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From the Classroom to Democracy: Civic Learning and the Student Voice in RUSD

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Abstract

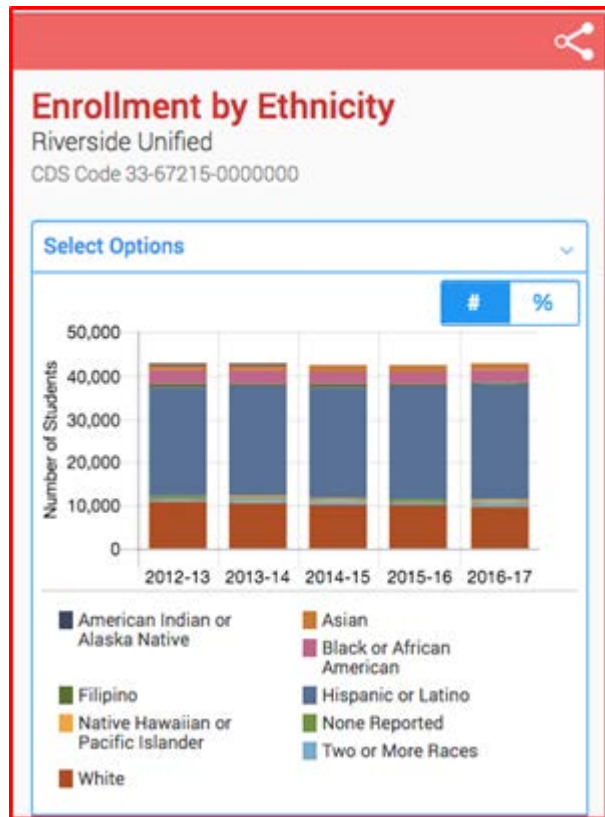
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Figure 1 – Ethnic Diversity in Riverside Unified School District



Credit: Ed-Data.Org

Figure 1: This graph displays the ethnic composition of the student population at Riverside Unified School District (RUSD) as of 2018. According to the graph, Hispanics and Latinos make up the majority of RUSD.

Introduction

Civic education has been incorporated into America's democracy since the nation's inception. Teaching civics to everyday citizens has since been identified as an essential tool for maintaining a healthy democracy; however academic professionals grapple with which techniques and pedagogies are most effective in teaching civics to youth. More specifically, how can public school classrooms serve as spaces to develop our youth's civic identity? And how can academic professionals and educational reformers reframe civic education in a way that motivates youth to engage democratically once they reach adulthood?

There are several factors that strain the provision of civic education reform including effects of low socioeconomic status, lack of resources, and achievement gaps between ethnic groups. For this exploratory study, I facilitated one focus group in a Riverside Unified School District (RUSD) high school to identify the current levels of civic learning garnered from classroom experiences in order to address plausible civic education reform for the district. Additionally, I collected data from RUSD graduates who currently attend UCR to gather a retrospective viewpoint of their civic learning experiences from high school. Lastly, I provide an analysis and discussion for 6 major themes I identified from my data that can contribute to the discussion on local civic education reform.

Literature Review

What is Civic Education and Why Does It Matter?

In the literature, civic education can be defined in several ways. For example, Crittenden and Levine say civic education embodies all of the forces that contribute to how one behaves, formulates beliefs and makes commitments as part of a greater society (2016). For the purposes of this paper, I define civic education as K-12 school-based civic learning that enhances students' civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions (Levine et. al, 2011). The original design of civic education served as a way to preserve American culture. By the 1960s however, civic education became a great tool for American assimilation (Quigley, 1999). Consequently, the mainstream civic agenda tended to influence the civic curriculum in schools. For instance, a dominant historical narrative in schools was established that silenced the colonialism that completely altered Native American and other immigrant history. Thus, traditional conceptions of civic learning can be identified as attempts to “Americanize” the increasingly diverse population of the U.S. Many researchers would agree that political figures and the founding fathers influenced this type of civic learning in hopes of bringing unity through conformity (Quigley, 1999).

