Does Social Studies Promote Civic Engagement?

A Master’s Research Project Presented to

The Faculty of the Patton College of Education

Ohio University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Education

by

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AYA-Integrated Social Studies

August, 2013
This Master’s Research Project has been approved
for the Department of Teacher Education

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CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

Background

Social studies is an important aspect of our students’ curriculum as it is aimed at teaching students how to become active and responsible citizens (NCSS, 2013). At a time when many school programs are being cut in order to provide more funding and time for those subjects that appear on standardized tests, it is important for social studies to be seen as an important and vital component of the curriculum. In the article, *Groomed for: A Focus on Politics and Public Service Promotes Student Expertise both in and out of School*, Hutchins (2012) discusses the idea that, “Standards-based education seems to be civics-bereft education” (p. 71). Simply put, teaching to the test deprives us of an education in civics. Although other subjects are very important, Social Studies should be seen as just as if not more important than the subjects of reading, writing, science, engineering and technology which dominate standardized tests. Unlike these other subjects, social studies is tasked with the objective of teaching students how to become active, engaged, and responsible citizens. To quote William Galston, a political theorist, social studies is about “the formation of individuals who can effectively conduct their lives within, and support, their political community” (Downs, 2012, p. 343). Social studies is the only subject in elementary and secondary schooling whose intentional focus to developing our future citizenry.

It makes no difference how educated our students are in creating a better nation if they have no appreciation or dedication to the land on which they reside or their fellow citizens. In order for our students to truly make changes in the nation and the world, they must believe in the
connection between themselves and those around them. Social studies is the one subject that has the responsibility of showing students how important the individual is to the community and vice versa. Disciplines are much like fingers in the sense that when they work together they pack a bigger punch than they do individually. If the individual feels no connection with his or her fellow citizens he or she less inclined to use their acquired talents to for the betterment of the whole.

Social studies is not simply teaching students about history and how to make changes, it is about teaching students how to become responsible, engaged, and purposeful citizens in our nation. Plainly speaking, civic responsibility is the relationship between citizens within a society and the effects of that relationship on individual attitudes and efforts. According to the National Council for the Social Studies, our discipline is tasked “to help young people develop the ability to make informed and reasoned decisions for the public good as citizens of a culturally diverse, democratic society in an interdependent world” (National Council for the Social Studies, 2010). As citizens of a nation there must be something which ties us together, and that is our civic responsibility to one another.

Civic responsibility is what drives us as citizens to act for the greater cause of the society as a whole. It is individual civic responsibility which influences individuals to become teachers, coaches, politicians, humanitarians, and entrepreneurs. Civic responsibility is frequently measured in terms of voter participation or turnout. This is generally the case as voter turnout presents straightforward data to review. Over the past few decades there has been great concern about the decline in voter turnout and overall participation (Moguel, 2003, p. 28-29). It appears that voter efficacy is declining despite increasingly greater voter access to resources. Some research attributes this lack of civic participation to the inadequacies of current social studies
Statement of problem

As a future social studies teacher I, like many others, am concerned about how well current curricula prepare today’s students to become active, engaged citizens tomorrow. Looking back at my education there were limited opportunities which prepared me to become an active, engaged citizen. In fact the only real experience that I can recall during my elementary and secondary education was the requirement in my twelfth grade Government class to volunteer for a political party during election season.

This lack of opportunity to engage students in real world experiences that prepare them for their civic responsibilities unfortunately seems to be the norm rather than the exception. It is the responsibility of Social Studies teachers to encourage students to become active, engaged citizens as it appears we are not fully meeting that objective.

Research questions

I. Does the middle school social studies curriculum promote civic engagement?
II. What factors influence the civic engagement of middle school students?
III. Do middle school students have a notion of civic engagement?
IV. To what extent are middle school students civically engaged?

Methodology

In completing the research for this Master’s Research Project I utilized two methods of gathering data. The literature that was used in this research project was gathered via the Internet.
For the purpose of data collection I searched the terms “civic education,” “civic engagement,” “Social Studies and social justice,” and “civics and Social Studies.” Several search engines were used including Academic Search Complete, InfoTree, ERIC, EBSCO, JSTOR, and Ohio University’s Alice Online Catalog. I also limited the results to research completed primarily in the United States.

In addition to the literature used, I also gathered data from a survey of Athens Middle School students. The survey consisted of questions regarding students’ participation in civic organizations, requirements of social studies classes, students’ knowledge of the 2012 Presidential Election, and students’ perceived self-efficacy within their community. Students were surveyed during Fall 2012 and again during Spring 2013 in order to determine whether the curriculum had an impact on their civic engagement.

Limitations

The limitations of this study deal with finding current, relevant data to refute or support the positive relationship between social studies and civic engagement. In addition, the data was collected from scholarly sources found online. I found it difficult to locate current studies which duplicated the primary question of my research, “Does the middle school social studies curriculum promote civic engagement?” Studies and research were conducted which touched upon the subject, but none fully answered the question. In order to gather significant data I had to expand my search to include civic duty and social justice research.

The study was also limited by the sample of students who were surveyed. This study included a small sample in comparison to the number of middle school students in the state of Ohio. Only one predominantly white school, which shall be referred to as Middle School of Ohio (MSO), was included.
Significance of study

The purpose of this study was to assess to what extent the social studies curriculum influences students to become active and positive citizens. I believe that as teachers, specifically in the field of social studies, it is not only our responsibility to meet the standards set by the state, but to also ensure that we are molding our students into responsible citizens. This research project will help me as an educator develop a curriculum that not only addresses standards but also will encourage my students to become active in their community while making a difference in the world.

