



Report

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Civic Learning through Action: The Case of Generation Citizen

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A perennial debate in civic education is about the role of “action”: whether to involve students in political or civic *activities* in addition to simply asking them to discuss or study politics and civil society. This debate goes back at least to the early 1900s, when the great American philosopher John Dewey argued that civic education had to be experiential. In 1915, the U.S. Bureau of Education (the forerunner of the Department of Education) formally endorsed an approach called “community civics.” “Community civics” often involved a strong element of action outside the school.¹ Since then, similar practices have always existed. To name just one example, students in Benjamin Franklin High School in East Harlem, NY identified negative stereotypes about their community as the most significant problem and engaged in an elaborate community mapping project to influence the news media. This was in 1948.²

Yet action-oriented civics programs have often been marginal, compared to curricula rooted in textbooks. In 2010, six groups came together because of their common interest in promoting experiential civic education that involves underserved and marginalized youth working for social change. They were not the only organizations that share that commitment, but they launched a promising effort to expand the scope and prominence of their approach. CIRCLE was among the founding organizations. One of their early steps was to coin the phrase “Action Civics.”³

In a “call to action” made at the White House in January 2011, Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, challenged schools, colleges, and universities to “make civic learning and democratic engagement a staple of every American’s education.” Emphasizing the need to invigorate and innovate civic learning, Secretary Duncan used the phrase “Action Civics”:

Unlike traditional civic education, civic learning and democratic engagement 2.0 is more ambitious and participatory than in the past. To paraphrase Justice O'Connor, the new generation of civic education initiatives move beyond your “grandmother’s civics” to what has been labeled “action civics.”

The goals of traditional civic education – to increase civic knowledge, voter participation, and volunteerism – are all still fundamental. But the new generation of civic learning puts students at the center. It includes both learning and practice –

*not just rote memorization of names, dates, and processes. And more and more, civic educators are harnessing the power of technology and social networking to engage students across place and time.*⁴

This report first summarizes the definition and theoretical foundation for Action Civics. It then reports on Generation Citizen, an Action Civics program with a strong research base specifically designed to serve low-income and disadvantaged middle and high-school students. CIRCLE independently reviewed available evidence and materials provided by Generation Citizen for this report.

What is Action Civics?

Action Civics is a broad term used to describe curricula and programs that go beyond traditional civics programs by combining learning and practice. Action Civics prepares young people “for their roles as citizens and leaders by allowing them a chance to participate in authentic democratic activities, from elections to advocacy, from public debates to the creation of new civic media.”⁵

Although Action Civics is a new phrase and category of programs,⁶ it has deep roots in practice, going back at as the ideas and ideals of John Dewey and the Settlement House leader Jane Addams around 1900. Its resemblance to various established models of democratic education gives it a strong theoretical foundation.

First, Action Civics draws from aspects of Positive Youth Development theory,⁷ because young people are viewed as assets to the community in which they learn and live, and the programs intentionally create a setting in which adults respect and help youth lead the process of personal development and community change. A large-scale review of Positive Youth Development programs found encouraging effects on social skills and emotional development as well as academic achievement.⁸ Second, Action Civics, by definition, involves experiential learning, meaning that students become engaged in some sort of hands-on activities, such as conducting action research projects, producing social justice-oriented media materials, or working as poll workers on Election Day.

Although Action Civics programs vary in subject area (e.g., environmental science, media literacy, or politics) and in scale, location, and duration, they share some fundamental features. Student voices and experiences are encouraged, valued, and incorporated in decision-making to the fullest extent possible. And students learn by doing, by engaging in civic activities directly, whether in classrooms or beyond.⁹ Students usually choose an issue that is important to them and learn to think strategically and act collaboratively to make a difference. The students reflect on their own actions, successes, challenges and failures throughout the project. The best of these programs work to narrow disparities in civic empowerment by providing low-income and disadvantaged youth with a means to acquire motivations, skills, knowledge and behaviors that are essential for constructive civic and political participation.¹⁰ The focus on marginalized youth may not be implicit in the definition of “Action Civics,” because any student could benefit from that approach; but all the supporters of the Action Civics Declaration are focused on low-income and disadvantaged youth. Appendix I of this report includes the most up-to-date version of common theory of change model developed through collaboration among National Action Civics Collaborative, which is a group of organizations committed to promoting and expanding

evidence-based practice of action civics. Generation Citizen is a founding member of this group.

