

9-1-1990

Participation in Democratic Citizenship Education

Todd Clark

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/slceslgen>

Please take our feedback survey at: https://unomaha.az1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_8cchtFmpDyGfBLE

Recommended Citation

Clark, Todd, "Participation in Democratic Citizenship Education" (1990). *Service Learning, General*. 311.
<https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/slceslgen/311>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Service Learning at DigitalCommons@UNO. It has been accepted for inclusion in Service Learning, General by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@UNO. For more information, please contact unodigitalcommons@unomaha.edu.



Participation in Democratic Citizenship Education

TODD CLARK

Democracies require citizens who have a generosity of spirit and commitment to the well-being of their society. Public education must help make that happen; for in a democracy, it is the school's role to build and strengthen the social compact. Let me illustrate how this can happen, using as an example a young man I know in Los Angeles. He is unusual because of what he does, but typical of the young men from his community in most other ways. His name is Pedro Reyes. He came to Los Angeles from Mexico City with his mother when he was seven. He had a difficult time adjusting and learning English and wanted to go back home. He has always lived in a tough neighborhood. In his early teens, he joined a gang because he wanted to belong and to get attention and because no adult that he knew cared what he did with his time. In high school, Pedro got involved in a community service program, an experience that has changed his life. Pedro, now eighteen, has planned and completed, along with other students and adults, many projects in his school, his neighborhood, and his city. He is no longer in a gang—he does not have the time or the inclination.

The Challenge of Civic Education

One of the great challenges to American education is dealing with the thousands of Pedros, or perhaps hundreds of thousands of them, waiting in our schools to be stimulated to community action and linked positively to our society. Our failure to provide most youth with that stimulus robs the nation of a resource of immense value. Voluntary community service is one way, not the only way, to help youth bond to our schools and society. For the exceptional student, sports or excellence in academics or the arts can provide the link to a productive and fulfilling life. Voluntary service programs can stimulate the average student to believe that we value him or her. Such programs can help them realize that they, as a part of our society, can make a positive difference to the lives of others. Participation in such programs strengthens the young peoples' sense of commitment to the good of the larger community of which they are a part.

Abe Lincoln is supposed to have said, "God must have loved the common man, he made so many of them." As educators, we do not pay enough

attention to the ordinary student and notice the *special*, high or low, extraordinarily good or bad. It is vital to think about what Lincoln said and remember that democracy works because ordinary people support it. Increasingly, these are the very people who do not vote and do not feel an obligation to take part in the voluntary activities that are so important to the welfare of our society.

Where are our young people supposed to learn civic participation skills, to value helping others, to develop a sense of being part of a community with shared values and common goals? Kathleen Kennedy Townsend—Bobby's oldest child—says she learned to give by giving, learned to take part by doing. Her family valued service and set a high standard in which every child was given the responsibility of helping others. Marian Wright Edelman, founder of the Children's Defense League and one of the most respected Americans of our generation, said recently about her childhood:

We were taught that service is the very rent we pay for living. It's the very purpose in life and not something you do in

your spare time or after you've achieved your personal goals.

Tension between Individual and Community

The young people we teach are not Kennedys or Edelmans, and many have parents (or a single parent) so involved in getting along in life that they have little time to model positive values for their children. Some emphasize the wrong values altogether. In fact, some psychologists are greatly concerned about the growing tendency of parents to place too much emphasis on individual achievement. Some schools report that increasing numbers of students come to school so self-centered and individualistic that they simply cannot work with others. Social scientists are studying this phenomenon because of its potential effect on our society.

The tension between individual freedom and the importance of the community is deeply ingrained in the American system. We have tried in the past to develop a certain balance between these competing values as we socialized young people at home, in their neighborhoods, or in church. Nonetheless, for many of today's young people, school remains the only institution that can serve as a community in which participation and service to others are valued.

I recently served on an advisory committee to the People for the American Way that produced a national study called *Democracy's Next Generation*. Peter Hart and Associates examined young peoples' understanding of and commitment to three important aspects of citizenship in a democracy: meeting personal responsibilities; serving the community, and participating in political life. Three important conclusions from this study are:

1. Youth today are less interested in public life than previous generations were.

2. They feel that the institutions with the best opportunity to teach citizenship—family, school, and government—have let them down.

