Implementing Social Action Curriculum in an Elementary Classroom:

Reflections from the Journey

Michelle Vander Veldt
Jennifer Ponder
California State University, Fullerton

This study examines how a social studies methods course, with an emphasis in civic education, is taught and carried through from its original implementation within a teacher education social studies course to practicing teachers’ classrooms. Findings suggest that by implementing social action curriculum projects teachers: 1) effectively integrated emerging curriculum, 2) facilitated student-led instruction in a democratic classroom, 3) increased effective communication and built partnerships beyond the classroom, and 4) used structured reflections as a tool for growth and evaluation.

Key words: civic education, service learning, social action, social studies, teacher education

Introduction

Shortly after his election, the President of the United States, Barack Obama, issued a call to service for all American citizens. Despite the unsettling times that our world currently is facing, there are many reasons why it is critical for all citizens to work together. The government, in particular, cannot and should not be expected to solve all of our problems. As citizens of this world, we have an incredible amount of influence on the issues and problems that plague society. Many members of our society have been complacent and apathetic regarding change and their ability to enact change. A renewed sense of commitment and energy appears to be sweeping the globe. As teacher educators, we believe the enthusiasm surrounding change can be used as a catalyst to identify areas of injustice in our local communities and beyond, while also highlighting the power of social action curriculum and civic education in the classroom. The classroom, after all, is a microcosm of society and gives students the opportunity to prepare for their role as global citizens.

Historically, the primary motive for establishing public schools was for the implementation of civic learning, its aim being to equip its students with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions required for effective civic engagement. Civic learning includes a variety of teaching and discovery methods that enable citizens to participate in and sustain, democracy. Most schools today have mission statements that list civic education as a top priority, but with the push for higher test scores, civic education often is left behind (Parker, 2008). The National Alliance for Civic Education (2008) believes it is time that people come together to support future generations understanding of democracy and actively engage in building this democracy in America.

It is not surprising that schools are identified as the logical place for students to learn about civic participation and responsibility. If
school is where children acquire their civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions, then it is crucial for teacher educators to help teachers become knowledgeable, civic-minded citizens. We agree with other researchers (Mason & Silva, 2001; Partick & Vontz, 2001) that civics education prepares students to understand the roles and responsibilities of democratic citizens. Many teachers unfortunately initially reject the idea of a civics-centered curriculum because it does not support their district’s curriculum goals. Since the implementation of the No Child Left Behind Act (2001), our teachers often report that their curriculum has been sharply narrowed to focus on mathematics and language arts. Real world experiences and meaningful curriculum projects are obsolete because their format does not support the test preparation regimen mandated by school districts. As a result, any request to deviate from the script often is met with resistance from the administration. High stakes tests become the driving focus behind the curriculum.

In an attempt to revive civic education in the curriculum and reaffirm its role in the preparation of citizens, we determined that teachers must first experience the complex task of integrating meaningful civics curriculum into their every day instruction. This creates a need for a different approach to teaching and learning in the social studies classroom. Theorists such as John Dewey (1897, 1916, 1938) pioneered the idea of learners constructing curricula and designing school experiences. Levi Hopkins (1954) also supported this idea of students contributing to curriculum decisions. In light of these theories, teaching and learning is conceptualized as involving students’ needs and wants. To facilitate this experience, the teachers in our graduate social studies courses are required to conduct a service-learning project with their elementary students. The project involves students in identifying and examining social issues, a messy process allowing the curriculum to develop with students’ input. Classroom teachers are encouraged to follow teachable moments that are born out of their classroom discussions and research, and ultimately allow students’ interests to guide the direction of the project. The curriculum emerges as students are immersed in a social action curriculum that encourages active citizenship and decision-making through thoughtful deliberations (Epstein & Oyler, 2008, Shultz & Oyler, 2006).

