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Educational Policy Through Service Learning: Preparation for Citizenship and Civic Participation

Susan G. Forman and Louise C. Wilkinson

ABSTRACT: This article describes a course designed to prepare undergraduate students to participate effectively in civic life and in public decisions about education and schooling. The course includes an examination of the theoretical and conceptual basis of civic responsibility and service learning, a review of the process of educational policymaking, and an in-depth exploration of a number of current educational policy issues. The course is taught with service learning pedagogy. Experiences in a service placement yield personal knowledge that has the potential to inform students' critical analysis of theoretical, research, and policy literature and to make students more effective active classroom learners.

Each day newspapers and newscasts across the country describe a multitude of problems associated with public schools and the education of children and youth. Some of these problems are related to the structure, organization, and management of school systems such as inequities in school finance and the misuse of funds, power, and authority. Others are related to the cognitive and academic achievement of students such as poor test scores and poor student reading, writing, and math skills. Still other problems are related to emotional, behavioral, and/or social issues such as school violence, substance abuse, and teenage sexuality/pregnancy.

Despite substantial public concern about these issues and despite the fact that schools are public institutions and should therefore func-

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tion with citizen input, many citizens feel unable to influence the manner in which public schools function and attempt to address serious societal and individual problems. Even teachers and other professional staff members, although well-trained for their specific roles, may feel powerless to effect the larger systemic change that is needed to address these problems. Unfortunately, institutions of higher education may have contributed to the development of this situation by failing to educate students about the manner in which the education system functions and the role of citizens in the provision of educational programs and services.

At universities, systems and educational policy issues are typically addressed in educational policy courses. These courses are generally reserved for graduate students in education and usually taught only to advanced graduate students in doctoral programs. This situation promotes the belief that the educational policymaking process is one reserved for highly trained educational policy professionals. Thus, there is promotion of the perception that neither the general public nor nonadministrative school staff can acquire the knowledge and skills needed to influence our educational systems.

As indicated by the curricular structure described above, a substantial number of academics think the current manner in which educational policy courses are offered is desirable and believe the knowledge and skills of educational policymaking are so complex that they are best left to highly trained professionals. Although desirable from some academic viewpoints, this situation runs contrary to one of the major tenets of this nation's democracy: that it is imperative that the general population participate in the governing process.

Public educational services are provided by and regulated by the various levels of government through the public schools. It is therefore within the rights and responsibilities of this nation's citizens to participate in setting policy for these schools. Dewey (1916) believed that government exists in a democratic society to serve its community and that the community must share in selecting its governors and determining their policies. To accomplish their mission to produce an educated citizenry, it is incumbent upon colleges and universities to address this crucial area.

Lack of public participation in addressing educational policy issues may be a specific instance of the broader problem of lack of civic

participation (Putnam, 1996). Much has been written in the popular and academic literature about the failure of today's government to address pressing educational and social issues and about the alienation of citizens from their government. In an examination of issues related to the failures of contemporary political leadership, Barber (1993) contends that democracy requires both effective leadership and vigorous citizenship and that the current conditions of leadership seem to undermine strong citizenship. Barber explains that we have settled for strong leaders and weak citizens and that strong leaders have made Americans weak citizens and that government institutions have distanced the citizenry from the government.

As a consequence, when faced by crisis—when leadership has failed them—the American people have turned not to themselves or the civic resourcefulness of their fellow citizens, but to a futile and self-exonerating quest for new and better leaders. (p. 163)

Civic participation has been a longstanding issue of concern in the growth of democracy. Warnings about the possibility of the development of our current condition, in which most of the citizenry is uninvolved in civic life, appeared as early as the 1830s when the French social philosopher Tocqueville offered an analysis of the relationship between character and society in *Democracy in America* (1835/1960). He described the mores of Americans, which he called "habits of the heart", and showed how they helped to form American character. He identified participation in local politics as one factor that helped create the type of person who could sustain a connection to a wider political community and thus support the maintenance of free institutions. He warned that some aspects of the American character, which he called "individualism", might eventually isolate Americans from one another and thereby undermine the condition of freedom.

