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Developing the Civic Skills of Public School Youth: A Mixed Methods Assessment

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This study employed mixed methods to examine the experiences of public high school youth (N=126) who participated in youth-designed and youth-led community action over the course of an academic year. The authors explore the development of leadership skills, attitudes toward school-community, and sense of agency. Quantitative findings demonstrate statistically significant changes in youths' civic attitudes and skills. Qualitative findings provide nuanced understanding of youths' experiences with responsibility-accountability, confidence-empowerment, perseverance, leadership, mentorship-relationship, and professional skills.

Keywords: *civic engagement; mixed methods; youth empowerment; youth-led organizing; school based civic engagement*

American democracy has long been rooted in the participation of ordinary people in community and political decision-making. For generations, individuals taking part in community organizations, political institutions, and civic discourse have played a role in the health of the democratic system. In order to ensure the continuation of participatory American democracy, youth need to be exposed to the institutions and experiences that will help them to see themselves as civically competent (Youniss et al., 2003) and engaged members of their communities. This is especially true for youth who represent marginalized groups, such as low-income youth, young people of color, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender youth; as scholars have noted, they tend to be less civically engaged than other youth (Atkins & Hart, 2003; Ginwright & James, 2003; Russell, 2002). Students of color are less likely to believe they can create community change, and students of lower socioeconomic backgrounds have lower levels of U.S. civic knowledge and skills (Carnegie Corporation of New York, 2003). Galston (2001) notes, "if those who withdraw [from public engagement] the most are those who have the least, the system will become even less responsive to their needs" (p. 220).

To achieve the goal of raising the next generation of engaged civic actors, youth need practice with the skills necessary to impact the political world around them. While this has long been a widely accepted goal of the public school system, civic education and development were largely put on the back burner for much of the last few decades in favor of more traditional classroom education (Galston, 2001). Even as civic education returns to focus in the fields of education and social sciences, students are not always learning the civic skills they need for engagement. A 2003 study of high school- and college-aged students reported that "eight out of ten high school students have given a speech or oral report, but only half (51%) have taken part in a debate or discussion in which they had to persuade someone about something, and just 38% have written a letter to someone they

do not know" (Andolina, Jenkins, Zukin, & Keeter, 2003, p. 278). Without these most basic skills for engagement, students cannot be expected to excel as community leaders and citizens. In fact, youth who did not have support for engagement from their home, school, or other activities were less likely to be engaged in civics and politics, while those who had opportunities to debate issues in class and participate in political groups in high school later reported sustained participation in civic and political matters (Andolina et al., 2003).

Current literature documents that students who are involved in civic engagement activities report increased notions of civic responsibility, academic development, critical thinking, and life skills (Astin & Sax, 1998; Batchelder & Root, 1994; Eyler & Giles, 1999; Gray et al., 1996). Opportunities for civic engagement protect urban, low-income, and minority youth by fostering resistance to antisocial behavior, substance abuse, and disengagement from school (Finn & Checkowy, 1998; Fogal, 2004; Kelly, 2009). Additionally, youths' likelihood of effectively navigating critical life transitions and civic participation as adults increases when they have opportunities to engage in meaningful civic action (Kelly, 2009; Michelsen, Zaff, & Hair, 2002).

In 2000, Putnam argued that Americans suffer from civic fatigue and disinterest in the political and civic realm. However, just the year prior to that, a study by the National Association of Secretaries of State (1999) found that two-thirds of youths aged 15 to 24 agreed that "our generation has an important voice, but no one seems to hear it" (p. 22). It has been 14 years since that report, and now, as civic education returns to the itinerary in schools and communities in various forms, it is important to assess the success of these programs and methods for their effectiveness in promoting democratic citizenship, community engagement, and student learning (Kuh, 2001).

While much of the recent literature focuses on undergraduate students in service- learning and civic engagement programs at universities, Public Achievement (PA), the focus of this paper, primarily engages middle and high school students in civic action on community issues that interest them. Research demonstrates that PA positively influenced fourth-grade female participants' civic knowledge (i.e., understanding of the legal institutions and structures of a community), skills "for effective political participation," and increased their sense of civic efficacy (Smith, 2012, p. 50). Another study of PA with elementary school students produced inconclusive findings, indicating that at the close of the study, the youngest participants (grades 2 and 3) had a decrease in their confidence about making the world a better place (RMC, 2005). However, the fourth- and fifth-grade participants in that study indicated greater affinity for willingness to solve problems at the close of the project (RMC, 2006). A search of the current literature, including an extensive annotated bibliography on leadership and civic engagement, did not uncover any studies of PA with high school-aged students (Haugen & Harrington, 2010). The current study extends the study of PA to high school youth to explore the following research questions: What civic skills and attitudes arise for youth who participate in PA? How do youth describe the skills and attitudes they cultivate in the process of developing public projects?

