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Set Charge about Change: The Effects of a Long-Term Youth Civic Engagement Program

Robbin Smith

Abstract

In an effort to create an enhanced sense of civic engagement within the U.S. population, a variety of initiatives have been launched recently. Predominantly, these efforts have focused on young adults in high school and college. Although some programs have targeted younger age groups as well, they are typically short in duration. This case study focuses on a small group of elementary school students who participated in a long-term youth engagement program. The participants' civic knowledge, civic skills, and civic efficacy were measured at regular intervals throughout the 17 months of the program. The findings suggest that, at the end of the project, all of the participants demonstrated increased civic knowledge and skills, and an enhanced sense of civic efficacy. An analysis of what happened during the project and the lessons that may be applicable to those who undertake civic engagement projects with younger children is also offered.

Introduction

For some time now, academics, politicians, and the public have expressed a renewed interest in civic engagement. Thomas Erlich (2000), in his call to revitalize higher education and democratic institutions, defined civic engagement as “working to make a difference in the civic life of our communities and developing the combination of knowledge, skills, values, and motivation to make that difference. It means promoting the quality of life in a community, through both political and non-political processes” (Preface, vi).

Literature Review

Many cite the work of Robert Putnam (2000) as the impetus for a larger national discussion on civic engagement. In his seminal book, *Bowling Alone*, he suggested that Americans suffered from a civic malaise that was particularly acute among the young. Putnam concluded that, “social capital has eroded steadily and sometimes dramatically over the past two generations” (p. 287). His conclusions were particularly problematic because not only did they suggest there had been a marked decline in collective action, but they also implied that the very notion of an engaged citizenry, capable of participating effectively and exercising its rights and responsibilities, had been diminished, thereby jeopardizing the health of democratic institutions. Putnam's work became a clarion call for all who had expressed concern about related declines in such disparate areas as voter turnout, trust in government and elected officials, and civic attachment.

While many researchers focused on the adult population, some scholars sought to determine if

the lack of community involvement in the general population was the result of a decline in youth civic education and civic engagement, and, if so, how to reverse that trend. Several subsequent studies found that U.S. students exhibited the same lack of engagement that Putnam had decried. For example, the collaborative Carnegie Foundation and CIRCLE Report on the Status of Civic Education and Citizenship (2003) found that “young Americans are not prepared to participate fully in our democracy now and when they become adults” (p. 8). The serious implications of the Carnegie-CIRCLE study were highlighted by the results of the subsequent 2006 National Assessment of Educational Progress study that demonstrated that in the 4th, 8th, and 12th grades, only a fraction of U.S. students scored at the proficient level in civics (NCES)¹.

Some of the solutions proposed and pursued to address the decline in youth engagement took the form of governmental action. When state legislators became concerned about the lack of civic knowledge in public schools, numerous states enacted measures emphasizing the importance of civic education. These measures ranged from symbolic gestures (e.g., legislative resolutions), to professional development opportunities (such as funding for teachers in the area of civics), to financing formal studies on how to increase youth civic engagement.

Other scholars, however, sought to show that the situation was more complex and yet less dire than that posited by Putnam. For example, Marcello and

¹Although in the 2006 study, fourth grade students performed better than their counterparts did in 1998 (NCES, 2007). The 2010 study found a slight increase in proficiency for 4th graders (NCES, 2011).

Kirby (2008) examined trends in voter turnout and concluded that the outcome was not as dismal for youth engagement as Putnam had purported. Their conclusions were supported further by subsequent research on youth voter registration and voter turnout trends (Marcello, Lopez, Kennedy, & Bar, 2008). Zukin, Keeter, Andolina, Jenkins, and Delli Carpini (2006) also challenged Putnam's findings and argued that the youth of the U.S. demonstrated greater levels of involvement in charitable activities and higher levels of volunteering than older Americans. In addition, Torney-Purta, Lehmann, Oswald, and Schulz (2001) surveyed 90,000 students across several domains including democracy and citizenship, national identity, and social cohesion and diversity on behalf of the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement. Torney-Purta et al. (2001) found that most of the students had a basic understanding of democratic values and processes. Moreover, a majority of the respondents recognized that electoral participation was an important facet of citizenship. All of these researchers concluded that there was renewed hope for youth civic engagement. Even Putnam (2005) acknowledged this renewed optimism indicating that much of the recent research was "a most welcome harbinger perhaps of a new-found respect for the values of public service" that might lead to "regenerating social capital" (p. 8).

