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INNOVATIONS IN
CIVIC PARTICIPATION

PROCEEDINGS

TRANSFORMING STUDENTS INTO ACTIVE STEWARDS OF DEMOCRACY

*A report on the U.S.-U.K. seminar Political Literacy and
Service-Learning: The Role of Schools and Their Communities*

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INTRODUCTION

A seminar entitled Political Literacy and Service Learning: The Role of Schools and Their Communities was held in Charleston, South Carolina, on April 12-15, 2005. The three-day meeting was organized by Innovations in Civic Participation in Washington, D.C.; the National Center for Learning and Citizenship in Denver, Colorado; Learning and Teaching Scotland (LTS); and the Department for Education and Skills in London. Co-sponsors of the seminar included the Birkbeck College at the University of London and the Citizenship Foundation in the United Kingdom; the South Carolina Department of Education assisted in the seminar's organization. The Bay and Paul Foundations generously provided funding, and the Carnegie Corporation of New York was essential in bringing together 42 participants from the United States and the United Kingdom for a vigorous exchange of ideas and experiences.

The Charleston seminar followed up on a meeting held in Edinburgh in May 2004, which was organized and funded by Learning and Teaching Scotland on the same topic. The Edinburgh seminar convened 47 participants from the U.S. and U.K. for two days of discussion focused on the role of communities in the implementation of citizenship education, and highlighted the U.K. experience.

The Charleston seminar was intended to extend this discussion to examine: (1) the connections between political literacy and service-learning, and (2) related research and assessment strategies.

Seminar participants represented a wide range of expertise, including classroom teachers, service-learning coordinators, researchers, policy experts, government officials and nonprofit leaders from states across the U.S. and from England, Scotland and Northern Ireland. The seminar began with an opportunity to visit local schools where a variety of service-learning programs are currently being implemented. Participants had the chance to observe classes involved in projects, to hear student presentations of current work, and to ask questions of students and school personnel. A powerful, real-world perspective emphasizing the importance of education for citizenship was given by Bill Saunders from the South Carolina Citizenship Schools, drawing on the importance of Citizenship Schools in the American Civil Rights movement.

Seminar presentations included an overview of political literacy and service-learning by Rick Battistoni of Providence College and Christine Twine of Learning and Teaching Scotland. Shelley Billig of the U.S.-based RMC Research Corporation and Liz Craft of the U.K. Qualifications and Curriculum Authority presented recent developments in research and assessment. Special guest Terry Peterson, senior education fellow at the

University of South Carolina Educational Foundation and chair of the Afterschool Alliance, commented on the ties between the afterschool and service-learning movements. Stephen W. Hefner, superintendent of South Carolina's Richland School District Two, spoke from his perspective as a pioneering administrator in the field of student engagement.

The seminar was structured to allow all participants ample opportunities for exchange of American and British practices, and important discussions about the status of both political literacy and service-learning in the American and British education systems. The presentations and deliberations constituting a dynamic meeting are captured in this report.

WHY POLITICAL LITERACY AND SERVICE-LEARNING?

For democracies to succeed, a nation's young people must be prepared and willing to take their place as active, principled adult citizens. Voting, engaging in political discourse, and simply understanding how governments and political systems operate are essential to maintaining a healthy democracy. Each successive generation must have the tools needed to properly shape and participate in government.

The key to providing these tools lies in a nation's schools. In fact, experts agree, "Schools are the only institution with the capacity and mandate to reach virtually every young person in the country. Of all institutions, schools are the most systematically and directly responsible for imparting citizen norms."

And yet two of the world's oldest democracies – the United States and the United Kingdom – consistently contend with lagging support for citizenship education. Support is also weak for pedagogies such as service-learning, which produce promising student citizenship outcomes by combining meaningful service in the community with rigorous classroom work and reflection. This lack of adequate support comes about, to some degree, from a renewed focus on other academic priorities that are often viewed as competitors for scarce education resources. The result is that policymakers and the public have witnessed important failures in how their schools educate children for citizenship.