Simply put, instead of empowering students with transferable civic knowledge or skills, traditional civic education can instead serve as a way to create “good citizens.” The “good citizen” is typically one who is obedient, patriotic, and knowledgeable of the economy and American history; however, its meaning varies depending on the definitional framework of individual democratic educational programs (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). Regardless of definition, advocates of our democracy tend to agree that the role of schools is a major component to raising up civically engaged citizens in America (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004).

The discrepancy of civic learning experiences that are experienced nationwide has the potential to become more equitable once it is properly defined within K-12 public schools.

The 11th grade and 12th grade civic curriculum covers American history in a way that fosters “good citizens” in a traditional lens. Topics including U.S. government, presidential elections, and the voting processes (Harts & Atkins, 2003) are taught without curriculum on U.S. power structures and inequalities (i.e. race, gender, etc.). Because of this, students may not be thinking critically about the historical accounts that hold dominance in American history. Moreover, this can lead to a greater focus on memorization rather than enriching civic literacy. This can make it difficult for students to relate civic material to their lives as minors in America. Thus, the existence of routinized teaching can fail to empower youth as competent civic agents of democracy. In response, there is substantive research on action-oriented approaches to revitalize civic education in public school classrooms (Galston, 265).

While the issue of the current civic education crisis are multifaceted, I focus in this paper on two major issues: the inadequacies of the civic vision of schools and the hindrances students face when participating in school-based civic learning.

Now Is the Time for Change

The original civic mission of schools is inadequately meeting the needs of modern day democracy, as our youth demographic is diversifying by the day. For example, a critical part of civic education is the study of our nation’s founding documents. Truthfully, documents like the Bill of Rights, the Federalist Papers, and the Declaration of Independence are significant pieces of historical literature and can apply to current political and civic discourse. In the current civic education curriculum however, students are not trained to connect these documents with current events. According to the National Civic Assessment results (National Center for Educational

Statistics, 2011), solely focusing on civic knowledge has proven to be insufficient. Incorporating historical documents in civic learning is significant, however educational reformers are challenging the way in which they are discussed. While the traditional framework for civic learning has the potential to preserve a problematic history as discussed before (i.e. colonial America), it can also be used in the classroom to encourage meaningful civic discourse, social justice and critical thinking.

In the 21st century, the civic competencies of youth are alarmingly low. According to the 2010 National Civic Assessment, nearly 1/3 of students were at or above the proficient level in civics (2010 National Civic Assessment). There is also a significant achievement gap between students of colors and white students. On average, Blacks, Hispanics, and American Indians/Alaska Natives receive lower scores on civic assessments (NAEP, Civics, 2010). The “civic opportunity gap” is illustrated through these statistics, and directly correlates with the overall achievement gaps we see in the education system. The “civic opportunity gap,” however, occurs when there’s a disconnect between the U.S. civic agenda in schools and the lived experiences within civic institutions (Rubin, El-Haj Graham, Clay, 2016). Students of color are more likely to experience the civic opportunity gap due to educational inequity.

Fortunately, digital media is beginning to equalize access to civic information for students of color and white students (e.g. social media, the internet). As a result, the civic mission of schools should be updated and address technology’s new ways of engaging sociopolitical issues. In addition, the digital age is providing new avenues of political engagement for young people. The #Blacklivesmatter movement is a prime example of the ways social media has become a political tool for organizing large demonstrations and service opportunities. Digital media alone will not remedy the systemic inequalities among ethnic groups that contribute to the persistent

civic achievement gaps. However, civic education reform should occur to better prepare students for full participation in our democracy, including participation via new media and digitized forms of democracy.

Civic Education: Take Space, Leave Space

Another insufficiency in contemporary civic education is students' inability to discuss current events in the classroom setting. Traditional civic learning practices alone are hindering the empowerment of students as civic agents (Shanker, 2003). A lack of relevance to the course materials is also known to cause disengagement from students; therefore, a restructuring of civic education is necessary (Woodman, 2017). Many researchers agree that the restructuring of civic education as an appropriate next step to preserving the future of American democracy for our students.

