

CITIZENSHIP KNOWLEDGE AND PERCEPTIONS OF EXITING MIDDLE
SCHOOL STUDENTS

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to gauge the citizenship knowledge and perceptions of students in two rural school districts in southeast Ohio who were near completion of the eighth grade. Their citizenship knowledge was measured by administering the fifty odd-numbered questions from the list of “100 Civics Questions and Answers” on the United States Naturalization Test (USCIS, 2010). Citizenship perceptions were measured by individually interviewing, in consultation with the teacher, a selected group of students who took the test. The findings suggest that the majority of the students had a very poor knowledge base concerning citizenship as measured by the United States Naturalization Test as most, due to their age and cognitive development, were not able to fully understand concepts that might inform their perceptions of citizenship.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Civic duties and responsibilities are an integral part of being a United States citizen. The knowledge and skill set a citizen needs to become an active participant in our democracy is taught in the social studies classroom. Unfortunately social studies is becoming increasingly marginalized in our school system mainly due to standardized testing and budget cuts. With the advent of No Child Left Behind, the reading and math curriculum have been given a disproportionate amount of instructional time. No Child Left Behind set the national goal that all students be proficient in both reading and math by the year 2014 while at the same time setting up a progressively stricter accountability structure in terms of intervention that requires schools to spend no less than 10% of Title I funds on professional development for schools that are deemed to be underperforming (RAND, 2010 and ODE 2004). In order to meet an acceptable performance level, schools have increased the amount of instructional time for reading and math while decreased the amount of instructional time for social studies (O'Connor, Heafner & Groce).

The National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) recently released a revised and updated version of the national social studies standards. This document, *National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies: A Framework for Teaching, Learning and Assessment*, defines and reaffirms the importance of social studies. According to NCSS (2010), social studies is:

... the integrated study of the social sciences and humanities to promote civic competence. Within the school program, social studies provides coordinated, systematic study drawing upon such disciplines as anthropology, archaeology, economics, geography, history, law, philosophy, political science, psychology, religion, and sociology, as well as appropriate content from the humanities, mathematics, and natural science. The primary purpose of social studies is to *help young people make informed and reasoned decisions for the public good as citizens of a culturally diverse, democratic society in an interdependent world.*”

(Author’s emphasis) (p. 9).

Furthermore, NCSS reiterates that one of the goals of social studies is the “promotion of civic competence – the knowledge, intellectual processes, and democratic dispositions required of students to be active and engaged participants in public life” (p. 9).

NCSS is focused on “elementary, secondary, and college teachers of history, geography, economics, political science, sociology, psychology, anthropology, and law-related education” (NCSS, 2010). The National Curriculum Standards encompass ten themes and provide a framework for K12 teachers on which to base their social studies instruction. These themes are: Culture; Time, Continuity, and Change; People, Places, and Environments; Individual Development and Identity; Individuals, Groups, Institutions; Power, Authority, and Governance; Production, Distribution, and Consumption; Science, Technology, and Society; Global Connections; and Civic Ideals and Practices (NCSS, 2010). Within each of the ten themes NCSS provides “learning expectations” for early grades, middle grades and high school which “identify the reasons

why it is important to study each theme” (p. 10).

The Civic Ideals and Practices learning expectations for the middle grades include students understanding: key historical documents that deal with citizenship rights, why citizenship is important, practices involved in citizenship, past and present issues concerning citizenship and the importance of being informed. NCSS also states that in the middle grades, “social studies programs should include experiences that provide for the study of the ideals, principles and practices of citizenship in a democratic republic” (p. 121). These learning expectations also include that students by the end of the middle grades should be able exhibit: an informed personal position on a civic issue based on reasoned arguments; develop and share policy positions in such forms as position statements, editorials, or political cartoons; use a variety of media to report on debates, petition, and findings from surveys; and create and implement a plan of action in collaboration with others on an issue of public concern (p. 122).

Even though NCSS, the Ohio Council for the Social Studies (OCSS) and other advocates for social studies are calling for social studies education to receive an equal amount of instructional time and emphasis, the state of Ohio appears to be following the trend set in motion by No Child Left Behind. New curriculum standards for social studies, approved by the Ohio Board of Regents, and released in June 2010, consolidated the seven 2002 standards into four. The original standards included: History; People in Societies; Geography; Economics; Government; Citizenship Rights and responsibilities; and Social Studies Skills and Methods. These seven standards have been reduced to a more traditional core of social studies courses, to be fully implemented in 2014-15:

History, Geography, Economics and Government. The Citizenship Rights and Responsibilities standard will now fall under the Government standard, (ODE, 2010). It is important to note that although NCSS has kept Civic Ideals as a separate standard in its recent revision, Ohio has chosen to collapse its civic standard into the Government standard. Social studies is also facing problems in Ohio due to recent budget deficits. The state standardized tests for grades K-8 social studies have been suspended and are unlikely to return in the near future. Despite claims at the time of suspension that the test would be restored as soon as state funds would allow, given the current state of the economy, no funds have been reallocated in the next biennial budget. OCSS (2010) has stated that it, "...recognize[s] that the suspension of social studies assessments will negatively impact the instructional time allocated to the subject," and is therefore has encouraged its members to contact state representatives requesting the restoration of the social studies standardized test as a priority in the next biennial budget.