Unfortunately, much of this research typically defined youth engagement as something that was only relevant to those 14 years of age and older. In fact, Marcello and Kirby (2008), Zukin et al., (2006), and Torney-Puerta et al. (2001) all surveyed students 15 years or older. And yet, many scholars who study youth civic engagement acknowledge that it is critically important to introduce engagement opportunities as early as possible and to develop activities that are long-term in nature. Levine and Higgins-D'Alessandro (2010) argued that, "by developing young people's skills of social analysis and deliberation, we help to promote democratic decision-making and thereby optimize society's support for capabilities" (p. 124). Berti (2005), for example, found that between the ages of 10 and 11, children build "a fairly standard conception of political parties, as connected to elections, in conflict with each other, aimed at producing leaders and having to do with government" (p. 82)². Regardless of children's capacity to learn civic concepts, the Carnegie-CIRCLE report noted that "[b]etween 1988 and 1998, the proportion of fourth-graders who reported taking social studies daily fell from 49 percent to 39 percent, a steep decline that reflects

a general trend away from civics and social studies in elementary grades" (Civic Mission of Schools [CMS], 2003, p. 15).

Just as civic education has declined, so too have the opportunities to develop civic skills through youth engagement. For example, a study conducted by the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS, 2006) found that only 38% of U.S. youth 12–18 years old report that they have engaged in school based service and most of this participation occurs during high school, as "[h]igh school students are 37% more likely than middle school students to participate in school-based service" (p. 7). Moreover, of the middle school students surveyed, only 7% indicated that they had engaged in a school-based service project while enrolled in elementary school. While such findings certainly are cause for concern, there are a few programs in existence today that provide an opportunity to introduce civic engagement concepts to younger age cohorts and to examine the impact of those programs in terms of: 1) the children's civic knowledge including their views of citizenship; 2) their development of concomitant civic skills; and 3) the cultivation of a civic disposition that inclines them to act as engaged citizens (i.e. civic efficacy). Youth in Action is one such program. Public Achievement (PA), which is the focus of this paper, is another. Before presenting the case study findings of PA's effect in these three areas, however, it is important to clearly delineate how the terms "civic knowledge", "civic skills", and "civic efficacy" are conceptualized.

Civic Knowledge

The CMS formed, as an outgrowth of the 2003 Carnegie-CIRCLE report, was one of the first organizations to formally conceptualize "civic knowledge". To them, this consisted of an understanding and awareness of: important historical events; issues and actors; the structures and process of government and the legal system; the role of social movements; and the relevant social and political networks for change (<http://civicmissionofschools.org>). This conceptualization echoed that of several previous researchers. For example, Jennings and Niemi (1974, 1981) argued that political knowledge encompassed an understanding of political structures and major political actors (including international political leaders), the party system, major historical events, and significant public policy issues. Similarly, Galston (2001) claimed that civic knowledge was limited to a

²Astuto and Ruck (2010) found that as early as preschool, young children develop identifiable civic capacities.

familiarity with “political institutions and processes, leaders and parties, and public policies” (p. 221). In a slightly different vein, Torney-Purta et al. (2001) contended that civic knowledge included an understanding of democracy, governmental and economic processes, institutions, and values, as well as the social participation values of one’s nation and the socio-economic stratification and opportunity structures for selected groups in society.

As conceptualized in this paper, civic knowledge consists of: 1) an understanding of governmental structures, actors and processes; 2) a comprehension of governmental outputs in the form of policies; 3) knowledge of non-governmental forces such as the media, interest groups, and social movements; and 4) familiarity with the prominent social networks within a given community setting.

Civic Skills

While civic knowledge has a degree of certainty in its conceptualization, civic skills, unfortunately, do not. Often when academics discuss civic skills, they refer to those skills necessary to be effective citizens. In other words, they delimit and define civic skills as those skills necessary for effective political participation. At times, effective political participation is further reduced to simply electoral participation. In short, under these definitions, civic skills are merely those skills necessary to vote, and being a “good citizen” is one who actually votes. However, the concepts of civic skills and citizenship are much broader than that and widely debated. Dalton (2008) confronted this dilemma in *The Good Citizen*. He distinguished between two forms of citizenship: duty-based citizenship and engaged citizenship. Duty-based citizenship included the traditional forms of political participation such as voting, paying taxes, and obeying the law. He noted that, “these norms reflect the formal obligations, responsibilities, and rights of citizenship.” Engaged citizenship, on the other hand, related to one’s concern for others and the community and having the capacity to “understand the opinion of others” and “a moral or empathetic element of citizenship” (p. 28). Dalton found that members of the 1980s generation and Generation X were more likely to demonstrate engaged citizenship than duty-based citizenship that was more commonly found in the pre-World War II and Baby Boom generations. Thus, the younger age groups displayed a greater “concern for social rights and the protection of the disadvantaged” (p. 91). Dalton concluded that, “these orientations should promote tolerance” (p. 226).

Likewise, Loeb (2010) advocated for a form of citizenship promoted by William Deikman in which individuals have a “receptive consciousness” that “helps us view ourselves as part of a larger life process” and “lets us reach out to our fellow human beings” (p. 236). Likewise, Jennings and Niemi (1974) found that good citizens (as conceptualized by their respondents) were those who were tolerant of others, got along with other people, were considerate, and were willing to be active in their communities. Thus, while the definitions of citizenship vary, (e.g. the engaged citizenship of Dalton or the informed citizenship of Galston) at their root, they share a common concern with tolerance and respect for the views of others.

