



# The Impact of Action Civics Service-Learning on Eighth-Grade Students' Civic Outcomes

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## The Impact of Action Civics Service-Learning on Eighth-Grade Students' Civic Outcomes

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Using both quantitative and qualitative data, the study discussed in this article examined the effects of participating in an action civics service-learning program on civic commitment and civic competence. The sample consisted of 393 eighth-grade students in three diverse middle schools from urban and rural contexts. Though previous research has demonstrated positive influences of service-learning on youth civic development, few studies have focused on younger adolescents and underrepresented populations, particularly Latino students. The results of this study indicated that a school-based action civics service-learning program may support the development of middle school students' civic commitment and competence. A significant effect was found in relation to gender, with females reporting significantly higher levels of civic commitment and competence than males. The results demonstrated the complexity of developing civic dispositions, as project characteristics and implementation procedures influenced students' participation levels and civic outcomes.

**Keywords:** service-learning, action civics, civic education, middle schools, youth

Civic engagement is broadly defined as the political and social processes through which people work together to improve the quality of life in a community. These collaborative processes are viewed as essential to sustaining a strong democracy because they foster informed public discourse, promote civic equality, and increase elected officials' accountability to their communities (Gould, Jamieson, Levine, McConnell, & Smith, 2011; Levine, 2007; Levine & Kawashima-Ginsberg, 2017). Low levels of civic proficiency among school-age youth (National Center for Education Statistics, 2011) and the lack of political participation among young voters (Sullivan & Godsay, 2014) have raised concerns about young people's commitment to and capacity for civic engagement. However, more concerning are the persistent racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic gaps in indicators of civic engagement, particularly for Latino youth (Callahan & Muller, 2013; Levinson, 2012; Lopez & Gonzalez-Barrera, 2013; Niemi, 2012). For example, low participation of historically marginalized groups in voting—an indicator of civic engagement—highlights that these voices are not equally represented in national or local policy decisions. Addressing these imbalances in civic participation is particularly important for states like California, where, “for the first time in modern ... history, Latinos have reached a plurality of the state's total population” (Romero, 2016, p. 2).

In the 2014 general election, registered voter turnout for California was unprecedentedly low across all demographic groups, and there were historic disparities in voting between non-Latino Whites and Latinos (Romero, 2015). In response to this lack of participation by Latino voters in the political sphere, a cross-section of policy makers, voting advocates, and civic leaders began a dialogue about reforms to help engage citizens in the political process. From these conversations emerged the Power of Democracy initiative, a collaboration between the California State Supreme Court and the California Department of Education to improve civic awareness, learning, and engagement in the state. A key component of this initiative was the creation of regional coalitions of business, political, civic, education, and judicial leaders, with the goal of strengthening civic education across California.

Our study examined the work undertaken by one of the Power of Democracy regional coalitions, focusing namely on the first year of the Civic Learning Middle School Project (CLP). With an emphasis on youth empowerment, the CLP aims to support youth in developing a sense of agency to make a difference in their communities through action civics (Levinson, 2012) service-learning. In contrast to many other

similar programs that occur in out-of-school or extracurricular contexts, the CLP focuses on supporting teachers in transforming classroom contexts through the use of authentic, interactive, civic learning experiences. We emphasize the unique action civics approach to service-learning to denote how the CLP intentionally centered on developing students' understanding of effective principles of civic action and capacity to navigate political processes. In the following sections, we provide an overview of the research guiding this study, a description of how the CLP was implemented, and an analysis of how the CLP influenced the civic competence and commitment of the youth participants.

## **Literature Review**

The aim of this study was to explore the ways in which diverse middle school youth developed dispositions toward civic engagement. The study was guided by research suggesting that an individual's dispositions and actions are influenced by one's self-efficacy, or sense of agency over events in one's life (Bandura, 1997). Further, one's sense of competence, or internal judgment of performance, is thought to be central to the development of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1986; Pajares, 1996; Schunk, 1995); therefore, students' self-reported sense of civic competence was a key focus in our study. We also examined students' dispositions toward civic commitment, or the desire to contribute positively to one's community, because research has found that civic competence is an important mediator of civic commitment (Gastil & Xenos, 2010; Quintelier & Van Deth, 2014; Zaff, Boyd, Li, Lerner, & Lerner, 2010).

Many studies have sought to better understand how schools can create the conditions for fostering these civic dispositions in youth. A robust body of research has indicated that experiential activities, such as simulations and role-play (Torney-Purta, Amadeo, & Richardson, 2007), discussions of controversial issues (Hess, 2009; Hess & McAvoy, 2014), and addressing social issues through service-learning (Billig, 2000; Furco & Root, 2010) do enhance students' civic knowledge, civic efficacy, and their commitment to future political participation. Though research has identified ways for schools to support youth in developing a sense of civic efficacy, not all students are afforded these opportunities. Levinson (2010) argued that the disparity in civic participation across racial and ethnic groups emanates from a "civic empowerment gap" (p. 331) and that this gap stems from a lack of opportunities for adolescents to develop the self-efficacy and commitment required for civic engagement. Research has consistently found evidence of such opportunity gaps, whereby students from politically underrepresented groups do not have access to the same high-quality civic education experiences as other students (Coley & Sum, 2012; Flanagan 2009; Kahne & Middaugh, 2008; Kawashima-Ginsberg, 2013; Levine & Kawashima-Ginsberg, 2015; Wilkenfeld, 2009; Yoder, Kibler, & van Hover, 2016).