More recently, Robert Bellah, in *Habits of the Heart* (1985), reported on the results of interviews with 200 Americans. Bellah described the current American lifestyle as a self-centered one, devoted to personal ambition and consumerism. In a discussion of the need to reinvigorate participation in civic life, he suggested that universities shift their current focus on individual careerism to developing in students the skills and knowledge needed for civic participation. The documented continuing decline in civic participation in the past

few years (Putnam, 1996) underscores the urgency of this call for a greater emphasis on development of civic interest and skills.

The Course: Educational Policy and the Lives of Children

What follows is a description of an educational policy course for undergraduate liberal arts majors taught with service learning pedagogy. The course was developed as one institution's response to the need to prepare undergraduate students to participate effectively in civic life and to understand education and public schooling as one of the major areas in which decisions are made and programs and services are provided by government. Service learning is a pedagogy that fosters the development of the skills and knowledge needed for participation in civic life. It is a means of developing individuals who are knowledgeable about societal problems and issues, have an understanding of the role and responsibilities of citizens in a democratic society, and are experienced in skills necessary for effective civic participation and service. The course was developed in conjunction with Rutgers University's Citizenship and Service Education (CASE) Program, which provides a range of service learning courses across the curriculum that link academic subject matter to larger societal issues in a variety of disciplines.

Goals of the Course

The goals of the course, entitled "Changing the Lives of Children in Schools: Educational Policy Through Service Learning", and an overview of content and process are first presented to students in the following course description that they receive before making their course selections.

The success of our schools in educating children will in large part determine the future success of our society. It is essential that citizens participate in decisionmaking concerning the manner in which schools operate. This course will provide an introduction to the educational policymaking process and major policy issues facing public schools.

We will explore how public decisions about schooling are made and how they effect the lives of children and adolescents. We will examine major policy issues public schools are confronting; findings from the research literature regarding how these issues can be addressed; and the manner in which local, state, and federal policy currently address

these issues. We will discuss topics such as assessment, grouping, school violence, substance abuse, and adolescent sexuality.

Readings for the course will include case studies, research literature reviews, policy literature, and regulatory literature. We will meet with individuals involved in local and state level educational policy decision-making. In addition, you will have an opportunity to gain an in-depth understanding of the issues by participating in a service activity in a school setting. Through the readings and personal experiences resulting from this class you will become aware of issues that need further action and better understand the mechanisms by which change can be achieved.

Course Content: Current Issues and the Policymaking Process

The semester course, which is team taught and has 15-20 students, starts with an examination of the theoretical and conceptual bases of civic responsibility and service learning. In addition, the process of educational policymaking is explored. Six educational policy issues are then studied in depth. These issues meet the following criteria: a) currently written about in the popular press, b) addressed by policy literature, c) connected to an existing body of research/theory, d) deemed by the instructors to be significant. The issues focus on student cognitive functioning, student emotional/social functioning, and school operation and consist of assessment, grouping/tracking, school violence, substance abuse, teenage sexuality, and school finance.

Time constraints of the course preclude the possibility of covering, in depth, all significant educational policy issues on the state and national agenda. However, students are given the opportunity to identify other key issues, in addition to the six selected by the instructors. Students then research these issues, write major papers, and give class presentations.

To stimulate students' thinking and to provide real-life grounding for abstract policy processes and issues, a variety of case studies are assigned as readings during the first weeks of class. First, students read and prepare for discussion a set of case studies that appeared in the *New York Times* in 1993, entitled "Children of the Shadows." This series was the result of investigative reporting on the lives of ten inner city children and youth. In both first-person narrative and journalistic expository form, each case provides the story about an individual and his or her relationship to school. Using case studies as the first readings in the course also serves to establish the validity

of personal experience early in the course and thereby to encourage students to participate in class discussion.

