

## **POLITICAL KNOWLEDGE AND PLACE-LOCATION SKILLS OF IRISH AND UNITED STATES ADOLESCENTS**

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Adolescents' knowledge of major international and national political figures and their skills in place location (judged by ability to locate places on a world map) in the United States (N:306) and Ireland (N:558) were compared. Irish adolescents, although somewhat younger than their American counterparts, were more successful in identifying both international and national figures. Irish students also performed better in identifying places (mostly countries) throughout the world. Males scored higher than females in each country on both tasks. In both countries, knowledge of international and local political figures correlated significantly.

We live in an interdependent world. Events such as the Wall Street Crash, the middle-Eastern crises, and the Chernobyl disaster in which radio-active material was blown across European borders, serve to highlight the fact that no nation has the power to guarantee the safety, protection, or welfare of its citizens. Further, the growth of multinational corporations has been a conspicuous feature of recent decades. Today, nations around the planet are often more closely linked and interdependent through trade and financial arrangements than neighbouring states were less than one hundred years ago (National Governors' Association, 1989).

The need for an international dimension to education scarcely needs to be emphasized. Daily newspapers and television and radio news bulletins highlight the names and places that dominate the political arena. It is not unreasonable to suggest that today an educated person should be able to converse about the Middle East crisis and the collapse of communism. Knowledge of political affairs is not an end in itself. Such knowledge has been associated with moderation (Neuman, 1986) and with a low tolerance for a narrow national perspective (Barnes & Curlette, 1985). Furthermore, interest in politics is more closely related to voting than is level of education or social class (Eyler, 1982).

According to the National Governors' Association (1989), 'the continued viability of the democratic system depends on an informed citizenry' (p.8). In

its absence, foreign policy issues can be unduly influenced by relatively small pressure groups whose goals may or may not reflect the views or the long-term interests of the electorate. Powerful special interest lobbies may develop. In the United States, for example, the inordinate power of the Israeli lobby has merited comment by former senior political figures (Fulbright & Tillman, 1989; O'Neill & Novak, 1987). While politicians may bemoan the present lack of world knowledge, they have not always provided us with good examples in this area. President McKinley, to cite but one instance, after having dispatched the US forces that led to the annexation of the Philippines, confessed to a friend that 'he could not have told where those damned islands were within two thousand miles' (Karnow, 1990, p. 104).

In the United States, there appears to be a low level of political knowledge among the mass electorate (Neuman, 1986). The Gallup Organization (1988) national survey of American adults noted that only about half were able to name the countries in which the Arabs and Jews or the Sandinistas and Contras had been in conflict, while 16% (including more than one in ten college graduates) were of the opinion that the former USSR was a member of NATO. A survey of 200 high school seniors commissioned by ABC reported that while virtually all recognized Michael Jackson, Michael J. Fox, and Madonna, less than half knew Nicaragua's Daniel Ortega, the Philippines' Corazon Aquino, or Iran's Ayatollah Khomeini, three figures who featured prominently in the international news at that time (Walters, 1988). In Britain, a study of 7- to 11-year-olds found that over 30% of the sample claimed that Germans were non-white (Johnson, Middleton, & Tajfel, 1970). Many television viewers, especially children (Cullingford, 1984), are simply not interested in political figures or issues (Hyman & Sheatsley, 1947) or their interest appears to be limited to a number of specific issues. Young males tend to have greater interest in and knowledge of political affairs than females (Hahn, 1987; Langeveld, 1979). Among 12- to 17-year-olds, interest in politics tends to increase with age, with the period of most rapid acquisition of political knowledge lying between 15 and 17 years (Langeveld, 1979).

A basic knowledge of world geography would seem to be a prerequisite for understanding current political policies and events (Gillmor, 1980). Many current serious political confrontations have to be viewed against a geographical perspective in order to be understood. For example, geographical factors can help explain the United States' concern with events in El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Cuba, the former USSR's involvement in Afghanistan, China's ambitions for Hong Kong and, more recently, Saudi Arabia's reactions to events in Kuwait and Iraq. It would be virtually impossible to make any sense of the new political

alignments emerging from the break-up of the Soviet Union without some knowledge of the geography of the region.

