

Action Civics in Fourth Grade: Tackling School- and Community-based Issues

Peter Cipparone and Alison K. Cohen

This article describes an Action Civics project conducted with fourth graders in Peter’s classroom at P.S. 29, John M. Harrigan School, in Brooklyn, New York.¹ This project was based on ideas and methods in the curriculum of Generation Citizen, which is geared for middle and high school students, but applied here to the fourth grade.² The project required four 50-minute classes over a two-week period, with some additional time at the end for following up with students as the results of their efforts unfolded. Co-teachers in this project included Generation Citizen’s Director of Programming Sarah Andes and Executive Director Scott Warren. (See **SIDEBAR A** about the collaboration, page 12)

Mapping a Community ... and Its Issues

Fourth graders are usually eager to share their many observations about the world around them, and our initial lesson played into this enthusiasm. We first asked students to describe where they live. One student focused on the pace of movement in her neighborhood:

My neighborhood is sometimes or always busy. For example, everybody is always rushing and moving together, kids going to school or parents going to work. In the morning (we call that rush hour) it’s the worst.

Another observed the built environment where she lives [grammar uncorrected]:

We have a nice neighborhood. There is children’s parks, there is gardens, there are awesome classes and all the way at the end of Atlantic (Avenue) you get Brooklyn Bridge Park. But I don’t like Hicks Street, where I live. There are no trees, and a lot of littering.

In discussion following a writing activity, Mary, a fourth grade student, noted that she belongs to two communities—where she lives, and where she used to live.³ “What about school, and where I go in the summer? Is that community?” The elastic nature



Students volunteer with the Gowanus Canal Conservancy.

Laura C. Fontaine

of communities began to dawn on the kids. “Communities are everywhere,” said Andrew.

After the class composed a shared definition of communities, students mapped their own communities. We encouraged them to label landmarks at the street level. After students had worked for a bit, we introduced the terms “asset” (a thing of value) and “issue” (a problem or hazard) and prompted students to include examples of each on their map.

At the end of the session, we compiled everyone’s issues of concern, and the list was long. Ina mentioned that cars raced down a nearby street at dangerous speeds; Jenny noted a lack of trees in her neighborhood. Some students focused on problems

“a student-centered, project-based approach to civics education that develops the individual skills, knowledge, and dispositions necessary for 21st century democratic practice.”

—National Action Civics Collaborative

SIDEBAR A. A School/Generation Citizen Collaboration in Brooklyn, New York

This article reports on a collaboration between educators at P.S. 29, John M. Harrigan School, in Brooklyn, New York, and the nonprofit organization Generation Citizen, upon whose curriculum this project was based.

Generation Citizen (www.generationcitizen.org) is a nonprofit organization that works with teachers in the metropolitan areas of Boston, New York City, Providence, and San Francisco, with the goal of engaging middle and high school students in the political process through a semester-long action civics curriculum implemented during the school day.

This article presents a research-driven application and evaluation of action civics pedagogy at the elementary level.ⁱ Although U.S. citizens do not have the right to vote until age 18, the knowledge, skills, and dispositions a person needs to be civically engaged can begin to develop much earlier.ⁱⁱ

In the action civics approach, students learn civics by taking action on an issue of interest in their community.ⁱⁱⁱ There are several examples of action-oriented civics curricula that are aligned with standards in areas like literacy and science, as well as social studies.^{iv} Motivated by their commitment to a particular issue, students build skills for effective civic action (like persuasive communication) through lessons that may have a main focus in science or language arts. There is growing interest in action civics nationwide. In 2012, for example, U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan exclaimed that action civics was “Civics 2.0.”^v Indeed, the Internet has made it possible for activists of all ages to quickly access background information on just about any public issue.

