

## Raising Students' Awareness of Social Justice through Civic Literacy

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### Abstract

This research study measured the impact of Project Citizen on Moroccan students' civic literacy. Project Citizen (PC) is a community problem-solving curriculum which has been implemented in more than 80 countries worldwide. Using mixed methodology, the authors examined the extent to which students' participation in PC had an impact on developing their civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions, and whether it fostered a commitment to social justice in them. Results indicated that participation in PC increased perceptions of efficacy regarding students' impact on policy as well as their ability to think critically about important local issues. Students also reported a heightened sense of responsibility to address societal problems as well as a need to respect divergent opinions. In regards to issues of social justice, participants indicated that participation increased their commitment to addressing issues of injustice as well as contributing to positive societal change.

**Key words:** social justice, civic literacy, citizenship education, Project Citizen

### Introduction

Across the United States social studies teachers are responsible for curriculum that “provides students the content knowledge, intellectual skills, and civic values necessary for fulfilling the duties of citizenship in a participatory democracy” (National Council for the Social Studies, 2005, p. 1). With these important goals in mind, many social studies teachers teach civic education/civic literacy to equip students with knowledge and skills related to participation in democratic processes. Civic literacy is the ability to effectively participate in civic life through knowing how to stay informed and understanding governmental processes as well as “the local and global implications of civic decisions” (Partnership for 21st Century Skills, n.d., para. 1).

Researchers have reported on the positive impact of civic education for students in grades K-12 because it provides them with opportunities to participate and engage actively in civic and civil life (Schulz, Ainley, Fraillon, Kerr, & Losito, 2010; Tovmasyan & Thoma, 2008). One of the goals of civic education is to inform students about the importance of sustaining self-

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government in a democratic society in an informed, reflective manner (Quigley, 1995). In addition, civic education is meant to help students create a better future for their society through informed contributions to their communities (Landsman & Gorski, 2007). Soule (2000) posited that effective civic literacy might favorably affect students' political knowledge, participatory skills, and dispositions even in areas which have experienced fractured political systems and civil strife.

One successful civic literacy program was created in 1995 and is called Project Citizen. Project Citizen (PC) is an educational program that began in the United States and has spread to more than eighty countries, including eleven countries in the Middle East/North Africa (MENA) region (Glaser Consulting Group, 2004). Participating in Project Citizen can help equip students with a number of key life skills such as citizenship, problem-solving, research, and oral and written communication (Medina-Jerez, Bryant, & Green, 2010). This study was conducted in Morocco, where PC has been implemented since 2004 to more than 30,000 students in grades seven through eleven, as well as teachers in training (E. Imad, personal communication, July 21, 2017). Studying Moroccan students' experiences was chosen because other than middle school, Moroccan public school curriculum contains almost no formal civic education components. As a result, the researchers were better able to directly attribute changes in student behavior or knowledge to specific experiences within PC. Given the dearth of opportunities for learning about democratic practices in Morocco, the present study was then uniquely appropriate for assessing the impact of this curriculum on students' civic literacy and measuring their commitment to social justice issues.

Civic literacy and civic education have, at their core, the concept of citizenship to include what citizens should know and be able to do. However, the concept of effective citizenship is subjective and oftentimes implies a wide variety of beliefs and components. To create an operational definition of the concept, Westheimer and Kahne (2004) identified three distinct citizenship types: personally-responsible citizenship, which focuses on following rules and laws and helping others; participatory citizenship, which requires people to become involved with the democratic process via political events and participation (e.g., voting and campaigning); and finally, the social justice paradigm, which necessitates citizens critically assessing societal problems to identify which aspects need to be improved. One of the goals of the current research is to see the extent to which participation in PC impacts students' civic

behaviors and beliefs beyond the classroom, especially in regards to any adaptation of the social justice orientation toward citizenship.

### **Literature review**

King Mohammed VI assumed the throne of the Kingdom of Morocco in 1999. After events of the Arab Spring in 2011, the king agreed to allow the Moroccan Constitution to be amended in response to the international community and Moroccans' calls for "greater transparency and accountability in governance" (Madani, Maghraoui, & Zerhouni, 2012, p. III). These constitutional changes garnered support from the Moroccan populace as well as leaders in the international community (Silverstein, 2011). Key provisions of these changes included a codification of the judicial branch's independence from the legislative and executive branch, limits on the king's power to appoint officials, and the incorporation of input from opposition parties within the government (MFAC, 2011). Despite the reforms in political power, however, all important educational initiatives and programs are controlled by the Ministry of Education (Llorent-Bedmar, 2014).