3. Young people claim that they want to be involved and are only waiting to be asked. Fifty-one percent support students' participation in community service as a high-school graduation requirement. Eighty-nine percent of the students felt those who volunteer for service should be awarded school credit. Those who have already participated (38 percent) say they gain a strengthened sense of investment in civic life. Fifty-eight percent reject the notion that people should take care of themselves first. The study concludes that "more young people can be stirred from disengagement to action if society makes this a priority mission. The message from this study is clear: Our nation must ask our young people to participate and show them how they can."

In my opinion, it is during the early years in school that we as educators do our best job of preparing youth to value service and community involvement. We teach team work, cooperation, sharing, and following rules. We do projects in groups and emphasize being kind to and helping others. We work on these skills as an important part of helping children learn successfully to be part of a group. The day-to-day activities of a self-contained classroom approximate a community. This focus on interdependence and caring for others vanishes with school departmentalization and as youths become part of large schools. Children move from being somebody to being nobody; they become anonymous at the very time they most need identity. They are expected to have learned how to behave during elementary years so that they can be filled with knowledge, in subject-, not student-centered schools. As many youths lose identity, we begin to single out for special opportunities, those who need them the least. We encourage the stars. We fail to think of the individual needs of the largest group of students in our schools, those who are squarely in the middle. During these years, more and more such young people become invisible. Is it surprising that these are also

the years of growing school failure, of delinquency, and defeatism?

Martin Luther King, Jr., said "Everyone can be great because everyone can serve." It is also true that to serve you must know where and how. Learning the skills needed to participate effectively in the life of the community must become a standard part of citizenship education. Teachers must provide encouragement and leadership so that students learn to help others who need their help.

Support for Participation

For years, the National Council for the Social Studies has proclaimed that knowledge, skills, values, and participation are the four interlocking goals of social studies. Service is a critical part of citizenship in the same way that application is the key to learning; and service fosters a connection, even a passion, to help others. As Americans, more than anything else, we must help build a sense of unity in what is essentially a highly individualistic society.

Momentum is growing at all levels of government to provide incentives to encourage the creation of school service programs. In California, policies are changing faster than practices. Our state social studies framework says "campus and community . . . activities and volunteer service . . . can provide students with opportunities to develop a commitment to public service and help link students in a positive way to their schools and communities." The quality indicators used by California's school improvement program to evaluate elementary, middle, and high schools all identify service as one measure of effective social studies programs. Community service is now one of the authorized programs for the use of Federal ESEA Chap. II monies. President Bush supports the concept in his Youth Entering Service to America Program. Congress is considering legislation that would make several million dollars available for grants, kindergarten through the university, to help initiate programs.

At least two states, Minnesota and Pennsylvania, have developed comprehensive statewide service programs for youth. The California legislature may soon pass a bill that provides incentive grants to high schools to start programs. The state has created a state scholarship program to reward outstanding youth service at each high school in the state. Many of our nation's colleges and universities encourage and reward voluntary student service.

What Should Schools Do?

What does an effective service program look like? Enough research has been done to suggest an answer to that question. Diane Hedin and Dan Conrad, researchers from the University of Minnesota, list these six characteristics of effective programs.

1. Community service must meet genuine needs and involve tasks that both the students and the community deem worthwhile
2. Community service must have real consequences and involve others who must be dependent on the students' actions
3. Community service must present significant challenges, placing students in new roles and new environments, and call on new skills in situations that stretch their thinking both cognitively and ethically
4. Community service must require significant personal responsibility and decision making, where the students are, in a real sense, in charge
5. Community service must involve collaborative effort with adults and/or peers
6. Community service programs must provide systematic reflection on the experience, including extensive and ongoing discussion and written analysis.

Service can be integrated into the curriculum in at least four ways.

Building the Commitment. At every grade level, lessons need to illustrate the positive and important ways people can help each other. These lessons

should examine why people volunteer, how people feel who are helped, and why service and volunteerism are important to our country. They should point out that there are careers available in the hundreds of thousands with organizations outside of government that help deliver necessary volunteer services.