The Generation Citizen Approach

Generation Citizen is considered as one of the leading Action Civics organizations and is a founding member of the National Action Civics Collaborative.¹¹ Generation Citizen works with middle and high schools in diverse communities by offering a curriculum, coaching, and assistance in teaching civics through action (See Figure 1 for a detailed illustration of Generation Citizen's model). A growing program now operating in three states, Generation Citizen trains college students to visit classrooms twice a week, teaching civics through an established curriculum.

Generation Citizen's approach is described as "action-oriented, standards-aligned, community-based, and student-centered,"¹² and it begins with fostering an empowering setting and relationships. Its model is youth-centered, evidenced by the fact that students choose the issue that they will work on. Each class chooses a community problem, develops a strategic plan for change, and then implements the plan. Actions range from lobbying elected officials to developing a video. The semesters end with a Civics Day in which classes present their projects and outcomes. Generation Citizen's curriculum meets the state social studies standards and the English and Language Art Common Core standards while allowing students to learn in a relevant, hands-on manner. Students learn to conduct research and take action while studying the general U.S. system of government, acquiring specific skills needed for issue-oriented advocacy, and learning to take strategic action. For instance, in Providence's Central High School, students were able to learn important communication, oratory and research skills while addressing an issue that affected the students in the community directly (Textbox 1). Another way to look at Generation Citizen's model is that it fosters a setting where young people, often from disadvantaged backgrounds, can find their voices, contribute to a relevant cause, and feel efficacious and valued by peers and adults by shifting the traditionally hierarchical paradigm of education to a democratic and deliberative learning opportunity.

Generation Citizen's theory of change (Figure 1) maps out what happens in and outside of the program itself and how the program aims to change both the secondary school

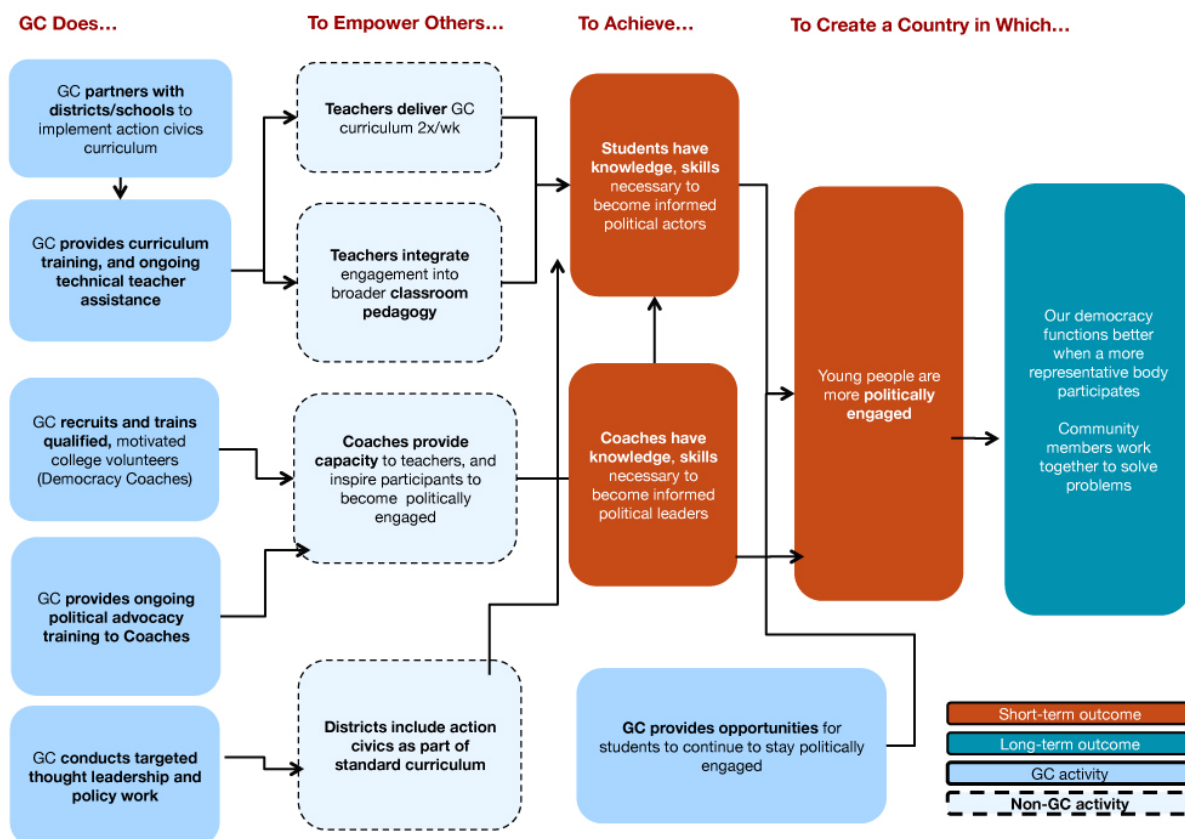
Textbox 1: An example of Generation Citizen project - Gang Violence at Central High School, Hope High School, Providence, Rhode Island