The Current Study

Public Achievement (PA), a civic engagement model developed at the University of Minnesota in 1990, is based on a community organizing model and recognizes the assets of young people as change agents in their communities. The program has since expanded beyond U.S. borders to engage youth in assessing and solving problems that affect them in their local communities. The curriculum is manualized (http://www.du.edu/ccesl/media/documents/2012-2013_pa_curriculum.pdf), and there is also a specific training manual for the coaches who work with the youth participants (Post, 2003). PA participants, with the support of their coaches, complete five phases in which they (1) build relationships with each other and with community members, (2) identify and select an issue in their community that they would like to address, (3) research the causes of the issue and barriers to solving it, (4) plan and implement a collaborative community project to address the issue, and (5)

reflect on their learning and assess their impact on their community. Through these steps, PA aims to develop students' civic skills and attitudes associated with positive youth development, community attachment, and empowerment (Hildreth, 2000). Atkins and Hart (2003) suggest that civic identities are fostered by "experience[s] of participation in one's community, the acquisition of knowledge about the community, and adoption of fundamental democratic principles" (p. 157). PA emphasizes public work, "the idea that an important component of democracy is the 'work of the people' and an important component of citizenship is being a co-creator of one's public world (in contrast to being a consumer, client, or volunteer)" (Hildreth, 2000, p. 627). In alignment with this conceptualization of public work, PA participants identify an issue they see in their community, conduct research to fully understand the issue, develop a project to address it, and implement their solution by collaborating with others. PA participants collaborate across generations with teachers, their PA coaches, and community members; learn to map and negotiate power relations with stakeholders; develop a public voice; conduct community-based research; and co-create civic projects to address issues they choose. The program aligns with criteria for engaging youth as laid out by Stoneman (2002), who suggests that youths' civic skills and interests are sparked when they have hands-on experiences ascertaining issues that affect them and their communities and creating actions to address these issues.

Flanagan and Faison (2001) lament the dearth of spaces where youth can practice the skills for civic engagement. PA provides such a space in which youth practice and apply civic skills to produce a public project. Participation in PA offers students the opportunity to develop civic skills, particularly the effective uses of power and collaboration which are integral to positive social development and community attachment (Nicotera, 2008). By working with community members and stakeholders to implement their public projects, participants develop a practical understanding of institutional power, of "power *with* and power *to*, rather than power *over*" (McCauley et al., 2011, p. 151). By building collaborative relationships with each other, with their PA coaches, teachers and school administrators, and with community leaders and political representatives, students in PA experience the challenges and successes of working in the political realm. These experiences occur in the context of supportive coaches who aim to empower participants to achieve their goals, for the betterment of the community and for the personal development and learning of the students involved.

In our study, the PA curriculum was delivered through the auspices of a university-community partnership with urban high schools. Student participants in the program met weekly during an entire academic year to work in small groups with coaches (trained undergraduate student volunteers) who mentored and facilitated the group while ensuring that the youth maintained leadership of their initiatives. The study examines the civic skills and attitudes of youth prior to and at the conclusion of their experiences with PA. The use of mixed methods deepens our understanding of the skills and attitudes youth develop.

Methods

Design

This study employed the mixed methods, convergent parallel design to explore two research questions: (1) What civic skills and attitudes arise for youth who participate in PA? (2) How do youth describe the skills and attitudes they develop in the process of developing public projects? In alignment with the convergent parallel design, qualitative and quantitative data were collected concurrently, but qualitative and quantitative analyses were conducted separately, followed by a mixed analysis and interpretation (Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2011). The quantitative portion of the study was a nonexperimental pre- and post-test design. The study was approved by the University's institutional review board. Parental consent and youth assent forms were completed and explained the voluntary nature of participation in the study, the purpose of the study, and protection of privacy.

Participants and Context

Participants (N = 126) attended four public high schools in a metropolitan location in the Mountain West of the United States. Survey data was initially collected as administrative data; therefore, demographic data specific to each participant were not available. However, demographic data to describe the school contexts where the study occurred was available (see Table 1). The percentage of the student body receiving free and reduced lunch at the schools where PA was studied ranged between 60% and 90%. The youth who attended these schools were predominately Latino/a; however, there was variation in the ethnic-cultural makeup of the schools. In one school, 44.2% of the student body was African American, and 52.4% was Latino/a. In comparison, two of the schools had student body populations that were between 88% and 92% Latino/a. Finally, one of the schools had a student body that reflected the most variation in ethnic-cultural demographics, with 38.1% Latino/a, 30.4% White, and 22.8% African American. Asian students made up the smallest percentage of students across the four schools.

Table 1. Demographic Data for the Four Schools

Indicator	School 1	School 2	School 3	School 4
% African American Students	3.6%	3.1%	22.8%	44.2%
% Latino Students	92.1%	88.5%	38.1%	52.4%
% White Students	4.0%	6.2%	30.4%	2.7%
% Asian Students	0.0%	1.0%	7.6%	0.3%
% Students Receiving Free/Reduced Lunch	92.3%	73.8%	58.8%	79.9%

Procedures and Measures

Quantitative Measures and Procedures

Surveys were completed in a classroom setting in the fall at the beginning of the program and again at the end of the program in the spring. The survey consisted of 25 Likert-type items (see Table 2) measured on a four-point scale (4 = Always, 3 = Sometimes, 2 = Rarely, 1 = Never) to assess attitudes, perceived skills/knowledge, and diversity/community background (pre-survey α = .883; post-survey α = .912).

Ten items focused on assessing attitudes-dispositions (pre-survey α = .828; post-survey α = .841). These items assessed youths' attitudes about whether (a) they belonged to the school community, (b) they should help to make change, (c) they were at ease with diversity, and (d) adults listened to their ideas. Examples of items included, "I feel like I belong to my school community," "Adults listen to my ideas and concerns," and "I can learn from people who look different from me" (see Table 2 for the full list of items).

