



CURRENT AND EXPECTED ACTIVITIES RELATED TO POLITICS

6.0 Introduction

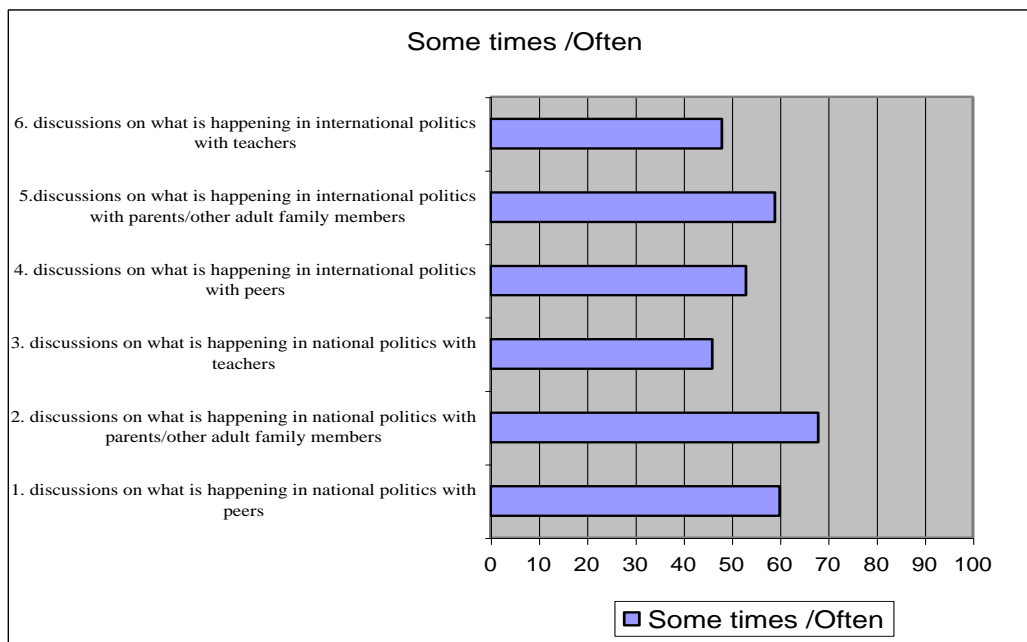
A central goal of civic education is to prepare students to participate in the political process of their country. Research has provided evidence that when civic education is offered in the context of systematic study, students acquire knowledge, abilities and attitudes that may lead to later adult community participation (Wade and Saxe, 1996). Previous research also indicates that students who participate in community and political activities, or in extra-curricular activities related to civic issues while in secondary school, are more likely than non-participating peers to be community and political activists as adults (Damico, Damico, and Conway, 1998).

A prerequisite of responsible participation is political interest and the search for information. The CIVED study examined students' political interest and exposure to political news, and students' expected participation in political activities. This chapter examines activities related to politics that SL students currently engage in, as well as the political actions they expect to engage in as adults. It examines students' involvement in discussions of national and international politics, followed by their use of various media to obtain information about civic and political issues. In the country specific section on Peace in particular, students were queried on how familiar they were with the on-going peace process, and the discussions being held. This chapter concludes by looking at the activities related to politics that students expect to engage in as adults.

6.1 Participation in discussions on national and international politics

In introducing the Common General Paper in the General Certificate of Education (Advanced Level) examination, civic related outcomes such as increased awareness, familiarity and participation of students in the discourse on national and international politics were anticipated. Research shows that participation in political discussions in the home increases the likelihood that adolescents will be informed about and accept civic responsibilities (Szymanski, 1991). Research points to a relationship between participation in discussions at home and students' anticipation of being politically active adults. Additionally, there is some indication that participation in discussions and adolescent expectations of political activity predict later participation (Miller and Kimmel, 1997) and that frequent discussion of current events in school enhances students' civic knowledge (Niemi and Junn, 1998).

In Section L (Political Action 1) of the student questionnaire, students were queried on the extent to which they engage in discussions on what is happening in national politics. Their responses in the combined category Sometimes/Often is presented in Graph 6.1, and in the two combined categories Never/Rarely and Sometimes/Often, in Table 6.1, respectively.