Emerging research has indicated, however, that the engagement gap can be narrowed when the opportunity gap is reduced (Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, 2013; Levinson, 2012; Rubin & Hayes, 2010), and scholars and policymakers have called upon schools to provide more underrepresented students with authentic, active civic experiences. Service-learning has been viewed as a powerful pedagogy that promotes the development of competent and effective citizens by combining academic instruction with the opportunity to practice democratic citizenship while engaging in service to the community (Billig, 2000; Furco & Root, 2010). However, some scholars have critiqued traditional service-learning activities for neglecting the social, political, and historical factors that underlie community issues (Daigre, 2000; Hart, 2006; Schensul & Berg, 2004), arguing that such enactments align more with charity or social service than social change and may not sufficiently develop the critical skills and dispositions students require for effective civic participation. Current research has supported this stance, demonstrating that participation in service-learning experiences that involve political action or examination of societal structures lead to greater growth in civic outcomes (Christens, Winn, & Duke, 2016; Melchior & Bailis, 2002; Reinders & Youniss, 2006).

From these critiques, action civics has emerged as a promising practice in civics education (Ballard, Cohen, & Littenberg-Tobias, 2016; Christens et al., 2016; Levinson, 2012). We view action civics as a unique form of service-learning. There are many similarities between these two approaches. They are both grounded in a positive youth development (PYD) philosophy (Lerner, Wang, Champine, Warren, &

Erickson, 2014), which values youth as resources and change makers; engages students in an iterative process of research, action, and reflection about key issues in their own communities; and operates on the premise that civic competence and commitment are fostered through engagement in authentic, student-generated, meaningful civic activities. The key distinction is that action civics deliberately emphasizes developing strategies to understand and navigate sociopolitical contexts.

## Gaps in the Literature

Service-learning has strong potential to enhance civic efficacy, civic commitment, and civic engagement in general (Gibson & Levine, 2003; Hart, Donnelly, Youniss, & Atkins, 2007). However, there are several gaps in the literature this study attempted to address. First, limited research has been conducted on the ways service-learning experiences impact the potential civic engagement of low-income and minority students, particularly Latino youth (Celio, Durlak, & Dymnicki, 2011). Though large-scale survey studies have found that minority students who had service-learning experiences in high school reported greater intent to participate as adults (Campbell, 2007; Kahne & Middaugh, 2008; McIntosh & Munoz, 2009) and demonstrated stronger civic participation as adults (Kahne & Sporte, 2008; Kawashima-Ginsberg & Levine, 2014), such studies do not account for the nuances of specific experiences.

Some qualitative research has identified associations between specific experiences and civic dispositions. For example, Latino and African-American high school students reported that the opportunity to collaborate with adult community members and actively address local community issues increased their connections to their neighborhoods, which fostered their commitment to future participation (Cammarota & Romero, 2009; Ozer & Wright, 2012; Rubin, 2007). However, researchers have continued to call for more qualitative investigations into the contextual factors that influence the development of students' civic identities (Cohen & Chaffee, 2013; Kahne & Middaugh, 2008; Saavedra, 2016; Voight & Torney-Purta, 2013). For instance, Melchior and Bailis (2002) noted specifically that large-scale evaluations of service-learning do not capture the perspectives of participating youth and suggested that mixed-methods approaches would allow for a deeper understanding of the processes by which students experience political awakening, acquire a sense of agency, or become committed to their communities through service-learning approaches.

Another limitation of the literature around marginalized groups, and most germane to this study, is the dearth of research on middle school youth. Even though scholars have asserted that the civic attitudes and skills that enable civic engagement result from an accumulation of opportunities that begin in childhood and the adolescent years before high school (Astuto & Ruck, 2010; Boyle-Baise & Zevin, 2009; Flanagan & Levine, 2010; Sherrod & Lauckhardt, 2009; Wade, 2008; Youniss & Yates, 1999; Zaff, Hart, Flanagan, Youniss, & Levine, 2010), a recent meta-analysis of service-learning research found that less than 10% of studies were conducted with young adolescents (Celio et al., 2011). Accordingly, there is a need for more studies to examine middle school students and the influences on civic identity development in early adolescence (Celio et al., 2011; Flanagan & Levine, 2010; Voight & Torney-Purta, 2013; Wray-Lake, Syvertsen, & Flanagan, 2016).

