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Listening and Learning About Civic Education from the Community

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Abstract

Building on the argument that effective civic, character, or social-emotional education programs need to be embedded within a community's values [1], this paper will give an example as to how community based listening tours can be used to facilitate this process. It will summarize how these listening tours gave voice to community beliefs about the why and the how of effective civic education.

Keywords: *Civic education, Community, Equity*

Introduction

From the United States to Myanmar, we see significant evidence that there are important and sometimes conflicting conversations about how we should be a civic community. Building on the argument that effective civic, character, or social-emotional education programs need to be embedded within a community's values [1], this paper will give an example as to how community based listening tours can be used to facilitate this process. It will summarize how these listening tours gave voice to community beliefs about the why and the how of effective civic education.

For those who see that the purpose of an educational system is to prepare children to find a meaningful and productive place in their society, there is a growing consensus that a high-quality education is more than the acquisition of competence in numeracy or literacy [3]. K-12 education needs to focus on whole child development, which includes the development of a child's character, social and emotional competence, and the knowledge and skills needed to be an engaged citizen [4]. To systematically achieve this outcome will require the development of shared community expectation [1]. This paper will share the results of an effort to engage community members into identifying what they wanted from a civic education curriculum that was centered in equity.

With the support of the Hewlett Foundation, two civic education non-profit organizations, iCivics [5] and Generation Citizen [6], collaborated to bring together a coalition of individuals and organizations across the United States who were interested in increasing their understanding of the relationship between equity and civic education and exploring strategies to further promote that relationship [2].

The working definition of equity for this project focused on the intentional creation of learning and organizational environments that not only explicitly recognize the historic marginalization of lower-



income communities, students of color, and rural communities, but also ensures the culturally relevant preparation of those communities and students for lifelong civic participation.

Method

To develop a community based understanding of what a civic education grounded in equity could look like, the Equity in Civics Project [2] held six listening tours across the United States to ensure substantive geographic diversity among the participants. A listening tour is a place-based series of community convenings designed to engage directly impacted stakeholders in defining a collective problem and proposing specific, scalable solutions for redressing the identified issue. The challenge facing the civic education ecosystem is one of figuring out how to best prioritize equity in K-12 schools. For the Equity in Civics Project, the primary stakeholders were those who most directly impacted by democracy education — students, parents, and teachers. Those stakeholders are not the only audience of import, but they are a crucial constituency to engage in order to construct a bottom-up viewpoint of civic education. The following protocol was followed in each location.

A host organization was identified in each location. Its role included a) coordinating all of the logistics, b) securing diverse participation in the listening tour session with at least 25 attendees including K-12 teachers, parents, students, out-of-school civic education providers, in-school civic education providers and other community or civic leaders interested in this issue, and c) preparing a written summary of the listening session. Each host organization recorded the sessions and then performed a thematic analysis of the conversation, which were then reported in summary form.

Results

These listening tours found that effective civic education programs should a) elevate student voice, b) engage parents in program development and implementation, c) engage community-based youth serving agencies in program development and implementation, d) include communities that have a prior interest or exposure to equity in K-12 civic education, e) demonstrate a commitment to centering the lived experience of students in the programming, f) have a school district-level commitment to civic education (staff, resources, stated mission, etc.), and g) have state-level commitment to civic education (education department policy, state standards and curricular frameworks, relevant civics legislation, etc) [2]. One core takeaway from these listening tours are that successful educational programming is no longer a function of just a great teacher, principal, or program. It is a function of the system working together to create opportunities for our children to thrive. Another is that a lived civic education program can serve to bring communities together around student learning and agency.

Discussion

In addition to articulating community expectations and concerns about the whys and hows of a high quality civic education curriculum that is centered on equity, this project demonstrates the importance of systematically seeking community voices to deepen our understanding of what is needed and facilitate engagement in the development and implementation of such a curriculum. In one of the listening tours, the experience of engaging in the conversation left parents and community based organizations excited to work with teachers and students to create and implement effective civic education programs. This project has implications for school districts, community based organizations, and funders of research and policy projects.

Most important is to systematically engage community involvement early and often. Among the organizations that are engaged in the development and implementation of civic education programs there is a tremendous amount of expertise about curriculum that can motivate youth to become civically engaged. By involving parents, students, and community based organizations in the planning process from the beginning, one can anticipate sustained community commitment to the changes in the curriculum. The primary hypothesis that led to the development of these listening tours is that community understanding of the relationship between equity and civic education would support the implementation of such programs received initial support from these findings.



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