

360 CIVIC LEARNING

A STUDY OF THE PRACTICES THAT
CULTIVATE CIVIC ENGAGEMENT AMONG
YOUTH FROM UNDERSERVED COMMUNITIES



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Generation Citizen (GC) works to inspire robust, diverse civic participation by promoting Action Civics education: a student-centered, experiential approach to civics education in which young people learn about democracy by actively working to address issues in their own communities. This educational opportunity provides students with the knowledge, skills and motivation they need for a lifetime of active and responsible civic engagement. GC promotes Action Civics nationwide through a dual focus on direct service and systemic policy change — designing and delivering best-in-class Action Civics programming in partnership with primarily low-income schools, while simultaneously supporting appropriate state policy changes to drive widespread adoption of Action Civics education.

We believe that a democracy only works when all of its citizens' voices are represented and valued in the decision-making process. Yet, for a variety of reasons, this is not currently happening. Generation Citizen, as an organization and movement, exists to ensure that the voices of people from communities that have historically marginalized in our democracy are heard and valued. We strive to reach this democratic ideal by committing to core principles of diversity, equity, and inclusion across all levels of our work.

ABOUT THIS REPORT¹

This report investigates studies of the activities and practices in communities that effectively drive civic engagement among young people from historically marginalized communities, in order to determine and highlight common qualities. Individuals and groups designing programs, policies, and practices that engage young people should consider incorporating these common qualities as a means towards cultivating young people from underserved communities as civic actors. We hope for a broad audience as we know that even those who do not consider their work to be in the service of promoting civic engagement, do indeed play a role in influencing young people in this domain.

¹ This project was directed by Dana Harris, Generation Citizen's Advocacy Director with leadership from two Fellows: Brianna Yang and Clare Seekins.

UNEQUAL CIVIC PARTICIPATION IN AMERICA AND ITS ROOT CAUSE

The statistics are disheartening: in the 2016 presidential election, only 50% of eligible voters aged 18-29 across the country turned out to vote.² In midterm elections, turnout is typically even worse. In 2014, only 20% showed up to the polls, the lowest rate ever recorded.³ Turnout among this population spiked comparatively in the 2018 midterms to about 30%, yet it remains that 70% of eligible voters in the age group did not show up.⁴ Voting is a fundamental form of civic participation, and the most easily quantifiable, so low voter turnout among young voters raises alarms and indicates a broader failure to adequately prepare young people for the responsibilities and opportunities of citizenship.

Recent assessments of civic knowledge corroborate this hypothesis about youth civic engagement. On the 2014 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) Civics Assessment, over 75% of American students scored “below proficient.”⁵ Yet, for a variety of reasons, including differential access to resources, and student-oriented, culturally relevant pedagogies, these knowledge gaps are not distributed equally among young people in America. On average, African-American and Hispanic students score 10% lower than white students; low-income students⁶ score 7% lower than high-income students; and English-language learners score 13% lower than English-fluent students.⁷

These racial, ethnic and economic disparities in civic knowledge carry over into practice.

Individuals of color vote at about two-thirds the rate of their white counterparts, and individuals from families that make above \$75,000 per year are twice as likely to vote (and six times as likely to be politically active) as those from families that make below \$15,000 per year.⁸ Fewer naturalized citizens vote compared to native-born citizens, even as the population share of immigrants in the United States continues to rise.⁹

Combined, the above context and statistics begin to point to root causes of unequal civic participation between individuals from historically marginalized, or underserved, communities, including low income communities, rural communities, refugee communities, immigrant communities, and communities of color and those from white, wealthy, and otherwise more privileged communities.¹⁰ The consequences of this dynamic are grave: without creating conditions for engaged participants of all backgrounds, a true democracy is not functional, and can not persist.

Unequal civic participation is not new and it exists for a number of reasons.

² CIRCLE Staff, 2016

³ CIRCLE, 2015

⁴ CIRCLE, 2018

⁵ The Nation's Report Card, 2014

⁶ For the purposes of this report, low income students are defined as those who qualify for free and reduced lunch.