Organization of project

Chapter One introduced this Master’s Research Project. It provides background information on the relationship between social studies and civic engagement and discussed the significance of this study in addition to briefly presenting my methodology. Chapter Two will be a literature review of scholarly research on the relationship between social studies and civic engagement. I examine and summarize the literature. Chapter Three details the methodology used in the data collection and analysis for this project. In this chapter I discuss my rationale and specific reasons for selecting the sample surveyed and my data collection methods. Chapter Four presents the findings from the data collection. In this chapter I present the findings from the two student surveys. I discuss the ways in which the data supported and refuted the positive relationship between social studies and civic engagement. Chapter Five will presents the conclusions and offer suggestions for future research.
CHAPTER TWO
LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter presents a literature review of scholarly research on the relationship between social studies and civic engagement. As educators it is imperative that we understand the relationship that an education in civics plays in shaping the political character in our students, in order to provide them with the necessary tools to act as engaged citizens. The findings of the literature review are divided into five sections that discuss this relationship: 1-What is the importance of social studies in our schools; 2-What is civic engagement; 3-Has social studies evolved to address the needs of current events; 4-Does social studies promote civic responsibility; 5-What are the best teaching strategies for encouraging civic engagement.

What is the importance of social studies in our schools?

The importance of social studies in our schools is that it prepares students to be political actors for social change. Social studies has the purpose of teaching students about the world in which they live and how to positively affect society. The current curriculum, specifically in Ohio, focuses on educating students in the four areas of History, Geography, Government, and Economics. According to the Ohio Department of Education, the social studies curriculum is tasked with the following objectives:

- Helps students develop the ability to make informed and reasoned decisions for themselves and for the common good;
- Prepares students for their role as citizens and decision makers in a diverse, democratic society;
- Enables students to learn about significant people, places, events and issues in the past in order to understand the present;
- Fosters students’ ability to act responsibly and become successful problem solvers in an interdependent world of limited resources (ODE, 2012, pp. 3-4).

Social studies is important not only because it teaches students about the past, but also because it teaches them how to change the future. It teaches students how to process what is presently going on in the world around them and actively engages them in society.

Social studies has helped us to achieve traditional goals of public education that mathematics, science, and reading alone cannot attain. It is a necessary component of a well-balanced education. Historically speaking, “For [Jefferson], public schools - perhaps more than any other institution - bore the responsibility for ensuring that Americans acquire the cultural knowledge and skills of deliberation that could make possible a public process of determining the public good” (Moguel, 2003, p. 29).

Presently social studies has to address and teach students how to navigate through current events. This includes both domestic and foreign affairs as these two worlds have become more and more intertwined through advances in technology. Social studies teaches students about all of the components which make up their political and social community. Social studies is a subject that is prefaced upon encouraging students to simultaneously think about themselves in relation to the community and their individual person. It is concerned with teaching students how to interact to cause a better society. More specifically, the “Civic education curriculum promotes the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary for students to nourish democratic communities” (Camicia & Saavedra, 2009, p. 505). A quality education in civics provides students with the necessary tools to help their communities flourish.
Social studies unlike any other discipline has the responsibility of molding students into responsible, adults citizens. When properly executed, “effective civic education develops habits of democratic attitude and participation that are carried forward into adult civic and political activities” (Malin, 2011, p.113). With the proper influences and education, students have the potential to become engaged citizens that positively affect social change. To cite John Dewey, “classrooms are a part of life, not merely preparation for it, and … to make society more democratic, students must participate in classrooms that are themselves democratic societies” (Moguel, 2003, p. 29). Social studies provides the classroom in which students can realistically prepare to participate in our democratic society.

Although many people think social studies is just about government and history, there is a great deal more to the discipline. Judge Marjorie Rendell asserts,

If our democracy is to thrive, citizens need to understand that they have a role to play. Citizens must understand and embrace their responsibilities, be active in both the electoral process and public policy, and be armed with a basic level of knowledge that will allow them to engage their government in determining the future. All this begins with civics education and learning, and as a nation we must do better; (Raia, 2011, p.17)

Social studies teaches students how they relate to the whole and how individual action affects the entire community. It teaches students about their role in the community and their responsibility to others. Even more so, it teaches students about their obligations of civic engagement.

What is civic engagement?

Civic engagement is defined by participation in the political and social arena. Although it casts a wide net, it involves a very specific type of engagement depending on the individual.
According to one study, civic engagement can be defined as, “any activity, individual or collective, devoted to influencing the collective life of the polity” (Downs, 2012, p. 344). For some, civic engagement is voting, volunteering for political campaigns, attending town hall meetings, lobbying, or running for political office. For others, civic engagement is going to church, volunteering for a local charity, stopping the demolition of a historical landmark, or protesting for a cause. Generally speaking, civic engagement is an action that one partakes in to positively affect the livelihood of others.

Civic engagement is an aspect of civic education which allows students to interact with their learning environment. According to Downs (2012), civic engagement can be used, “as a method of fostering civic education” (p.344). This can be achieved through providing students with early interactions with political and social issues. One of the easiest ways to achieve this in the classroom is through class discussions or debates. As involvement in student government, extracurricular activities and youth organizations can provide additional platforms, it has been argued that these too are forms of civic engagement (Youniss, 2011). Civic engagement provides real life applications of the materials and ideals learned in the classroom.