Respect for divergent views is a particularly important civic skill emphasized in youth engagement programs. In fact, the Carnegie-CIRCLE (2003) report concluded that one of the goals of civic education in all schools was to develop “competent and responsible citizens” who are “concerned for the rights and welfare of others, are socially responsible, [and] willing to listen to alternative perspectives” (p. 10). In short, active listening and a respect for diverse approaches are both key components in citizenship and, thus, important civic skills in youth engagement programs. Moreover, according to CMS, youth engagement programs should develop two strands of civic skills: 1) intellectual civic skills, such as critical thinking, active listening and “understanding, interpreting and critiquing ...different points of view” (Civic Competencies, para 2); and 2) participatory civic skills such as effective communication, building consensus, community mapping, and organizing groups. Finally, quality civic education programs will teach tolerance and respect as well as a “rejection of violence”, a “desire for community involvement”, and “personal efficacy”(Civic Competencies, para 3). Thus, civic skills relevant to youths extend beyond traditional political participation and include the ability to empathize, respect diverse opinions, and communicate effectively. The concept of the “good citizen”, then, is one rooted in civic knowledge, civic skills and civic efficacy. Efficacy, however, also has a wide variety of conceptualizations and definitions, to which we now focus our attention.

Civic Efficacy

Albert Bandura (1977) argued that efficacy, specifically self-efficacy, was “a belief in one’s personal capabilities” (p. 4). Maddux and Gosselin (2003) added that “self-efficacy beliefs are not concerned with perceptions of skills and abilities divorced

from situations; they are concerned, instead, with what people believe they can do with their skills and abilities under certain conditions” (p. 219). CMS (2005) reiterated this belief by indicating that the goal of civic education should be to educate democratic citizens who “are informed and thoughtful about public and community issues, reflecting a grasp and appreciation of history and the fundamental processes of American democracy” and who have a developed sense of “personal efficacy” (Criteria for Success, para. 1). Additionally, according to Kahne and Westheimer (2006), “a sense of efficacy is a key building block for civic commitment.” They contend that, “many educators believe that if we shore up young people’s sense of efficacy (their confidence that they can make a difference), then their levels of civic and political engagement will rise” (p. 289).

Maddux (2005) further differentiated between self and collective efficacy. Collective efficacy is the “group’s shared belief in its conjoint capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given levels of attainments” (p. 284). Of course, collective efficacy is related to self-efficacy. In fact, they are “mutually supportive” (Beaumont, 2010, p. 526). Individuals with high self-efficacy are more likely to demonstrate high collective efficacy and vice versa. Moreover, the skills and knowledge that contribute to a sense of self-efficacy for the individual are identical to those that create collective efficacy among groups. But while Maddux and Gosselin (2003) focused on self- and collective efficacy, Kahne and Westheimer (2006) and Torney-Purta et al. (2001) found distinguishing between internal and external efficacy to be more important in the political realm. .

The sense of political efficacy is usually defined as the attitude that citizens can make a difference in government decisions. It is often thought of as having two parts. External efficacy is the belief that government officials are responsive to citizen input, while internal efficacy is the belief that the individual can mobilize personal resources to be effective (p. 130).

Kahne and Westheimer argued that students in civic education programs may learn that there is a great difference between internal and external efficacy. Students who participate in a program in which they gain internal efficacy may find governmental institutions or actors unwilling to negotiate over certain public issues. In that case, the students do not gain any external efficacy and

may lose internal efficacy as a result. Thus, for the authors, any youth program that focuses on “educating citizens for a democratic society” must encourage students to “gain a sense that they can make a difference and also identify, analyze, and challenge social and institutional practices as they work to create a more just society” (p. 295). According to Torney-Purta et al. (2001), although political scientists have long expressed interest in efficacy as an important concept relevant to adult political behavior, “[t]he community and the school are among the settings in which such efficacy can be experienced, especially by young people” (p. 130). Thus, the evidence indicates that the creation and fostering of civic knowledge, civic skills, and civic efficacy is vital in youth engagement programs. But how are the conceptions best introduced and developed in young children? This is a question that researchers have increasingly begun to address. An example of one such program that may offer insights into the development of youth civic knowledge, civic skills, and civic efficacy is Public Achievement.

Public Achievement

Public Achievement (PA) is one example of a youth civic education and engagement program with the expressed goal of developing the participants’ civic knowledge, civic skills, and civic efficacy. PA is a youth engagement model begun at the Center for Democracy and Citizenship at the University of Minnesota’s Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs. In the prototypical PA program, college students take a semester-long course on civic education, engagement, and developing the efficacy of young children. The following semester, the college students are assigned to work with groups of children in an elementary or middle school. The children, with the assistance of their college “coach”, select a project that must be public in nature. Often these projects focus on some local concern or issue. For example, recent groups in the U.S. have focused on teen violence, the establishment of recycling programs in schools, or the improvement of the quality and nutritional value of school lunches. Whatever the topic or concern, the college students act merely as facilitators while the younger students develop their projects and see them through to fruition (Hildreth, 2000; Boyte & Farr, 1997).

