Elementary Education Students' Perceptions of "Good" Citizenship

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Abstract: *The purpose of this study was to investigate how elementary pre-service teachers perceive of 'good' citizenship. Prior to any instruction in their methods courses, 309 pre-service elementary teachers from nine different states were asked to respond to the prompt "What is a good citizen?" The two most common responses were "helping others/community involvement" (n=180) and "following laws" (n=163). Using the framework created by Westheimer and Kahne (2004), the authors make the conclusion that a majority of undergraduates have adopted a "Personally Responsible" model of citizenship. The authors argue that social studies methods instructors should attempt to move students in the direction of adopting a more "justice-oriented" model of citizenship when teaching elementary students in their future classrooms.*

Keywords: *good citizenship, preservice elementary teachers*

"Democracy must be born anew every generation, and education is its midwife."
John Dewey, 1889.

"If reading and math are the building blocks of an education, social studies is the mortar that holds it all together"
Johnnie Eames, social studies teacher.

Introduction

When asked, many social studies educators identify the development of citizenship skills as their central mission. This is corroborated by the National Council for the Social Studies which states that the primary goal of social studies instruction is to **"**teach students the content knowledge, intellectual skills, and civic values necessary for fulfilling the duties of citizenship in

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a participatory democracy" (NCSS, 2005: 1). This statement was echoed in *The Nation's Report Card: Civics 2006,* which stated, "The United States depends on a well-informed and civic-minded population to sustain its democratic traditions" (Lutkus & Weiss, 2007). Schools and teachers can play a major role in achieving these goals. Teachers can use social studies as a conduit to pass on democratic beliefs and behaviors that our culture has deemed desirable or widely accepted (Gagnon 2003; Wineburg 2001).

The lead author of the current study teaches elementary social studies methods at our institution, and one of the first questions he asks every term is, "Why do we teach social studies?" Typical student responses include, "To teach students history" or "To teach students to be patriotic." Seldom does a student mention the word "citizenship." Students are often surprised when the instructor posits that the central goal of social studies is to prepare students to be effective life-long citizens.

To more fully investigate the perceptions of citizenship held by pre-service teachers, this study surveyed teacher candidates from several institutions in several different states and regions of the U.S. Such research reveals how these future educators conceptualize the concept that is to be central to their future social studies instruction, and illuminates (at least in part) what social studies teacher education programs need to address during the training period for teacher candidates.

Research on Citizenship and Citizenship Education

Research conducted in the past decade indicates that Americans' political participation and civic involvement has declined significantly (Galston, 2008), that many young adults are not knowledgeable about democratic principles nor do they care about international relationships (Torney-Puerta, 2001), and that teacher candidates are less informed of world events than candidates in the past (Wartella & Knell, 2004). This suggests a need for renewed emphasis on educating pre-service teachers on the importance, values, and practices of good citizenship.

When describing how teachers teach the concept of citizenship, Anderson et al. (1997) found "four coherent, identifiable, and separate viewpoints on citizenship education" (p. 351) held by teachers. The first is called the *critical thinking* perspective. These teachers believe that citizenship education should help students question the status quo, develop critical thinking and questioning skills, and encourage open-mindedness and tolerance. The second viewpoint is called the *legalist* perspective. These teachers believe that citizenship should stress obedience to

laws, teach the basic structure of our political system, and inform students of their rights and responsibilities. The third perspective is that of *cultural pluralism*, and these teachers focus on celebrating the diverse and pluralistic nature of the United States. Rather than simply teaching about political structures in the U.S., these teachers expose students to a wide range of political ideologies. The last is called the *assimilationist* perspective. Teachers who adhere to this paradigm hold similar beliefs to legalists, but they explicitly reject the notion of "political correctness" and want to transmit to students the dominant values of our society. While teachers may vacillate between models in their instruction, their views on what they consider to be most important about citizenship education are sure to influence their instruction.