There is a considerable body of evidence to suggest that students' and adults' knowledge of geography, in particular the ability to locate important places on the world map, leaves much to be desired. In a small-scale international study of 13-year-olds, Polish students scored highest, correctly answering 41% of items. Irish (28.3%) and US students (24.7%) scored lower (Saveland, 1980). A 1987 survey of 5,000 high school seniors in eight major US cities showed that 48% of Hartford students could not name three countries in Africa, while in Dallas 25% were unable to name the country that borders the United States to the south (Bradley, 1987). Separate US studies have shown that almost 70% of university students could not name one African country south of the Sahara (Bradley, 1987), that place-location skills among college students had fallen (Kennedy, 1987), and that fewer than 40% of preservice teachers were able to locate England, France, or Japan (Herman, Hawkins, & Berryman, 1985). Similar studies in the United Kingdom have revealed relatively low levels of knowledge of geography (Hadfield, 1989; Johnson, Middleton, & Tajfel, 1970).

In a large-scale nine-nation study conducted by the Gallup Organization for the National Geographic Society, adults (N:10,820) were asked to identify 16 places (14 countries and two bodies of water). Swedes (11.6) and West Germans (11.2) scored highest, followed in turn by Japan (9.7), France (9.3), and Canada (9.2). Adults in the United States (8.6) and the United Kingdom (8.5) identified slightly more than half of the places. Respondents in Italy (7.6) and Mexico (7.4) scored lowest. The United States was the only country where the youngest age group (18- to 24-year-olds) scored lower (6.9) than older respondents. A later study revealed that 1,500 Soviet adults identified an average of 7.4 of the same 16 places (National Geographic Society, 1989). This placed them at the bottom with Mexico. Among 18- to 24-year-olds, the Soviets scored an average of 9.3. Thus individuals in both of the superpowers 'demonstrated an astonishing lack of awareness of the world around them' (p.2).

Students who study geography appear, not unexpectedly, to have an advantage on place-location tasks. For example, in Canada where geography has a longstanding presence as a separate discipline, students in grades 7 to 12 tend to do fairly well in labelling places on a world map (Fox, 1988).

The present study contrasts Irish and American adolescents' level of knowledge of international political figures and place-location (geographical knowledge) skills. Secondly, it examines the relationship between political and geographical knowledge. Thirdly, gender differences in both political and geographical knowledge are investigated.

## METHOD

*Subjects*

The subjects were 306 students drawn from high schools in six of the United States: California (N:44), Florida (N:60), Massachusetts (N:48), Missouri (N:43), Montana (N:56), and Texas (N:55) and 558 students drawn from five (3 urban and 2 rural) post-primary schools in Ireland. Pupils enrolled in accelerated or remedial classes were omitted.

The US schools were considered to be reasonably representative of American high schools but were really selected for convenience. Co-operating teachers in the schools were asked to select classes in which most of the pupils were 16 years old.

The Irish sample was confined to students who had taken the Intermediate Certificate Examination in the previous year. The schools which they attended were considered to be reasonably representative of Irish post-primary schools but no systematic method of selection was employed. The schools reflected the Irish urban-rural mix and both single-sex and co-educational schools were represented. Two of the schools were single sex; one catered for boys, the other for girls. Three of the schools (one in Dublin, one in the west and one in the south-west) catered in the main for students from working-class backgrounds while the majority in the remaining two Dublin-based schools were from lower-middle- or middle-class backgrounds. Different students from one Irish school participated in both rounds of data collection.

The mean age of the US sample was 16.51 years (SD:0.76), while that of the Irish sample was 15.74 (SD:0.59). There were 386 females and 478 males in the total sample.

