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The Importance of Civic and Social Engagement in Minority Communities

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Introduction

As communities and schools become more ethnically and culturally diverse, participation in civic and social engagements by members of the community becomes more important. Participation in such activities provides the support needed to strengthen communities that have been around for generations and grow those communities that are just developing. Moreover, civic and social engagement undergirds the foundations of schools in those communities by providing resources to further support student academic success. The purpose of schools is to prepare our students to interact and function in an ever-shrinking world. Support pillars to help prepare students to participate in a diverse society, and become critical thinkers and advocates for social change are community residents who share their world experiences with students. This idea is perhaps most important for minority communities as some are faced with a myriad of issues that stagnate the growth and prosperity of schools and communities. It begins, however, with creating and cultivating a sense of trust among all stakeholders. It is critically important that there is a commitment to community engagement through civic organization partnerships, volunteering, or participation in the political process to enact change. Civic and social engagement through community activities strengthen society by: 1) addressing social justice issues in both the community and schools, 2) providing a voice for people in the community to challenge inequities, and 3) investing in our schools to ensure future advancement. This is perhaps keenly evident when examining the recent water crisis in Flint, Michigan.

In Flint, where the majority of the residents are African American and low income, the crisis began over two years ago when the state-appointed emergency manager, in efforts to save money, decided to draw water from the Flint River, rather than continue piping clean drinking water from Detroit. This resulted in a variety of health issues for Flint residents, including lead poisoning for some children that affected their ability to learn. While residents complained, city officials assured them that the water was safe to use. Their concerns were dismissed (Simmons, 2016), although General Motors said that parts in the local engine factory were being corroded by the city's water in October 2014 (Kolowich, 2016). Many residents had to resort to (and continue to do so) using bottled water to bathe, cook, and clean, while some others could and still do travel outside of the city to homes of friends and other family members to take care of basic needs. It was not until September 2015 that researchers announced that the city's water supply and samples of blood at the local pediatric hospital contained lead (Kolowich, 2016). Finally at this juncture, no longer could residents' concerns and complaints be dismissed. It is now an environmental injustice

(Simmons, 2016) situation where so many people were let down, and unfortunately, the crisis continues. It is these kinds of crises and social justice issues that should continue to encourage us to participate in civic and social engagement activities.

Community members who participate in social and civic engagement send positive and encouraging messages to schools and students. Their participation in activities highlights the importance of taking care of their community and building trusting relationships between members. Strengthening schools through collaborative partnerships are the backbone of thriving communities and keeps us all connected within the global community. Globalization expands the "scope and magnitude of human contact with subsequent escalation of interaction and interdependence" (Cushner, McClelland, & Safford, 2012, p. 208). Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to explore aspects of civic and social engagement and their importance in minority communities.

Defining civic and social engagement

While there are several definitions of civic and social engagement that can be discussed, for the purpose of this piece, the definition of both terms is offered by McBride (2003), who posits that civic engagement focuses on activities and actions of two components, social and political. Keeter, Zukin, Andolina, and Jenkins (2002) further explain that civic engagement encompasses 3 different areas—civic activities, electoral activities, and having a political voice. Moreover, Lenzi et al. (2014) simply defines civic engagement as being involved in community life. However, Nath (2012) offers a more detailed definition with the assertion that:

> social engagement is characterized by behaviors such
> as acting as a member of, volunteering for, and donating
> various types of resources to an individual, group,
> association, or organization, as well as acts of care for
> neighbors that do not occur through an organization
> or as a result of friendship; political engagement refers
> to behaviors that influence legislative, electoral,
> or judicial processes and public decision-making. (p. 1)

Additionally, civic engagement is addressing issues concerning the public, both as an individual or as a collective group. Grillo, Teixeira, and Wilson (2010) offer that it is also "a product of social trust" (p. 453). It is through social trust that community members embrace a common goal to work together to bring about change or to address a pressing issue that affects the community as a whole. To that end, civic and social engagement activities can be in many forms such as individual volunteerism, and

organizational or political involvement (American Psychological Association, 2016). The focus of engagement activities may be on issues political in nature, social injustices that affect groups of people, or community improvement; thus, stronger communities are cultivated.

Regardless of how civic and social engagement is defined, it is important to note that they support a sense of public responsibility. In that regard, active participation in activities reinforces schools and communities by providing care and development of others who would otherwise be left out of the dynamics of human experiences. Public responsibility supports the human experience and highlights the breadth and depth of our need to preserve communities; so much so, that we exercise our right to vote, participate in rallies, join organizations that we are passionate about, and donate our time to volunteer activities and service learning projects.