In the scope of ethnic diversity, the lack of space to discuss civic concerns can especially hurt the Latinx student population in California. Latinx students are experiencing a civic achievement gap between other ethnic majority and minority groups. On average, Latinx students are challenged with structural and academic blockades within the education system. This in part is because of the policies that are created without Latinx representation that are known to structurally hinder the academic success of Latinx students (Bedolla, 2012, 23). Furthermore, the civic concerns of these students are systematically excluded from the average K-12 classroom American because their ideals and civic concerns are excluded from the traditional narrative. The current Trump administration is delineating a greater need for safe classroom discussion of current events that relate to students' personal/familial experiences. Schools are seen as the prime location for civic learning because the youth spend majority of their lives in school, and their education serves as preparation for college and career. In doing so,

students will learn how to democratically engage social issues that potentially hinder their academic and personal wellness. Ideologically, conservative curriculum is oftentimes incompatible with civic discussion around controversial topics that affect students of color. This phenomenon will be explored later in my discussion section as it relates to students in Riverside.

Some scholars also identify the lack of cultural context as a root challenge. For example, incorporating immigration policy into historical curriculum could benefit civic learning for Latinx (especially first generation) students. According to Suárez Orozco, 2/3 of Latinx students in school come from immigrant families (Suárez Orozco, 2008). Political socialization of Latinx students is especially important in immigrant communities that are present in California, given the historical context of the state. A greater academic emphasis on community needs, bilingual education, and policy are recorded as push factors that can specifically revitalize civic education for Latinx students (Suárez Orozco, 2008).

On the other hand, some scholars believe that students need to focus more on the civic information that is already integrated into 11th and 12th U.S. curriculum. Eleventh and 12th grade curriculum covers topics like the U.S. government, presidential elections, and the voting processes, yet students in urban areas do not receive sufficient instruction on civic knowledge and skill (Harts & Atkins, 2003). The routinized teaching as aforementioned does not encourage civic qualities like critical thinking, problem solving or collaborative work. This is especially concerning for students who are structurally positioned to be unprepared for political agency and democratic participation.

Bringing the Conversation to RUSD

In order to identify possible solutions for civic education reform in my local context, I first examined the ethnic demographic of Riverside Unified School District (RUSD). RUSD is rich

with ethnic diversity, with 62.1% of its students identifying as “Hispanic or Latino” in 2016-2017 (RUSD, 2018), as displayed in Fig.1, below. Additionally, the award-winning district has a significant English learner population as illustrated in Fig. 2. Through individual interviews and focus groups, I aimed to gain student insight on district-wide civic learning experiences in RUSD. Having interviewed current and former RUSD students, I then hoped to explore the impact of classroom dynamics when participating in a diverse civic learning environment. The goal was to incorporate student voices into this dialogue, in hopes to promote their perspective.

Methods

Participants and Procedure

Through coordination of Dr. Joseph Kahne and Dr. Daniela DiGiacomo of the Civic Engagement Research Group (CERG), I gained access to RUSD and to a high school where administrative staff and students consented to collaborate. This high school has a total minority enrollment of 56%, with 32% of those students being Latinx students (U.S. News 2018). The school represents a diverse student population. Of the three classrooms that were invited to participate in the focus group, eight students consented and were interviewed on April 10, 2018. Additionally, all three UCR students I recruited to interview consented and participated on April 15th and 16th of 2018.

While my sample of RUSD students is small and non-representative of the district as a whole, it does reflect the ethnic diversity shown in Figure 1. The high school students were recruited voluntarily, and were individually offered a \$15 Amazon gift card as an incentive to participate. UCR students volunteered to participate in this study as well, and were individually offered a \$25 Amazon gift card as an incentive to interview. I created an electronic announcement to inform RUSD graduates of UCR about the research opportunity. Three students scheduled a time to meet with me to discuss their classroom-based civic learning experiences from two RUSD high schools. All the high school students were under the age of 18, thus they and their guardians were required to sign a consent form. All of the UCR undergraduates were over 18 years old, and completed their own consent form prior to their interview.

