

# **The Great American Experiment: Developing Citizen Participation through Youth Civic Engagement and Education**

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## **Abstract**

The article discusses how outside and inside classroom interactions may affect the civic development of today's youth as they transition into adulthood. It states that the lack of civic engagement in early adulthood may exclude students from becoming active citizens. According to the co-authors, changing the approaches educators and administrators take to include and integrate civic education into the classroom curriculum can transform students into engaging citizens. In addition, the changes that are made today can impact the success of democracy in the future and create well rounded members of our society. The article reviews some initiatives that are occurring around the United States to integrate civic education in unique and pioneering manners such as the Justice Sandra Day O'Conner Civics Education Act of 2010, the Legislative bill that was passed in Tennessee in 2011 and service learning initiatives that link education with community based civic engagement. It concludes that developing citizen participation through civic education and development at the primary and secondary education levels is plausible if students are engaged and exposed to civic education inside and outside the classroom and if students have access to the necessary information and educational tools.

**Keywords:** Active Citizens, Civic Education, Civic Indicators, Empowering Students.

## **Introduction**

There is a need for long-term policy commitment, innovation and culture change for civic social inclusion. Democracy has a causal relationship with citizen participation. Through youth civic education, service learning initiatives and engagement, citizen participation and civic indicators (civic duty, civic efficacy, neighborhood social connection, activism and civic participation) can be improved.

For effective and inclusive democracy to occur, citizens need to be empowered and encouraged. Citizens in turn, need to participate and exercise their voice to be active citizens. Without active citizen participation, bureaucracy and other public administration entities can become monopolized. Members of the community can become ostracized. Government, at its core exists, to be comprised of people, to act on behalf of people, and to be a representative of the people it serves.

There is an increasing gap in action based service-learning civics' curriculum, and how interactions outside/inside the classroom interactions may affect the civic development of today's youth as they transition into adulthood. The "civic skills, habits, and motivation of young adults result, in part, [is] from the accumulation of engagement opportunities in the child and adolescent years" (Flanagan & Levine, 2010, 166). Studying how younger generations develop their sense of civic duty is central to the survival of our democratic system.

It is the goal of this exploratory composition to gauge the function of youth civic education at the primary and secondary education levels. The level of responsibility that interpersonal communication and motivation have in building sustainable communities which foster civic engagement and development as indicators of citizen participation. Verba, Schlozma, and Brady (1995) "identified three factors that are necessary for individuals to become civically engaged: the desire to get involved (motivation), the ability to contribute (civic skills and time and/or financial resources), and a connection to networks of collective action (usually in response to an invitation by a network member)" (Kirlin & Kirlin, 2002, 80).

Civic engagement and civic development are not interchangeable and should be looked at as consecutive components of citizen involvement. For the general public to be civically engaged, a certain degree of development must occur. For the purpose of this article, civic development refers to the attainment of knowledge, skills, values, motivation and historical awareness needed to make educated and prudent decisions pertaining to individual citizen participation.

Civic engagement is the process of accepting and acting upon the responsibility as an individual to participate, either alone or as a part of a collective, in identify and addressing issues of public concern. Having concern for the wellbeing of those around you and how together, problems can be solved. The emphasis for this exploratory composition is on community based forms of civic engagement and development. Community based civic involvement occur at multiple levels; from volunteering, activism, taking part in community based project to lobbying for a local cause or taking part of the local election process. Taking the time to have their voices heard; expressing their ideas and points of views in their local communities, attending and participating at school board hearings, write letters to local government officials, approach issues at the local level in a manner in which it is relatable and understood. The same approach can be tailored to students pursuing primary education.

## **Literature Review**

John W. Gardner argues that there is a linkage between the values of people, their development as individuals and freedom (Braun and Williams, 2002). That without understanding our role in democracy we will not be able to protect it, nurture it, or live freely with it. That when democracy becomes personal, when people are directly affected in one way or another, that the issues become real.

The civic development of today's youth will impact future generations. This is why teaching civic education is fundamental. In 2012, the National Assessment of Education Progress conducted a survey, which identified that three fourths of students graduating from high

school in 2012 were not aware of what it meant to be a citizen, or the role they played. The survey also identified that 62 percent of Americans surveyed could not name all three branches of government and a third can't name a single [branch]. The same study noted that twice as many respondents could name a judge of the hit television show 'American Idol' (Reiss, 2012).

Perhaps the reason for this knowledge incongruence is that people no longer feel a connection to governance. Older generations driven out by millennials have become disillusioned and feel as if they no longer have a voice or power within government. Younger generations face a difficult time connecting who they are as individuals to being civic-minded adults.

Flanagan and Levine (2010) noted that there was evidence of generation specific citizen participation fluctuations with episodic patterns of increased engagement. This increase of civic engagement would ultimately level once the generation in review begins to become stable. During this elevated formative period of engagement, "civic values and political ideologies crystallize"(Flanagan & Levine, 2010, 163). Providing a unique perspective and voice, which can play an important role in generating ideas and solutions to the problems being faced.

