

# Social Action Activities, Service Projects, and Civic Engagement

Rachelle Donnelly

**Abstract:** Social studies educators need to understand the impact of assigned social action activities and service projects on student learning so they can best meet the goals of social studies education. A major goal of social studies education is to create good citizens, and a key aspect of being a good citizen is being civically engaged. Studies show that assigned social action activities and service projects can positively impact civic engagement in the areas of community issue awareness, character development, and social responsibility. Assigned social action activities or service projects should be utilized in the secondary social studies classroom to improve civic engagement and achieve a major goal of social studies education, creating responsible citizens.

## Introduction

Social studies educators engage their students in social studies discourse through assignments, activities, and projects to teach them how to think like a historian, political scientist, or other practitioner in the field. Assigned social action activities or service projects should be utilized in the secondary social studies classroom to improve civic engagement and achieve a major goal of social studies education, creating responsible citizens. Social action activities will be defined as activities where students work together to identify, plan, and carry out solutions to problems in their school, community, and beyond. Service projects will be defined as volunteer actions generally for established community groups. By civic engagement, I mean citizens that get involved in their communities and take a stand for or against issues that are important to them. According to Engle (1960/2003), “[t]he goal of the social studies lies not merely in information but in the character of people. The goal is the good citizen” (p. 8).

A key part of being a good citizen is being civically engaged. Another term for civic engagement is active citizenship. According to Lin (2015), civic engagement at the community level can include activities such as helping a neighbor or attending a town meeting. The National Council for the Social Studies (2010) provides characteristics defining civic engagement. These include understanding the basic process of democracy and the ability to identify community issues. This means active citizens know the fundamental ways democracy works and can identify problems or areas for improvement within their communities. Active citizens are also able to engage in dialogue with others who have differing opinions, ideas, and perspectives and show moral and civic virtue. This requires the skills necessary for respectful discussions and debates. Participating in communities and organizations to promote and address a variety of ideas and beliefs is another characteristic of civic engagement as defined by the National Council for the Social Studies (2010).

Civic engagement also includes actions for the public benefit through “through group problem solving, public speaking, petitioning and protesting, and voting” (National Council for the Social Studies, 2010, p. 4). Furthermore, Scales et al. (2000) notes that relationships help young people acquire their attitudinal and behavioral archives especially through modeling and expectations from those significant to the young people. Scales et al. (2000) continues to explain:

Being enabled by adults to provide help to others, watching adults do the same, and communicating about the meaning of those experiences, as common features of service learning programs, might facilitate the acquisition by young people of socially responsible attitudes and behaviors (pp. 333-334).

Assigned social action activities and service projects can positively impact some of these characteristics of civic engagement/active citizenship and promote an important goal of social studies education.

## **Impact on Active Citizenship/Civic Engagement**

### ***Community Issue Awareness***

When beginning their study, Taylor and Iroha (2015) wanted to know how a community-oriented, art-based project in social studies would impact high school students and what the most important community issues were to high school students. They conducted their research through the Detroit Billboard Project where participants were 62 male students from the same school in Detroit, Michigan. Ninety-eight and a half percent of the participants were African American and all participated during social studies classes in designing a public service billboard (Taylor & Iroha, 2015). Students identified community issues and created messages for a billboard to address these issues. Students completed lessons on art’s ability to inform and persuade and the role of artists as agents of political and social change. Then students each chose an audience and created a billboard design using one of the messages compiled earlier in the project with the main goal to influence their chosen audience. All students participated in the democratic process of anonymous voting and selected the winning billboard from all of the student designs. A local advertising company donated the resources to create the winning billboard on a busy street near the school. Students then did reflective writing and anonymous surveys for the researchers to use to collect data.

The researchers found that 78.26% of students agreed or strongly agreed that the project had raised their awareness of community issues and 87.23% of students agreed or strongly agreed that the project gave them the opportunity to express concerns about community issues (Taylor & Iroha, 2015). These two aspects of civic engagement were positively impacted by the Detroit Billboard Project.

This study has limitations as it was only conducted in one school and one city. The students involved in this project were all male and almost all African American. While additional research is necessary to see if the results would be similar at other schools and communities, this study still provides valuable information. It shows that civic engagement can be positively impacted by assigned social action activities

or service projects because the project raised students' awareness of community issues and the ability to identify community issues is a characteristic of civic engagement as identified by The National Council for the Social Studies (2010).

### ***Character Development***

Similar to the study by Taylor and Aroha (2015), Billig et al. (2008) investigated the impacts of service-learning projects and specifically wanted to know how service-learning impacts "students' character development in the areas of prosocial attitudes and behaviors; citizenship and civic engagement attitudes and behaviors; academic performance; and behaviors related to disciplinary referrals" (p. 24). Billig et al. (2008) conducted a study with 840 participating students and 155 comparison students in middle and high school within a school district of Philadelphia. In 1998, the school district that participated in this study began to require "student engagement in citizenship projects (through service-learning) as a condition for promotion to middle school and high school, and for graduation" (Billig et al., 2008, p. 23). The school district implemented this requirement to produce socially responsible citizens and to promote academic achievement. The quality of the service-learning offered throughout the district varied greatly. In 2002, the district received a Partnerships in Character Education Grant that allowed them to create community partnerships for their service-learning (Billig et al., 2008).

