Gauging Pre-Service Teacher Perceptions of Incorporating *Project Citizen* in
School Curricula as a Vehicle for Civic Education

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Abstract

This article considers undergraduate pre-service teachers' perceptions and likelihood of integrating *Project Citizen* into future middle and high school curricula after completing *Project Citizen* as part of a required undergraduate "Programs in Social Education" course. The study further considers pre-service teachers' own sense of their role as citizens in a democracy and examines whether and how these attitudes impact pre-service teachers' desires and expectations of integrating civic education experiences into their social studies curricula. The results suggest that assigning *Project Citizen* to pre-service social studies teachers has limited benefits in impacting pre-service teachers' plans to incorporate civic education in future classes and in how they perceive themselves as citizens in a democracy.

This article focuses on advanced undergraduate pre-service teachers' perceptions and likelihood of integrating *Project Citizen*[1] into future middle and high school curricula after completing *Project Citizen* as part of a required undergraduate "Programs in Social Education" course. *Project Citizen* promotes civic learning through a multifaceted program that teaches students about public policy and citizenship. It includes a service- learning experience that promotes student community involvement in influencing public policy. The study contributes to the civic education literature by examining the perceptions held by an underexamined, yet important, population that plays a critical role in advancing civic education—the middle and high school teacher. The study further considers pre-service teachers' own sense of their role as citizens in a democracy and examines whether and how these attitudes impact pre-service teachers' desires and expectations of integrating civic education and engagement experiences into their social studies curricula. The results of the study will aid scholars and activists in their efforts to identify potential areas of opportunity and risk to advancing civic education.

Why Does Civic Education Matter?

Civic education is the process of learning about the rights and duties of citizenship. In learning about the relationship between the people and their government in a democracy, citizens develop an awareness of their role and opportunities to shape public life through their own actions as individuals and through collective action. The report, "Guardian of Democracy: The Civic Mission of Schools" (2011), published by the Campaign for the Civic Mission of

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[1] *Project Citizen* teaches middle school students how to identify, research, and devise solutions for local problems, as well as how to make realistic plans for gaining their acceptance as public policies (Branson, 1998). It is a multifaceted program that teaches students about public policy and citizenship that includes a service learning component that promotes student community involvement, including influencing public policy. *Project Citizen* was developed by the Center for Civic Education in 1987. The Center for Civic Education represents *Project Citizen* as a middle and high school program that "promotes competent and responsible participation in local and state government…[by helping] participants learn how to monitor and influence public policy. In the process, they develop support for democratic values and principles, tolerance, and feelings of political efficacy" (Center for Civic Education, Project Citizen, "About Us").

Schools, suggests that schools are the best institutions for teaching citizenship knowledge and skills:

> Knowledge of our system of governance and our rights and responsibilities as citizens is not passed along through the gene pool. Each generation of Americans must be taught these basics. Families and parents have a key role to play, yet our schools remain the one universal experience we all have to gain civic knowledge and skills. That is the civic mission of schools (p. 5).

The report's argument that American democracy functions best when its citizenry has strong civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions, and that schools are the best means to achieving this goal, has been reinforced by both activists and scholars (CIRCLE, 2011) who see schools as the way to reverse the long-term trend toward anemic participation in democratic life. because schools connect with the greatest number of citizens in "laboratories of democracy" (Rubin, 2007; See also Dewey, 1938). As noted by Parker (1996),

> …numerous and varied interests are consciously shared…many ties potentially connect members of the school community, faculty and students alike…the interplay among groups—students, teachers, ethnic and racial groups, males and females… potentially is quite vigorous. Public schools are the only public spaces encountered by virtually all children, and this makes them, if not ideal sites and certainly not the only ones, nonetheless promising sites for a genuine civic apprenticeship (pp. 10-11).