The elementary and secondary students, as part of PA, gain civic knowledge about local governmental structures, the role of relevant public actors, and the history of related events while learning about civic and political concepts such as community, citizenship, democracy, and power. They also learn

and must master a variety of civic skills, such as team building, negotiating, planning, interviewing, and public speaking. See Figure 1 for an overview of the PA model.

The overall objective is for the students to acquire a greater interest in their own civic life and an ability to participate in the public debates within their own communities. The other goal of PA is to develop a civic disposition in the students such that they develop an appreciation for different views and perspectives and a sense of individual and collective efficacy. In other words, the PA program strives to provide the participants with the knowledge and skills to involve themselves in public work and the willingness to continue that engagement long after the program has ended.

The format of PA has proven to be successful and has been replicated in a variety of communities throughout the US and overseas (e.g., Georgia State College and University, Colorado College, and Northern Arizona University while internationally, programs have occurred in Israel, Northern Ireland, Poland, and Turkey).

While many researchers and advocates have promoted a variety of approaches for cultivating youth civic engagement in high schools and middle schools, very few initiatives have been attempted at the elementary school level. PA is one of the few that has. In the remainder of this paper, the results of a case study of a 17-month long PA initiative are presented, and a discussion of the extent to which the PA program augmented the civic knowledge, civic skills, and civic efficacy of the participants will be reviewed.

Methodology and Results

In January of 2009, the author began working with a group of fourth grade girls on a modified Public Achievement project that culminated in June of 2010.³ The overall objective of the project was to encourage these students to view themselves as engaged citizens. The young students committed to meeting and working together every week on a project of interest to them. Prior to the inception of the program, they completed surveys on their civic knowledge, civic skills, and their own sense of civic efficacy. They repeated these surveys at the end of each phase of the project. Additionally, the young women were interviewed throughout the 17-month project about their experiences.

In the inaugural meeting, they identified a variety of potential public issues that they wished to address. Their initial topics included a review of the public library's video selections for young girls, the installation of a map of the U.S. on the school blacktop, and a conservation project. After much discussion and debate, they decided that of primary importance to them was the use of school fields during recess. Years before, the fields had been widely available to all elementary students. However, in recent years, access to the fields had been limited solely to 5th graders and only on an intermittent basis. Thus, the majority of the school children were left with the unappealing option of playing on a

³The program was modified because it lasted much longer than the typical one semester program. The project continued 17 months with the same group of young women. Additionally, there was no college student coach. The author served as the coach of the program.

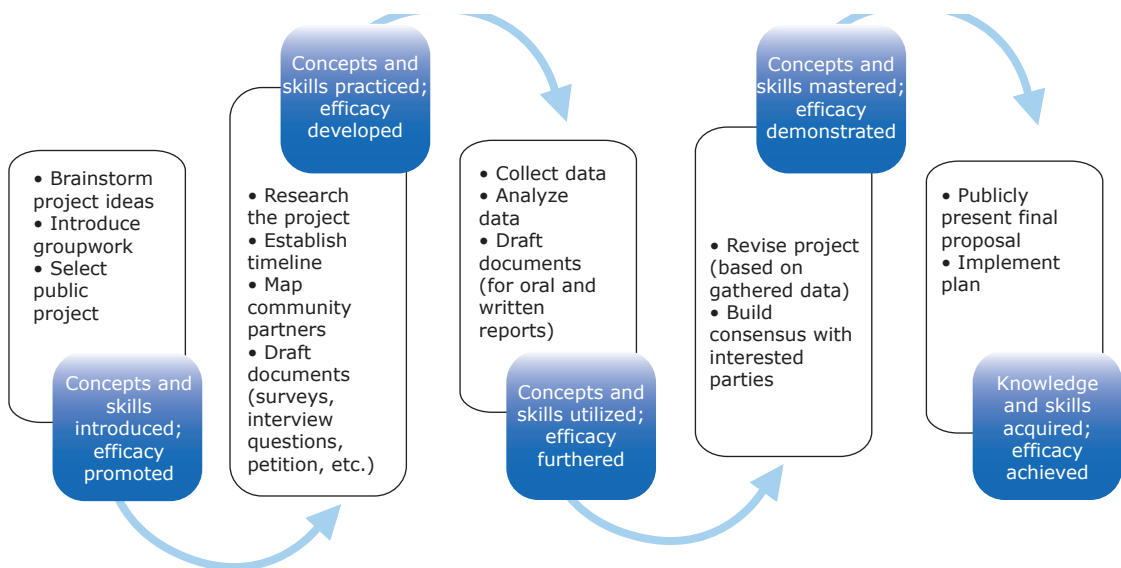


Figure 1. The Public Achievement Youth Engagement Program Process

playground largely designed for younger children (i.e. kindergarten–second grade) or hanging out on the blacktop area congregating aimlessly. In both locations, no running was allowed due to risk of injury.⁴ Adjacent to the playground, but down a short hill, was a large school field that remained off limits to children of all ages. Thus, the young women in the PA program sought to develop a solution to a problem that they had identified as being important to them: access to a recreational space.⁵