When describing how social studies instruction is implemented in elementary level classrooms, recent developments prove troubling for citizenship education in the United States. While the NCSS regards teaching citizenship as the main objective for social studies educators, there is ample – and growing – evidence that social studies instruction is being marginalized in our nation's elementary schools (Barton & Levstik, 2004; Rock, et. al, 2006). Some researchers have found that teachers view social studies as less important than other academic subjects, and that it is sometimes considered an enrichment or second-ranked subject (Hinde, 2005; Houser, 1995, Thornton & Houser, 1996; Wade, 2002). Since the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act in 2001, the increased emphasis on student scores on standardized tests has forced teachers to focus more on language arts and mathematics, often marginalizing social studies instruction in the classroom (Brighton, 2002; Smith and Kovacs, 2011). Davis and Davis (2007) found that only 15% of elementary students are getting five hours or more of social studies per week. Furthermore, research has documented reductions in the time allotted to practicing teachers for professional development in social studies (Van Zastrow, 2004; Smith and Kovacs, 2011).

In sum, a growing need for citizenship education is emerging, just as the emphasis on social studies in our schools seems to be declining. According to professional standards, it is vital that teachers teach citizenship, and do so with some level of efficacy, to develop active, thoughtful members of society. However, political participation is down, while instructional time for students and opportunities for professional development for teachers in the social studies is sparse and waning. These developments do not bode well for a democratic nation.

An understanding of how people perceive of the concept of citizenship is thus imperative. Westheimer and Kahne's (2004) seminal work describes three categories of "good citizens": the

personally responsible citizen, the participatory citizen, and the justice-oriented citizen. Personally responsible citizens obey laws, pay taxes, volunteer to help the community and help others in need. Participatory citizens "actively participate in the civic affairs and the social life of the community at local, state, and national level" (241). The justice-oriented citizen critically assesses social, political, and economic structures in an effort to enact societal change and when possible, addresses the root causes of problems. While the personally responsible citizen would donate food for the hungry, the participatory citizen would be the person who organizes the drive; the justice-oriented citizen "ask[s] why people are hungry and act[s] on what they discover" (242).

Prior research indicates that a narrow, often incomplete, conception of "good citizenship" is quite common among students, usually reflecting only the Personally Responsible model. For example, Conover and Searing (2000) investigated how high school students from urban, rural, and suburban schools perceived the notion of "citizenship." Students were given cards with citizenship duties, and participants were asked to rank the importance of each. More than 90% of the participants believed that following laws and paying taxes were the main obligation of citizens. Other responses of note included voting in elections (83%), showing patriotism (78%), serving in the military during wartime (75%), participating in jury duty (56%), and donating to charity (23%). As a result of their findings, Conover and Searing concluded that "[students'] grasp of what it means to act as citizens is rudimentary and dominated by a focus on rights, thus creating a privately-oriented, passive understanding" (108).

In 2005, Martin and Chiodo compared the perceptions of citizenship between 8th grade and 11th grade students in rural, suburban, and urban settings. Their main findings were that a majority of these students perceived that good citizens followed rules and laws and helped others. These students believed that demonstrating good citizenship required them to help out with community and school projects and to obey laws. When asked about their future endeavors towards good citizenship, participants mentioned voting, being gainfully employed, and helping with community projects. Participants had difficulty relating to future political engagement beyond voting in local and national elections.

Closer to our purposes here, Gallavan (2008) surveyed 93 pre-service teachers from one university at the conclusion of their early childhood, elementary, middle, and high school student teaching experiences. The survey asked participants about their views regarding teaching world

citizenship. Among her findings were that a vast majority (97%) of the participants wanted to teach their students to be "world citizens" but that a majority (72%) of these future teachers felt that they were not prepared to do so. Her study also revealed that many teacher candidates did not have a clear definition of what it meant to be a "world citizen" in the curricular content or in their instructional strategies. These findings substantiated the research of Robbins, Francis & Elliott (2003) who found similar themes reported by students during their student teaching experiences.