I conducted 1 focus group with four high school students for my study, while Dr. Daniela DiGiacomo conducted a focus group of four other high school students. Each group contained

students from 10th-12th grade, and contained a mix of students from 12th grade government/economics class, 10th grade history class, and 10th and 11th grade English Language Arts classes. A focus group is a designed conversation used to retrieve data on a population typically used to improve a product or service (Patton, 1990). Conducting a focus group was an effective qualitative method for this study because they enabled exploration of the students' points of view with school-based civic education in a collaborative, engaging way. In my study, it was used to simulate a classroom discussion, which also measured the students' capacity to exercise their civic competency via group discussion. In conjunction to the focus groups, individual interviews with RUSD graduates provide retrospective, comparative data that support the exploratory function of the research design. The purpose of the exploratory study design was to sample the level of civic competence that is fostered in RUSD so that CERG and RUSD staff/administration can create informed decisions on how to redesign a civic core curriculum that is both excellent and equitable.

The interview protocol was identical for both interviews and the focus group, and included questions that were structured to measure 2 proven civic practices that were previously mentioned: 1) Classroom Curriculum, 2) Discussion of Current Events and Controversial Issues. I had planned to discuss the extent to which students were involved in extracurricular activities and school government, but the time frame did not permit. To do this, I designed the questions with the intent to reveal how often/to what extent they have experienced these 2 core practices. For example, one question I asked was, "Can you recall a time when you discussed current events in a classroom? Can you tell me about a recent time?" This question was designed to measure the extent to which students are encouraged to engage in civic discourse regarding current events and political topics. Another question was, "If students have any concerns about

the school and the way it is run, are there ways for you to voice your perspective/opinion?” Similarly, this question was created to identify the students’ awareness of their agency as a student of a public-school institution.

The interview protocol also included questions that explored civic components such as democracy, American identity, and politics. One question that addressed these components was: “When you graduate, do you feel as though you will be prepared to engage civically in our society as an adult in America?” By posing a question about “American identity,” I sought to understand how students internalize their civic identity now as students in America in juxtaposition to how they feel it should develop by the time they are 18 years old.

Furthermore, the protocol left space for students to express civic concerns that are pertinent to their intersectional identities. For example, one of my questions asked the students to identify civic topics in which they were interested. In doing so, I collected data on the core issues that are evidently affecting the groups of students, which was dependent upon several factors including identities and classroom involvement. For this study, I focused mostly on classroom ethnic diversity.

Limits

One limit on my study was the small sample size used for data collection limits the study’s ability to represent the entirety of RUSD student perspectives in relation to civic learning in the district. To combat this, I explicitly stated that the purpose of the study was not to be representative in nature, but instead was meant to integrate student voices into the reform process and explore themes of privilege, power, and agency of the students in relation to their civic identity. Also, it was slightly taxing for UC Riverside students to recall their classroom-based civic learning experiences in junior and senior high school. This too has the potential to cause

gaps in data; however, students were asked to draw upon very specific experiences, which helped the participants recall specific memories of teacher facilitation and student engagement.

Findings & Discussion

The most important finding of this study is that teachers play a significant role in students' civic learning experiences. In addition, because the students in this sample discussed their exposure to civic-based learning in their respective RUSD classrooms, this study highlights structural factors that either encourage or discourage student access to equitable civic learning experiences. In what follows, I discuss these and other findings from the study.

First, the data indicated that students primarily engage in civic-based education in a few core classes. In RUSD, students participated in civic learning in history, government and/or English language arts/literature classes. These classes tended to emphasize civic knowledge as opposed to the other civic skills such as civic action and discussing community problems. As discussed in the literature review, students are taught traditional paradigms of citizen duty, yet the traditional 'good citizen' may contradict a good citizen of the modern age (McCabe & Kennedy, 2014).

Furthermore, I found that inequitable civic learning partially exists because of the civic learning gap between specialized courses and college prep courses. For the purpose of this analysis, I define specialized courses as any course that is designed for high achieving students. On average, students that participated in AP classes reported higher levels of civic discourse. In the individual interviews, the UCR students recalled discussing President Obama's reelection regardless of course level; which proved that political season may increase the probability for civic learning. On the other hand, one undergraduate student said, "[My Government Class] wasn't AP - it was a normal government class and legit in that government class we took notes like twice a week and the rest of the time we just [wasted time]."