Civics Curriculum

Since civic competence is the goal of social studies (National Council for the Social Studies, 1994) and citizenship usually is mentioned in most school mission statements, then, what does democracy look like when translated into a common curriculum? It is essential that teacher educators find curricula to help students understand that civic education is not a list of mechanical skills for a test, but knowledge for "creating a public" (Postman, 1995, p. 18). John Patrick (2002) developed a framework that defines components of common education for citizenship in a democracy. For the present study, we used Patrick’s framework to create the following three categories of civic education as related to civic curriculum: 1) civic knowledge, 2) civic dispositions, and 3) civic skills. These three components guided the development of our civics-infused social studies methods course and this research study.

Civic Knowledge, Dispositions, and Skills

If active civic involvement is necessary to promote civic competence, it is crucial that citizens are knowledgeable about democracy (Parker, 2008). By exploring issues, students find meaningful connections in a real world context that provides the foundation for building new knowledge. We argue that natural connections related to the knowledge of the concepts, principles, practices, contexts, and history of democracy and institutions of repre-
sentative democratic government (Patrick & Vontz, 2001) will emerge through the curricular experience. If this is true, then teachers should attempt to use the context of a social action project to expand students’ civic knowledge, both past and present.

The second aspect of civic education critical to quality civic curriculum is the development of attitudes and values regarding the roles and responsibilities of citizenship. These civic dispositions are the elements of civic education concerned with the habits and inclinations that summarize an individual’s behaviors and values in relation to democracy. According to Walter Parker (2008), these virtues include responsibility, civility, honesty, courage, fairness, and lawfulness. Edward Wynne (1986) emphasizes the importance of civic dispositions by stating that “the transmission of moral values has been the dominant educational concern of most cultures throughout history” (p. 4). This transmission of civic dispositions continues through the current filtering of character education through public school domains (Lickona, 1991). According to John Patrick and Thomas Vontz (2001), qualities such as promoting the common good, recognizing and supporting equality for all people, and responsible civic participation are all traits necessary to sustain a representative democracy. By perpetuating and promoting these dispositions through a social action curriculum, educators can begin to help students move beyond citizenship that focuses on good deeds, and develop the participatory civic skills of deliberation and policy analysis necessary in order to maintain democracy.

Civic skills, or the skills necessary to “empower citizens to influence public policy decisions and to hold accountable their representatives in government,” are a crucial piece to civics curriculum (Patrick & Vontz, 2001, p. 42). Through social action projects, teachers can provide students with opportunities to identify, describe, evaluate, analyze, and think critically about issues related to civic life. More specifically, students should be actively engaged in thoughtful deliberations that encourage the consideration of multiple perspectives before decisions are made. Creating and implementing a plan of action to inform and influence social change allows students to use valuable civic skills and to participate in civic life beyond the four walls of their classroom (Patrick & Vontz, 2001).

Types of Citizenship

Civic participation can be examined through different levels of involvement. Joel Westheimer and Joe Kahne (2004) identify three categories of citizenship: personally responsible, participatory, and justice-oriented. Personally responsible citizenship requires individuals to act responsibly in the community. Such action involves the individual: working, paying taxes, obeying laws, recycling, and volunteering. Participatory citizenship centers on organizing community outreach for those in need. These citizens are active members of community organizations and work to accomplish collective tasks. Finally, justice-oriented citizenship focuses on critically assessing the social, political, and economic circumstances surrounding the surface conditions. These types of citizens seek to identify areas of injustice in the world. They have knowledge of democratic social movements, which informs how these citizens effect systemic change.

