Developing Civic-Mindedness in the Intermediate Grades: 
A Community-based Inquiry Project

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The purpose of this study was to use the inquiry process to engage fifth grade students in a community-based project that would educate them about what it means to be a civic-minded citizen. While the unique nature of any community-based project prevents exact replication of the project in another context, the inquiry process itself and the overall positive results are worthy of consideration by other teachers and teacher educators who hope to develop civic-minded citizens in the intermediate grades. This article will describe the context in which the project was implemented, the inquiry process that unfolded in one fifth grade classroom, and the lessons that were learned by all involved. The project suggests that if students are to become active citizens for the future, then they must be guided through discussion, research, and service learning experiences. Most importantly, this project seems to indicate that students may become more civic-minded when they are provided with authentic opportunities to participate in meaningful citizenship activities within their own communities.

Keywords: Inquiry process, Citizenship, Civic-minded, Intermediate students, Service learning, Social studies

Introduction

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 was intended to strengthen our nation’s schools by strengthening students’ skills in math and reading (No Child Left Behind [NCLB], 2002). In an effort to comply with the law, states mandated the annual testing of students in grades three through eight in math and reading. The grand irony is that, although schools may no longer be “leaving behind” students in mathematics and reading, now they are leaving them behind in social studies. In a study conducted by the Center for Education Policy, 71 percent of school districts reported that in order to allow time for reading and mathematics, emphasis on other subjects such as social studies had to be significantly scaled back (Westheimer, 2008).

Some have made the argument that we need a citizenry that is skilled in reading and mathematics, and that developing an understanding of civic-mindedness and what it means to be an active citizen is of central importance for our nation. At a young age students must learn that although they may not be old enough to vote, they have responsibilities as citizens and should seek ways to connections with their community and government (Shields, 1999). Teachers should creatively facilitate a civic-minded classroom environment, one that will fit into the curricular expectations they must meet on a daily basis. According to current research, the combination of active participation and inquiry based learning projects are effective strategies for teaching citizenship.
Some have suggested that civic-minded, inquiry based projects should incorporate service learning as a means of developing content understanding (Barker, Basile, & Olson, 2005; Ohn & Wade, 2009; Sandmann, Keily, & Grenier, 2009). Implementation of such projects should be guided by the students as they make informed decisions about the direction and outcomes of the project. J. D. Ohn and Rahima Wade (2009) suggest that community based inquiry projects will be successful only when students are able to relate personally to the topic of investigation. When students are given the opportunity to actually participate in addressing a “real world” issue that relates to their community or lives, they begin to see how one citizen’s actions can have a ripple effect in making positive changes. Thus, students should be given the freedom to select for themselves the community project that is of most interest to them. Some of the projects selected by children may seem simplistic by adult standards, but the issues involved may be very important to children. In a study conducted by Cynthia Sunal, Lynn Kelley, and Dennis Sunal (2009), elementary students who visited a nursing home returned to their classroom and suggested to their teacher that they make cards for the nursing home residents. This simple suggestion demonstrates the ability of students to select community-based learning projects that are meaningful and relevant to them. Students not only need, but also want to experience learning opportunities that enable them to make choices, reach a common goal, and find solutions to everyday problems.

Although service-learning is highly recommended in current research, it appears that authentic service-learning is not used often in today’s elementary classrooms. A study conducted by the Corporation of National and Community Service (2008), surveyed 1,847 public school principals. Fifty-one percent of elementary school principals surveyed reported their students were too young for service-learning projects. This alarming perspective can communicate the subtle message to elementary teachers that their students are too young to act as responsible citizens in the community. Yet, responsible citizenship is exactly what teachers expect of students in their classrooms each day. Another factor that might deter the use of service-learning projects in the elementary classroom is a narrow understanding of what activities qualify as service-learning, and uncertainty about how service-learning aligns with state learning outcomes and the social studies curriculum (Corporation for National and Community Service, 2008).

