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Citizenship Education in Elementary Schools that Serve New Immigrants

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Currently about 20 percent of U.S. school children have at least one immigrant parent.[1] Across the country, urban, suburban, and rural schools alike are facing increasingly diverse student bodies.[2] This demographic change certainly shapes nationwide discourse on "citizenship" and, in turn, citizenship education. This article explores new avenues for elementary schools facing these realities, providing examples of innovative approaches and projects that encourage the practice of citizenship for all students. We will demonstrate how the schools highlighted below use the power of diversity, community, and student action to ensure learning about democratic participation, the democratic path, and the meaning of "e pluribus unum."

To recruit new families to SLLIS, instructors run "demonstration lessons" at area pre-schools while parents observe. Here, four- and five-year old prospective students Olivia, Locke, Iris, and Nicole learn about body parts in Spanish at a St. Louis-area pre-school, Casa de Niños.

Beyond a Participatory Approach

Across the United States, elementary schools have taught civics and considered what makes us all "American" in a variety of ways. Some schools practice citizenship by encouraging students to participate in school-wide democracy.[3] For example, in schools that follow the "Just Community" approach (inspired by educational philosopher John Dewey), even very young children reflect on the fairness of school rules.[4] They serve on decision-making bodies and have the opportunity to change their schools via a democratic process. There is a focus in the classroom on cooperation and taking responsibility for oneself and others. By taking part in such basic elements of democracy from a young age, students do not only read about civics, they actively participate and learn what it means to be an "American citizen."

There are always questions, however, about who gets to take part in such activities, and how new groups—such as immigrants—are perceived and woven into their school (and larger) communities. A number of social studies educators have argued that we need to build on this participatory approach, and perhaps even re-define what we mean by "citizenship." They argue that it is important to ensure that children (1) learn about the historical struggle for all citizens to participate fully in U.S. society, and (2) have opportunities to act on democratic principles beyond the school grounds.[5] Suggestions from educator Walter Parker, for example, include recognizing the links between "participation" (actions of direct democracy as suggested above), "path," and "diversity."[6] Briefly, students should experience and understand that democracy is about taking a particular political path: this opportunity is what connects us as fellow citizens. Moreover, democracy is a process, not an accomplishment. All citizens, in all of our diversity, must struggle to continually improve upon what was initiated at our nation's founding, so that people of all genders, races, religions, and backgrounds can truly participate. These ideas of participation, path, and diversity are also

reflected in discussions of "global citizenship," in which citizenship encompasses an understanding that the world—not just the nation—is interdependent and pluralistic. Citizens, then, should analyze problems from local, national, and global perspectives, and they should work to effect positive change.[7]

Given these perspectives, what should citizenship education look like in the 21st century? The schools highlighted here work at practicing citizenship by following these key ideas: (1) civic education should build upon the strengths and resources that all diverse students, including immigrants, bring to school; (2) schools should offer civic paths to all, in part by ensuring that families and communities are included in the schooling process; and (3) educators and students should do research and take action within their local communities (not just within schools) to actively participate in and learn about democracy.

Designing for the Practice of Citizenship

Two curricular programs build on the strengths of new immigrant communities to practice citizenship: newcomer schools[8] and language immersion schools.[9] Newcomer schools serve immigrants (often refugees) who arrive in the United States with limited to no English skills, low literacy in their own language, and little experience with formal schooling. Newcomer pupils are usually adolescents. In contrast, language immersion programs often start at the elementary level.[10] Language immersion programs, which provide content instruction in languages other than English, sometimes serve students from monolingual, English-speaking homes, but other programs have 50 percent English-language dominant students and 50 percent students who are immigrants or English Language Learners (ELLs). The main goals of language immersion schools are to graduate students who (1) are proficient in a target language as well as English; (2) have increased cultural awareness; and (3) achieve high academic success.[11]

This article highlights two innovative programs: the International Community School (ICS) in DeKalb County, Georgia, and a new network of schools in Missouri, the St. Louis Language Immersion Schools (SLLIS). Both programs use the International Baccalaureate Primary Years Programme (IBPYP), which aims to develop students' sense of community, identity, and cultural awareness in children's elementary years. IBPYP enhances children's capacities and opportunities to practice citizenship in their own communities through hands-on, inquiry, action projects. (See Sidebar on this page).

As a newcomer school, ICS is notable because it enrolls refugee, immigrant, and local U.S.-born students, integrating them across many lines of difference. Likewise, even though SLLIS is constructing French and Spanish immersion schools primarily for monolingual English speakers, school leaders expect that about 10 percent of the student body will be immigrants from native Spanish- and French-speaking countries. Each school reflects the changing U.S. student body, opening many avenues for discussions about diversity and democracy.

International Baccalaureate Elementary Charter Schools Launched

The International Community School (ICS), a charter school located in DeKalb County, Georgia, was "strategically designed to bring together refugee, immigrant and native-born children in an academically challenging and nurturing environment." It serves some 417 students in grades K-6 and is in its seventh year as a school. ICS was authorized as an International Baccalaureate World School in February 2008. Read more at www.intcomschool.org.