## Method

The goal of this study was to address gaps in the literature regarding the ways diverse middle school youth develop and enact active civic identities by exploring the relationships among eighth-grade students' school-based civic learning experiences, processes of constructing civic identities, levels of perceived civic competence, and levels of civic commitment. Descriptive and correlational quantitative methods were combined with qualitative methods in a concurrent triangulation mixed-methods design, giving equal priority to quantitative and qualitative data (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). Ultimately, mixing methods allowed for stronger interpretations through the convergence of evidence across the data sources. Likewise, complementarity allowed for the qualitative data to elaborate and clarify the results of the quantitative data (Collins, Onwuegbuzie, & Sutton, 2006).

This investigation was guided by the following research questions:

1. Do service-learning experiences influence students' civic commitment, and are there differences across demographic groups?
2. Do service-learning experiences influence students' civic competence, and are there differences across demographic groups?
3. What aspects of service-learning experiences do students and teachers identify as supports or constraints in developing youth civic identities?

## Participants and Context

District leaders participating in the civic learning collaborative distributed information about the program within their respective districts. The participating schools' principals volunteered to join the program and recruited teachers from within their schools. The sample consisted of 393 eighth-grade students from three middle schools. As presented in Table 1, the student participants represented the diversity of the region, with a majority of students (48.7%) identifying as Hispanic/Latino/Chicano. In total, five teachers participated, three female and two male. One White male history teacher participated from School A; he had had a few experiences with extracurricular service projects with student leadership groups but had never applied service-learning in the classroom. One Mexican-American male history teacher, one Mexican-American female language arts teacher, and one White female language arts teacher participated from School B. These latter three teachers had extensive experience working with school student leadership groups (e.g., school council) on school-wide service initiatives but limited experience integrating service-learning into classroom instruction. One White female history teacher participated from School C, and she had extensive experience applying service-learning pedagogy within her classroom.

**Table 1:** Participant Demographics

Demographic Characteristics	School A	School B	School C	Total
Total Students	132	180	81	393
Gender (% Female)	49.00%	53.00%	47.00%	51.00%
Ethnicity				
African American/Black	8.30%	2.80%	7.70%	5.60%
American Indian or Alaska Native	0.80%	2.20%	1.30%	1.50%
Asian (other than Southeast Asian)	1.50%	9.40%	0.00%	4.90%
Southeast Asian (Hmong, Laotian, Vietnamese)	2.30%	1.10%	0.00%	1.30%
Hispanic/Latino/Chicano	38.60%	61.70%	35.90%	48.70%
Native American	0.80%	3.30%	1.30%	2.10%
Pacific Islander	0.00%	0.00%	1.30%	0.30%
White/Caucasian	27.30%	8.90%	28.20%	19.00%
% Other/Mixed Race	20.50%	10.60%	24.40%	16.70%

## **Civic Learning Middle School Project (CLP)**

Two members of the regional civic learning coalition coordinated the CLP. These coordinators were educators with extensive experience with service-learning and civic education. Throughout the project they provided ongoing support for implementation through site visits, email communication, and organized professional development sessions. They also served as liaisons to the community and connected students and teachers with individuals and organizations relevant to the needs and interests of the students.

The CLP was a yearlong initiative that began with a leadership development retreat for teachers and student leaders from all three schools. Student leaders from Schools A and C were elected by their peers while those from School B were selected by the teachers. During the retreat, students participated in team-building and leadership activities, and listened to community organizers and young adult civic leaders speak about the importance of civic engagement. The retreat culminated in students deliberating within and across school teams about potential project topics, key ideas to share with peers at their schools, and strategies to inspire interest and engagement from their classmates.

The CLP projects were conducted through a five-phase process guided by the standards for service-learning and the action civics framework (Billig & Weah, 2008; Levinson, 2012). Phase 1 focused on implementing lessons based on the state standards that provided students with knowledge about civic and character values, democratic principles and practices, and skills such as civil dialogue and deliberation. During Phase 1, students were also taught how they would apply these principles, practices, and skills to service-learning projects. In Phase 2, students identified a topic or issue of concern, grouped together around similar interests, and then conducted research. Applying these democratic principles, practices, and skills, groups presented their issues for class deliberation. From the ideas presented, each class selected one focus issue or topic. In Phase 3, each class created a systems map of stakeholders, gathered resources and met with community advisors/mentors to engage in deeper research of the selected issue, determined potential solutions, and developed an action plan for implementation. In Phase 4, students implemented their action plan and continually reflected on the efficacy and progress of that plan, making adjustments as necessary. Finally, in Phase 5, student groups constructed presentations of their civic action projects and shared them publicly at a Democracy School Showcase event. Representatives from each class were selected to attend and present at a public auditorium. This event also publicly recognized the project teachers, parents, and community members who had supported the students' civic action projects. Approximately 250 family members, community mentors, and civic leaders attended, and local news outlets reported on the event. Table 2 provides a summary of the issues examined and actions taken for each project.