The purpose of this study was to gauge the knowledge and perceptions of citizenship of students who were near the completion of the eighth grade. In order to do so, the students who participated in this study took an abbreviated version of the United States Naturalization Test (see Appendix A). Next, twenty students were selected, in consultation with the teacher, for one-on-one interviews (see Appendix B). The teachers' response to their students' performance on the test was an additional focus of this study. Both participating teachers were interviewed after their students completed an abbreviated version of the U.S. Naturalization Test (see Appendix C).

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW/BACKGROUND

Civic Education

One of the most important goals of formal education in the United States, and other industrialized nations, is to produce informed, active citizens. Children attend school to learn characteristics, values and skills that can be carried on into their adult life, which will in turn help them function in a democratic society. There has been an ongoing debate as to whether schools are sufficiently educating students in civics and citizenship concepts. If students do not know how to participate as a citizen or are not knowledgeable about social, politics and civic issues their worth and contribution to society is diminished.

Citizenship is characterized by one's knowledge and attitudes toward political and civic engagement and societal duties. This concept of citizenship implies a certain level of knowledge as to what one's duties, obligations and functions would be in society. Westheimer and Kahne (2004) define three categories along a spectrum of citizenship: personally responsible, participatory and justice-oriented. The personally responsible citizen is defined as hard-working, self-disciplined and honest. This citizen "acts responsibly in his/her community, which includes such acts as donating money, volunteering and recycling (p. 239). A participatory citizen is involved in politics and civic activities and will organize events to benefit others. In other words, "while the personally responsible citizen would contribute cans of food for the homeless, the

participatory citizen might organize the food drive” (p. 240). Lastly, the justice-oriented citizen is concerned with injustices in society, works to determine the causes of these injustices and find solutions. He or she “uses rhetoric and analysis that calls explicit attention to matters of injustice and to the importance of pursuing social justice” (p. 240). Teachers should keep these three types of citizens in mind when they teach social studies as it is clear that society needs all three types to function.

Civic education is the process in which schools ready students to become fully engaged, informed, and participating citizens. This may take place in an actual civics course or integrated into social studies courses. The goal of civic education, as stated by the Civic Mission of Schools report (Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement [CIRCLE], 2003), is to create, “competent and responsible citizens who are informed and thoughtful, participate in their communities, act politically and have moral and civic virtues.” Kahne and Middaugh (2008) outline the best practices schools can use to promote and teach civic education teach about the local, state and national government, give opportunities to talk about current events, create opportunities for service-learning projects, become involved in extra-curricular activities, allow students to be involved in decision making, and use simulations for students to experience citizenship duties.

The Partnership for 21st Century Skills (2004) lists citizenship as one of the key components in a new set of skills we must equip our students with. Some other components of 21st century skills include: global awareness, critical thinking/problem solving, media literacy, and information and technology skills along with basic content

knowledge. Torney-Purta and Wilkenfeld (2009) report that students who receive either a discussion- or lecture-based civic education outperform students who do not receive civic education in all 21st century skills. Even though civic education is attributed to successful life skills it has quickly taken a backseat in our educational system to other content areas, namely reading and math. Since the No Child Left Behind Act of 2002 only requires schools to test students in math, science and reading many schools have pushed civic education out of the curriculum as much as possible (O'Connor, Heafner & Groce, 2007). As stated by Kahne and Middaugh (2008), "71% of districts reported cutting back time on other subjects to make space for reading and math instruction" (p. 34-35).

Retired Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor has also emphasized the importance of civic education. O'Connor championed a bill, passed in Florida in 2010 and enacted into law as the Sandra Day O'Connor Civics Education Act. The Act requires all Florida schools to integrate civics into the language arts curriculum by the school year 2011-2012, all students to take a civics course in the sixth grade beginning the 2012-2013 school year, and beginning in 2014-2015 pass a civics high stakes test by the end of eighth grade. O'Connor was surprised by the negative statistics reported on young people's civic knowledge and maintained that, "only one-third of Americans can name the three branches of government, but two-thirds can name a judge on American Idol" (Killian, 2010).

Statistics show conflicting trends in terms of the civic engagement and civic knowledge among young people, aged 18-24. While voter turnout seems to be

increasing, civic knowledge is decreasing. In the past two presidential election years, 2004 and 2008, respectively 46.7% and 48.5% of people, aged 18-24, voted. This can be compared to presidential election years 1996 and 2000 when just 35.6% and 36.1% of the same age voted, respectively. (CIRLCE, 2009). Even though this trend may indicate an increase in civic engagement among young people, we are also seeing that these young people are leaving school with a deficit in civic knowledge that may affect to what extent they are able to be civically engaged. The 2010 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) Report on Civics (NAEP, 2011) showed a slight increase in knowledge level among fourth grade students compared to the findings in the 2006 report. While the knowledge level among eighth grade students showed no significant changes, it decreased slightly among twelfth grade students. The NAEP also reported that the majority of students in the education system have only a basic knowledge level (defined as “denotes partial mastery of the knowledge and skills that are fundamental for proficient work at a given grade,” p. 4) in civics on a basic, proficient and advanced scale. Moreover, the average scores for all three grades in 2010 were relatively low with fourth grade averaging 157, eighth grade averaging 151, and twelfth grade averaging 148 out of a possible 300 points. Civic knowledge is a necessary asset for our students to leave school with. If students leave school without a sufficient understanding of how a democracy works, what rights and responsibilities our Constitution and Bill of Rights gives and assigns to U.S. citizens, and the general structure of our government, they will not be able to make informed decisions when they go out to vote and participate in the democratic process (NAEP, 2007).