"I'm so happy we are finally getting our voices heard and not just sitting around. We are making a change."
— 9th grader, Central High School.

In response to an outbreak of gang-related gun violence, students from two high schools in Providence focused on gang violence in their community. Students at one of the schools concentrated on raising awareness of gang violence by creating a documentary film. Partnering with the Providence Streetworkers Program, Central students interviewed former gang members, families affected by gang violence, and local residents about the ways that gangs have affected the community. Through this process, students learned about the filming process, prepared and conducted interviews, and decided which footage was most important to include as a final product. The process helped to develop communication and oratory skills, tested their research abilities, and culminated in a final project that inspired and motivated them for the future.

students and college student volunteers (whom Generation Citizen calls “Democracy Coaches”).

Figure 1: Generation Citizen Theory of Change¹³



Is the Generation Citizen Program Effective, and for Whom?

Students

Emerging research finds that Generation Citizen boosts civic knowledge and efficacy among students and college student mentors in the classrooms. Findings from a quasi-experimental study by Generation Citizen suggest that the students who were involved in the GC program showed an increase in civic engagement, and they also felt more prepared for civic action compared to the students of similar backgrounds who did not participate.¹⁴ The effect size was estimated to be around 1.0, which is considered a “large” effect in social science research.¹⁵ Using the figures presented in the study, CIRCLE estimates that an average intervention group participant ranked at 72nd percentile in the civic engagement scale, while an average control group participant would have ranked at 35th percentile of the civic engagement score, a large difference in practical terms.

This finding is particularly encouraging because the control group participants were, overall, similar to the GC participants in terms of race and gender, but the control group participants were more academically advanced. Ten percent of GC participants, compared to 52% of control

participants, were in at least one honors class, and 89% of GC participants and 96% of control group participants expressed college aspirations.¹⁶

Another study found a relationship between the level of program implementation and the level of student participation. In a qualitative study of a representative sample of “democracy coaches” and their students, the researchers found that when the coaches understood and committed to the program’s philosophy and mission, built strong personal connections with students, and continuously improved their mentoring skills, the students asked questions more frequently, felt that their time spent in the GC program was worthwhile, and felt inspired by their mentors.¹⁷