*Variables*

*International Political Figures.* A list of 27 political figures who had featured prominently in the international news sections of United States newspapers during 1988 was developed. The list included world figures (e.g., Gorbachev, Thatcher, Mitterand), leaders of smaller countries (e.g., Noriega, Ortega, Kadaffi), two US Secretaries of State (Schultz and Baker) and prominent political activists (Mandela, Tutu, and Walesa). Two political figures in two large countries which did not feature prominently in the news at the time (Peng and Hawke) were also included. Students who were given a list of the names were instructed to write the name of the country associated with the person as well as a brief comment to show what they knew about the person. One mark was awarded for each correct nationality or home country and one for each

correct comment. No marks for correct comments were awarded in the cases of President Zia, King Hussein, Colonel Kadaffi, Archbishop Tutu, General Pinochet, or President Mubarak since many students simply repeated the person's title in the comment section. Internal consistency reliability measures were computed for the political knowledge test for the entire sample and separately for the American and Irish subsamples. These yielded reliability indices of .89, .86, and .91 respectively. The inclusion of students' comments increased the reliability indices by .05, .07, and .04 respectively.

*National Public Figures.* Students were also asked to identify seven current public figures who were considered national rather than international. The names in this group were randomly interspersed among the names of the international figures. US students were asked to identify Biden, Bork, Carlucci, Cuomo, Ferraro, (Sandra Day) O'Connor, and Weinberger while Irish students were presented with Collins, Fitzgerald, Hillary, Lenihan, McCusker, Paisley, and Spring. Internal consistency reliability indices of .81 and .71 were recorded for the US and Irish national figures scales respectively.

*Place Location.* Each student was asked to complete a 28-item geographical place-location test by identifying places called aloud by the test administrator. The first 16 items taken from the international Gallup Organization (1988) survey were USA, USSR, Central America, France, Japan, Canada, Persian Gulf, Mexico, Italy, Sweden, United Kingdom, South Africa, West Germany, Pacific Ocean, Egypt, and Vietnam. To this list were added an additional twelve countries most of which might be regarded as having been in the political news in 1988: Afghanistan, Angola, Argentina, Chile, Ethiopia, The Falklands, India, Ireland, Israel, Libya, Poland, and New Zealand. The map was a black and white oval projection on an 11" x 6" sheet on which national boundaries and lines of longitude and latitude were the only geographic features. Students were instructed to indicate location either by inserting a number or a number linked with a line and arrow to the appropriate place on the map. (For small countries, such as Israel, it would not have been possible to write a correct number within its national boundaries on the map.)

Failure to attempt to answer items may reflect lack of knowledge or a disinterest in the assigned task. We accepted the latter interpretation. Students who attempted fewer than four items on the political knowledge test and fewer than three items on the place-location task were eliminated from the analyses. In effect, this reduced the US sample by 13.1% to 266 and the Irish sample by 1.8% to 548.

Some of the names which were dominant in the news in 1988 were no longer as newsworthy in 1989 when the second portion of the Irish data was collected. For instance, leaders such as Khomeini, Marcos, and Zia had died in the interim.

This raised the question of the appropriateness of grouping data from the 1988 and 1989 Irish samples. Since we had data from the same Irish school for 1988 and again for 1989 we were able to compare scores for this school to determine if there had been a significant loss of political knowledge over the one-year period. The difference in mean scores was not significant. Accordingly we grouped the data from both Irish samples.

*Geography.* Letter grades awarded on the Intermediate Certificate geography examination were transformed into numerical rankings using the following scheme: A=7; B=6; C=5; D=4; E=3; F=2; NG=1. Traditionally, letter grade distributions vary little from year to year.

#### *Procedure*

Teachers were sent copies of the list of political figures and place-location instrument, together with detailed instructions for administration. The instruments were administered to students in their classrooms. They were allowed 15 minutes for the political-figures recognition task and 15 minutes for the place-location task.

Irish teachers provided information on the grades obtained by students in the Intermediate Certificate Examination.

Data were collected in the United States early in 1989 and in Ireland in late 1988 and again in late 1989.

### RESULTS

#### *Political Knowledge*

There were 48 items on the political knowledge test when the six items in which students repeated a person's title in the comment section were excluded. On this reduced test, scores ranged from 0 to 46. The overall mean score was 18.47 ( $SD=10.60$ ). The mean recorded by Irish students (20.21) was significantly different from that recorded by their US counterparts (14.88) ( $F=47.87$ ;  $df=1,812$ ;  $p<.001$ ). If we confine analyses to the identification of the country associated with each political leader (i.e., omitting the comments), we find that United States' students correctly answered an average of 8.75 of the 27 items while Irish students answered 11.72 items.

