

Thriving Youth, Flourishing Civil Society

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Civic Engagement as an Educational Goal

THRIVING YOUTH, FLOURISHING CIVIL SOCIETY

HOW POSITIVE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT
STRENGTHENS DEMOCRACY AND SOCIAL
JUSTICE

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How can we give young people the skills needed to thrive, to construct productive lives for themselves, and to contribute to democratic society through gainful employment and successful entrepreneurial activities in a flat world (Friedman 2005)? How can we assure their active and positive citizenship, their civic engagement and their valued civic contributions?

This article addresses these questions, and discusses how positive and healthy child and adolescent development occurs, how such development is, or may be, linked to active citizenship that contributes to civil society, and what some non-governmental organizations have done in an effort to provide such experiences for youth and, in the process, to strengthen communities. Accordingly, our goal is to elucidate how to educate our youth for active citizenship that promotes a flourishing, cohesive, socially just democracy. We will argue that an integrative approach to education, that links systematically across childhood and adolescence connections among families, schools, businesses, government, media, philanthropy, and the institutions of civil society, must be involved in promoting optimally healthy, civically active youth and a cohesive, socially just society. Both theory and research support this argument.

1 Theoretical and empirical foundations

Theory and research suggest that positive youth development (PYD) and, a young person's contributions to social cohesion and democracy, lie in aligning across the first two decades of life the strengths that are present in all young people with the resources for positive, healthy development that are available in their homes, schools, and communities (Lerner 2002). Within contemporary developmental science, mutually influential relations between individuals and the ecological or contextual settings within which they live are represented as individual ↔ context relations (Lerner 2002). When these individual ↔ context relations are also of mutual benefit to all components of the relations, then support is provided for PYD (Lerner 2004).

Five “Cs” – Competence, Confidence, Connection, Character, and Caring – have been used to conceptualize PYD (Lerner, et al. 2005). These five Cs are linked to the positive outcomes of youth development programs reported by Roth and Brooks-Gunn (2003). When a young person manifests the Cs across time a “6th C”, Contribution, emerges. A young person showing PYD will be more likely to contribute to self and to family, community, and civil society in positive, valued ways (Jelicic, et al. 2007).

To inculcate such behaviors among young people, socialization – for example, formal, school-based and out-of-school educational experiences – must integratively promote: (1) an ideological, moral, “spiritual” (or “transcendent”) – or simply identity defining – orientation among youth that good is created through contributions to positive individual ↔ context relations; and (2) a commitment to enhance the institutions of civil society by constructing the ecological “space” for individual citizens to promote in their communities institutions of social justice, equity, and democracy. When young people understand (define) themselves as morally committed to and behaviorally engaged in building civil society, and when they possess a transcendent sense of the value of all life, they are able to be agents both in their own, healthy development and in the positive enhancement of other people and of society (see Lerner 2004).

2 Indicators of youth civic behaviors

Bobek (2005) discussed four interrelated categories of indicators of civic behaviors that are widely agreed to be necessary for individuals to make meaningful contributions to the maintenance and perpetuation of civil society and democracy and, theoretically, for PYD to emerge in relation to these behaviors (i.e., for there to be a PYD \leftrightarrow civic behaviors relation across development).

2.1 Social trust and social capital

Social capital is the “connections among individuals - social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them” (Putnam 2000: 19). Social capital facilitates collective actions in communities and exists in the relationships among people (Coleman 1988). Social capital creates a sense of mutual obligation and of social trust; together social capital and social trust foster norms of reciprocity and of shared responsibility for the greater good (e.g., Jennings and Stoker 2004).

Within the United States, trust and connections to civic and religious groups, family, and friends decreased across the last 30 years. Trust has been found to be higher for females than for males, and higher for Whites and Asians than for Blacks, Multiracial students or Hispanics (Baldi, et al. 2001). Young people are significantly less cynical about the competence of government and political leaders than are older Americans and generations past (Kohut, et al. 2007).