While all three types of citizens are necessary to sustain a democracy, we challenged our teachers to engage their students in activities that would require active civic involvement on a participatory, or justice-oriented, level. We wanted our teachers to move beyond projects with a narrow focus such as a charity donation or a one-time volunteering event. We encouraged them to provide opportunities for their students to critically examine the root causes of specific problems in society and to develop their own plan of action to inform or influence others.
As social studies methods professors, we are on a quest to challenge teachers to consider building the foundation of their classroom framework around meaningful social studies instruction, with an emphasis on active civic involvement and democratic citizenship. The classroom is a perfect microcosm of society in which to give students the opportunity to prepare for their role as global citizens of this Earth. While it is no surprise that meaningful social studies experiences often are missing from the elementary curriculum, we are convinced that even small changes are noteworthy, and often can impact the system on a much larger level. Genell Lewis-Ferrell (2007) found that for social studies methods to effectively promote civic engagement, the following components needed to be included in the course: 1) sought to understand students’ experiences, values, and beliefs, 2) challenged existing schemas of civics, 3) taught critical inquiry through primary source documents, 4) modeled democratic processes during instruction, including classroom management techniques with civic-minded goals, 5) integrated all disciplines with a foundational base of civics content, and 6) engaged students in service-learning projects. These components became the foundation of our current study.

Methodology

This qualitative study includes data collected from 12 teachers enrolled in a graduate social studies methods class. Since we were interested in understanding how the participants constructed meaning from their experiences (Sherman & Webb, 1988) in a graduate social studies methods course combined with their active participation in a service-learning project, we chose to use qualitative research methods. The data was captured from participants through interviews, surveys, and written documents, and analyzed through a phenomenological approach.

Research supports the notion that first-hand experiences as a participant in a service-learning project enhances understanding, which inevitably leads to more effective action in the future (Eyler & Giles, 1999). As a result, we designed a study that sought to answer the following research question: Does a social studies methods course, with an emphasis in civic education, have an impact on classroom teachers’ classroom practices in terms of social action curriculum?

Research also suggests that effective reflection promotes the power of service-learning, or social action, curriculum (Bathchelder & Root, 1994; Boss, 1994; Eyler & Giles, 1999; Eyler, 2002). Janet Eyler (2001) created a reflection map to guide reflection before, during, and after service. For the purpose of our research, we decided to adapt the reflection map and require students to reflect at four different stages of the project (Table 1). During stage one, teachers were asked to reflect on their prior experiences with civic involvement, identify their hopes and concerns, and plan an outline for implementation. During stages two and three of project implementation, teachers were asked to make two additional on-line posts to encourage teachers to reflect on the process, assess students’ progress, and summarize their overall reactions. During stage four, the teachers completed a final post to analyze findings from their service-learning assignment, reflections on the process, and implications for future practice.

As teacher educators, we believe the enthusiasm surrounding change can be used as a catalyst to identify areas of injustice in our local communities and beyond, while also highlighting the power of social action curriculum and civic education in the classroom.
Table 1. Teacher Reflections adapted from the Reflection Map (Eyler, 2001)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Before civic involvement</th>
<th>Prior experience with civic involvement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hopes &amp; Concerns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Outline for service-learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>During civic involvement (2 posts)</td>
<td>Reflective on-line journal (progress, artifacts, impressions)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>After civic involvement</td>
<td>Findings from service-learning, reflection on the overall process, &amp; implications for future practice</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) was used to analyze the reflective posts and service-learning data in search of recurring themes or common responses. As patterns emerged, passages were highlighted and numbered to code the data. After themes were identified, the researchers went back to the literature in an attempt to ground the themes that emerged from the study to theoretical foundations.

Findings

How it Started

A service-learning assignment was created for classroom teachers who were enrolled in a graduate level social studies methods course. This assignment provided steps the teachers would use to involve their students in an active citizenship project, while documenting connections between their academic learning and their civic knowledge, dispositions, and skills as related to their involvement with the project. The teachers also collected data sources such as student reflections, artifacts, and photographs and reflected at various stages of the project.

The graduate class was composed of twelve students who were learning about social studies methods with an emphasis in civic education. All twelve participants had multiple subject credentials and taught in grade levels ranging from Kindergarten to eighth grade. Two of the twelve students were substitute teachers and full-time graduate students so they completed their projects as guests in other teachers’ classrooms. The participants years of teaching experience ranged from 0 to 25 years. Throughout this article, pseudonyms are used in place of the teachers’ actual names.

