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Spatial citizenship education: Civic teachers' instructional priorities and approaches



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ABSTRACT

This qualitative case study draws on interview and focus group data from six Civics teachers. As global education scholars assert, local, national, and global “levels of citizenship” do not occur in a vacuum, instead, each level is invariably connected to one another. Teachers in this study, however, placed different priorities on the levels – prioritizing the national, minimizing the local, and marginalizing the global. Participants also used different teaching strategies in order to teach the different levels: emphasizing knowledge acquisition and values transmission at the national level and more active civic behaviors at the local level.

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Introduction

The dramatic rise in global interactions and communication amongst people, organizations, and businesses has significant implications for the human race (Heinlein, 2007). While it is important to consider both the advantages and the serious limitations and challenges that accompany an ever increasing global landscape (Stiglitz, 2002), the consequences and pace of globalization necessitate that schools prepare citizens to understand and to be able to navigate these forces. However, this proves challenging since schools in the United States are known for their preoccupation with domestic affairs (Butts, 1969; Rapoport, 2010).

As Americans come to understand globalization, there is increasing concern that schools are not adequately preparing students for the challenges of a changing world (Boix-Mansilla & Jackson, 2011; Darling-Hammond, 2010; Merryfield, 2002; Reimers, 2006). According to The National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS, 2002), social studies is the field most associated with preparing active and responsible citizens with civic knowledge, skills, and attitudes. Through a strong and meaningful civics curriculum, NCSS (2012) asserts students are prepared to deal with “the world-wide political interdependence that is altering traditional boundaries between domestic and international politics” (Why are global education and international education important? section, para. 5).

Social studies researchers have maintained that teachers should help youth develop a global perspective and be able to understand local-to-global connections (Cogan & Grossman, 2009; Gaudelli, 2002, 2003; Merryfield, 2002). Other scholars (Friedman & Friedman, 2008) suggested that the increasing interconnectivity known as globalization is an expanded “arena of interaction among localities” (p. 4). Thus, globalization does not supplant the local or the national, but rather connects

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localities and nations to a greater degree. Considering this context, citizens should increasingly be prepared to engage in multiple levels of citizenship – locally, nationally, and globally.

The local and national levels of citizenship are often closest and most immediately concerning to the lives of citizens (Sembor, 1993). These levels are most visible to citizens (e.g., levying taxes, issuing licenses, direct governmental policies) in a democracy, and they are the most accessible for systematic democratic behaviors (e.g., popular elections, petitioning government). Perhaps in part to higher rates of visibility and accessibility, traditional citizenship education in the U.S. has almost exclusively prioritized the national level of citizenship education (Boyer, 1990; Quigley & Bahmueller, 1991; Robelen, 2011). This tradition of schooling has fostered strong civic affiliation with local governing structures and the nation at large. This type of “local-centric” citizenship education has its roots in Thomas Jefferson’s notions of public education for producing civic leaders of local wards and other units of local government. Jefferson ascribed to the notion that democracy, enacted locally, preserves a free and democratic nation (Koch, 1957).

While it is true that local and national levels of citizenship most visibly impact the livelihoods of citizens, we contest that an increasingly global age demands citizenship education that prepares students to engage and see the connection between the local, national, and global levels (Bloomfield, 2003; Grossman, 2001; Kubow, Grossman, & Ninomiya, 2000; Shin, 2013). Coupling global level citizenship education with local and national level citizenship education has the potential to prepare citizens to recognize the interconnectedness of the world’s people through their environmental, economic, political, and social actions (Kirkwood-Tucker, 2003). In particular, we ascribe to Brownlie’s (2001) notion that:

Global citizenship is more than learning about seemingly complex ‘global issues’ such as sustainable development, conflict and international trade – important as these are. It is also about the global dimension to local issues, which are present in all our lives, localities, and communities (p. 2).

In this qualitative, multiple instrumental case study (Creswell, 2008), we draw on interview and focus group data from six high school Civics teachers in North Carolina to report teachers’ perceptions of spatial citizenship by exploring how teachers prioritized and taught spatial citizenship at three different levels. We define spatial citizenship as the capacity to see oneself as a member of several overlapping communities (Grossman, 2002). For the purposes of this study, the overlapping communities are the local, national, and global levels. Although we draw largely on the work of global education scholars in this manuscript, our focus in this study is not exclusively global citizenship education, but spatial citizenship education that includes local, national, and global dimensions. We found that teachers placed drastically different priorities and employed distinct teaching strategies when teaching for local, national, and global citizenship. We also highlight the factors that contributed to teachers’ decisions to prioritize certain levels of spatial citizenship over others. The guiding question for this study is as follows:

- How do Civics teachers prioritize and teach levels of spatial citizenship?

Context of the study

Study participants taught a 10th grade course entitled *Civics and Economics* along with at least one other history course. Civics and Economics is a required course for all students in the state in which the study was nested, North Carolina (NC). At the time of data collection, Civics and Economics was one of five courses that have a required End of Course test (EOC) that counts for 25% of each student’s final course grade.¹ The NC Civics and Economics course is structured to spend one-half of class time on U.S. government and political systems and one-half of class time on the U.S. economic system. This study focuses exclusively on the Civics portion of the Civics and Economics course. As such, the course will henceforth be referred to as “Civics.”

Literature review and theoretical framework

This literature review draws on scholarship related to levels of citizenship and the structural challenges to teaching citizenship across levels. This study is grounded in Law and Ng’s (2009) theoretical model of multileveled citizenship education.

Levels of citizenship

Citizenship is a highly contested and complex concept. Citizenship scholar Skklar once quipped, “There is no notion more central in politics than citizenship, and none more variable in history, or contested in theory” (1991, p. 1). Despite the conceptual challenge of operationalizing citizenship, social studies teachers are expected to teach citizenship (NCSS, 1994) resulting in two foundational challenges: operationalizing citizenship and determining the bounds of citizenship. In the space that follows, we attempt to delimit citizenship into levels of participation for the purposes of this study.

¹ This test has recently been removed from the course. The course has also been moved from a 10th grade requirement to a 12th grade requirement.

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