Literature Review

Scholars studying civic education focus attention on students' response to civic curricula (CIRCLE, 2003; Hutchens and Eveland, 2009; Levine, Lopez, and Marcelo, 2008; Newmann, Bertocci, and Landsness, 1977), assessment (Niemi and Junn, 1998), the relationship between civic education and political participation (Kahne and Sporte, 2008), co-curricular civic experiences (Billig, Root, and Jesse, 2005), how teachers approach civic education through both curricula and pedagogy (Parker, 2001; Peng, 2000), and, more recently and with less attention, how pre-service teachers respond to civic education curricula as part of their pre-professional training (Weber, 1998). These efforts demonstrate

that students who learn about citizenship using a host of active-learning pedagogies, such as service learning, in-class deliberation and discussion, participation in school governance, and simulated governance experiences organized around substantive, organized, and meaningful content, tend to demonstrate higher content knowledge acquisition compared with students who are taught the content absent such active-learning strategies. Teachers find that student performance and retention is stronger when active civic learning strategies are incorporated into content instruction.

> According to Patrick (2000):
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> …a central facet of civic education should be the joint development of cognitive and participatory skills. Cognitive skills empower citizens to identify, describe, explain, and evaluate information and ideas pertinent to public issues and problems and to make and defend decisions about them. Participatory skills empower citizens to influence public policy decisions and to hold accountable their representatives in government…The development of cognitive and participatory skills requires active learning by students…(pp. 3-4).

Patrick (1998) also argues that "students need to move beyond conceptual understanding to learning experiences that develop participatory skills and civic dispositions for exercising their rights and carrying out the responsibilities and duties of citizenship in a democracy" (p. 2). Patrick identifies three types of participatory skills: interacting, monitoring, and influencing.

Daly, Devlin-Sherer, Burroughs and McCartan (2010) conducted a pilot program involving pre-service teachers implementing *Project Citizen* in their internship field-experiences. Findings suggest that, after the first program year, nearly half the teacher candidates were unable to accurately describe what was meant by "public policy," a focus of *Project Citizen*. Yet the researchers noted that "*Project Citizen* is an appropriate vehicle for addressing a range of civic objectives in secondary education teacher preparation programs because it helps interns in all disciplines understand public policy and the importance of active, informed citizens" (Daly et al., 2010, p. 127).

Research finds that students participating in *Project Citizen* show improvements in their civic literacy and civic development (Daly, et al., 2010).

Wade (1995) noted, "If the true mission of our profession [social studies education] is active citizenship, we must help our students [pre-service social studies teachers] learn the value of engaging in long-term efforts to revitalize our democratic society" (p. 122). According to Wade, social studies teacher educators are uniquely positioned to support pre-service teachers' commitment to foster community involvement in their own classrooms.

Community service learning is a pedagogical best practice that reflects core social education theory. John Dewey, Ralph Tyler, Hilda Taba, John Goodlad, Ernest Boyer, and Ted Sizer (Kinsley, 1992 in Wade, 1995) each speak to the value of civic learning through social education. Since the goal of social education is to develop an active, knowledgeable, and involved citizenry, social studies educators are better able to contribute to the national service learning agenda.

Many social studies educators have promoted citizenship by advancing knowledgeable and active involvement in the social and political life of the community (Wade, 1995). And, some contend that community service learning projects may be exceptionally effective in developing active citizens (Wade, 1995; Rutter & Newmann, 1989). The *Project Citizen* core components that include informed, active and engaged citizenship, and community service learning, reflect the pedagogical best practices and theoretical underpinnings outlined in the civic education literature that makes *Project Citizen* one means by which classrooms become "laboratories for democracy."

Surveys of students completing service learning projects indicate increased self-esteem and self-efficacy, enhanced motivation and interest in high school, and greater academic achievement and social responsibility (Wade, 1995). Similar studies on college student involvement in community service learning reveal positive effects on personal development, career awareness, and self-efficacy regarding one's ability to help solve societal problems (Wade, 1995).