Feinberg and Doppin (2010) conducted a study measuring high school seniors' knowledge of citizenship using the United States Naturalization Test and a questionnaire survey. They found that the participants lacked basic knowledge required to answer many questions on the Naturalization Test, and furthermore, could not articulate a sense of active engagement or participation as a citizen on the questionnaire survey.

Doppin, Misco and Patterson (2008) used a survey to measure teachers' perceptions of citizenship and social studies education. One of the main research goals was to answer the question, "to what extent are teacher perceptions and practices congruent with the citizenship mission of social studies education?" (p. 4). The participants who took the survey included 198 out of 2,000 elementary and secondary social studies teachers in Ohio who were randomly chosen from the Ohio Department of Education database. Many of the teachers who participated in this study placed great importance on teaching basic content knowledge and critical thinking skills rather than developing citizens. However, the authors found that teachers who taught in the higher grades ranked teaching citizenship skills higher than those who taught in the lower grades. The authors concluded, in reference to the citizenship mission of social studies, that "citizenship does not appear to be a guiding concept and is, in fact, defined by the majority as personally responsible or participatory" (pg. 9).

Civic Education in Ohio

The original Ohio Academic Content Standards for Social Studies (2002) require teachers to include the Citizenship Rights and Responsibilities content standard in their curriculum. In grades six through eight these standards are focused on participation,

knowing citizen rights and responsibilities and becoming familiar with figures and documents that have shaped contemporary citizenship. The six through eight grade Benchmarks for Citizenship Rights and Responsibilities are less extensive and require students to “show the relationship between civic participation and attainment of civic and public goals” and “identify historical origins that influenced the rights United States citizens have today” (ODE, 2002). These Benchmarks represent the skills and knowledge students are meant to have acquired when they leave middle school. However, according to the NAEP Report (2007) and the Civic Mission of Schools Report (CIRCLE, 2003) it appears students may well not do so.

As referenced above, the new Ohio Academic Content Standards for Social Studies (ODE, 2010) do not include a separate category for Citizen Rights and Responsibilities, thus further undermining the state of social studies in Ohio. Meanwhile, the Common Core Standards Initiative, representing efforts at the national level, seeks to create a “common core” curriculum for social studies which will, “provide a consistent, clear understanding of what students are expected to learn” (Common Core Standard Initiative, 2010).

United States Naturalization Test

One of the best practices for teaching civic knowledge and responsibilities is to engage students in simulations. The United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) Naturalization Test is a way for students to experience an aspect of what an individual has to go through to get to become a United States citizen. This test is also a way to measure civic knowledge in terms of democracy, American history, government,

rights and responsibilities, geography, and participation.

The United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) Naturalization Test used in this study was the new 2008 version. This updated version replaced the old Naturalization Test which according to the USCIS, “encouraged applicants to memorize facts just to pass a test” (USCIS, 2006). In order to become a citizen of the United States one must pass the Naturalization Test which assesses a prospective citizen’s knowledge in the three areas: American Government (Principles of American Democracy; System of Government, Rights and Responsibilities), American History (Colonial Period and Independence, 1800s, Recent American History and Other Important Historical Information) and Integrated Civics (Geography, Symbols, and Holidays). Whereas the old Naturalization Test focused on facts the hope for the new test was that it promotes patriotism and emphasizes citizen rights and responsibilities (USCIS, 2006). The USCIS has claimed the new Naturalization Test integrates many facets of citizenship in the United States; therefore, it is the ideal citizenship knowledge assessment for students.

Middle School

Middle school students in the United States are adolescents ranging in age from 10 to 15 years. These students are forming their identities, values, and independence during this time period while simultaneously undergoing rapidly growth and physical change to a more adult-like body. The National Middle School Association (NMSA) states in its publication *This We Believe* (2003) that successful middle schools are characterized by

[Teachers who] value working with this age group [and] are prepared to do so;

courageous, collaborative leadership; a shared vision that guides decisions; a safe and inviting environment for all; present content that is relevant to a middle school student's life; teach to multiple learning styles; provide diverse assessments; and maintain high expectations; students and teachers engaged in active learning; an adult advocate for every student; and school-initiated family and community partnerships (p. 7-19).

The NMSA implies that when these characteristics are present in middle schools they will help ensure every student receives the support needed to succeed both academically and socially.

Cognitive Development

Piaget proposed that people go through different levels of cognitive development as they grow and gain life experiences. During the middle school years, ages 10 to 15, students are in the process of transitioning from the concrete operational stage to the formal operational stage. According to Piaget, a typical child is in the concrete operational stage from about ages 7 to 11. While in this stage a child is able to think logically about concrete events. Around age 12 a child transitions to the formal operational stage during which he or she gains the ability to think abstractly. (Myers, 2005). Consequently, before fully transitioning from the concrete operational stage to the formal operational stage, a child may have difficulty understanding citizenship concepts such as the participatory and/or justice-oriented citizen as these often go beyond concrete participation such as voting and recycling (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004).

CHAPTER THREE

METHODS

Participants

This study was conducted in two schools in Southeast Ohio, Pawpaw Middle School and Sycamore Middle School. The two communities in which these schools were located are predominantly rural, Caucasian and characterized by a majority of students with a low socioeconomic background. The two schools and teachers were chosen because of their previous cooperation and collaboration with and proximity to the university. To protect their identity all teachers and students involved in this study were given a pseudonym.

