mandatory community service in promoting adolescent civic engagement is mixed, and research simultaneously analyzing multiple components of the school environment is rare. To address gaps in current scholarship, the present study evaluates a theoretical model linking multiple school characteristics (democratic school climate, civic discussions at school, perceived fairness at school) to adolescent civic engagement (operationalized as civic responsibility and intentions for future engagement), to elucidate potential processes responsible for this association.

### School Role in Civic Engagement

School represents the institution with the most explicit mandate for educating youth about democratic principles and civic participation. The transmission of civic values at school is provided not only by civic education, but also by giving the younger generation the opportunity to feel part of society (Flanagan et al. 2007a). School is not only responsible for promoting students' knowledge about government and political processes (Niemi and Junn 1998), but is also critical in fostering adolescents' commitment to goals and values related to the common good.

Teachers can promote active citizenship among adolescents by establishing a democratic climate for learning and social interaction (Flanagan et al. 2007a; Vieno et al. 2005). Classroom climate has been the object of extensive research, mostly aimed at understanding how it relates to students' achievement (McCoy et al. 2013; von Rhoneck et al. 1998) and social relationships and risk behaviors (Klein et al. 2012). These studies have defined classroom climate in a variety of ways, for example by the level of cooperative learning, disciplinary practices, degree to which schools emphasize academic success, fairness of grading, and social support. Less is known about the effect of democratic school climate during child and adolescents development.

### Democratic School Climate

Democratic school climate has been defined as a school climate centered around democratic values (Ehman 1980), where students participate in making rules and organizing events. Past research has demonstrated that a democratic school climate promotes the development of democratic skills, such as perspective taking; students perceiving a democratic school climate also show higher levels of trust

in other people and institutions (Hahn 1998). Furthermore, studies suggest that a democratic school climate is positively associated with students' ability to think critically about civic issues and their knowledge about international affairs (Newmann 1990), as well as a higher involvement in voting (Campbell 2008). In general, findings from previous studies suggest that supporting a democratic climate at school can promote adolescents' commitment to collective goals and values (Vieno et al. 2005), which in turn increases the likelihood of becoming active in the civic domain.

A possible explanation for the association between a democratic school climate and civic engagement is supported by the social cognitive theory (Bandura 1977). Bandura's (1986) theory of observational learning states that many attitudes and behaviors are developed through interactions with other people in different social contexts, or by observing others' behavior and the consequences associated with their actions. Thus, when students are exposed to a democratic climate at school, they have the opportunity to learn democratic values through the process of changing their cognitive structures about societal functioning and their role in society. However, the specific psychological mechanisms responsible for this association are less clear.

### Discussion about Civic Issues

According to Watts' psychological theory of sociopolitical development (Watts et al. 1999, 2003), a possible mechanism through which a democratic school climate may nurture civic engagement is through discussion about civic issues. In a school with a democratic climate, students feel comfortable having civic discussions, that is, debating social issues and exploring their own opinions and those of their classmates. As a consequence, they believe discussions on controversial issues can easily take place in their school and may be more willing to discuss civic issues. According to Watts' theory (1999), all situations that encourage reflection on civic topics have the potential to nurture civic consciousness, that is, the ability to analyze societal values, norms and institutions in a critical way (Freire 1990; Prilleltensky and Prilleltensky 2006). Based on this theory, youth can increase their awareness of societal problems and develop their motivation to contribute to collective goals by reflecting and discussing civic issues. As a consequence, when attending schools with frequent opportunities to discuss civic issues (e.g., news about the local community and the wider society), adolescents may develop a system of collective values and beliefs, consider it important to be involved in the life of their communities, and be more willing to participate in civic life in the future.

### Perceived Teacher Fairness/Unfairness

Another mechanism that may explain the association between a democratic school climate and adolescents' civic responsibility involves perceptions of how fairly teachers treat students. Students are likely to perceive high levels of fairness at school in a classroom where they can participate in defining the school rules and making decisions about things that affect their daily lives. The perception of fair/unfair treatment by teachers is a critical but understudied factor that may influence students' moral development. A desire for fair treatment from authority can be understood from an instrumental perspective (Leventhal 1980): perceiving that one's own opinion is heard gives control over one's life, fostering higher levels of control and belonging (Cropanzano et al. 2001). When people feel that they are treated fairly, they also tend to consider authority as more trustworthy (Tyler and Smith 1999).

