

Civic Learning at the Edge: Transformative Stories of Highly Engaged Youth

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Abstract:

Why some young people become highly engaged in the social and political issues of a democracy and others do not is a topic of much speculation and research. This study explored how initiative is nurtured through public service and how challenging civic learning experiences are transformed into sustained civic action.

Through the use of narrative inquiry, this qualitative study explored the lived experiences of a diverse and highly purposeful group of social and politically engaged college students. Forty-four participants, nominated by civic leaders and educators in 20 states, completed questionnaires on their civic engagement experiences. Twenty-two students participated in additional semi-structured interviews.

Several strands of multi-disciplinary literature offered foundational insights into understanding civically engaged youth. The first was the literature on child and adolescent development, particularly Erik Erikson's theory of identity and initiative. Other core contributions included research on initiative by Reed Larson, youth purpose by William Damon, self-efficacy by Albert Bandura, youth moral development by James Youniss and Miranda Yates, and citizenship education by Joel Westheimer and Joseph Kahne.

Results suggest that highly engaged adolescents overcome intellectual, interpersonal, and intrapersonal challenges as a result of civic involvement; benefit from adult scaffolding; and are personally transformed by demanding service experiences. They define their civic identity as a way of life rather than a collection of service activities on a resume. These purposeful youth gradually shift from external to internal motivators, discover value in small successes, and make developmental gains in other life arenas.

The study found that overcoming intrapersonal challenges in real-world service environments that involve face-to-face interactions with people who are suffering were transformative to the development of initiative, purpose, and civic identity. Also important was the role that high school educators and other non-parent adult mentors played in the development of self-efficacy, a characteristic of civically engaged youth.

Nine characteristics of engaged young citizens were identified. While initiative, purpose, moral reasoning, moral development, self-efficacy, critical thinking, self-reflection, ideology, and civic identity have been studied by numerous researchers, this study found a relationship between them that, through further research, may offer a new conceptual understanding of citizenship development.

The three main findings of this study are briefly summarized below:

Finding I: Challenges and Obstacles Engage Cognition and Emotion

This study suggests that the development of civic initiative and purpose are highly influenced by young people's abilities to overcome challenges in their community service and service-learning experiences. It validates the importance of overcoming challenges and obstacles in the real world – outside traditional classrooms.

This research outlines distinctions in the types of challenges found in civic activities and the differing roles played by intellectual, interpersonal, and intrapersonal challenges. Participants related overcoming intellectual challenges to gains in critical thinking, planning, organizing, and problem solving. Interpersonal challenges developed young people's abilities to communicate, collaborate, and motivate others.

This study revealed a deeper understanding of the intrapersonal challenges of civic engagement. Interviewees reported emotional, out-of-comfort-zone challenges as their number one source of motivation and purpose. In fact, all interviewees pointed to specific intrapersonal challenges that transformed their understanding of civic engagement and motivated them from *within* to adopt social or environmental causes. These challenges always invited internal moral-ethical reasoning that produced new meaning and changes of perspective.

Finding II: Adults Scaffold Inner Strengths in Young Citizens

While the term “scaffolding” is most often used in the context of teaching cognitive skills like math and language, this research suggests that adult mentors, parents, and program leaders also scaffold moral development and critical thinking as well as internal strengths like self-efficacy. In turn, these attributes bolster a young person's capacity to successfully engage in civil society.

This research uncovered a clear distinction between civic role models and non-parent adult mentors. Participant stories supplied consistent evidence that one-to-one relationships with adult mentors, most often high school educators, afforded the scaffolding that helped them develop a belief in themselves. And they attributed that belief to the people they had become. While civic role models sometimes doubled as adult mentors, most participants reported that adult mentors did not focus on either their academic or civic activities. Rather, mentors were singularly committed to their growth as individuals.