2.2 Civic knowledge and skills

It is necessary to develop civic/political knowledge and skills in order to be prepared to be effective, democratically-oriented citizens who participate politically by undertaking civic actions, such as participating in community meetings, or political actions, voting, or running for office (e.g., Dudley and Gitelson 2002). Older adolescents, those students who have parents with higher educational attainment, and those students who have had discussions of current events at home are more likely to define democracy correctly.

Participating in extracurricular activities at school or in organizations in the community were the main covariates of correctly defining democracy. Participation in a community organization increased the likelihood of a correct definition by 22%, while participating in a school extracurricular activity increased the likelihood of a correct definition by 19% (Flanagan, et al. 2005). In turn, Hart and Atkins (2002) found that urban youth, and particularly poor urban youth, scored significantly worse on measures of civic knowledge than did other young people. Civic knowledge was greater among young people who had affluent, well-educated parents than it was among youth whose parents were poor or lacked education (Hart and Atkins 2002). Kohut, et al. (2007) report that young people today are more interested in staying abreast of politics and national affairs than the previous generation of young people.

In a study administered to a nationally representative sample of about 2,800 U. S. youth, mostly 14-year-olds, in 124 public and private schools (Baldi et al. 2001), high civic achievement scores were related to studying social studies daily or almost-daily. However, students were more likely to possess textbook knowledge, rather than practical civic skills (e.g., knowing how to write an opinion letter or to participate in a debate). Students who participated in civic activities in school or in the community had higher civic achievement scores than students who had never participated in civic activities; but the frequency of participation did not matter (Baldi, et al. 2001).

2.3 Civic attitudes

By engaging young people in meaningful community roles, positive attitudes towards civil society and democracy can be engendered. For example, Yates and Youniss (1996) found that adolescents' work in a soup kitchen promoted young people's sense of moral identity and their ability to reflect politically on societal issues. In turn, Youniss, et al. (1999) note that faith-based, youth-serving programs may provide such civic and political orientations. In addition, Youniss, et al. (1999) found that youth who take part in service activities are likely to "reflect on these justifications as potential meanings for their (own) actions."

Mandatory community service does not appear to change most students' attitudes about the people they serve or about political issues (Hunter and Brisbin 2000). However, students who participate in service activities – either voluntarily or as part of the service-learning course – have been found to be more likely to enjoy participating in public activities, and to report more willingness to listen to others' points of view, to value racial diversity, to believe in the importance of helping others less fortunate, and to believe that working together is more important than working alone (Hunter and Brisbin 2000).

2.4 Civic participation, civic engagement, and civic contribution

There is considerable evidence that young people are engaged in their communities at some level; other evidence indicates that voluntary participation or community engagement varies across groups. Analyses of a sub-sample of youth from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY) indicate that voluntary service is predicted by income, with higher-income youth being more likely to be engaged in their communities (Hart, Atkins, and Ford 1998). In turn, since poverty is more pervasive in minority communities, and due likely to community differences in opportunities available, voluntary engagement was greater among White adolescents (40.2%) than Black (16.9%) or Latino (15%) adolescents (Hart, et al. 1998).

There are also sex differences in civic behaviors. Flanagan, et al. (1998) studied over 5,500 12 to 18 year-olds in three stable (U.S., Sweden, and Australia) and in four transitional democracies (Czech Republic, Hungary, Bulgaria, and Russia). Girls in five of the seven countries were more likely than boys to volunteer, and in all countries girls were more likely to report that their families encouraged an ethic of social responsibility. Moreover, engagement in volunteer work related to civic commitment among boys in the U.S., Sweden, and the Czech Republic., and among the girls in the Czech Republic, Bulgaria, and Russia. Similarly, Theokas and Bloch (2006) report that volunteering is slightly more prevalent in girls (64%) than boys (56%), a sex difference consistent with sex differences in contribution found in the 4-H Study of PYD (e.g., Jellicic, et al. 2007).