Inspections conducted during 2003-04 in England, for instance, found that one in four secondary schools have done an unsatisfactory job of integrating citizenship education into their curricula. Many schools confused citizenship education with personal, social and health education. This was true despite the fact that, since 2002,

DEVELOPING QUALITY OPPORTUNITIES FOR CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION

“Beyond simply developing knowledge about the workings of government and the legal system, students need to develop thinking and participatory skills to analyze and interpret information, and they need to develop the proper attitudes and dispositions – such as tolerance and a sense of empowerment – in order to be prepared to be effective citizens.”

**– Rick Battistoni, professor,
Providence College**

England has included citizenship as a mandatory part of its national curriculum for all secondary schools.

In the U.S. there are similar signs indicating a need for stronger emphasis on citizenship education. In recent nationwide assessments, only one-quarter of U.S. high school seniors scored at a proficient level in civic knowledge and skills, while roughly one-third of all students failed to reach even a basic level of achievement. Other studies have found that few young people understand the importance of voting and that a majority of young Americans are disengaged from civic life.

In both the U.S. and the U.K., concerns also have increased regarding the ability of schools to produce students who enter society as active, principled participants in democracy. Experts agree that accomplishing this task requires more than just imparting students with civic knowledge. Efforts and activities such as service-learning should be explored to help ensure that students develop a variety of citizenship skills and dispositions.

All four countries that make up the United Kingdom (England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales) have, in the past five to seven years, attempted to make citizenship education a higher priority, although initiatives have developed differently within each country’s separate education system. In 2002, for instance, England made citizenship a required subject for all secondary students, and it will be required in Northern Ireland by 2007. In Scotland, “values and citizenship” is one of five “national priorities” in education, while in Wales the subject is part of a required course in “personal and social education.”

For a variety of reasons – including sagging scores on nationwide civics assessments and steadily declining voting rates – interest in citizenship education has also recently increased in the United States. Forty-one states now have statutes – mostly focused on addressing the acquisition of rote student citizenship knowledge – that specifically mandate teaching of government, civics and/or citizenship and have a course or credit requirement in government or civics for high school graduation.

Despite this renewed interest and attention, American and British experts expressed similar concerns over the quality of citizenship education that is delivered. Of particular importance is the growing impact of academic testing. In both countries, an emphasis on testing and accountability has grown since the 1990s. Many believe this emphasis has led to a narrowing of curriculum and teaching to match what is tested.

Participants from both the U.S. and the U.K. discussed why such narrowing poses a serious threat to the quality of citizenship education. In particular, it is clear that simply imparting rote knowledge to students about the workings of government is insufficient to produce active, principled adult citizens. Instead, education systems must make it a priority to ensure that students also have the skills and dispositions necessary to take their roles as effective participants in democracy.

“Relevant and meaningful citizenship learning experiences promote a sense of worth – that young people’s views matter, and that their actions can make a difference in society.”

**– Liz Craft, subject advisor for Citizenship,
Qualifications and Curriculum Authority in England**

USING SERVICE-LEARNING TO IMPROVE CITIZENSHIP EDUCATION: WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS

Developing appropriate skills and dispositions so students can learn to be politically literate – effective “agents of change” – was a theme consistently identified as a top priority by experts from both sides of the Atlantic. Examples of the types of skills students should learn include: the ability to analyze, synthesize and interpret information, and the capacity to communicate, listen and deliberate effectively with others. Examples of the types of dispositions students should acquire include a developed sense of personal responsibility, a desire for empowerment to make one’s voice heard and a belief that active participation in government is a worthwhile endeavor.

The participants at the Charleston seminar agreed that combining community service with rigorous classroom education and reflection is a promising tool for accomplishing the goal of cultivating appropriate student citizenship skills and dispositions. In the United Kingdom for example, “active citizenship” programs seek to involve more students in working to create positive social and political change in their communities. Initial findings from such programs have shown some interesting results. In England, studies have shown that participating students display high levels of enthusiasm in their work and show greater understanding of key citizenship concepts. Findings also show, however, that many community involvement programs have proven difficult to coordinate and properly manage. Additionally, many teachers have expressed uncertainty regarding how to best assess student citizenship achievement. In working to address these issues, researchers in England are targeting several priorities, including the need to identify and learn more from existing “best practices,” and the need for more clarity with regard to expected program outcomes.