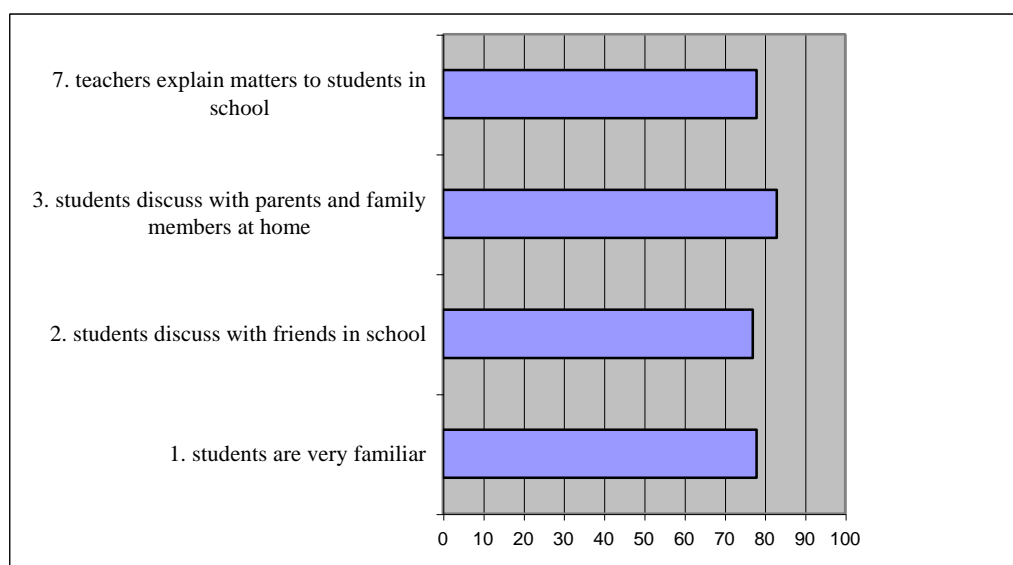
Graph 6.1: Percentage of students reporting that they sometimes/often have discussions about national and international politics

Table 6.1: Percentage of SL students reporting how often they have discussions about national or international politics

Section L: Political Action How often do students have	Never/ Rarely	Some Times/ Often	Total N
L1. discussions on what is happening in national politics with peers	40	60	2441
L2. discussions on what is happening in national politics with parents/other adult family members	32	68	2427
L3. discussions on what is happening in national politics with teachers	54	46	1948
L4. discussions on what is happening in international politics with peers	47	53	2561
L5. discussions on what is happening in international politics with parents/other adult family members	41	59	2378
L6. discussions on what is happening in international politics with teachers	52	48	2427

Overall, SL students were more likely to discuss national politics with parents/family members and peers than with teachers, as reported by 68, 60 and 46 percent respectively, in that order. On what is happening in both national and international politics, on the average, 61, 57 and 47 percent students discuss with peers, parents/family members, and teachers respectively. Interest in national politics is more than in international politics.

In Sri Lanka for example, the activities relating to the peace process such as the peace talks, are followed with keen interest, by the country's citizens. That student respondents in this sample share that interest is indicated by 78 percent agreeing with the statement, 'I am familiar with peace talks being conducted in Sri Lanka'.



Graph 6.1a: Percentage of students who agree/totally agree that they are familiar with and participate in discussions on the peace talks being conducted in the country

Table 6.1a: Percentage responses of SL students reporting on their familiarity with and participation in discussions on the peace talks being conducted in the country

Section: Sri Lanka - Peace On peace talks being held in Sri Lanka,	Totally disagree/ Disagree	Agree/ Totally agree	Total N
1. students are very familiar	22	78	2574
2. students discuss with friends in school	23	77	2588
3. students discuss with parents and family members at home	17	83	2594
7. teachers explain matters to students in school	22	78	2571