Ten items assessed skills/knowledge and covered topics of working with adults, interviewing and research skills, knowing where to get help, comfort with public speaking, talking with adults and teachers in general, knowing how to help others, working on a team, and engaging with community leaders (pre-survey α = .833; post-survey α = .860). Examples of items included, "I can talk with teachers and adults about issues that affect my community" and "I know how to interview my classmates" (see Table 2 for the full list of items).

Five items covered attitudes about community outside of school and focused on perceptions of neighborhood safety, how well participants know their neighbors, and whether neighbors help each other and engage in cooperative problem-solving (pre-survey α = .833; post-survey α = .860). Examples of items included, "People in my neighborhood take care of each other" and "When there is a problem in my neighborhood my parents work with other neighbors to solve it" (see Table 2 for the full list of items).

Table 2. Survey Items and Cronbach Alpha Coefficients

Attitudes-dispositions items pre- α = .828 post- α = .841	• I feel like I belong to my school community. • Adults listen to my ideas and concerns. • I have ideas to share with my school or community. • By working with others I can make change in my community. • I should to help solve problems in my community. • Kids like me can take action to help my community become a better place. • I believe that kids like me have ideas to share with their communities. • I can learn from people who are different from me. • I am comfortable around people who look different from me. • I think it is important to come to school every day.
Skills-knowledge items pre- α = .833 post- α = .860	• I can work with adults. • I know how to interview my classmates. • I can do research on issues that matter to me. • I know how to ask for help when I need it. • It is easy for me to speak in front of my classmates. • I know how to interview members of my community. • I know how to take care of people who need help. • I can work on a team with others in my community. • I know how to contact community leaders to work on a community project. • I can talk with teachers and adults about issues that affect my community.
Community - Neighborhood items pre- α = .548 post- α = .707	• I feel like I belong to my neighborhood community • In my neighborhood, it's safe to be outside • I know the people who live next door to me • People in my neighborhood take care of each other • When there is a problem in my neighborhood, my parents work with other neighbors to solve the problem.

Ideally, experiences of PA impact the participants' community in ways that better the community-neighborhood outside of school. However, the students in each group uniquely define the "community" their projects will affect; they do not tend to reside in the same neighborhoods, and if neighborhood-community is the focus of change, this type of change may take longer to appear. Therefore, in addition to examining pre-post differences for the entire survey (25 items), we also examined the mean differences for only those 20 survey items that covered attitudes-dispositions and skills-knowledge (see the first two sections of Table 2 for these items). Cronbach's alpha for these 20 items was .897 at pre-survey and .913 at post-survey.

Qualitative Measures and Procedures

At the time that the final surveys were completed, a subsample of 15 youth participated in focus groups (boys N=8; girls N=7). Each youth participant was invited to join a focus group as long as his or her parent signed a consent form, and 15 students returned signed forms and provided assent for focus group participation. Given the small qualitative sample, ethnicity-race was not collected to protect privacy. The 15 youth, who had participated in PA and attended three out of the four schools where it was delivered, were divided across three focus groups. Each focus group was audio recorded and lasted approximately 45 minutes. We used a semi-structured interview protocol that posed the same set of open-ended questions with each focus group to strengthen the rigor of data collection by providing the structure needed for fidelity across the focus groups and interviewers (Padgett, 2008; Patton, 2002). The 13 questions focused on the program content, projects the

students worked on, and the level of competence students felt in addressing community issues (see Appendix for the full protocol). More specifically, questions covered the types of projects the students had completed and skills they felt they had learned through the process. Discussions also focused on the relationships participants built through the program and how those relationships contributed to accomplishing their projects. Focus group interviews also honed in on the way in which participants felt the program had influenced their ability to affect change in the school and community. Final questions focused on the assessment of strengths and areas of change for the program.

Analysis

Quantitative Analysis

Paired sample t-tests were run in SPSS 20 with listwise deletion. All items were coded so that larger scores indicated an increase in attitude or skill (see Table 3 for means, standard deviations, and t-test results).

Qualitative Analysis

Focus group recordings were transcribed verbatim and loaded into Atlas-ti for analysis. The two primary authors and a graduate student conducted the analysis. Template analysis (Crabtree & Miller, 1999; King, 1998, 2002, 2012) was used to analyze the focus group data. This method of analysis is applicable to a wide range of epistemologies and involves a series of analytic steps through which the researcher codes the data and develops a series of templates that culminate in a final template of results (King, 2012). Initial analysis can begin with a priori codes or with open coding based on a set of topics related to the research questions (King, 2012).

Qualitative analytic step 1. Our analytic process involved four steps. The first step was to analyze the data by applying the quantitative survey items as an a priori template. This step was integral for ascertaining the mixed-methods findings. A graduate student read through each transcript and coded data segments that coincided with any of the survey items. For example, one item in the quantitative survey is "I feel like I belong to my school community," and quotes from the qualitative data that mirrored this concept were coded to coincide with this item, such as the following quote:

> It has brought us closer as a school, because now that we have something that can make us laugh and all that, everybody is going to be like you know, "this is a good thing, [name of school] has a lot of school spirit, they have their own mascot, not a lot of schools can say they have their own personal mascot."