Research findings in the United States offer an additional set of insights about the use of service-learning to build student citizenship skills and dispositions. Studies in the U.S. show service-learning can positively impact communication, teamwork and conflict resolution skills. It can also improve the way in which students understand how their education is preparing them to make a difference in their communities and the larger world. In addition, research in several states (including Pennsylvania, Michigan, New Hampshire and Vermont) show that students who participate in service-learning programs perform better on statewide academic tests.

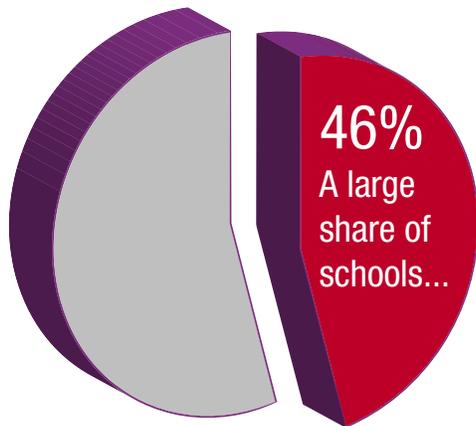
However, the research also shows that service-learning must be done well to have any lasting positive effect on students. In fact, while high-quality programs can have multiple beneficial effects on students, low-quality programs appear to have no impact at all. Studies show there are several keys to high-quality service-learning programs:

1. **Link to Academic Standards:** Projects must be linked to the larger academic curriculum and cannot merely be isolated acts of community service. Projects must also be well selected to match a clearly identified citizenship education outcome.
2. **High-Quality Service Work:** Students should have direct contact with those who are being served by the project. The intensity and duration of the project also matters – one-time, isolated projects will have less impact on participating students.
3. **Reflection:** Time must be provided to allow students to absorb what they have learned through a project. Reflection should address the citizenship outcomes that are sought, and should incorporate multiple strategies – such as journal writing, visualization and perspective taking.
4. **Youth Voice:** Students should be given a voice in the design and implementation of the project. Allowing for such input helps ensure the selection of a project that engages students and demonstrates they have a real stake in the process.

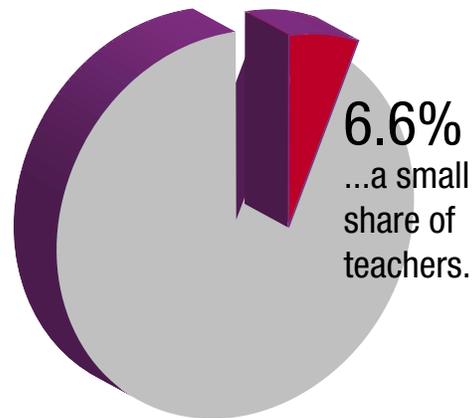
Unfortunately, many service-learning programs in the U.S. do not incorporate these key elements. In fact, while many U.S. school systems report the use of service-learning, data show that such programs are too often cursory at best.

“Unfortunately, service-learning programs in the U.S. too often tend to be a mile wide and an inch deep.”
– Shelley Billig, vice president, RMC Research Corporation

Percentage of High Schools Reporting Service-Learning



Percentage of Teachers Using Service Learning Among All Schools Using Service-Learning



Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Educational Statistics, Fast Response Survey System (FRSS), "National Student Service-Learning and Community Service Survey," FRSS 71, 1999.

As the above graphs illustrate, a survey by the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Educational Statistics found that 46% of U.S. high schools report using service-learning to educate their students. Thirty-eight percent of middle schools and 25% of elementary schools similarly report the use of service-learning. Yet less than 7% of teachers among all schools that reported using service-learning said they used such programs in their classrooms. These findings indicate that, in many U.S. schools, implementation of service-learning is, too often, "a mile wide and an inch deep." Such programs are not likely to incorporate the four key elements of high-quality service-learning outlined above and are also not likely to produce the academic or citizenship benefits desired.

