

Positive Opportunities for Youth: Engagement for the Future

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The values emphasized in education and child rearing will affect the types of citizens our younger generation will become, as well as the kind of society they will create. To the extent that values focus on enhancing the self rather than connecting individual interests to those of a larger public, young people may be less oriented to the needs of the common good. To promote a deep democracy, young people need to know the full story of history and be encouraged to become engaged in and take a stand on issues of concern to their communities.

The leadership of adults (teachers, principals, sports coaches, mentors of non-formal youth groups) is essential in communicating the principles of tolerance that bind democratic societies together. This means that adults must insist on inclusion where membership transcends social cliques. It suggests that public programs must provide all young people with practice in working as teams toward mutually defined goals and in resolving differences that may divide them. Finally, it indicates that conflict resolution programs should focus on universal efforts that have the potential to shift the norms of group interaction rather than target specific individuals to change.

Youth Civic Development: Implications of Research for Social Policy and Programs

Why is youth civic development important? Schools, non-formal youth organizations such as the Boy and Girl Scouts, 4-H, and the Boys and Girls Clubs identify civic values such as leadership, responsibility, and patriotism as objectives in their programs. Yet we know very little known about program effectiveness in these areas because civic goals have rarely been evaluated.

Developing civic literacy, skills, and attachments of the younger generation are prominent goals of virtually every public school in the United States.

What are civic literacy, skills and attachments? *Civic literacy* is the knowledge about community affairs, political issues, and the processes whereby citizens effect change, and how one becomes informed on these matters. *Civic skills* include competencies in achieving group goals, such as leadership, public speaking, active listening, and perspective taking. *Civic attachment* is an affective or emotional connection to the community; it implies that one matters, has a voice and a stake in public affairs.

Why promote civic literacy, skills, and attachment? Among adults, civic literacy is positively related to social tolerance and engagement in community affairs. However, national assessments of high school students' knowledge indicate that they know most about issues that matter to them such as a citizen's right to due process and which level of government issues a driver's license.

Family communication styles that engage their children in discussions of controversial issues and encourage them to hold their own opinions are related to greater civic knowledge, interest, and exposure to political information (Chaffee & Yang, 1990; McLeod, 2000; Niemi & Junn, 1998) as well as to their tolerance (Owen & Dennis, 1987), and the ability to see political issues from more than one perspective (Santolupo & Pratt, 1994).

Trust plays a key role in developing civic attachment. Social trust is defined as a belief that most people are generally fair and helpful rather than merely out for their own gain (Smith, 1997). Between 1973 and 1997, there was a decline among younger generations in their beliefs that most people are trustworthy, helpful, and fair (Smith, 2000).

Trends in Voting

In many Western democracies, including the United States, young adults are typically less likely than any other age group to vote. Although young people feel as if they cannot affect political outcomes, they do feel they can make a difference in their local communities through volunteering. Though the voting aspect of civic engagement remains low, volunteerism has become the norm among young adults. In a 1997 survey of college freshman nationwide, 73% of incoming students reported performing community service during their senior year in high school, an increase of 11% from 1989 (Astin & Sax, 1998). If youth are willing to volunteer but less likely to engage in other forms of civic engagement, the question becomes how to link their volunteering to larger civic issues.

Youth need opportunities to engage in local civic opportunities that connect to their everyday lives, such as participating in forums with local citizens who are running for elected office.

Encouraging Civic Engagement through a Civil Society

Adults other than parents who interact regularly with youth are in powerful positions to help shape as adolescent's level of civic commitment. Schools are a natural place to build and encourage civic engagement through classroom practices. Teachers' insistence upon civility in the classroom impacts the level of civic engagement among students. Young people with teachers who insure all students are treated equally, show respect to students and their ideas, and demand that students listen to and respect one another, tend to have higher levels of civic commitments.

In order for youth to have a commitment to civic engagement, they need to feel as if they can trust the government. Disparities exist among youth regarding the level of trust they feel for their government. Minority youth are more likely to feel politically dissatisfied and distrust government more than their white peers (Niemi & Junn, 1998). This has not always been the case. Prior to 1967, similar feelings of political trust were reported by African-American and white youth. Since 1967, however, most surveys find lower levels of political trust among African-Americans.

Similarly, it is questionable whether figures such as the president or police still carry the same authority as they once did. In the aftermath of Watergate, research indicated that support for

leaders from young people is not unconditional (Dennis & Webster, 1975; Greenstein & Polsby, 1975; Sigel & Hoskin, 1981). Once civic trust has been broken, it is difficult to recover.

If traditional, symbolic figures such as the president and police cannot garner support from young people, then other authority figures may need to fill the gap. Teachers, school administrators, coaches, or the staff at a local community youth agency may play important roles in helping young people realize the importance of civic engagement.

School administrators can model a civic ethic by setting and enforcing policies concerning intolerance and bullying. Schools that adopt laissez-faire policies regarding bullying and intolerance do not teach students to settle differences in a civil fashion. Some school administrators may feel that students need to learn to handle disagreements “on their own”. However, this form of hands-off policy tells young people that there are no principles governing social interactions, and that the rules are simply whatever you can get away with. If schools genuinely want young people to “work it out”, administrators can enable them by providing training in conflict resolution.

The topic of bullying in the United States has neither received the scientific nor the policy attention it has had in other nations (Smith et al., 1999). Although bullying has received attention in the U.S., educational programs and scientific literature tend to subsume bullying within issues of school safety or violence (Harachi, Catalano, & Hawkins, 1999).