In the US sample, and also in each of the six states, males scored significantly higher than females (overall means: males, 16.8; females, 12.96). Similarly, in Ireland the overall score for males (23.71) was higher than for females (15.03). Males also had higher scores in each of three co-educational schools.

TABLE I

## PERCENTAGES OF STUDENTS CORRECTLY IDENTIFYING INTERNATIONAL POLITICAL FIGURES

Political figure	Location	Percentage			Higher Score	
		Total Sample <sup>1</sup> (N:266)	US (N:548)	Ireland (N:548)		
1. Daniel Ortega	Nicaragua	16.2	21.4	10.9	.001	US
2. Corazon Aquino	Philippines	51.3	50.0	52.7		
3. Lech Walesa	Poland	26.1	12.0	40.1	.001	IRL
4. Bob Hawke	Australia	20.4	2.3	38.1	.001	IRL
5. Nelson Mandela	South Africa	49.2	20.7	77.6	.001	IRL
6. Francois Mitterand	France	48.2	19.2	77.6	.001	IRL
7. President Mubarak	Egypt	5.5	4.5	6.4		
8. Brian Mulroney	Canada	12.6	13.2	12.0		
9. P.W. Botha	South Africa	35.1	12.4	57.8	.001	IRL
10. George Shultz	USA	71.9	82.0	61.7	.001	US
11. Li Peng	China	49.8	40.2	59.3	.001	IRL
12. General Zia	Pakistan	6.3	2.6	9.9	.001	IRL
13. King Hussein	Jordan	11.9	7.9	15.9	.001	IRL
14. Colonel Kaddafi	Libya	56.5	59.0	54.0		
15. Archbishop Tutu	South Africa	50.9	28.9	72.8	.001	IRL
16. Margaret Thatcher	United Kingdom	83.9	71.1	96.7	.001	IRL
17. General Pinochet	Chile	8.9	4.5	13.3		
18. Yassir Arafat	Palestine/ Middle East	25.6	26.3	24.8	.05	
19. Fidel Castro	Cuba	48.1	51.9	44.2		
20. Ferdinand Marcos	Philippines	51.7	53.8	49.5	.001	
21. Rajiv Gandhi	India	71.6	63.9	79.2		
22. Mikhail Gorbachev	USSR	93.4	92.9	93.8	.001	
23. Manuel Noriega	Panama	11.5	17.3	5.7	.01	US
24. Yitzhak Shamir	Israel	13.3	9.0	17.5		
25. Ayatollah Khomeini	Iran	30.1	30.5	29.6	.001	
26. Helmut Kohl	West Germany	28.0	10.2	45.8	.001	IRL
27. James Baker	USA	41.4	67.7	15.1		
Overall Mean Percentage		37.7	32.4	43.0		

<sup>1</sup>Corrected for sample size

Table 1 presents the results in terms of percentages answering correctly individual items on the international political knowledge test along with the percentage of respondents in each subsample who identified the person's nationality or home country. In the United States sample, the best known figures were, in order of recognition, Gorbachev, Schultz, Thatcher, Baker, and Gandhi

while the least known were Hawke, Zia, Mubarak, Pinochet, and Hussein. Irish students were most likely to recognize Gorbachev, Thatcher, Gandhi, Mandela, and Mitterand and least likely to recognize Noriega, Mubarak, Zia, Ortega, and Mulroney.

The majority of incorrect comments had little in common. Some, however, were quite unexpected. Fidel Castro was described as a basketball player, Archbishop Tutu as a Vatican employee, James Baker as a TV evangelist (an obvious association with Jim Bakker), Daniel Ortega as a boxer, Brian Mulroney as leader of the IRA, and perhaps the most unlikely description of all, Yassir Arafat was listed as an Israeli religious leader.