Findings suggest that mentors provided the scaffolding for the development of self-efficacy by supporting and encouraging, listening, setting high personal expectations, showing interest in youth as individuals, fostering self-decision making, and providing another perspective during problem-solving. Participants considered these mentors friends and often stayed in touch, even as college students.

While many programs and religious institutions played a key role in scaffolding character development, this research found civically-engaged youth mostly attributed moral values to their families of origin. Even when adolescents rejected the values, religion, or political views of parents, they acknowledged the impact of those views on the citizens they became. Parents instilled positive values by exemplifying how to live in moral ways. They also encouraged and supported their children's interests and showed them how to overcome obstacles.

Finally, this research demonstrated that young people learn – and have transformative experiences – even in programs where leaders do not always respond in desired ways. In fact, many of the challenges and obstacles of civic engagement were related to program leadership and structure. Regardless of program structures or leadership styles, participants reported enormous personal growth and development as a product of their participation.

Finding III: Transformative Learning Connects Meaning to Civic Action

Findings expand previous studies through exploration of how meaning is constructed from the intrapersonal challenges of civic engagement and suggest these challenges may be rich contexts for transformative learning. The elements required for transformative learning include a disorienting dilemma that serves as a catalyst for change and critical reflection. The outcome of transformative learning is perspective change. It often involves a deep shift in how people see themselves, their relationships with others and the world, and approaches to peace and social justice.

The young people in this study reported episodes of deep learning following specific disorienting moral dilemmas associated with community service. These dilemmas most often occurred when participants came face-to-face with less privileged populations or other situations that involved human suffering. Participants dealt with these disorienting dilemmas by turning inward to discover more about themselves and their worlds, i.e., through self-reflection. Scaffolded by adult mentors, they found encouragement, support, and acceptance through non-parent relationships that allowed them to openly share thoughts and feelings.

Regardless of religious or political backgrounds, what seemed to be a driving ideology for most participants was a belief in a caring, just, and sustainable society. Some researchers have commented on this ideological shift, predicting that globalism and technological advances of the information age have made this generation of youth more acutely aware of social justice issues around the world and given them additional tools to tackle global problems.

While young people in this study formed engaged civic identities through diverse service experiences, they described the process of identity construction as an unfolding journey of learning, meaning-making, skill development, and personal awareness that occurred over time. Based on recurrent themes in participant's stories, four characteristics appear to characterize civic identity formation: 1) Development over time through the dynamic interplay between service opportunities, morality, and adult scaffolding; 2) The ability to face and gain from intellectual, interpersonal, and intrapersonal challenges, 3) Reflection and meaning-making based on multiple experiences, and 4) Integration of one's activities into a meaningful way of life rather than a collection of service experiences.

Concluding Thoughts

While the problems of civil society are immensely complex and daunting, the young adults in this study inspire hope. It is the task of each generation to take up the burdens of renewing society and to make its own history. Some assert that contemporary youth are not equipped to tackle these burdens, pointing to the overwhelmingly bad press on today's youth culture. The young people in this study, and thousands like them, are making a difference through collective efforts to improve society. Their work often goes unnoticed because they are not troubled youth. Neither are they likely to be star athletes. They are simply committed, motivated, and engaged adolescents who care about the planet and collectively act to make it a more caring, just, and sustainable place to live.

What did these young people have in common? After analyzing hundreds of pages of narrative stories, three interrelated words trickled to the bottom of the huge data funnel: opportunity, morality, and scaffolding. The engaged youth in this study had *opportunity*, chances to serve through programs that expanded the boundaries of their thinking and pushed them to the edges of civic learning. They were young people who paid attention to issues of *morality*, choosing codes of conduct and beliefs that showed respect, caring, and fairness to others. Lastly, they had the benefits of adult *scaffolding*, wise helpers who kept them on track, provided resources, set high expectations, fostered self-decision making, and encouraged them to believe in themselves. Three simple words. One powerful result.

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Full-Text Copy of Study (187 pages):

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