## **Data Collection**

Quantitative and qualitative data were collected across the phases of the CLP. We administered a survey to students before the leadership retreat and after the showcase event to collect quantitative data regarding students' commitment to civic participation and civic competence (i.e., efficacy). We focused on these two constructs because, as noted in the literature review, they are highly correlated. The items on the survey were drawn from instruments used in previous studies (Flanagan, Syvertsen, & Stout, 2007). Civic commitment was measured on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 ("I definitely can") to 5 ("I definitely can't"). The items were drawn from the California Civic Index (Flanagan et al., 2007). The five items (e.g. "When you think about your life after high school, how likely is it that you would do each of the following? ... vote on a regular basis, work with a group to solve a problem in the community where you live") had a satisfactory internal consistency with Cronbach's alphas of  $t1 = 0.71$ ,  $t2 = 0.75$ . Civic competence was measured on a 5-point Likert-type scale that ranged from 1 ("I definitely can") to 5 ("I definitely can't") (Flanagan et al., 2007). The four items (e.g. "get other people to care about the problem," "organize and run a meeting") had a satisfactory internal consistency with alphas of  $t1 = 0.72$ ,  $t2 = 0.77$ .

**Table 2: CLP Projects**

<b>Projects (School A, B, or C)</b>	<b>Community Members/Organizations</b>	<b>Civic Action</b>
<i>Trauma Leading to Homelessness (A)</i>	Rescue Mission; City Police Department Homeless Task Force; County Bar Association	PSA developed on ending bullying and trauma; shared through social media
<i>Ending Racism (A)</i>	U.S. Federal Courts; City Council; City District Attorney; university sociology department; Black Lives Matter; Faith in Community	Developed lesson on building cross-cultural relations; adopted as part of school curriculum
<i>Obesity and Nutrition Awareness (A)</i>	Off the Front; County Office of Education Wellness and Nutrition educator; Metro Ministry Food Systems director	Developed presentation on findings and future directions
<i>Drug and Alcohol Addiction Awareness (A)</i>	County Behavioral Health advisory board-alcohol/drug counselor; school district psychologist	Developed presentation on findings and future directions
<i>Bullying and Mental Health Awareness (A)</i>	National Alliance for Mental Illness; school district psychologist; Survivors of Suicide counselor	Developed lesson; proposed for district-wide curriculum adoption
<i>Care Packages for Troops (B)</i>	City Improvement Association	Sent 11 packages to three soldiers serving abroad
<i>PTSD Awareness (B)</i>	City Council; National Alliance for Mental Illness; City Veterans Memorial District	Developed website on PTSD support systems; posted on city and school district websites
<i>Heart of the Horse (B)</i>	Heart of the Horse Animal Therapy; City Improvement Association; local businesses	Raised funds and donated saddle to support therapy of dozens from the region
<i>Homelessness (C)</i>	Homeless shelter; City Rescue Mission	Made and donated pillows to organizations
<i>Diversity and Unity Mural (C)</i>	Local artist; Cultural Arts Rotary Club	Designed and created mural in city's downtown district

Qualitative data were collected through student focus groups and teacher interviews. The researchers conducted the student focus groups in a classroom during class time without the teacher being present. Participating teachers assisted researchers by purposively selecting two to three students per project ( $n = 56$ ) to represent differences in levels of participation, gender (25 male, 31 female) and ethnicity (3 African American, 5 Asian, 4 Southeast Asian, 26 Latino/Hispanic, 18 White). The aim of the focus groups was to capture students' views on how the CLP process influenced their development of civic skills, knowledge, and attitudes (e.g., "What does it mean to be an active citizen? Thinking about what you've been doing in your class, what are the things that have most helped you learn about being an active citizen?"). Teacher interviews were conducted with all five participants using a semi-structured protocol at

the retreat and after the showcase event. The aim of the interviews was to capture teachers' descriptions of their instructional approaches and their views on how these approaches impact students' civic development (e.g., "How have you used service-learning to promote civic education this semester? How do you think these activities have impacted students' civic attitudes, knowledge, and skills?").

## Data Analysis

Survey data were analyzed using SPSS software (version 24). Repeated measures analysis of variances (ANOVA) were calculated to compare pre- and posttest survey scores using the factors gender, ethnicity, and schools. Listwise deletion was used to handle missing data. A grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990) was used to analyze each set of qualitative data. The first iteration of analysis began with repeated readings of the data, using memoing techniques to record initial perspectives. These initial perspectives were analyzed to develop a coding scheme for the second iteration of analysis. Once coding was complete, the data gathered from each school were analyzed as a bounded case. Within each case, deeper analyses compared teacher and student perspectives, different project groups, as well as demographic groups. A series of cross-case analyses compared teachers, project groups, and schools.

## Results

This study aimed to explore the complex phenomenon of developing youth civic identities. In line with the mixed-methods approach that shaped this study, we structured this section to highlight the complementary relationships between the quantitative and qualitative data. Examining the results together provided for a deeper understanding of how the different factors and structures of service-learning experiences influenced the students' civic commitment and civic competence.