Some of the quotes coincided with more than one item from the survey and were coded to reflect this overlap. For example, two survey items—"Adults listen to my ideas" and "I can work on a team with others in my community"—were mirrored in the following quote:

> I just want to close up the [name of teacher] discussion, you have to know that he's offered a partnership next year, because we communicated with him, because we had that open conference and all the dialogue came on the table. Now he wants to partner to make a really great big step towards a more I don't know, whatever he feels in an enduring legacy here and [name of high school], so you have someone you can reach for, you have a support from him now because we had that communication meeting.

After each transcript was coded as described above, the two primary authors and the graduate student met to examine the data segments that had been coded with themes to match the survey items in order to further assess viability of these matches and recode any conceptual mismatches.

Qualitative analytic step 2. Step 2 of the analytic process involved further analysis of each transcript for data segments that represented experiences and program impacts that the survey items did not cover. This step was integral for establishing the qualitative findings. Once these data segments were highlighted, they were examined for commonalities and grouped by similar thematic content. For example, we found a series of data segments in which the youth referred to how they got things done by holding each other accountable or being responsible for the steps to turn their projects into a reality. These quotes were coded as responsibility-accountability. The following quote is an example of one of these data segments:

> How did we hold each other accountable? I'll give you an example. "Check this, if you don't get it done then we're gonna be upset with you! Yeah, we're gonna be disappointed." [Or] If I see him in the hall a lot, "Hey did you do that?" "Hey are you gonna be there today?" "Make sure you're there, you know."

Qualitative analytic steps 3 and 4. After the grouped data segments were coded with themes such as the one noted above, we conducted step 3 in the analysis. This step was a process of examining the themes and data segments to ensure that the themes were represented across the focus groups and not just representative of one youth or one focus group. A final fourth step in the analysis involved searching the data for any negative cases (Creswell & Miller, 2000) of either the a priori survey items or the themes. For example, we searched the data for quotes that could refute or contradict each theme. There were very few negative cases in the data. However, the following quote provides an example of a negative case of the confidence-empowerment theme, as it demonstrates the insecurity one of the youth felt in the beginning of the year: "I definitely started the project like, 'I don't know if we can do this,' and then we kept going and it happened. We had to make the dream become reality."

Results

Quantitative Findings

The paired sample t-tests indicated statistically significant differences in attitudes and skills from pre- to post-survey (see Table 3 for full results). For example, there was a significant increase from pre- to post-survey on the mean score for the 20 items that measured attitudes-dispositions and skills-knowledge (pre-mean = 60.70; post-mean = 66.32; t(102) = -6.295, p = .000; CI (95%) -7.37 to -3.84). There was also a significant increase for the mean scores on the full survey that included the neighborhood-community items (pre-mean = 74.67; post-mean = 81.47; t (98) = -6.586 p = .000; CI (95%) -8.48 to -4.74). The increase in mean scores for the attitude-disposition items alone was also significant (pre-mean = 31.45; post-mean = 33.77; t (121) = -5.173, p = .000, CI (95%) -3.20 to -1.43) as was the increase in scores on the skills-knowledge items alone (pre-mean = 28.98; post-mean = 32.27; t (113) = -6.689, p = .000; CI (95%) -4.26 to -2.31). There was also a small but statistically significant change in the neighborhood-community items (pre-mean = 14.3; post-mean = 15.2; t (125) = -4.030, p = .000; CI (95%) -1.384 to -.472).

Table 3. Means, Standard Deviations, t-test Results

	Pre-test		**Post-test**		**t-test results**
	M	***SD***	***M***	***SD***	
All survey items (1-25)	74.67	10.37	81.47	10.45	t (98) = -6.586, p = .000
					CI (95%) -8.48 to -4.74
Attitude and Skills items	60.70	9.44	66.32	8.84	t (102) = -6.295, p = .000
					CI (95%) -7.37 to -3.84
Attitudes-Dispositions	31.45	4.72	33.77	4.37	t (121) = -5.173, p = .000
					CI (95%) -3.20 to -1.43
Skills-Knowledge	28.98	5.49	32.27	5.18	t (113) = -6.689, p = .000
					CI (95%) -4.26 to -2.31
Neighborhood items	14.3	2.64	15.2	2.89	t (125) = -4.030, p = .000
					CI (95%) -1.384 to -.472

Qualitative Findings

The final template for the qualitative data included 19 of the 25 survey item concepts and an additional six themes: responsibility-accountability, professional skills, confidence-empowerment, perseverance, leadership, and mentorship-relationship. One of the six survey items that did not appear in the qualitative data was the skills-knowledge item "I know how to interview members of my community." While there was implied evidence of this skill in the focus group data, the youth did not mention it directly; hence we did not code that item onto the qualitative data. The other five survey items that were not found within the qualitative data all posed questions about neighborhood community context and parental civic engagement (e.g., "*People in my neighborhood take care of each other," "I feel like I belong to my neighborhood community," "My parents work with other neighbors to solve neighborhood problems"*). The mixed-methods results section provides a fuller description of the qualitative data and matched survey items. This section presents the six themes which are also described in Table 4. These six themes illustrate the qualities and actions of a civically engaged individual. An abbreviated definition of each theme is provided within the text here so as to avoid repetition of Table 4.

Confidence, Leadership, and Accountability

Many of the quotes represent a combination of the themes at work in one instance. The quote below reflects three themes: (1) confidence-empowerment (e.g., gaining a sense that one can have an impact), (2) leadership (e.g., skills used to share information and make an impact), and (3) responsibility-accountability (e.g., expecting self and/or others to be responsible).

