

Citizenship and Service-Learning in K-12

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Introduction

“Serving others is not just a form of do-goodism or feel-goodism, it is a road to social responsibility and citizenship. When linked closely to classroom learning...it is an ideal setting for bridging the gap between the classroom and the street, between the theory of democracy and its much more obstreperous practice.... Service is an instrument of civic pedagogy.... In serving the community, the young forge commonality; in acknowledging difference, they bridge division; and in assuming individual responsibility, they nurture social citizenship” (Barber, 1998).

The research on service-learning and citizenship in K-12 schools is growing rapidly as the issue of citizenship takes center stage on the national level. This fact sheet provides a brief discussion of several emergent issues in the research.

Definitions of Citizenship

Citizenship is defined in many different ways in the research literature. Organizations and researchers that discuss citizenship generally speak to the need for young people to see themselves as part of a public or community and as contributors to democracy. For example, the Education Commission of the States, in its publication entitled “Every Student A Citizen: Creating the Democratic Self” (2000), discusses citizenship as a “moral enterprise” which helps young people cultivate a sense of the common good and their place in achieving it. In addition to acquiring civic skills that nurture “judgments that are rooted in such principles as fairness, beneficence, self-denial, liberty, loyalty, honesty, and a commitment to the greater good,” young people need to develop a strong capacity for critical judgment and reflection, the ability to conduct thoughtful inquiries about facts and decisions, and the ability to participate in public deliberations impartially and objectively. Other attributes associated with good citizenship include the ability to respect the heritages, diversity, and interests of others; to understand others' views; to be willing to engage in mutual give and take without animosity; and to continue to participate when things do not go their way.

Those who emphasize the need for young people to master the skills and knowledge associated with the ways that society and government work often point to the particular knowledge, skills, and dispositions measured in the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), which included:

- knowledge of civic life, politics, and government;
- knowledge foundations of the American political system and the Constitution;
- knowledge of the roles of citizens in democracy and global affairs; as well as
- intellectual skills, participatory skills, and civic disposition.

Indicators of Civic Engagement/Disengagement

There is a large, convergent body of research that shows the growing disenchantment and disengagement of young people with some of the traditional democratic structures of society. This is juxtaposed with the growing engagement with community, often evidenced by increased volunteerism. Putnam, in his book *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (2000), detailed the weakening of civic ties over the past generation and the impact this has had on the quality of education, safety, physical and emotional health, economic development, and citizenship. Indicators from his book included declining trends in the following areas: political participation; civic participation; altruism, volunteering, and philanthropy; and informal social connections.

According to Putnam, “the last several decades have witnessed a striking diminution of regular contacts with our friends and neighbors. We spend less time in conversation over meals, we exchange visits less often, we engage less often in leisure activities that encourage casual social interaction, we spend more time watching (admittedly, some of it in the presence of others) and less time doing. We know our neighbors less well, and we see old friends less often. In short, it is not merely 'do good' civic activities that engage us less, but also informal connecting” (Putnam, 2000, p. 115).

Students' Civic Knowledge

A large scale study of civic education of American youth was conducted in 1999 by the Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs, located at the University of Texas, Austin. According to the project director, Kenneth Tolo (cited in Black, 2000, p. 48), more than one-fourth of all state constitutions base their system of public education on the belief that “an informed and capable citizenry is vital to the preservation of a free and democratic government.” Despite this, Tolo found that only Alaska, Colorado, and Vermont have standards specifically related to civic education, though 23 other states included civics as part of social studies standards.

Relationship between Citizenship and Service-Learning

Many researchers believe that service-learning can be effective in re-engaging young people. The beliefs tend to stem from two distinct theories. On the one hand, researchers believe that problems of disengagement stem from the lack of social capital, that is, the lack of attachment to social networks that many young people display. On the other hand, researchers believe that the problems can be traced to a lack of civic identity, that is, too little connection of self with society.

There is increasing evidence that high quality service-learning practice that is carefully designed to increase civic outcomes can encourage civic engagement in young people.

For a more detailed discussion, including references and documentation, see the complete online fact sheet at http://www.servicelearning.org/instant_info/fact_sheets/k-12_facts/char_ed/expanded.php

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