Notes

- i. Stephanie Serriere, Dana Mitra, and Jennifer Cody, “Young Citizens Take Action for Better School Lunches,” *Social Studies and the Young Learner* 23, no. 2 (November/December 2010), 4–8.
- ii. D. Hart, K. Matsuba, and R. Atkins. “Civic Engagement and Child and Adolescent Well-being,” in *Handbook of Child Well-Being*, A. Ben-Arieh et al., eds., (Springer Netherlands, 2014), 957–975; L. Wray-Lake and A. K. Syvertsen, “The Developmental Roots of Social Responsibility in Childhood and Adolescence,” *New Directions for Child and Adolescent Development* 134 (2011), 11–25.
- iii. Alexander Pope, Laurel Stolte, and Alison K. Cohen, “Closing the Civic Engagement Gap: The Potential of Action Civics,” *Social Education* 75, no. 5 (March 2011), 265–268.
- iv. Alison K. Cohen, Allison Waters, and Phil Brown, “Place-based Environmental Health Justice Education: A Community-University-Government-Middle School Partnership,” *Environmental Justice* 5, no. 4 (2012), 188–197.
- v. Arne Duncan, “Remarks at ‘For Democracy’s Future’ Forum at the White House,” 2012, www.ed.gov/news/speeches/secretary-arne-duncans-remarks-democracys-future-forum-white-house.

in the school, such as graffiti in the bathrooms. By the end of class, students were bubbling with ideas.

Identifying Decision-Makers

Citizens don’t always know whom to ask, or where to find others with similar concerns.⁴ (Who might have useful information about a problem in the community? Who might have the knowledge or influence to do something about it?) During the next session, students learned about decision-makers and how citizens can influence them. We provided the hypothetical example of a teacher who gave a grade of zero on a test if a student was absent that day due to illness. Students paired up to generate ideas about who might help them attempt to improve such a situation. Their responses included talking to some friends; asking one’s mother; and going to the principal.

Turning to the issues (problems and hazards) marked on their maps, each student chose one issue that he or she hoped could be solved. Students brainstormed a list of possible decision-makers and allies who might relate to their various causes. For example, James reasoned that they would have to appeal to teachers in a quest to extend time devoted to recess. Mariana recognized that, in order to ban smoking entirely in New York City, she’d have to go straight to the top. On the decision-maker line of a handout, she jotted, “Mayor of New York: Bill de Blasio.” Teachers can help students identify decision-makers by giving simple information about the roles of the many levels of government (city, state, and federal) and discussing which departments of city government are responsible for addressing particular concerns.