Locating a curriculum that addresses both service-learning and the research supporting it is nearly nonexistent (Sandmann, Keily, & Grenier, 2009). Effective teachers seem to intuitively know that service-learning is a valuable tool for teaching citizenship (Kahne & Sporte, 2008). Many teachers, however, do not feel they have the time or resources needed to plan a service-learning project that correlates with their grade level. As service-learning lessons and curriculum guides correlated with state and national standards become more readily available, it stands to reason that elementary educators will have more resources with which to engage their students in service-learning projects. CivicConnections is a national civic program that serves grades 3-12. This curriculum is designed to align inquiry-based instruction and service-learning in social studies. CivicConnections encourages the classroom teacher to select a community based service-learning project based on the suggestions provided through this program. According to Ohn and Wade (2009), these activities encouraged students to take responsibility for their community in an active way and enabled the students to reaffirm or disregard what they initially believed. Another program designed to incorporate service learning in the 4-5 grades is Project Citizen. This program focuses on active citizenship in local communities (Center for Civic Education,
The availability of service learning curricular support like CivicConnections and Project Citizen has the potential to encourage elementary teachers and principals to expose their students to the much-needed real world experiences of citizenship.

Jennifer Ponder and Genell Lewis-Ferrell (2009), conducted an action research project in which they asked graduate elementary education students to create a civic-project for their students that would have a meaningful impression on their students. The study indicated the benefits of civic-minded, inquiry-based projects appear to be in the lasting impressions and life changing outlooks that result for both students and teachers. Students come to realize that they have a made a difference in their community. They also develop knowledge and skills in other subject areas (e.g. math, writing, reading) while they are implementing a “real world” social studies project. According to Ponder and Lewis-Ferrell (2009), the survey results reveal that teachers also experience educational benefits during the implementation of inquiry based classroom projects; specifically, teachers are able to reflect upon and refine their own teaching methods, as well as to examine their own commitment to active citizenship. While all students should be taught what it means to be civic-minded, this may be an especially important concept and skill to develop in students who come from low-socioeconomic family contexts. According to Joseph Kahne and Susan Sporte (2008), “Low-income and less educated citizens, as well as, recent immigrants and those less proficient in English, are often underrepresented in the political process and have far less voice” (p. 739). These students need to see, and participate in, practical examples of civic education within their own communities.

Research has shown that students growing up in politically active families who are considered financially “better off” continue to be active citizens themselves (Kahn & Sporte, 2008). Studies also suggests that using inquiry processes to teach social studies actively engages students in their own learning, increases motivation to learn, develops critical life skills, and enhances learning in students of all ability and grade levels (Couchenour & Chrisman, 2004; Parker, 2005; Siler, 1998; & Zarrillo, 2004).

In light of research indicating a positive correlation between civic-minded citizens and inquiry-based instruction, the purpose of the following series of social studies lessons was to use the inquiry process to engage students in a community-based project that would educate them about what it means to be a civic-minded citizen. While the unique nature of any community-based project prevents exact replication of the project in another context, the inquiry process itself, and the overall positive results, are worthy of consideration by other teachers and teacher educators who hope to develop civic-minded citizens in the intermediate grades. This article will describe the inquiry process that unfolded in one 5th grade classroom, and the lessons learned by all involved.

**Guiding Question**

The guiding question for the classroom teacher and university professors involved in this project was: Will engagement of 5th grade students in a social studies inquiry project that focuses on the needs of, and service to, the local community positively impact student understanding of what it means to be civic-minded?

After a class discussion, the students decided it would be helpful to find out what the citizens of Montevallo knew about recycling and to determine their interest in various approaches to citywide recycling.
Local Community-Based Inquiry Project

Initially, the fifth graders were given a pre-assessment survey to determine what they understood about civic-mindedness (Table 1). With the survey results in mind, the classroom teacher and university instructors planned a series of social studies lessons taught over a span of 15 days during the fall of 2009. One teacher educator participated in each of the sessions, which lasted from 30 minutes to one-hour. What follows is a brief description of the inquiry process in which both students and adults engaged.