To introduce the assignment, the teachers watched a clip from the movie Pay it Forward (Leder, Abrams, Carson, Levy, McLaglen, Reuther & Treisman, 2000). In the featured movie clip, the teacher introduced social studies to a group of 7th grade students on the first day of class by asking them to identify their roles and responsibilities as citizens of the world. To encourage the kids to become active citizens, the teacher introduced a social studies assignment for the whole year that challenged the students to think of a way to change the world and put it into action. After watching the clip, the teachers were asked to reflect on the assignment presented in the movie and discuss how it connected to their personal definition of social studies. This led to a discussion about the dimensions of citizenship education (Parker, 2008) and connections to social studies. The teachers next were asked to define the characteristics of a good citizen. After examining the categories of citizenship (Table 2) defined by Westheimer and Kahne (2004), the teachers were challenged to engage their students in activities that require active civic involvement on a participatory or justice-oriented level. After sharing examples of different projects completed by children in the past, the teachers were provided with a handout to guide the facilitation of an active citizenship project in their classrooms. The following objectives were presented to help them process the long-term goals associated with the assignment:
1. Students will be able to recognize their rights and responsibilities as citizens of this world.
2. Students will view themselves as agents of change and realize that their voice can make a difference.
3. Students will understand how to design a plan of action that addresses an issue and work toward making a change.

Table 2. Joel Westheimer and Joe Kahne’s (2004) categories of citizenship

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Justice-Oriented Citizenship</th>
<th>Participatory Citizenship</th>
<th>Personally-Responsible Citizenship</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Critically assesses social, political, and economic structures beyond surface causes</td>
<td>Organizes community efforts to care for those in need</td>
<td>Acts responsibly in the community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seeks out and addresses areas of injustice</td>
<td>Active member of community organizations</td>
<td>Works and pays taxes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Obeys laws</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knows about democratic social movements and how to effect systemic change</td>
<td>Knows strategies for accomplishing collective tasks</td>
<td>Recycles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Volunteers</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The methods course professor provided continuous support throughout the semester and conducted activities in class each week related to topics including, but not limited to, deliberation, patriotism, historical inquiry, community involvement, and global interdependence. One such class assignment required students to conduct a book review on *Pledging Allegiance: The Politics of Patriotism in America’s Schools*, edited by Joel Westheimer (2007). The students were instructed to read the book, take notes, participate in an on-line book club discussion, and prepare a book review. The purpose of the assignment was for students to articulate their own ideological position in regards to patriotism, as well as consider the ideas presented by their classmates. After having students identify their own stances, the next questions revolved around how they could address the complexities associated with patriotism in their own classrooms. Do they simply go through the motions by reciting the Pledge of Allegiance every morning with their students, display a flag at the front of the room, and celebrate patriotic holidays with superficial activities? Or, do they strive to create democratic communities in their classrooms where students are encouraged to explore controversial issues, raise questions, engage in dissent, and examine multiple perspectives before making a decision, while respecting one another’s ideas and viewpoints on important issues? According to a recent study, such classroom practices are among those that predict higher levels of civic participation by high school students (Kahne & Sporte, 2007). Further research is needed to determine the effects of civic involvement with elementary students.

“The classroom is a perfect microcosm of society in which to give students the opportunity to prepare for their role as global citizens of this Earth.”
A consideration of the ideas presented in this book is a natural complement to promoting active civic engagement among all elementary students. Patriotism should promote citizens’ commitment to respect each other’s ideas, stand up for justice, search for the root causes of problems, and come up with solutions to them. Students must consider the voices of those who are oppressed and marginalized and consider multiple perspectives, while actively participating in the on-going struggle for equality, tolerance, and respect for all groups of people in our world. Without considering these dimensions of citizenship, activities such as social action curriculum projects can be limited to a focus on volunteerism and charitable action without developing an understanding of the political conditions that give rise to injustice and inequality. Recognizing that we have global problems and that we must address them is the first step towards the renewed and reconceptualized sense of patriotism for which Westheimer (2007) and many of the contributors to this book argue.