To understand the current state of Morocco's educational system, the impact of colonial rule and policies cannot be understated. Until independence in 1956, Moroccan society and the educational system had spent more than four decades under French colonial rule. As a result, the current educational system in Morocco still contains vestiges of colonial practices implemented by France. Most notably is the elevated status granted to the use of the French language in Moroccan classrooms. By privileging French over Arabic, Moroccan graduates are linked to both the culture of France and its language, thus perpetuating class distinctions (Kharbouch, 2009); it also means that elite positions were reserved for graduates from Francophone schools (Hamdaoui, 2013), whether in Morocco or France. The imposition of the French language and culture over Moroccan culture and Moroccan Arabic produced several negative consequences in Moroccan society, including a distrust of state-provided education available to Moroccan students. In the years since independence, Morocco has implemented a variety of initiatives to distance itself from French influence while improving both the quality and content of instruction in Moroccan schools.

One such initiative was called the *Guide to School Life*, a document which sets forth the foundation and expectations about what life should look like in school (*Sahifat al-Ustad* [Teacher's Paper], 2012). Important aspects of this reform include the promotion of civic

education and respect for learner and citizen rights, and a reaffirmed commitment to the concept of the rule of law, an important goal in any democratic society. Despite efforts to improve the educational system, researchers have noted that parents are opting to pay for private lessons and are sending their children to private schools in greater numbers than at any time in Moroccan history (Boum, 2008; Kharbouch, 2009).

The potential benefits of civic education cannot be understated in countries such as Morocco so that students are well-prepared to partake in the responsibilities of active and engaged citizenship. Chapin (2015) posited that civic education is not only beneficial for students, schools, and communities, but it is also “helpful for new immigrants, and necessary for democracy” (p. 228). However, educational policy always exists within particular socio-political contexts, and in the case of many MENA countries, reaction to educational and civic initiatives has not always been positive. Afettat (2012) explained that several governments in North Africa view public education as a medium for maintaining the status quo, especially in regards to replicating hegemonic relationships which exist politically, culturally, and economically. Others have criticized initiatives in civic education, describing them as tools of the West (specifically, the United States) to maintain economic and political superiority over countries which have less access to resources and power on the international stage (Craddock, 2007).

It was within this socio-political context that the researchers undertook the current study to measure the impact of PC on Moroccan students’ civic literacy and their commitment to social justice. PC was chosen because of its international recognition as a means to improve civic literacy for students who participate. PC is a community problem-solving curriculum that utilizes Chapin’s (2015) preferred method of teaching students through outcome- and project-oriented work. This curriculum engages students in identifying and researching a given problem in their local community, and requires them to work in groups to examine solutions, create an action plan, and use primary sources while conducting research (Fry & Bentahar, 2013; Medina-Jerez, et al., 2010; Vontz, Metcalf, & Patrick, 2000). In addition, all PC students present their solutions to community members that often include leaders and decision-makers, thus providing them with valuable experience in speaking publicly and advocating for a particular cause.

## **Method**

The purpose of this study was to examine whether engagement with Project Citizen affected Moroccan students' civic literacy (civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions), and whether the experience fostered a commitment to social justice in them. This study followed a mixed methods design utilizing a survey completed by PC participants, as well as semi-structured interviews for teachers, program directors, and one student. By utilizing surveys and interview data, the researchers hoped to gain a more robust understanding of the impacts of PC on Moroccan students' civic development. The two guiding research questions were:

1) Does engagement with Project Citizen affect Moroccan students' civic literacy? If so, how? If not, why not?

2) How does Project Citizen foster in students a commitment to social justice?

To answer these research questions, mixed methodological procedures were employed. In mixed methods, researchers collect, analyze, and mix quantitative and qualitative data in one study or a series of studies (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007; Johnson, Onwuegbuzie, & Turner, 2007). The researchers chose a mixed methods approach for several reasons. First, the strengths of each method exceed the limitations of the other strand (quantitative and qualitative or vice versa). Second, using either quantitative or qualitative method alone may provide insufficient data, hence the benefit of the mixed methods approach. Third, mixed methods research can provide a more complete understanding of any phenomenon by using multiple lenses to view it. By utilizing survey data, the researchers were able to gain general information from all participants (including demographic information); the structured interviews allowed the participants to clarify and expand on responses to the research questions.