In the study most closely related to the one reported here, Martin (2008) asked 39 elementary education majors and 36 secondary social studies, "What does it mean to be a good citizen?" Her major conclusions were that these pre-service teachers emphasized civic engagement more than political engagement: the two main criteria for good citizenship were community engagement and following laws. Both elementary and secondary students in her study felt that helping others was integral to good citizenship and that their future "good citizenship" endeavors would include teaching and helping others in need.

Limitations of Existing Research

Most of the research in this realm has addressed how students perceive of citizenship. Little has been done to assess the views of teacher candidates, especially at the elementary level. Only Martin's study (2008) focused on the perceptions of pre-service teachers, but her research drew participants from only one institution, and mixed elementary pre-service teachers' perceptions with those in secondary programs. To address these shortcomings, the present study gathers data from a larger and wider group of respondents, expanding both the number of study participants and their locations. Furthermore, this study only includes pre-service elementary level teachers. As a result, findings from this study will offer enhanced insight into how elementary pre-service teachers perceive good citizenship, as well as offering a greater ability to generalize to the larger population of pre-service teachers nationwide.

Research Question

As Westheimer and Kahne (2004) note, how teachers conceive of the notion of citizenship – *i.e.,* whether a teacher's ideas of good citizenship reflect the "personally responsible," the "participatory," or the "justice-oriented" model – can have a significant impact on curriculum, and how teachers prepare students for their future roles in a participatory democracy. Therefore, to satisfy both the needs of a democratic nation, and fulfill the

professional standards set forth by the NCSS, teacher education programs need to develop full comprehension of the concept of citizenship in their teacher candidates. It is essential to this task that teacher education programs focus some of their instruction on developing in their teacher candidates appropriate understandings of what it means to be a "good citizen," as well as training them in best practices for developing citizenship in their future students.

To do so, teacher educators must understand the perceptions of citizenship held by would-be teachers when entering teacher education programs. With such knowledge, methods instructors can address deficiencies in understanding or commonly-held fallacies regarding citizenship among teacher candidates. Understanding and addressing these perceptions can lead to greater effectiveness when teaching the all-encompassing concept of "good citizenship" to pre-service teachers, which ultimately informs the classroom practice of these individuals.

To this end, the research question that guided this study was "How do pre-service elementary teachers perceive good citizenship?" We were interested in student views *before* they were exposed to instruction in their elementary social studies methods course. Our findings will reveal how well pre-service teachers understand the concept of citizenship, and provide direction for methods instructors when teaching the skills and knowledge integral to citizenship education.

Data Collection

Convenience sampling was used to enlist participants in the study. This type of sampling is used to get responses easily accessible by the researcher and is one of the most commonly used purposive sampling methods (Kemper, Stringfield & Teddlie, 2003). Specifically, the lead author asked colleagues to suggest names of other teacher educators in the field of elementary social studies. Eleven professors were contacted and eight agreed to provide data from their respective classes. The goal of the data collection was to gather responses from at least one public teacher education program in each of the five geographic "regions" in the United States (i.e., Southeast, Northeast, Midwest, Southwest, and West), thereby making the results more generalizable to pre-service elementary teachers across the nation. The locations from which the data were gathered as well as the number of responses from each state are listed in Table 1 below.

TABLE 1: Locations and numbers of responses by state (N=309)

	State	Responses	Region	
1	Alabama	26	Southeast	
2	Florida	100	Southeast	
3	California	30	West	
4	Minnesota	24	MidWest	
5	Texas	36	SouthWest	
6	Connecticut	19	NorthEast	
7	Idaho	8	West	
8	Georgia	24	SouthEast	
9	Kentucky	42	SouthEast	
	Total	309		

Participating pre-service elementary teachers were asked to anonymously answer the question, "What is a good citizen?" during the first week of their "Elementary Social Studies Methods" course. Because we wanted to assess perceptions at the time teacher candidates enter their professional coursework, it was important that the responses were gathered at the beginning of the semester before instruction began, so that their methods course did not influence their perception of the tenets of "good citizenship." Written responses were collected anonymously by the respective instructors and returned via U.S. mail to the researchers. After gathering all responses, the entire data set was transcribed by a staff assistant at the researchers' university.