Applying assumptions of the Social Information Processing model (SIP; e.g., Crick and Dodge 1994) to the potential effects of unfairness (Arsenio and Gold 2006), some authors argue that when adolescents are highly exposed to social contexts with a lack of fairness and reciprocity they tend to develop the belief that life primarily revolves around dominance (Arsenio and Gold 2006; Nation et al. 2008). More specifically, being exposed to unfairness and inequalities in different social contexts may encourage the tendency to value instrumental goals more highly than relational goals. Instrumental goals are represented by the tendency to seek higher levels of power and control over resources in order to achieve desired outcomes. In contrast, relational goals aim to foster social relationships with others, instead of achieving personal goals. In social situations, people valuing instrumental goals will be more interested in reaching their own goals, whereas people valuing relational goals will prefer to act in a way that prioritizes the maintenance of good relationships with others (Arsenio et al. 2009). In the school context, perceived unfairness by teachers may be one of the factors that favor these biases in adolescents' morally relevant cognitions. Being exposed to unfairness and inequalities may encourage the tendency to value instrumental goals more highly than relational goals. This is supported by research that has found that adolescents who experience more unfairness and inequality in their daily social contexts, such as authoritarian parenting, unfair treatment at school, and socioeconomic deprivation, are more likely to develop a system of values and beliefs centered on instrumental goals (Nation et al. 2008).

Just as perceived unfairness can favor the endorsement of instrumental goals, perceived fairness at school may nurture the endorsement of relational goals. Perceiving fair teaching and disciplinary practices, such as equal grading

and punishments, may foster the development of a system of beliefs valuing equality, fairness, and collective goals; in other words, perceived fairness at school may nurture adolescent civic responsibility and students' intention to participate in the future. Thus, a system of values and beliefs centered on the common good may also contribute to nurturing adolescents' motivation to contribute to the improvement of their communities, by fostering their future intention to participate in civic activities.

### Gaps in the Current Research Literature

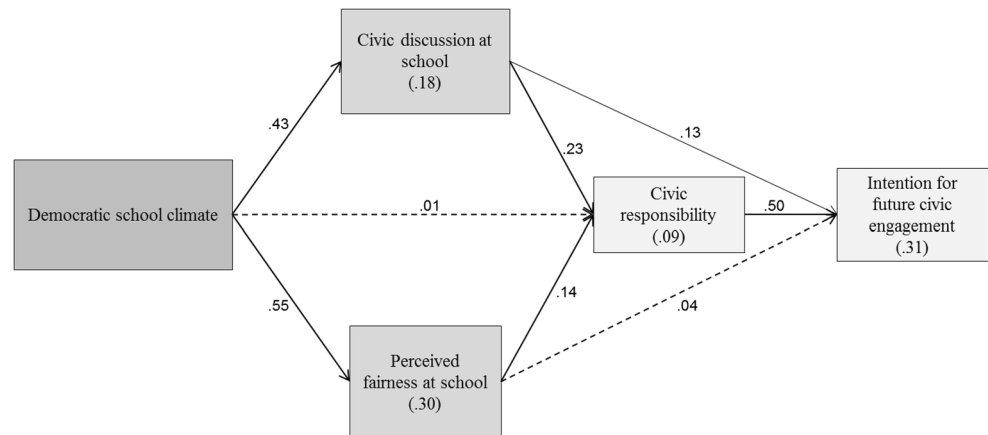
Overall, studies investigating the association between the school environment and adolescent civic engagement have emphasized the role of different individual school factors on civic development (Jacobsen et al. 2012; Lenzi et al. 2012a; Perliger et al. 2006). Whereas evidence of the influence of explicit civic education, such as service learning, on civic engagement has been mixed (Henderson et al. 2007), less structured influences (such as school climate, fairness, and civic discussion) have been infrequently investigated. In some cases, studies have obtained contradictory results. For example, there is evidence that the perception of inequality may represent a trigger for civic actions, in order to modify social inequalities (Montada and Schneider 1989); on the other hand, there is evidence that belief in a just world is positively associated to civic behaviors, such as volunteering (e.g., Lodewijkx et al. 2008). To our knowledge, no studies to date have explained the mechanisms accounting for the positive association between perceived fairness and civic engagement. Moreover, studies simultaneously investigating multiple components of the school environment are rare, and the psychological processes explaining school influences on adolescent civic engagement are not well understood yet. Finally, past research has focused on late adolescence; less is known about the influence that the school can have on early and middle adolescents' civic development.