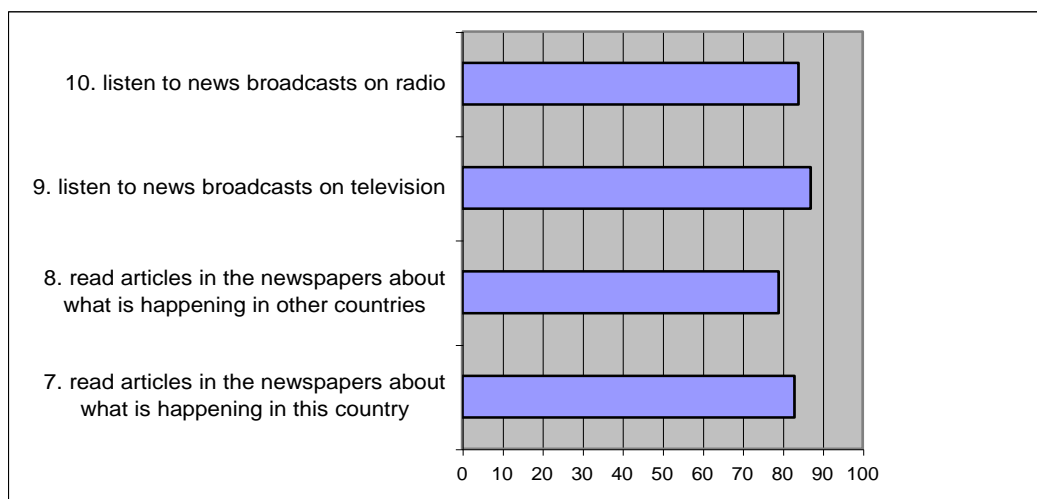
In responding to items in the section on Peace (Table 6.1a), 83 percent of the students indicated that they discuss with parents/family, 77 percent that they discuss with peers, and 78 percent of students that teachers explain matters to students in school. On peace talks being held in Sri Lanka, 78 percent of the students reported that they are very familiar.

At 14 years of age, students report more confidence in their ability to participate in politics (74 percent) than is manifested in their ability to understand the complex political web currently obtaining in Sri Lanka. During focus group interviews conducted with students who had responded to the student questionnaire, their limited understanding of the political moves and the bases on which peace was being negotiated was clearly evident. When asked whether a separate state had been promised to the LTTE, in the process of the peace negotiations, some of the students insisted that it was so. After clarifications were offered on the difference between a separate state and self-government, the stance taken earlier remained unchanged.

6.2 Media exposure to current civic issues

The means through which students and young adolescents obtain information about civic issues and politics has implications for the development of their political attitudes and perceptions about the political behavior of adults. In particular, research highlights the importance of recognizing the influence of the mass media, especially television, in shaping students' political roles and civic understanding (Ehman, 1980; Hepburn, 1998). In this age of information overload, television and other media have become either more important than or equally important as schools in creating political knowledge and awareness.

In response to items on media use, in Section L in the student questionnaire, the students indicated the frequency of reading articles in the newspapers and listening to news broadcasts on radio and television. The findings are presented in Graph 6.2 and Table 6.2.



Graph 6. 2: Percentage responses of students reporting that they sometimes or often obtain news from the newspaper, television or radio

Table 6.2: Percentage responses of SL students reporting frequency of media use, on what is happening in national and international politics

Section L: Political Action How often do students	Never/ Rarely	Sometimes/ Often	Total N
L7. read articles in the newspapers about what is happening in this country	17	83	2505
L8. read articles in the newspapers about what is happening in other countries	21	79	2496
L9. listen to news broadcasts on television	13	87	2519
L10. listen to news broadcasts on radio	16	84	2507

An average of 83 percent students reported that they use the popular media, newspapers, television and radio as sources of information, about politics. On the average, only 17 percent of the SL students report that they rarely or never use the media. In response to item 8 in Part II of the student questionnaire, 66 percent of students reported that they get a daily newspaper at home. Most students in this sample would have a radio at home, and have access to television, even if not in their own home. The radio and television channels in SL broadcast many programmes on politics, and most adults in the country tune into these programs. Apparently, 14 year olds in this sample participate in viewing and listening to these programs, in the course of which discussions ensue with parents and family members. In the CIVED study it is reported that in all countries students watch more television news broadcasts than they read newspapers or listen to radio news broadcasts, about what is happening in national and international politics. A similar pattern is noted in the responses of SL students in the CESL sample.