⁷ The Nation's Report Card, 2014

⁸ Gould, 2011

⁹ Levinson, 2010

¹⁰ Gould, 2011



1. SYSTEMIC AND STRUCTURAL INEQUITIES

Unequal civic participation has persisted for centuries because of systemic and structural inequities that disadvantage communities of color, immigrants, and low-income and rural Americans such as voter suppression, disenfranchisement, and gerrymandering.



2. UNEQUAL CIVICS EDUCATION

Civics education in the classroom is not created equal, either in access or quality. Students from underserved communities experience fewer civic learning opportunities (e.g. civic-oriented government classes, community service, simulations, and open classroom climates) in the classroom than students from higher income and white communities,¹¹ and low-income students are less likely than their more wealthy counterparts to discuss current events, participate in debates, or participate in simulations.¹² Even when students from underserved communities do receive civics education, that education is often tailored to the experiences of white, middle-class students.¹³ As a result, young people from underserved communities may feel a sense of civic disjuncture whereby their daily experiences (e.g. discrimination, violence, and economic injustice) conflict with what they learn in the classroom about American ideals and government.¹⁴



3. INTERGENERATIONAL CYCLES

Parents' civic participation and education levels are powerful predictors of long-term civic engagement. Low civic participation can be a self-reinforcing cycle, passed from generation to generation.¹⁵



4. INSUFFICIENT POLITICAL OUTREACH

In some underserved communities, civic action is more typically in forms of collective action, like protests, and there are fewer models of traditional civic behaviors, like voting.¹⁶ As a result, organized outreach to some underserved communities from political parties, labor unions, and other political and community organizations has dwindled and young people growing up a part of them lack the type of political socialization experienced by their more privileged counterparts.¹⁷

¹¹ Kahne & Middaugh, 2008

¹² Generation Citizen, 2016

¹³ Levinson, 2010

¹⁴ Rubin, 2007

¹⁵ McFarland & Thomas, 2006

¹⁶ Levinson, 2010

¹⁷ Kahne, & Middaugh E., 2008



5. LACK OF CIVIC RESOURCES.

Easily available civic resources are not readily present in some urban centers and many rural areas; in these contexts, youth often lack access to civic opportunities such as community organizations, political institutions, and volunteer opportunities altogether, similarly preventing political practice and socialization.¹⁸



6. CIVIC DISILLUSIONMENT AND DISJUNCTURE.

Individuals in underserved communities are more likely to be discouraged about their ability to effect change through political participation because of the historical disenfranchisement and marginalization their communities have faced, contributing to their civic disjuncture, and further contributing unequal civic participation.¹⁹

Addressing unequal civic participation is important; falling short of doing so leaves the promise of democracy — of equal voice and influence — unfulfilled. With unequal civic participation being driven from many sides, a single-pronged approach to addressing it would be inadequate. Instead, addressing it will require diverse efforts including, critically, effective civic learning which can have a compensation effect with regards to civic engagement. For instance, a study of civics classes showed group-based civics education has a greater impact on political engagement among youth from families that are less politically engaged than those from families that are more politically engaged.²⁰

Holistic civic learning relies on a coordinated ecosystem of the many influences in young people's lives including schools, teachers, parents, peers, siblings, community leaders, policymakers, philanthropists, and beyond. Smart and focused attempts to address unequal civic participation that build on the best practices outlined in the remainder of this report, will have greater influence on the communities that need it most.

¹⁸ Atwell, Bridgeland, & Levine, 2017

¹⁹ Rubin, B., 2007

²⁰ Neundorf, Niemi, & Smets, 2016

ADDRESSING UNEQUAL CIVIC PARTICIPATION

In order to best organize and prioritize our efforts and resources towards addressing unequal civic participation, we have undertaken a review of literature assessing existing civic learning practices across communities that promote the civic engagement of American youth from underserved communities. Through this review we identified practices and influences that ultimately lead to the formation of engaged civic actors among youth from this group. We hope our audience will leverage these learnings to support the development of fully engaged citizens. It is intended that our audience is broad and unbounded. Any potential influence might read this and find ways to support youth from underserved communities to achieve these civic dimensions.