In 2009, St. Louis Language Immersion Schools Inc. (SLLIS) opened the first two schools in its network: French and Spanish language immersion elementary charter schools in the City of St. Louis. Each school has begun enrollment with kindergarten and first grade students and will grow to fifth grade. The SLLIS network plans to eventually run middle schools and a secondary school. All SLLIS schools would implement the International Baccalaureate curricular frameworks in addition to local and national achievement measures. Read more at www.sllis.org.

Diversity as Strength

"We really want the diversity of our school to represent the diversity of St. Louis: geographic, ethnic, socioeconomic, linguistic, and country-of-origin diversity."

—Rhonda J. Broussard, Executive Director, SLLIS [12]

In schools that serve newcomers, an important theme is that diversity is a strength. Both SLLIS and ICS believe that a student body diverse in culture, socio-economics, ethnicity, language, nation of origin, and immigrant status can fortify a school community and students' citizenship education. Specifically, the designers of these schools believe that integrating children and families across various lines of difference will enhance students' opportunities to understand our society and to be active citizens. Such diversity allows many opportunities for recognizing the different groups in our midst and for discussing how groups have walked the "political pathway" to full participation. As stated in the charter of SLLIS: "We recruit and retain students, educators and advocates who represent the diversity of the region. We are diverse and we are committed to exploring our differences. Despite our differences, we are similar in our desire to create a world in which we are all equally respected."

Unlike many Newcomer Schools, ICS deliberately maintains a 50/50 balance of immigrants to native-born citizens in its student body. Refugees and immigrants comprise more than 15 percent of the population of DeKalb County, Georgia, which has one of the highest proportions of refugees in the southeast.[13] ICS believes that such planned integration will help language and citizenship development. As in immersion schools, newcomers who speak other languages and native-born English speakers gain from each other's language models. In addition, ICS students benefit from the cultural and social experiences of

classmates who come from 35 countries, speaking 40 languages among them.

SLLIS educators also seek out immigrant communities as rich sources of cultural knowledge and language expertise by recruiting from Head Start Centers, other preschools, clinics, and churches that primarily serve immigrant families. The fraction of foreign-born in St. Louis and surrounding area hovers around 6 percent, so SLLIS must reach out to community organizations where diverse families congregate, striving to meet with families "on their turf."

In addition, SLLIS believes that language immersion schools shift the balance of power in a classroom toward speakers of the target language. Rather than being immersed in an unfamiliar language (English) in kindergarten, SLLIS students from Spanish- and French-speaking homes experience their school day in the language most comfortable to them: their heritage language. Here students have the opportunity and ability to be active citizens. They are listened to and understood. With the power of language, they can initiate changes in their social environment, and this experience gives them confidence.

Schools as Communities

"To educate, build community."

—Laurent Ditmann, Principal, ICS[14]

The administrators and teachers at ICS and SLLIS believe that schools should embrace their larger communities. Both schools make it a priority to integrate not only students, but also families and other community members into the schooling process. Family involvement in developing political paths beyond the school is a key part of school operations. When students witness local organizations and family members making positive changes for their school, they are seeing citizenship in action. Like the recognition that one's voice counts, such visible enactment of citizenship is powerful.

To serve students and families, ICS makes a variety of social services available through partnerships with community organizations. For example, the school works closely with the local food bank and farmers' markets to help families who are in need. Churches, social centers, businesses, health care providers, and counselors play an active role in school life. In addition, parents and caregivers take part in regular "Strategic Planning Parent Forums" and compose a weekly newsletter. As Principal Ditmann has stated, education at his school is a community-focused endeavor: ICS will mobilize when necessary to let all students know that "we have their backs."

Similarly, SLLIS has assembled a host of community resources in support of their families, and they have worked hard at parent participation. The assistant head of school is responsible for coordinating and encouraging a range of activities: cultural celebrations and other events for families and school officials to interact outside of classroom hours; courses in English, Spanish, and French for family members who want to strengthen their own language and cultural skills; job training, citizenship courses, and other adult-education programs; and a host of parent task forces that assist with such items as hosting college interns from abroad, cafeteria meal options, and acquiring school uniforms.

It can be challenging, however, to faithfully and fully integrate everyone within a school community. Families with varying immigrant status, socio-economic situations, or cultural practices may have different ways of becoming engaged in school life, or they may have different beliefs about what is proper engagement. Thus, SLLIS works with families to provide opportunities to those who might be less able or inclined to participate in traditional ways. For example, educators and parents together plan to host events throughout the community at times and places where families congregate, such as the local church on Sunday afternoons. In addition, they ask each family what they want to share with the school community. For example, an immigrant mother might choose to teach Spanish to English speaking parents.