In addition to these case studies about individual children, the students read *Lives on the Boundary* (Rose, 1989) a narrative account of the author's own journey from an impoverished childhood where school was minimally helpful to him, to his own work with inner city youth as a teacher, and then as a college professor. *Savage Inequalities* (Kozol, 1992) provides a final set of case studies of failed urban school systems. Class discussion then bridges case study and policy issues.

For each of the major policy issues discussed in class, the students read reviews of research and theoretical literature as well as policy literature. During class discussions, students' service placement experiences relative to the policy issue at hand are considered along with the case studies and research, theoretical, and policy literature. The gaps and discrepancies between these sources of information are highlighted. The students learn to search for and identify the differences in what the research and theoretical literature state, what the policymakers have done, and what they are seeing first-hand in their school service placements. The instructors do not attempt to reduce the complexity and tension resulting from review of an issue from several points of view: research, theory, policy, and experience. In fact, the differences among these are emphasized.

Service Learning Pedagogy: Process in Support of Outcomes

The defining characteristic of all service learning courses is participation in a community service placement. In this course each student serves four hours per week in some capacity in a local school setting.

The placements are "service learning" placements in that both the school and the student gain from participation. In developing the placement, the K-12 school personnel are asked to define a capacity in which the student can work that would be useful for the school and at the same time would allow the student to observe and learn about school operation and student functioning and development. Thus, the service learning placement is different from a practicum or internship placement because it is devised for the equal benefit of both the school and the student. School personnel determine the capacity in which the student will work that will be most useful for

them while still allowing student learning, given the skills of the student.

The service placement serves a number of pedagogical functions. Through a service placement students work in a setting in which community and societal problems related to a particular discipline exist and thereby gain first-hand knowledge of the manner in which information from an academic discipline is used or has the potential to be used in the larger society. Thus, participation in the service placement helps to link the disciplinary focus of the course to personal experience and to the larger society. For this course, potential placements are developed prior to the beginning of the semester and are finalized after students describe their interests. Students are placed in local urban and suburban schools in a variety of capacities. Students have worked in a range of grade levels, in both regular and special education classes as classroom aides, in a school nurse's office, and in the school district superintendent's office.

Experiences in the service setting yield personal knowledge that should inform students' critical analysis of theoretical and research literature and thus make them more effective active learners. These experiences also help to keep class participation at a very high level, because of the personal involvement. As a result of dealing with some aspects of the course content first-hand in a real-world situation, students feel that they have a basis for stating their thoughts and opinions about class readings and the instructors' classroom statements. The placement experience gives students the background necessary to respond to and challenge readings and the instructors' ideas.

In addition, while learning experientially, students make a useful contribution to the community. This contribution will help them gain an understanding of how they can participate in their communities throughout their lives.

The other defining pedagogical feature of the course is the emphasis on class discussion which accounts for approximately 75% of class time. Although there are lectures and presentations by the instructors, individual guest speakers, and guest panels, there is an emphasis on student participation and critical analysis of the statements of "experts" (including those of the instructors).

The importance of student classroom participation is emphasized from the beginning of the course. Students are told that one of the purposes of the course is to prepare them for one of their roles as citizens in a democratic society: participation in decisionmaking

about public schooling. The instructors also state that the issues to be explored in class do not yet have answers and that the students and their peers will hopefully advance better solutions than currently exist. This immediately establishes a participatory set for the course; although the instructors and the readings convey current knowledge, this knowledge has not provided satisfactory solutions to the problems schools face. It will be up to the students to work at finding those solutions throughout their lives. Participation in class is presented by the instructors as preparation for lifetime participation regarding course-related issues.

The relationship between the service placement and classroom participation is also emphasized. The service placement is presented as a means through which students can gain first-hand knowledge about the issues and problems to be discussed in the course. The students are told that their service experiences will give them important knowledge about the nature of the issues with which the class will be dealing. As a result of this first-hand knowledge their observations about these issues will be as important as those of the instructors and guest speakers, or those expressed in the readings.