Additionally, AVID courses such as the Socratic Seminar implement more high impact civic practices. However, all students reported engaging in classroom debates to some degree. Though I do not know to what degree debates are embedded in RUSD's civic curriculum, the structure of the debate seemed to affect the level of student engagement and the internal drive of the students while debating. For instance, some students were assigned a specific stance in a debate instead of debating from an organic standpoint. I found that students were more driven to win the debate for academic achievement instead of educating and persuading their opponents. This brought to question the value of predestined positions in classroom debates. The integrity of civic-learning may be tampered if the internal motivation of the student is to get good grades.

Second, I found that the current students of RUSD do not see the connection between the classroom-based civic learning opportunities and preparation for civic competence and engagement. One high school student said, "How do you apply what you learned in government class to the real world once you've left? I may have crammed and learned the three branches of government and other stuff, but how does that apply to me now?" The same disconnection was echoed through the UCR undergraduates, which suggests both immediate and long-term impact. These findings align with previous research on the inadequacies of traditional civic-learning in the education system. An additional course that came up in my data is the Socratic seminar course, which is instructed by AVID faculty. The Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) Program leads Socratic Seminars to provide students various opportunities to practice and apply critical thinking, reading comprehension, dialogue and collaborative skills (Teaching Toolbox, 2012). This methodology was created with the intention of shaping students to be college ready, which also aligns with the objectives of common core and to effective civic core

curriculum. Out of all the classes that were mentioned, this course seemed to promote the highest impact civic learning opportunities and student engagement.

Third, the teacher's perceived level of interest in civics affected the way students described their current/former civic education experience at RUSD. Teachers who encouraged civic learning were ascribed adjectives such as "sweet," "open," "connected," "passionate"; one was even noted to have a connective energy with the students. These teachers tended to prioritize classroom discussion on current events and political debates, which fostered student engagement and civic awareness. For instance, one student noted that their government teacher would sing "happy birthday" and pass out voter registration to students once they turned 18. This presents an interesting case for studying what teacher methodologies and styles increase student engagement after high school. For this student in particular, they were looking forward to receiving their voter registration form; this echoes the importance of teachers in civic education.

Fourth, I find that students are more likely to express their civic concerns when the classroom is non-threatening. A threatening classroom environment can stem from two social factors: the teacher facilitation and the student relations. For instance, teachers who explicitly discuss their political viewpoints may disrupt the learning environment in way that discourages an open discussion and students engagement. A few students recalled frustrating civic discourse that occurred in their classroom. One said, "Students would disagree, but it was mainly based off of their opinion... they didn't really back it with facts. It was more just like, this is my opinion because of my emotional connection to this topic." Another said that a student wrote hate speech on the board that would offend Middle Eastern students. This is consistent with the empirical research that links a positive and sustained school environment with student success and development (Cohen, Pickeral, McCloskey, 2009). In this case, I find this to be true with student

socialization process in the classroom. This is especially true when we analyze the classroom dynamics that can occur. For example, debates may create a majority- minority dynamic. The majority-minority dynamic can happen when majority of the students in a classroom agree upon a political stance while a minority of students in the class is prone to being seen as deviant. This is especially important as school districts such as RUSD try to foster students' political socialization a safe environment. Outside of political ideology, the intersectionality of students affect the majority-minority dynamic. I find that students who graduated from RUSD were more likely to connect the racial makeup of their schools with their levels of comfortability when engaging in civic discourse. If students found themselves in the racial minority in the classroom, they were less likely to view the classroom as a safe space to engage in discussion of controversial topics, political affairs, or even personal concern.

Fifth, I find that students generally look towards their teachers when they have concerns at their schools, however this is contingent upon their ability to form a trustworthy student-teacher relationship. In my findings, students rarely interacted with their student body in times of concern for a few reasons: the organization only functioned to coordinate school programming and/or the organization was perceived as an exclusive club rather than a means for social change in the school. I find this significant to note because student organizations such as ASB have the framework to change the democratic nature of on-campus student engagement, which can them better prepare its students for civic engagement.