The program progressed over three phases that corresponded to the three semesters that the group worked together. Initially, the students demonstrated almost no grasp of civic concepts and ideas. They had significant difficulty differentiating the public from the private domain. For example, at the first meeting, the students suggested a variety of possible public projects including working for a church or changing the businesses in a local shopping plaza. Moreover, they had almost no comprehension of political actors or the governance structure not only within their own community, but even their own school. While the children could identify the school principal and the curriculum specialist who served as a *de facto* vice principal, they had no knowledge of their respective roles within the school. Nor did they understand who had jurisdiction over the use of fields at recess (e.g. one thought it was the town, another the principal, a third thought it was the teachers, and the remaining participants claimed not to know at all).

Additionally, they did not express confidence in selected civic skills. None of the group believed that they worked “very well” with children their own age. One of the participants noted that she had said she worked “somewhat well” with children her age because “we argue a lot.” Another participant said she did not like to work with other children her own age because she “liked to work by [her-]self.” Thus, the children demonstrated little civic knowledge and limited civic skills. Not surprisingly, they claimed to have no civic efficacy as well. All of the girls indicated that they believed that they had no opportunity in their own community to express their views even if they wanted to do so. In fact, the children indicated that they did not believe that there was much that they could do to change their lack of access to the school fields. Therefore, their initial evaluation of their own efficacy reflected both a lack of internal and external efficacy. Not only did they not believe

that they could make a difference, they also did not believe that anyone (be it institutions or actors) would be responsive to them. In the first phase of the project, the girls frequently noted that no one ever listened to them so there was no point in speaking up. They were, after all, “just kids.”

In Phase One, which lasted seven months, the children selected their project after much group discussion and deliberation. They then researched the benefits of aerobic versus anaerobic exercise. They collected data on the usage of school fields throughout the community by interviewing their peers at other schools. Also, they learned how to identify those with authority over the fields, evaluate competing demands within the community, map out likely community supporters, and develop interview questions for the variety of interested actors that they identified as relevant to the field issue. They also conducted their first interviews. They periodically reported on the progress of their work over their school’s public announcement system using documents they drafted. Finally, they presented their project and ongoing work to a group of university faculty and to the national director of PA at a meeting held on the university campus to discuss university-community partnerships.

In short, they gained some civic knowledge and civic skills. For example, they learned about the city system of regulating the fields (in both the parks and on school grounds) and they discovered that while the town was responsible for the upkeep of the fields and their usage after school hours, during school hours, the school administrators maintained authority over the fields and controlled access to them. Thus, they understood the relationship between the public works department, the recreation department, and the school administration. They also recognized that in order to achieve their goal, they would have to work through the school administrative network. (See Table 1 for an overview of the knowledge, skills and efficacy demonstrated by the students). Additionally, they had acquired certain civic skills. In this period, they learned to identify a public problem, express their opinions in a constructive manner, actively listen to their peers, plan and conduct their own meetings, and effectively interview adult community members. In fact, at the end of Phase One, one participant said that interviewing was her favorite task. Another student noted that while she still disliked working in groups, she liked PA because PA “works on your teamwork.” The students also learned about certain civic concepts, including public and private work, citizenship, democracy, community and power in

⁴ And, in Connecticut, the corresponding risk of litigation.

⁵ A typical Public Achievement group has 4–6 members although one coach typically works with two groups simultaneously.

Table 1. Knowledge, Skill, and Efficacy Development in a Youth Civic Engagement Program

| | Phase 1 | Phase 2 | Phase 3 |
|---|--|--|---|
| Civic Knowledge: Concepts and Content | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Community • Democracy • Citizenship • Public vs. private • Power • Types of exercise | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • School administrative structure • Jurisdictional responsibilities • State regulations | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • School policies • Division of school roles • Leadership • Differentiation |
| Civic Skills: Intellectual and Participatory | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Active listening • Build consensus • Plan and conduct efficient group meetings • Conduct research • Develop interview strategies and techniques • Power map • Data collection • Draft documents • Public reports | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ability to identify obstacles and challenges • Organize and plan presentations • Content analysis • Interviewing • Survey creation and distribution • Initial data collection • Data analysis • Public presentation | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Accountability and responsibility • Recognition and diverse constituencies • Negotiation and mediation • Persistence • Data collection and compilation • Proposal presentation |
| Civic Efficacy: Internal | Nonexistent | Nominal | Evident |
| External | Nonexistent | Nonexistent | Evident |

this phase.