Another example of a class activity in the graduate social studies methods course was the students’ involvement in a mock congressional hearing. The students evaluated and discussed instructional strategies in class that could be used in conjunction with the Constitution and the rights of American citizens. After the students became familiar with the structure of our government and the implications of the Constitution, the class participated in a simulation of a mock congressional hearing to apply these ideas to current issues and events.

Stage One: Before Service Reflection

Prior to the implementation of the service-learning project, classroom teachers were asked to respond to a series of on-line prompts related to their prior experiences with social action curriculum, along with their hopes and concerns. All 12 of the classroom teachers reported no prior experience with student-led social action curriculum projects. Four teachers discussed their students’ involvement with school-wide service-learning projects. Examples provided by the teachers included writing letters to soldiers in Iraq, contributing canned goods to a food drive during the holidays, and adopting a needy family at Christmas.

Embarking on this new journey evoked unanimous feelings of optimism and enthusiasm from all 12 teachers when reflecting on the possibilities of the project. The thought of deviating from their comfort zones was overwhelming for all of the teachers because they questioned their students’ abilities to actually lead and implement a project that was not teacher-directed. All 12 participants discussed both hopes and concerns, so their responses were coded according to recurring themes. Many of the teachers listed student ownership, motivation, and extension of active citizenship beyond the scope of the project as hopes they had for the project. Several concerns were voiced at the onset of the project. The teachers were worried about the project choice of the students. Would the selected project be realistic and deemed worthy? Other teachers felt their students might not be committed to the project. The most mentioned concern was that of testing constraints. What would happen if the project did not align with the pacing guide or the test preparation demands? This initial reflection provided information regarding how the teachers were feeling about implementing the social action curriculum projects in their classrooms.

“By implementing service-learning opportunities such as social action curriculum projects that integrate the curriculum, educators shift the focus of learning from teacher-centered to student-centered.”
Stages Two and Three: During Service Reflection

To ensure on-going reflection throughout the project, classroom teachers were asked to document highs and lows at different checkpoints throughout the project. The stage two posts were made one month after the project was launched. Responses were organized according to the level of concern reported: no concerns, some concerns, more concerns than anticipated, and major concerns. Eight of the twelve teachers did not express any concerns with the project. Instead, their posts reflected enthusiasm about the classroom students taking the lead and collaborating on the project, which lead to student empowerment and student engagement through the development of the social action curriculum. One teacher expressed some anxiety during implementation, because the project was new and unfamiliar. Another teacher stated that one month into the project there were more concerns than she originally anticipated because of current job placement. She did not have her own classroom to complete the project, which resulted in working with students through a volunteer club. This created scheduling conflicts as well as difficulties with generating student buy-in with the project. Two teachers had major concerns with the implementation of the social action curriculum project because their principals did not support the project. These teachers were bound by district mandates to adhere to strict pacing guides and test preparation, which prevented their projects from developing.

Two months into the project, teachers were asked to reflect again using the same prompts. Responses were similar to those obtained in the first month, with more positive examples provided as the social curriculum project developed. Again, responses were organized according to the level of concern reported: no concerns, some concerns, and major concerns. Overall, the majority of teachers, nine out of twelve, reported positive outcomes with the project. Comments related to student initiative, empowerment, engagement, and collaboration were mentioned repeatedly in the teachers’ reflections. The teachers commented that students were leading the projects and serving as the facilitators. It is important to note a shift in attitude regarding project satisfaction had occurred. The teacher who originally reported anxiety about implementing a new type of curriculum in the classroom had moved to the no concern category by the second month. The teacher who experienced more problems than she originally anticipated had found solutions to many of her original concerns, but still reported that she was dealing with unavoidable roadblocks related to the nature of her teaching position. This teacher still reported enthusiasm for the project and commented multiple times that despite her frustration with scheduling and time constraints, she could definitely see how effective this project would be if she had her own classroom. The two teachers who were struggling to gain their principals’ support at the beginning of the project because of testing preparation, unfortunately reported that they were still limited in their flexibility with the project during month two.