STRUCTURING OUR FINDINGS

The remainder of this report is divided into two sections: (1) Civic Building Blocks, and (2) Effective Qualities. The Civic Building Blocks describe four dimensions that we feel combine to create a civic actor — civic knowledge, civic skills, civic values/ disposition, and efficacy. The Effective Qualities are six shared characteristics of successful youth civic engagement efforts that cultivate the aforementioned four dimensions in youth, and should inform any outreach that aims to boost civic engagement among youth in underserved communities and therefore address unequal civic participation. Rather than isolating one or two of the effective qualities, efforts to increase youth civic engagement in underserved communities should focus on the all six characteristics in order to holistically cultivate long-term civic engagement.

For the purposes of this report, civic engagement and civic activities have been defined broadly in order to capture the fullest picture of the factors that contribute to youth civic engagement. The secondary research was conducted with

a broad spectrum of sources including, but not limited to, scholarly articles, dissertations, blog posts, reports, and white papers; research was conducted in this manner in order to aggregate broad existing knowledge and insights as well as incorporate practices that may be missed in traditional scholarship. For this analysis, we have limited our research to experiences of youth in the United States, believing that our institutions, culture, and history have created a relatively unique condition of civil society and civic engagement. We have challenged ourselves to look beyond the classroom into the cultural and community-driven influences of civic development.

It should be noted that many assessments of civic knowledge and civic engagement lean heavily on the assumptions and values of the mostly middle-class, native-born, white scholars conducting them. Consequently, “non-traditional” types of civic engagement more often practiced by underserved communities can be overlooked and undervalued. Non-traditional, modern, or community-specific forms of civic engagement — like social networking tools, art, music, hip-hop culture, or informal neighborhood leadership — often go unstudied by many scholars who adhere to a traditional definition of civic engagement.²¹ In order to better support the civic learning opportunities available to youth from underserved communities, it is important to recognize and account for this deficiency in traditional definitions of civic engagement. We have attempted to incorporate these as appropriate into our analysis.

Still, traditional types of civic engagement, like voting, joining political parties, or reaching out to elected officials, remain important to learn and practice by all if we are to make progress towards transforming oppressive and inequitable systems. Exercising informal political influence through protest, public assemblies, and other means, is an important pathway to systems-level change, but often must be complemented by traditional civic engagement activities to establish lasting change.

²¹ Levinson, 2010

CIVIC BUILDING BLOCKS: LEARNINGS AND BEHAVIORS THAT ENABLE CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

Previous research indicates four critical Civic Building Blocks that contribute to the development of youth as civic actors: civic knowledge, civic skills, civic values/ disposition, and efficacy. It is the interaction among these four that produces a youth civic actor. Civic knowledge is important for exercising civic skills; civic knowledge, skills, and values/ disposition drive efficacy; civic values/ disposition and efficacy are needed to act on civic knowledge and skills.

The first three Civic Building Blocks (civic knowledge, skills, and values/ disposition), typically measured by civics education programs,

can be traced back to the report, *Guardian of Democracy*, which outlines how schools can better their civics education to achieve these outcomes. The fourth, efficacy, is key to translating motivation into action, especially for individuals from underserved communities. Below is an elaboration of each of the Building Blocks, highlighting specific challenges that exist for their development, particularly among youth from underserved communities, and listing some practices that are known to develop each of them.

CIVIC BUILDING BLOCK 1: **CIVIC KNOWLEDGE**

Civic knowledge is broadly defined as an understanding of the who, what, how, and why of government, politics, and the law. This includes the different levels and branches of government (and the roles of each), civil rights and liberties, and the process of making laws and policies.²² Civic knowledge also includes the minutiae of citizenship (where, when, and how to register to vote and voting, political parties and their ideologies, current events), and extends further to include an advanced understanding of local power structures, community politics,²³ community diversity, and historical trends in voter registration and civic participation. Ultimately, civic knowledge is the understanding of basic information needed to be a responsible and effective citizen. As enumerated in this paper's introduction, the civic knowledge gap between underserved and privileged communities is widely documented.