Ms. Johnson taught both eighth grade science and social studies at Pawpaw Middle School. Ms. Stout taught eighth grade social studies at Sycamore Middle School. Every student in both Ms. Johnson's and Ms. Stout's social studies classes took the abbreviated U.S. Citizenship Test. Ms. Johnson taught a total of three blocks each day, alternating weekly the time spent on science and social studies. Her first lesson period of the day consisted of all the eighth grade students with Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) and had an aide, Ms. Tuttle, to help students one-on-one. The other two lesson periods were made up of the regular students but included some Talented and Gifted [TAG] students as well. Ms. Johnson's classroom was sparse in social studies related items as it was primarily a science lab with sinks, microscopes and long counters in the back. Ms. Stout taught a total of five social studies daily lesson periods. Her first two

lesson periods consisted of inclusion classes in which the students with IEPs were pulled out by the Special Education teacher to take tests or be read to as needed. Ms. Stout enriched her room with many social studies-related paraphernalia such as maps, posters, flags and even a suit of armor. Everyday her students had to answer a “question of the day” related to historical events or to review previously covered content.

The 2009 population estimate for the county in which Pawpaw Middle school is located was about 35,359 with approximately 97.8% being Caucasian. 84.0% of the adults aged 25 and older had graduated from high school while 9.8% held a Bachelor’s degree or higher. The median household income in 2008 was \$42, 309. In 2008, 14.4% of families and 18.1% of individuals lived below the poverty level (US Census, 2010).

The 2009 population estimate for the county in which Sycamore Middle School is located was 28,912 with approximately 96.4% being Caucasian. 84.4% of the adults aged 25 and older were high school graduates with only 10.3% of the same age group having obtained a Bachelor’s degree or higher. The median household income in 2008 was \$41,764. In 2008 10.9% of families were living below the poverty level and 14.3% of individuals were below the poverty level (US Census, 2010).

The participants in this study were students near completion of their eighth grade year, attending public school in rural, southeastern Ohio. A total of 147 students completed the written format of the fifty odd- numbered questions from the list of “100 Civics Questions and Answers” on the Naturalization Test (USCIS, 2010). The majority of the students in this study were Caucasian (98.3%), with no other races being reported in the school statistics, 31 students have an Individualized Education Plan (IEP), and

59.6% of the students are considered economically disadvantaged (ODE, 2010b). The typical age of students was 13 – 14. Male students in this study made up 59% of the participants while 41% were female.

Study Instruments

To measure students' citizenship knowledge they were given an abbreviated version of the United States Naturalization Test (see Appendix A). The Naturalization Test is given to immigrants who apply for U.S. citizenship. USCIS provides 100 questions for prospective U.S. citizen to prepare for the citizenship interview in which they will be required to answer 10 to 20 questions taken from the 100 questions list (Feinberg & Doppen). There are three main sections of the test with 29 questions related to American Government, 15 to American History and 6 to Integrated Civics. Each of these three sections also has three subsections. American Government is subdivided among Principles of American Democracy; System of Government; and Rights and Responsibilities. American History is subdivided in Colonial Period and Independence; 1800s; and Recent American History and Other Important Historical Information. Integrated Civics is subdivided in Geography; Symbols; and Holidays. For this study the students were given the fifty odd questions of the one hundred total questions. The abbreviated version for this study, which included all odd-numbered questions on the 100-item list, consisted of 29 American Government questions, 15 American History questions and 6 Integrated Civics questions.

Except for one, all questions on the Naturalization test are knowledge-based. Only one question includes elements of Westheimer and Kahne's definition of a participatory

citizen. This question is included under American Government in the Rights and Responsibilities subsection. It asks, “What are two ways that Americans can participate in their democracy?” Possible answers provided by USCIS (2010) include: vote, join a community group, run for office and call Senators and Representatives. The completed tests were individually analyzed by first marking all the incorrect responses and calculating a grade based on a 100-point score. Each question was allotted two points, with two part questions allotted one point per answer, to make the highest possible score 100. Next, all the incorrect questions were tallied. This allowed for the analysis of the most often missed questions as well as the most often correctly answered questions.

Both Ms. Johnson and Ms. Stout gave their students about 30 minutes to take the test. However, Ms. Johnson allotted her first block of students with IEPs about 50 minutes and she read each question aloud giving them ample time before moving on to the next question. Many of the students expressed dismay at first glance and some even vocalized their belief that they would “fail” the test. Each teacher calmed the students down and made them work quietly during the allotted time. Some students at each school did not use the fully allotted time as they deemed the test too hard and “gave up” by putting their heads on their desk. One student from Sycamore MS even said, “I tell you what, if I wasn’t a citizen of the United States, I wouldn’t be.” Ms. Johnson was more sensitive to her students than Ms. Stout as she pointed out to them that they had learned about a few of the questions earlier in the year. Ms. Stout repeatedly told her students that they would need to know this information for the OGT.

To measure students’ citizenship perceptions, 10 students at each school were

selected, in consultation with the teachers, to participate in a one-on-one interview. This number was selected to be representative of the body of students at each school. The students represented varied academic levels in social studies from lower to higher achievement. This number was agreed upon by the teachers as a realistic number of students to take out of class and interview throughout the school day. Students from Pawpaw MS were taken into an empty room to be interviewed and students from Sycamore MS were taken to the library. Each interview was recorded in its entirety with a digital audio recorder. The audio recordings were erased after being transcribed. Each student was pulled out of class separately to answer a series of eight questions (see Appendix B) concerning their perceptions of citizenship in a six to eight minute interview. Interviewees were neither informed that they were being asked questions that followed Westheimer and Kahne's three typologies of citizenship nor were they provided with the terminology used by Westheimer and Kahne, personally responsible, participatory, and justice-oriented citizen.