Civic engagement is the action of the individual as a response to how he or she feels connected to society. According to Richey (2011), civic engagement is determined by four factors, “(1) work[ing] with other people to deal with some issue facing your community, (2) attend[ing] a meeting about an issue facing your community or schools, (3) telephon[ing], writ[ing] a letter to, or visit[ing] a government official to express your views on a public issue, and (4) tak[ing] part in a protest or march in the last year” (p. 1050). Engagement can embody many activities all of which center around making an active change or influence in the community. Civic engagement is important for our students because, “When younger Americans
have a voice in community affairs, they can contribute their insights to public debates and their energies to addressing public problems” (Flanagan & Levine, 2010, p.160). More specifically, it is essential that our youth are engaged so that they may positively affect changes that are needed and in turn feel as if those changes are relevant and important to their society.

Has social studies evolved to address the needs of current events?

For some educators, it is imperative that civics education not only addresses traditional goals and objectives, but also attempts to address new goals and objectives brought forth by current events. In an ever changing society, social studies addresses the “need to educate citizens who are able to solve global problems (Camicia & Saavedra, 2009, p. 502). Historically international issues were of little concern domestically as they did not directly affect us. However, as technology transforms our worlds and brings global issues into our lives, it is imperative that students be prepared to solve problems both global and domestic. In an increasingly technological era, educators have to be prepared to teach students how to navigate within a world that brings what was once the unknown right into the palm of our hands.

Specifically, in light of the 9/11 attacks on the United States the discourse of civics education has evolved in numerous ways. A study conducted by Barrett and Dietrich (2010) found that since the attacks of September 11, “the definition of democracy has expanded to include not only the rights, duties, and responsibilities but also the values of being a good democratic citizen and world citizen” (pp. 14-15). Not only are people more concerned with domestic issues, but also how those issues affect international issues. September 11 is a critical point in American history as it sparked mass action of the polity across the nation. Citizens questioned the government, donated their time and money to various causes, and were willing to
help fellow citizens without thinking twice. In addition, citizens were also concerned with the lives of citizens in countries upon which the United States has waged war.

With the emergence of technological advances, people have greater access to and interaction with people all across the world. This has transformed a world of strangers into a network of familiar people. It has brought those who we once considered strangers or unknown starkly into our consciousness. Therefore, people are more concerned with how their action affects others in their domestic and global networks. Moreover, people now consider those unknown faces to be a part of their networks. Metaphorically speaking, we have left our intimate, close-nit neighborhood, and traded it for big city living. We now have developed more diverse relationships with people who differ from us in a plethora of ways.

As America is an increasingly diverse melting pot of cultures, it is important for teachers to not only be educated in teaching social studies, but also in how to teach a heterogeneous population of students. Carjuzaa & Abercrombie (2008) theorize that “social studies teaching must be transformed to equip every students for participation in the construction of a pluralistic American national identity” (2008, p.12). Unfortunately, this is an area in which current social studies curricula and teacher preparatory programs fail. Although most programs have not fully achieved this goal, many institutions are redesigning their programs in order to better prepare teacher candidates. Hopefully changing the way that educators are prepared will directly affect the outlook and implementation of the curriculum in our k-12 schools. This is an important and necessary step as “the most successful experiences in civic learning depend not only on individual public leadership development but also on change in cultures of the institutions to become more engaging, educating, and energizing” (Bayte, 2003, p.95). There are very serious long-term consequences for our students that directly stem from the experiences that they have in
social studies courses. If educators lack sensitivity and an appreciation for diversity, it tells our students that they are unimportant actors within society.

Does social studies promote civic responsibility?

There is conflicting data on the relationship between social studies and civic engagement. On the one hand social studies is the one constant influence of civics that all active citizens are exposed to; however, on the other hand research suggests that social studies does little to actually engage students. Some theorize that current curriculum may actually undermine rather than promote civic engagement as, for example, “middle school students were rarely encouraged to analyze multiple perspectives on a range of social issues and historical narratives (Camicia & Saavedra, 2009, p. 504). In fact, when referencing their own personal experiences, it was a general consensus that social studies educations are centered upon an idealistic portrayal of U.S. history as seen through the eyes of white, privileged males. According to Bayte (2003), “Those who most need power which is derived from political skills and knowledge are those who are least likely to gain such knowledge and skills” (p.87). This is one of the most popular sentiments expressed as a downfall of the current curriculum.

Many questions arise when reviewing the research on curriculum. However, the most important question, and the question which seems to be central to the debate, is the question Downs (2012) presents on this topic: “Is it the proper business of educational institutions to promote civic engagement above and beyond civic education” (p. 345)? Some theorists believe that schools should only be concerned with providing knowledge on the subject and that action should be left up to the individual. Others believe that promoting engagement goes hand in hand with educating the masses. Pratte (2001) asserts that regardless of the question or position taken, social studies has failed to provide adequate civics education or promote civic responsibility (p.
He further posits that, “civic education presently is precisely the breakdown of the crucial link between the citizen and the community,” (p.306).