Classroom instruction in social studies is one of the most obvious routes to this knowledge. However, fact-based, rote learning tends to be less engaging to students than other pedagogical approaches, and it may actually deter them from taking serious interest in politics and civics.²⁴ Moreover, such learning may be particularly ineffective for students of color, who may have fewer complementary civic learning opportunities in the home. Instruction alone cannot address this piece of unequal civic participation. Rather more engaging learning practices can begin to do so.²⁵

SELECT PRACTICES THAT DRIVE CIVIC KNOWLEDGE

- Engaging classroom pedagogies:
 - Open climate classrooms (where the discussion of political issues is welcome)
 - Action Civics
 - Simulations
- Civics testing
- Student governance
- Student-led research, or “research in action”
- Youth participatory budgeting
- Discussing current events and news literacy
- Service learning
- Youth participation in municipal councils and boards
- Parent-led discussions (of political systems or current events)
- Involvement in faith-based and community organizations
- Community/ youth organizing

²² Gould, 2011

²³ Levinson, 2010

²⁴ Gould, 2011

²⁵ Healy, 2014

CIVIC BUILDING BLOCK 2: **CIVIC SKILLS**

Civic skills are the set of competencies useful for participating in a democracy. They are broadly grouped into three categories: (1) communication including expressing and understanding facts and opinions, (2) democratic deliberation and collective decision-making, and (3) critical analysis of political information.²⁶ They include a mix of “hard” and “soft” civic skills, from speaking and listening to collaboration and teamwork to interacting with people who hold different opinions and beliefs.

Like civic knowledge, there is an acute civic skills gap between white people and people of color, and between high-income and low-income people.²⁷ While schools are still the expected primary incubators of most civic skills, especially communication (written and oral), leadership, critical thinking and analysis, and collaboration, civic skills are commonly developed in a wide range of spaces including in the workplace and through participation in voluntary associations. Youth from underserved communities are less likely to have the opportunity to develop such skills in each of these venues²⁸ because of fewer allocated resources as well as social, economic, and systemic factors that make them more “likely to leave school sooner and be less educated, to have lower-status jobs, and to participate in voluntary associations less.”²⁹

SELECT PRACTICES THAT DRIVE CIVIC SKILLS

- Practicing civic skills while addressing an important problem in their community:
 - Community/ youth organizing
 - Action Civics
- Debate and discussion in any venue (classroom, home, community, among peers)
- Open classroom climates
- Student governance
- Student-led research, or “research in action”
- Service learning
- Public speaking
- Youth participatory budgeting
- Youth participation on municipal councils and boards
- Journalism activities like investigative reporting or writing op-eds
- Leadership and decision-making roles of any kind
- Self-expression through the arts
- Participation in team-based activities such as sports
- Involvement in faith-based and community organizations
- Engagement in interest-based voluntary organizations or clubs

²⁶ CIRCLE Staff, 2010

²⁷ Levinson, 2007

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

CIVIC VALUES / DISPOSITION

If one has the basic information (civic knowledge), the communication, consensus building and analytic capability (civic skills), the motivation or intention to employ their knowledge and skills facilitates them actually becoming a civic actor.

“Civic values” or “civic disposition,” as its termed most frequently, is the aggregate of attitudes and beliefs that motivate a person to participate in a democracy. A civic disposition involves a concern beyond the self, with civic purpose being “a sustained intention to contribute to the world beyond the self through civic or political action.”³⁰ For this building block, more than for knowledge or skills, it is the confluence of experiences and environments that contributes to a young person’s development.

SELECT PRACTICES THAT DRIVE CIVIC VALUES / DISPOSITION

- Practicing civic skills while addressing an important problem in their community:
 - Community/ youth organizing
 - Action Civics
- Debate and discussion in any venue (classroom, home, community, among peers)
- Open classroom climates
- Student governance
- Student-led research, or “research in action”
- Service learning
- Youth participatory budgeting
- Youth participation on municipal councils and boards
- Journalism activities like investigative reporting or writing op-eds
- Self-expression through the arts
- Participation in team-based activities such as sports, particularly in leadership positions
- Involvement in faith-based and community organizations
- Engagement in interest-based voluntary organizations or clubs
- Parent civic engagement and education level
- Peer civic participation
- Volunteering
- A sense of belonging or connectedness (e.g. strong religious or ethnic affiliation, or a strong association with one’s neighborhood or school)