Initially there were three community partners in the Billig et al. (2008) study, Champions of Caring, City Year Philadelphia, and Earth Force. The second year of the program Need Indeed was added as a fourth community partner for the service-learning projects. Champions of Caring worked with teachers to provide a full year service-learning curriculum based on studies of the Holocaust and other events related to racism and discrimination. In this service-learning project, students identified and addressed issues related to discrimination in their own community (Billig et al., 2008). City Year Philadelphia utilized its volunteers, young people ages 18-26, to engage students. They provided tutoring for the students as well as opportunities for students to organize community service events and become part of their specific programs like City Heroes. City Heroes is a group that met regularly to identify and address needs they saw in their community (Billig et al., 2008). Earth Force assisted teachers in creating and carrying out environmental service projects, which included projects to promote recycling and campus beautification projects at the school (Billig et al., 2008). Need Indeed assisted teachers in using the My Voice service-learning curriculum. With this curriculum, "students identified specific community needs, brainstormed ways to meet needs, engaged in service activities, and then reflected on their progress and impact" (Billig et al., 2008, p. 24). Each school was able to select one of these community partners to work with or had the option to create their own service-learning project.

Data was collected through pre and post surveys of students, post surveys of teachers, and data from the school district such as standardized test scores (Billig et al., 2008). The researchers found that "[s]tudents who engaged in the service-learning character education program outperformed their nonparticipating peers over time on the scales measuring school community, citizenship and civic engagement, and an aggregate score of all of the subscales" (Billig et al., 2008, p. 28). Billig

et al. (2008) found that three outcomes investigated in this study were related to the Essential Elements of Service-Learning including citizenship and civic engagement and “[f]ollow-up regression analyses revealed that only Element 3, assessment used to enhance student learning and evaluate how well students have met content and skill standards, was positively related to student growth in citizenship and civic engagement,  $t = 4.092, p < .001$ ” (p. 28). This relationship between Element 3 of the Essential Elements of Service-Learning and citizenship and civic engagement is highly statistically significant at the  $P < .001$  level and shows that when assessment was used to evaluate the degree of which students met content and skill standards, students’ citizenship and civic engagement is increased.

This study is limited in that it is done within one school district and results are mostly self-reported by students and teachers. Additional research is needed because there are so many components of service-learning, it would be helpful to deconstruct service-learning projects to investigate the relationships between the different components and features of service-learning (Billig et al., 2008). Despite the limitations, this study does give insight on the impact of service-learning projects on civic engagement. This study found that civic engagement is positively impacted by service-learning projects.

### ***Social Responsibility***

Finally, Scales et al. (2000) wanted to know if service-learning has a positive impact on students’ social responsibility. They measured social responsibility by students’ concern for the welfare of others, feelings of duty to help others, and how effective students perceive they can be in helping others (Scales et al., 2000). Scales et al. (2000) studied 1,153 sixth through eighth grade students with roughly equal numbers of students from each grade. Fifty three percent of the students were female and 47% male, and 70% of the students were white, 15% were African American, 4% Native American, and the remaining 11% were students identified as biracial, Hispanic, Asian, or other (Scales et al., 2000). Half of the sample students participated in service-learning in groups while the other half were in control groups.

The teachers leading the classes with service-learning groups were trained in service-learning classroom implementation. “Young adolescents themselves were involved in choosing the service activities in more than 80% of the service-learning classes, either alone, in groups, or with their teachers” (Scales et al., 2000, p. 338). This helps the students feel more connected to the service project and promotes awareness of community issues as discussed in the Taylor and Iroha (2015) study. The service activities in this study differed in content and length, but all included students performing service for the school or greater community. One group worked throughout the spring to build a nature trail to be used by the entire community. Another group worked for two weeks in the fall to develop and deliver a lesson to fifth graders on children’s charity. This included creating a puppet show and songs to teach the younger students about war-torn countries as part of a charity drive. A third group spent about one month recording oral histories of retired tool industry employees for a local heritage museum (Scales et al., 2000).

Researchers had the teachers leading the service-learning and control groups give the Survey of Middle School Student Life to their students at the beginning

and end of the school year to collect data (Scales et al., 2000). Scales et al. (2000) found that service-learning in the middle school classroom can positively impact social responsibility and “even service-learning programs of limited average duration and scope can have positive effects on students’ concern for others’ welfare, a concern that in the absence of service-learning declined over the school year” (p. 350). This study also found that substantial amounts of service-learning and reflection on service paired with the feeling that service-learning motivates the student in other classes helps students maintain their concern for others and can also improve how effective they believe they can be in helping others. These two factors can promote more active citizenship in students (Scales et al., 2000).

