

**Citizenship Education:
Current Perspectives from Teachers in Three States**

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Introduction

In the minds of many educators, students, and concerned citizens, the nature and purpose of public education in the United States has undergone several prominent shifts in recent years. Given sufficient time and support, some of these events have extended themselves into becoming true reforms of the educational structure – for it is generally agreed that a theory must be embraced and utilized by a critical mass before it is labeled as a systemic reform (Berman, 2000). In addition, recognized reforms in education may assume a variety of styles, each of which leads to a similar result while following different paths and means (Ferrero, 2005). Typically, these reforms are not the product of a spontaneous act, but rather occur over a prolonged period of time and impact.

Yet it is possible, however, for systemic reform to indeed occur as the result of a single watershed act. The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 and the implementation of legislation from the federal *No Child Left Behind Act* (NCLB) are two examples, while strikingly different, of epic events that have transformed multiple institutions in American society, including education, national security, political conversation, and civic participation. The terrorist attacks, while immediately altering our nation's future approach to security, also certainly impacted the curriculum of American public schools; for almost overnight, more attention was given in the curriculum to issues of international relations and homeland security among other related topics. In a like manner, NCLB also presented a sharp turn for many educators, as teachers were asked to embrace increased standardized testing, while state offices of education needed to develop new accountability measures for their schools. Historically, in the wake of such monumental occurrences as these, public schools in America have either attempted to be (or were forced to be) a primary societal change agent; consequently, public schools have often sought to (or were forced to) affix a new identity on themselves – or even a new role in society – in the aftermath of such events.

As a contemporary product of this process, civics education is suddenly finding itself at the forefront of discussion on educational reform. Heretofore considered as merely a peripheral strand of the social

studies, civics – generally defined as the study of local, state, and federal government and the rights and responsibilities of the citizenry – had long been marginalized as a “sub-subject” of little importance, the content of which high school students were required to take for as little as nine weeks, if at all. But in the wake of “9/11,” discourse continues to rise among groups of educators about the need for an enhanced civics curriculum in the schools, and the potential implementation of such programs well before the student reaches the high school level. Curricula that provided for students the different facets of community, government, and other aspects of the public sector are currently being piloted at the early grades in a widespread manner (see Westheimer and Kahne, 2004). Whether or not this is an actual effect of the terrorist attacks is open to debate, but it can certainly be argued that the events of 9/11 served as a catalyst for curriculum change. Within the arena of standards-based education, NCLB has also positioned itself at the center of pedagogical discussions, serving as an “academic foundation for states to follow in establishing their own criteria of effective schooling” (Sanders, 2004). Under NCLB, states have been given unprecedented flexibility to set curriculum standards – and state and local school districts have likewise experienced unprecedented scrutiny for accountability from the federal level. Thus, events such as these have, at the very least, stirred the pot of civic discussion, and have raised the issue of the importance of quality civics education in America’s schools.

However, as has been found by American society (not only throughout the past five years, but over many decades), the idea of effective civics education – or even the existence of a decent citizen, for that matter – involves more than just knowing on Election Day where the local polling place is located. It should, in its rightful form, involve the knowledge of factual history, modern and historical geography (perhaps most ideally working from the local to the global), the United States Constitution and the Bill of Rights, and other information critical to the constructive performance of societal participation. For asSizer (1984) once noted, “High schools exist not merely to subject the pupils to brute training... but to develop their powers of thought, of taste, and of judgment” (p. 4). It has been argued by some that poor citizenship education in American high schools has contributed to not only an uninformed voting population, but an apathetic citizenry in general. The failure of many students to know and act upon their rights and responsibilities has led to categorizing the current generation as apolitical (See Apple, 2002; Ravitch, 2002). In the minds of some scholars, the

educational foundation of this trend dates back into previous decades, for as Ochoa (1991) wrote, “The curricular vision to guiding the preparation of informed and reasoning citizens is absent from most social studies programs as currently practiced” (p. 27).