Similar project findings show these implications: students benefit more from direct rather than indirect projects, reasonable goals that are on par with the depth of the project are more helpful, and students will not likely consider projects beyond their own communities. According to Wade (1995), students should be encouraged to reflect on the connections between their service activities, the social studies curriculum, and active citizenship.

Together, the scholarly and activist communities are clear in their push for civic education in K-12 learning environments in both curricular and co-curricular settings such as local communities. Scholars and activists focus on students, teachers and pre-service teachers as their research populations.

Methodology

The study population was composed of 38 undergraduate Social Science Education majors enrolled in the senior level required course "Programs in Social Education" at a large southeastern university. The course required pre-service teachers to complete the middle school *Project Citizen* curriculum in assigned groups outside of class time. The instructor met with each student group once during the semester to check student progress; a project showcase mirroring the *Project Citizen* program outline[2] took place at the last class meeting. In utilizing *Project Citizen* for the study, the instructor did not endorse the program in whole or in part; rather, the program was chosen because of its wide use in middle and high school social studies classrooms. It was reasonable to assume that a large percentage of the study population might be tasked with integrating *Project Citizen*, or a similar program, into their civics, government, or American history curricula in the future.

Examining *Project Citizen*'s impact on pre-service teachers' perceptions of social education involved conducting a mixed-method phenomenological study that began with a 34-question pre-intervention survey administered to the teacher candidates.[3] The survey included two question strands: first, how much time the pre-service teachers believed should be spent teaching specific subjects; and second, to what extent specific quotes relating to democracy aligned with their own views. The survey was conducted in class as part of the students' coursework. After students had completed several weeks of the *Project Citizen* curriculum, researchers conducted focus group interviews with each project group. The questions focused on student perceptions of conducting research on

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[2] *Project Citizen* ends with a project showcase that includes a presentation by each group.

[3] A phenomenological approach was warranted because the study population shared in common that they were pre-service teachers who had experienced the *Project Citizen* curriculum (See Creswell, 2007).

public policy issues, working in their community, the impact of *Project Citizen* on their ability to identify and research public policy issues, and the likelihood that they would assign *Project Citizen* upon becoming social studies teachers.

Near the end of the course, students completed a post-intervention survey incorporating the same topics as the pre-intervention survey to measure what changes, if any, occurred as a result of participating in *Project Citizen*. The survey included open-ended items seeking detailed information on student responses. Finally, students presented their projects to the researchers and their classmates; presentations included a portfolio with work samples and final results.

Data Analysis

Both surveys asked participants to indicate how much classroom time should be spent on teaching 18 distinct topics.[4] Factor analysis was used to identify patterns and themes in the survey results. This analysis technique allowed researchers to group data in order to identify underlying themes among multiple variables that may be related. In survey research, factor analysis allows researchers to create thematically connected constructs that are thematically connected based on responses to several indicators. The researchers utilized this technique to accommodate the study focus requiring that several questions be asked focusing on what might be perceived as similar topics. Factor analysis is typically used when populations exceed 50 cases (de Winter, Dodou & Wieringa, 2009). Still, the researchers decided that the study subject warranted implementing this method because of the *prima facie* similarities among indicators.

The factor analysis results revealed four constructs: social problems, civics, history, and dialogue/debate.[5] After running a paired samples t-test, researchers compared the mean scores from the same pre-intervention questions asked before *Project Citizen* began with the post-intervention questions asked after the students were near completion of *Project Citizen*. Researchers used the same before-and-after data analysis method to analyze questions about the extent

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[4] Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) was used to complete the analysis of the survey responses.

[5] Multiple validation strategies were used to mitigate concerns about bias. See the section on validity that appears after this section.

to which respondents' own views aligned with quotes relating to democracy. The results show six constructs: community participation in a democracy; multiculturalism and diversity; rights and privileges; respect for individualism; social welfare; and human interconnectedness.[6]

Student perceptions of how much time should be spent on various social studies topics showed no significant differences after students participated in *Project Citizen*. Students' expressions as to whether their own views aligned with quotes about democracy exhibited similar results. Still, some items revealed significant findings. For example, "Citizenship education is to teach students about power and how it works. This includes understanding the practice of racism, sexism and class exploitation in everyday life" showed t (34) = -2.630 and p= .013, a significant result.