Stage Four: After Service Reflection

At the conclusion of the project, teachers were asked to analyze the data they collected for their service-learning projects and reflect on the experience of implementing social action curriculum. Once again, specific themes emerged from their analysis. In terms of meaningful curriculum integration, all 12 teachers reported that natural connections emerged through the project in multiple subject areas. Lacey, a sixth grade teacher stated, “The project took on a life of its own after the ball started rolling.” Anna, a second grade teacher, commented, “Incorporating it into the curriculum was much easier than I thought. Natural
connections were made to science and language arts standards through our project.” Missy, a fifth grade teacher, was delighted that her students were able to write a persuasive essay about their issue, conduct research, and design and analyze a survey without opening a textbook. All of the teachers agreed that the curriculum connections were natural and meaningful. Reading and writing took on a new life in these teachers’ classrooms; the students were using their skills for a cause that extended beyond the four walls of the classroom. In all of the projects, students were applying valuable language arts skills to communicate with an audience, which ultimately provided the students with a meaningful purpose for learning. The two teachers who struggled with support from administrators unfortunately felt that their connections were severely limited because of the test-pacing guides that drove their instruction.

All 12 teachers agreed that student leadership was key to the success of the project. Mindy, a third grade teacher stated, “Teachers must give up control, be flexible, and let the children make the decisions.” In terms of decision-making, all of the teachers reported that opportunities for student collaboration led to deliberation, critical thinking, and ultimately problem solving. Andrea, a kindergarten teacher, echoed the importance of collaboration and teamwork when using social action curriculum. She stated, “Deliberation was a key component of this project. It was very important to let students use their voices and work together to make decisions.” Laney, a sixth grade teacher, said that the biggest lesson she learned from this whole project was to, “Step back and let the students make the decisions because this ultimately leads to responsibility and ownership of the project.” Jane, an eighth grade teacher, agreed. She stated, “If you give children a chance, with some structure and guidance, they will show you amazing things”. It is important to note that the idea of allowing the students to lead the project was not easy for her or many of the other teachers in the beginning. Jane candidly discussed her reluctance to give up control during one of her earlier posts, but stated that she quickly realized her students would rise to the occasion and take ownership if she would allow them to use their voices and make decisions. She came to these conclusions when her students started making connections between social justice issues, their project topic, and their responsibilities as citizens after reading a story during language arts.

Eight of the twelve teachers mentioned the importance of building partnerships beyond the classroom to extend support for the project. Examples included working with other classes, communicating with parents and administrators, informing the district office of the project, reaching out to local community and government officials, writing letters to businesses, and alerting the media were cited as positive partnerships that supported and extended students’ projects.

All 12 teachers discussed an increase in student motivation and enthusiasm for school. Melissa, a sixth grade teacher, stated, “My students begged to work on the project. They didn’t even realize they were learning!” Jane, an eighth grade teacher, reported that her students insisted on extending their project to address a second issue after the first issue had been addressed. Teachers’ comments repeatedly reflected their genuine surprise with how motivated students were to work on the project before school, after school, on the weekends, and during valuable free time such as lunch or recess. Tim, a fifth grade teacher, reported that 11 of his students volunteered at a local event on a Saturday because it supported their project. Overall, the students were motivated and willing to do whatever it took to solve the issues identified for their projects.