### Civic Commitment

The survey results showed that most students reported a strong civic commitment at both points in time—that is, before the leadership retreat and after the showcase event—and, overall, there were no statistically significant changes in the levels of commitment from the beginning of the study ( $M = 3.86$ ,  $SD = 0.69$ ) to the end ( $M = 3.79$ ,  $SD = 0.77$ ),  $t(259) = 1.62$ ,  $p = 0.106$ . There was no significant difference among the three schools, and there were also no statistically significant differences across racial and ethnic groups. However, we did find a difference regarding gender (see Figure 1). Overall, females ( $M = 3.97$ ) reported statistically significant higher levels of civic commitment than males ( $M = 3.67$ )  $F(1, 249) = 13.95$ ,  $p = 0.000$ ,  $\text{partial } \eta^2 = 0.05$ . When we examined the gender differences by ethnicity (White vs. Latino), we did not find any statistically significant interactions.

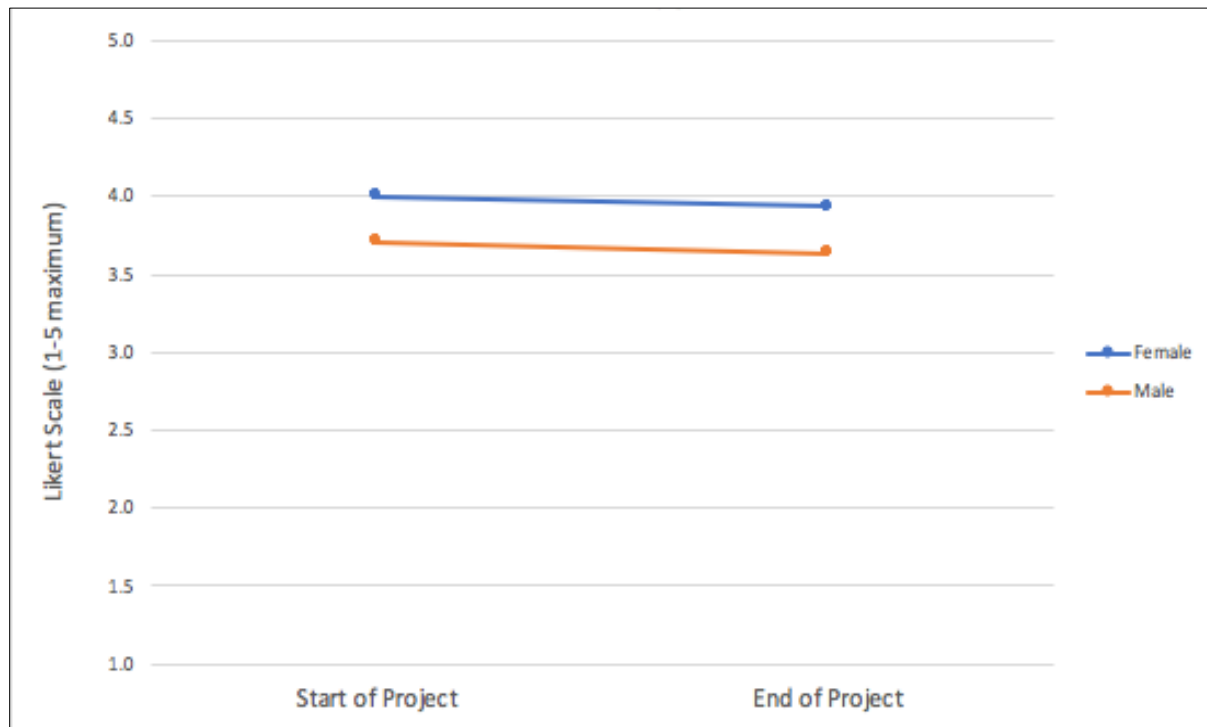
### Civic Competence

Overall, most students reported a strong sense of civic competence at both points in time.