> One of the specific things we did is we had a booth at lunch for about two weeks. We stood outside with …we had um…a sexual education game and the kids could play and get a piece of candy if they got the answer right. The candy also had a fact on it. A week before prom we went around the lunch room and we informed people about STDs and you know teen pregnancy. It's a real issue here. I think that it was really important doing it the week before prom because we all know what happens on prom night. I think that made a big

impact…hopefully you know we improved the judgment of one person that night [of prom]…um, I think that…our mission was accomplished.

Table 4. Qualitative Themes and Example Quotes

Theme Label and Description	Example Quote
Responsibility-accountability: Participant describes learning a sense of responsibility or holding others accountable. This may pertain to self, team members, the task, the community.	"There's always going to be problems in the world, but you need to look for them and you need to find a way…or your personal way to try and fix them…and you're not going to do that if you're just gonna sit on your butt and not do anything."
Confidence-empowerment: Participant describes gaining the sense that he or she can create change/have an impact or describes general self-confidence or task-specific confidence.	"At first, I didn't really want to join this club because I was scared that I might do bad or these people are smart and I feel kind of dumb. But once I got more outgoing I actually got the hang of this and now I feel comfortable and now I see that I can do other things at school, like teaching."
Perseverance: Participant describes gaining the value in sticking with something, finishing what you start—even if it is not fun or easy, or if obstacles are encountered.	"I think that it showed, was like if you want something you gotta keep pursuing it, can't just give up, cuz it would have been easy for us just to give up and go with him [refers to adult], but it probably wouldn't have completed the [name of project]"
Leadership: Participant describes gaining a sense of self as a leader. May refer to developing specific leadership skills (e.g., verbal skills used to work with others, to impact others), or a growing perception of self as a leader (making a goal and collaborating with others to reach it).	"I think having a purpose. We kind of found our issue that we thought was important at [names school] and then we executed a way to help it…or to fix it. So, that's something that not a lot of high school students can say that they do. A lot of people in their careers do that kind of stuff…so…to say that we're doing it on our own time, um…is…I think it's something to be mentioned."
Mentorship-relationship: Participant refers to the relationship between self and the group coaches, the nature of that relationship, and the effect it had.	"I think, um, there's higher accountability…um, you guys trust us, our coaches trust us…they view us as equals, they don't…you know…view us as…they don't lecture us and look down on us…and scold us if we're not doing something right…it is up to us…and that's the main difference I think…
Professional Skills: Participant describes how the program helped him or her develop professional skills such as effective verbal and written communication, public speaking, networking or engaging with adults/other professionals/members of the community, creating a presentation, obtaining information, getting along with others who are different from oneself.	"I think the research part of it was very valuable because we did research about other places, nationwide and uh…incorporating that research into our project I think was really valuable. We found out like which other schools have health classes…we found out like the health class requirements of other schools and other places…so that helped us to set the parameters for our own health class."

Confidence, Perseverance, and Professional Skills

In this section, the confidence-empowerment theme combines with two themes, perseverance (reaching for a goal even in the face of obstacles) and professional skills (practice of effective verbal and written communication, public speaking, networking, creating a presentation, obtaining

information, getting along with others who are different from oneself) as this youth considers his future:

> I think, in the beginning, I was kind of afraid of leaving high school and going to college just because it is the beginning of your life… what are you going to do? You think college is so big and you are so afraid but you are actually able to accomplish it, it actually made me excited. And be like I am ready to go off and do something. I'm ready for college, and like there is nothing I can't carry. I know my abilities. I have nothing to be afraid of.

The themes of perseverance and professional skills come together in the following quote in which a youth describes the challenge of working with peers, the need to cope with "clashes," and to persevere through them:

> [I]t is also at the same time hard, because we're all very strong people and all have really strong personalities. We're all leaders so we do clash and it happens. So I think the bigger accomplishment is, um…learning to work through our differences and learning to compromise and learning to collaborate. It's one of the big things.

Leadership, Accountability, and Professional Skills

The next quote links the themes leadership, responsibility-accountability, and professional skills when a youth describes her experience of the program:

> I think the program is a lot like college…like they don't take attendance…and they're not going to chase you around. Either you're responsible enough to show up or you lose out. That's what the program is all about, it's about the students taking the initiative… to step up and be leaders.

The following quote from a conversation between several youth and the interviewer further exemplifies the theme of professional skills ("Y" refers to youth; "I" refers to interviewer):

> Y1: And besides from that I think we got like kinda like school skills as in like writing and reading and all that 'cuz we did a lot of that, like write a proposal, especially like typing.
> Y2: Yeah typing and like, writing proposals, note taking,
> I: Yeah I saw you guys present to Dr. [name of person], and the faculty too, your whole idea of the proposal.
> Y3: That's where the professionalism came in.

The theme of professional skills is further exemplified when a youth relates the skills learned in the program to the future:

> We had to make the contacts and call the restaurants and the venue and we had to get all those things contacted and set to go. So I think, as far as that goes, it was a life skill because when we go off to college and we want to create a project or we want to do something that is going to impact our community or whether it's just going to a job interview, building those connections I think will be really like, wow, you know helpful.

Mentorship and Confidence

The mentorship-relationship theme appeared when youth described how the program had changed them and related that change to their group coaches. The following quote links that theme with

confidence-empowerment. For example, when asked how the program had changed her, this youth noted:

> Like um seeing [names coach] who moved from [another state] to here from this place to that place, and it just like made me want to travel more seeing that she is still the same, she tells me she is the same when she traveled. She's doing just as good when she was over there. It influenced me more to want to go out of state and not be afraid or not think that I am not able to.