The purpose of this qualitative exploratory study, therefore, was to investigate the perceived state of civics education as viewed by practicing teachers in three large high schools in the midwestern and southeastern United States, in an effort to discover what teachers in different geographical regions deem as critical to this area of study.

Review of the Literature

To be certain, lively and informed discourse has always been a centerpiece of American culture – particularly related to political participation. In another of their studies on the history of civics education, Westheimer and Kahne (2003) noted that “for more than two centuries, democracy in the United States has been predicated on citizens’ informed engagement in civic and political life” (p. 9). Unfortunately, the portrait painted by the recent performance of American students in this area is uninspiring. For according to Euben (2002), students in the United States aged 18 to 24 came next to last in their knowledge of geography and global affairs in the National Geographic Society survey of more than 3,000 young adults in nine countries. She went on to point out that 83% of young Americans could not point out where Afghanistan was on a world map (as well as 87% not being able to locate Iraq), even in the supposed “heightened awareness” after the attacks of 9/11, which were said to have, in part, originated from Afghanistan. As one of his domestic measures to fight terrorism, President George W. Bush in 2002 promoted a wave of public service initiatives (through organizations such as AmeriCorps) designed to rekindle the love of country. “One of the best ways to counter evil,” President Bush said, “is through the gathering momentum of millions of acts of service and decency and kindness.” It is part of a transformation of knowledge that is seen occurring in the modern American school, whereby the meaning of learning has been shifted to the larger, geo-political, macro-cosmic realm (Alexander, 2004). In this regard, volunteerism has been viewed as one avenue in which young people can assert varying degrees of civic involvement.

Despite these measures, the “trend” in civic ignorance, however, is not newly discovered. For as Galston (2003) states, “As far back as evidence can be found – and virtually without exception – young adults seem to have been less attached to civic life than their parents and grandparents” (p. 29). As he continues, however, he also cites a chasm

that apparently exists between the duty of service – which, as with President Bush’s statement, is commended in modern times – and the *understanding behind the service*. “They [today’s high school students] understand why it matters to feed a hungry person at a soup kitchen; they do not understand why it matters where government sets eligibility levels for food stamps or payment levels for the Earned Income Tax Credit” (p. 30). So while the philanthropic attitude of many young Americans today can be viewed as encouraging, a stronger foundation of understanding must be laid as to the reasons that their public service acts are necessary. In addition, it is noted by Patterson (2004) that “in 1960, 60 percent of the nation’s television households had their sets on and tuned to the October presidential debates. In 2000, less than 30 percent tuned in” (p. 11). Unfortunately, Patterson misses the point that many people in past four decades have turned to other means – especially the Internet – to gather their political information. To complicate matters further, it is suggested by some scholars that mere concentration on civic instruction is, in itself, not sufficient in creating a well-rounded young person in civic involvement. For as Westheimer and Kahne (2004) claim, “Varied priorities – personal responsibility, participatory citizenship, and justice-oriented citizenship – embody significantly different beliefs regarding the capacities and commitments that citizens need for democracy to flourish” (p. 263). These concepts are also supported by Smith (2004), who claims that “despite the growth of education and the spread of the Internet, repeated studies have shown that the public is not any better informed now than it was fifty years ago. The reason is apparently that the number of people who find politics interesting has remained roughly constant over the years” (pp. 17-18). How then, in light of the issue raised by Smith, do we enliven informed interest among students – particularly high school students, who are close to voting age – in civic processes?

One manner was suggested by Broutas (1996), who found that civics education can, if implemented properly, take the form of a Lancasterian mode of instruction. She discusses the high school classrooms of Jim Smith and John Purton in Bangor, Maine. The students in their civics classes were giving the task of teaching voting rights and duties to local first graders. Through the efforts of the high school students, it was discovered that the material they learned in their civics classes were better reinforced when they had an opportunity to teach some of the material – in this case, to the first graders of the community. In the end, the author was astounded with the success of the experiment.