Factors affecting civic and social engagement participation
Participation in civic and social engagement activities is different for various cultural and ethnic groups than their white counterparts. For some individuals a commitment to participate in civic and social engagement activities require a certain level of trust. Furthermore, involvement in community life is based on reciprocal relationships (Lenzi et al., 2014). McBride, Sherraden, and Pritzker (2006) state that most studies find that those who are gainfully employed, have an advanced education, and own a home are more likely to participate in civic engagement through political organizations and participate in social engagement through volunteerism, association and group memberships. However, this is not to say that those from low income neighborhoods or those of ethnically and culturally diverse backgrounds do not contribute to their communities through civic and social engagements. According to Zani and Barrett (2012), "research on participation by ethnic minority and migrant groups is relatively recent, but has revealed that such populations are no less active than majority groups, although the forms of participation may be different because they are focused more on issues relating to their status as minorities" (p. 276).

There are some factors that contribute to a lack of participation in activities. However, these factors are not necessarily based on a lack of concern for the community, but rather on the aspects of the human condition. Research studies have indicated specific reasons why individuals participate in civic and social engagements activities, and have also outlined some of the characteristics of these community members. For instance, Flanagan and Levine (as cited in Nath, 2013) reveal:

inequalities in political participation among young
Americans are rooted in the differing education

and political involvement of their parents. The
parents of high socioeconomic status pass on to
their children such advantages as political awareness,
access to community and educational resources, and,
ultimately, the child's own educational attainment. (p. 7)

In the African American and Latino communities, civic and social engagement is depended upon economics and social capital (McBride et al., 2006; Nath, 2012; Zani & Barrett, 2012). A study by Segura, Pachon, and Woods (2001), found that "residential mobility and lower real income adversely affect social capital formation in Latino communities" (p. 92); thus, Latino participation in civic engagement and political participation were affected. In addition, Bird (as cited in Mayan, Turner, Ortiz, & Moffatt, 2013), found that language barriers, poverty, and a lack of understanding of the political process also prevent underrepresented minorities from participating civic and social engagement activities. Keidan (2008) offered that involving Latino community members in public decision making within communities can be challenging because of language literacy, bias and prejudices that exist in public agencies, and a sense of fear and lack of trust of the government. Hence, the level of commitment to and concern about community engagement activities cannot be assigned to one or two categories or narrowly defined. We must view civic and social engagement through a variety of lens as they relate to individuals.

While we may have a sense of civic mindfulness, some may not have the wherewithal to actually participate in those activities that are needed to bring about change. Limited participation in civic and social activities in minority communities are based on other factors as well. Such factors include, not enough time to devote to activities because of family and work commitments, limited information and awareness of engagement opportunities, and low socioeconomic status and low educational levels (Flanagan, & Levine, 2010; Grillo et al., 2010; Segura et al., 2001). These factors have their roots in the social capital of the community. Therefore, a discussion of social capital and its impact on civic and social engagement participation is offered below.

Social capital
Segura et al. (2001) best describe social capital by using the conceptualization of James Coleman. Segura et al. (2001) state that "social capital is defined as an inherent aspect of any social interaction that provides the foundation by which some future social interaction is initiated"

(p. 85). In light of this description of social capital, it is evident of how it plays a role in civic engagement. Thus, it is can be said that social capital can be an attribute by which members of the community identify with others in the community, and their role in being responsible to and for the positive development of community resources. It is important to note that civic engagement and social capital are not synonymous. Grillo et al. (2010) explain that:

> civic engagement is a manifestation of social capital, while social capital itself is the disposition to create and maintain social networks. From this perspective, civic engagement is an observable result of social capital. Therefore, communities that have greater social capital also have greater civic engagement. (p. 452)

Given this statement, a relationship between social capital and economics is highlighted. Polson (2015) offers that social capital provides those attributes of human character that allows individuals to participate in civic engagement. Cox-Petersen (2011) further adds that social capital is illustrated in a community by diverse interactions and relationships cultivated through the participation in activities such as volunteerism, service and community activities. Moreover, it is social capital that defines our stewardship (a call to be responsible for the welfare of the world). Stewardship includes individuals or groups working together to build and sustain peace throughout all communities (Cox-Petersen, 2011). Whether one wants to acknowledge it, we are all called to be good stewards of the Earth, and it begins within our own communities. Additionally, it is through active participation in our communities that encourages civic engagement as it is the supporting network for thriving communities. Collective participation in civic and social engagement activities impact communities in a number of ways. Such activities support communities in schools, promote a collective voice that addresses social justice issues, and sustain community development.

Communities in schools and globalization
Studies have shown that civic and social engagements benefit schools. Communities in schools seek to enhance schools' missions to not only educate students, but to help them become critical thinkers who will work with others to address social justice issues. A strong partnership between members of the community, who actively participate in civic and social engagement activities, and schools provide the framework in which students learn to interact with others and function in the world at home, at school, and in the community (Taylor & Whittaker, 2009). Creating

community in schools is requisite for ensuring that students are educated from a global perspective. In doing so, students are able to understand their own condition in the community and in the world to make better judgements or assessments of other cultures and the human condition (Cushner et al., 2012).