Overall, American and British experts agreed that more research is needed to document the outcomes and effects of service-learning or "active citizenship" programs, and to specifically identify the elements that help make programs effective. The experts also agreed that greater gains in knowledge could be made by more actively pooling knowledge between the two countries. For instance, the U.K. has focused resources on more structured, formal research (including a new longitudinal student study). U.S. research, on the other hand, has been less structured but has gone deeper into the detailed workings of individual programs. By combining the best of both countries' approaches, researchers and educators might see a much clearer picture of the benefits of service-learning and the elements crucial to program success.

BARRIERS TO EFFECTIVE SERVICE-LEARNING

The British and American experts discussed and identified a variety of barriers to the proper development of service-learning programs. Two areas in particular surfaced:

1. Challenges for teachers
2. Gaps in available research.

Challenges for Teachers

Challenges to teachers were identified in several areas. Of particular concern in both the U.S. and the U.K. is increasing pressure from academic testing – and the resulting tendency to spend larger amounts of class time on lessons specifically targeted at preparing students to pass standardized examinations. Because teachers feel pressed for time in covering tested material, such "teaching to the test" often occurs – even though educators may recognize the advantages of service-learning as a teaching method. In the U.S., there is significant concern that this problem will become more pronounced as impacts from federal No Child Left Behind Act testing requirements – which do not address citizenship – are increasingly felt.

Even when citizenship is included as a topic on standardized tests, the effects on a student's education can be negative. For example, while citizenship testing may increase the amount of time teachers spend addressing the subject, the kind of instruction might overemphasize the acquisition of rote knowledge or factoids about the workings of government or the legal system. Such heavy emphasis on rote learning will not produce the types of skills and dispositions needed for students to be politically literate citizens.

Systemic challenges pose another barrier to teachers. Often a large number of ideas, programs, curricula and recommended practices are thrown at educators over the course of a typical school year. Such exposure can lead to "initiative overload" that causes programs like service-learning to be lost in the shuffle. Also, service-learning often is implemented because of the exceptional zeal of an individual teacher who has navigated through a barrage of proposed initiatives. Once such a teacher leaves or retires, however, the service-learning program is lost.

Another challenge faced by teachers and school leaders in implementing service-learning is a fear of negative repercussions when students take on controversial subjects. Issues such as war, environmental cleanup or abortion rights frequently are at the forefront of students' interest and are therefore often incorporated into service-learning activities. Teachers and school leaders, however, are often unprepared or unwilling to cope with the resulting feedback from parents and the community when students take on such challenging, controversial topics.

Gaps in Available Research

While current studies inform the potential value that service-learning offers in educating students for citizenship, wide gaps in information remain. In general, U.S. and U.K.

"School leaders and teachers cannot run effective programs if they are terrified of public response to a service-learning program that tackles a controversial issue."

**– Clare McAuley, officer,
Northern Ireland Council for
Curriculum, Examinations and
Assessment**

experts agreed that a great deal of existing research offers only a simplistic view of how service-learning can best be used to impact student education. Studies also suffer from not having common definitions for service-learning, political literacy or citizenship education. Without a common definition as a starting point, it is difficult to compare and interpret findings from a variety of sources.

Researchers must also grapple with the means by which attitudinal and behavioral changes can be accurately measured in students who participate in service-learning projects. Since a key goal of such projects is to shape and enhance student skills and citizenship dispositions, devising ways of accurately studying and analyzing such attitude and behavior changes is of critical importance.

Often, for instance, studies are based on interviews with students who have participated in service-learning proj-

ects. Interviewers ask students a series of questions to help determine what changes the project might have had on a student's citizenship knowledge, skills and dispositions. The reality, however, is that most students sense there is a "desired" response to the questions posed, and will therefore offer such a response even when it is not completely accurate. This ability to "see through" the questions posed – which can occur whether studies are based on oral or written surveys – threatens the validity of many service-learning research projects that attempt to measure student outcomes.

The Importance of Leadership

Stephen W. Hefner, superintendent of Richland School District Two in South Carolina and board member of the National Center for Learning and Citizenship, delivered a keynote speech inspiring meeting participants to understand and focus on the importance of strong local, district and school leadership. Such leadership is essential, Hefner said, to interpret federal and state policies and to encourage, support and reward effective classroom citizenship practices.