Providing the Service. As soon as it is practical, every school should, as an

School recognition programs are needed to demonstrate that we value service and understand that it is vital to our country.

educational goal, consciously organize and make available service opportunities to all students. As students mature and follow the effectiveness criteria previously reviewed, these opportunities should be expanded to include increasingly formal and complex activities.

Identifying and Training Leaders. By middle-school, a service-leadership elective class should be offered, one that is coupled with an after school service program. We know from experience that of every hundred volunteers, ten to twenty do most of the organizing work. Let us identify and train these workers who are not an elite group but a cross section of committed youth who need help learning to identify needs and to design, plan, and deliver service projects.

Recognizing Service. At all levels, school recognition programs are needed to demonstrate that we value service. Certificates, awards, letters of commendation to students and parents, and newspaper articles all tell the community that schools value service.

Building Community Service. With a

program in place, it is remarkable what young people can achieve. Los Angeles students last year carried out these projects. They planted trees to help turn Los Angeles into an urban forest and sponsored events for children with sickle cell anemia. They made ongoing visits to senior citizens at convalescent homes, tutored children in an after-school latchkey program, and taught adults how to read as part of a literacy program. Students worked with the Red Cross on weekends for blood drives, put on a picnic for battered and abused children, and performed earthquake-prevention skits in schools. They helped to register voters on the high school campus and in the community. They helped junior high students carry out conservation projects and provided anti-drug information to elementary school children. In addition, they spent time with homeless children, painted out graffiti, and led a monthly one-hour clean-up campaign involving an entire high school. As one of the community clean-up projects they sponsored, the students adopted a community wall to keep graffiti-free. They tutored children in reading, arranged a Halloween carnival at a shelter for battered and abused children, and put on Halloween safety skits.

Let me illustrate the power of service by finishing Pedro's story. In September 1989, he was selected by the Hitachi Foundation as one of six high school students in the United States to receive the Yoshiyama Award for exemplary youth service. He took his mother as his guest to Washington, D.C. In accepting his award, he said with great embarrassment, "I didn't do anything to deserve this." The point of the story is not the award but that to Pedro, service had become the norm. He *hadn't* done anything special. For most students, however, it would have been something special because no one ever told them how or where to help. Students will help if they are asked, and then service will become the norm for all of them.

It is our job, and a vital one to our democracy, to provide the means to

translate youth's willingness to help others into positive and broad-based program strands in our schools. Robert Bellah (1985) and his colleagues make the point powerfully in their book *Habits of the Heart*. In a single sentence, they sum up why community service should be seen as a vital ele-

ment, a missing element, in all that we do as teachers of history.

A good society [thus] depends in the last analysis on the goodness of individuals, not on the soundness of institutions or the fairness of laws. (p. 294)

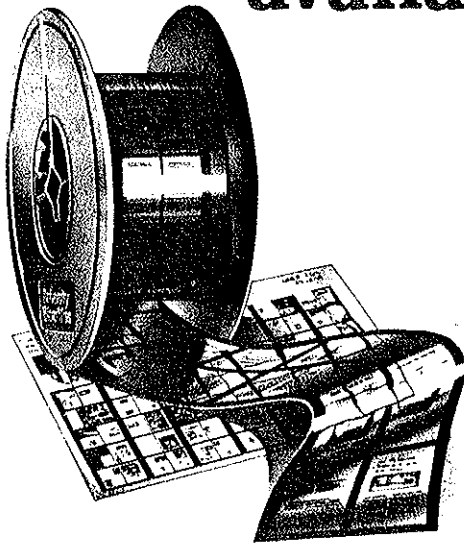
Developing in young people such a

sense of goodness is a goal we must all strive for.

REFERENCES

Bellah, R., et al. 1985. *Habits of the heart*. Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press.

This publication is available in microform.



University
Microfilms
International

University Microfilms International reproduces this publication in microform: microfiche and 16mm or 35mm film. For information about this publication or any of the more than 13,000 titles we offer, complete and mail the coupon to: University Microfilms International, 300 N. Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, MI 48106. Call us toll-free for an immediate response: 800-521-3044. Or call collect in Michigan, Alaska and Hawaii: 313-761-4700.

Please send information about these titles:

Name _____

Company/Institution _____

Address _____

City _____

State _____ Zip _____

Phone () _____