The interviews were analyzed using the qualitative method of "grouping answers together across respondents" (Best & Kahn, 2003). Students were asked whether they agreed or disagreed with three typologies of citizenship which facilitated grouping answers. The answers to the open question to describe a good citizen were thematically grouped by similar language use.

Finally, the teachers in this study, Ms. Johnson and Ms. Stout, participated in a personal audio recorded interview in which they answered questions concerning their personal responses to their students' performance on the Naturalization Test (see

Appendix C). Ms. Johnson's interview lasted about 15 minutes while Ms. Stout's interview was more lengthy, lasting about 30 minutes. Ms. Stout's interview was more informal and conducted more as a discussion with the guiding questions while Ms. Johnson just answered each question succinctly. Although a seasoned teacher, Ms. Johnson's career was predominantly that of a science teacher, whereas Ms. Stout's career has been that of a social studies teacher. Both had taught various grades within their license qualifications.

Upon witnessing the reactions of the teachers to their students taking the U.S. Citizenship Test and the results, I decided that a teacher interview would greatly enrich the study. During the administration of the test, each teacher expressed concern about the general lack of citizenship knowledge in her classroom. Ms. Johnson freely admitted that she did not have much interest in social studies. After informing her that my weakness is science she said, "Social studies to me is like science to you, you don't really like science." Many of the students seemed to trust and confide in Ms. Johnson. During my observations several female students talked about troubling home issues with her. However, Ms. Johnson also seemed to want to be a friend more than teacher as the students were often not engaged in academic work during my observations, which could also be attributed to it being near the end of the school year. However, her students did watch a historically-oriented film during one of my observations. Ms. Stout took social studies education much more seriously even though she felt discouraged because the state social studies test had been temporarily discontinued. During each observation in her classroom there was a "question of the day" on the board and the students either listened

to a lecture or completed class-related work.

CHAPTER FOUR

FINDINGS

Citizenship Knowledge

To gauge their knowledge of citizenship related facts and concepts, the student participants in this study took an abbreviated version of the United States Naturalization Test. Each question was scored based on the percentage of students that answered that question correctly. Overall, only 6 of the 50 questions were answered correctly by 70% or more of the students (see Appendix D). In the “System of Government” section, 84% of students correctly answered the question that required them to name one branch of the government. In the “Colonial Period and Independence” section, 70% of the students correctly answered the question who lived in America before the Europeans arrived. The students in this study did well in the “Geography” section as 74% correctly answered that the Pacific Ocean is on the West coast of the U.S., 82% were able to list one U.S. state that borders on Mexico, and 83% knew where the Statue of Liberty is located. Finally, in the “Symbols” section, 95% of students correctly answered why the flag has fifty stars.

The results at Sycamore Middle School were the same in regard to number of questions answered correctly by 70% or more of students. 82% of Sycamore MS students correctly named one branch of the government, 74% identified who lived in America before the Europeans arrived, 78% knew the Pacific Ocean is on the West Coast, 84% could name a state that borders Mexico, 83% named where the Statue of

Liberty is located, and 95% explained why the flag has 50 stars. Conversely, only 4 of the 50 questions were answered correctly by 70% of the students from Pawpaw Middle School. The four questions were to name one branch of the government which was answered correctly by 90% of students, name one state that borders Mexico which was answered correctly by 81%, where is the Statue of Liberty is located which was answered correctly by 88%, and why the flag has 50 stars which was answered correctly by 95%.

The overall average score on the U.S. Naturalization Test was 30% with Sycamore MS averaging higher with 32% than Pawpaw MS's 26% average. At Sycamore MS the highest score was an 81% and the lowest score was 0%. Comparatively, at Pawpaw MS the highest score was a 61% and the lowest score was 5%. Even though a higher percentage of students at Sycamore MS correctly answered several questions and as a collective scored better on the U.S. Naturalization Test than the students from Pawpaw MS, the difference, six percentage points, is very marginal.

As the overall and individual performance of the students on the U.S. Naturalization Test was very poor the analysis of the lower achieving questions only addresses the questions that 10% or less answered correctly, which alternatively can also be thought of in terms of 90% or more of the students answering incorrectly. In the "Principles of American Democracy" section 4% of students correctly answered both the number of amendments to the Constitution and identified the economic system in the U.S. In the "System of Government" section 6% or less of students correctly answered questions pertaining to the length of a U.S. Senator's elected term, how many voting members there are in the House of Representatives, who their U.S. Representative was,

who becomes President if both the President and Vice-President can no longer serve, what the President's Cabinet does, what the judicial branch does, how many justices there are on the Supreme Court, what one power of the federal government is and what the name is of the current Speaker of the House of Representatives. In the "Colonial Period and Independence" section, 6% correctly answered what happened at the Constitutional Convention while 1% of students correctly named one of the writers of the Federalist Papers. In the "1800s" section 4% of students were able to state one important thing Abraham Lincoln did and 6% correctly knew Susan B. Anthony's role in the women's suffrage movement. In the "Recent American History and Other Important Historical Information", 1% of students knew who the President was during WWI, and 8% knew what the main concern of the U.S. was during the Cold War. Lastly, in the "Geography" section 6% of students were able to correctly name one U.S. territory.