The research suggests that although social studies can promote civic responsibility, the current curriculum model does not fully satisfy this objective. Although many researchers and educators agree on this position, there has yet to be a consensus on the most effective model to achieve this goal. Some models believe that the current curriculum must be completely revamped to include a new methodology which places a more diverse curriculum in place. Other models rely on simply adding to the status quo in order to create a more diverse curriculum which not only encompasses a knowledge of domestic civics, but one which incorporates a more global outlook. The one thing that all of the models have in common is the idea that if done correctly, social studies can promote civic responsibility and that civic responsibility is best promoted by engaging students starting at an early age.

What are the best teaching strategies for encouraging civic engagement?

There are several teaching strategies that help to encourage civic engagement. One strategy includes the promotion of a service-based education in civics in an effort to teach students how to get involved. Another strategy for promoting civic engagement is to simply listen to students so that they have a platform for their voices to be heard. Lastly, civics engagement is best taught in an environment where it is not centrally focused within one subject. In order to fully promote and develop civic responsibility, students must be engaged with vast and diverse opportunities. According to Malone (2008),

narrowly focusing civic education on a lone social studies class, confining civic opportunities to a single extracurricular activity, or placing selected students as token representatives on a school board is insufficient to develop civic-minded,
altruistic youth. In other words, youth civic engagement rarely results from an occasional class or activity to which the student feels little personal connection (p. 1).

Requiring students to participate in civic activities encourage their civic participation as adults. Bayte (2003) cites the, “wide emphasis among progressive educators on the close connection between productive civic engagement and civic learning opportunities for young people” (p. 97). By increasing the in-school opportunities for discourse and participation, we can in turn increase the likelihood that students will engage in real world civics. According to Malin (2011), “methods that engage young people in civic-like activity, such as service learning and discussions of political issues, are strong predictors of future civic knowledge, participation, and commitment (p. 113).

One of the best teaching strategies that educators can use is to listen. In listening to our students we allow them the opportunity to express their ideas freely while at the same time fine tuning their problem solving skills. Some methods of achieving this include creative writing, problem solving, and discussions or debates. This provides a platform on which we can encourage our students to voice their opinions. In addition, it allows educators to show students that their voices are important, relevant, and valid.

Civic engagement is best taught through an all-encompassing philosophy. Pratte (2001) presents the best argument, “To develop civic virtue through acceptance and practice of the ethical elements of the curriculum means that all subjects must be taught in such a way as to bring out and make central their moral significance in social, economic, and political life” (p. 307). He explains that in teaching the mathematics of buying a house you should not only compute the costs of buying said house, but also examine the social aspects of the property such
as purchasing a home in a racially skewed neighborhood in an attempt to help racially diversify the community. This gives students the opportunity to see civic engagement at work in more than just social studies, it gives them real world interactions with the curriculum. According to Wade it is important that educators, “provide students with opportunities to use and develop information-processing skills in authentic ways” (as quoted in Camicia & Saavedra, 2009, p. 507).

Summary

A review of the literature suggests that there is debate about whether social studies actually helps or hinders the engagement of students as future citizens. Due to the structure of social studies curriculum, it is often used as simply a historical account rather than an opportunity to influence students to act. Surprisingly, there is debate about whether it is even the responsibility of social studies to encourage students to become civically engaged. I believe that as social studies educators, not only is it our responsibility, it is also our duty to encourage students to become active, engaged citizens of the polity. If we do not encourage our students to engage, there will be no one in the future to effect the change that is needed in our society. Therefore despite its downfalls, I believe that social studies has an indissoluble place in our curriculum as it provides the primary platform for promoting civic engagement. The literature includes both positive and negative perspectives on the current status of social studies and its effect on students.

Unfortunately the main criticism is that the relationship between social studies and civic engagement is weak at best. The research suggests that social studies overall has done a poor job of encouraging students to become engaged, active citizens. Some argue that students simply don’t feel connected to society, have poor self-esteem, or lack efficacy. Others suggest that our
teachers are not receiving the proper training in order to provide students with the tools that are necessary to encourage action. Fortunately, the literature also suggests that all of these reasons can be combatted if dealt with correctly.

On a brighter note, there is hope for current teachers that even without proper training, there are some steps that they can take in order to positively influence their classrooms today. The best thing that we can do for our students is to provide a safe platform for them to learn to voice their opinions on the social issues that affect them. We as teachers have the power to make changes today. We can encourage students by offering them volunteer opportunities, address social causes, join organizations, and take small step actions that promote civic engagement. Teachers have to give students opportunities in the classroom to participate in real life scenarios, such as debates, lobbying, or taking a stand for a cause.
CHAPTER THREE
METHODOLOGY

Research & Design

This chapter presents the methodology used to examine the relationship between social studies and civic engagement and answer the following questions:

- Does the middle school social studies curriculum promote civic engagement?
- What factors influence the civic engagement of middle school students?
- Do middle school students have a notion of civic engagement?
- To what extent are middle school students civically engaged?

Participants

For the purpose of this Master’s Research Project I chose to survey middle school students. Adolescent and young adults are at the beginning of the development of their identity as an adult. They are in the infancy of figuring out who they will be as an adult. Therefore, at their age, most students have not fully developed or come to terms with their identity. For middle school students, this marks the beginning of the final developmental phase of their pre-adulthood lives. In this stage students are just beginning to develop an identity and personal self-concept (Pressley & McCormick, 2007, pp. 144-148). An important milestone for middle school age children is their moral development. At this stage children begin to figure out for themselves the difference between what is right and wrong. Unlike in earlier stages, they are not only being told the difference, they are actually seeing for themselves the consequences of actions. They begin to see and think about how their actions influence other individuals. It is in
this stage that students begin to determine for themselves a sense of morality, which helps them to develop a personal identity. (Pressley & McCormick, 2007, pp. 75-81).