The current study evaluates a theoretical model linking democratic school climate to adolescent civic responsibility and future intentions for civic engagement, taking into account the mediating role of civic discussion at school and perceived fairness from teachers. Moreover, we hypothesize that civic responsibility is positively associated with students' intention to be active citizens in the future.

### The Proposed Conceptual Model

Based on the theoretical models discussed in the previous section (Arsenio and Gold 2006; Watts et al. 1999), the

**Fig. 1** Path coefficients (standardized) for the theoretical model predicting adolescent civic responsibility and intention for future participation from democratic school climate. *R-squares* are shown in parentheses ( $n = 403$ )



model evaluated in our study included four main pathways (Fig. 1).

1. First, our model posits that perceiving a democratic school climate is directly related to a higher civic responsibility (Bandura 1977; Campbell 2008; Hahn 1998; Newmann 1990).
2. Democratic school climate is expected to predict more frequent civic discussion, which in turn is hypothesized to be related to higher levels of civic responsibility and intention to participate in civic activities in the future. Civic discussions encourage reflection on topics pertaining to the civic domain, thus nurturing feelings of responsibility toward the common good (Freire, 1990; Prilleltensky and Prilleltensky 2006; Watts et al. 1999, 2003).
3. Democratic school climate is expected to be positively associated with perceived fairness. Based on the SIP assumptions applied to the studies on unfairness (Arsenio et al. 2009; Crick and Dodge 1994), we expect that students' perceptions of being treated in a fair manner by teachers is positively associated with civic responsibility (i.e., a system of beliefs valuing equality, fairness, and collective goals; Arsenio et al. 2009; Arsenio and Gold 2006; Crick and Dodge 1994) and the intention for future civic engagement.
4. Finally, because civic responsibility is among the determining factors hypothesized to nurture the intention to become an active citizen (Brady et al. 1995), the model evaluates whether civic responsibility is positively associated with the intention to be civically engaged in the future.

Moreover, considering the gender differences highlighted in the literature on civic engagement (with females generally scoring higher in civic engagement and voluntary behavior: e.g., Cicognani et al. 2012), we used a multiple group model to test, without any specific hypotheses, the extent to which the proposed theoretical model is consistent across gender.

## Method

### Sampling and Participants

Participants were randomly selected from the Padova (a mid-sized Italian city located in the Northeast) register office, to obtain a representative sample of adolescents residing in the city. A random sample of 800 adolescents was drawn from the complete list of 11-, 13- and 15-year-olds residing in Padova, using a stratified sampling method with proportional allocation for neighborhood, age, gender, and immigrant status.

Participants in the final sample were 403 adolescents (47.9 % male) from 38 different neighborhoods attending different public schools<sup>1</sup> of Padova. The response rate was 59.5 %, excluding families who relocated (4.5 %) or who were not found (10.9 %). The participants' age ranged from 11- to 15-years-old (mean age = 13.6 years; SD = 1.64). The sample was diverse in terms of socio-economic status (as estimated by father's level of education), with 0.8 % having completed only elementary school, 17.6 % middle school, 8.8 % vocational studies, 36.3 % having obtained a high school diploma and 36.5 % having at least a bachelor's degree. However, perhaps due to potential difficulties in filling out the questionnaire by immigrants, almost all adolescents participating in the study were born in Italy (95.3 %), with small percentages from Eastern Europe (2.7 %) and other countries (2.0 %). Immigrants comprised 12.6 % of the original sample (reflecting the 14.4 % of immigrants living in the Municipality; Comune di Padova 2009), thus, our study's sample lacks representativeness in terms of ethnic composition. Regarding family structure, 89.6 % of the participants were living in a

<sup>1</sup> In order to obtain a representative sample of the population in the whole city, the sample was not stratified by school, thus, the sample is not representative of the schools' population (although approximates the size of the different schools), with the number of students in each school ranging from 1 to 20 across 71 different schools.

two-parent family (with parents married and/or living together).