“Although Jim had spoken glowingly about his seniors and outlined what I might expect in terms of student involvement,” Broutas wrote, “I never imagined the scope of this understanding or the commitment and energy these students were prepared to expend.” A current difficulty with the dearth civics *instruction*, however – endangering the Bangor teachers from having their idea come to light, if not for Broutas’ writing – is that even less attention is paid to the *assessment* of civic skills in American students. “We are fortunate if civic knowledge is assessed once a decade,” Galston (2003) claims. Galston’s assertion is nearly exact in its veracity, as per the reports of the National Assessment of Education Progress. According to NAEP (2005), the last national assessment that took place in the subject area of civics occurred in 1998; the next such assessment is due to take place in 2006, and then once again in 2012.

With the comparatively-little and rarely-sampled data that educators possess in the area of civics, therefore, it is critical to view the perceptions of practicing teachers on the subject. The following study attempts to secure a sampling of these views.

Data Collection and Analysis

As stated previously, the purpose of this qualitative exploratory study was to investigate the perceived state of civics education as seen by practicing teachers in three large high schools (each with a student enrollment of at least 2,200) in the midwestern and southeastern United States, with one high school selected by the researcher in each of the states of Illinois, Indiana, and Mississippi. The three schools were purposefully chosen by the researcher for several reasons. The researcher had been personally familiar with each of the schools (while not being employed at any time within any of them, the researcher had worked on previous projects – unrelated to this study, or to the topic of civics education – at each location); all of the schools were within a similar enrollment range, falling between 2,200 and 2,677 students (while the opinions of smaller schools naturally cannot be ignored, larger schools were chosen because of the presence of a critical mass of teachers for potential respondents); and each school maintained a bona fide civics education program, with more than one educator teaching the subject and the requirement that all students complete at least one quarter of civics coursework prior to graduation. Furthermore, while early-childhood, elementary, and middle school teachers are certainly concerned with issues related to civics education, the focus level of this study was the high school level, as most intensive courses in civics are taught at this stage. Surveys (see appendix) were sent to all full-time teachers in every subject area offered at the high

schools, for it was presumed by the researcher that ideas from teachers outside the social studies would be valuable to the larger conversation on civics. On the day that the researcher visited each individual school, the teachers were instructed to anonymously submit their completed surveys into a designated envelope in the main office of the school, and the envelopes were subsequently retrieved in-person by the researcher.

While the answers of teachers at the schools are naturally not meant to represent the entire American teaching population, they nonetheless can suggest what educators in different parts of the country – and those working with similar populations and school environments – perceive as the characteristics of contemporary civics education, and what can be done to improve its quality.

The respondents in the surveys represented a wide range of backgrounds. Strong response to the project was shown, as 113 out of 174 (65%) of the teachers at the Indiana high school participated in the survey, as well as 125 out of 166 (75%) of the Illinois teachers and 87 out of 143 (61%) of the Mississippi teachers. The average experience for teachers at all three schools was 20.6 years, indicating a seasoned faculty that was involved in the responses. In addition, 59% of the teachers responding were female, and 19 % were of an ethnic minority group. On the initial part of the survey, the teachers were asked to respond to three Likert Scale questions regarding their perceptions of civic education, both from their own educational backgrounds and at their current places of employment. The three questions were as follows:

“How well do you feel students *in your community* involve themselves in citizenship issues?” [such as voting, community volunteerism, etc]

“How well do you feel students *in America in general* are involved in citizenship issues?”

“How well do you feel *were you* prepared in citizenship education in your school career?”

The researcher purposefully allowed for great latitude in allowing each individual teacher to determine what constituted “citizenship issues” in his or her own mind, to attempt to achieve a consensus of the data. On the surveys, the teachers were asked to mark the scale from one to ten, with a “1” representing “Not Involved” and “10” denoting “Very Involved” for the first two questions; for the final question, a “1” denoted

“Unprepared” and a “10” equated to “Well Prepared.” The following table displays the results from the teachers in each of the three high schools, with the mean and range of the answers provided.