The students who participated in this research project were selected based upon their location in the state of Ohio. As a social studies teacher I am interested in validating the significance of social studies as a discipline and necessary aspect of the elementary and secondary curriculum. I specifically chose this school after learning that the eight grade class undertakes an annual weekend field trip to Washington D.C. to learn about the historical significance of our nation’s capital.

Middle School of Ohio [MSO] is a middle school located in Southeastern Ohio. It is located in a business area of the city. The school is a traditional public school whose students attend school five days a week for approximately ten months out of the year. The school building is nearly evenly divided into a 7th grade and 8th grade classrooms section. Although the school received a designation of “medium-low poverty” by the state’s department of education, it is adequately equipped facility that includes an auditorium, cafeteria, library (with computer lab), gymnasium, and science labs. After serving as a high school the building underwent extensive renovations to serve as a 7-8 middle school. Although it is not brand new, it appears to be a solid structure.

This study took place in six 8th grade social studies classrooms at MSO. Participation was obtained through parental consent. (See Appendix A) Students were given a week to return the parental consent form. Thirty-six parental consent forms returned out of 100 sent home. A total of 24 students completed both the pre and post-questionnaires. Those students who returned the form were then given a questionnaire to complete at the beginning of the class period. In order to compare the responses between the initial and follow up questionnaire,
students were asked to write the name of their favorite artist and the month and day of their birthday at the top of the questionnaire. In order to protect their privacy each student was assigned a pseudonym. According to the 2011-2012 Ohio School Report Card 88.2% of the students of MSO were Caucasian and of non-Hispanic descent, 3.3% were Asian or Pacific Islander, and 4.7% were Multi-Racial. In addition, 38.6% of the students come from economically disadvantaged households. As the questionnaires were completed anonymously, it is impossible to know the demographics of the individual respondents.

Data collection

Data were collected through a student questionnaire, administered during the fall semester and then again during the spring semester of the school year (see Appendix B) The survey consisted of 23 open-ended questions on a range of topics related to civic engagement, civic influences, and civic education. More specifically, questions pertained to the students’ volunteer work, their political knowledge, influences, and aspirations for change. In addition, the questionnaire included questions soliciting the students’ opinions about the need for social change in their community. My primary focus on community centered on neighborhood, city, state, and nation).

Data analysis

To analyze the data I compared the individual responses during each term to the rest of the responses that same term. For example, I compared all responses I received during the Fall term to one another. Next, I compared the individual responses from the Fall term to those of the Spring term. Although the students were given directions to provide responses that were “at least three sentences long with five words per sentence” most responses failed to meet this
criterion. While initially I intended to only use a qualitative method to analyze the data, the actual analysis of the data suggested including a quantitative methodology as well.

In the first stage of analysis I categorized responses as either positive or negative. Positive responses affirmed current civic engagement, whereas negative responses did not. Next I compared each student’s Fall term engagement to his or hers during the Spring term. I coded each student’s civic engagement as: increased, no change, or decreased. In addition, I compared the civic engagement of the total number of students.

In the second stage of analysis I analyzed the responses to individual questions. (see Appendix B for corresponding questions) In order to organize the data I developed five categories of analysis:

1. **Engagement:** Questions 5-12, 15, 18, and 21 is required either a “Yes” or “No” response. “Yes” responses were categorized as positive whereas “No” responses were categorized as negative. These responses helped to determine whether or not the middle school students in this study were actively engaged in their community.

2. **Connections:** Individual responsibility and connection to the community constituted the basis of analysis for the responses to questions 1-4, 14, 16-20 and 22.

3. **Influences:** The response to questions 6, 10-14 and 23 sought to determine who or what influenced the student’s civic engagement.

4. **Curriculum:** Finally, the responses to questions 11-13 and 23 provided data on the relationship between the current social studies course and civic engagement.
CHAPTER FOUR
FINDINGS

This chapter presents the data collected in my field study through the use of student questionnaires. Collectively 36 student participants completed a questionnaire in either the Fall or Spring term. However, only 25 middle school student participants’ responses could be used because they completed questionnaires during both the Fall and Spring terms. The remaining nine student participants completed a questionnaire only during one term and were therefore voided and not included in the data.

The first level of analysis examined whether or not student participants’ level of civic engagement increased, decreased, or remained the same. Analysis of the data without regard to external factors (i.e. parental, social, or curricular influence), student suggests student participants’ level of civic engagement remained the same from Fall to Spring term as their responses were nearly identical. Most student participants 98% (23/25) indicated they were actively involved in either environmental, social, or extracurricular activities because of the personal satisfaction they derived from doing so as well as out of a sense of obligation. In some cases, student participants changed one of the three responses to the ways in which they helped their community; however, in most cases their responses remained the same. For example, during the Fall term one student participant indicated that he/she donated food, picked up litter, and donated clothes, while in the Spring term the same student indicated that he/she donated food, picked up litter, and donated gifts to less fortunate children.

The next level of analysis suggested four different themes amongst the students’ responses: engagement, connections, influences, and curriculum.
Engagement

Are middle school students actively engaged in their community?