Kahne and Spote 2003-2005 study of 4,057 Chicago high school students of identified what type of civic learning opportunities are preferred by students and would have a positive impact in their commitment to civic participation. Their research sought to answer if schools can promote the type of civic foundation that is needed to be conducive to the development of commitments of civic participation. Kahne and Spote emphasized the demographic of the area as well as the role of education practitioners' supporting student's development.

Syvertsen, Flanagan, Wray-Lake, Osgood, and Briddell (2011) assessed the trends of high school students who were preparing to graduate over a period of thirty years. The study wanted to determine if there were educational differences that were related to civic engagement based on their aspirations and academic plans they had upon graduation. They described students as gauges for civic participation and the future of civic engagement.

Syvertsen et al. research reasoned that trust is an important notion for participation, especially for the younger generations. While there has been a decrease in traditional roles of engagement such as voting and election participation, there has been a shift to community based civic engagement and development that reflects the connection students have with government. This shift includes actions such as volunteering and participating in their local communities. Students are inclined to shift their participation towards local civic engagement largely due to lack of trust in government. Instead, they engage in volunteerism and local projects in which they are able to see immediate result to their action.

Eckstein et al, reintroduced the impressionable years hypothesis as presented by Sears and Levy in 2003, where "political attitudes are less firmly developed and more susceptible to influences at younger ages" and that "given the assumption of a greater susceptibility to attitude changed among younger people, their political orientation should be less consistent over time and thus characterized by a lower stability of inter-individual differenced"(2012, 486). For this reason, proper development of citizen roles and civic education could positively impact today's youth.

## **The Audience**

Prior to creating cultural changes and impacting social inclusion as a means to increase civic participation utilizing civic indicators (civic duty, civic efficacy, neighborhood social connection, and civic participation), it is important to understand the targeted audience-

millennials. Without considering what makes this group of individuals unique, creating effective change will be limited. Millennial, is a generation term used to describe individuals born between 1984 and 2000. This birth bracket is often extended into 2004, with the youngest members of the Millennial Generation still enrolled in elementary school. The Z Generation refers to the individuals born after the millennium, starting in the year 2000. Data and research on Generation Z is limited, individual beginning to develop as a generational unit. Both millennials and Z generation are within the impressionable year bracket described by Sears and Levy.

Individuals who comprise the Millennial Generation are often identified by their 'all-about-me' personalities, unquenchable need for constant access to technology, information and people. With endless access to information and people, this is a generation that has developed a respectable mindfulness to the world around them, embracing the diversity. They welcome different experiences associated with interactions beyond their scope of understanding. This generation is "said to strongly value fast-paced, technological interactions and constant and instantaneous feedback from leaders" as well as high expectation for opportunities to be involved and make an impact (Lester et al, 2012, 342).

This generation's motivation is directly related to the person. It focuses on their ability to fulfill their personal developmental needs and having direct control on how their success is measured. Instead of performance measures, success is measured by experience and personal growth. For example, was the process of creating and delivering a presentation for their civics' class rewarding at a personal level, did the individual learn a new skill, did the product reflect who they are or what they are able to bring to the table? Was the process fun and where they able to interact with people in a manner that met their needs for development and social interaction? By providing the flexibility and opportunity to create their own standard of success, educators are better equipped to motivate this generation to become involved.

## **Students Today, Active Citizens Tomorrow**

Civic participation and engagement is limited by socioeconomic status, age, gender, race and ethnicity. Education has the ability unite these variables and provide a platform where they may be addressed. It is our responsibility as members of our societies to provide every opportunity to today's youth to have access to the tools they need to succeed. Access to a public, equitable, and equal education should be universally available. Restructuring the curriculum, empowering students to take active roles in their own education, to speak and question opinions related to governance and civic engagement is a game changer.

One aspect of civic development and engagement that needs to be considered when developing a civic centered curriculum is the relationship between social classes, community awareness, family status and civic participation. These relationships affect education outside of the classroom as much as they affect the education that occurs inside of the classroom. The education process does not occur in a single format or location. It has been well noted that individuals who are from higher social classes have a greater opportunity to be civically involved and have a better understanding and access to resources.

Individuals who are well versed in community occurrences and how they may impact change have the ability to pass along this status and ability to their children. Members of society that comprise lower socioeconomic levels will have less involvement, awareness and access to resources. This will ultimately influence the participation and engagement of their children. An important predictor of involvement is parent's profession or income (Flanagan & Levine, 2010). If parents or legal guardians are not civically engaged or active participants, there is a reduce likelihood that conversations pertaining to being civically engaged will not occur at home.

There have been countless changes in educational philosophies. Increases and availability of in technology an resources has driven the field of education to make necessary changes to meet educational expectations. Changes in teaching pedagogy that focus on multiple learning perspectives recognizing the idea of universal design and that each individual learns at a different pace and style also play a key role in how education is approached.