Student Perceptions of Citizenship

To gauge the citizenship perceptions of students in this study, 20 students participated in a one-on-one interview. The interviews comprised four sections whose findings are presented next.

Good citizen

The first section, in which the students were asked what their definition of a good citizen is, common key words were identified. The words "respect," "obeying laws," "honesty," "help [the environment, people, community, country]," "vote," "constitutional rights," and "paying bills/taxes" were used in various forms and combinations by all 20 students in the definitions they provided. More than half of the students used language

related to being respectful. In a typical “respect” response James said, “Just respect everything and the people around” while Josh said, “...be good and, like, kind and not rude.” Slightly more than one-third of the students used words related to obeying the law in their definition of a being a good citizen while more than one half used language related to “helping” in their definition. Students referred to “helping” in four different areas, i.e., the environment, people, community and country. Dakota, using “help” language, said, “A good citizen would probably be helping out neighbors...and just like help the environment and stuff.”

Personally responsible

In the second section, students were asked whether they agreed or disagreed with the three major citizenship types provided by Westheimer and Kahne. However, it is important to note that students were not given the citizenship labels Westheimer and Kahne identify. When the following question was presented, “Some people think that a good citizen is honest, has self-discipline and works hard. Do you agree with that? Why or why not,” which falls under the construct of a personally responsible citizen, all the students answered positively. One of the main reasons students gave for agreeing with this construct was that good citizens need to get paid, i.e. get a job to earn income, and not be lazy. Justin D., for example, answered this question by saying, “Yeah, I agree with it because I think that it is something important to do so you can get through life and have a good life and have a nice job and pay your bills” while James F. said, “Yeah, cause people should work really, really hard and if they don’t they are just a bum. Like my brother-in-law, he’s lazy.” Cody E. said, “Yeah, I agree with that because if you’re

not self-disciplined or don't work hard and are not honest you won't get a job and won't be a responsible adult.”

Participatory

In the third section of the interview students were questioned about the importance of being a participatory citizen as follows: “Some people think that it is not enough to be a good person but a good citizen is also involved in politics and civic activities in his or her community at the local, state, and national level. Do you agree with that? Why or why not?” Slightly more than one-half of the students, 11 out of 20, disagreed when asked whether they thought one needed to be involved in politics and civic activities to be a good citizen, one-third, or seven students, agreed while two students remained uncertain/undecided. Most of the rationales for disagreeing with the participatory citizen construct were based on the statement that being a good citizen does not mean you have to know about or be involved in politics. Five of the students who agreed thought that being informed is enough participation. However, simply being informed well fits the definition of a personally responsible citizen rather than that of a participatory citizen, which could imply they do not understand how one can be a participatory citizen outside of being informed and voting. Nicole B. offered a typical negative response to the participatory construct when she said, “No, because ... even a little person not even involved in politics or anything could help someone and could make a big difference. They just don't get as noticed as the people that are involved in politics.” Jacob offered a typical positive response when he said, “Yes, I agree with that because it is important to know what is happening in the government and stuff.”

Justice-oriented

In the last section of the interview students were asked whether they agreed or disagreed with the justice-oriented citizen construct in the form of the following question: “Some people think that it’s not enough to be a good person and be involved in politics and civic activities in the community, but they also think that people should try to figure out why some things are unfair and what citizens can do to fight for justice and fairness for everyone. Do you agree with that? Why or why not?” For the most part, when answering this question, students were very confused about and unsure of the role a justice-oriented person could play in society which was evident from the answers they provided. Nearly one-half of the students, nine of the 20, were uncertain/undecided about whether they agreed or disagreed with the statement that a good citizen should try to figure out why things are unfair and what he or she can do to fight for justice for everyone. Slightly less than one-half, or eight, of the students agreed with the statement while three students disagreed. Of the students who agreed with the statement, most provided very weak answers that lacked in substance, not fully being able to articulate the reasoning behind why they agreed. A typical response from those who agreed that one should strive to be a justice-oriented citizen came from Jessica who said, “Yes, cause if you just sat around nothing would get done. Like an example would be slavery, nothing would have got done.” Also, Samantha replied, “I think I do agree with it because if something is unfair you do have a reason to figure out why it is unfair and you should be able to fight for your justice and fairness altogether.” Nine, or almost half of the students, were uncertain/undecided and suggested someone needs to do it, i.e. fight for

justice, but they themselves did not want to do so but that rather judges and the police officers should do so, or they were just confused. A typical uncertain/undecided response came from J.J. who said, “I would agree with it because it kind of is unfair for people to do that because if they are fighting for the wrong stuff, like dictators and everything, if they fight for the wrong stuff, like a whole bunch of people could die.”

Teacher Perceptions

After the students took the U.S. Naturalization Test both the teacher from Pawpaw Middle School and Sycamore Middle School were interviewed (see Appendix B). Pawpaw MS Teacher, Ms. Johnson, taught both eighth grade science and social studies while Sycamore MS Teacher, Ms. Stout, taught eighth grade social studies.

