



Stephanie C. Serriere

Empowering Young Learners with Civic Agency!

According to an NCSS Position Statement, powerful teaching and learning should build a child's sense of "civic efficacy," one of two major goals, along with "building social understanding."¹ While "efficacy" involves one's belief in one's capacity to change things for the better, a related term—"civic agency"—takes into account the entire socio-cultural scene that supports the possibilities of having a voice and that the voice matters. In and out of schools, a child who has civic agency knows that her negotiations within the public sphere can effect change. Civic agency entails youth taking a stance on issues that matter to them.

In this issue, you will learn about the inspiring practices occurring around the country that position and support children as civic agents. It's worth noting that three of these articles arise from collaborations between a school and a teaching college or nonprofit organization, as described in various sidebars.

Why is it important to frame children as civic agents? Doing so steers us back to original purpose of the U.S. public school: to create participatory citizens engaged in democracy. The early years in school can serve as a springboard for an engaged civic life. As a former elementary school teacher who now partners with an elementary school in my work as a teacher-educator, I have seen how children can investigate social issues and assume civic agency. When an adult takes their concerns seriously, children often rise to the occasion.

The articles in this issue offer proof that children can be empathic, critical, and motivated citizens. Developing children's sense of agency goes beyond fostering a "skill" by creating the conditions in which action is possible. As these educators show, children's agency may start with a class conversation, a field trip to a grocery store, or a map of the school neighborhood—and then develop into academic investigations into history, conversations with adults in the community, and inquiries on why "audience" matters.

In her article "Children as Civic Agents during the Civil Rights Movement," **Kristy A. Brugar** offers an historical look at children taking action on the front lines of the civil rights movement during the 1960s. She presents innovative ways to use quality children's nonfiction in the elementary classroom.

In their article, "Action Civics in Fourth Grade: Tackling School- and Community-based Issues," **Peter Cipparone** and **Allison K. Cohen** use ideas from an action civics program,

Generation Citizen. His students map their community and identify decision makers. The class decides to tackle two issues, one in the school and one in the neighborhood.

In "Civics in the Grocery Store: A Field Trip of Awareness and Agency," **Erin Adams** asks children to critically examine the role of grocery store from a variety of perspectives. Following her article, the activities in the Pullout, "Exploring the Grocery Store," engage students in skills of interviewing and mapping to help them exercise their rights and responsibilities as consumers in a grocery store.

In "Who Can Fix This? The Concept of "Audience" and First Graders' Civic Agency," **Katherina A. Payne** examines the importance of framing children's message to an audience. As children learn to solve problems that they have experienced, they also learn that the impact of their message depends on someone on the other end being motivated to listen.

In "I Am Engaged: Action Civics in the Classroom," **Brooke Blevins** and **Karon LeCompte** describe "four phases" of implementing the Action Civics model that puts students at the heart of civic action. The authors provide examples of young people engaged in a cycle of identifying a problem that they care about, research, action, and reflection.

The article "Developing Civic Agents by Framing Curriculum with Children's Concerns" by **Whitney Douglas**, **Sara Fry**, **Jeffrey D. Wilhelm**, and **Angela Housley** takes us into a fourth grade classroom where students learn that their own disagreements can be topics for reflection and study, as well as an inspiration for new student-created resources which other students might find useful.

These articles encourage us to consider:

How do you make space and time for students' spontaneous (yet sometimes predictable) social concerns and shape them into civic inquiry?

How do you create experiences and structures that facilitate historical knowledge of civic engagement?

How do you foster the knowledge of empowered and informed participation pathways at the national, state, local, school, and

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classroom levels?

How can we position young students, who are often on the margins, in the center of civic action?

Have your students ever initiated civic change outside the walls of the school?

How do you, as a teacher, model responsible civic engagement?

I invite you to contribute your ideas to continue this conversa-

tion online at NCSS Connected, connected.socialstudies.org/ home. We look forward to YOUR voice and engagement! 🌐

Notes

1. NCSS, "A Vision of Powerful Teaching and Learning in the Social Studies: Building Social Understanding and Civic Efficacy." An NCSS Position Statement (2008), <http://www.socialstudies.org/positions/powerful>.

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Teaching the College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework: Exploring Inquiry-Based Instruction in Social Studies

Edited by *Kathy Swan and John Lee, with Rebecca Mueller and Stephen Day*
NCSS Bulletin 114, 156 pp.

This book is an indispensable guide for teachers implementing the C3 Framework. The book consists of model lessons contributed by 15 of the best social studies curricular organizations. Each lesson encompasses the whole of the C3 Inquiry Arc from questioning to action, engages students in a meaningful content experience that fits a typical curriculum, and needs between 2 and 5 days of instruction. Students collaborate, practice disciplinary literacy skills, and present their findings creatively. There are lessons for all grade bands from K-2 to 9-12.

The 15 lessons cover the range of C3 disciplines. Contributors examine the meaning of national symbols, the need to vote, and democracy in schools. There are economic analyses of the causes of the Great Depression and the historical impact of technology on productivity, as well as geographic perspectives on conflicts over rivers and American Indian responses to environmental challenges. Authors use primary sources to introduce historical topics ranging from the U.S. Constitution, immigration, and women's suffrage, to the collapse of democracy in Nazi Germany and the U.S. civil rights movement.

This book is an essential resource for teachers seeking to put the C3 Framework into action.

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