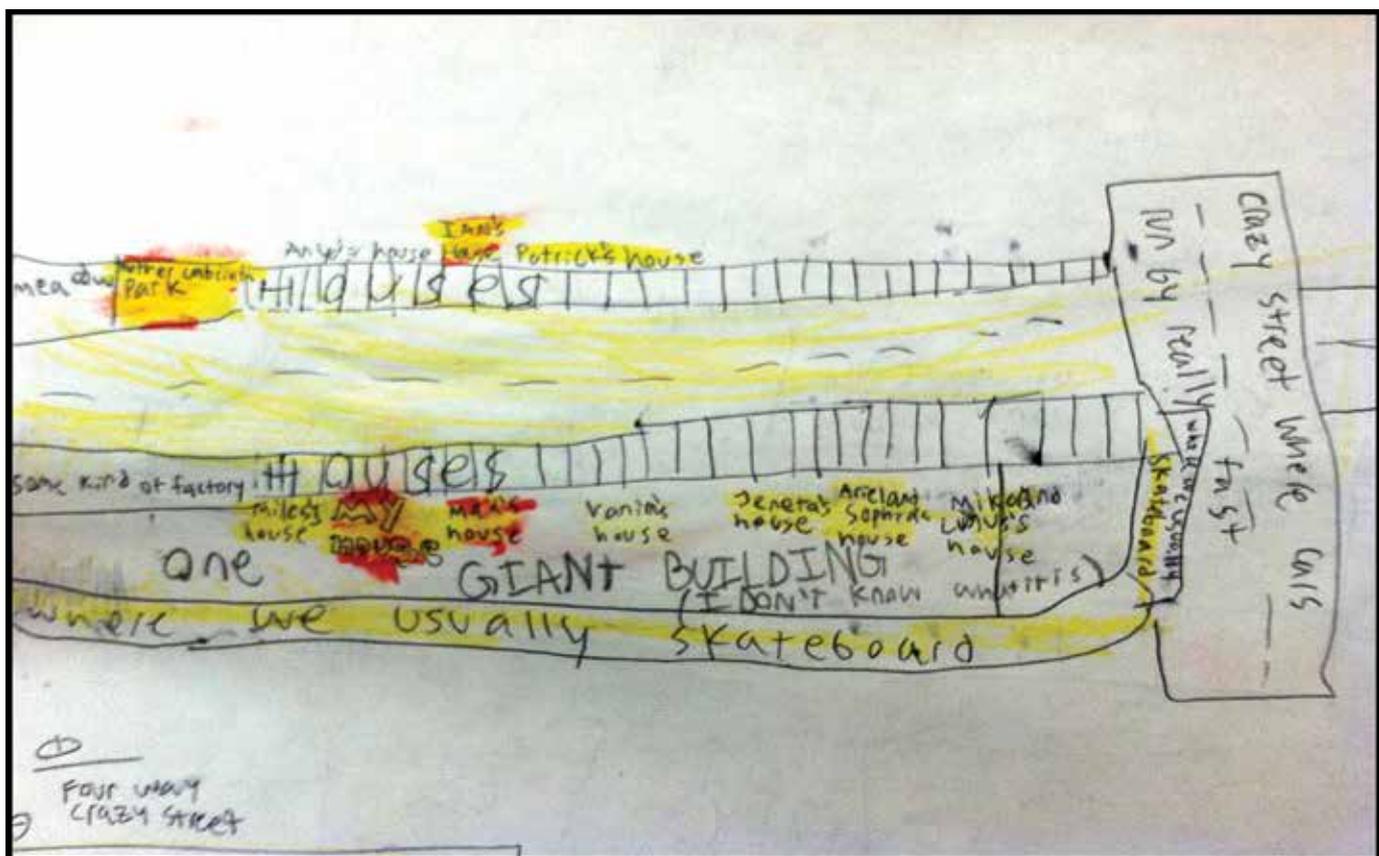
At the end of the second session, students’ excitement about the prospect of making a difference was palpable. Andrea started a “Make a Difference” club and taped the membership list to the bookshelf next to her table. The club was to meet on Tuesdays and Thursdays at recess. Anika and Raúl wrote a letter to Mayor de Blasio about cleaning up the sludge in Gowanus Canal, which is about 2 miles from the school. The canal is a historical waterway about 1.8 miles long, with green spaces and watershed, that is an EPA Superfund cleanup site.

Debating and Making Group Choices

In the third session, we asked students to consider choosing a single issue that they would focus on as a class. We began by asking students to discuss with a partner what it means to vote, and why people might use voting to make a decision. Some students noted that voting is helpful when not everyone agrees, and that the outcome of voting is not guaranteed to please everyone.

When the students seemed to have a grasp of some of the benefits and shortcomings of voting as a method of making a decision, we introduced the idea of “consensus,” a situation in which everyone has reached a common agreement. The kids murmured. Wilma spoke out, “That sounds hard!” We told them we would try both methods of decision-making.

The students seemed to be most interested in four issues: improving the school’s bathrooms, installing an elevator or



escalator at the school, restoration of the Gowanus Canal, and reducing the risk of accidents at dangerous streets in their neighborhood. We put these four topics up for vote via secret ballot in order to pare the list down to two issues. School bathrooms and the Gowanus Canal emerged as the finalists. Some students were momentarily crestfallen, but we reassured them that as the class worked on the chosen two issues, students would be developing the skills to work on any issue they cared about.

To introduce the process of building consensus, we invited students to place themselves along a line running the length of the classroom: those who strongly want to focus on improving the school bathrooms at one end, and those who strongly want to work on improving the Gowanus Canal at the other. Students could place themselves anywhere along the line (leaning in favor of one issue or the other), including right in the middle (undecided). Speaking one at a time, students then made oral arguments to convince others that their issue of choice was the one most worthy of our group efforts. Sam noted that the graffiti on the walls of bathrooms affected younger kids, teaching them inappropriate rules and setting a poor example. Ina countered his point, “Out of all the bathrooms in New York City, one bathroom doesn’t make a difference.”