It is noteworthy that in the current study, priority was given to the qualitative data, specifically the open-ended responses provided by the participating students and the responses to the semi-structured interviews. It was hoped that by examining the responses written by students, as well as their views of civic literacy reported in interviews, a much clearer understanding of participants' views on civic literacy and social justice would be gained. While the survey instrument allowed a larger sample of responses, the main analysis came from comments made by interviewees. These semi-structured interviews provided an opportunity for

shareholders to explain their beliefs and experiences more clearly, rather than simply report agreement on a list of pre-determined questions containing Likert-type response choices.

The theoretical framework employed by the researchers as they interpreted the data is based on the Social Reconstruction paradigm. Social Reconstructionists are conscious of the problems existing in any society; they maintain that the primary purpose of education is to “facilitate the construction of a new more just society which offers maximum satisfaction to all of its members” (Schiro, 2008, p. 6). This framework was chosen because it aligns with the goals of both citizenship education as well as the tenets of social justice. By viewing the results through this lens, the researchers hoped to discover palpable impacts on students’ civic literacy, as well as their views on the idea of social justice.

### **Research Design**

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### **Participants**

After gaining IRB approval, invitations to participants in Morocco were extended by The Moroccan Center for Civic Education (MCCE) and the Friends for Civic Education Association in Morocco. The researchers were unable to employ random sampling procedures; rather, participants consisted of former Moroccan Project Citizen students, teachers, and program directors who were willing and able to participate in the study. The resulting sample size was seventy students and seven stakeholders.

The study utilized a survey (Appendix A) and interview questions (Appendix B) addressing the same topic, namely whether engagement with Project Citizen affected the development of students' civic literacy and their commitment to social justice. The parallel questions (i.e., use of different instruments addressing the same topic) helped merge the results of both the quantitative and qualitative data types in the interpretation phase in order to make

the comparison of responses more meaningful (see Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011) and examine areas of data convergence and corroboration (Bowen, 2009).

### Demographics

#### *Survey participants*

In total, 77 people participated in the current study. Former PC students (n=70) completed a survey, either online or on paper. Additionally, four teachers (n=4), two program directors (n=2), and a student (n=1) participated in interviews. Of the 70 students who completed surveys, fifty percent (n=35) were male, and fifty percent were female (n=35). Table 1 contains demographic information collected from participants.

**Table 1.**

#### *Demographics for interviewees*

Respondent (pseudonym)	Gender	Age	Field (content area)	Teaching Position Experience	Level	
Mounir	Male	55	Teacher Ed.	32	PC PD	Higher Ed.
Mohamed	Male	54	Social Studies	26	PC PD	M.S.
Adam	Male	38	Social Studies	15	PC T	M.S.
Ahmed	Male	45	Islamic Ed.	20	PC T	M.S.
Amal	Female	56	Social Studies	30	PC T	M.S.
Ashraf	Male	53	Social Studies	27	PC T	H.S.
Sami	Male	22	Web and Media Development	N/A	PC Student	College

*Note:* PC = Project Citizen; PD = Program Director; T = Teacher; M.S. = Middle School; H.S. = High School; NA = Not Applicable

Regarding the disproportionate number of males versus female interviewees in the current study, this is representative neither of the Moroccan teaching force in general nor of the stakeholders involved with Project Citizen in particular. The interviews were conducted during the summer, and only one female teacher was both available and willing to participate. However, her comments were helpful in understanding a teacher's perspective as we interpreted the results.

### Data Collection Tools

#### *Survey*

The survey portion of the study contained seventeen statements with Likert scale responses as well as two open-ended questions. The researchers adapted some items from Fry and Bentahar's (2013) survey that compared PC to senior projects in the United States. The



seventeen Likert- scale survey statements were categorized into four target areas: civic knowledge, civic skills, civic dispositions, and social justice. The survey also contained a section asking the students two open-ended questions, which will be explained subsequently.

### *Interview*

The interviews conducted with the seven stakeholders examined the perceived impact of the PC experience on students' development of civic literacy and a commitment to social justice. The semi-structured interviews contained a corpus of predetermined questions, but follow-up queries were solicited to clarify and elucidate details for various responses, new prompt questions, as well as explanations and elaborations. Each interview lasted between 25 and 45 minutes.