Method of Analysis

After transcription, our research team coded the responses using a modified open-coding process (Babbie 2004; Strauss and Corbin, 1990). The team consisted of the authors and a research assistant. Based on results from Martin (2008), we created a list of nine (9) code categories. Individual responses that addressed multiple categories were given multiple codes, therefore the total frequencies reflected in Table 2 (f=807) is greater than the number of participants (N=309).

In order to establish inter-rater reliability, each team member reviewed the same set of 50 randomly chosen responses from the data set, identifying any and all code categories in each response. This produced a possible 450 categorizations (9 possible categories x 50 responses.) We then compared assignments made by each team member, which yielded a "rate of agreement" of 94.66%. Team members discussed any discrepancies until reaching consensus, and three new code categories were identified: achievement orientation, environmental responsibility, and ethics / honesty. The remaining responses were then coded by the group utilizing the 12-category schema. Code categories and frequencies are also shown in Table 2.

Results

The responses indicate that the two most common response categories—by a wide margin-- were in that the most common two "community involvement/helping others" and "following laws." More than half the participants mentioned at least one of these ideas, and most of these (93 participants) mentioned both in their response.

	TABLE 2: Code Categories and Frequencies					
1	Community Involvement (help others, attend comm'ty events)				180	
2	Following laws				163	
3	Respecting others				115	
4	Being politically active / Voting				98	
5	Keeping up with current issues				71	
6	Loyalty / Pride about US / Patriotism				48	
7	Environmental Responsibility				31	
8	Ethics / Honesty				28	
9	Achievement Orientation / Be Educated				26	
10	Supporting the Gov't				19	
11	Understanding the Gov't				16	
12	Paying taxes				12	

One hundred and eighty respondents (58.3% of our participants) mentioned some aspect of community involvement in their comments, while one hundred and sixty three respondents (52.8%) mentioned some aspect of obedience to rules or the law. Recurrent phrases relative to community involvement included being "actively involved in the community" and "making the community a better place." Forty three pre-service teachers thought that "volunteering" was an essential component of good citizenship. Another consistent idea was that 'good' citizens direct this assistance towards those "less fortunate" or those "who need help."

"Respecting others" was also mentioned by more than 1/3 of respondents (n=115, or 37.2%). Respondents included comments like "be sensitive to those around you," "know that others have feelings," and "be respectful." Others said that good citizens are "not judgmental or stereotyping," "considerate of others," and "compassionate and understanding towards your fellow citizens."

Other categories appeared in less than 1/3 of the responses. Being Politically Active and Voting were identified by 98 respondents, while Keeping up with Current Issues was something 71 of our pre-service teachers thought good citizens do. Of the 98 participants who mentioned voting as a characteristic of good citizenship, 36 also mentioned that people should be informed of issues. Patriotism and Loyalty to / Pride in the U.S. were mentioned 48 times, and about one in ten participants held either Environmental Responsibility (n=31) or certain ethical traits like honesty (n=28) as key to good citizenship. The environmental responses revolved around the concepts of "not littering," and "recycling," and four people specifically used the terminology

"going green." Ethical traits of honesty, morality, and "having values" were explicitly mentioned in participant responses. More than two dozen (n=26) identified working hard, being employed, achieving "success" and fulfilling one's potential, or being educated as important, while 19 said a good citizen supports and /or respects the government. Understanding the government, questioning its policies or decisions, or understanding politics etc., was only brought up by 16 pre-service teachers. Paying taxes was identified by 12 students.