The researchers then analyzed the focus group interview findings. The results conflicted with survey findings. "Problem solving," "*Project Citizen* in the classroom," and "impact on view of self in the world" were the three core themes that emerged from the focus group interviews.[7] One statement frequently expressed was "one person can make a difference." When combined with the notion that students believed that they were developing an ability to contribute to their communities, it appears that, in at least one regard, completing *Project Citizen* impacted respondents' overall belief in their ability to impact their society. One student mentioned, "Since *Project Citizen* required us to [communicate with our community] I feel as though we learned how to participate in a democracy. It is very important to know that just one person can make a difference." Another student said, "*Project Citizen* has made real the idea of the power of one person to change the world. My civic life in the future will undoubtedly be a reflection of that interconnectedness learned from *Project Citizen*." When asked how *Project Citizen* changed how one views teaching about community participation in a democracy, one student responded, "As the individual sees how the one can influence the many, I believe a greater awareness emerges and with it, love of a community, and sense of belonging. *Project Citizen* has made me aware of this." This finding relates to Wade's (1995) assertion that social studies teacher

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[6] Both lists of items are found in Appendix I.

[7] The complete focus group interview results are found in Appendix II.

educators are uniquely positioned to support pre-service teachers' commitment to foster community involvement in their own classrooms.

"Problem solving" was the second prominent theme emerging from the focus groups although respondents demonstrated conflicting beliefs about the process itself. Some pre-service teachers critiqued using a middle school curriculum with college students. For example, the worksheets included in the *Project Citizen* workbook were viewed as tedious and overly simplistic. One student, whose project dealt with the mistreatment of animals in pet stores, mentioned, "it's so much paperwork which is not that big of a deal, but when it's like five of the same worksheet, with five different sources, all the same question, I feel like it's very tedious." Others, though, expressed more positive positions about the scaffolding provided by the worksheets and the curriculum as a whole. For example, a student whose project addressed texting while driving discussed how the program shaped her understanding of how to affect public policy issues. "I think it definitely helped us, guided us. I would never have known before starting *Project Citizen* who to reach out to. It breaks everything down on a community level. Makes you think about the rankings of who you can get in contact with; who you can approach." Understandably, students had distinct differences in their perceptions of the curriculum itself.

These findings indicate that many factors contributed to students' perceptions of *Project Citizen*. These factors included choice of topic, group dynamics, and how successful students were in garnering information about and support for their projects. Participants enjoying positive experiences appeared more likely to express the positive effects of the project on personal development, career awareness, and their ability to help solve societal problems (see also Wade, 1995).

The third theme emerging from this research focused on using *Project Citizen* in participants' future classrooms. Approximately 75% of the pre-service teacher participants remarked that they would use *Project Citizen*—or at least components of it— in their future classrooms. One student, who worked on a project involving hazing in high school athletics, expressed positive views about using the curriculum in his future career: "I will definitely use the *Project Citizen* project to help my students become more focused on helping the community." Another student remarked that he did not think he would use the program: "The general outline of *Project Citizen* seems pretty sound: discover a problem then

figure out how to fix it. But the paperwork, forms, worksheets, and documentation make the activity extremely boring and they don't help in the slightest. If I were going to teach something similar to this, I definitely would not use the *Project Citizen* workbooks or format." Though some researchers assert that community service-learning projects, such as *Project Citizen*, may be effective in developing active citizens (Wade, 1995; Rutter & Newmann, 1989), individual perceptions and participation with such programs clearly impact how pre-service teachers view their understanding of both civic and social education.