Table 1

Civic-Minded Survey

DIRECTIONS: Read the following questions below and CIRCLE ALL of the #'s of the answers that you think are correct. There are NO WRONG answers! These are your thoughts and opinions – Good luck!

1. What does it mean to be a good citizen?
   a. Do your share to make your school and community better
   b. Cooperate with others
   c. Get involved in community affairs
   d. Stay informed, vote
   e. Obey laws/rules, respect authority
   f. Protect the environment

2. How are your parents active in your community?
   a. Voting
   b. Reading the newspaper
   c. Attending city or county meetings
   d. Volunteering
   e. Writing letters to officials
   f. Helping neighbors

3. How can you be active in your community?
   a. Voting
   b. Reading the newspaper
   c. Attending city or county meetings
   d. Volunteering
   e. Writing letters to officials
   f. Helping neighbors

4. What does it mean to be civic-minded?
   a. You are informed and thoughtful about how democracy works
   b. Participate in communities through membership in voluntary civil associations
   c. Act politically to accomplish your community’s needs
   d. You have moral and civic traits such as responsibility

5. How can you find out about current projects/needs that are going on in your community?
   a. Reading the newspaper
   b. Watching the news
   c. Reading flyers or posters in town
   d. Attending city council meetings

6. Write how do you think a 10-11 year old can make a difference in your community?
Day One

The fifth grade students were introduced to the concept of “active citizenship.” They participated in a carousel-type cooperative learning project in which the students worked in small groups to respond to specific citizenship questions written on poster boards. The students brainstormed, and discussed, answers to a question recording their responses on sticky notes. The students attached the sticky notes to the poster board and then swapped their poster board with another group until each group had answered all of the active citizenship questions. After the carousel activity, the teacher explained that the class was going to begin an inquiry-based project to determine a local community problem or need, and ultimately to propose a solution to the problem. In so doing, the teacher emphasized that, as fifth-graders, they would become active citizens in their city!

Day Two

On day two, the teacher asked the fifth graders to brainstorm ways in which they could discover information about current needs or projects in their community. Typical student responses included, “watching the news,” “reading the newspaper,” and “asking my parents.” The teacher explained that the students also could find out about their community’s needs and projects by visiting the City of Montevallo, Alabama’s city council webpage. Next, the students went to the school’s technology lab to locate the website. The students were asked to find the city council meeting minutes from the previous month’s meeting. Then, they worked in pairs to read through the minutes and make a list of current needs/projects going on in the city.

Day Three

On day three, the teacher asked the students to review their lists of the city’s current needs/projects from day two. As pairs of students shared their findings with the whole class, the teacher compiled a class list on a large sheet of chart paper. The class list included items such as: sponsoring a citywide family day, exploring community recycling, addressing the DUI problem, finding ways to increase public library security, dealing with water drainage and yard trash issues, and building a walking path through the community.

Next, the teacher asked the students to discuss the needs within small groups and to decide which need or project they would like for the class to select for their active citizenship project. Then, the teacher invited one student from each group to present a rationale for the project selected by their group. Finally, the teacher used individual ballots and asked the students to vote on one of the needs. After counting the ballots, the majority of students voted to explore community recycling through an active citizenship project. This need may have been of greater concern for many students because they were aware that the elementary school’s current recycling program was in danger of being discontinued due to lack of funding.
Day Four

In an effort to build the students’ knowledge about recycling programs, a guest speaker was invited to speak to the class about current city efforts in community recycling. The guest was an active member of the local community who coordinates recycling efforts at the university. She explained to the students that the city was considering three recycling options: curbside pickup, continuing the use of the university’s recycling bins, or building a recycling center for the city. The university instructor requested students to take notes while guest speaker spoke. At the conclusion of her talk, the teacher led the students in brainstorming ways in which they could contribute to the community’s recycling discussion.

