

Civic Education as a Poverty Reduction Strategy

A Conceptual Overview

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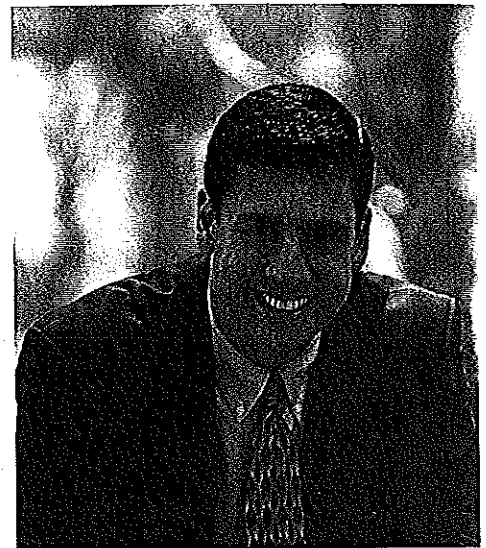
Civic engagement of young people has become a topic of national focus as research points to increasing disengagement of American youth from civic life. Although public schools in the United States were conceived in part to provide civic education and are uniquely positioned to strengthen civic culture, the nation has faced challenges in fulfilling its mission or potential in this respect.

The most recent National Assessment of Educational Progress in Civics (NAEP, 2011), completed in 2010, reinforces these conclusions. Test results point to a significant lack of strong civic achievement among the nation's students. Only 27% of fourth graders scored at or above the Proficient level and only 22% of eighth graders did so. Among high school seniors – who were eligible to vote in the 2010 election – only 24 percent scored at or above the level of Proficiency. The 2010 test also offered little evidence that the condition of civic education is improving. Scores for eighth and twelfth grade students showed insignificant change between 1998 and 2010. There was some improvement in fourth grade scores, although gains were very modest. In fact, students demonstrated lower levels of academic achievement in civics than they did in mathematics, a subject in which the performance of U. S. students often provokes public outcry. In the 2009 NAEP, 39% of fourth graders and 34% of eighth graders scored at or above the Proficient level in math.

Despite the critical role of democratic principles and citizen-

ship education in schooling, U.S. federal and state assessment systems have negated civics or social studies, thereby edging the content out of the center of the school curriculum. Research findings (Wills, 2007) have confirmed a decline in instructional time for elementary social studies, especially in the primary grades. Since the enactment of No Child Left Behind, 44 percent of districts surveyed have diminished time for social studies. That percentage rose to 51 percent in schools serving impoverished communities. Most recently, Berson, Berson and Fitchett (2010) found that over 60% of kindergarten teachers in Florida ranked social studies as the fourth most important content area, and another 12% ranked social studies as less important than physical education and/or art. In many schools, social studies is not taught at all and in others, it is deferred until April, when state-wide testing is complete (Florida Joint Center for Citizenship, 2009). Wills (2007) concluded that diminished instructional time in social studies resulted in a reduction in the scope of the curriculum, curtailment or elimination of opportunities to promote students' higher order thinking, and an increased emphasis on the simple reproduction of content knowledge.

Available evidence indicates that failure to effectively teach civics may have especially significant consequences for culturally and linguistically diverse students in high poverty schools. National voting patterns clearly show that minority subgroups from low socio-economic



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communities typically are disenfranchised and do not actively participate in the voting process (Kahne & Middaugh, 2008). Schools have a uniquely important role in countering this disengagement. Research suggests that children start to develop social responsibility and interest in politics before the age of nine (Berti, 2005). The way that they are taught about social issues, ethics, and institutions in elementary school matters a great deal for their civic development. Moreover, of all institutions, schools are the most systematically and directly responsible for catalyzing civic engagement by facilitating students' skills to mobilize their voices, access resources, and develop innovative solutions for public problems.

Although alarming gaps in both students' preparation for and participation in the democratic process exist, across nations civics has offered a potential mechanism to foster poverty alleviation (Clever, 2005). "Indi-

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viduals will only find ways out of poverty if they feel that they belong, are valued and that they can make a contribution to society” (Arnot, Casely-Hayford, Wainaina, Chege, & Dovie, 2009, p. 4). Yet young people living in impoverished neighborhoods have the least access to power and are often socially excluded, alienated, and marginalized. They “wait outside the gates of citizenship” (p. 49), confronted with barriers that hinder their rights to participate, freely express themselves, associate with others, or access information.