### **Data Collection**

The researchers utilized a 17 question survey with Likert scales that measured students' views on participation in and results of their experiences with Project Citizen. Participants were asked to answer three questions which gathered demographic data (gender, age range, and highest level of educational attainment). Students were also asked two open-ended questions; the first asked what all Moroccans need to be responsible citizens, and the second asked participants to report any changes in their commitment to social justice as a direct result of their participation in PC. In all, 70 students responded to the questionnaire, 35 of whom answered question on paper and pencil assessments, while the other 35 provided responses using an online survey. Due to the anonymous nature of data collection, it is impossible to know if any systematic bias occurred during data collection utilizing electronic means. Participants were given the option to write their short responses in Arabic, French, or English, and most chose to write in Arabic. The responses were translated with the assistance of a Moroccan English language teacher who has a graduate degree in Arabic/English translation.

### **Data Analysis**

For quantitative studies, analysis procedure(s) and the statistical methods used and their justification for appropriateness for each research question or hypothesis should be explained in detail in this section. Data analysis procedures in qualitative studies should also be discussed comprehensively.

## Findings

The seventeen survey questions began with the statement “Because of my experience in Project Citizen,” and then students chose from a Likert scale provided. For this section, quantitative data regarding research question one will be presented first followed by qualitative findings, then findings related to research question two will be presented using qualitative data. The students’ survey responses about civic literacy revealed a high level of agreement about the development of civic literacy as a learning outcome of their participation in PC.

Regarding civic knowledge, responses from participants indicated that participation in PC increased perceptions of efficacy regarding their impact on policy and their ability to think critically. Table 2 contains means and standard deviations for the four questions related to this concept.

**Table 2.**

*Moroccan Students’ Means and Standard Deviations on Civic Knowledge*

Item	N	M	SD
Because of my experience in Project Citizen, #1: I learned to support a social cause that I believe in	70	3.50	0.61
#2: I became aware that elected officials need to be concerned about citizens’ problems	70	3.23	0.59
#7: I learned that young citizens can also influence policy	70	3.50	0.56
#10: I can recognize the importance of thinking critically	70	3.54	0.70

*Note.* N=70. The items were measured on the following scale: 1 = *Strongly Disagree*, 2 =

*Disagree*, 3 = *Agree*, and 4 = *Strongly Agree*.

The four statements indicate that students learned to support a particular cause, and felt more efficacious at both identifying societal problems as well as influencing policy over them. The highest score in this theme (mean=3.54) indicates that students became better at recognizing the need for critical thinking as they grappled with complex problems affecting their community. Three questions on the survey related directly to student perceptions regarding civic dispositions, which in this case involved feeling a sense of responsibility to

ameliorate societal ills and to respect divergent beliefs. Results in Table 3 indicate that the students learned to feel a sense of responsibility toward their communities, as well as the importance of respecting divergent viewpoints.

**Table 3.**

*Moroccan Students' Means and Standard Deviations on Civic Dispositions*

Item	N	M	SD
Because of my experience in Project Citizen,			
#6: I feel the need to fulfill my responsibilities to my community	70	3.34	0.56
#8: I did not learn to be tolerant of difference in opinions	70	1.56	0.86
#11: I learned how to treat other people with respect regardless of any differences	70	3.27	0.51

*Note.* N=70. The items were measured on the following scale: 1 = *Strongly Disagree*, 2 = *Disagree*, 3 = *Agree*, and 4 = *Strongly Agree*.

Respecting others' viewpoints is important in an ethnically diverse society such as Morocco. Although Islam acts as a unifying force in Morocco, the existence of distinct ethnic groups (e.g., Arab, Amazigh, Sahrawis) makes the respect for differences extremely important, especially in light of ethnic uprisings in neighboring countries (e.g., Algeria and Libya). Therefore, PC has the potential to help students learn to be more tolerant and respectful of others' divergent opinions and cultures within and beyond Morocco.

According to several students, their citizenship and presentation skills also improved as a direct result of their successful efforts in conducting a community improvement project more effectively. Table 4 presents findings related to perceived changes in participants' civic skills.