Day Five

The classroom teacher met with the mayor, city council members, and local university’s facilities manager to discuss recycling center options in greater depth. The purpose of this meeting was to gather additional information the teacher could share with students and use in guiding them as they planned efforts to assist in community recycling.

Day Six

On day six the teacher shared the information she had obtained from the previous day’s meeting with community officials. After a class discussion, the students decided it would be helpful to find out what the citizens of Montevallo knew about recycling and to determine their interest in various approaches to citywide recycling. The teacher led the class in creating a survey to be sent home with all the students who attend the elementary school. The students brainstormed questions that were used in a paper-and-pencil survey that would be taken home with directions for completion by parents or an adult household representative. The survey question included:

- Does your family recycle your garbage?
- If your family does recycle, where do you take the recycled items?
- Are you aware that the University of Montevallo has recycling bins that are available for public use?
- Would you be in favor of a recycling center in a centralized location in town?
- Are you aware that a recycling center can make money for your city?
- How often would you use a recycling center in Montevallo?
- Would you be willing to sort your own recyclable materials in separate containers for plastics, paper, and aluminum?
- Did you know that there are seven different grades of plastic and that only grades one and two can be recycled in the state of Alabama?
- In the future, would you be open to the idea of paying an additional five dollars a month for curbside pickup for recycling materials?

While waiting for the surveys to be returned, the students decided to create recycling posters to display in the downtown area so that the citizens of the city could become more knowledgeable about the need for recycling.
Table 2

Recycling Survey

Please complete the survey and return tomorrow in your child’s Wednesday folder. Circle the answer that best fits your family.

1. Does your family recycle your garbage?
   a. Never
   b. Sometimes
   c. Always

2. If your family does recycle, where do you take the recycled items?
   a. University of Montevallo
   b. Your place of employment
   c. Other

3. Are you aware that The University of Montevallo has recycling bins that are available for public use?
   a. Yes
   b. No

4. Would you be in favor of a recycling center in a centralized location in town?
   a. Yes
   b. No
   c. Undecided

5. Are you aware that recycling centers can make money for your city?
   a. Yes
   b. No

6. How often would you use a recycling center in Montevallo?
   a. Never
   b. Sometimes
   c. Always

7. Would you be willing to sort your recyclable materials in separate containers for plastics, paper, and aluminum?
   a. Yes
   b. No
   c. Undecided

8. Did you know there are seven different grades of plastic and that only grades 1 and 2 can be recycled in the state of Alabama?
   a. Yes
   b. No

9. In the future, would you be open to the idea of paying an additional $5 a month for curbside pickup for recycling materials?
   a. Yes
   b. No
   c. Undecided

10. Do you have other thoughts or suggestions to share about recycling in Montevallo?

Days Seven through Ten

On day seven the students distributed the recycling surveys to every classroom teacher in the school and asked the teachers to send them home with their students. Again, a short note was attached to the surveys to indicate directions for completion by a parent or adult representative from the household. The university instructor typed the student-generated questions, copied the surveys, and sent them home in all of the elementary students’ weekly folders. The parents completed the surveys, and returned them in their child’s weekly folder. All homeroom teachers sent collected surveys to the 5th grade classroom. While waiting for the surveys to be returned, the students decided to create recycling posters to display in the downtown area so that the citizens of the city could become more knowledgeable about the need for recycling. The students participated in a class discussion about reasons people do not recycle. Some of the reasons included not being knowledgeable about the importance of recycling, not knowing where to recycle, and not knowing what items could be recycled. The students spent several days researching these questions and creating colorful, informational posters. Elementary education majors from the university volunteered to collect the fifth graders’ posters and hang them throughout town in the windows of local businesses.