Question	Indiana High School (n=113)	Illinois High School (n=125)	Mississippi High School (n=87)
#1 – Citizenship among students in your community	5.8 (range of 3-8)	5.9 (range of 3-9)	5.1 (range of 1-8)
#2 – Citizenship among students in the U.S.	4.7 (2-7)	4.7 (2-8)	5.0 (3-7)
#3 – Teacher’s own preparation in citizenship	7.3 (3-10)	6.9 (3-9)	5.3 (2-8)

As shown, the widest variance occurred in the third question, which asked the teachers to reflect upon their own educational background in regard to being prepared in civics. This is seen as a crucial element, as one’s own educational background will certainly impact one’s perspectives and resources from which to draw in the midst of a teaching career, regardless of the grade level and subject area chosen for the profession. It was decided by the researcher to not further disaggregate the responses by gender or race, so as to concentrate solely on the general consensus of the teaching staff for the scope of this study (although these would be sub-topics of inquiry for further study with great potential for instructional implications). Teachers were asked for their total years of teaching experience (in addition to the number of years they have served in their current school) so as to contextualize the data derived from the three questions. Not surprisingly, educators with more years of teaching experience – which can logically be deduced to comprising an older population – felt better prepared in their own educational backgrounds in regard to civics than their less experienced colleagues. However, this sentiment did not necessarily mean “a greater moral virtue in the good ol’ days,” as one veteran educator from Illinois pointed out. “About 80% of students can be counted on,” she claimed. “But it was that way when I was young. About one in five persons could not be trusted.”

President John F. Kennedy made famous the words, “Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country.”

In responding to two open-ended questions on the survey (“In general, what are students lacking in citizenship skills in today’s society?” and “What can American schools or “the home” do to teach students better citizenship?”), several of the teachers surveyed echoed the sentiment promulgated by President Kennedy, as they felt that too many of their students have focused upon that to which they are entitled, rather than the responsibilities to which they are bound. As one teacher from Indiana noted, “They [high school students] are lacking an understanding of what their role as a citizen should be.” One of her colleagues wrote that “we [teachers] need to teach more responsibility and less [*sic*] rights... they [the students] need to learn what they owe society, not dwell on what they think society owes them.” Yet another teacher from Mississippi suggested that parents and schools “hold the students more accountable for their actions. Stop allowing and accepting excuses for poor behavior in the name of preserving self-esteem. Teach them pride in their country, and make personal connections to those who have given so much to this country.” This final comment was particularly interesting to the author, as the state of Mississippi relies on the armed forces as a primary source of employment for many of its residents – especially recent high school graduates.

An intriguing issue raised by the respondents was how the impact of the events of 9/11 have significantly changed the way that both teachers and students view their responsibilities within society. One of the teachers from Illinois offered that “After September 11, 2001, many Americans feel a greater sense of patriotism; however, they lack the basic knowledge of how this country is operated. I don’t believe young people fully appreciate the laws or the three branches of government. Even myself, I lack understanding in these areas.” This concept carried over into the teachers’ suggestions of the roles that parents should play in the civic development of their children. “Ethics should be taught at an early age,” says one of the educators. “If the parents are good, solid people, then their children should be as well.” Another asserts that “parents need to teach old-fashioned morals, ethics, and what it means to be a good citizen. They need to teach accountability. They need to encourage honesty and raise expectations instead of accepting mediocrity.” Still another, “Patriotism needs to be demonstrated in the home, through the example of paying taxes, obeying the law, and saluting the flag.” Or, as another plainly stated, “When the American home abdicates its responsibility in teaching citizenship, in my opinion, the American schools will be stuck with another job to do.” It was evident that proper instruction in citizenship

from the home was the most prominent suggestion coming from the teachers. "It all starts in the home!" one Mississippi teacher exclaimed. "Parents need to be aware of what their children are doing at all times." One of his colleagues agreed. "I think that parents must have a sense of citizenship and community for the child to take as a model."

Another revealing suggestion made by teachers at all three of the high schools (in one format or another) was the proposed integration of a mandatory service learning component into the curriculum. As an example, the following was noted by teachers in the Illinois high school:

Make service learning mandatory!