### Procedures

The present data are from a study conducted in the city of Padova that was approved by the institutional review committee at University of Padova. The approval of the Padova municipality was requested in order to have access to the city register office for research purposes, thus overcoming privacy issues.

Researchers delivered the questionnaires to the sampled families at home, along with a letter explaining the aims of the study and a consent form for parents to allow their children to be included in the study. After a period ranging from 3 to 5 days, researchers contacted the families (on the phone or directly at home) to discuss the objectives of the study. Consent was requested from the family and an appointment was made to collect the completed questionnaires, which were filled out at the participants' home. Participants were instructed not to complete sections that did not seem clear but rather to wait for instructions from researchers on the day of collection.

When the telephone number was not available (about 50 % of cases), researchers attempted to reach the families through a home visit. When the family was not found at home, the researchers made three to five attempts at different times of the day; after these attempts, families that were not found were excluded from the sample. Data were collected during a 4-month period (October 2009–January 2010). Participants who took part in the study received a small incentive (10 euros).

### Measures

#### *Democratic School Climate*

Students' perception of democratic school climate was assessed through five items (adapted from Vieno et al. 2005), asking them the degree to which they perceived an open climate, where they participate in making rules and are involved in decisions regarding school life. Sample items are: "In our school students take part in making rules" and "I am encouraged to express my own views in my classes by my teachers." Responses were rated on a five-point scale ranging from (1) = *strongly disagree* to (5) = *strongly agree*. Alpha reliability for the five-item scale was .72 (95 % CI 0.67–0.78). Items were averaged to create a single measure of democratic school climate; higher scores indicate higher levels of perceived democratic school climate.

#### *Civic Discussion at School*

Discussions about civic issues at school were measured using a five-item adapted version of the *Social Analysis at School California Civic Index* (Kahne et al. 2005). Sample items include: "In our class, we talk about people and groups who work to make society better" and "In our classes, we discuss about problems in our society and what causes them." Responses were rated on a five-point scale ranging from (1) = *never/almost never* to (5) = *everyday/almost everyday*. The scale has an acceptable reliability ( $\alpha = .82$ ; 95 % CI 0.79–0.85). Participants' five single item responses were averaged to create a single measure of the variable (where higher scores represented a higher frequency of civic discussion at school).

#### *Perceived Teacher Fairness*

Teacher fairness was measured via questions about students' perceptions regarding whether teachers treated them fairly and the perceived fairness of the school's rules. Two items from the *Teacher and Classmate Support Scale* were used (Torsheim et al. 2000; Santinello et al. 2009): (1) "Our teachers treat us fairly" and (2) "The rules in this school are fair." The students responded on a scale that ranged from (1) = *strongly disagree* to (5) = *strongly agree*. The two items were averaged to create a single measure, and a higher score indicates a higher level of perceived fairness. Correlation among the two items is  $r = .50$ .

#### *Civic Responsibility*

Sense of civic responsibility toward societal issues was measured by integrating items from the *Justice Oriented Citizen* and the *Participatory Citizen* scales (Flanagan et al. 2007b). Participants reported the degree to which they consider it important to work for improving the well-being of society and contributing to solving societal problems by responding to nine items ( $\alpha = .76$ ; 95 % CI 0.75–0.82; e.g., "I think it is important to protest when something in society needs changing," "There are things which people can do as individuals to help solve the world's problems"). Response options were on a Likert scale ranging from (1) = *completely disagree* to (5) = *completely agree*. A single measure of civic responsibility was obtained by averaging responses to the different items (higher score indicates greater civic responsibility).