³⁰ Malin, Ballard, & Damon, 2015

CIVIC BUILDING BLOCK 4: **CIVIC EFFICACY**

The final piece of the civic development puzzle as we see it is efficacy; it is the bridge between values/disposition and action.³¹ Efficacy takes three forms: political, personal, and collective. Political efficacy is the sense that any individual regardless of their race, gender, or geography can influence government. Personal efficacy (or self-efficacy) as it relates to civic engagement is the sense that “I” personally can influence government. Collective efficacy is the belief that a group of people can work together to accomplish a determined goal. All are important for the complete formation of a civic actor, but personal efficacy is critical.

Low-income individuals and individuals of color typically express markedly lower feelings of efficacy than wealthier or white individuals.³² Building efficacy within youth from underserved communities is crucial to driving civic participation and ultimately addressing unequal civic participation. For youth from underserved communities compared to more privileged youth, understanding the broader systemic inequities that shape their lives can “replace underserved adolescents’ feelings of isolation and self-blame for challenges they are encountering,” and consequently build their sense of efficacy to strive for social justice.³³

Efficacy is the least understood and least studied of these Building Blocks, especially with regards to civic learning. This means that there is a real opportunity to better understand and support this linchpin of civic engagement among youth from underserved communities.

SELECT PRACTICES THAT DRIVE CIVIC EFFICACY³⁴

- Practicing civic skills while addressing an important problem in their community:
 - Community/ youth organizing
 - Action Civics
- Student governance
- Democratic and open school climates
- Student-led research, or “research in action”
- Youth participation on municipal councils and boards
- Journalism activities like investigative reporting or writing op-eds
- Parent civic engagement
- A sense of belonging or connectedness (e.g. strong religious or ethnic affiliation, or a strong affiliation to one’s neighborhood or school)
- Student decision making and leadership opportunities

³¹ Gould, 2011

³² Levinson, 2007

³³ Seider, Tamerat, Clark, & Soutter, 2017

³⁴ Efficacy has not been universally measured by the field as an outcome of civic learning efforts and as such, certain effective practices may not yet be known to increase efficacy

EFFECTIVE QUALITIES: SHARED CHARACTERISTICS OF SUCCESSFUL YOUTH CIVIC ENGAGEMENT EFFORTS

The defined Effective Qualities are shared characteristics of successful youth civic engagement and civic learning programs and practices that serve youth from underserved communities, and are intended to inform the design and direction of civic learning programs, engagement activities, and any effort intended to address unequal civic participation as well as inform future research on the matter. Even though Generation Citizen's work with youth from underserved communities is primarily in the classroom environment, our intention is to highlight practices that can be applied in any forum, and enacted by a variety of influences, from teachers to parents to coaches to community leaders to policymakers.

We have identified six Effective Qualities of successful programs, through a review of literature, each of which are detailed below. Though these insights are not exhaustive, civic engagement efforts that incorporate some or all of them are more likely to activate the Building Blocks discussed in the previous section.

The defined Effective Qualities include:

- 1** Building critical consciousness
- 2** Providing a safe space for growth
- 3** Elevating youth voice and leadership in decision-making
- 4** Promoting youth-adult partnerships or adult support
- 5** Building social capital
- 6** Focusing on civics and politics in an applied and experiential context



Critical consciousness is an understanding of the systemic, institutional, and historical injustices that cause the pervasive inequities in resources and opportunities for certain groups.³⁵ Enhancing critical consciousness among youth from underserved communities is a vital step to building efficacy as it entails understanding an individual's relationship to a broader system. In this regard, critical consciousness largely drives civic values/ disposition. Given the alienation youth from underserved communities can experience, critical consciousness can help to contextualize their lived experiences and equip them with a sense of agency and determination to change the systems that have affected them."³⁶