For all that they gained in civic skills and civic knowledge, however, there was little change in their own sense of self-efficacy. Although they were developing civic dispositions that contributed to a heightened sense of internal efficacy, they still had no confidence that the interested institutions would be responsive to them. For example, they appreciated working in a group and developed a sense of belonging to that group because their peers understood them and they thought they could “work together easier.” The participants noted that they had the ability to “participate in community things.” One young woman even claimed that, “young children can take power and set charge about change.” However, although they were developing an appreciation for each other and their group and a concomitant sense of internal efficacy, they still did not indicate that they had acquired any external efficacy. In fact, 3 out of the 5 children still indicated that they had no ability to affect change in the community because they were “only children.” The one participant who had claimed she could “take power”, in the same survey, wrote that she did not believe she could have a voice in her community because “I am a child.” Another participant said no one would listen to her because she was a child

but she would be able to tell her parents her views and they might be able to make a difference. Her views were echoed by another participant who felt that “kids can make a difference” but only by communicating to adults “what I like/dislike.”

During Phase Two of the project, the students undertook the following tasks: they conferred with a professor of physical education; conducted interviews with selected school officials; engaged in a content analysis of those initial school interviews; gathered all of the findings from their readings and their interviews and summarized then for public presentation; and developed two comprehensive surveys (i.e. one for the students, and the other for the teachers and staff). Moreover, they learned about the history of field usage at the school through interviews with older community members. The students discovered that the current limitations on field usage were a relatively recent phenomenon; that, at one point, the fields had been open to all grades. They also advanced their own civic knowledge when they learned about the school administrative structure. They discovered that the curriculum specialist was actually in charge of teacher and staff assignments during recess, not the principal. In addition, they ascertained that there were state regulations in regards to recess staffing ratios and teacher and

staff contract restrictions on imposing additional recess duties on school personnel. Collecting this information extended their civic knowledge as they began to explore the agencies and organizations that played a role in field maintenance, use, and scheduling. After interviewing the school physical education instructors and learning about their need for field space for certain curricular units, they also began to realize the important role that negotiation and compromise would play in order for them to be successful. And, finally, they further examined the concept of democracy and democratic decision-making as part of their group efforts and during the distribution of tasks as they progressed over the course of the semester. In short, they enhanced their civic knowledge of democracy, the school structure, and the relationship between school policies and state law while also garnering new civic skills such as interviewing, active listening, composing survey questionnaires for differing populations, and compiling several sources of data. They also acquired a variety of important group skills, including engaging those with different perspectives, planning and running meetings, and identifying and addressing future challenges.

Finally, in Phase Two, the students began to demonstrate increased levels of efficacy. That the students indicated they had an increased sense of efficacy in this phase is perhaps not surprising given that Hess and Torney (1967) found that “children’s sense of efficacy increases with age” and that “the sharpest increase occurred between grades four and five” (p. 68), which corresponds to the end of Phase One and beginning of Phase Two for these young women. After scheduling meetings with teachers and school administrators early in the 5th grade school year, for example, the girls commented how they would never have done that before. Four out of five of the participants indicated that they felt more comfortable approaching adult authorities to discuss school issues as a result of their participation in PA. They also began to identify themselves as “good citizens” based on their involvement at school. In fact, four of the five girls ran for the student council executive board that year and three of the four were elected.⁶ While two of the girls were still uncertain if they could “contribute to solving problems in their community”, the other three expressed agreement with the statement. Moreover, 3 of the 5 young women strongly agreed that “it is important to be involved in one’s community” while the remaining two said that they agreed.

In the third and final phase of the project, they debated and distributed a series of tasks designed to

achieve their ultimate goal. Teams of two girls each, working in rotation, contacted every classroom teacher in grades 2-5 to arrange a time to survey those students on the use of the fields. They then surveyed every second, third, fourth, and fifth grade classroom in their elementary school using the questionnaire they had designed in Phase Two. They collected and tabulated the results from 223 students and discovered that the elementary school students overwhelmingly favored access to the fields and supported opening the fields five days a week. Additionally, they arranged and conducted individual interviews and surveys with every teacher, administrator, and staff member responsible for recess staffing. A few of those respondents raised concerns about gender exclusion (e.g., the boys might exclude the girls from the more physical games that would take place if the fields were available, whereas on the playground, there was greater gender parity). Many respondents expressed concerns about the developmental differences that would be very apparent if two grades had recess and access to the fields at over-lapping times and they preferred distinct play areas on the field for the different age groups in order to allow for differentiated play spaces. Almost all of the teachers and staff indicated that they did not believe that they had the right to grant students access to the fields. Some thought there was a preexisting rule that forbade the use of the fields during recess, while others did not believe that such a policy existed, but they also did not believe that they had the power to approve such access. Ironically, many of those interviewed noted that while they believed that the students should have access to the fields, they had no ability to change the present situation; in other words, the adults lacked a sense of efficacy.