Although the student participants felt a connection, they were not actively engaged in their community. (See Appendix B, questions 5-12, 15, 18, and 21.) The students’ civic engagement was more sporadic rather than continuous. They participated in annual school sponsored clothing, monetary, and food drives, and donated gifts during the holidays. Aside from four student participants who reported they were engaged in a religious organization, the students did not routinely participate in any community activities.

Students in this study were actively engaged in their community when prompted by others. Although student participants weren’t influenced by their social studies curriculum to participate in their community, they were sometimes prompted to act in school sponsored drives (clothing, food, and monetary) or volunteering when prompted by parents. The responses indicate that 48% (12/25) of student participants donated or volunteered their time but only minimally. They occasionally volunteered during the holidays or in school sponsored drives. Only 32% (8/25) of the student participants indicated they are active in an organization on an ongoing basis and half (4/25) of these reported that participation as being part of a religious group.

The responses indicated that the students were informed and knowledgeable about political issues but did very little to effect social change. In fact, 100% (25/25) of the student participants responded that they have never attended a school board or city council meeting or volunteered for a political campaign. In addition, only 32% (8/25) of student participants indicated they discuss or access political information on social networks or websites.
Connections

Do middle school students feel a responsibility towards their community and society as a whole?

The middle school students in this study did in fact feel a responsibility towards their community and society as a whole. In order to answer this question I analyzed the data from questions 1-4, 14, 16-20 and 22. (see Appendix B for specific questions.) Not only did the students feel a responsibility towards their community, and acted upon that conviction, they overwhelmingly sought to make a society better.

They acted in order to positively effect change in their community and society as a whole. All students, with one exception, listed at least one way in which they helped their community. A compelling majority of 96% (24/25) indicated that they make some type of donation. Overall 48% of the students volunteered or donated their time for causes, charities, or simply to help someone in need. Furthermore, 8% (2/25) had donated blood, 60% (15/25) had donated food, 24% (6/25) had donated clothes, while 36% (9/25) had made monetary donations to charities and organizations. Many student tried to help the environment: 56% (14/25) had picked up litter, 28% (7/25) recycled, and 16% (4/25) planted trees.

Surprisingly, these students felt connected to politics and social issues. They are knowledgeable about current national events. They were knowledgeable about the platforms of their favorite presidential candidates and made their decisions based upon the candidates’ platforms in terms of social equality, economics, educational reform, future plans, and track records. In fact, only two students indicated that their choice was influenced by their parents rather than the issues.
Influences

Who influences the positive civic engagement of middle school students in their community or society?

In order to answer this question I analyzed the data from questions 6, 10-14 and 23. (See Appendix B for specific questions.) The students were most influenced by the media and least influenced by social studies, with familial influence falling somewhere in between. The relative lack of parental influence and encouragement was surprising.

Social studies had relatively little influence on these students’ civic engagement. Only 16% (4/25) indicated they got their information regarding national politics from their social studies classes. It should be noted, however, one student reported that he received this knowledge from his prior year’s social studies class rather than the current. Although Ohio’s state mandated social studies curriculum does not require civic engagement, these students nonetheless suggested they were positively influenced by their social studies class. The responses affirmed their belief that social studies teaches us to not repeat the mistakes of our past. The students also indicated that everyone in the community should have an equal voice. However, they did not know how to use those voices, suggesting that their social studies class did not encourage civic engagement per sé but rather discouraged anti-civic behavior. As students believe that social studies deters us from making past mistakes, that influence prevents them from engaging in similar actions and recreating such events.

The students were somewhat more influenced by people with whom they interacted on a daily basis such as family and friends, although the statistics are surprisingly low. As middle school student participants are highly influenced by their peers, it is not surprising that some student participants mention that they talk politics with their friends as well as their parents.
Three-fifths 60% (15/25) of the students actually discussed politics with family and friends on an average of four days per week. These students’ parents appeared to have rather little influence as only 52% (13/25) indicated their parents encourage them to be civically engaged.

Overall, the findings suggest that the majority the students in this study were influenced by the media. In total, 80% (20/25) indicated they got information about national politics from various news outlets. More than half of the students (14/25) indicated that they watch such shows as nightly news (9/25), PBS (1/25), the Today show (1/25), CNN (1/25), BBC (2/25), and the O’Reilly Factor (1/25). Others got their information from various news websites. Only about one-third, or 32% (8/25), discussed or accessed political information via social networks or websites. Among these, two students felt reluctant to share their personal views on the World Wide Web.

Curriculum

*Does the middle school social studies curriculum promote civic engagement?*

This question lies at the center of the purpose of my research. As a future social studies educator I am interested in developing a curriculum that not only addresses the Ohio Academic Content Standards but also encourages students to become positive, active, and engaged citizens in their community. The findings in this study suggest that these students’ current middle school curriculum did not promote civic engagement. In order to answer this question I analyzed the date from questions 11-13 and 23. (See Appendix B for specific questions.) Surprisingly, *all* of students responded that their social studies teacher did not encourage them to participate in any community organizations or volunteer for political campaigns and that they got most of their political influences from friends, television, and the Internet.
Their social studies curriculum did not actively encourage participation in any aspect of the community outside of school. However, these students’ social studies teacher, as its advisor, actively encouraged her students to participate in student council. However, the regular curriculum did very little other than “encourage” students to become active in the community. They’re not required to participate in any political campaigns, attend school board meetings or city council. Although the school organized food and clothing drives, the social studies class did nothing to go above and beyond those activities.