**Table 4.***Moroccan Students' Means and Standard Deviations on Civic Skills*

Item	N	M	SD
Because of my experience in Project Citizen, #9: I developed research skills that I can use as an adult	70	3.50	0.61
#12: I did not learn how to present confidently before an audience	70	1.39	0.64
#14: I learned basic skills of conducting a community project	70	3.46	0.67
#16: My social skills did not change at all	70	1.44	0.71

*Note.* N=70 The items were measured on the following scale: 1 = *Strongly Disagree*, 2 = *Disagree*, 3 = *Agree*, and 4 = *Strongly Agree*.

**Qualitative Data**

Research question one asked, “Does engagement with Project Citizen affect Moroccan students’ civic literacy? If so, how?” To answer this question, the researchers conducted semi-structured interviews with participants to discover their perceptions. Initially, all interviewees were asked to define the term “civic education.” The responses from all groups (i.e., directors, teachers, and students) did not vary considerably. Mounir (a teacher educator) defined the goals of civic education as knowing one’s “roles and responsibilities” regarding citizenship but added that it should include “an openness to one’s own and other cultures.” He added that the concept embodies heavy involvement “in political participation and community issues.” Mohamed (social studies teacher) mentioned the importance of learning about other cultures because, to him, understanding civic education is also related to the ongoing challenges that social justice efforts face, namely the clash of differing values and ideologies, barriers to full citizenship, and the increasing minority oppression and anti-cultural difference movements. Responses such as these perhaps indicate that participants are aware of the cultural divisions in Moroccan society and also indicate that PC offers one possible solution to bring cohesion to society through the amelioration of suffering and inequality by all groups.

For Sami (PC student), civic literacy refers to citizens’ awareness of the roles they play in society. He viewed civic education as the knowledge citizens have about their rights and responsibilities, which necessitates educating others about effective citizenship in society. Adam (social studies teacher) summarized civic education as all behaviors citizens manifest inside and outside school settings. In contrast, Amal, another social studies teacher, thought of it as a host of dispositions and values that citizens practice daily, such as justice, democracy,

and civic participation in school and beyond. While participants focused on slightly different aspects of civic literacy, all responses demonstrated that participants understood the importance of civic literacy on students' behavior as citizens.

Responses from participants also showed that Project Citizen offers opportunities for experiencing active citizenship, which the teachers and program directors hope to achieve as a by-product of individual experiences in PC. Amal (social studies teacher) noted that her primary goal while implementing the PC curriculum was to help students build strong character and become effective citizens able to access and attain knowledge and overcome community problems. Mohammed echoed these beliefs by explaining that, to him, the importance of PC lies in its ability to help build a strong character in students and prepare them as the citizens of tomorrow. These comments indicate that PC has the potential to help students become more civic-minded by strengthening character traits related to citizenship.

Civic literacy may also embody an understanding of the civic knowledge and dispositions that can be manifested in individuals' daily lives in areas such as security, education, safety, health, and employment (Branson & Quigley, 1998). According to Mohamed, the experiences gained from participating in PC "made students learn many competences at the level of knowledge and dispositions, which also helped them in their daily lives and academic and professional future."

When examining the goals of civic literacy, it is important to help create a class of citizens who feel both aware of and empowered to exercise influence over the creation of local, regional, or state policies which directly impact their lives. Project Citizen supported this goal by helping students better understand and practice engagement with public policy. In that regard, Ashraf added that educating students about public policies as they are carried out requires "raising [students'] awareness of public policy making and the management of local affairs with respect to everyday life in their community." Mohamed maintained that one of the goals that Moroccan Center for Civic Education (MCCE) had is to help students reach an understanding of engagement in public policy. He gave an example of his former PC students who "learned how citizens could have the power to identify the making of public policy in society and influence it," a statement that correlates quantitatively with a mean score of  $M = 3.50$  on a 4-scale point. Mounir expressed a similar statement in that Project Citizen helped create "a dialogue about public policy between [Moroccan] citizens [including students] and

the government and between the citizens and parliament.” Overall, interview results indicated areas of civic literacy where Project Citizen likely helped students develop a strong character, demonstrate active involvement in the community, and develop an understanding of public policy.

### **Project Citizen and Social Justice: Quantitative Findings**

Survey questions also asked participants four questions related directly to social justice issues. The questions focused on taking action to fight injustice, to work toward helping others to improve society, as well as question fifteen, which asked about the egalitarian nature of changes brought about by addressing issues of social justice. Table 5 provides the survey findings from these questions.