For a variety of reasons, we expected that national figures listed on the political knowledge test would be more readily recognized in Ireland than in the United States. By comparison with the seven named US national figures, the Irish figures would have been more prominent in the Irish media. The size of the respective countries also led to the belief that Irish figures were more likely to be known. Our expectations were confirmed. Irish students associated an average of 5.4 of the 7 listed national figures with Ireland. In contrast, United States students associated an average of 3.2 national figures with the United States. For US students, the correlation between their international and national political knowledge was .78; for Irish students the corresponding correlation was .49. Both were statistically significant.

#### *Place Location*

A summary of the results of the 28-item place-location test is presented in Table 2. For the US sample, the average number of correct placements was 15.19; the corresponding Irish mean score was 16.64. The difference between these scores is statistically significant ( $F=10.58$ ,  $df=1,812$ ;  $p<.001$ ). More than 90% of United States students correctly identified the United States, the USSR, Canada, and Mexico while fewer than 30% could identify Angola, Afghanistan, the Falkland Islands, Ethiopia, Israel, or New Zealand. Over 90% of Irish students identified correctly Ireland, the United Kingdom, the USSR, Italy, France, and the USA. At the other extreme, fewer than 30% correctly marked Ethiopia, Angola, Afghanistan, Vietnam, or Israel.

A discriminant analysis was carried out to determine which items on the place-location task best discriminated between the Irish and American samples. Not surprisingly, Ireland emerged as the major discriminatory variable. Given that the Irish sample had a distinct advantage over US students on this item, it was decided to omit it from the analysis. When Ireland was deleted from the analyses, the difference between groups remained significant ( $F=3.89$ ;  $df=1,812$ ;  $p<.05$ ).

TABLE 2  
PERCENTAGES OF STUDENTS CORRECTLY IDENTIFYING PLACES

Place	Percentage				Higher Score
	Total Sample <sup>1</sup>	US (N:266)	Ireland (N:548)	p<	
US	94.9	98.5	91.2	.001	US
USSR	96.3	97.0	95.6		
Japan	52.0	64.3	39.6	.001	US
Canada	91.7	96.6	86.7	.001	US
France	82.8	72.2	93.4	.001	IRL
Mexico	83.3	96.2	70.3	.001	US
Italy	88.5	83.1	93.8	.001	IRL
Sweden	50.7	40.6	60.8	.001	IRL
United Kingdom	79.4	62.8	96.0	.001	IRL
South Africa	64.5	63.9	65.1		
West Germany	52.7	39.5	65.9	.001	IRL
Egypt	47.1	51.9	42.2	.01	US
Vietnam	30.8	38.0	23.5	.001	US
Central America	60.1	75.9	44.3	.001	US
Persian Gulf	36.1	34.2	38.0		
Pacific Ocean	81.0	89.8	72.1	.001	US
New Zealand	44.4	29.7	59.1	.001	IRL
Afghanistan	18.7	14.3	23.2	.01	IRL
Poland	41.7	36.5	46.9	.01	IRL
Ireland	67.7	37.2	98.2	.001	IRL
Angola	9.4	6.8	11.9	.05	IRL
Falkland Islands	42.1	24.8	59.3	.001	IRL
Libya	35.2	35.7	34.7		
Ethiopia	31.0	27.1	34.9	.05	IRL
Chile	56.1	53.4	58.8		
Israel	27.0	27.4	26.5		
Argentina	53.6	46.6	60.6	.001	IRL
India	68.8	66.2	71.4		
Overall Mean Percentage	56.7	53.9	59.4		

<sup>1</sup>Corrected for sample size

Separate analyses showed that US males scored higher than females (17.01 vs 13.20) and also in each of the six states. Similarly in Ireland, males outscored females (19.00 vs 13.15) and also in each of the co-educational schools.

Sixteen of the 28 items used in our place-location task were taken from an international Gallup Organization (1988) survey. The US average of 11.05 items answered correctly in the present study compares favourably with an average of

8.6 correctly identified by the US Gallup sample and with the 6.9 identified by the 18- to 24-year-olds, the youngest subsection of the US sample. US students scored higher on every one of the 16 items in the present study than did their counterparts in the Gallup survey. Clearly, on the basis of this evidence, it cannot be assumed that the sample of students in the present study was inferior to the general population in their ability to locate places. The Irish sample of students correctly located an average of 10.79 of the 16 items common to both studies.