District and school administrators (superintendents, school board members and school principals) must not only support effective citizenship education but also model the characteristics of active principled citizens themselves. As an example, Hefner demonstrated through a personal story the importance of building and sustaining relationships over time and of understanding others' orientations and different life perspectives.

According to Hefner, this is a time that calls for courageous leadership. Education leaders need to maintain fidelity to the civic mission of schools in the face of a renewed focus on subjects like math and language arts. Leaders need to set the tone in their schools and districts and convey the message that such subjects and citizenship education are not mutually exclusive content areas. Instead, through programs like service-learning, students can gain content knowledge and build citizenship competencies at the same time.

Richland Two is a nationally recognized school district with a mission to "equip each individual for life-long learning, responsible citizenship and productivity in an ever-changing world."⁵ With the strong direction of Hefner, a commitment to using service-learning throughout the curriculum, and provision of leadership training opportunities for students and teachers, Richland Two is now considered a model for student engagement in the United States.

An additional challenge service-learning researchers frequently confront is a lack of current and reliable data on existing service-learning programs. In both the U.S. and the U.K., school surveys offer little detail on the types of service-learning programs currently in use; while self-reporting of data occurs on a sporadic basis, the quality and quantity of information produced often is not sufficient for researchers or analysts to determine what is actually taking place in schools. In particular, researchers could benefit from access to more longitudinal studies that track over time the academic and social development of students who participate in service-learning programs. Such a longitudinal study is now underway in the United Kingdom.

In addition to the shortcomings discussed above, the current research base in both countries fails to adequately address:

- How youth involvement in school and project decision-making enhances student academic and civic engagement
- The specific impacts of service-learning programs on at-risk youth
- How student political thinking develops over time and how to properly design projects for students of different ages and stages of development
- The impact of service programs on teachers, parents, schools, districts and communities
- The impact of professional development on teacher practice
- Whether a whole-school approach – which involves teachers from all subject areas in service-learning projects – improves program impact and delivery
- The costs and benefits involved with service-learning implementation.

Connecting Service-Learning with Afterschool Programs

At the April 2005 Charleston conference, representatives from both the U.S. and U.K. discussed potential synergies between service-learning and afterschool programs. Terry Peterson, senior education fellow at the University of South Carolina Educational Foundation and chair of the Afterschool Alliance, led the discussion. According to Peterson:

- 14 million U.S. K-12 students are on their own after every school day
- 8 million students are cared for by other siblings after school
- The highest crime rates occur between 3 p.m. and 7 p.m. during the school week.

Peterson said that service-learning is a “natural fit” with afterschool programs because both seek to expose students to opportunities not often available during the traditional school day. Schools such as Hand Middle School (Time Magazine’s 2001 middle school of the year) demonstrate the potential benefits of bringing service-learning into an afterschool setting. These benefits include:

- Greater flexibility in scheduling and facility use
- Exposing children to a wider set of community role models
- More opportunity to involve students from different ages or different schools in joint projects
- Providing students with a greater sense of belonging in their schools and developing a productive outlet for their energies.

Unfortunately, Peterson said, service-learning has not been implemented in many afterschool programs. This is a missed opportunity to strengthen both programs. For instance, Peterson argued that service-learning projects conducted after school can increase the strength of partnerships with the wider community. Such partnerships are a critical component to attract the people, energy and resources needed to conduct successful projects.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ *The Civic Mission of Schools, The Carnegie Corporation and The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement*, 2003, page 5. http://www.civicmissionofschools.org/campaign/cms_report.html
- ² *Citizenship in secondary schools: evidence from Ofsted inspections (2003/04)*, February 2005, page 4. <http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/publications/index.cfm?fuseaction=pubs.displayfile&id=3822&type=pdf>
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- ⁴ *Developing Citizenship Competencies from Kindergarten through Grade 12: A Background Paper for Policymakers and Educators*, Education Commission of the States, April 2004. <http://www.ecs.org/clearinghouse/51/35/5135.pdf>
- ⁵ Hefner, Stephen W. and Beverly Hiott. "Student Success Through Leadership Opportunities." Education Commission of the States, June 2004. <http://www.ecs.org/clearinghouse/52/00/5200.doc>

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April 13-15, 2005

Charleston, South Carolina

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