After analyzing their data, the teachers were asked if they would use social action curriculum again in their classroom. Active participation and reflection indicate that all
participants in this study see benefits with social action curriculum projects and will use it again. Ten of the teachers said they would definitely implement this curriculum again in the future without any reservations. Ali, a kindergarten teacher said, “Now that I have experienced it first hand, I am more confident and will definitely use it again. I learned as much about civic competence and active citizenship as my kids.” Tim, a fifth grade teacher, echoed Ali’s enthusiasm commenting, “This type of curriculum will be the center of my classroom instruction. It is a great way to integrate a project-based constructivist approach to education and deliver integrated instruction. I also believe it prepares students to be knowledgeable, responsible, and active citizens in our democracy.”

The two teachers with the most concerns during the project now said they would implement the curriculum again, if all conditions were favorable for support. These teachers specifically stated that if their principals were completely supportive, then they would absolutely consider implementing a social action project. Missy, a fifth grade teacher, said, “I would be willing to do it again…if it were earlier in the year when testing was not in the way…and if I had complete support and approval from the administration.” Mary, a sixth grade teacher at a different school site also stated, “I think service-learning is a very valuable tool to use in the classroom. However, considering my circumstances, I would not do it again if I had to face the same restrictions from my principal. I was disappointed that my students could not go through the process and decide what they really wanted to address. I hope to be able to use it again.”

**Conclusions and Implications**

We posed the question, does a social studies methods course, with an emphasis in civic education, have an impact on classroom teachers’ classroom practices in terms of social action curriculum? Findings suggest that the teachers involved in the social action curriculum projects evolved through reflecting on the process of implementation. Teachers gained the skills to: 1) effectively integrate emerging curriculum, 2) facilitate student-led instruction in a democratic classroom, 3) increase effective communication and build partnerships beyond the classroom, and 4) use structured reflections as a tool for growth and evaluation. Based on reactions from their respective students, the teachers were encouraged by student leadership, collaboration, engagement, and meaningful learning experiences. This led to improved teacher dispositions and increased confidence regarding the use of social action curriculum.

Findings initially suggested some teachers were reluctant to participate in the social action curriculum because they had to relinquish control of the project to the students. The curriculum evolved from the students’ projects did not follow a mandated pacing guide. Although teachers initially were uncertain about how the project might evolve, the projects became meaningful for both teacher and students as they were implemented. We concur with other researchers (Eyler & Giles, 1999; Lewis-Ferrell, 2007) that participating in service-learning opportunities results in greater understanding of democracy and leads to active involvement. By actively engaging students in the process, civic knowledge, dispositions, and skills were enhanced. In order to make decisions about how to proceed with the project, students needed background knowledge about the project topic. Student motivation and empowerment were made evident through the teachers’ reflective posts. This finding supports the development of civic dispositions related to democratic principles. Finally, by allowing student centered learning to occur, civic skills were enhanced and lead to students understanding democracy and the role of government in society.
The social action curriculum project varied in terms of how the students were participating as citizens. Civic involvement moved from the students acting as personally responsible classroom citizens, to more participatory and justice-oriented involved citizens. Although all categories of citizenship (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004) are important, we believe greater learning opportunities exist for both teachers and students when they actively engage in participatory citizenship. Implementing social action curriculum projects is one way to support this growth.

The philosophers John Dewey and Jean Piaget believed that learning occurs when students are involved actively in learning and when the learning has a distinct purpose. We found that social action curriculum projects are an example of student involvement in the curriculum. This is a novel approach to teaching because students are at the center of learning rather than being mere receivers of knowledge. Teachers today are faced with pressure to teach rote memorization and focus on testing rather than teaching critical thinking and holistic teaching (Epstein, 2009). By implementing service-learning opportunities such as social action curriculum projects that integrate the curriculum, educators shift the focus of learning from teacher-centered to student-centered. In our current study, we found that mandatory involvement in social action curriculum projects resulted in a greater understanding of social justice oriented civic involvement. Service-learning can be promoted by discussing Westheimer and Kahne’s (2004) categories of citizenship, however; discourse alone does not have the same impact. After administering surveys to 125 pre-service elementary teachers before and after the completion of a civics-infused social studies methods course, Lewis-Ferrell (2007) discovered that basic perceptions of civic knowledge and skills were minimally increased, and only slight improvements in civic dispositions were revealed. Interestingly, the service-learning component was missing from these courses.