Peter smiled and remarked that students were contrasting the benefits of local change versus systemic change. Through the conversation, students used many strategies, from detailed descriptions of the state of the bathrooms to emotional appeals about how cleaning the Gowanus Canal could help not only people, but the animals living in our area as well. When it became

clear that students on either side had “dug in their heels,” the teacher proposed a compromise: we would neither hold a final vote to decide one winning issue, nor would we strive for consensus. Rather, the class would focus on both issues. (This was a modification to the Generation Citizen curriculum, but seemed an appropriate one considering the dynamics of the class at that moment.) Students approved of this outcome. Regardless, the debate had provided students with a meaningful opportunity to “construct explanations using reasoning, correct sequence, examples, and details with relevant information,” and to “critique explanations,” which are all skills highlighted by the C3 Framework.⁵ (Sidebar B, page 14)

Crafting Advocacy Messages

In the fourth and final session, students began to develop questions for decision-makers with whom we hoped to communicate, as well as arguments to justify their calls for action. Mary rehearsed what she wanted to tell Dr. Fagin, our principal. “I think the writing on the walls of the bathrooms is a bad example for the kindergarteners.” Sam wanted to pressure the city’s department of sanitation into action by asking, “The Gowanus Canal is important to a lot of people and businesses, so what are you doing to clean it up?” Ina started a petition about the school bathrooms and gathered 60 signatures from students and teachers. Kenneth wrote a memo. “Attention, Dr. Fagin. I know you are very busy. But there’s one thing you need to fix right away: the school bathrooms ...”



School and Community Outcomes

Students took some concrete actions after the course finished. They held a productive meeting with Principal Fagin, and shortly thereafter the school's bathrooms were repainted. However, students realized that repainting alone would not lead students to change their behavior. The goal, Julian said, was for future P.S. 29 students "to not even think of drawing on the bathroom walls." A change in attitudes among students themselves was needed. With this idea in mind, students designed and painted student-friendly signs in art class, to remind others that the bathrooms are shared, public space. Curtis' sign reads "Slam Dunk Paper Towels!" and features a hand placing paper towels into a trash can with the design of a basketball hoop. Another sign simply states, "Treat our bathrooms with care."

Kathryn Garcia, commissioner of the New York City

Department of Sanitation, responded to our letter, and recommended that our class collaborate with the Gowanus Canal Conservancy.⁶ Staff at that organization said they would be happy to provide a tour of their facilities or use student volunteer labor on a Gowanus Canal workday. Students elected to attend a workday so they could take immediate action on a problem. On that decision, there was consensus.

Pedagogical Outcomes

Over the course of this four-session project, students gained Action Civics skills, as indicated by assessments we conducted before and after the unit. An initial survey asked students to identify strengths and problems in their school and then to choose one issue, describe who might help make an impact on that issue, and write a short, persuasive letter to a decision-maker about it. On a survey administered after this project, students listed more potential "allies," or people who could help them in their efforts at reform. Students could also list more decision-makers whom they might approach about the issue. Interestingly, after this unit, students listed more strengths, or positive attributes of their school.

The students also showed growth in their written compositions. After the unit, students suggested more specific actions and wrote about specific pathways to change. For example, many students wrote about the school's rule against touching snow at recess (to prevent snowball fights and injuries) in both the pre-project and post-project surveys. In the latter, many students suggested that meetings be held to discuss snow policy with students, teachers, and parents (potential allies), with both the principal and recess supervisors (decision-makers) present. The students' experiences while planning a similar meeting about school bathroom likely informed these suggestions.

Students' enthusiasm for making a difference in their community noticeably increased as a result of their participation in this unit. Some continued their involvement outside of class. One student carried a folder with petitions to lunch and recess each day. A parent described her son eagerly telling about the Generation Citizen activities he'd worked on in class that day.

Finally, students' ability to see multiple points of view seemed to improve. This may be a result of the provocative whole-class discussions that were held during the unit. For example, after initially seizing on the idea of installing an elevator in the school, students began to ponder some of the potential costs and complexities of implementing it.

SIDEBAR B. *Dimensions of the C3 Framework's Inquiry Arc*

1. Developing Questions and Planning Inquiries
2. Applying Disciplinary Concepts and Tools
3. Evaluating Sources and Using Evidence
4. Communicating Conclusions and Taking Informed Action.