Youth programs and extra-curricular activities are examples of institutions that promote peer solidarity and pride. As members of youth programs or school-sponsored programs, adolescents help define the groups’ meaning and have a say in defining group goals. Participation in such activities and organizations offers young people opportunities to explore what it means to be a member of ‘the public’ and to work out the reciprocity between rights and obligations in the meaning of citizenship. By having a voice, youth exercise the citizen’s right to self-determination. But self-determination is not enough. Democratic societies rely on persons with democratic dispositions, i.e., “a preparedness to work with others different from oneself toward a shared end; a combination of strong convictions with a readiness to compromise in the recognition that one can’t always get everything one wants; and a sense of individuality and a commitment to civic goods that are not the possession of one person or one small group alone” (Elshtain, 1995, p. 2).

In our research, we have conceived of young people’s experiences of membership in institutions and organizations as the developmental foundation for a political community and for the ties that bind members of that community together. The importance of student solidarity as a factor in developing identification with the common good emerged in a comparative study in which adolescents from four fledgling democracies and three stable democracies participated. Across countries, youth were more likely to commit to public interest goals such as serving their communities and country if they felt a solidarity with peers at school and if they felt that most students in the school were proud to be part of an institution where caring transcended the borders of social cliques (Flanagan, Bowes, Jonsson, Csapo, & Sheblanova, 1998). Student solidarity is a student’s perception of the collective properties of the school. Similar to the ‘collective efficacy’ of neighborhoods where residents act in the public interest (Sampson,

Raudenbush, & Earls, 1997), ours is a measure of the collective properties of the student body. As such, it taps an inclusive climate in which students generally feel they and their fellow students matter to one another and to the institution.

This does not suggest that social cliques did not exist in these schools. Rather, cliques do not override the broader climate of inclusiveness in the school.

Tolerance and interdependence are essential aspects of a democratic identity and participation in extra curricular activities and youth organizations play a role in building these qualities in young people. Participation in such activities is associated with higher involvement in civic and political activity in adulthood (Verba et al., 1995; Youniss et al., 1997). Even when socioeconomic status and academic achievement are controlled, involvement in extracurricular activities is related to later involvement in organizations such as the PTA, communities of faith, or labor unions (Hanks & Eckland, 1978; Otto, 1975) as well as to political action such as voting, writing letters to the editor, or contacting local officials (Otto, 1975).

Policy Implications

The issue of equal opportunity for youth to participate in extracurricular and community organizations is a policy question that has received little attention. The fact that involvement in such organizations seems to protect young people from health-compromising behaviors (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2000) is reason alone to raise the issue of equal access. Besides keeping youth out of trouble, these institutions connect young people to the broader polity and foster their commitment to its service. Thus, if access to community clubs and extracurricular activities is unevenly distributed, we should not be surprised if those youth who have few opportunities to connect are disaffected politically and disengaged from civic activity as well.

According to analyses of national longitudinal data, youth from more advantaged families are more likely to be involved in community clubs, teams or organizations and involvement in such groups is highly related to the likelihood of being engaged in community service (Hart, Atkins, & Ford, 1998). Connell and Halpern-Felsher (1997) have observed the institutions that provide primary services to youth – Little League, YMCA, 4-H, Boys and Girls Clubs, etc. – are typically less represented, with fewer resources, in poorer neighborhoods. Taken together, these studies suggest that there are multiple ways in which socioeconomic advantages in families and in neighborhoods afford children opportunities for civic connection and practice.

This article is based on the following:

Flanagan, C.A., & Faison, N. (2001). Youth civic development: Implications of research for social policy and programs. *Social Policy Report*, 15, 3-15.

Connie Flanagan, Ph.D. Biography

Dr. Flanagan completed her Ph.D. in developmental psychology at the University of Michigan and is currently a professor of youth civic development at Pennsylvania State University. Her program of work, "Adolescents and the social contract," concerns the factors in families, schools, and communities that promote civic values and competencies in young people. She directed a seven-nation study on this topic as well as a study of inter-group relations and beliefs about justice among youth from different racial/ethnic backgrounds in the United States.

Two new projects include: a longitudinal study of peer loyalty and social responsibility as it relates to young people's views about health as a public or private issue and to their inclinations to intervene to prevent harm to one another and a study of the developmental correlates of social trust. Flanagan co-chairs the Society for Research in Child Development's Committee on Public Policy, and Public Information. She is a William T. Grant Faculty Scholar and a member of the MacArthur Foundation's Network on the Transition to Adulthood and Public Policy. She is on the editorial boards of three journals and on the advisory boards of Health!Rocks, Student Voices, and CIRCLE (the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement).

Relevant Publications

Osgood, W., Foster, E.M., Flanagan, C.A., & Ruth, G. (Eds.). (forthcoming) *On your own without a net: The transition to adulthood for vulnerable populations.*

Sherrod, L., Flanagan, C.A., & Kassimir, R. (Eds.). (forthcoming). *Youth Activism: An International Encyclopedia.* Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing.

Flanagan, C.A. (2003). Developmental roots of political engagement. *PS-Political Science and Politics*, 36 (2), 257-261.

Sherrod, L.R., Flanagan, C.A., & Youniss, J. (2002). Dimensions of citizenship and opportunities for youth development: The what, why, when, where, and who of citizenship development. *Applied Developmental Science* 6(4), 264-272.

Flanagan, C.A. & Van Horn, B.E. (2003). Youth civic development: A logical next step in community youth development. In F.A. Villarruel, D.F. Perkins, L.M. Borden & J.G. Keith (Eds.), *Community youth development: Practice, policy, and research* (pp. 273-296). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Flanagan, C.A. (2004). Volunteerism, leadership, political socialization, and civic engagement. In R.M. Lerner & L. Steinberg, (Eds.), *Handbook of adolescent psychology* (pp. 721-746). NY: Wiley.