Young people often develop the four Civic Building Blocks when they respond to issues of personal concern. For example, students who are immigrants or who have family, friends, or neighbors who are immigrants are motivated to participate when an issue arises that affects the immigrant community.³⁷ Developing critical consciousness is key to uncovering community concerns, putting youth on the path towards effective civic learning. Civic learning that is rooted in the context of young people's lives and communities can itself trigger the development of the critical consciousness and allow students to better understand the different structures of government and ways to wield influence over it. Critical consciousness is also an important dimension of the healing process for the lived experience of oppression and injustice. As one scholar puts it, "The healing process fosters hope, which is an important prerequisite for meaningful

civic engagement and social change. Together, healing and hope inspire youth to understand that community conditions are not permanent, and that the first step in making change is to imagine new possibilities."³⁸

When paired with political or community action, critical consciousness can help youth from underserved communities see themselves as agents of change. Youth organizing and youth-led participatory action research are examples of activities that effectively build critical consciousness among young people from underserved communities as they work to identify the root causes of systemic inequity, then take steps, through advocacy, to address the issues. When young people have the opportunity to act to redress injustice, enabled through their critical consciousness, they see civic participation as a meaningful way to enact needed change.³⁹

³⁵ Ginwright & James, 2002

³⁶ Seider, Tamerat, Clark, & Soutter, 2017

³⁷ Malin, Ballard, & Damon, 2015

³⁸ Ginwright, 2011

³⁹ Rogers, Mediratta, Shah, Kahne & Terriquez, 2012

Young people need safe places to express their emerging opinions and explore approaches to self expression. When a program, activity, or school offers young people a safe and inclusive environment to vocalize their views and thoughts, they are more likely to stay involved long-term. These places are key to social and emotional learning, which is critical to developing civic skills and efficacy.

Engaging and learning in a safe and inclusive environment is especially important for youth from underserved communities, who are more likely to face traumatic experiences in their lives. A study of Project HIP-HOP (PHH, Highways Into the Past - History, Organizing and Power), a youth-led cultural organizing group that links art and social justice, found that “those who stay do so in large part because it has become a sort of home, and the people a sort of family. Some explained that this is because PHH offers a sense of psychological safety, allowing for freedom of expression and identity exploration.”⁴⁰

A hallmark of inclusive spaces is open dialogue, which is key to building civic knowledge, skills, and values/ disposition. Open dialogue and critical consciousness often go hand-in-hand. Conversations about oppression and injustice can help youth to understand and process systemic inequity. In classrooms, students who engage in open and respectful conversation about current events or controversial issues are more knowledgeable about politics and are more likely to see themselves as informed voters.⁴¹ Having frequent discussions on civic issues is also associated with increased civic motivation

and intent to participate.⁴² This effect is even greater for students who are expected to obtain a lower level of education, thus showing that open dialogue is especially important for youth from underserved communities.⁴³

Safe places for growth can exist in the classroom, community forums, or in the home. Children who discuss politics frequently with their parents are also more likely to monitor national news, participate in community service and have more political knowledge and public communication skills – but these outcomes are dependent on the level of political knowledge that the parents have.⁴⁴

⁴⁰ Kuttner, 2016

⁴¹ Campbell, 2008

⁴² Lenzi, Vieno, Sharkey, Mayworm, Scacchi, Pastore, & Santinello, 2014

⁴³ Campbell, 2008

⁴⁴ McIntosh, Hart, & Youniss, 2007

ELEVATING YOUTH VOICE AND LEADERSHIP IN DECISION-MAKING

When young people get the chance to take on leadership positions or take part in important decision-making processes, they greatly enhance their civic values/ disposition and efficacy. A study of student voice in service-learning, an educational practice that combines classroom instruction and community service, showed that students' feelings of efficacy increased as their level of voice in the program (e.g., involvement in leadership positions and leadership in directing the project) increased.⁴⁵ Municipal youth councils are also an exceptional example of this dynamic. Hampton, Virginia has institutionalized youth engagement through its youth commission, youth planners, school superintendent's youth advisory group, and principal's advisory group in each of the city's four public high schools. These councils do meaningful community work: for example, the youth commission and the youth planners collaborated to propose and design a Teen Center that would hold youth-driven programming.