#### *Future Intentions for Civic Engagement*

Adolescents' intentions for future civic engagement were measured through an adapted version of the *Expectations*

for *Engagement in Community Issues* scale (Flanagan et al. 2007b). The scale is composed of three items ( $\alpha = .74$ ; 95 % CI 0.68–0.79) asking participants to report the likelihood of performing different actions in adulthood, such as working to reduce ethnic discrimination or protesting to change unequal laws. Participants responded on a Likert scale varying from (1) = *not at all likely* to (4) = *extremely likely*. A single score was computed by averaging participants' responses to all of the items and higher scores indicate greater future intention for civic engagement.

### Analytic Plan

The pattern of associations specified by our proposed theoretical model was evaluated through path analysis, using the R (R Development Core Team 2012) Package lavaan (Rosseel 2012) and utilizing a single observed score for each construct examined in the model. Path coefficients were estimated using the robust maximum likelihood method (Satorra and Bentler 1988). To evaluate the goodness of the model we considered the  $R^2$  of each endogenous variable and the total coefficient of determination (CD; Bollen 1989; Jöreskog and Sörbom 1996)<sup>2</sup>, defined as:

$$1 - \frac{|\hat{\Psi}|}{|\hat{\Sigma}_{yy}|}$$

where  $|\hat{\Psi}|$  is the determinant of the covariance matrix among the errors and  $|\hat{\Sigma}_{yy}|$  is the determinant of the covariance matrix among endogenous variables (Bollen 1989). Classical SEM fit indices in models without latent variables are not particularly informative because they are often not sensitive to errors in model equations that are expressed from the  $\Psi$  matrix. A Monte Carlo simulation to demonstrate this is available elsewhere (Lenzi et al. 2012b). For the mediation effect lavaan uses the normal approximation method, which is based on the delta method (Casella and Berger 2002). The model was also tested by using a multiple group approach, to evaluate whether the proposed theoretical model was consistent for males and females.

<sup>2</sup> According to several studies (e.g., Abraido-Lanza 1997; Rosario et al. 2005), in models without latent variables, standard fit indices are not particularly useful because they are often not sensitive to errors in model equations that are expressed from the W matrix. To demonstrate this, in a previous work (Lenzi et al. 2012b), a simple Monte Carlo simulation was performed based on parameters of the model.

### Results

In Table 1 the means, standard deviations and bivariate correlations between the study variables are presented. As expected, all of the study variables were positively correlated with the others. In particular, a strong positive correlation was found between perception of democratic school climate and the other two school characteristics measured in the study (perceived fairness and civic discussion at school). Moreover, the feeling of civic responsibility was strongly correlated with the intention to be civically engaged in the future.

Path analysis results partially validated the hypothesized theoretical model. Higher levels of democratic school climate were associated with higher levels of adolescent civic responsibility; the association was fully mediated by civic discussions and perceived fairness at school.

In the first step of the multivariate analyses the proposed model was tested. Figure 1 represents the test of the model with estimated standardized parameters. The squared multiple correlations for the structural equations indicate that the model accounts for a significant portion of the variance in study variables, that is: 18 % of the variance in civic discussion at school, 30 % in perceived fairness at school, 9 % in adolescent civic responsibility and 31 % in future intentions for civic behavior. There were two predicted coefficients that were non-significant: the direct link between democratic school climate and adolescent civic responsibility and the direct association between perceived fairness and intention for future civic engagement. The total CD was .397.

As shown in the figure, all the other hypothesized pathways were confirmed. More specifically, a positive direct link was found between perceiving a democratic school climate and the frequency of civic discussions at school. Democratic school climate was also positively correlated with the perception of fairness at school; in turn, the more adolescents report frequent discussion on civic issues at school and perceived fairness, the more important they consider contributing to the common good (civic responsibility). Frequent civic discussions at school and higher levels of adolescent civic responsibility were also directly associated with a higher intention to be an active citizen in the future. Finally, higher levels of adolescent civic responsibility were positively associated with the future intention to be an active citizen in the future.