Still another instance of the mentorship-relationship theme linked to the confidence-empowerment theme is exemplified here, where a youth describes the sense of confidence gained from knowing and witnessing the actions of the group coach:

> So they [the coaches] would tell us about those experiences… it makes us see the possibilities that we have. I don't know, I think it was rewarding to be able to look at [names coach] for example, who has all this stuff going on in her life and she is always on top of it, and she's talking about contacting the mayor because she works with him on a regular basis. It was great to see that she is someone that is not much older than us, and she's been able to make those connections, so it makes us look at it and be like, "I can do that too"… you know?

Finally, one youth provides a heartfelt description of the effects of the mentorship-relationship in this quote:

> I think they [the coaches] showed us kinda like ambition. From what I got, I didn't want to look back on my life and be like what did I do? You know they do all these fantastic things and you think about it and you think I want to be able to do that, I want to put that on my resume. I want to be able to look back and think that I took advantage of the time I had. As well as going to college, not just going to college, but really experiencing college for the way it is and everything that it has to offer. I am going to college and I am very excited. So, that's basically what it is though, I think they showed us that even though you have to do a lot, they still had fun with us, they still got to do something fun. Something that we will always remember and hopefully something they will always remember also. It's not just getting stuff done, but the experience you get out of it also.

Mixed Methods Findings

The mixed methods findings further our understanding of the civic skills and attitudes that arose in youth over the course of PA (see Table 5). On one hand, they give voice to the statistical findings. On the other hand, they demonstrate the interplay between the civic attitudes and skills which are often measured as discrete experiences. First, we present the voices behind the statistics (see Table 5) and then the interplay between civic attitudes and skills (see Table 6).

The Voices Behind the Statistics

The quantitative findings support a statistical increase in the civic attitudes-dispositions and civic skills-knowledge that arose for participants over the course of PA. The quotes that were coded as being linked to these survey items illuminate youths' descriptions of those attitudes and skills. For example, two of the civic attitudes items ("I think it is important to come to school every day" and "Kids like me can take action to help my community become a better place") are depicted in the following quote in which a youth describes her group's project and rationale for choosing it:

> One of the projects we worked on was the mascot. Trying to get more school spirit seemed like what the school wanted. 'Cuz um we want kids to be motivated to come to school every day.

Additional discussion on the impact of this project further emphasizes the civic attitude that youth can take action to make their school-community a better place as well as the idea measured in the civic attitude item, "I feel like I belong to my school community":

> But, in the end it was like you know they enjoyed it [the mascot]; to see the expression on their faces when they came out you know, this is something new! This is something new and it feels real good to have something that's our symbol that we can take with us to games, something like that to show that we're a force to be reckoned with.

Survey items that measured civic skills-knowledge (e.g., knowing how to contact people in the community) also appear in the quotes such as the following one in which a youth describes what he learned from participating in the program:

> Something I took from this was organization and that if you are trying to contact a restaurant, because my job was to contact restaurants, that you have to continuously continue to call because they will forget and then when you call back later, they won't remember that you called. So keeping on them is good, even then, once the day of, some of our food wasn't ready so we had to, they still made it for us and everything, but basically just organization and keeping contact.

Another civic skill survey item—"being able to help or take care of others"—comes to life in this quote in which a youth describes the impact of the program:

> I finally found my leadership role. Um, like I like to get things done, like … one thing I learned that um, I take the time out to do things like I normally don't do. Like if um someone needs me to help out after we get done meeting with each other.

Table 5. The Voices Behind the Statistics

Survey Items	Example Quotes
Attitudes-dispositions: I should help solve problems in my community. Kids like me can take action to help my community become a better place.	"There's always going to be problems in the world, but you need to look for them and you need to find a way…or your personal way to try and fix them…and you're not going to do that if you're just gonna sit on your butt and not do anything."
Attitudes-dispositions: I feel like I belong to my school community. I have ideas to share with my school or community. I believe that kids like me have ideas to share with their communities.	"At first, I didn't really want to join this club because I was scared that I might do bad or these people are smart and I feel kind of dumb. But once I got more outgoing I actually got the hang of this and now I feel comfortable and now I see that I can do other things at school, like teaching." "With you guys everything I did was sincere and everything I felt was honest because you demanded it from me it wasn't that I could skate by with the little things, like you guys looked through my veils on days where I was like, I just want to be in a corner, you were like get out!"

Table 5. (continued)