A limitation to this study is that the service-learning programs involved were found to be “somewhat better than average but not decidedly high quality” (Scales et al., 2000, p. 353). There are some additional limitations of this study including that the students’ parents had higher than average education levels and the service-learning programs were varied in content (Scales et al., 2000). Despite these limitations, this study provides data that service-learning programs in middle schools can positively impact social responsibility. Social responsibility is part of civic engagement. The specific qualities of social responsibility examined in this study, concern for the welfare of others and efficacy of helping others, are mentioned in the explanation of civic engagement from the National Council for the Social Studies (2010) under the category moral and civic virtues.

## Conclusion

This research shows that we, as members of a professional community of social studies educators, know that assigned social action activities or service projects can positively impact student learning within the area of active citizenship or civic engagement. This is seen through the findings of the three studies previously mentioned. Taylor and Iroha (2015) found that the assigned social action project in their study positively impacted the awareness of community issues and increased students’ perceived opportunities to express their concerns about their community. Billig et al. (2008) found that service-learning projects positively impacted students’ character development in citizenship and civic engagement. Scales et al. (2000) found that service projects positively impacted social responsibility. All three of these studies show positive impacts on a part or civic engagement. According to the National Council for the Social Studies (2010), civic engagement includes the ability to identify and understand community issues and to “[e]xhibit moral and civic virtues such as concern for the rights and welfare of others, social responsibility, tolerance and respect, and belief in the capacity to make a difference” (p. 4).

Engle (1960/2003) believes “the purpose of the social studies is to be education for citizenship” (p. 8). As previously mentioned, Engle (1960/2003) also believes the goal of social studies is not just retaining information but building character and good citizens. Engle (1960/2003) goes on to describe a good citizen as someone who “has achieved a store of sound and socially responsible beliefs and convictions” (p. 8). As we can see throughout the research discussed in this essay, active citizenship or civic engagement is an important part of being a good citizen and can be positively impacted by assigned social action activities or service projects.

Important aspects of civic engagement like social responsibility and the awareness of community and social issues can be positively impacted by engaging students in social studies discourse through assigned social action activities or service projects. It follows that assigned social action activities and service projects can help promote a major goal and purpose of social studies education. Therefore, assigned social action activities or service projects should be utilized in the secondary social studies classroom to improve civic engagement and achieve a major goal of social studies education, creating responsible citizens.

## References

- Billig, S. H., Jesse, D., Grimley, M. (2008). Using service-learning to promote character education in a large urban district. *Journal of Research in Character Education*, 6(1), 21-34. <https://web.p.ebscohost.com/ehost/detail/detail?vid=10&sid=57d96db4-08ee-4689011c8bf0b2fccc0%40redis&bddata=JkF1dGhUeXBIPXNoaWImc2l0ZT1laG9zdC1saXZlI#AN=35129544&db=ehh>
- Engle, S. H. (2003). Decision making: The heart of social studies instruction. *The Social Studies*, 24(7), 7-10. (Reprinted with permission from (1960). *Social Education*, 24(7), 301-306).
- Lin, A. (2015). Citizenship education in American schools and its role in developing civic engagement: A review of the research. *Educational Review*, 67(1), 35-63. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131911.2013.813440>
- National Council for the Social Studies. (2010). *National curriculum standards for social studies*. <https://www.socialstudies.org/standards>
- Scales, P. C., Blyth, D. A., Berkas, T. H., Kielsmeier, J. C. (2000). The effects of service-learning on middle school students' social responsibility and academic success. *Journal of Early Adolescence*, 20(3), 332-358. [https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Peter-Scales-2/publication/247764172\\_The\\_Effects\\_of\\_ServiceLearning\\_on\\_Middle\\_School\\_Student\\_Social\\_Responsibility\\_and\\_Academic\\_Success/links/57cef26a08aed678970111b8/The-Effects-of-Service-Learning-on-Middle-School-Students-Social-Responsibility-and-Academic-Success.pdf](https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Peter-Scales-2/publication/247764172_The_Effects_of_ServiceLearning_on_Middle_School_Student_Social_Responsibility_and_Academic_Success/links/57cef26a08aed678970111b8/The-Effects-of-Service-Learning-on-Middle-School-Students-Social-Responsibility-and-Academic-Success.pdf)
- Taylor, J. A., & Iroha, O. (2015). Social studies education and public art: The Detroit Billboard Project. *Journal of Social Studies Education Research*, 6(1). <https://web.s.ebscohost.com/ehost/detail/detail?vid=6&sid=b3e61096-e4e3-4cd2-8939-a0f0ef592bb6%40redis&bddata=JkF1dGhUeXBIPXNoaWImc2l0ZT1laG9zdC1saXZlI#AN=EJ1105361&db=eric>



## About the Author

Rachelle Donnelly holds a bachelor's degree in political science and a Master of Public Administration, both from Bowling Green State University. She will receive a Master of Education in Secondary Education, Integrated Social Studies from the University of Toledo in 2023 and begin her teaching career at Findlay High School.