Education practitioners have become aware of the demands and evolving needs of students. Becoming in tuned with providing educational materials in different formats and platforms to be inclusive and remove educational barriers. Including characteristics of coaching styles, teachers support students as they take the lead in their own education. Educators are pushing the boundaries of teaching initiatives and styles, becoming innovate as they compete against technology for the attention of their students and the ability to educate them.

Changing the approaches educators and administrators take to include and integrate civic education into the classroom curriculum have the ability to examine the student's academic experience. The impact that students have on whether each other feels supported, acknowledged and encouraged is also important. Individuals at the primary and secondary education levels should be encouraged to come together, learn from each other's perspective and unique approaches and solve the problems they are facing as a team while rallying for the success of each other. There are initiatives that are occurring around the United States to integrate civic education in unique and pioneering manners. Justice Sandra Day O'Conner's Civics Education Act of 2010 and service learning initiatives that link education with community based civic engagement are just the start.

### **Justice Sandra Day O'Conner Civics Education Act of 2010**

As per the State of Florida House of Representative website, the civics education act which honors Justice Sandra Day O'Conner by name describes a change in the State of Florida educational curriculum and the state grade level assessment. This act requires "that reading portion of language arts curriculum include civics education content for all grade levels; provides requirements for civics education course that student must successfully complete for middle grades promotion; requires administration of end-of-course assessment in civics education as field test at middle school level; provides requirements for course grade & course credit; requires inclusion of civics education end-of-course assessment data in determining school grades" (<http://flhouse.gov/Sections/Bills/billsdetail.aspx?BillId=42220>).

The act mandated that within the 2014-2015 academic year that middle school student in 8<sup>th</sup> grade would pass a state wide standardized test that examined the subject knowledge. The data sets are at their infancy, but as of April 2014 report conducted by National Assessment of Education Program, the data shows slight improvement. This illustrates the culture change that needs to occur to have a successful impact in this field.

Justice Sandra Day O'Connor reflected on the published results:

"We cannot ignore this problem. The numbers we just read in the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) report tell us that there is virtually no chance that young people understand and know the historical context for the current state of our democracy. Without knowing our history, how their country works and how they can take ownership of their civic position, young people face an even greater challenge for changing the course of their collective future."  
<https://www.icivics.org/news/justice-sandra-day-oconnor-responds-naep-findings>.

## **In the Classroom**

A meaningful component to establishing civic participation in the American secondary education system is building a curriculum centered on democracy. Educators must teach today's youth to know what it means to be an active and contributing member of our democracy (Day O'Conner, icivis.org). The practice of including what students are learning from their textbooks to what they are experiencing daily is a component of service learning. By integrating lessons, such as, electing student representatives and selecting a class civics project, students are able to making connections that develop their civic identity, because "there is no right way to teach democracy unless we also practice it" (Fleming, 2011, 44).

Curriculums that include civic development and engagement should be flexible in their pace and material coverage. The curriculum should be crafted in such a manner that it includes different fields of study, merging what students are being taught in their math, science, reading and other classes.

The objective of service learning initiatives as a catalyst for civic engagement is to empower students to use innovation, guided by teachers, to create solutions to problems that they were all facing and caring about the final outcome. Fostering civic engagement and citizen participation via curriculum and education is about being aware and knowledgeable about what is important in your respective community and what can be done when citizens come together for a better purpose.

When the curriculum and projects are developed with intentionality in mind, they have the ability to connect students with their communities, to further their education without them being aware of it. To establish and strengthen the community, school and student relationship and being the groundwork needed to intrigue and motivate youth for future citizen participation.

Effective civic engagement and civic development is comprised of creating and nurturing relationships and motivating students to take part in the process. It is about creating a sense of change in the academic culture to include and link various forms of civic opportunities. Specifically focusing on community based civic engagement. Community based civic engagement opportunities are critical as stepping-stones for future participation.

## **Conclusion**

Developing citizen participation and engagement through civic education and development at the primary and secondary education levels is plausible, if, students are engaged and exposed to civic education inside and outside the classroom and if students have access to the necessary information and educational tools. In the classroom, changes to the curriculum to deliberately and methodically include civics and history in such a manner that appeals to students and that they can directly relate it to their personal life can have an impact in the education that occurs outside of the classroom. Civic engagement for students is an important part of their development as individuals and for the success of democracy.

Promoting democratic responsibilities and making it a priority for students during important developmental stages is about them developing the ability to be concerned for the members of their community over all. To understand that there is more than just themselves and those actions have impacts for everyone. It is important for the success of current and future generations, that students are able to master and connect with the ability that together they can work on solving problems and provide a new voice that reflects the truths they are living.

Addressing citizen participation through youth civic engagement and education, focusing on changes in the curriculum and educational culture climate changes at the primary and secondary education levels are important because during these developmental stages, students are contemplating who they are and who they want to become. They begin to think about their future and what is their role in their community. By embracing and encouraging open classroom where there is not limit to the open exchange of information and opinions, where students participate in service learning opportunities, and education practitioners continuously include civic learning opportunities, students will develop their civic identity and may foster citizen participation as adults.

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