Along with the direct paths shown in Fig. 1, there are some significant indirect relationships. With respect to the exogenous variable, democratic school climate has indirect effects on civic responsibility through civic discussion at school (.10) and perceived fairness (.08); moreover, there are indirect effects of civic discussion at school and

**Table 1** Means, standard deviations, and correlations (n) among study variables

	1	2	3	4	5	M (DS)
1. Democratic school climate	–	.430 (n = 393)	.531 (n = 398)	.179 (n = 392)	.174 (n = 386)	3.59 (.83)
2. Civic discussion at school		–	.269 (n = 393)	.263 (n = 389)	.272 (n = 384)	2.62 (.83)
3. Perceived fairness at school			–	.199 (n = 392)	.179 (n = 386)	3.57 (.83)
4. Civic responsibility				–	.540 (n = 391)	3.80 (.51)
5. Intentions for future civic engagement					–	3.28 (1.00)
Males	3.57 (.70)	2.65 (.84)	3.61 (.83)	3.76 (.54)	3.29 (1.05)	
Females	3.61 (.65)	2.59 (.83)	3.54 (.84)	3.84 (.49)	3.27 (.96)	
<i>t</i> test ( <i>df</i> )	.39 (397), <i>p</i> > .05	.51 (393), <i>p</i> > .05	.63 (397), <i>p</i> > .05	2.54 (396), <i>p</i> > .05	.05 (390), <i>p</i> > .05	

**Table 2** Multigroup model for gender

	N	$\chi^2$	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>	$\Delta\chi^2$	$\Delta df$	$\Delta p$	CFI	BIC	$\Delta BIC$	SRMR
Male	193	1.36	2	.51				1.00	1,968.38		0.02
Female	210	0.07	2	.97				1.00	2,036.85		0.00
Configural invariance	403	1.51	4	.82				1.00	4,027.26		0.01
Regression invariance	403	3.59	7	.83	2.08	3	.56	1.00	4,021.25	–6.01	0.02
Mean invariance	403	4.99	11	.93	1.40	4	.84	1.00	4,011.90	–9.36	0.03
Total invariance	403	9.44	15	.85	4.46	4	.35	1.00	4,005.96	–5.93	0.04

perceived fairness on intention to participate in the future (.08 and .05, respectively).

After evaluating the model in the total sample, a multiple group model tested whether this model was consistent across gender, in terms of covariance matrices and forms (dimensions, and patterns of fixed, free, and constrained values). As shown in Table 2, there were no statistically significant differences between males and females (total invariance =  $\chi^2_{(15)} = 9.44$ , n.s.).

## Discussion

The theoretical model proposed in the current study, in which democratic school climate is associated with adolescent civic engagement (operationalized as civic responsibility and intention to participate in the future), was partially validated. Our primary aim was to evaluate an integrative model linking perceived democratic climate at school and adolescents' civic responsibility and intention to be civically active in the future. We also evaluated the role of civic discussion and perceived fairness at school as mediators in this association. The proposed model was partially validated, supporting a positive association between democratic school climate and adolescent civic

responsibility; this association was fully mediated by civic discussions and perceived fairness at school. Adolescents' civic responsibility, then, was positively associated with the intention to participate in the civic domain.

Past research has mostly focused on the role of explicit forms of civic education in fostering students' civic development, and has obtained mixed results (e.g., Henderson et al. 2007). Furthermore, research examining multiple characteristics of the school simultaneously is rare. There is also a need to better understand the mechanisms through which these features may operate in influencing adolescents' civic engagement, especially during early and middle adolescence. The present study advances the current literature on adolescent civic engagement by simultaneously analyzing the role of multiple characteristics of the school context in fostering students' civic responsibility and their intention to become active citizens in the future. Moreover, we evaluated potential processes explaining the association between democratic climate at school and civic engagement in a sample of early and middle adolescents.

The first pathway proposed in our theoretical model, hypothesizing a direct link between perceived democratic school climate and students' civic responsibility, was not confirmed. Based on past studies (Campbell 2008; Hahn

1998; Newmann 1990) and the social cognitive theory (Bandura 1977), we hypothesized that a climate based on democratic values, where students' opinions are taken into consideration and they can contribute in making rules, would be transmitted to students and related to their own democratic values (Bandura 1986). However, our findings did not support this direct link, suggesting instead that the association between democratic climate and adolescents' civic responsibility is fully mediated by civic discussion and perceived fairness at school.