**Table 5.**

*Moroccan Students' Means and Standard Deviations on Social Justice*

Item	N	M	SD
Because of my experience in Project Citizen, #3: I became more determined in speaking up against wrong doing	70	3.50	0.61
#5: I reinforced my belief in helping anyone in need	70	3.24	0.55
#13: I feel the need to contribute to positive social change in my community	70	3.24	0.62
#15: I believe social services should reach all social classes	70	3.33	0.50

N=70. *Note.* The items were measured on the following scale: 1 = *Strongly Disagree*, 2 = *Disagree*, 3 = *Agree*, and 4 = *Strongly Agree*.

Considering the 4-point scale, these scores reflected positive support for the claim that Project Citizen helped participants develop a commitment to social justice. Responses in Table 5 indicate that students acknowledged a responsibility to their respective communities as well as the need to treat others with respect, regardless of their divergent opinions or diverse backgrounds. At a time in history when many countries (most notably the United States) are experiencing an increase in nationalistic and isolationist sentiment, curricula such as PC can be one part a larger attempt to find common ground between diverse populations within nations and across the globe. Many issues of social justice affect disparate groups of people, so a shared commitment to social justice can act as a unifying force to combat divisions in individual societies and can also help foster a commitment to social justice worldwide.

### **Project Citizen and Social Justice—Qualitative Findings**

Students were asked to respond to the question “How did your experience with Project Citizen affect your commitment to social justice?” Of the 70 students who participated, 51 provided written responses to this question. Forty-nine of the 51 students who provided responses to the open-ended prompt emphasized the positive effect of the experience on their views toward social justice. Twelve students mentioned the notion of a “responsibility” to work toward social justice in the Moroccan society, and another four made similar statements.

The other consistent theme that emerged in response to this question was that students experienced a palpable change in skills they learned through PC. Specifically, four students mentioned that their social and presentational skills had improved. Students must present their solutions to local community leaders as part of the PC experience, and comments related to this experience were overwhelmingly positive. Response nine stated, “I benefited greatly from the teachers who helped my self-confidence to be able to present my work before an audience.” Concerning his ability to utilize critical thinking as a result of PC, respondent 37 stated, “It was a rich experience. I learned how to use critical thinking skills in dealing with the problems of society.” Another wrote, “...[PC] enabled me to acquire many skills through conducting fieldwork, meet[ing] officials, and speak[ing] with them about a community problem.” While not the central focus of this paper, improving students’ critical thinking and presentation skills are nevertheless important outcomes of PC which are closely linked to both civics and social justice.

Next, the interviewees were asked to examine the possible connections between Project Citizen and social justice. Responses to this question provided information with practical examples of how PC might have contributed to students growing as advocates for social justice. Mounir stated, “[t]he good thing about Project Citizen is that it has contributed to social justice” in Morocco. Emphasizing the inclusive nature of PC, Sami noted that promoting social justice in schools should be “done from a social perspective that does not exclude any party or member of the community and society at large.” According to Ahmed, social justice matters help increase students’ awareness of their civic and civil rights and ways for obtaining them, an outcome that should not be achieved through violence, but “through peaceful, civic ways.”

When asked whether civic education might have an impact on students’ growth as social justice advocates, Mohamed responded that the two concepts cannot be separated when

it comes to implementation of PC. He added, “The Project Citizen curriculum was designed to help students understand and apply principles and basic considerations of dealing with social justice-related problems. It also enables students to decide and choose a just solution... in a sensible, efficient manner.” He went on explaining, “This curriculum helped [our] students develop increasing awareness of the importance of social justice in their lives and its status in modern society.”

Amal described how she used civic education to help spread awareness of many social injustices. For her, increasing civic awareness was a starting point for her students to better understand social justice, “because these students have rights and responsibilities that they need to strive for and maintain.” She added, “I also seek to convey the idea of equality by helping them reject divisions between the rich and the poor, and among the hardworking and the lazy.” In addition to the positive impact of Project Citizen on her students’ academic performance, “it also helped them build a strong character [to] ably defend their opinion and advocate for rights.” She said that given the nature of this program as a medium for solving community issues, students had the opportunity to understand social justice in practical ways.