With opportunities to contribute to community decision-making in this way, youth learn the nuances of public service, balancing their ideas and goals with others' ideas and goals for the community. It drives civic skills and values/ disposition by giving them a sense of ownership aligned with a responsibility to consider and make decisions based on the interests and needs of others who might be affected.⁴⁶

Young people are not blank canvases awaiting instruction on what to care about and how to act on it. Rather, they enter spaces "having

already at least partially constructed their own understandings of their civic identity, of their membership in or exclusion from the polity, and even of history's significance and meaning for their own lives."⁴⁷ As such, their voices deserve attention and their experiences and perspectives, consideration.

Critical to establishing safe spaces for young people to express themselves and take on leadership is demonstrating respect for them and their opinions. Young people are often not thought of as civic agents in their own right by their communities. The belief that adults are more competent and skilled than young people, can be a barrier to open dialogue.⁴⁸ However, if young people are to be civic actors in the future, they should be treated as such in the present in order to develop the habits of civic participation. Open dialogue between adults and youth, and specifically teachers and students can moderate the traditional power imbalance between them, creating "teacher-students" and "student-teachers" and empowering youth as valuable contributors and decision-makers.⁴⁹

⁴⁵ Morgan & Streb, 2001

⁴⁶ Sirianni, 2005

⁴⁷ Levinson, 2010

⁴⁸ Nemoy & Miles, 2018

⁴⁹ Mirra, Morrell, Cain, Scorza, & Ford, 2013

INCLUDING YOUTH-ADULT PARTNERSHIPS OR ADULT SUPPORT

Adults play a significant role in motivating youth civic participation and the impact of civic role models cannot be underestimated as they drive civic knowledge, skills, values/ disposition and efficacy. When young people feel higher levels of support from adults in their community and even just witness adults participating in community life, they express a higher commitment to civic participation and social responsibility.⁵⁰

The most direct role adults can play is as parents; parents have the potential to be the most important source of political socialization in a young person's life. A parent's degree of education, specifically the mother's education, is a significant predictor of a student's civics assessment scores, independent of race, socioeconomic status, and English fluency.⁵¹ Strong parent-child bonds and a high frequency of shared family activities improve the likelihood of civic engagement.⁵² When parents are civically engaged, they pass along those same habits and motivations to their children.

In the absence of parental engagement, other adults can serve as important models of civic behavior for adolescents. Teens who feel that adults in their community support youth and care about improving the neighborhood are more likely to report high levels of civic commitment.⁵³ Young people who are civically engaged often cite being recruited by an adult as the reason for their involvement.⁵⁴ Whether the adult be a teacher, neighbor, or a coach, they can spark and nurture a young person's civic potential,

connecting them to interesting opportunities and extracurriculars, encouraging them to speak their mind in discussions, or teaching them the skills and knowledge needed to participate.⁵⁵

A formal study of youth-adult partnerships in organizational governance found that positive relationships with adults and respect for youth voice were significant factors that motivated youth to stay involved.⁵⁶ These youth-adult partnerships exist when youth and adults deliberate and take collective action together over a period of time in order to advance a social, community, or organizational goal.⁵⁷ Although both the adults and the youth may need training to understand how to work with each other, when adults take youth seriously as informed participants, decision-makers and civic agents, it builds their efficacy and civic values/ disposition.

⁵⁰ Kahne & Sporte, 2008

⁵¹ Healy, 2014

⁵² Mahatmya & Lohman, 2012

⁵³ Kahne & Sporte, 2008

⁵⁴ Malin, Ballard, & Damon, 2015

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Zeldin & MacNeil, 2006

⁵⁷ Zeldin, Christens, & Powers, 2013

Social capital refers to “the links, shared values and understandings in society that enable individuals and groups to trust each other and to work together.”⁵⁸ As such, civic engagement can actually be an expression of social capital, and so fostering social connections is particularly important for developing civic values/ disposition, and can drive civic skills as well.

Programs can build social capital by encouraging collaboration, teamwork and problem solving among peers – and by fostering a sense of belonging to a larger group or mission. This is particularly true for immigrant youth who may not have other opportunities for community integration. Socioeconomic status, in-group/ out-group dynamics, and education level all can impact an individual’s level of social capital, and thus influence their level of civic engagement.⁵⁹ Neighborhood social capital is a significant predictor of a young person’s civic commitment.^{60,61}

Social trust, a faith in the honesty and reliability of others, is also a key component of social capital. Youth, people of color, and low-income individuals are less trusting in government than older, white, or high-income individuals. A lack of social trust may result in a reluctance to participate politically – only 26% of Gen Z⁶² trust elected officials, and only 47% think voting is important.⁶³

Social capital is challenging to measure and evaluate, and the influences that build community

and contribute to social trust are vast and perhaps unexpected. A study of urban design and civic engagement found that the design of public spaces can improve civic trust, participation in public life, stewardship of the public realm, and inform local voting.