Student Action

Both ICS and SLLIS follow the International Baccalaureate Primary Years Programme (IBPYP), a curricular framework used in 2,576 schools in 134 countries (**www.ibo.org**). The program is designed for children ages 3-12 and focuses on the whole child, encompassing social, physical, emotional and cultural needs in addition to academic development. IBPYP draws on best practices from a number of countries and international schools. Using its program helps to meet the core values of SLLIS and ICS.

Like other IBPYP schools, older elementary students at SLLIS and ICS participate in "Exhibition," a multi-year project that requires student research, writing, and community action. The project encompasses "learning about what it means to act," giving students a chance to "come into the world."[15] Starting in kindergarten, students learn about a variety of world and local issues. Then, in the upper elementary grades, students work gradually on their Exhibition, doing extensive research about a public issue and drawing from the curriculum as well as other sources. They also work with an expert community mentor of their choice. In the fifth grade (usually) students exhibit their completed work before a panel of teachers, parents, and classmates, explaining their efforts and describing an action that might improve conditions or resolve their chosen issue. SLLIS Executive Director Rhonda Broussard describes what she enjoys most about Exhibition:

> Exhibition really provides this opportunity for collaboration with community mentors . . . We help students identify people outside of our school building who can be their mentors in the process. For instance, in a project about water usage, this could be someone at a water treatment plant or it could be someone who's working at an energy conservation nonprofit in town. It could be someone who has just returned from a study abroad program, where her role was to help carry water back from the wells. And so one of the

ways that we help students grow in this Exhibition process is we connect them to different community sources. Their understanding of their question—the need that they want to address in their action—is linked to whatever people are doing in their daily lives.

The culmination of this project requires students to think about what they can do to positively affect their communities, which is a key component of practicing citizenship. Students are assessed on their understanding of concepts, acquisition of knowledge, mastery of skills, and choice of social action. Research demonstrates that this kind of "real-life" work not only enhances children's understanding of citizenship, but also increases their later political involvement as teens and adults.[16]

Conclusion

With parents, educators, students, and community organizations working together, citizenship can be more than a term that children hear about in their classrooms; it can be something that they actively practice, both at school and in the larger community. Schools that use the power of diversity, community involvement, and student action can develop 21st-century citizens. This goal resonates with what social studies scholars, policymakers, and state standards all suggest. For example, *Developing Citizenship Competencies from Kindergarten through Grade 12* provides a list of how schools foster civic engagement.[17] Among other suggestions, the authors state that effective citizenship education, starting from a young age, should give students opportunities to:

- Join other students and adults to address a community need
- Learn about the root causes of community problems and assess opportunities to solve them
- Demonstrate a willingness to spend time in bettering their communities
- Link experience in their families and communities with school-based civic education

Citizenship education, then, calls on each of us to employ student and community strengths, perhaps especially those revealed by the immigrants and newcomers in our classrooms. Thus, the challenge for elementary educators is to embrace the diversity in the school and the greater community, and then create a supportive platform for civic participation and action by all of our young students.

Notes

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6. Parker.
7. Jack Wolowiec, ed., *Teaching for Tomorrow: Integrating LRE and the Social Studies* (Chicago, IL: American Bar Association Special Committee on Youth Education for Citizenship, 1994); Charlotte Anderson and James Landman, *Globalization and Border Crossings: Examining Issues of National Identity, Citizenship, and Civic Education* (Washington, DC: American Bar Association Division of Public Education, 2003); Banks.
8. Deborah J. Short and Beverly A. Boyson, *Creating Access: Language and Academic Programs for Secondary School Newcomers* (Washington, DC: Center for Applied Linguistics and Delta Systems, 2004).
9. Tara Williams Fortune and Diane J. Tedick, eds., *Pathways to Multilingualism: Evolving Perspectives on Immersion Education* (Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters, 2008); For a directory of programs nationwide, see the Center for Applied Linguistics, www.cal.org.
10. Fortune and Tedick.
11. Ashley Lenker and Nancy Rhodes, *Foreign Language Immersion Programs: Features and Trends Over 35 Years* (Washington, DC: Center for Applied Linguistics, 2007).
12. Interview with Rhonda Broussard, February 26, 2009. Later quotes by Broussald are also from this interview.
13. U.S. Census Bureau, "State and County Quick Facts," quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/13/13089.
14. Laurent Ditmann, "To Educate, Build Community," *Teachers College Record* (ID Number: 15423, October 22, 2008, www.tcrecord.org). Later quotes by Ditmann are also from this article.
15. Biesta.
16. Beth Rubin, "'There's Still Not Justice:' Youth Civic Identity Development Amid Distinct School and Community Contexts," *Teachers College Record* 109, no. 2 (2007): 449-481; James Youniss and Miranda Yates, "Youth Service and Moral-Civic Identity: A Case for Everyday Morality," *Educational Psychology Review* 11, no. 4 (1999): 361-376.
17. Judith Torney-Purta and Susan Vermeer Lopez, *Developing Citizenship Competencies from Kindergarten Through Grade 12* (Education Commission of the States, 2006), www.ecs.org.

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