Sami’s response to the question, “During or after completing Project Citizen, did you have the chance to be part of initiatives or activities that foster a sense of social justice?” revealed real-life experiences that the student shared. He explained that the issues his school tackled included lack of cleanliness and decent infrastructure. Thanks to PC, Sami and his peers succeeded in completing projects geared toward clean-up and beautification. For him, this was a way of ensuring all students enjoyed an acceptable condition of public schooling as one of the students’ rights. By seeing the immediate results of their efforts, after the experience, students were more aware of problems, and as importantly, saw that their efforts could result in palpable improvements to their daily experiences. After fixing broken locks and doors to increase student safety, Sami remarked that he and his fellow students felt a stronger connection to their community as they looked for solutions to problems all students faced.

### **Discussion and Implications**

#### *Social Justice at Stake in Morocco*

Project Citizen students’ experience resulted in a realization of the perceived reality of social justice in Morocco. It was reported in a number of responses how through engagement



with Project Citizen and direct contact with the community, some participants concluded social justice barely existed in Morocco. Adam, a social studies teacher, made it clear that schools cannot discuss social justice because the concept is not widely understood and rarely debated in the country. One student shared this view, saying:

The Project Citizen experience made me believe that our society is unfair and taught me to start change through myself and try to be a responsible and just citizen as much as I can, and not consider the surfaces of things, but their essence.

One student deemed PC an eye-opening experience, yet believed that it was probably too early to talk about social justice in Morocco. Two students thought PC helped them realize the hidden reality that social justice was still lacking in Morocco, a statement shared by another student who “felt that there is social inequity and social justice is hard to achieve in reality.” While these responses indicate a heightened awareness of the difficulties the students faced when trying to achieve a small measure of social justice in Morocco, these comments also indicate a heightened awareness of promoting positive change.

### **Discussion**

One of the important requirements of PC is the creation of individual portfolios showcasing the students’ work and proposed solutions. Portfolios can be used by teachers to “demonstrate the student’s educational growth over a given time for set learning targets” (Brookhart & Nitko, 2008, p. 180). By creating these portfolios, students demonstrate how they actively engaged in the public policy process, and they share their proposal with local, regional, and national officials, which is another form of civic engagement (Vontz et al., 2000). Findings from this investigation indicate that Moroccan students and stakeholders believed that participation in PC had a positive impact on both civic skills and knowledge, as well as on beliefs toward social justice. Mohamed (teacher) wrote that participation in PC “made students learn many competences at the level of civic knowledge and dispositions, which helped them in their daily lives and academic and professional future.”

Responses from all interview participants, and from written comments by most students, indicated a strengthened commitment to improving the lives of others in their respective communities. For instance, the students who focused on the problem of high dropout rates in their community, discovered that the statistics are “so appalling that they are hidden by authorities.” By raising awareness of the problem, the students forced local government officials

to acknowledge the issue so it could be addressed. Anecdotes such as these appear to be an indication of the importance of including community-based problems and solutions in the implementation of curricula of this type, specifically so that students can feel empowered to work for change.

Results from this study support the claim that young citizens, through experiences with PC, can gain efficacy at impacting policy decisions. This viewpoint is vitally important for Social Reconstructionists who believe that educational project-based curricula might help connect students with their community in ways that address societal inequality. The authors believe that schools and teachers have the responsibility of helping students understand societal needs and then engage in efforts towards this end.

One of the desired learning outcomes of PC is that students learn what is needed in order to influence policy and provide suggestions peacefully and constitutionally. That is, the student group's proposed solution to a community problem should be one that the law and the constitution support, according to PC guidebooks and Center for Civic Education (CCE, 2007). Working within legal and constitutional guidelines is important in countries such as Morocco, which many consider an "emerging democracy." After evaluating the effect of PC on more than 1,400 students in three countries, Vontz et al. (2000) concluded PC helps promote civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions in many countries around the world and creates opportunities for students to influence existing public policies. The experiences students have gained from participating in PC might potentially contribute to a much needed, well-informed citizenry in Moroccan schools.

PC's core components include informed, active, and engaged citizenship and community service learning. The components also reflect the pedagogical best practices and theoretical underpinnings outlined in the civic education research, which makes PC one medium of rendering classrooms "laboratories for democracy" (Scheiner-Fisher & Fine, 2013, p. 7). Based on both quantitative and qualitative findings of this study, implementation of the PC curriculum was successful at both improving civic literacy, as well as fostering a commitment to social justice among all who participated.