Consistent with our hypotheses, when adolescents perceive high levels of democratic climate at school, they also report having more frequent discussions about civic issues during classes. It is plausible that in a school where students perceive that their opinion is heard and they have a say in decisions about school life, they also feel more comfortable in expressing their opinions on civic issues, which are often controversial. At the same time, when teachers establish this open climate, it is also more likely that they will stimulate students to express their opinions on societal issues. Frequent civic discussions, in turn, were positively associated with adolescents' civic responsibility and their future intention to participate in civic activities. This finding is consistent with Watts' theory of sociopolitical development (Watts et al. 1999, 2003), which states that having more opportunities to reflect on and discuss civic issues at school may nurture adolescents' civic consciousness (Freire 1990; Prilleltensky and Prilleltensky 2006). Our findings provide support to the claim that civic discussions at school can make students more aware of societal problems and increase their motivation to work for collective goals. In other words, when schools provide more opportunities to discuss civic matters, adolescents also report stronger feelings of responsibility toward the common good and a higher motivation to become active citizens in the future.

The third pathway included in our theoretical model, hypothesizing a mediating role of perceived fairness at school in the association between democratic climate and adolescents' civic responsibility, was also confirmed. Our findings show that students' perceiving higher levels of democratic climate also reported higher levels of perceived fairness; this perception, in turn, was positively associated with adolescents' civic responsibility. As hypothesized, when students perceive that they can contribute to defining the school rules and have a voice in decisions that affect their daily lives, they also tend to evaluate their school and teachers as more fair. Moreover, our findings showed that higher levels of perceived fairness was associated with a stronger feeling of civic responsibility. This result can be explained by some of the assumptions of the SIP model (Arsenio and Gold 2006; Crick and Dodge 1994), according to which when adolescents are highly exposed to social

contexts dominated by unfairness and inequality (e.g., an unfair treatment at school) they tend to develop a system of beliefs valuing more instrumental than relational values (Arsenio and Gold 2006; Nation et al. 2008). Our findings support the idea that perceiving one's own school as a fair environment, for example in terms of allocation of rewards and punishments, may nurture a system of beliefs valuing collective goals and equality. For this reason, perceived fairness at school might promote adolescents' commitment to the common good, i.e., civic responsibility. Moreover, when people feel they are treated fairly they also tend to evaluate authority as more trustworthy (Tyler and Smith 1999); thus, students may be more willing to listen to their teachers and endorse the values that they promote during the civic education classes.

These findings contribute to the debate in community and social psychology about the nature of the association between perceived (un) fairness and civic engagement (Montada et al. 2007; Watts and Guessous 2006). Past evidence has found that social inequalities and unfairness can provide the motivation to act for modifying the status quo (e.g., Lodewijkx et al. 2008). However, we argue that perceived unfairness also can have the opposite effect (i.e., leading to less civic engagement) depending on the characteristics of the setting. It is possible that, in an educational setting with a strong imbalance of power (such as the teacher–student relationship in the school environment), perceived unfairness is more likely to favor feelings of helplessness and anger, or a system of beliefs centered on instrumental values. According to our findings, if schools want to be effective in teaching democratic principles and promoting civic participation, they must represent a microcosm of society where democratic principles are in action and can be learned by students. The processes occurring within the school environment may represent a “simplified version” of the functioning of the civil society (Flanagan et al. 2007a), in which civic processes are more approachable and easier to learn for adolescents. However, in our study the direct path hypothesized between perceived fairness and future intention for civic engagement was not supported by our analyses, suggesting that perceiving fair treatment at school may not translate directly in the motivation to act; instead, it appears to be associated with the intention for future participation by fostering adolescents' feelings of civic responsibility.

Regarding the role of gender, despite the studies showing that females are usually more civically engaged than males, our results showed that democratic school climate had similar associations with civic responsibility and intention to participate for boys and girls.

Overall, the evaluation of our model confirmed the potential mediating role of civic discussion and perceived fairness at school in explaining the link between



democratic school climate and students' civic engagement. The theoretical model explains 31 % of the variance in adolescents' intention to become active citizens in the future and 9 % in civic responsibility; these findings suggest that the role of the school in influencing adolescents' civic development is not limited to civic curricula. Civic education may also occur through the establishment of specific teaching methods, discipline strategies and the development of a school climate that transmits values about the common good and the importance of civic participation.