Survey Items	Example Quotes
Attitudes-dispositions: I think it is important to come to school every day. I have ideas to share with my school or community Kids like me can take action to help my community become a better place.	[Describing the project they initiated and completed during PA] "One of the projects we worked on was the mascot. Trying to get more school spirit, seemed like what the school wanted. 'Cuz um we want kids to be motivated to come to school every day."
Skills-knowledge: I can do research on issues that matter to me.	"I think the research part of it was very valuable because we did research about other places, nationwide and uh…incorporating that research into our project I think was really valuable. We found out like which other schools have health classes…we found out like the health class requirements of other schools and other places…so that helped us to set the parameters for our own health class."
Skills-knowledge: I can work with adults.	"Our coaches trust us…they view us as equals they don't…you know…view us as…they don't lecture us and look down on us and scold us if we're not doing something right. It is up to us…and that's the main difference I think."
Skills-knowledge: I know how to ask for help when I need it.	"I depend on other people to do things, but when I come down to me having to do things I did go through with it and kinda like, I was able to step outside of that and ask can you help me with this?"
Skills-knowledge: I know how to take care of people who need help.	"I think before um…truthfully before senior year I wasn't as intent on wanting to better it [school community]…I was kind of…I'm gonna be honest I was kind of selfish and this year I think I've grown a lot. I've wanted to um improve the school and improve the lives for the students who are coming after us."
Skills-knowledge: I can talk with teachers and adults about issues that affect my community. I know how to contact community leaders to work on a community project.	"When we presented to Mr. [name of principal], I think that was kind of like the culmination of everything…and it was like, "Wow, we finally got here, because he's the principal…and ah we're proposing something substantial…a substantial change to the school…you know, adding a class…that's a big deal." "I think that's when it comes into gaining those contacts, we know that when you go and you pitch a project to someone, you have to be real with them and be like 'here's what I am trying to accomplish, and here is why I want your help.'"

Interplay of Attitudes and Skills

In addition to giving voice to the youths' statistical increase in civic attitudes and skills over the course of PA, the mixed-methods findings also illustrate the interplay between the survey items that are typically measured as discrete experiences (see Table 6). An example of this is when a youth describes how a group of students prepared to present their ideas to a teacher in order to gain his support for their project:

> Well, research was a big part of it but then we also had to collaborate…with…we had several groups…we had to collaborate with those groups to put everything together…in an organized fashion. We asked him if we could have a health class here at high school.

The youth describes three skills in the above quote: (1) *doing research on issues that matter to them,* (2) *actually working on a team with others,* and (3) *talking with teachers about issues that matter to them* and that they put to use in the belief or attitude that *adults will listen to youth's ideas*.

Another interplay of civic attitudes and civic skills is depicted in the following quote in which two of the youth reminisce about the impact of the program on their *ability to speak in front of classmates*, their *ability to work on a team with others* (civic skills), and the civic attitude *that one can learn from people who are different from oneself*:

> Y1: I mean like when we first started getting the project together we were all iffy about talking and what we wanted to do, but then as we got going everybody threw in ideas, and um some of them we debated on. Yeah, to me I thought it was like, a positive, because you had to interact with your peers and I got to see how all of them think.
> Y2: Yeah, it was like teamwork, like a lot of teamwork 'cuz, like you know I'm not used to working with [names a peer] and [names another peer], all these kids. I'm not used to working with them.

Table 6. Interplay of Attitudes and Skills

Survey Items	Example Quotes
Attitudes-dispositions: By working with others I can make change in my community. I should to help solve problems in my community. Kids like me can take action to help my community become a better place. **Skills-knowledge:** I can work on a team with others in my community.	"I think having a purpose. We kind of found our issue that we thought was important at [names school] and then we executed a way to help it…or to fix it. So, that's something that not a lot of high school students can say that they do. A lot of people in their careers do that kind of stuff…so…to say that we're doing it on our own time, um…is…I think it's something to be mentioned."
Attitudes-dispositions: Adults listen to my ideas and concerns. **Skills-knowledge:** I can work with adults.	"I think um, there's higher accountability…um, you guys trust us, our coaches trust us…they view us as equals they don't…you know…view us as…they don't lecture us and look down on us…and scold us if we're not doing something right…it is up to us…and that's the main difference I think…"
Attitudes-dispositions: I can learn from people who are different from me. **Skills-knowledge:** It is easy for me to speak in front of my classmates. I can work on a team with others in my community.	Y1: "I mean like when we first started getting the project together we were all iffy about talking and what we wanted to do, but then as we got going everybody threw in ideas, and um some of them we debated on. Yeah, to me I thought it was like, a positive, because you had to interact with your peers and I got to see how all of them think." Y2: "Yeah, it was like teamwork, like a lot of teamwork 'cuz, like you know I'm not used to working with [names a peer] and [names another peer], all these kids. I'm not used to working with them."

Table 6. (continued)

Survey Items	Example Quotes
Attitudes-dispositions: I am comfortable around people who look different from me. **Skills-knowledge:** I know how to interview my classmates.	[Describing impact of the one-to-one interviews] "They gave us the opportunity to really get to know them and to build a really, really strong relationship, that I think it opened our eyes. I was like, I stereotyped you to be this type of person for four years, but until we had this conversation, I never really knew you."

Discussion

This study explored two questions: What civic skills and attitudes arise for youth who participate in Public Achievement, and how do youth describe the skills and attitudes they develop in the process of developing public projects? Our findings show that during participation in PA over one academic year, students' civic skills-knowledge and attitudes-dispositions increased, and students described their experiences as beneficial in many areas of civic development. The qualitative and quantitative findings of this study support each other and reinforce the notion that students who participate in civic engagement programs gain a sense of civic responsibility, academic development, critical thinking and life skills (Astin & Sax, 1998; Batchelder & Root, 1994; Eyler & Giles, 1999; Gray et al., 1996). In addition, the research on PA is extended as we find that the benefits of the program are not limited to elementary school-aged children (Hildreth, 2000; RMC, 2005, 2006; Smith, 2012) but that high school students also gain in the areas of civic skills and attitudes when they engage in the creation of public work through the PA model.