These findings suggest that pre-service teachers' perceptions of *Project Citizen* are positively related to their expressed intentions of incorporating *Project Citizen* in their course curricula in the future and in their self-perceptions of becoming active citizens. Pre-service teachers who found *Project Citizen* to be a positive experience suggest that they were more likely to include *Project Citizen* in future social studies curricula if given the option. These teachers also expressed stronger self-perception of their role as citizens and predicted that they would be more politically active in the future. Similarly, those teachers who did not find *Project Citizen* valuable or worthwhile were far less likely to predict that they themselves would become active participants in their democracy and, given the option, would not integrate *Project Citizen* in their future social studies classes.

Group project outcomes also affected student perceptions of *Project Citizen*. Some groups experienced almost instant results with their projects, while others addressed issues that could not be fully realized in one semester. Those who experienced a greater sense of topic ownership also appeared more engaged and thus developed greater positive perceptions about the program.

Validity

Since the study includes a qualitative analysis, the researchers were cognizant that personal experiences and positionality could threaten the validity of the study. Researchers used multiple validation strategies to mitigate possible inaccuracies or biases. These strategies included triangulation, an approach using multiple methods of data collection to provide corroborating evidence. The researchers also addressed bias concerns by examining their positionality to the study. Positionality occurs when past experiences influence researchers' perception of, and approach to, their study. Finally, researchers addressed

concerns about bias using peer review, a process that includes debriefing with colleagues as the study progresses (see Creswell, 2007). Researchers also assuaged potential ethical concerns about human research participants by adhering to Institutional Review Board requirements.

Conclusion

Exploring the impact of *Project Citizen* on pre-service teachers' understanding and perception of social education and determining if pre-service teachers' perceptions changed as a result of participating in *Project Citizen* constituted the study's purpose. The results reveal contradictions. The survey shows that *Project Citizen* did not significantly affect participants' expectations of the elements they would include in their future classrooms. At the same time, the *Project Citizen* experience affected what pre-service teachers considered worthwhile to include in citizenship education.

For many participants, *Project Citizen* did not give them a greater understanding of citizenship education or public policy. One student said, "[Project Citizen] did not affect how I would teach civics in my future classroom. I found the project really didn't teach me anything about civics, so I will not be able to pass it on to my own students." She provided conflicting information in subsequent responses including: "It did impact my view of community participation…I found that I will teach students that they need to be more aware of what is happening in their community... teaching students to know what's going on will help them to be better citizens," and, "[*Project Citizen*] did impact how I would teach patriotism, as it showed me that to be a patriot is more than flying a flag and saying the Pledge of Allegiance." These conflicting responses indicate that some students may not have grasped the concept of citizenship education in theory, yet they understood, as a result of working through the program and becoming engaged with their community, that there are more ways to teach about citizenship beyond memorizing facts about the government and the electoral process.

The researchers observed that a number of participants did not complete the reading assignments associated with the workbook pages of the program. These students' ability to identify a public policy problem was at times quite challenging, and their understanding of developing an action plan to see their

solution implemented was left wanting in many cases. These students' actions may be explained in that so many participants found the middle school worksheets simplistic and thought that completing the assigned reading was not necessary because they already knew the information found in the middle school workbook. Further, much of the instruction was assigned as independent reading and group work. Future use of *Project Citizen* with pre-service teachers would benefit from a detailed discussion and direct instruction regarding definitions of public policy and how and why to complete each project component.

These results reinforce the value of introducing civic education programs to pre-service teachers. These results are also revealed by those studying the attitudinal impact of *Project Citizen* on middle and high school students. Such programs create opportunities for pre-service teachers to contemplate their professional and civic futures. Future research might involve increased direct instruction with participants so that they enjoy the most benefit from the project. A longitudinal follow-up study with the pre-service teachers once they are fully vetted educators might help ascertain if they followed through with implementing a civic education program such as *Project Citizen*.