During the interview process, the teachers and staff informed the students about the school’s emergency response teams (ERTs), the district guidelines in regards to such teams, their roles in the event of a recess emergency, and their potential impact on field accessibility.⁷ They examined all of the data that they had collected, wrote a report, and presented their findings to the Student Government Association and to the school curriculum specialist. Thus, the girls gained additional civic knowledge

⁶They actually won the most seats possible because two of the young women ran against each other.

⁷All schools in the district are required to maintain voluntary emergency teams with teachers trained in First Aid and CPR, who, by virtue of their proximity to school emergencies, respond first but who work in cooperation and consultation with the school nurse (West Hartford School Policy 6131.1)

in the third phase of the project. The participants increased their knowledge about the division of functions within the school setting and the teachers' diverse views on appropriate forms of child play.

Moreover, they garnered additional civic skills. The young women gained numerous communication skills, including negotiation and mediation. They negotiated a resolution to the lack of access to field usage that included balancing the overwhelming desires of the students for field access with the state requirements in regards to staffing and the needs of the physical education department. They also learned that there is a crucial difference between agreement and implementation. The Connecticut State Association of Health, Physical Education, Recreation and Dance awarded them a citation for their leadership and their efforts to improve health and fitness in their community. However, when the citation was given, the new staffing schedule for the recess use of the fields existed but was not yet adhered to by the school faculty. Further conversations with the teachers and staff revealed that the necessary communication between the school administrators and the faculty and staff was lacking. The five girls took it upon themselves to breach the communication divide and to resolve this final issue. In other words, they also learned about bureaucracies, organizational inertia, and mediation while mastering patience and persistence. The fields opened for recess use in early June of 2010, approximately 17 months after the project first began.

In this final phase, the young women also demonstrated the highest levels of confidence and efficacy, both internal and external. At the inception of the project, the 5 participants said that they liked to work in groups only "somewhat well" with one young woman still noting that, "I like to work by myself." By the end of the project, 4 of the 5 participants had changed their responses to "very well" with one child commenting that, "Working in groups is fun and helps our social skills." One of the participants noted how her views about group work had changed; "I like it better. It is easier." Likewise, in the beginning of the project, the girls were reticent about working with adults. None of them felt comfortable approaching any of the school administrators, some of the staff and, in one young woman's case, some of the teachers. At the end of the project, 4 out of 5 girls felt more comfortable talking to adults within the school setting, and 3 out of 5 thought it was easier to approach school administrators. They also displayed much higher levels of confidence. Their heightened confidence translated to a higher level of efficacy.

As one participant stated, "People appreciate kids and their power more," while another student claimed that her group made it possible for kids to "achieve something they want to in public." A third participant said she liked PA because it "is a group where we can improve the community." In short, the young women developed both internal and external efficacy.

Conclusions

Over a 17-month period, these young women gained civic knowledge, garnered additional civic skills, and recognized and appreciated their own sense of civic efficacy. The results of this case study reinforce the arguments of Flanagan and Faison (2001) who contended that students who participate in long-term civic engagement programs are more likely to demonstrate increased civic knowledge, civic skills and civic efficacy than their peers. In fact, the results from the case study of these young women highlight the two main and interrelated benefits of many youth civic engagement programs: 1) such programs operate to increase children's civic knowledge, certain civic skills and civic efficacy; and 2) such programs are good for the long-term health of a democracy.

Increasing the civic knowledge of youths at all age levels throughout the U.S. has become a significant goal of educators, policy practitioners, and politicians. For example, the National Education Association (2011) mission states that the goal of public education in the U.S. is to provide "individuals with the skills to be involved, informed, and engaged in our representative democracy" (para. 7). Likewise, U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, in a 2011 speech, noted that, "a foundation in civics is not a luxury but a necessity." Moreover, he said that, "Students today absolutely need a sense of citizenship, an understanding of their history and government, and a commitment to democratic values.... Civics cannot be pushed to the sidelines in schools" (para. 5). The PA program, in this case study, provided the young women with an opportunity to gain knowledge about their school and the larger community and to do so in a democratic, engaged manner. Finally, Representative Gwen Moore (D-WI) introduced legislation in March of 2011 to honor the memory of Christina-Taylor Green, the young girl killed at a "Congress on the Corner" meeting in January of 2011 in Arizona. While such resolutions are normally little more than political posturing, the resolution does acknowledge "the importance of returning the teaching of civic education and civil discourse to schools, especially

for students in grades 6 through 12” and calls for “the Secretary of Education to direct schools receiving federal funding to include instruction in civic education and civil discourse.”⁸ Moreover, the resolution “encourages schools and teachers to conduct educational programming on the importance and methods of civic education and civil discourse” (House Resolution 181). The methods of a “civil discourse” are found in PA as judged by the tolerance the young women developed for divergent views. Roholt, Hildreth, and Baizerman (2007) also found that PA is a “living citizenship” program in which the participants “learned what it meant to be a member, to do democratic civic practice, to be democratic citizen, and how to do and be this democratic citizens in everyday life” (p. 103).