Moreover, consistent with the theoretical ideas about bidirectional relations between individual and context involved in the PYD perspective (Lerner 2004), civic engagement and civic contribution are influenced by variables other than those associated with school-based or community-based educational or service programs. For instance, Theokas and Bloch (2006) report that there is covariation between adolescents' volunteerism and several individual variables linked to the Cs of PYD, for instance, doing better in school (Competence), feeling more positive about the self (Confidence), avoidance of risky behaviors, e.g., drug use (Character), and several indicators of the 6th C of Contribution: likelihood of voting, possession of a positive work ethic, and – as adults – likelihood of being socially responsible.

For instance, teenagers from advantaged backgrounds, from two-parent homes, or with parents who are better educated were more likely to be volunteers than were teenagers from other backgrounds. Adolescents with multiple peer and adult role models were more likely to volunteer, e.g., 51% of 12- to 17- year-olds volunteer when they have neither friends nor adults in their lives who volunteer; corresponding rates are 73% for youth who only have friends who volunteer, 81% for youth who have only adults who volunteer, and 96% for youth who have both friends and adults who volunteer. Longitudinal findings reported by Smith (1999) underscore also the important role of family relationships in early adolescence in predicting young adult political and civic behavior. Smith reported that close family connections in early adolescence, as well as participation in out-of-school activities and in religious institutions, positively predicted young adult political and civic involvement.

School assets may be important as well. School climate (a sense of membership and caring within the student body, and the encouragement of democratic decision making by teachers) influences civic commitments (Flanagan, et al. 1998).

2.5 Civic activism and social cohesion

Civic activism may be an instance of civic engagement, one that may be especially linked to civic contribution. Civic activism may involve behaviors such as picketing, distributing pamphlets about a political issue, or communicating, through letters or a blog with or about elected officials or political issues. These behaviors have been promoted as a strategy useful for enhancing social cohesion by enabling youth who, for reasons of race, religion, class, gender, or sexual orientation, may be disenfranchised (or feel alienated) from the social commerce within civil society.

In a meta-analysis of 30 studies linking participation in extracurricular activities and later adult participation, Kirlin (2003) reported that there was a strong correlation between participating in extracurricular activities and later civic and political participation -- including involvement in adult political organizations, voting, and feeling politically enfranchised. These relations were moderated, however, by the type of organization in which the young person participated. Young people who participated in activities that involved engagement in a collective goal were more likely to be politically involved than those young people who participated in more individual activities such as chorus, arts, or sports (Kirlin 2003). Importantly, these associations were found even for the young people who came from lower socioeconomic status families.

These results suggest that the type of activity in which young people participate is more important than mere participation in an activity. Activities that require the skills of cooperation, interaction, and collective decision-making, and which provide opportunities for individuals to have an active voice, may be the most likely to result in civic identity development. Such development diminishes feelings of alienation and marginalization which, in turn, fosters feelings of integration that may facilitate social cohesion (Kirlin 2003). This conclusion is supported by other studies.

A meta-analysis of 60 studies on civic engagement concluded that programs seeking to encourage civic engagement among young people should take a multiple strategy approach to developing civic skills and opportunities, should involve young people in decision-making and evaluation, and should continue these efforts for a long period of time, rather than simply provide one-time opportunities (Zaff and Michelsen 2002). In turn, a study of young people participating either in (1) organizations that seek to support marginalized youth in developing an integrated and connected sense of self, (2) organizations that include opportunities for young people to assert their voice and engage hands-on with issues important to them, or (3) agencies that do not focus specifically on individual or civic identity, found that young people who participated in either of the first two types

of organizations were more likely to experience positive supports and opportunities conducive to the development of their abilities to be contributing members of society (Gambone, et al. 2004). The key differentiation between the first two types of organizations and the third one was the deliberate investment in youth decision-making and in high-quality staff and volunteers who were willing to take the time to guide young people in learning how to navigate the complicated process of collective decision making (Gambone et al. 2004).

3 Building real-world programs that promote PYD and civic contributions

To design effective programs that promote the PYD \leftrightarrow civic engagement link, researchers, practitioners, and founders must do more than demonstrate that a theoretically-predicated program can work. Programs must also be shown to address these issues in manners that are palatable, feasible, durable, sustainable, and affordable in real-world settings (Jensen, Hoagwood, and Trickett 1999). In short, to be brought to go to scale and to be sustained, effective programs must also be cost effective.