Although the social studies curriculum at Middle School of Ohio did not promote civic engagement, it did promote positive action. More than nine out of ten, 92% (23/25) students believed that the purpose of social studies is twofold. First they believed that social studies is tasked with teaching about history. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, they believed that social studies teaches us about our past so that we do not make the same mistakes presently and in the future and helps to guide citizens towards positive action. Only two students (8%) suggested that social studies has the purpose of teaching students about how the political system works and that everyone has the right to have a voice in the community.

All students are adamant that everyone has the potential to effect positive change. However, less than one-fifth, or 16% (4/25) argued that not everyone’s voice is heard. To illustrate Adele declared,

> Every citizen does have the right to be heard by others in the community and government. But I don’t think every citizen would really be heard. People a lot of times don’t really listen to people who are poor or homeless, or don’t have as much as other people.”
Adele’s commentary suggests that social studies has the potential to have a positive impact on developing engaged citizens. Adele’s commentary also suggests that the social studies curriculum falls short when it teaches students that everyone should have a voice, but does not teach them how to fully utilize those voices. However, simultaneously it affirms that social studies has the potential to develop engaged citizens. In summary, while the social studies curriculum taught the students in this study that change is necessary it did not provide them with the tools they need to become fully engaged citizens who act to achieve change.
CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSIONS

This chapter presents conclusions and suggestions for future research. This Master’s Research Project was guided by four key questions to examine the relationship between social studies and civic engagement:

- Does the middle school social studies curriculum promote civic engagement?
- What factors influence the civic engagement of middle school students?
- Do middle school students have a notion of civic engagement?
- To what extent are middle school students civically engaged?

There was not a strong relationship between social studies and civic engagement at [school pseudonym]. Although students in this study believed that social studies teaches them about the past in an effort to not duplicate our mistakes, they did not consider social studies an influence upon decisions about current civic engagement. Surprisingly, students were influenced less by their social studies class than they were by the media and social websites.

Most of the students got their information about current events from watching news programs or surfing the Internet and in turn acted based upon that information. They became involved based upon what they saw happening in the world and within their community. Surprisingly, the data suggested that parents had little influence upon the civic engagement of these students. In fact, a slightly less than half of the students were not encouraged by their parents to volunteer or participate in any organizations.

The data suggested that civic engagement is more or less developed internally rather than through outside influences. Simply put, students acted because they believed in the cause. For
example, one student stated that they provide babysitting services for free because they knew that their neighbor could not afford to pay. Other students discussed making donations, especially during the holidays, in an effort to help the less fortunate. The data also suggested that these students were rather mature and had their own concept of civic engagement.

The middle school students who participate in this study had a high rate of civic engagement despite the lack of influence from the social studies curriculum. Students actively volunteered and made donations to many charities and causes. They were also involved at the grassroots level by picking up litter in their neighborhoods, donating gifts to local families, recycling, and walking or bike riding as an alternate form of transportation.

Teaching strategies for encouraging civic engagement

Several teaching strategies can be implemented in the classroom to enhance students’ civic engagement. These methods include brainstorming, creative writing, debates and discussions, and field work. As adolescent and young adults are beginning to develop their identity as an adult, it is important that educators take advantage of the opportunity to help them to become civically engaged. They are in the infancy of defining who they will be as an adult. Therefore, at their age, most students have not fully developed or come to terms with their identity. For middle school students, this marks the beginning of the final developmental phase of their pre-adulthood lives. In this stage students are just beginning to develop an identity and personal self-concept. This makes this age group a suitable avenue for developing adult citizens who are committed to civic engagement.

Brainstorming strategies will allow students to develop and share creative ideas regarding an issue. It allows the teacher to act as a coach in order to motivate individual learning and participation. Through brainstorming in the classroom, students are able to freely express their
thoughts and ideas in a comfortable, more intimate environment, in order to prepare them to act more comfortably in their civic lives.

Creative writing activities allow students to freely express their ideas and thoughts through writing exercises on a given topic thus encouraging language and literacy development. Creative writing specifically can be used to help students learn how to write proposals for town hall meetings, write letters to their local representatives, and write letters to newspaper editors in order to voice grievances or experiences. In creative writing students are not limited by specific boundaries and therefore provide them with creative freedom.

Debates and discussions not only allow students to speak and verbally present offer information on a given subject or topic but to also to learn about important issues as seen through the eyes of their peers. Debates and discussions allow students to engage one another through town hall meetings, mock trials, political debates, and consortiums. This specifically allows students to prepare for such future engagements. All of these actions lead up to the most important teaching strategy, field work.

Field work includes all actions which allow students to actively get out and interact in the community by, for example, attending town hall meetings, volunteering for political campaigns, and attending political rallies or protests. Engaging students in field work allows them to become familiar with the different arenas of civic engagement. By allowing students the opportunity to practice civic engagement in the classroom at an early age, we encourage them to grow and therefore act more confidently in the real world.
Suggestions for future research

While completing this Master’s Research Project research several challenges emerged in both the methods and the tools used to gather information, which present opportunities for improvement.