A global perspective goes beyond access to and communication through the internet. It is important for stakeholders to understand how a global perspective prepares our students to be contributing members of society and citizens of the world. Teaching from a global perspective emphasizes different ideas that ultimately encapsulate the characteristics of social and civic engagement. According to Cushner et al. (2012), in summary, a global perspective emphasizes these five ideas: 1) the influence of "transnational, cross-cultural, and multicultural and multiethnic interaction" (p. 211) on people with regards to the human experience, 2) the work we do to purchase the things we need and the communication across cultures within and outside of our communities, 3) multiple team players in the world that includes individuals, corporations, and nongovernmental organizations, 4) the interdependence of humans within the global environment, and 5) local and international civic participation is vitally important.

Teaching from a global perspective focuses on the study of various cultural aspects of different nations and civilizations. It is through this perspective that students learn how to navigate through issues of our own pluralistic society. Students also gain an understanding and awareness of how world cultures and societies are interconnected. Moreover, a global perspective support students in their endeavor to become critical thinkers and action oriented change agents.

Student involvement in civic and social engagement

While it is vitally important for adult members of communities, particularly minority communities, to be engaged in activities to support their neighborhoods, it is just as important for young people to be involved. Students should be contributing to the growth and development of their schools and communities through civic and social engagement. Educators, community leaders, parents and stakeholders must help students in any endeavor in which they take action as community members.

Students as community leaders build stronger schools by disrupting the idea that young people are not investing in their future. Minority students are constantly placed at a disadvantage in the school environment. Some issues these students face include the inequities presented by the achievement gap between Hispanic and African American students and

White students (Nieto & Bode, 2012), a disproportionate number of African American males in special education courses (Banks & Banks, 2013), and the higher number of students of color suspended or expelled from schools more so than their White counterparts (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). While the U.S. has made strides in addressing these and many other inequities in schools for underrepresented minorities, more work is needed. For example, during the 2011 – 2012 school year, the United States experienced the highest high school graduation rate at 80%; however, African American students graduated at a rate of 68% and Hispanic students at 76% (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015); thus, what can be done at the community level to help improve graduation rates and possibly address other school inequities? One possible way to get students involved in civic and social engagement is through the use of service learning in the classroom. By doing so, involvement disrupts those negative critical experiences that result in limited student achievement for underrepresented minority students. Taylor and Whittaker (2009) state that school-family-community partnerships ensure that every child has an opportunity to grow because of the relationship dynamics created through these partnerships.

While there are a myriad of words and phrases that define service learning, one particular definition captures the essence of the goals of service learning. According to the National Service Learning Clearinghouse (n.d.), "Service-learning combines service objectives with learning objectives with the intent that the activity changes both the recipient and the provider of the service. This is accomplished by combining service tasks with structured opportunities that link the task to self-reflection, self-discovery, and the acquisition and comprehension of values, skills, and knowledge content" (p. 1). In short, service learning seeks to transform both the student and the community. Ideally, service learning promotes active learning, fosters a sense of caring for others in the community, and extends learning beyond the doors of the school (Fiske, 2002). Ultimately, this is what we want our students to do—contribute to their school and community in a positive way. Cox-Petersen (2011) offers that service learning is a dualistic relationship whereby through the learning process, "students contribute and provide a service to the community while the community in turn provides a service to students and schools" (p. 147).

Unfortunately, civic opportunity gap or "civic knowledge gap" (Shiller, 2013, p. 69) for adolescents exists in those communities that need young people to be involved. Young people feel connected to society by experiencing a sense of belonging. Active participation in community service and volunteerism, in essence, provides that validation that some of

them seek. Studies on adolescent civic engagement reveal that in lower income communities, schools in these areas tend to offer fewer civic learning activities (Chan, Ou, & Reynolds, 2014). Other studies find similar results in that limited participation of students in civic and social engagement activities has more to do with social class disparities (Flanagan, & Levine, 2010). Schools with more affluent or privileged students, tend to offer more opportunities for students to engage in civic activities whether it is through school clubs or through partnerships with community organizations or local businesses. Getting students to participate in civic activities or community service projects in disadvantaged communities can be challenging. According to Flanagan and Levine (2010), many community service activities take place in the context of community-based youth organizations that rely heavily on adult volunteers of the community to lead these activities, however, for some low-income communities there is a high ratio of children to adults. Hence, there are not enough adults to carry out or support these programs.

In conclusion, to encourage more young people to get involved in their communities, we should: 1) inspire other adults to visibly engage in service activities, 2) connect young people with adults with similar interests (e.g. create mentoring relationships), 3) invite youth to join community groups, and 4) include the youth in efforts to address problems that affect the community. Student participation in civic and social engagement increases the social trust of adolescents thereby strengthening the social connections and relationships between them and the community. Youth involvement in civic and social engagement allows them to work with others with shared goals to build a stronger community that enriches society.

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