In order to maximize the teaching potential of the service placement and to prepare the students to discuss their service experiences in class, students are taught to make structured observations and keep "critical incident" journals. Instructors lecture, model, and give feedback to students to teach them these skills. The structured observation is presented as a means of focusing attention on important aspects of the setting and situation, such as the nature of the physical setting, the characteristics of the individuals involved, and the activities as well as verbal and nonverbal behavior of the individuals. The "critical incident" journal provides a written record of some of the events that occur in the service placement. Students are asked to write about an incident that occurred each week in their service placement which they felt affected their view of schools and/or children. The observations and journal entries are discussed in class weekly. During the discussion the observations and critical incidents are related to class readings and class discussion of theoretical, research, and policy information. Thus, the information gained by the students in their service placements is valid for discussion in the same way as are other more traditional academic sources of information. Some examples from the student journals follow.

- "Hi, Mike, you want to get started?" I asked, to break the ice. (Meanwhile, my heart is beating 300 times/minute!!) Michael takes out his math book while mumbling, loud enough for me to hear: "If she only understands what I'm going through . . . I just need somebody to understand me, that's all." Then he looked at me straight in the eyes and said, "See, my father told me that he went through worse things, and that I'll be doing just fine. He knows what I'm going through." Just for a moment, I felt the world stop spinning around me. I couldn't believe what I had just heard. I didn't know what exactly was that he was going through, but it seemed to include more than just his school matters . . . Teachers tend to get really impatient with kids like Michael . . . Nearly giving up on that one student and dealing with them by constant scolding and yelling is just not going to do them any good. (journal of student serving in first grade class)
- Strangely enough, last week I also heard my first inklings of boy-girl relationships between 6-year-olds. I already knew these kids were growing up much quicker and differently than I did. . . . Before storytime, I heard a couple of kids talking about playing "Spin the Bottle" It's things like this that make me more and more worried about the future when I read that abstinence-only sex education bills are about to be pushed through the legislature. (journal of student serving in first grade class)
- The union fights for benefits and protections for teachers that in some instances are in direct conflict with education. Administrators, as a result, cannot make decisions only on the criteria of learning. . . . Administrators become overwhelmed with implementing mandates and balancing budgets, educators are more concerned with protecting themselves from administrators . . . and all the time students become the secondary priority. (journal of student serving in school district superintendent's office)
- I can't go about without being concerned about the ESL children who are not fully capable of comprehending what's going on in their classes How can they still learn in school without the full ability to understand English? . . . I frequently saw the teacher yelling at the two or three ESL students when they made small errors, or when they simply couldn't understand the questions. All they seem to need is a

little bit of explanation. Children may need to be disciplined, but discipline need not mean unreasonable scolding, prohibition, or discouragement. (journal of student serving in first grade class)

Course Evaluation and Conclusions

The course has been evaluated in three ways, all involving student responses. Through the University-wide student rating form, students rate the course and instructors on eight items using a five point scale, with one being the poorest rating and five the best. The form also contains open-ended questions regarding positive and negative aspects of the course. An additional college-based evaluation form contains open-ended questions about the quality of the course. Finally, the students are asked to provide written responses to the following two questions: (1) What were the two most important concepts you learned in this course? (2) What are your two unanswered questions?

Student ratings have been very positive. The mean quality of the course has been rated as 4.5. The mean teaching effectiveness of the instructors has been rated as 4.58. Ratings on the following items have all been above 4.50.

- The instructor was prepared for class and presented material in an organized manner.
- The instructor responded effectively to student comments and questions.
- The instructor generated interest in the course material.
- The instructor had a positive attitude toward assisting all students in understanding course material.
- The instructional methods encouraged student learning.
- I learned a great deal in this course.