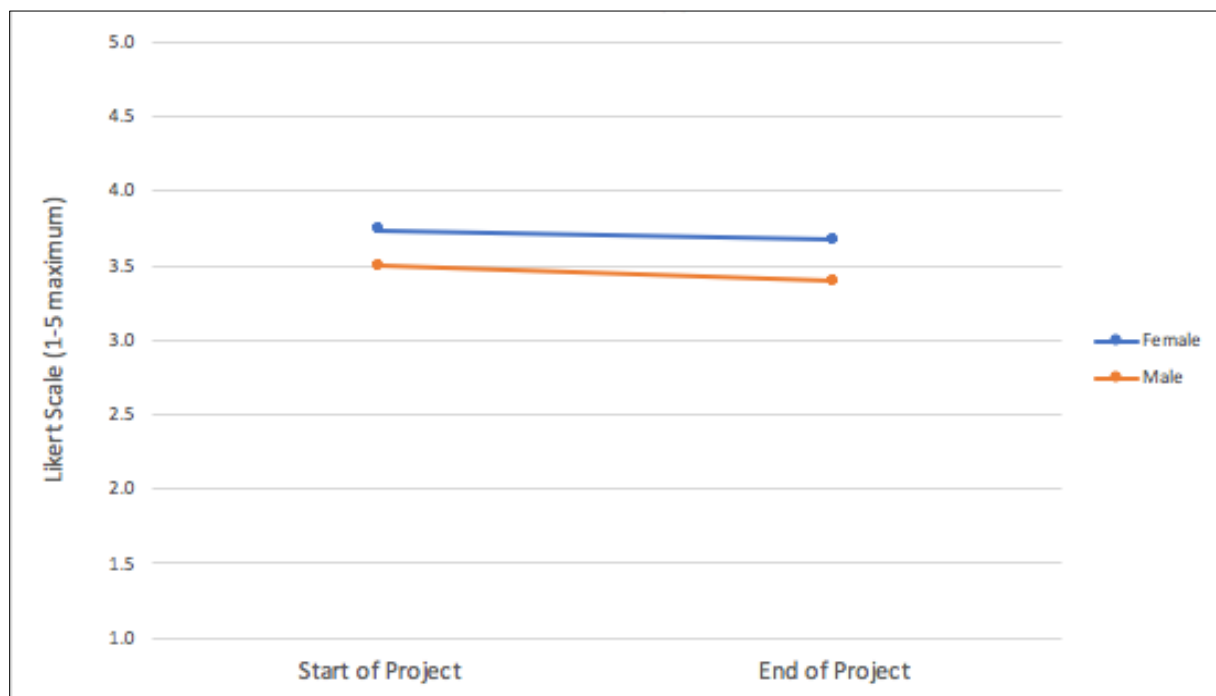
The survey results indicated that civic competence also decreased slightly but not statistically significantly from the beginning of the study ( $M = 3.61$ ,  $SD = 0.80$ ) to the end ( $M = 3.53$ ,  $SD = 0.83$ ),  $t(262) = 1.65$ ,  $p = 0.100$ . Overall, females ( $M = 3.70$ ) reported statistically significantly higher levels of civic competence than males ( $M = 3.44$ ),  $F(1, 252) = 8.37$ ,  $p = 0.004$ ,  $\text{partial } \eta^2 = 0.03$ , but both genders exhibited a similarly decreasing trend over time (see Figure 2). A significant main effect of gender was found in analyses including gender, ethnicity, and schools  $F(1, 166) = 5.62$ ,  $p = 0.019$ ,  $\text{partial } \eta^2 = 0.03$ , which points toward a persistent mean difference between the genders.



**Figure 1.** Development in civic commitment for all students by gender.



**Figure 2.** Development in civic competence for all students by gender.



## Influences on Civic Commitment and Civic Competence

Though the quantitative results indicated no significant changes in civic commitment and competence, the qualitative data provided evidence that these civic learning experiences did have an impact on students' development. Further, the qualitative data also provided some insights into this contradiction. Deeper quantitative analysis demonstrated a strong positive correlation between the two constructs of civic commitment and competence ( $r = 0.537, p < .000$ ), and the interview responses elaborated on how these concepts intersected.

The themes presented below highlight how the authenticity of the civic learning experiences fostered students' civic development; in particular, the real-world consequences of the projects and the direct interaction with community members were identified as positive influences. Cross-analyses of the qualitative data did not identify any distinct differences in civic commitment or competence across schools, race and ethnicity, or gender. However, there appeared to be some differences across specific projects. Specifically, the process of implementation and the framing of the project goals appeared to influence the students' civic development.

### Authenticity, Interactions, and Commitment

All of the teachers commented on students' sense of commitment to community and the ways students' perspectives had changed over the course of the projects. When asked about particular aspects of the projects that influenced students' sense of commitment, the teachers overwhelmingly cited the authenticity of the civic experiences. For example, the teacher from School C noted, "I think as long as the students work with somebody else outside of the classroom, that gets them a little more engaged." Another teacher from School B elaborated on this aspect of active connection within the community, focusing on the real consequences of the students' endeavors:

I think going to the Heart of the Horse [Animal Therapy] had a big impact. It was just so emotional. When we went to the ranch, they had the vets there. Some of the vets that volunteer and some of the vets that receive the therapy. So it gave the kids a chance to see that it was going for something really good.

The student responses supported the teachers' observations of how the meaningful purpose of the projects stimulated their commitment. For some students, direct interaction outside the classroom with the people they aimed to support was motivational. One student from School B shared, "Yeah, we actually went to the ranch. When we went, there were some kids having their sessions. It was really moving. You could just see their faces brighten up, and they were just so happy." For others, classroom activities that highlighted the purpose of the projects enhanced their levels of commitment. One student from School A noted how the research phase influenced her motivation: "I would say at the beginning of it, it was kinda like, 'Why are we even doing this?' But as we slowly got into it more in-depth, we got more involved and learned more, and we just got more motivated to take part in what was happening." Another student from a different project at School A elaborated on how interacting with community members in the classroom inspired her:

I was kinda laid back because I didn't know what we were doing, and I was just kinda like, "OK. Why are we researching this? What is the point of this?" So I didn't really take it seriously, but once Mr. G. [community activist] came in and I found out the purpose of why we were doing this, I was like, "Oh gosh! I have to be serious. This is a real problem." So my tone went from unmotivated, to really motivated, to serious, to acting my age.

### Impact and Efficacy

As students described their learning experiences, they consistently spoke about their sense of accomplishment. One student from School B noted how the project "made people aware that us 'kids' are able to do things you wouldn't expect." Similarly, a student from School A explained how "choosing a topic and then working on it showed we can change something in the real world. Even at a young age."