Both teachers responded very differently when asked whether they thought the questions were information most eighth graders should know. Pawpaw MS Teacher Ms. Johnson said that they should not be expected know everything on the test but should nonetheless be much more knowledgeable by their senior year. On the other hand, Ms. Stout, the teacher at Sycamore MS said, “Because they got it in fifth grade, they will re-get it in the eighth grade and there is no reason for them not to know it. I mean we have taught it.” Ms. Johnson thought the test was fair because, “they need to gain knowledge about what immigrants have to do to get into the United States.” Ms. Stout thought that the test was mostly fair but admitted, “...Well, for eighth graders to name your U.S. representative, I hate to be honest with you, I don’t know who it is myself,” In reference to the question that asks students to identify one promise you make when becoming a U.S. citizen, she said, “...because they aren’t being naturalized I don’t think eighth

graders understand what is going on with this one.” Both teachers were disappointed with the performance of their students, although admittedly they were not surprised. When asked whether the performance of the students is a reflection upon their own teaching, Ms. Johnson responded, “I can honestly say I am not the best social studies teacher.” However, she also lamented, “I do not [even] have a map in my room and I *am* a social studies teacher.” Ms. Stout said, “Yeah [this is a reflection on my teaching], which obviously must not be that good. No, I would take that back. I am definitely not the best teacher, I am definitely not the worst teacher... Obviously, I need to do something differently.”

Finally, each teacher responded to the question of whether social studies is important. Ms. Johnson said, “I feel that some aspects of social studies are real important, and others not so much. I think we should teach the students more American history rather than ancient civilizations.” Ms. Stout said, “Of course it is important. Does it outdo reading and math? No... I can’t imagine not learning about the past to understand why you are what you are today... I just can’t make everybody else interested in it.”

Even though each teacher responded that her students should be able to correctly answer most of the questions on the U.S. Naturalization Test, each put a different emphasis on how she could improve her own teaching in the future. Ms. Johnson stated that eighth graders should not have to know everything on the test, but should be more knowledgeable by their senior year. This effectively defers the responsibility of citizenship education to higher grade level teachers when the students are closer to graduation from mandatory schooling. Ms. Stout, on the other hand, was more focused

on the process of learning and her responsibility in the process. Throughout the interview she reiterated her idea of using the U.S. Naturalization Test in her classroom next school year to ensure students gain specific citizenship knowledge that they may not pick up in daily classes. However, she did not address the importance of citizenship knowledge outside of academia for students. Rather she was focused on the implications of their lack of citizenship knowledge in terms of standardized testing.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Every student who goes through the public school system in the United States receives a social studies education. One of the main goals of social studies is to help develop engaged, informed citizens. Even though social studies is being de-emphasized across the nation, it has become no less important to be politically engaged. If this study is any indication, students who leave middle school have some distance to go until the end of high school in terms of citizenship knowledge and perceptions. Based on the poor performance of the students who participated in this study on the U.S. Naturalization Test and the many times they offered confused, incoherent or basic answers during the one-on-one interviews it can be concluded that students entering high school need to focus on broad citizenship concepts that go beyond concrete, limited notions such as voting or picking up trash.

Although, some students in this study were able better than others to articulate their thoughts, categorizing the students into what type of citizen they are, or would like to be, is nearly impossible since most did not appear to understand how each type would function in and benefit society. Consequently, it is hard to determine whether the inarticulate students simply did not understand what was being asked or simply were unable to verbalize their thoughts, or both. The findings also suggest that the students in this study failed to meet many of the Civic Ideals and Practices learning expectations for the middle grades, as advocated by NCSS (2010).

High school teachers should understand that students entering high school are in a transitional period in their cognitive development. The ability to engage in abstract thinking of students in this age range, for the majority, is not sufficiently developed to understand broader concepts of civic participation and how different citizen constructs, such as personally responsible, participatory and justice-oriented, benefit society. During this time students are somewhere between concrete operational and formal operational stages in their thinking (Myers, 2005). Based on findings from the interviews, it is important to pair concrete examples with abstract concepts to ensure students understand citizenship material presented to them as many students interviewed for this study backed up their explanations of, or benefits of, the different citizenship constructs with actions people perform.

In conclusion, students leaving middle school appear not to be equipped with the basic citizen knowledge they will need to effectively participate in society. Students leaving middle school also do not have an understanding of the personally responsible, participatory and justice-oriented citizenship constructs as defined by Westheimer and Kahne (2004) and how they can be situated within the same individual and be of benefit in a broad civic context. Even though findings suggest the students in this study have a significant lack of citizenship knowledge, it is encouraging to know that their high school years will provide them the opportunity to develop the critical thinking skills to engage more deeply in broad terms of citizenship. If students are introduced to citizenship knowledge in middle school they will be more receptive to their high school social studies teachers helping them enhance their ability to "...make informed and reasoned

decisions for the public good as citizens of a culturally diverse, democratic society in an interdependent world” (NCSS, p. 9).

APPENDIX A

ABBREVIATED VERSION OF UNITED STATES NATURALIZATION TEST

American Government

A: Principles of American Democracy

1. What is the supreme law of the land?
2. The idea of self-government is in the first three words of the Constitution. What are these words?
3. What do we call the first ten amendments to the Constitution?
4. How many amendments does the Constitution have?
5. What are two rights in the Declaration of Independence?
6. What is the economic system in the United States?

B: System of Government

7. Name one branch or part of the government.
8. Who is in charge of the executive branch?
9. What are the two parts of the U.S. Congress?
10. We elect a U.S. Senator for how many years?
11. The House of Representatives has how many voting members?
12. Name your U.S. Representative.
13. Why do some states have more Representatives than other states?
14. In what month do we vote for President?
15. What is the name of the Vice President of the United States now?