An analysis of variance revealed no significant difference between Irish and US students in their ability to locate correctly the 16 places used in the Gallup survey on the map. Thus, the difference in performance on the place-location task between Irish and American students reflected a difference in ability to locate the 12 mainly 'political hotspots' that comprised the remainder of the place-location task. Analysis of variance revealed a significant difference between Irish and US students in their ability to locate these places ( $F=58.130$ ;  $df=1,812$ ;  $p.<001$ ). The difference remained significant when Ireland was omitted from the comparison ( $F=26.21$ ;  $df=1,812$ ;  $p.<001$ ).

Many of the places incorrectly located might be termed 'near misses'. Among the more common errors were confusing Sweden with Norway, the Persian Gulf with the Red Sea, and West Germany with East Germany or Poland. While approximately 37% of incorrect answers could be termed 'near misses', roughly a third were placed on the wrong continent.

#### *Performance of Irish Students on Intermediate Certificate Geography*

The mean level of performance of Irish students who took geography in the Intermediate Certificate Examination in 1989 (N:225) was marginally below the national average (see Ireland: Department of Education, 1990). National data were not available for the 1988 geography examination. Assuming comparability of geography standards from year to year, it would seem that the 1988 sample (N:279) was slightly above average in geography.

#### *Relationship Between Political Knowledge and Place Location*

The correlation between political knowledge and place-location skills was estimated at .67 ( $p.<001$ ) for the Irish sample and .58 ( $p.<001$ ) for the US sample.

#### DISCUSSION

The results of this study should be interpreted with some caution. First, neither the United States nor Irish samples may be representative. The limited evidence

available suggests that the US students were substantially superior, in terms of place-location skills, to the national sample of 18- to 24-year-olds who had participated in the 1988 international Gallup survey, while the Irish sample was approximately average in terms of achievement in geography. Secondly, the list of 27 international political figures was based, in the main, on figures which featured prominently in the US media; a separate list based on Irish media coverage would undoubtedly have included the majority of the same names but would also have had a more European bias. Thirdly, we suspect that the procedure we used to eliminate students who attempted fewer than four items on the political knowledge test and fewer than three items on the place-location task, on the assumption that these students were not trying, contributed to an overestimate of US students' scores since the adoption of these criteria resulted in the elimination of 13.1% of the US sample but only 1.8% of the Irish sample.

In the study, Irish students outscored American students in the identification of international figures. Indeed, the performance of the American students, even if superior to that of the general population and to that of 18- to 24-year olds, would appear to be poor. Almost 40% of them failed to name the country associated with six or more of 27 major international political figures; almost one-quarter of the Irish students fell into this category. Turning to national figures, roughly 20% of the US students were unable to link more than one of seven prominent people with the US. Over 80% of Irish students correctly associated five of seven national figures with Ireland. This finding was not considered surprising given the relatively small size of the country and the prominence afforded these people in the Irish media. No doubt, ease of identification of such figures was aided by the fact that they are 'big fish in a small pond'. However, the superior performance of Irish students is perhaps surprising when one considers the difference in age between them and the American students, particularly if the students can be regarded as being at an age at which a rapid acquisition of political knowledge occurs (Langeveld, 1979).

On both the political knowledge and place-location tests, girls in both countries tended to do less well than boys. It may be that the gender difference in political knowledge is related to place-location knowledge. At any rate, our findings support those of other studies that indicate that young males have a greater interest in, and knowledge of, political affairs than have young females (Langeveld, 1979).

Knowledge of current international political figures is not an end in itself. We would argue, however, that the ability to recognize the name of an important figure is a prerequisite for understanding the significant political issues, institutions, and policies associated with that individual. It represents a minimum

condition for a basic understanding of international issues as well as enabling communication and dialogue about important political considerations. Such knowledge can help create a less stereotypical approach towards leaders and members of other nationalities. In the long run, it can contribute to the creation of a more sophisticated electorate which can ultimately influence foreign policy issues in such key areas as trade, defence, and foreign aid. The low level of knowledge of major international figures exhibited by students in this study suggests that among adolescents effective understanding and communication about political issues remains a distant goal.

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