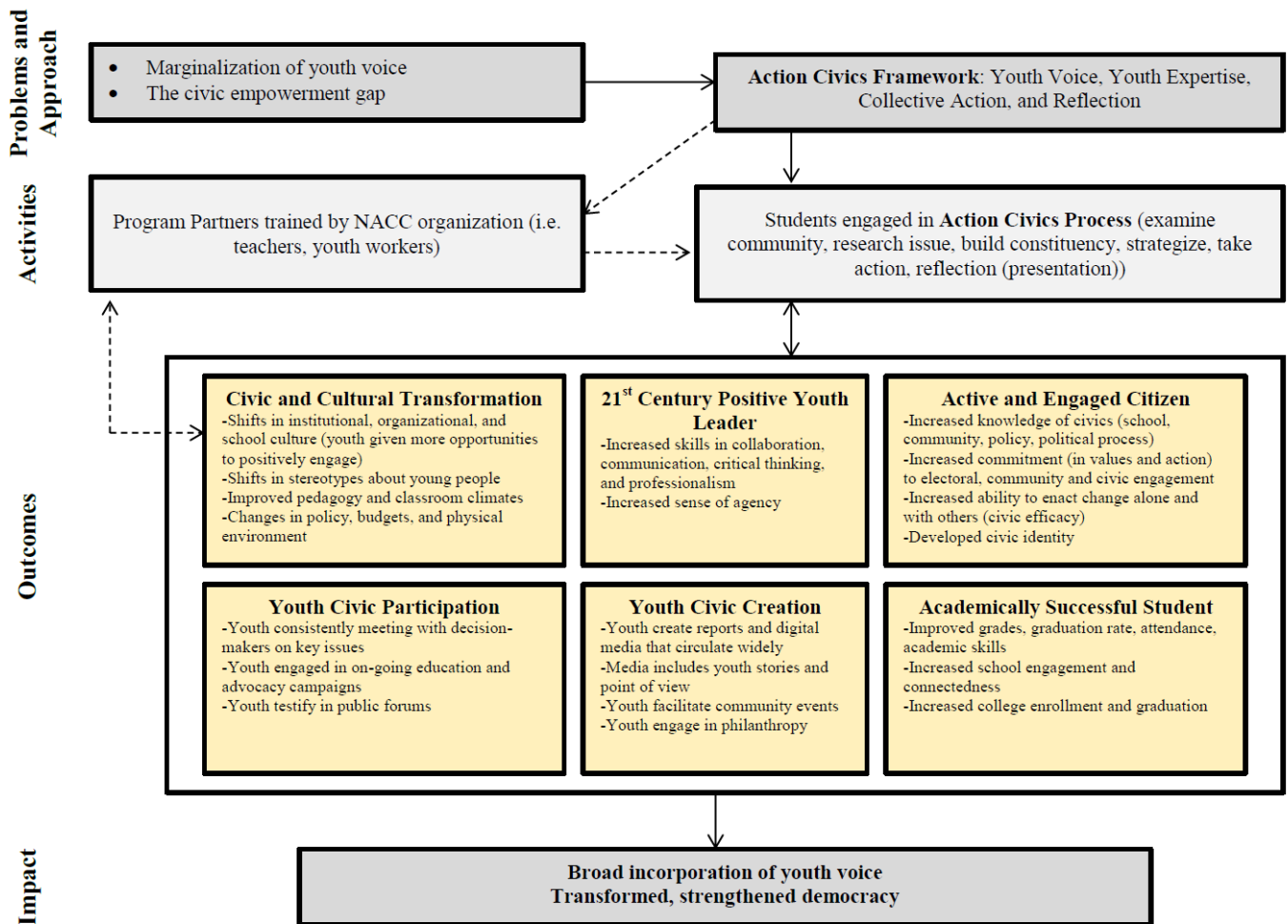
Democracy Coaches (Mentors)

The democracy coaches, college students volunteering their time in the GC classrooms, also benefited from their participation in Generation Citizen. Using pre-post and two-year follow-up data, GC’s research findings suggest that the GC coaches “demonstrate increased civic awareness and achieve a better understanding of how to be effective advocates, change-makers, and educators.” The democracy coaches also reported gaining important skills for teaching and changing the way they conceptualized community service and civic responsibility. In a small two-year follow-up study, researchers found that 100% of the surveyed mentors were pursuing a career in the public sector.¹⁸

Conclusion

The general concept behind Action Civics is more than a century old and has always been practiced by seasoned and skilled educators, both in and out of schools. But Action Civics is a new phrase that has given the concept renewed momentum. Generation Citizen and CIRCLE are members of the National Action Civics Collaborative, which is dedicated to strengthening and assessing practices and expanding the scope and impact of empowering civic education. The GC’s theory of change and initial evaluation results exemplify the goals of the NACC.

Appendix I: National Action Civics Collaborative Theory of Change ¹⁹



Endnotes

¹ Levine, P. (2000), *The new Progressive Era: toward a fair and deliberative democracy*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, p. 229.