SOURCE: NCSS, *Social Studies for the Next Generation: Purposes, Practices, and Implications of the College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards* (Bulletin 113, Silver Spring, MD: NCSS, 2013), www.socialstudies.org/c3.

“How would we figure out which classes got to use it?” Wilma said.

“I think there are other things that are more important for us,” Kenneth said.

Iris defended the idea with a new point. “What about people in wheelchairs?” she said. “I think us not having an elevator makes handicapped people not come to our school.”

The whole-class debate about the adoption of a class issue was a particularly clear example of learning about and practicing argumentation, as emphasized in both the C3 Framework⁷ and the Common Core. The discussions proved particularly valuable for students who struggle with writing; one such student contributed arguments that motivated other students to alter their position along the line of opinion. These activities provided all students with opportunities to reason for themselves, listen carefully to others, and to offer thoughtful criticism of other’s ideas.

The students’ initiative to write the mayor a letter about the Gowanus Canal is just one example of how the Action Civics lessons connected to other academic disciplines and can serve as a model of subject integration. In particular, a theme underlying much of the school’s literacy instruction is helping students become agents of change, since strong reading and writing skills are empowering. Students learn specific strategies for close reading of both fiction and nonfiction, and they strive to compose clearly structured essays.

Reflecting on the Project

Generation Citizen Executive Director Scott Warren, who co-taught some of these lessons, has also taught the full curriculum to students in grade 6-12. In his view, the main challenges of teaching adapting this project for the fourth grade arose from the abridgment of elements in the Generation Citizen curriculum, rather than from the students’ younger age. In particular, the fourth graders were quite motivated and enthusiastic, participating in classroom discussions extensively. However, while the full curriculum leads students through the process of selecting a focus issue as a class, in our project, students provided a large collection of possible issues to work on, and there was less time to work toward consensus. This meant that teachers had many examples to refer to (which was good for discussing the breadth of civic possibilities), but had some difficulty communicating to their younger students how a process of civic action can develop from beginning to end.

The outcomes of this fourth grade project suggest that Action Civics can lead to powerful learning for upper elementary school students. Civics education is currently concentrated at the middle and high school level, but the action-based orientation of Generation Citizen allowed nine- and ten-year olds to engage in the process on a developmentally appropriate level. If schools and teachers provide opportunities for students to take action on issues in their community through reading, writing, discussion, and reaching out to decision-makers, then those students can begin their journey as agents of change. 🌍

Acknowledgments

We thank Dr. Rebecca Fagin, Principal of P.S. 29, John M. Harrigan School, in Brooklyn, New York, for her leadership and encouragement of this collaborative project and the students’ activities.

Notes

1. National Action Civics Collaborative (NACC), founded in 2010, has its offices in Chicago, Illinois. NACC is “a growing network of educators, researchers, organizations, and youth workers working to reform civic education, amplify youth voices, and ultimately transform democracy.” Visit www.actioncivicscollaborative.org.
2. Generation Citizen, founded in 2008, has its main office (one of four) in Boston, Massachusetts. Generation Citizen was a founding member of NACC. A graphic summarizes the curriculum of Generation Citizen at generationcitizen.org/curriculum.
3. Student names are pseudonyms.
4. We use an expansive definition of “citizens” to refer to all people engaged in their community, rather than in reference to individuals’ legal status.
5. NCSS, *Social Studies for the Next Generation: Purposes, Practices, and Implications of the College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards* (Bulletin 113, Silver Spring, MD: NCSS, 2013), www.socialstudies.org/c3.
6. Gowanus Canal Conservancy, www.gowanuscanalconservancy.org.
7. NCSS, *Social Studies for the Next Generation: Purposes, Practices, and Implications of the College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards* (Bulletin 113, Silver Spring, MD: NCSS, 2013).



PETER CIPPARONE is a fourth grade Teacher at P.S. 29, John M. Harrigan School, in Brooklyn, New York

ALISON K. COHEN is Director of Research and Evaluation, Generation Citizen, in San Francisco, California