Civic education is based on the notion that citizenship works as a critical link between individuals and their democratic political community. Democracy breaks down if the responsibilities and duties that are part of that link go unfulfilled (Patrick, 1998). According to this view, individuals involved in civic education should understand how citizenship itself works in a democracy, what rights and responsibilities it entails, and how they themselves are connected to it. As schools provide meaningful laboratories for teaching about democracy, creating stronger civic education programs through effective pre-service teacher training helps create the needed building blocks for fostering civic effectiveness in the society-at-large.

Appendix I

Pre-Intervention and Post-Intervention Survey

Use of Class Time Items (Response options: Every day or almost every day, A few times per week, A few times a month, A few times a semester, Rarely or never):

The U.S. Constitution
American History
World History
Current events
Federal or state government
Local government
The rights of citizens in a democracy
The responsibilities of citizens in a democracy
Elections and the voting process
How to analyze political issues
Controversial political issues and alternative perspectives on those issues
Assessment of community needs
The definition of public policy
How to debate an issue
How citizens can create social change
The need to respect different opinions

Core democratic values or principles
Social problems (e.g. poverty)

Goals of citizenship education in a democracy Items (Response options: Strongly agree, Agree, Neither agree nor disagree, disagree, strongly disagree):

"Democracy cannot work without a knowledgeable electorate. Thus, schools should teach students the founding principles or democracy, such as individual liberty and majority rule."
"Schools should stress that democracy is more than a type of government, it is a way of living together. The more people participate in shared interests and the more numerous their contacts with others, the more democratic their society."
"In a democratic society, education must be compatible with the culture of the student. We need a multitude of styles of education for a multicultural society."
"A major goal of citizenship education in a democracy should be to teach students to ask questions about their society to avoid tacitly endorsing and supporting the status quo."
"A priority for citizenship education is to teach students to understand their rights and privileges in a democracy and to respect the rights and privileges of others."
"Schools should teach that good democratic citizenship goes beyond obeying the law. It means consideration for social welfare rather than regard for selfish interests."
"Citizenship education should teach students to be critically-minded participants in democratic processes and to closely monitor the

performance of their elected representatives."
"Citizenship education should teach that oppressed groups deserve rights and representation based on their group's unique needs."
"A priority of citizenship education is to make students aware of their civil and political rights as citizens."
"Citizenship education is to teach students about power and how it works. This includes understanding the practice of racism, sexism and class exploitation in everyday life."
"Not every group in the country shares the same values. Cultural groups should have the right to transmit their values about citizenship to their children through the schools."
"Citizenship education should help students realize that each citizen is free to enjoy whatever status, privilege and power s/he is capable of winning for him/herself 'out of the general striving'."
"Citizenship education should teach that good citizenship means far more than accepting one's duties in a society. Good citizens must think critically about authority and distance themselves from traditional ways of doing things."
"Citizenship education should teach active participation in the community in order to help students learn a sense of responsibility and obligation to others."
"Citizenship education should teach that good citizenship is a continuous process- that what citizens do between elections is just as important as what they do during elections."
"This is a multicultural nation, and therefore, knowledge in our schools should reflect the experience and goals of all groups in our society."

Adapted from Root and Northup (2007)

Appendix II

Focus Group Interview Results

Theme	Codes	Frequency
Problem Solving	*Hard to find information.*	4
	Narrow Scope.	1
	Learning the Process of influencing public policy.	13
	Knowing where to find information on issues.	6
	Community support.	1
Project Citizen in the Classroom	*Use in future classroom.*	13
	Made social studies more interesting.	1
	Opinion of value of project dependent on outcome.	1
	Tediousness of Project Citizen	5
Impact on View of Self in World	*One person can make a difference.*	6
	Ability to Contribute.	5
	Attitudes about future civic involvement.	6
	Ownership in the outcome.	1
	Volunteering.	4
	Inspiration from other groups' success.	2
	Reflective thinking.	3
	Increased awareness.	2

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