Table 6.3: Percentage responses of students on their understanding, interest in, and ability to participate in discussions on political issues or problems

Section I: The political system	Strongly disagree/ Disagree	Agree/ Strongly agree	Total N
8. I am able to understand most political issues easily	46	54	2218
10. I am interested in politics	43	57	2341
5. When political issues or problems are being discussed I usually have something to say	35	53	2181

6.3 Expected participatory political actions

A scale comprising of three items - join a political party, write letters to a newspaper about social or political concerns, be a candidate for election - measured students' expected participatory political action. In addition to the three items in this 'conventional participation' scale, two other items - vote in national elections and, get information about candidates before voting in national elections, were included in the questionnaire. The percentage of students who reported that they probably or certainly expected to engage in each of these activities as an adult, is presented in Graph 6.3 and Table 6.4.

Graph 6.3: Percentage of students reporting that they probably or certainly expect to participate in various political activities as adults

Table 6.4: Percentage of students reporting expected participation in various political activities as adults

Section M: Political Action 2	I will certainly not do this/ probably not do this	I will probably do this/certainly do this
1. Vote in national elections	24	76
2. Get information about candidates before voting in an election	23	77
3. Join a political party	60	40
4. Write letter to the newspapers about social or political concerns	43	57
5. Be a candidate for election	60	40

The majority of students in all countries do not intend to participate in the three actions in the conventional scale, according to their responses to the CIVED student questionnaire. Similarly, the majority of SL student responses indicate that they do not expect to join a party or be a candidate for election, but 57 percent respondents do expect to write letters to the newspapers about social or political concerns. Joining a political party and being a candidate for election are the two actions that only 40 percent of the SL respondents expect to engage in. Voting in national elections is by far the most preferred future political activity of students in the

international study. In the CESL study, students also expect to get information about candidates before voting in an election.

Five additional items deal with social movement activities; collect signatures for a petition, participate in a non-violent protest march or rally and, unconventional illegal forms of political behaviors such as spray-paint protest slogans on walls, block traffic as a form of protest, occupy public buildings as a form of protest. A last item deals with volunteer commitment for charity causes, collect money for a social cause. The findings are presented in Tables 6.5 and 6.6.

Table 6.5: Percentage responses indicating expected participation in social movement related activities

Section M: Political Action 2	I will certainly not do this/ probably not do this	I will probably do this/certainly do this
M6 Volunteer time to help the poor in the community	10	90
M7 Collect money for a social cause	13	87
M8 Collect signatures for a petition	53	47
M9 Participate in a non-violent protest march or rally	48	52

The vast majority of students in the CESL study expect to volunteer time to help the poor and to collect money for a social cause. A majority, 52 percent would participate in a non-violent protest march. For collecting signatures for a petition, and participating in a non-violent protest march, the SL student responses approximate the CIVED student responses in a majority of countries, reported as 'neither high nor low'.

Table 6.6: Percentage responses indicating expected participation in unconventional illegal actions

Section M: Political Action 2	I will certainly not do this/ probably not do this	I will probably do this/certainly do this
M10 Spray paint protest slogans on walls	73	27
M11 Block traffic as a form of protest	81	19
M12 Occupy public buildings as a form of protest	80	20

According to the findings of the CIVED study, in most countries only small minorities of students intend to participate in illegal activities such as spray-painting, blocking traffic or occupying buildings. Among these three behaviors, 'spray-painting protest slogans on walls' is the relatively more preferred activity of student respondents in both the CESL and international samples.

6.4 Summary

A central goal of civic education is to prepare students to participate in the political process of their country. A prerequisite of responsible participation is political interest and the search for information. In this chapter, activities related to politics that SL students currently engage in, as well as the political actions they expect to engage in as adults were examined.

SL students are more interested in national than in international politics, and are more likely to discuss national and international politics with parents/family members and peers than with teachers. The vast majority of students are familiar with the most crucial national political agenda, the peace talks and matters related. A little over half the respondents consider themselves politically interested and knowledgeable, although how superficial their understanding is, of national politics, was evident in focus group discussions conducted with students.

Television is the media most used by students to obtain news, in preference to radio news broadcasts and the newspapers. In indicating trust in media, student response patterns were similar.

Other than voting in elections, the majority of SL and INT students do not envisage more direct political participation such as contesting elections or joining a political party. However, they expect to participate in social movement activities such as volunteering time to help the poor and collect money for social causes, and approximately half the students would even join in non-violent protest marches. Few would engage in unconventional illegal activities, with 'spray painting protest slogans on walls' being the most preferred of the illegal activities listed.