### **Conclusion**

The results of this study indicate that PC can have a positive impact on students' civic literacy and citizenship skills; it can also help students develop a commitment to social justice.

Globally, 12.9% of the world's population suffers from chronic malnourishment (World Hunger Education Service, 2016), and 844 million lack a stable source of clean drinking water (World Health Organization, 2016). Due to free trade agreements, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Trade Organization (WTO), and neo-colonial economic policies, global economic inequality is growing worse (Hickel, 2016). Rather than perpetuating the status quo, the authors argue that schools should be places where students are taught to work toward creating a better environment for themselves and others. By asking students to identify and address problems in their local communities, students can begin to become active agents of change with an appreciation of social justice for all.

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**APPENDIX A**

Survey Administered to Students (N=70)

Directions: Please indicate your level of agreement with each of the following statements by **circling**

your response. Circle only **ONE** answer; do not circle between numbers.

Strongly Disagree  
(SD)

Disagree  
(D)

Agree  
(A)

Strongly Agree  
(SA)

Because of my experiences with Project Citizen,...

- |  |    |   |    |    |
|--|----|---|----|----|
| 1. I learned how to support a social cause I believe in<br>SA                              | SD | D | A  |    |
| 2. I became aware that elected officials need to be concerned about<br>citizens' problems. | D  | A | SA | SD |
| 3. I became more determined to speak up against wrongdoing.<br>SA                          | SD | D | A  |    |
| 4. I did not learn anything about being a responsible citizen.<br>SA                       | SD | D | A  |    |
| 5. I reinforced my belief about helping anyone in need.<br>SA                              | SD | D | A  |    |
| 6. I feel the need to fulfill my responsibilities to my community.<br>SA                   | SD | D | A  |    |
| 7. I learned that young citizens can influence policy.                                     | SD | D | A  | SA |
| 8. I did not learn to be tolerant of different opinions.                                   | SD | D | A  | SA |
| 9. I developed research skills that I can use as an adult.<br>SA                           | SD | D | A  |    |
| 10. I can recognize the importance of critical thinking.<br>SA                             | SD | D | A  |    |
| 11. I learned how to treat people with respect regardless of any<br>SA<br>differences.     | SD | D | A  |    |
| 12. I did not learn how to present confidently before an audience.<br>SA                   | SD | D | A  |    |

13. I feel the need to contribute to positive societal change in my SA community.	SD	D	A	
14. I learned basic skills of conducting a community project. SA	SD	D	A	
15. I believe social services should reach all social classes.	SD	D	A	SA
16. My social skills did not change at all.	SD	D	A	SA
17. My experience with Project Citizen was a waste of time. SA	SD	D	A	



Please tell me about yourself by circling the appropriate answer below:

- 18) Gender                      a. male                      b. female
- 19) What is your age group? a. 18-21                      b. 22-25                      c. 26-28
- 20) What is the highest level of education you have completed?  
a. High School                      b. Undergraduate                      c. Graduate

Please respond to the following questions:

21) What do Moroccan students need to be responsible citizens?

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22). How did your experience with Project Citizen affect your commitment to social justice?

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Thank you for your participation

## **APPENDIX B**

### Semi-Structured Interview Questions Administered to Stakeholders

Teachers (n=4), Program Directors (n=2), and Student (n=1)

- What is civic education/civic literacy? How would you define it?
- Why did you participate in Project Citizen? Did you have specific goals for your students?
- What impact did Project Citizen have on your students?
- Tell me more about how you felt after completing Project Citizen? How do you think the experience was valuable or a waste of time for you?
- How would you define social justice?
- How does Project Citizen promote social justice?
- Were there any challenges for you /and the Project Citizen students? What were the causes for those challenges?
- How did Project Citizen help you develop social justice issues? How do you feel about it? Any examples?
- Do you remember any personal studies or experience of Project Citizen with your friends/peers where you felt you wanted to - or managed to - bring about change in the community?
- Project Citizen works on a community problem. What was the problem that you and your group worked on? And how well did you to solve it?
- Overall, how do you think the students did with their projects? Why/ Why not?
- Overall, what do you think went well and why did those things go well? Why/ Why not?
- Any comment? Something that you wanted me to ask and I didn't? Please share.