The methods used helped to answer my research questions; however, they also suggested opportunities for improvement. In the future a roster of the student pseudonyms should be disseminated by the teacher. This will facilitate tracking each student’s response. Although the survey helped to collect the desired data students were reluctant to provide the requested amount of information or simply answered the question wrong. Including either a glossary or providing examples would help students not only understand more clearly what is being asked of them, but to also give them a better idea of what could be included in their response. Future surveys might also include the more yes/no responses and less open-ended responses. Future research should also include a survey for the teachers in order to gauge to what extent they believe they actively encourage civic engagement. This added step would give researchers a better understanding of a possible a disconnect between students and teachers.
Title of Research: Social Studies and Community Participation

Researcher: Catia Carter

You are being asked permission for your child to participate in research. For you to be able to decide whether you want your child to participate in this project, you should understand what the project is about, as well as the possible risks and benefits in order to make an informed decision. This process is known as informed consent. This form describes the purpose, procedures, possible benefits, and risks. It also explains how your child’s personal information will be used and protected. Once you have read this form and your questions about the study are answered, you will be asked to sign it. This will allow your child’s participation in this study. You should receive a copy of this document to take with you.

Explanation of Study

This study is being done because I would like the opportunity to see whether or not Social Studies helps to encourage students to participate in the community.

If you agree to allow your child participate, please complete the attached signature page and return it to Angela Hall by October 1, 2012.

Your child’s participation in the study will consist of completing (2) questionnaires. They will complete (1) in the fall and (1) in the spring.

Risks and Discomforts

No risks or discomforts are anticipated

Benefits

The benefit of the research will be to help understand how well our Social Studies programs are preparing students to become civically responsible citizens in society. The results will help give Social Studies teachers an idea whether or not we are completing our duties as educators. Personally the study will better help me to evaluate whether traditional methods of teaching Social Studies will be an effective tool of learning in my classroom.

Your child may not benefit, personally by participating in this study.

Confidentiality and Records

Your child’s study information will be kept confidential by keeping your child anonymous. The responses will be tracked by asking students to identify themselves by selecting their
favorite artist followed by the day and month of your child’s birthday (Ex: Angelina Jolie 1029, Picasso 1205, Justin Timberlake 0316, Suzanne Collins 0728). This will only be used to compare the results of the first questionnaire with the results of the second one.

Additionally, while every effort will be made to keep your child’s study-related information confidential, there may be circumstances where this information must be shared with:
* Federal agencies, for example the Office of Human Research Protections, whose responsibility is to protect human subjects in research;
* Representatives of Ohio University (OU), including the Institutional Review Board, a committee that oversees the research at OU;

Contact Information
If you have any questions regarding this study, please contact Catia Carter (Investigator) cc150900@ohiou.edu or Frans Doppen (Advisor) doppen@ohio.edu

If you have any questions regarding your child’s rights as a research participant, please contact Jo Ellen Sherow, Director of Research Compliance, Ohio University, (740)593-0664.

By signing below, you are agreeing that:
- you have read this consent form (or it has been read to you) and have been given the opportunity to ask questions and have them answered
- you have been informed of potential risks to your child and they have been explained to your satisfaction.
- you understand Ohio University has no funds set aside for any injuries your child might receive as a result of participating in this study
- you are 18 years of age or older
- your child’s participation in this research is completely voluntary
- your child may leave the study at any time. If your child decides to stop participating in the study, there will be no penalty to your child and he/she will not lose any benefits to which he/she is otherwise entitled.

Parent Signature __________________________ Date ________

Printed Name __________________________

Child’s Name __________________________

Version Date: [insert 08/31/2012]
APPENDIX B

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT QUESTIONNAIRE

Favorite Artist Month/Day of your Birthday ______________________________________
Ex: Angelina Jolie 1029, Picasso 1205, Justin Timberlake 0316, Suzanne Collins 0728

Directions: Please answer each question as fully as possible to the best of your ability. Each response should be at least 3 sentences long with at least 5 words per sentence.

1. List 3-5 ways in which you have helped to better your community.
2. List 3-5 issues that need to be resolved in your community.
3. Who do you think is responsible for helping to better your community?
4. Why do you think that those individual[s] is/are responsible?
5. Do you belong to any organizations? If so, please list them.
6. Do your parents encourage you to volunteer or participate in community organizations?
7. Have you ever made a donation (money, clothes, food, etc.) to a person, cause, or organization? If so, for what hat organizations or causes have you helped to raise money (hunger, politics, global warming, UNICEF, March of Dimes, etc.)?
8. Have you ever attended a city council meeting? If so, how often?
9. Have you ever attended a school board meeting? If so, how often?
10. Do your parents volunteer in any organizations? If so, please list them.
11. Do your social studies teachers encourage you to participate in any community organizations? If so, please list them.
12. Are you required by your social studies teacher to volunteer for a political campaign this year?
13. Where do you currently get your information about national politics?
14. In a typical week, how many days do you talk about politics with your family or friends?
15. Do you access and discuss politics via social networks or websites?
16. Who are the two candidates in the 2012 Presidential election?
17. If you were able to vote in this year’s election whom would you vote for and why?
18. Did you ever or do you now, work or volunteer for a political campaign? If so, what did/do you do?
19. In what ways have you helped to educate or teach others about problems in your community or the world?
20. In what ways have you helped the environment?
21. Does every citizen have a voice, or the right to be heard by others, in the community and government? If so, why? If not, why not?
22. In what ways do you express your “voice” in your community or government?
23. What do you think is the purpose of taking social studies classes?
REFERENCES


http://www.ode.state.oh.us/GD/Templates/Pages/ODE/ODEDetail.aspx?page=3&TopicRela

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