The open-ended questions indicate that the two most positive aspects of the course have been the way in which class discussions are conducted and the community service placements in the schools.

- I liked the format, it encouraged more open discussion of controversial subjects.
- The class format was discussion based. This enabled all students to get involved and let us learn not only from the instructors but from each other.

One comment that seemed to articulate the intended link between the service placement and class discussion was as follows.

- The class was excellent. It was unique in that everyone could contribute to discussion without any prior coursework requirements. Everyone has gone to school; and, through the service component, we all were in the schools regularly. So this gave us enough background to participate intelligently in discussing education.

Several student comments indicated that one of the major goals for the course had been achieved: to develop an understanding of the need to participate in the educational policymaking process.

- The course has made me want to take an active role in my children's schooling in the future, and it has made me angry that there are so many parents who don't.
- I've never before been interested in politics or policy or the governor, and now I have a great interest in these things.
- This course has encouraged me to be actively involved in education with a knowledgeable background on certain substantive issues.
- I feel very motivated to being active in the educational system, I can now say I'd like to serve on the board of education in whatever school district my children attend.

In response to the question about the most important concepts in the course, the most frequent responses related to inequities in funding between school districts and difficulties in funding all school districts. A second often cited concept was "the importance of the family in properly preparing and motivating a child for school."

In their responses regarding unanswered questions, the students have made it clear that they understood that the issues discussed in class remained without definitive solutions.

- What I think is at the same time the most important concept and the most unanswered question is the problem of dealing with inner-city schools.

A number of students have also illustrated their new understanding of and concern about the relationship between politics and education in their responses regarding unanswered questions.

- With the new elected officials in office, what can be done to make education one of their priorities?
- After the election, how will it be now?
- How will all these issues be resolved? Will it be through community/parental involvement in a positive way?

In evaluating courses, most instructors have both overt and covert criteria. The overt criteria can typically be found by looking at the course syllabus where learning goals or objectives are stated. These goals usually relate to knowledge acquisition, and attainment is typically evaluated through tests and/or papers. The covert criteria may not be stated in a public way but are present in the instructor's thoughts. For the instructor, they answer the question, "How will I know if this course really worked? Through what evidence will I judge this course to be successful?"

The papers and other written products produced by the students in this class were outstanding. However, even more important was the level of class discussion and the students' indications that they would continue to participate in civic life after the course and the service placement terminated. The emphasis on student involvement and class participation, along with the use of a community service placement, appears to have provided the teaching and learning conditions necessary for both short- and potential long-term change in student knowledge, attitudes, and behavior.

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Strategic Planning: Evolution of a Model

Thomas S. Barker and Howard W. Smith, Jr.

ABSTRACT: In the 1990s many institutions are faced with pressures to serve the needs of society while facing declining financial resources. This increases the need for institutions to properly plan for the future. The literature shows that many institutions have not embraced the need for strategic planning. This article reviews the systems approach to strategic planning as a method to enhance the planning processes. Planning models in the literature were examined, and a new model specifically oriented to institutions of higher education is presented. The model uses the concepts of the systems approach, combines elements of models in the literature, and shows the relationships and responsibilities of elements of the institution.

In the 1990s, colleges and universities have been under pressure by many constituencies to become more accountable, to become attuned to concerns of society (e.g., equal opportunity for underrepresented groups and barrier-free access to buildings and facilities), and to serve the needs of society and business. At the same time they are coping with higher costs to students as tuition and fees increase and outside funding decreases. Public institutions in particular are feeling the pinch as the federal government turns more programs and the funding for these programs over to the states.¹ They must also compete with other interests as state legislatures scramble for funds to meet growing demands from various constituents.

The interest and attention devoted to strategic planning in the literature shows that more institutions, businesses, and even governments are recognizing the necessity for strategic planning. This is happening with no increase in funding for public institutions when strategic planning is mandated. In this environment, it is necessary for institutions to carefully shepherd available funds and to use these

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