The students' levels of efficacy may have been influenced by their perceptions of how deeply their work impacted the community. A teacher from School B explained the students' sense of accomplishment: "Talking with the students, they said that it wasn't that they merely learned about it, but that they contributed to solving the problem." The teacher from School A provided some elaboration on how different outcomes influenced student perspectives:

I would say two of my five groups really felt like they had an impact on the community. They really felt empowered and felt like they were doing something that made a difference. My other groups, I think they felt a little disheartened because they felt like they didn't have a big impact. I just found a direct correlation between their attitudes toward it and their final product. The kids that actually went in and taught a lesson or did some sort of real project obviously felt like they made a bigger impact.

The student interview data supported the teachers' observations. Though students from each project reported on the value of their experiences, the particular groups identified earlier by the teachers reported much stronger feelings of accomplishment. As one student from the mental health group noted,

I remember, me and [her], we both went to Mr. [X's] class to teach. That's when I really noticed, "Wow. We're like really here, and we have all of this information. We are teaching other kids what we learned." For me, that's when I figured out how much work we actually did.

In addition to the implementation of lessons, several other students described how demonstrating their knowledge to the wider community also enhanced their sense of achievement. A student from the racism group noted, "But once the speech night hit, we were like, 'Oh my gosh! We just did this whole project. We probably just changed a few people's lives!'" Another student from the mental health group also noted the influence of the showcase:

Adding on to what [she] said, when we went to the civic engagement showcase, when I presented, I was like proud of myself because I was able to present to all of these people what I had learned and the process we went through.

In contrast, students from a group that did not complete a project spoke about "needing more time to work to have a better quality finished project in the end." Thus, the outcomes of the projects appears to have played a crucial role in developing student civic competence.

### **Challenges to Civic Development**

Two main themes emerged from the interview responses that provided some insight into interpreting the lack of significant changes in students' survey responses. First, there appeared to be an unequal differentiation of participation. Though both teachers and students believed that most of the students in the classes were involved to some extent in the projects, they also reported that some students were more involved than others. Logistical constraints influenced how the larger schools (i.e., A and B) structured the project implementation. School B teachers selected a group of student leaders to guide each project, which created a lack of awareness of the projects among the larger student body. During this exchange, a group of student leaders explained how this structure may have influenced their peers' commitment.

Student 1: I think a lot of the kids didn't really care about the projects because they didn't know much about them.

Student 2: Yeah, we [i.e., the leadership group] understand the purpose of the project, and a lot of other people don't know why we are doing it. I think if they understood why, they might have more dedication to being involved.

Student 3: Maybe they just didn't know how to help out. They might have been interested but didn't know what to do for the project.

Student 4: I think a lot more people would have been involved if they were part of the leadership group. I know a lot of people signed up to do it, but not as many got picked to do it. I think if more people got picked to do it then they would have been more involved with it.

When asked about this unequal participation, one teacher from School B explained how the level of involvement was influenced by the managerial demands of project implementation:

I would have liked to see more of the kids be involved, but it's also hard because when you have too many, it's like, "Well, what part do you get?" And so, it worked great with the kids that we had. It worked really well. Adding more would be good, so more could be involved. But when you have more, then you have to end up doing more projects.

Another factor that influenced student involvement was the decision-making process for selecting project topics. Teachers and students across School A and School C noted how the lack of student "buy-in" to projects created some disengagement. For example, one teacher noted, "We'll pick a project that a child may not actually buy into. Because with the democratic process, you're going to have a majority that say, 'Yes, let's do this project,' and there's always going to be some kids like, 'No. That's not the project that I wanted to do.'" Several students corroborated this observation. One stated,

Before we picked the certain topic that all of us were going to get in on, we split up into multiple groups in our class and all of us had a different topic that we had to present, and then we voted as a class. I think some classmates weren't as involved because they didn't get what they wanted.

## Discussion

Extensive research on youth civic engagement has focused on older adolescents but has neglected the civic development of younger adolescents, particularly those from underrepresented groups. Further, large-scale studies relying solely on quantitative data have not captured the unique influences on the development of youth civic dispositions. This study aimed to address these gaps in the literature on youth civic engagement. Utilizing a mixed-methods design, the study examined the ways service-learning experiences influenced the civic development of diverse eighth-grade students.

The survey results indicated that, overall, students did not report significant changes in their civic commitment or civic competence over the course of the study. This trend may be attributable to internal validity threats associated with self-reported survey data. Moore McBride, Chung, and Robertson (2016) found a similar trend in studying the impact of service-learning on youth and identified response-shift bias as a plausible explanation (Howard & Dailey, 1979). Richards et al. (2013) also found similar trends and posited that exposure to the realities of civic responsibility may have clarified the challenges and thus limited students' ideas of what is possible. Since the constructs of civic competence and civic commitment were so highly correlated, youth in the present study may have rated themselves lower in civic competence on the posttest survey because the service-learning experiences shifted their frame of reference and made them more aware of the complexity of civic engagement, which in turn influenced their stances on civic commitment.