3.1 Cost-Benefit Ratios

What is the immediate or long-term cost effectiveness of the integrative programs we are describing? It may be possible to infer cost-benefit ratios by reasoning about the value of outcomes known to be associated with such programs. Such an approach may be reflected in the report by Levine (2006), who notes that there are data consistent with several hypotheses regarding the economic value of programs educating youth for active citizenship. Consistent with the PYD perspective we have presented in this paper, and the integrative approach to civic, life, and employment skills development we have suggested, Levine's key idea is that education for active citizenship enhances civic participation and, in turn, the skills associated with civic participation are skills that are linked as well to economic development.

For instance, Levine (2006) notes that a hypothesis he and colleagues at the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) are exploring is that civic education (including service experiences in school) enhances students' motivations, sense of purpose and attachment to school, initiative, and skills, thereby increasing the odds that students will graduate from both high school and college. He therefore expects that civic education will affect individuals' earnings, occupations, and job satisfaction, among other outcomes. In support of this hypothesis, Levine (2006) describes the results of two forthcoming CIRCLE Working Papers by Dávila and Mora (2007a, 2007b), who use the NELS data set and find that service, when required as part of a class, raises the odds of graduation from both high school and college.

In addition to the hypotheses and data marshaled by Levine (2006) to demonstrate their tenability, there is some limited empirical evidence that programs that are consistent with the integrative approach to the PYD \leftrightarrow civic contribution relation we are discussing are actually cost effective. In a study of 60 prevention and early intervention programs for youth in Washington State, Aos, Lieb, Mayfield, Miller, and Penucci (2004) note that "There is credible evidence that certain well-implemented programs can achieve significantly more benefits than costs. Taxpayers will be better

off if investments are made in these successful research-based programs” (Aos, et al. 2004: 1). In both cases, the measured benefits and costs to youth were positive.

Several cost effective programs were identified by Aos, et al. (2001, 2004). To illustrate, the National Job Corps program in the U.S., which provides employment assistance to disadvantaged youth between the ages of 16 and 24, is an intensive, comprehensive program whose major service components include academic education, vocational training, residential living, health care and health education, counseling, and job placement assistance. The typical average cost per Job Corps participant is about \$6,123. Using the incidence of youth involvement in crime as a means to estimate cost-benefit ratios for this program as well as others they assessed, Aos, et al. (2001) estimate that the National Jobs Corps program has a benefit of \$1.28 for every dollar spent. Mentoring programs were also found by Aos, et al. (2001) to have a favorable cost-benefit ratio in U.S. programs. This type of program links at-risk youth with volunteer adults, who act as positive resources for youth in need of positive role models. Aos, et al. (2001) reported that a typical average cost per mentoring participant is about \$1,054, but have net benefits of \$4,524 per participant, which is equivalent to a benefit of \$5.29 for every dollar spent. Aos, et al. (2001) point also to the Quantum Opportunities Program (QOP), which is designed to serve disadvantaged adolescents by providing education, service, and development activities. QOP also provides financial incentives from ninth grade through high school graduation, given that participants come from families receiving public assistance. Confirming positive cost-benefit findings for this program that were reported by Hahn, et al. (1994), Aos, et al. (2001) estimate a benefit of \$1.87 for every dollar spent.

The evidence regarding cost-benefit ratios is encouraging enough to motivate continued interest in the structural and substantive integrations we have suggested to be vital in PYD ↔ civic contribution programs. There are several excellent international examples of such integrative programs.

3.2 Examples of PYD ↔ Civic Contribution Programs

Some of the programs associated with the International Youth Foundation (IYF) serve as exemplars of the sort of efforts needed to foster PYD ↔ civic contributions. For instance, the “Nokia-IYF Global Youth Development Initiative” is intended to promote the positive development of young adolescents (10 to 13 year-olds) through nurturing 12 key life skills (i.e., communication, conflict resolution, contribution, cooperation, creative thinking, critical thinking, decision making, empathy, managing emotions, respect, responsibility, and self-confidence) within each of 13 countries (Argentina, Brazil, Czech Republic, Hungary, Mexico, Peru, Philippines, Poland, Russia, South Africa, Thailand, Turkey, and U.S.).