Days Eleven through Fourteen

The next four days involved the collection and analysis of survey data. The students collected 324 surveys and began tallying the data. Small groups of students worked together to tally the survey results for about 50 respondents. The students seemed to enjoy this part of the inquiry project, and worked tirelessly to accurately record the data from the surveys. In order to ensure reliability, the classroom teacher and the university collaborators rechecked the survey results of each group.
The students concluded that most of the citizens surveyed would support a city recycling center. The results also indicated that the citizens were unclear as to what items could and could not be recycled, and how the city would logistically handle the recycling program.

Day Fifteen

Finally, the students went to the computer lab to create graphs displaying the survey results. The students seemed excited to learn that their teacher had contacted the mayor to request that they present their findings at the next city council meeting. The students also were asked to complete the same post-assessment survey pertaining to civic-mindedness.

Two Weeks Later

The project culminated with the students presenting their information at a city council meeting in early November. The mayor commended the students for their efforts, saying that the city council had not received such valuable information on a single cause in six years. The following day, the city council expressed their appreciation for the fifth-graders’ work by awarding the elementary school $500 to support their recycling efforts.

Seven Months Later

In April 2010, in celebration of Earth Day, the city of Montevallo opened its long anticipated citywide recycling center. Representatives from each of the community’s public schools (elementary, middle, and high school) and city council members were present for the dedication.

Implications for Classroom Teachers

The social learning context makes the community-based inquiry project described in this article unique to the teachers and students involved; thus, the project itself cannot be replicated with other fifth-grade classrooms. The inquiry process implemented in the project holds promise for helping other intermediate grade students develop an understanding of what it means to be a civic-minded citizen. The following implications are presented for classroom teachers, as well as for teacher educators preparing pre-service elementary teachers.

- Teachers should provide their students with an opportunity to be engaged in solving real-world problems, making connections between the classroom and the world beyond. Examples of related classroom activities are the following. Teachers could create a “scavenger hunt” using local government websites, newspapers, and newsletters to help students identify current community issues and problems. A city council member could be invited to visit the class as a guest speaker. If time permits, students could survey community members about their opinions about the most pressing local problems. By linking citizenship instruction to a local community problem that directly impacts the lives of people nearby, students are motivated to become engaged and actively contribute to their communities.

Finally and most importantly, this project suggests that students might become more civic-minded when provided with authentic opportunities to participate in meaningful citizenship activities within their own communities.
students, learning becomes relevant for them.

- Teachers should provide their students with opportunities to engage in public discourse, to make decisions, to use scientific thinking to identify issues and to solve problems that lead to workable solutions as in the following classroom examples. Teachers might encourage students to write letters to the editor of a local newspaper, or sponsor a panel discussion in which community leaders express opinions and field questions from students. Students can poll the school community to identify levels of interest or concern about local issues. They can interview experts and complete WebQuests designed to increase their knowledge about a problematic topic. The ultimate goal of such activities is to involve students in applying their knowledge by making an informed decision and proposing sound and reasonable solutions to local issues of concern. When students are active participants in this kind of classroom inquiry process, they have the opportunity to develop lifelong learning and citizenry skills.

- Teachers should provide their students with an authentic audience to whom they can present the findings of their inquiry into local problems along with the solutions they propose. When students have engaged in substantive tasks and conversations, they can be given the opportunity to share their work with others through live and multimedia presentations, web sites, and various other public venues. Celebration of hard work and positive outcomes is a motivator for future learning. When parents, community members, and even the media recognize the students’ efforts, the ripple effect might inspire public support for future community-based learning projects in the school.

Studies suggest that students who have experience with actual service-learning activities are more likely to be committed and involved in various forms of civic engagement (Kahne & Sporte, 2008; Ohn and Wade, 2009; Sandmann, Keily & Grenier, 2009; Barker, Basile, & Olson, 2005). This community-based inquiry project engaged students in a month-long service-learning experience in their city. The outcome of the project suggests that if students are to become active citizens for the future, then discussion, research, and service-learning experiences have potential. Finally and most importantly, this project suggests that students might become more civic-minded when provided with authentic opportunities to participate in meaningful citizenship activities within their own communities.

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