For example, a UCR undergraduate who attended two RUSD high schools expressed positive levels of comfort in the high school with majority Latinx student population. This connects to the argument on whether or not politics should be discussed in high school classrooms. I find that both current and former RUSD students find value in discussing political

matters inside the classroom. For one, students acknowledge the need to develop civic competency in order to engage in society after high school. In contrast, students reportedly feel mildly empowered as civic agents. For example, a few students discussed participating in nationwide peaceful protest that was orchestrated by administration. While they seemed to understand the logistical need for administrative facilitation, they did not feel as though the protest was student-led, and therefore concluded that their civic education was insignificant. The topic of student engagement plays into the notion of comfortability in a classroom.

Sixth, analysis of findings suggests that students feel underprepared to participate in democratic society. One student expressed his concern: “A lot of things have been happening like with foreign affairs and even domestic things going on, and it makes you really think like ‘what is really happening?’” While some students feel as though they understand foundational civic knowledge (i.e. the three branches of government, how a bill is created), most students expect to leave high school without learning enough civic competence to engage in politics and government. One student expressed his concern: “I wish that we talked more about controversial issues and things that are really going to affect our future more than things like ‘what does the author mean in this sentence?’ or ‘what’s their motivation behind this?’” The protocol questions gave both the undergraduates and high school students space to elaborate on why they have acquired this sentiment.

Overall, current and former high school students expressed issues of timing and information management as it related to the current landscape of civic education. In this case, timing refers to the time frame in which civic learning occurs across academic grade levels, while information management refers to the management of information that is either intentionally included or excluded in classroom dialogue or curriculum. Today, students are

usually required one semester-long course on civic education; which is significantly less than the variety of civic development courses taught in American public schools during the 1960s (Kahne & Middaugh, 2008). The decline of such civic courses has been in question, and in my exploratory study, some students connect the decline to the time restriction teachers encounter in the classroom. The mandated curriculum that teachers are tasked to teach was identified as a potential obstacle for high impact civic learning. As one student put it, teachers are often unable to use “precious learning time” to create classroom dialect on political or local matters.

At times, new digital and action-based methods of civic engagement and information retrieval were mentioned in my data as tools used in the classroom to promote civic awareness. The upperclassmen at the high school brought up the digital civic platforms of Facebook and the contemporary phenomena of fake news. However, when these civic tools and other political discussions were mentioned, they tended to be verbally-based rather than project oriented. Some students expressed frustration when discussing a school-structured event that was not action-based: “It’s like the school’s controlling us... They said you have 15 minutes to [be civically involved] and then leave. And to me that’s not really doing any justice.” Additionally, the undergraduates may have felt unprepared for democracy because they were not empowered to engage in democracy in high school.

Conclusion

The civic education reform process is accompanied by philosophical differences in pedagogy, specifically on what high impact civic learning and democratic preparation should look like in schools (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). Regardless, my exploratory study provides a perspective of how a select group of students from a local high school is experiencing civic education today. Their participation in the focus group had dual importance of providing student voice in RUSD's civic core reform process as well as contributing their thoughts on experiencing civic learning in a diverse institution. The UCR undergraduates provided a comparative perspective of how their past civic learning experiences contributed to their current civic engagement and competence as legal adults in democracy.

It is hopeful that students are engaging in classroom discussion because this is progressive in relation to the modern American classroom. However, the discussion-based methodology is only one of many civic learning practices that are deemed effective by civic researchers. I presume the deficit of diverse civic learning practices may be contributing to the students' insecurity with participating in democracy after graduation. This conversation is crucial, and while the scope of my exploratory study was restrictive, it speaks volumes to when civic curriculum is effective, and what civic learning experiences could be added in order to promote civic competence both equitably and effectively. In order to enhance these classroom experiences, it is crucial for educators and administrators alike to be mindful of implementing a civic core that is accessible for a diverse student population. Additionally, classroom-based civic learning should be designed to engage democratic and societal affairs so that students develop greater levels of civic competence that will better prepare them for democracy.

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