As reported by Hahn, Lanspert, and Leavitt (2006), an evaluation of this effort showed that: 95% of young people surveyed in 12 countries said they had experienced an increase in key life skills targeted through the Initiative. Youth cited most frequently cooperation [or the C of Connection], self-confidence [or the C of Confidence], and creative thinking [a component of the C of Competence, in regard to cognitive competence] as showing improvement as a result of their participation in the program. In programs emphasizing youth volunteerism, 72% of youth continued their involvement in volunteer projects after completing the program (and thus there is evidence that the 6th C of contribution is positively affected).

A second exemplary IYF program is “entra 21”, a youth employment program in 18 Latin American and Caribbean countries (Pezzullo 2006). Designed to support both youth (ages 16–29 years) seeking work and employers searching for qualified people for entry-level jobs, entra 21 involves

(1) short-term training that is responsive to labor market needs, (2) a curriculum that includes technical training, life skills, and job-seeking skills, and (3) internships with local employers. Evaluation of the program indicates that young people develop technical and personal competencies (the C of Competence) and social connections (the C of Connection). They are then able to enter the job market with at least decent entry-level jobs. For instance, more than 50% of 21 graduates were employed six months following graduation, most (92%) in the formal sector, with either formal permanent contracts or benefits.

In addition, 9% of the graduates opted to start their own micro-enterprises. Accordingly, it may be that microfinance is an effective strategy in promoting a self-sustaining PYD \leftrightarrow civic contribution relation. In situations where, even with life- and job-skills training, the local context does not possess employment options for youth (i.e., there may not be any jobs available in a given community), support of micro-enterprise initiatives may be a means for engendering a youth-propelled sense of mattering and for fostering a hopeful future among them. In addition, such initiatives could add value to the social fabric of a nation (enhancing the economy, creating jobs), foster a spirit of entrepreneurialism, and create a means by which programs that involve education for active citizenship can not only be self-sustaining but, as well, generate favorable cost-benefit ratios.

4 Next steps

There is evidence for the substantive value and cost effectiveness of the structurally and substantively integrative approach to the design of programs that promote the bidirectional relation between PYD and civic contribution through synthesizing education for active citizenship with life skills and vocational skills and, as well, assuring that all settings of youth development (schools, families, and the community) are partners in promoting these integrations among youth. Despite this evidence, several remaining questions exist:

- What facets of civic behavior should to promote? Should all or only some of the four domains of indicators we have reviewed be of concern? Should other indicators be envisioned and operationalized?
- What indicators of PYD should we seek to promote? Should one, several, or all of the Five Cs be of focus? Should other facets of positive behavior be envisioned and operationalized?
- With what groups of youth (differentiated on the basis of age, race/ethnicity, religion, socioeconomic status, and geographic and national contexts) should we work?
- How do we establish measurement equivalence across groups?

In addition, we still need to ask “If we promote it, does it really matter?” Across nations, political systems, socioeconomic strata, and cultural milieus, does education for active citizenship, or the broader promotion of civic behaviors (participation, engagement, and contribution) through in- and out-of-school institutional experiences, matter (or matter in the same way) for young people?

Furthermore, what are the risks of fostering or of not fostering education for active citizenship? Finally, how then do we act? What constitutes best practice? What educational and policy options should be forwarded? How do we develop the requisite and integrative educational programs that provide youth with skill sets for life-long learning, for employment in a meaningful and rewarding job, or for building productive and wholesome family and civic lives? How do we create partnerships with business, industry, and the media, so that we can scale, sustain, and replicate effective programs and disseminate their value in ways that foster policy innovations?

None of these questions have easy answers. Nevertheless, as stipulated at the beginning of this paper, developing in a timely way satisfactory answers is work on which the future of democracy and peace depend.

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