Discussion

In their answers to our question, teacher candidates – like many people – reflect little more than traits of the personally responsible citizen. They suggest that citizens should simply follow the laws their government passes, be involved in some community events, and be honest and respectful of others. Very few future teachers seemed to embrace the *critical-thinking* perspective identified by Anderson et al. (1997). Among those suggesting some form of active involvement in society, most were aimed at "helping others" through volunteering or taking part in community events, but lacked an orientation toward working for social change through critical reflection and involvement in the political process.

Westheimer and Kahne's (2004) three categories of citizenship – the personally responsible, the participatory, and the justice-oriented citizen – helped clarify our results and offered a possible reason for the overwhelming number of personally responsible citizens. As Westheimer and Kahne note, the personally responsible citizen "receives the most attention" (p. 243) from policy makers, program officers, and citizenship educators, but the traits valued by the personally responsible conception are inadequate for – even potentially dangerous to – a democratic system. While everyone obviously wants young people to be honest and obey the laws, such behavior is not essentially democratic. Stressing loyalty and conformity with the law runs counter to the development of "the kind of critical reflection and action that many assume are essential in a democratic society" (Westheimer and Kahne 2004: p. 244).

We found very little evidence of this kind of critical perspective in the answers from participants. Only 16 respondents (5.1%) made any comments that reflected the idea that citizens in a democratic society should be engaged with current issues to the degree that includes critiquing the actions and policies undertaken by the elected representatives or the government of those citizens. Of the few who did mention this, the following are examples:

[If good citizens] disagree [with a law or governmental policy,] they learn the law making process and become an active citizen in either the state or national level. They vote and make informed decisions….

- Response #169, from Minnesota

[A good citizen means] you know what your rights and responsibilities are. It means you understand the government, economics, history and geography to be able to debate a controversial issue. It means you vote and take every opportunity for your voice to be heard.

- Response #277, from Kentucky

Good citizens…contribute to the political process by understanding it, voting, and working to change the laws that you do not agree with or for certain important causes.

- Response #19, from Alabama

These types of responses reflect more than simple personal responsibility, and more than basic community involvement. They suggest a critical, contemplative engagement with and fulfillment of the role necessary for a fully functioning democracy to thrive. Honest people who are willing to volunteer in their communities are certainly desirable, and such goals for citizenship education (and for citizens in general) are laudable. However, for a democracy to flourish to its fullest, citizens must be active in the political process, engaged with and informed about the issues of the day, and must ultimately take action to change unjust laws or policies.

Unfortunately, the vast majority of our responses made no such comments. More typically, participants made comments like the ones below:

To be a good citizen means having good morals and values. It means helping people when they need you to, obeying laws, reporting serious crimes if you see them happen so you are helping to protect your community, taking care of the environment, and being trustworthy to others.

- Response #10, from Alabama

A good citizen is a person who obeys the laws of their state. This person pays taxes, works in the community, and helps others if needed. A good citizen volunteers and does work for others.

- Response #238, from Idaho

A good citizen is someone who is respectful of laws placed in our society. Someone who doesn't go out of their way to break these rules (even though sometimes rules will be broken) and respects others.

- Response #58, from California

Possibly the most troubling quote from the entire set of responses was:

To be a good citizen means to contribute to a growing society on a regular basis. This can be any society. Even if the society's objective may be morally incorrect such as the Nazi society. Anyone who contributes for society's good is a good citizen.

-Response #139, from Florida).

Whether in their primary and secondary classrooms, or through social interactions in their lives, most of our participants have learned to conceptualize citizenship in a rather narrow way: obedience, honesty, and volunteering in the community. Several studies conducted in the United States and internationally (Hahn, 1999; Kahne & Sporte, 2008; Torney-Purta, Schwille, & Amadeo, 1999) indicate that educators, researchers and the public are concerned about engaging children and adolescents in civic life on an international level. Like Westheimer and Kahne (2003), we believe this engagement should be based on more than personally responsible models of civic engagement, especially as it pertains to citizens addressing the challenges of citizenship in a democratic society.