Give students assignments to complete out in the community.

I think that service learning would be a wonderful way to teach civic skills. Get them involved working with the community toward a goal. They can then see how "working together" toward a common goal can not only be beneficial to the whole community, but also rewarding to the "me!"

Other suggestions made by the teachers for the improvement of civic awareness among students included "teaching ethics in the early grades" (from the Indiana high school), "They [the students] should go back to using 'Mr., Mrs., sir, ma'am, and please'" (IL), and "Ethics should be taught in the schools in the early grades and followed up in high school and college" (MS). One suggestion summarizing much of the sentiment on the part of the educators came from a teacher in Illinois. "Schools need to encourage honesty and raise our expectations, instead of accepting mediocrity."

Conclusions and Future Discussion

In viewing the data, it is apparent that a consensus of the high school teachers from all three locations coincided with the reviewed literature – a concern about the lack of knowledge, attitude, and participation of young people necessary for the future growth of the American representative republic. What, therefore, are some possibilities for solutions to the issues that have been raised?

Patterson (2004) offers the idea of making the presidential Election Day a national holiday, thus allowing people more flexibility with their time to vote, as has also been suggested by the National Commission on Federal Election Reform. It is also theorized that students

do not have enough day-to-day opportunities to not only learn concepts in civic participation, let alone opportunities to practice them. This thought is echoed by one of the Indiana teachers, who asserted that civic knowledge only comes “out of the pocket” when it is needed or convenient, and thus is hard to retrieve. “I do not think that students are taught basic citizenship skills in a consistent manner,” she wrote. “How to fold a flag, how to be at “attention” when saying the Pledge of Allegiance, how to vote, etc. The only time they teach how to vote is when there is an election.” The point is clear – for as with any knowledge that is not regularly practiced, civic knowledge, as well, will be lost. Patterson (2004) continues by contending that “today, the schools must do more to give students a decent civic education and help them register [to vote] so that the first election upon graduation is a step toward lifelong participation” (p. 14).

A suggestion posed by the author is the establishment of partnerships between institutions of higher education and local schools particularly tailored to civics instruction. One example is seen in the Civics Education program offered by the Institute of Politics at Harvard University. This program involves undergraduates from local colleges and universities making ten weekly visits in both the fall and spring semesters to teach civics lessons to middle school students. The fall semester examines the branches of the federal government and the United States Constitution, while the spring term is devoted to the Bill of Rights. Through the Harvard program, many middle schools nationwide have enjoyed an upswing in not only their students’ participation in civic matters, but equally as important, their understanding behind their participation.

For as seen, the geo-political events of the past four years have reminded us of the consequences of uninformed participation in the democratic process. Informed participation by all will make a democracy truly what it purports to be – a cherished possession of the people. For as Thomas Jefferson asserted in 1813, “The people are, in truth, the only legitimate proprietors of the soil and government.”

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Appendix

Survey

Citizenship Education in American High Schools

Thank you for taking time to complete this brief survey. Your anonymous opinions will contribute to a study being conducted on teachers' perspectives on citizenship education and community involvement. Do not put your name on this survey.

Dr. Doug Feldmann, Northern Kentucky University

Your teaching area(s): _____

Your years of teaching experience: _____

How many years have you been at your current school? _____

Are you: Male Female

On a scale of 1-10, please rate the following by circling:

- How well do you feel students in your community involve themselves in citizenship issues? (service activities, etc.)

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Not Involved			Somewhat Involved				Very Involved		

- How well do you feel students in America in general are involved in citizenship issues?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Not Involved			Somewhat Involved				Very Involved		

- How well do you feel were you prepared in citizenship education in your school career?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Unprepared			Somewhat Prepared				Well Prepared		

In general, what are students lacking in citizenship skills in today's society?

What can American schools or "the home" do to teach students better citizenship?

Thank you once again for your responses. Please place your completed survey in the large envelope marked "SURVEYS" in the office, or simply return it to the researcher.

**Teacher Perceptions and Attitudes
About Teaching Statistics in P-12 Education**

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