The students in our program showed improved civic attitudes in areas such as feelings of belonging in their school community, a sense that adults listened to their ideas and concerns, and the belief that they could work with others to make change in their communities. The focus group descriptions of their experiences in the program illustrate how the opportunity to engage with their peers and community to address issues that mattered to them gave students the confidence and background to feel as if they could apply those skills to benefit their future endeavors, as this quote exemplifies:

> I'm planning on doing something along the lines of this [refers to project] in college…um, probably on a larger scale…but so this [PA] has helped me with leadership…problem-solving skills.

Students also developed civic knowledge through participation in PA and reported increased ability to work with others in their community, improved skills for interviewing community members, and improved aptitudes for speaking in front others to present issues that mattered to them and to sway others to support their work. These important skills in and of themselves do not create civic agents, but they are necessary for participation in the civic and political realms. When we combined the quantitative data with the students' descriptions of their civic skills, we saw they not only learned the skills they will need to engage civically, but they developed an understanding of how those skills can be used to better their communities and build relationships with other community members of all ages. As an example, one participant simply stated, "I learned that networking is important," while another participant provided more depth in the following quote:

> I think personally, it [PA] kind of made us do something independently for the first time. Like as a student it was rewarding to know that the effort we put in, most of it was our own. So, it was kinda nice to get to the end and see 'wow, we set this up ourselves.' So I think, as far as that goes, it was a life skill because when we go off to college and we want to create a

> project or we want to do something that is going to impact our community or whether it's just going to a job interview, building those connections I think will be really like, wow, you know helpful.

These skills and attitudes support the development of young people into civic agents of change. When they engage in collaborative public work with the people around them and endeavor to make changes that build stronger communities and address the critical issues affecting them, they play a part in the democratic process and move us all closer to the American democratic ideal.

Limitations

While the pre-post-test design made it possible to detect changes in skills and attitudes over time, and while our qualitative findings showed that students attributed their growth to participation in Public Achievement, it is possible that these findings are related to maturation over the course of the academic school year. Therefore, future iterations of this project would benefit from having a control group. Another limitation is the lack of follow-up to ascertain whether the increased skills and attitudes held over time. It would therefore be important in future studies to have follow-up assessments (e.g., at six months and one year after the program) to determine if the participants maintained these skills and attitudes.

Qualitative samples are meant to be small; however, the sample size of 15 students who participated in our focus groups represents only a small percentage of the 126 students who completed the pre- and post-surveys. It is possible that only the most committed students took the initiative to obtain parental consent and attend the focus groups; this may be why there are so few negative case examples. However, the qualitative findings do reflect the quantitative findings from the larger sample. Additionally, there was no focus group data for one of the schools where PA was studied. Students at this school did volunteer to participate and had parental consent. However, on the day of the focus group, unforeseen circumstances related to the facilitators forced the focus group to be cancelled, and since this occurred in the final week of the school year, we were unable to reschedule the focus group.

Conclusion

Programs such as Public Achievement, which support students in learning and testing their civic knowledge in the real world in order to develop as civic actors, should continue to be made available in communities. These programs are especially important for engaging the most disenfranchised in our society in solving the issues of the day and ensuring their voices are heard. As Youniss et al. (2003) point out, all sectors of society share the responsibility for ensuring the continued civic competence and agility of the citizenry to approach new public issues and adapt to changing cultural and economic challenges.

The students represented in these data achieved change in their communities that ranged from the creation of a student council ensuring the inclusion of youth voice in school decision-making, to the development a health class to confront issues such as teen pregnancy and STDs, to holding a community-wide diversity festival encouraging the multicultural exchanges which the students felt were lacking in their school and neighborhood. The 1999 report mentioned earlier indicated that two-thirds of youth between the ages of 15 and 24 agreed that "our generation has an important voice, but no one seems to hear it" (National Association of Secretaries of State, 1999, p. 22). Nearly 15 years later, "we" are listening to these important voices and seeing the changes they want and can create in their communities. The findings from this study suggest that providing opportunities that empower youth to develop civic competence is an important component for developing the skills and attitudes needed for civic leadership. Previous research suggests that youth of color, lesbian, gay, bisexual,

and transgender youth, and low-income youth are less likely to be civically engaged than other youth (Atkins & Hart, 2003; Ginwright & James, 2003; Russell, 2002). As the U.S. population and our public high schools become more diverse, school-based civic engagement programs will become even more important for closing this civic participation gap.

Appendix

Table A1. Focus Group Protocol

1. What sort of public project/event have you worked on as a result of the program? What kind of impact do you feel it had on your community?
2. What kind of skills did you learn this year in the program? How did you learn them?
3. Has the program helped you to build relationships with individuals who are different than you? If so, how?
4. What have you learned from the people you worked with this year? What have you accomplished together?
5. Are issues of inequality and social justice important to you? Can you identify such issues that exist in your school/community? How can youth tackle such issues in your school/community?
6. When you see a problem that matters to you in the community, what do you think you can do about it? What steps do you take to work toward solving the problem?
7. How do you define power? Do you see yourself as having an ability to influence problems in your school/your community? How?
8. In what ways are you different today than when you started the program last fall?
9. How are the program and your work with the group coaches different from regular school?
10. What was the most influential experience you had as a program participant?
11. What have you learned about yourself? What are your strengths and weaknesses?
12. Who here plans to go to college? What have you learned about college from your relationship with your group coaches?
13. What changes would you implement in the program for future students?

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