² Johaneck, M.C. (2012) Preparing *pluribus* for *unum*: historical perspectives on civic education. In Campbell, D.E., Levinson, M., and Hess, F, *Making civics count: civic education for a new generation*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, pp. 77-82.

³ See the "Action Civics Declaration," <http://www.centerforactioncivics.org/action-civics-declaration/>, which also provides a list of supporters and participating organizations. See also the Education Commission of the States (2013). *Educational Reform*, 14(2).

⁴ Arne Duncan's full remarks given to "For Democracy's Future" forum held at the White House on January 10, 2012 can be accessed at: <http://www.ed.gov/news/speeches/secretary-arne-duncans-remarks-democracys-future-forum-white-house>

⁵ <http://www.centerforactioncivics.org/what-is-action-civics/>

⁶ Education Commission of the States (2013). *Educational Reform*, 14(2).

⁷ Positive youth development (PYD) is a relatively new movement that originated from the idea that adolescents will be able to navigate through challenging adolescence without major problems if they can receive support from their environment to develop their own assets and learn to use them. An important characteristic of PYD is the view that young people are assets to the environment in which they develop, a view shared by Action Civics. Some of the seminal works in PYD were published starting around 2000. Examples of important works include Larson, R.W. (2000). Toward a psychology of positive youth development. *American Psychologist*, 55, 170-183; Lerner, R. M. (2004). *Liberty: Thriving and civic engagement among America's youth*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications; and Roth J. L., & Brooks-Gunn, J. (2003). What exactly is a youth development program? Answers from research and practice. *Applied Developmental Science*, 7, 92-109.

⁸ Durlak, J.A., Weissberg, R.P., Dymnicki, A.B., Taylor, R.D., & Schellinger, K.B. (2011). The impact of enhancing students' social and emotional learning: A meta-analysis of school-based universal interventions. *Child Development*, 82, 405-432.

⁹ Cohen, A.K., Pope, A., Stolte, L.C., Ridley-Kerr, A., & Wong, K. (under review). *Action civics and civic outcomes for urban youth: A quasi-experimental evaluation of Generation Citizen*.

¹⁰ Definition of action civics adapted from the National Action Civics Collaborative (NACC) website at <http://www.centerforactioncivics.org/what-is-action-civics>.

¹¹ See <http://www.centerforactioncivics.org/national-action-civics-collaborative/> for a list of all founding organizations, which includes CIRCLE.

¹² Pope, Stolte & Cohen, (2011). *Ibid*.

¹³ Generation Citizen (2013). *Generation Citizen Theory of Change Model*. Unpublished material.

¹⁴ Cohen et al. (under review). *Ibid*. In this quasi-experimental evaluation conducted by a team of external researchers and an internal program evaluator used a modified form of pre-post design by assessing students in the experimental group students at the end of a program semester and comparing them to the control group students who were assessed at the beginning of the following semester (a few weeks later).

Examples of the items to measures this construct were, "How likely are you to...?"

- ☐ Vote on a regular basis/in every election
- ☐ Express their opinion on an issue in a media outlet
- ☐ Volunteer on a regular basis
- ☐ Run for political office
- ☐ Be an active member of their community

¹⁵ The classification of effect size is based on Cohen (1992). A power primer. *Psychological Bulletin*, 112, 155-159.

¹⁶ Cohen et al. (under review). Ibid.

¹⁷ Maker, E. & Cohen, A.K. (Under review) *Fostering youth civic engagement through effective mentorship: Understanding the college volunteer mentors who succeed*. In this study a university researcher conducted a qualitative study with the Generation Citizen's internal evaluator to further understand why, how, and with whom college mentors were successful using a case-study method.

¹⁸ Cohen, A.K., Ridley-Kerr, A., Rzepka, S., & Root, A., (under review). *Assessing civic outcomes among college-age mentors implementing a civic education program for urban youth*.

¹⁹ Gingold, J. (2013). *What Makes an Active and Engaged Citizen: Analysis of the National Action Civics Collaborative (NACC) assessment tools*. Unpublished manuscript prepared for the National Action Civics Collaborative.