To help pre-service teachers move beyond the personally-responsible citizen towards a more socially just orientation, teacher educators should model a more critical perspective of citizenship. Tishman, Jay, and Perkins (1993) found that many teachers see their main function as passing on information to their students. Rather than adopting this simplistic notion, teacher educators should model more transformational models of citizenship education (Engle & Ochoa, 1988). Adherents to the transformation model of education believe that curriculum should be

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revised at the "social action" level, in that it encourages students to take action to address society's problems (Banks,1997; McLaren, 1994). In classrooms such as these, students are taught to make decisions and take actions regarding a societal problem. Jennings et al. (1994) posit that projects such as these can "convince participants of the power inherent within cooperative efforts against injustice" (Jennings, et al., 1994, p 5). If pre-service teachers enter their classrooms with experiences such as these, there is hope that they will encourage their students to view the world through a more critical lens and work to improve conditions when necessary.

Limitations

Some limitations to our study need to be addressed. The first involves the issue of generalizability. A broad understanding of citizenship beliefs among pre-service teachers is needed, and our study moves the field in that direction. Prior scholarship in this area has relied on smaller samples (less than 100) drawn from only one institution, mixing elementary and secondary teacher candidates. This project enlisted more than 300 teacher candidates from nine different states and schools, in five different regions of the United States, and included only elementary teacher candidates. The shortcoming is that these responses were not drawn from a truly random sample, which limits the overall generalizability of the results. The fact that this study contains the largest number of responses (N=309), from a homogeneous group (only pre-service elementary education teachers) at several different universities suggests improvement of our ability to understand how teacher candidates broadly conceive of citizenship.

Another limiting factor of this study is the fact that participants only replied in an open-ended response format. Our one-question survey was not prompted, nor were students prepared in advance, thus a full consideration of citizenship may not have been at the forefront of our participants' minds. One the one hand, this is what we wanted – an unsolicited, spontaneous response regarding citizenship that would reveal what actually was at the forefront of teacher candidates' minds. On the other hand, the extemporaneous nature of the survey, may have caused participants to only provide initial reflections on the issue that could be quickly and easily written down. A suggestion for future researchers is to use a list of code categories (e.g., helping others, following rules/laws, voting, etc.) like those we have identified to create a list from which participants can choose what behaviors and concepts fit their idea of citizenship, or even to rank these areas in importance according to their beliefs.

Conclusion

In the four or so months that pre-service teachers are enrolled in their social studies methods courses, teacher educators have the daunting task of helping this disparate group not only understand and clarify their own beliefs about what constitutes "good" citizenship, but they must also teach pre-service teachers to improve their future students' abilities to be effective citizens. The findings of this study indicate that a clear majority of pre-service teachers have adopted, whether consciously or not, a *legalist* perspective of citizenship. With this evidence in mind, teacher educators should utilize pedagogic strategies that can develop and enhance these future teachers' questioning and critical thinking skills.

In the current climate of accountability in which some elementary teachers are being forced to teach from teachers' manuals and follow scripted lessons, it is not difficult to understand how teachers would value following rules and being obedient. However, the founding fathers' perception of citizenship included the responsibility of citizens challenging existing power structures when necessary. Thomas Jefferson wrote "Ordinary people have power....when they rise up and defy the rules....propel new issues to the center of political debate....and force political leaders to reforms. These are the conditions that produce (America's) democratic moments" (Piven, 2008, p. 1). While elementary teachers have the responsibility of transmitting important information from the social sciences, they also have an equally important obligation to teach critical thinking so that students feel comfortable challenging existing power structures. If not, we as a nation risk losing future citizens who form the foundation for a more socially just world.

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