### Limitations

The present study has some limitations that need to be considered. First of all, the cross-sectional nature of the data does not allow us to draw strong conclusions about the direction of the effects or to interpret the mediation relations in a causal sense. Although the proposed model has been developed based on theoretical models and empirical evidence, it is possible that adolescents who have high levels of civic responsibility and intention to participate tend to incite more discussion on civic issues at school or act to ensure that the school respects principles of fairness and equality. Longitudinal research is needed in order to evaluate the degree to which different school features can impact later civic engagement.

A further limitation was the use of an adolescent self-report questionnaire, which is vulnerable to same-source bias, or the possibility of finding a spurious association between independent, mediator, and outcome variables due to the correlation between measurement errors (Diez-Roux 2007). For example, it is possible that adolescents who have high levels of civic responsibility and intention to participate tend to evaluate the school climate as more positive and focus more on civic discussions during classes, thus overestimating the frequency of civic discussion. Moreover, school characteristics in the current study were conceptualized and measured at the individual level, but previous studies showed that school climate also represents a characteristic of the school community (Vieno et al. 2013). Thus, future studies should use a multi-informant methodology to evaluate how school level structural (e.g., school SES) and social (e.g., teacher social cohesion) features may impact adolescent civic development.

Additionally, in an attempt to reduce the limitations of the cross-sectional nature of the data, we decided not to use a behavioral measure of civic engagement (such as membership in civic association, which could have occurred prior to students attending a particular school). Instead, we chose to operationalize civic engagement as civic responsibility (the attitudinal component of civic engagement) and intentions for future participation. The use of

adolescents' intentions as a measure of civic engagement may not be an accurate indicator of their future involvement. Nonetheless, some longitudinal studies of high school students have shown that anticipated civic activity during adolescence correlates highly with civic activity in the future (e.g., Campbell 2006).

Finally, there is the possibility that the geographic area from which our sample was drawn (the city of Padova) may not generalize to adolescents in other parts of the world, where school systems and cultural norms may differ. However, the city of Padova was mainly chosen for its medium size (213,797 inhabitants), such that it has some of the characteristics of a city, as well as other features similar to a village. The city is thus representative of many different geographical realities within the Italian context.

### Conclusions

Despite these limitations, the results of the present study inform practice and future research examining the role of the school institution in promoting adolescent civic engagement. In particular, our findings give support to the idea that some of the processes occurring within the school context may represent the processes of the wider civil society (Flanagan et al. 2007a). The school represents the institution with the strongest mandate for educating youth to democratic principles and civic participation, not only by fostering their knowledge about government and political processes (Niemi and Junn 1998), but also by creating a climate where these principles are reflected in school practices. More specifically, the results from the current study showed that a democratic climate at school might promote adolescents' civic development through increased opportunities to engage in civic discussion at school and greater perceptions of fairness within the school environment.

The findings of the current study have implications for the practices and policies adopted by schools. For example, schools may be able to promote a more democratic climate by providing better definitions of school rules and allowing students to contribute to the policies impacting their schools. As claimed by Gottfredson and Gottfredson (2001), many schools make use of rules and norms to promote positive behaviors (e.g. participation in volunteer groups) and reduce problem behaviors (such as bullying). However, the clarity, consistency, and sharing of these rules and policies are often lacking, and this could make the school management practices unfair and ineffective. The literature has identified different strategies to help teachers achieve consensus on school rules for behavior, including increasing communication about the school norms and involving students in creating those rules and their consequences (e.g., collaborative teaching techniques).

Future research is needed in order to understand what characteristics of the school environment promote civic engagement. More specifically, future studies need to better investigate the association between school-level characteristics (e.g., number of civic activities promoted by the school, degree of connection between the school and the students' families) and adolescent civic development. A better understanding of the mechanisms responsible for the association between school characteristics and adolescent civic commitment is critical in order to develop evidence-based promotion programs (Durlak et al. 2007). Interventions that increase democratic school climate, collaborative teaching strategies, and students' participation in the definition of school policies are some examples of school practices that may promote young people's civic responsibility and their intention to participate in the future.

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