This feeling of being looked down upon often arises from a combination of economic deprivation and sociocultural factors, such as ethnicity, colour, religion, social hierarchy and gender. Poverty not only arises from a lack of resources – it may also arise from a lack of access to resources, information, opportunities, power and mobility. As the United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights observes: “Sometimes poverty arises when people have no access to existing resources because of who they are, what they believe or where they live. Discrimination may cause poverty, just as poverty may cause discrimination.” (World Bank, 2006)

Education may play a significant role in poverty eradication by integrating development outcomes into learning (Phillips & Schweisfurth, 2007), including fostering students’ ability to exert political influence and enjoy social rights. These development outcomes are not merely restricted to promoting economic earning potential through education, but rather poverty alleviation necessitates “collective action, public



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accountability, caring for kin and community, environmental stewardship, the promotion of human dignity, and the creation of shared identity and rights” (World Bank, 2006, p.160). When framed as a human rights issue, poverty requires a multidimensional approach that extends the focus beyond financial deprivation and instead highlights education as a weapon against pervasive deficiencies in current civic structures and systems.

Civic engagement and instruction in schools may contribute to enculturating children to the values and behaviors necessary for achieving in a democratic social system. However, schools may also perpetuate inequalities by reinforcing the privileged positions of children from affluent neighborhoods and providing differential access to quality teachers and resources (Harber & MnCube, 2011). In the most egregious contexts, schools in poor communities

not only reinforce an environment of socio-economic inequalities but also replicate violent and demeaning climates that undermine the realization of democracy, freedom, and social justice.

Reflecting on how well schools prepare children for citizenship is more than an academic question of cognitive development, but rather the pursuit of one’s rights is a fundamental antecedent to poverty reduction and empowerment of the poor. Nelson Mandela stated that people must not be forced “to choose between bread and ballots.” They must have both (OHCHR, 2003). Empowering students by teaching them to exercise their citizenship necessitates a nurturing school environment in which the formative experiences enhance the human and social capital of children. Schooling has the potential to build a sustainable foundation of active en-

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The Mission of Civic Education = The Mission of Schools

The Historic Mission of Schools

by Elizabeth Hinde

Civics is the content area whose primary mission is to instill the knowledge, dispositions, and skills of citizenship. According to the Standards for Civics and Government created by the Center for Civic Education, "The goal of education in civics and government is informed, responsible participation in political life by competent citizens committed to the fundamental values and principles of American constitutional democracy."¹ It can be argued, however, that the goal of civic education is virtually the same as the overall purpose for schools in general. That is, citizenship in a democratic society is, and always has been, the overall purpose of schools and not just of one content area. In this age of accountability through mandated tests, many educators have lost sight of the overall purpose of schools, as well as their historic mission: to create effective, active citizens.

To wit, Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, and James Madison noted that a free society relies on the "knowledge, skills, and virtues of its citizens and those they elect to public office."² In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, educators Hannah Adams, Noah Webster, Caleb Bingham, and Jedediah Morse designed American curricula "as a tool for nation-building and citizenship development."³ These early American teachers recognized the important role of schools in educating for American democracy.

Later in American history, in the 20th Century, John Dewey argued that democratic life is the ultimate reason for schools. According to

Dewey, society exists through the process of transmission and this transmission takes place "by means of communication of habits of doing, thinking, and feeling from the older to the younger."⁴ Schools exist

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agement in constructive economic, social and political enterprises. Yet, the struggle is not just merely getting children to school, but also attending to what happens to them once they are there. In authoritarian and violent settings that oppress and restrict growth of the disadvantaged through threats and fear, the impoverished become more insecure and isolated. Conversely, democratic environments foster safety and peace for learners. In these contexts powerful, relevant, and engaging social studies education may ensure that the voices of vulnerable children are amplified and their rights upheld as they propel forward toward positive development outcomes.

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so that younger generations can learn from older generations "the essentials needed for the realization of democratic ideals."⁵ Dewey and other historic educators and leaders were

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