Additionally, a 2006 evaluation of 556 student participants in PA programs in 2005 and 2006 found that “elementary school students who had sustained participation in PA were more likely than their peers to acquire civic skills and to believe that young people can make a difference in the world. Surveys given before and after program participation showed that sustained involvement in PA was associated with strong increases on measures of civic dispositions, civic skills, and civic engagement outcomes” (RMC, 2006, p. 1). Roholt et al. (2007) note that youth engagement programs, including PA, provide students the opportunity to engage in meaningful experiential education. For the students “[l]earning was not for learning’s sake but was necessary to do the public work, their work as citizen” and they “experienced being and doing citizen” (p. 98). These findings also correlate with McIntosh and Youniss’ (2010) argument that “acquisition of skills and attitudes that constitute the elements of citizenship occurs *in the doing* within a political context” (italics added, p. 23).

Finally, youth engagement programs develop the efficacy of the participants. As Kahne and Westheimer (2006) learned, sometimes these programs develop only the internal efficacy of the group, but sometimes they operate to develop both the internal and external efficacy of the participants. In this case study, the PA participants demonstrated both increased internal and external efficacy. As one student participant said, “I like Public Achievement because I get to help make a difference and have fun with friends while doing it.” Roholt et al. (2007) agree that the students’ claims of wanting to make a difference are an important one:

Wanting to make a positive difference must become mastering the ways of thinking, doing, and being basic to socio-political activism in school, group, and community. ...When civic training is done well, as it often is in PA, and the young people believe they are learning real and useful stuff, they are more likely to become really involved, thus concretizing their typically more vague interests and goals, resulting in deeper commitment to the issue and to being and doing citizen (p. 134).

The idea that youth engagement programs might produce a deeper commitment to the community is an important benefit of such programs as well.

More importantly, and in addition to increasing children’s civic knowledge, civic skills, and civic efficacy, youth engagement programs, particularly those that allow the students to work in groups and increase the participants’ sense of efficacy, may be particularly important for future political participation, attachment, and engagement, and thus, the long-term health of a democracy. Greenstein (1974) suggested that early political learning operated to “maintain, perhaps even reinforce” (p. 83) adult political behavior. Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1995) also found that adults who were active in civic and political affairs in their communities had been active in extracurricular activities at school and in other community and youth groups. Moreover, Flanagan and Faison (2001) explained that:

It is likely that by being a member of a group and helping to define and work toward common goals, one gets a sense of what it means to work for the common good....One identifies with the group, cares about the other group members, and wants to help accomplish the goals of the group. This group identification is an essential part of political development because political goals are rarely accomplished by individuals (p. 519).

Thus, youth engagement activities may play a crucial role in civic and political involvement in adulthood. Pasek, Feldman, Romer, and Jamieson (2008) examined this very phenomenon and found that, indeed, youth engagement programs begun in an urban high school environment did fundamentally alter the participants’ subsequent political participation two years later. Their research showed that “program exposure was consistently

⁸The resolution has been referred to the House Education and the House Workforce committees for further consideration.

related to long-term increases in internal efficacy, political attentiveness, and knowledge of candidate positions” (p. 33).⁹ Likewise, Hess and Torney (1967) argued that, “[t]here is a great deal of evidence for the existence of continuity between childhood experience and attitudes and adult attitudes and action” (p. 7).

The long-term importance of youth civic engagement programs for a democracy should not be understated. Nor should the effect of the youth engagement program in this case study. As one young woman noted on her last survey, PA was “a group where kids can achieve something they want to in public.” They also want to continue and add to their civic engagement experiences. The PA participants who completed their project in June of 2010 still periodically ask to undertake another. Although the group has scattered to different middle schools, they approach the author with ideas and pleas for a new PA program on a consistent basis. Whether the participants in the program will demonstrate increased involvement in adulthood remains to be seen. Clearly, one year from the end of their project, they still want to be involved and believe that they can make a difference.

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⁹ See also Galston (2003), who argued that a decline in civic attachment and civic education among young people represented a serious long-term threat to representative democracy and public deliberation and that the solution to the disengagement of youth today should be addressed by increasing the emphasis on civics in the educational system. Political science researchers have found that political efficacy is an important determinant of political participation, including electoral participation, support for party platforms, the evaluation of elected officials, and even the decision to run for elective office (see Valentine et al., 2009, and Caprara et al., 2009). In fact research on the role of efficacy in politics and political behavior has been ongoing since the 1960s (for example, Easton and Dennis, 1967, Verba and Nie, 1972, Balch, 1974, and Finkel, 1985.)

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