Many teachers in our study reported that they had already participated in personally responsible citizenship, but through these projects, they had a greater understanding of social-oriented citizenship. Teachers and students were given the opportunity to think beyond themselves and instead, examine an issue or cause selected by the class. Reflecting on the process was key to understanding how teachers understood civic involvement throughout these projects. Current research suggests that service-learning projects, with an emphasis on civic involvement, can help students develop a sense of self-efficacy, enhance academic achievement, and improve social skills and civic mindedness (Schultz, 2008; Wade 2001; Werner, Voce, Gaufin, & Simmons, 2002).

Although the service-learning projects were a required component of the graduate social studies methods course, the overall goal was to empower and encourage classroom teachers to continue integrating service-learning projects into their curriculum. We agree with Rahima Wade (2002), that the current social studies curriculum model must undergo a major transformation before classroom teachers and school districts will begin to adopt service-learning pedagogy and civics-centered curriculum on their own. Wade suggests involving a variety of social studies educators in the development of this model and encourages stakeholders to continue to conduct, present, and publish research on this topic, work with publishers to develop dynamic curriculum materials that reach beyond the scope of a textbook, and pilot test materials with actual elementary students and teachers.

There are a myriad of other opportunities and resources teachers can use in the meantime to help infuse service-learning and civics-centered curriculum into their instruction. Internet searches, virtual field trips, resources from local universities, field trips, historical
studies, studies of local problems, current events, and children’s literature can all be used as a springboard to help spark students’ interest in issues that can be connected to the curriculum. These tips (based on steps recommended by Center for Civic Education [2006] and Kielburger and Kielburger [2002]) are helpful when launching a service-learning project in your classroom:

1. Increase awareness. Browse websites and look for genuine issues in the community or beyond. Make a list of the top issues based on students’ interests.
2. Deliberate. Let the students choose an issue. It will be more meaningful if it comes from their interests.
3. Become an expert. Students must conduct extensive research on the issue before they can take action.
4. Devise a plan of action. Let the students lead the project and make decisions.
5. Get busy. Publicize the issue in your community and beyond to increase awareness and build partnerships.

The transfer of civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions ultimately may be more likely to transfer into adulthood if authentic civic experiences were consistent throughout schooling. While the study we have reported cannot generalize or make suggestions regarding the effectiveness of projects such as this for all classrooms or groups of students, it does suggest that further research in this area would be beneficial. Our research provides evidence implying that using social action curriculum projects in teacher education might help to develop teachers who are more likely to implement these projects in their own classrooms. We have witnessed the positive effects that opportunities for active civic involvement can have on the classroom teachers and their young pupils. Our goal continues to be to bridge the gap between theory and practice in order to understand the process for defining and understanding citizenship.

References


http://www.socstrp.org


Mason, T., & Silva, D. (2001). Beyond the methods course: Civics as the program core in elementary teacher education. In J. Patrick, & R. Leming (Eds.), Principles and practices of democracy in the education of social studies teachers: Civic learning in teacher education: Volume 1 (pp. 65-86). Bloomington, IN: ERIC.


About the Authors

Michelle Vander Veldt. Assistant Professor in the Department of Elementary and Bilingual Education at California State University, Fullerton. Her Ph.D. is from the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. Research interests focus on examining epistemological and ontological beliefs, exploring civics education through active citizenship projects and investigating effective mathematics instruction. E-mail: MVanderVeldt@fullerton.edu

Jennifer Ponder. Assistant Professor in the Department of Elementary and Bilingual Education at California State University, Fullerton. Her Ph.D. is from Indiana University. Research interests focus on democratic and civic education, mentoring programs for beginning teachers, and infusing the arts into the curriculum.

Citation for this Article