The particular developmental stage of the participants may also have influenced the survey results. Wray-Lake et al. (2016) found a U-shaped trend in moral development, with middle adolescents reporting lower frequencies of prosocial moral judgments and declines in endorsements of collective responsibility. It may be that the students initially responded in socially desirable ways and the posttest survey responses more accurately reflected the students' internal beliefs.

However, the qualitative data provided evidence that the service-learning experiences did positively impact the students' civic dispositions. We see these discrepancies between data sources as aligning with the self-efficacy framework guiding this study (Bandura, 1997). The focus groups provided students with an opportunity to evaluate their performance in relation to the specific, concrete experiences of their project. In contrast, the survey required students to consider their future participation in abstract contexts. Students' self-reported civic competence and civic commitment were more positive when they evaluated their performance in the authentic personal experiences of their CLP projects. Thus, the mixed analysis suggests that understanding youth civic engagement may be strengthened by affording youth opportunities to reflect on their lived experiences. This finding was not only important for enhancing the

interpretations of the survey data in the present study, but it lends support to the calls for more qualitative investigations of the civic development of youth (Cohen & Chaffee, 2013; Kahne & Middaugh, 2008; Voight & Torney-Purta, 2013).

The mixed methods employed in the current study allowed us to understand the processes from the perspectives of the youth and to follow up on patterns that were not explainable solely through analysis of the quantitative measures. Specifically, direct interaction with community members had a positive impact on students' civic development. Similar to previous studies, projects that engaged students directly with the community created more authentic learning experiences, which enhanced students' perceived value of the projects as well as their commitment to civic action (Metz, McLellan, & Youniss, 2003; Reinders & Youniss, 2006). Direct interactions with the community beyond the school walls have also been linked to gains in civic competence; Ballard et al. (2016) posited that such experiences provide unique opportunities for students to feel efficacious in civic life. Students who did not have access to such opportunities may not have gained an understanding of the importance or direction of the project. Thus, the different levels of access to the community associated with different projects may have influenced students' sense of commitment and competence.

As the interview data demonstrated, both teachers and students were aware of the unequal levels of opportunity. The teachers used a variety of structures to organize the projects based on their local constraints. The current data did not allow for a deeper understanding of how individuals were positioned by teachers and peers. The different roles afforded students within each project could have fostered commitment or disengagement, which may have influenced their sense of civic commitment and competence. Observational data would have allowed for a more comprehensive understanding of how individual students engaged in project activities and how levels of involvement influenced civic development.

Integrating the survey and interview data provided some insight into the significant difference between genders. Females reported significantly higher levels of civic commitment and civic competence. This may have been influenced by the form of citizenship promoted by these particular projects. Research has shown that males and females prioritize different civic activities; females are more oriented toward service activities, while males tend to prefer political activities (Hooghe & Stolle, 2004; Metzger & Ferris, 2013; Metzger & Smetana, 2009; Voight & Torney-Purta, 2013). Across the three schools, students' responses regarding what they learned about participatory citizenship focused on the concept of social responsibility and "giving back to others," suggesting that the projects were viewed primarily as social contributions to the community. It might be that the way in which teachers framed the projects focused students' attention on social issues without simultaneously engaging them in exploring the political aspects of these issues. This emphasis on social civic engagement may have fostered disinterest among the males.

However, the emphasis on social responsibility may have had a positive influence on the Latino students. Suárez-Orozco, Hernández, and Casanova (2015) found that as Latino students developed a stronger sense of social responsibility they became more motivated to engage in social change. Contrary to Voight and Torney-Purta (2013), the results of this study showed that Latino students' commitment to civic action was relatively strong and similar to other racial and ethnic groups. This suggests that particular enactments of service-learning through an action civics framework may narrow the civic empowerment gap (Levinson, 2012).

## **Conclusion and Future Directions**

The findings of this study must be considered within the limitations of the research procedures. The context of this study involved only three middle schools participating in the CLP. Comparing these schools to others with a more traditional civic education approach would allow for a greater understanding of the specific effects of service-learning framed by an action civics approach.

The findings from this study hold important implications for service-learning researchers and teachers. First, the development of civic commitment and civic competence is complex; employing mixed-methods research procedures better enables researchers to capture this complexity. Classroom observations

were not conducted in the current study, and this source of data would have been valuable in understanding how different students' participation levels, frequency of project work, interactions with community members, and connections to the curriculum influenced students' civic commitment and efficacy. Observations focused on the implementation structures and processes would provide researchers with a better understanding of the roles afforded to students, the interactions among peers, teachers, and community members, and how these factors influence civic outcomes. Second, the framing of the project, as service-oriented or political, may influence student participation. The effects of service-learning depend on students' level of engagement and on the quality of the projects. If students are not engaged, then they are less likely to benefit from a project. Additionally, if students are engaged but the project is of low quality or is not successful in the eyes of the students, the experience could be frustrating and potentially decrease their sense of civic commitment or competence. Teachers should be aware of how males and females may respond to different types of projects and purposefully guide students to examine the political factors influencing issues.

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