Well-maintained parks with easy access and positive signs, for example, facilitate social interaction and increase civic trust and a willingness to help others.⁶⁴ Even the design and climate of spaces that young people inhabit frequently, like schools or community centers, have the potential to greatly impact both one’s experience and the connections that result.

⁵⁸ Keeley, 2007

⁵⁹ Grillo, Teixeira, & Wilson, 2010

⁶⁰ Kahne & Sporte, 2008

⁶¹ Wray-Lake, Gupta, Sirin (2015)

⁶² born 1995-present

⁶³ Dorsey, 2016

⁶⁴ Center for Active Design, 2018

FOCUSING ON CIVICS AND POLITICS IN AN APPLIED AND EXPERIENTIAL CONTEXT

Activities that focus specifically on civics or politics are, unsurprisingly, more effective in building civic knowledge, skills, and values/ disposition than other activities. Civic learning that is experiential, when young people have the chance to practice civic participation and ideally, enact real change in their communities, is more effective than passive learning. Combining the above described Effective Qualities with an intentional focus on politics and civics allows for the knowledge and skills developed to be applied directly in a political or civic context thus resulting in increased civic and political values/ disposition and self-efficacy.

School-based civic learning opportunities that include the Effective Qualities outlined above like service-learning and discussions of current events are impactful on a student's commitment to civic participation.⁶⁵ Action Civics, a project-based approach to civics education, whereby students take strategic action to address a community issue has been shown to boost students' civic knowledge, skills, motivation, and efficacy. In our Generation Citizen Action Civics program, 80% of students increased their civic knowledge, 72% their civic skills, and 64% their civic motivation, and 90% of students felt like they could make a difference in their communities at the end of one semester.⁶⁶ The application of the Effective Qualities to civic specific content and issues allows skills and efficacy to be directed towards and applied in political and community contexts. When students practice being civic actors, they can more easily

envision themselves as civic actors in the future.

A civics focus can also be impactful when incorporated into disciplines that are not traditionally civics-based. The SENCER (Science Education for New Civic Engagements and Responsibilities) approach incorporates civic education into science education. Students learn scientific principles and practices through a framework of addressing contemporary, real-world issues. The results are positive: "While few students reported engaging in civic activities such as attending hearings or writing letters to the editor before courses, roughly a fifth of the students who had never engaged in civic activities said they were more likely to participate in these activities after course completion."⁶⁷ When students have positive, real-world experiences related to civic and political engagement, their perceptions of the value of civic and political engagement increase.⁶⁸ The more young people are exposed to civic or political bodies and practices, in any field or discipline, the more likely they are to participate civically in the future.

⁶⁵ Kahne & Sporte, 2008

⁶⁶ Generation Citizen, 2018

⁶⁷ Science Education for New Civic Engagements and Responsibilities, 2012

⁶⁸ Levinson, 2010

CONCLUSION

No one program, policy, or activity alone can typically improve every one of the four civic Building Blocks and immediately move a student to engagement. Rather, it is the entire ecosystem of supports, from parents to neighborhoods and community groups to school climate to civic education, that scaffold the civic learning of young people. Woven together, they form the civic culture in which young people are immersed, a culture that hopefully supports the holistic development and participation of knowledgeable and motivated members of our democracy.

It is for this reason that it is imperative that those traditionally in the civics education space and those beyond it consider the outlined Effective Qualities for civic learning in their interactions with youth from underserved communities. It is critical that we recognize the civic impact an individual, program, or community can have on the development of youth as civic actors, particularly those from underserved communities. This will allow us to more constructively and proactively coordinate efforts as we all work to address unequal civic participation, and in doing so, promote full inclusion of our American democracy and the realization of its promise.

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