16. If both the President and the Vice President can no longer serve, who becomes President?
17. Who signs bills to become laws?
18. What does the President's Cabinet do?
19. What does the judicial branch do?
20. How many justices are on the Supreme Court?
21. Under our Constitution, some powers belong to the federal government. What is one power of the federal government?
22. Who is the Governor of your state now?
23. What are the two major political parties in the United States?
24. What is the name of the Speaker of the House of Representatives now?

C: Rights and Responsibilities

25. What is one responsibility that is only for United States citizens?
26. What are two rights of everyone living in the United States?
27. What is one promise you make when you become a United States citizen?
28. What are two ways that Americans can participate in their democracy?
29. When must all men register for the Selective Service?

American History

A: Colonial Period and Independence

30. Who lived in America before the Europeans arrived?
31. Why did the colonists fight the British?
32. When was the Declaration of Independence adopted?

33. What happened at the Constitutional Convention?
34. The Federalist Papers supported the passage of the U.S. Constitution. Name one of the writers.
35. Who is the “Father of Our Country”?

B: 1800s

36. What territory did the United States buy from France in 1803?
37. Name the U.S. war between the North and the South.
38. What was one important thing that Abraham Lincoln did?
39. What did Susan B. Anthony do?

C: Recent American History and Other Important Historical Information

40. Who was President during World War I?
41. Who did the United States fight in World War II?
42. During the Cold War, what was the main concern of the United States?
43. What did Martin Luther King, Jr. do?
44. Name one American Indian tribe in the United States.

Integrated Civics

A: Geography

45. What ocean is on the West Coast of the United States?
46. Name one U.S. territory.
47. Name one state that borders Mexico.
48. Where is the Statue of Liberty?

B: Symbols

49. Why does the flag have 50 stars?

C: Holidays

50. When do we celebrate Independence Day?

APPENDIX B

STUDENT INTERVIEW QUESTIONNAIRE

- In your own words, what does it mean to be a good citizen?
- Some people think that a good citizen is honest, has self-discipline and works hard.
Do you agree with that? Why or why not?
- What are some things that you think such a citizen can do to help society?
- Some people think that it's not enough to be a good person but that a good citizen is also involved in politics and civic activities in his or her community at the state, local and national level. Do you agree with that? Why or why not?
- What are some things that you think such a citizen can do to help society?
- Some people think it's not enough to be a good person and be involved in politics and civic activities in the community at the local, state and national level. They think that people should also try to figure out why some things are unfair and what citizens can do to fight for justice and fairness for everyone. Do you agree with that? Why or why not?
- What are some things that you think such a citizen can do to help society?
- What kind of citizen do you want to become once you get out of school? Please explain.

APPENDIX C

TEACHER INTERVIEW QUESTIONNAIRE

- Do you think the questions on the citizenship test are things that most eighth grade students should know?
- Do you think it was fair to give the students this test when they could not study for it?
- Do you think the questions on the citizenship test were fair? Which ones were fair, which ones weren't?
- How do you feel about the performance of your students? Was it what you expected?
- How did you feel/react when the students were taking the test?
- Why do you think some students did much better than other students?
- Do you think the students' performance reflects more on their schooling or their life experiences?
- Do you think your students' performance reflects on the way you teach them? If so, how? If not, why not?
- Do you think social studies is important? How is that reflected in your teaching?
- Is there anything I did not ask that you would like to comment upon?

APPENDIX D

RESULTS

Question #	Pawpaw Middle School Results: Percentage Answering Correctly ^t	Sycamore Middle School Results: Percentage Answering Correctly ^{tt}	Overall Results: Percentage Answering Correctly ^{ttt}
1	5%	20%	16%
2	24%	44%	38%
3	51%	56%	55%
4	5%	4%	4%
5	0%	17%	12%
6	0%	7%	5%
7	90%	82%	84%
8	39%	46%	44%
9	5%	20%	16%
10	5%	3%	3%
11	0%	0%	0%
12	0%	3%	2%
13	32%	51%	46%
14	34%	30%	31%
15	20%	28%	26%

16	0%	3%	2%
17	63%	66%	65%
18	2%	9%	7%
19	7%	5%	5%
20	7%	4%	5%
21	2%	7%	5%
22	22%	11%	14%
23	61%	52%	54%
24	0%	3%	2%
25	7%	31%	24%
26	61%	42%	47%
27	24%	23%	23%
28	24%	40%	35%
29	27%	62%	53%
30	63%	74%	70%
31	27%	40%	36%
32	7%	26%	21%
33	7%	7%	7%
34	0%	2%	1%
35	34%	47%	44%
36	7%	30%	24%

37	37%	65%	57%
38	2%	5%	4%
39	5%	7%	6%
40	0%	2%	1%
41	39%	42%	41%
42	5%	10%	9%
43	27%	44%	39%
44	42%	53%	50%
45	63%	78%	74%
46	10%	6%	7%
47	81%	84%	83%
48	88%	83%	84%
49	95%	95%	95%
50	49%	67%	62%
OVERALL AVERAGES:	26%	32%	30%

†: 41 participants

‡: 106 participants

§: 147 total participants

APPENDIX E

TESTING TIMELINE

Date	Event
May 3, 2010	U.S Citizenship Test administered at Pawpaw Middle school
May 10, 2010	U.S. Citizenship Test administered at Sycamore Middle School
May 17, 2010	Student and teacher interviews conducted at Sycamore Middle School
May 21, 2010	Student and teacher interviews conducted at Pawpaw Middle School

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