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Civic Education in the 21st Century

An Analytical and Methodological Global Overview

Prepared for USAID/ENGAGE activity

by Street Law, Inc.

January 2018

This research was conducted by Street Law, Inc. as part of its contract implemented under the USAID/ENGAGE activity, which is funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and implemented by Pact.

The contents of this research are the sole responsibility of authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of USAID or the United States Government.

Executive Summary

The goal of civic education is to produce active citizens who engage and participate in the democratic processes of society. However, since the breakup of the Soviet Union and throughout the beginning of the 21st century, many countries have struggled to meet that goal. The clearest measure of the challenges of civic education comes from the IEA civics study, the most comprehensive analysis of the global trends in civic education at the turn of the century. Based on the results of the survey and other research, experts in the civic education field have produced a list of six proven practices that can serve as a guide for the implementation of effective civic educational experiences in a variety of contexts. This paper presents an additional six recommendations for civic education in Ukraine.

Defining Civic Education

Civic education is concerned with the development of good citizens. In a representative democracy, this ideal citizen actively participates in society by engaging in the civic and political activities of his or her community. In their report on the Civic Mission of Schools, the Carnegie Corporation of New York and the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) explain the characteristics of the competent and responsible citizens that are produced from effective civic education.ⁱ On a conceptual level, these citizens are informed about societal issues and understand the balance between their own interests and the common good. Practically, however, they also demonstrate political participation in their everyday lives by actively contributing to their communities and society and valuing the rights of others.

Knowledge is a key component of the engaged citizen and is, therefore, an important element of civic education. Unsurprisingly, research shows that those who are unaware of the basic political structure of their society are substantially less likely to be actively engaged in civic life.ⁱⁱ As Meira Levinson notes, “one’s capacity for civic empowerment is greater if one knows about both political structures and institutions as well as about contemporary politics than if one does not know of these things.”ⁱⁱⁱ The content of civic education should impart to students practical and relevant information about the political realities of their society. However, the ideal civic educational experience is not simply a knowledge transfer from the teacher to learner. To produce actively engaged citizens, **civic education must also foster the development and use of civic engagement skills.** These include intellectual skills such as critical thinking and problem solving, as well as participatory skills such as deliberating about public issues, communicating with diverse sets of people, and influencing policy makers.^{iv} Civic education should provide a structured context for students to hone these skills. Finally, **the actively engaged citizen must possess certain sincerely held values or dispositions.** Without the attitudinal traits of tolerance, honesty, respect, and the like, “the best constitutions, institutions, and laws cannot bring about a sustainable democracy.”^v The civic educational experience should not only teach about these values, it should also actively demonstrate them through a carefully constructed democratic classroom environment. Effective civic education, thus, “explicitly teaches the knowledge, skills and values believed necessary for democratic citizenship.”^{vi}

Implementing Civic Education

Over the past 30 years, global interest in civic education has fluctuated. In the years following the collapse of the Soviet Union, eastern European states began to recognize that civic education was a crucial element of the infrastructure of their new democracies. The design and implementation of the civic education programs that emerged in the two post-communist states of Poland and

Romania present contrasting case studies of how civic education can be implemented. Though similar in geography and geo-political status, the two countries took strikingly different approaches to civic education in the early days of their democracies. The experiences in those countries and the difference in civic outcomes can provide insights to other countries implementing civic education initiatives nearly three decades later.

Poland

Poland is a prime example of a country that used civic education initiatives to bolster their rapid transition from a communist society that relied on martial law to a democratic society in which citizen participation is the valued norm. After WWII, Poland had a long period of totalitarian rule capped off by more than four decades of Soviet-supported communism. This post-war communism led to “widespread alienation towards public life and serious underdevelopment of public virtues.”^{vii} However, after economic pressure was applied from the United States and other Western democracies, in 1989 the people of Poland elected opposition leader and Nobel Peace Prize winner Lech Wałęsa, effectively signaling the end of communism in the country.

The new government quickly realized the need to effectively educate the people about civic participation and engagement. They immediately required grade eight students to take a civics course that taught the basics of democratic rule and the market economy. In 1992, recognizing the need to develop skills in addition to building knowledge, the country began the Education for Democratic Citizenship in Poland (EDCP). This series of initiatives, which included a new academic course, was widely regarded as the single most important step that Poland took towards building a civically engaged populace. The pedagogy of the EDCP class was completely different than the existing civics class, requiring teachers to utilize active learning methods, create student-centered lessons, and provide opportunities for real world applications of civic competencies. Understanding that teachers would need support to teach in this new way, the EDCP also included extensive teacher training, pre-written lesson plans, and plenty of teaching materials to ensure that the course was being taught effectively.^{viii}

To maximize learning outcomes, the EDCP served not only as a standalone course but also as a call to action to other government agencies, international organizations, and local civil society organizations to implement related civic education initiatives. One impressive program, run by a coalition of American and Polish teachers and education administrators, implemented skills training courses for students and teachers. Recognizing the need to develop Polish citizens’ participatory skills, the program allowed students to practice their civic engagement skills through activities such as mock community meetings, conflict resolution sessions, and negotiations. Another program, organized by UNESCO, helped foster democratic attitudes and values by using international language summer camps to build intercultural tolerance between Poles and their European and global neighbors. Finally, in order to build democratic competencies in the older members of society who grew up under communist rule, a number of local civil society organizations developed programs that helped adults develop civic skills that they could use in their own lives and bolster their capacity to effectively teach their children about democratic principles and ideals.^{ix}

Romania

Like Poland, Romania’s story since the 1950s is one of totalitarian and dictatorial rule that evolved into democracy. However, though many elements of the two countries are similar, Romania’s path to participatory democracy—as well as their adoption of civic education—was much rockier than

that of Poland. Romania's dictator through most of the post-WWII era, Nicolae Ceaușescu, was very skeptical of both labor movements and Western influences and was careful to keep those elements out of Romanian society. Despite his caution, he was overthrown and killed in 1989. Ceaușescu was replaced through an election by the pro-labor National Salvation Front (NSF); however, the NSF, which had connections to the Soviets, did not immediately turn towards democracy. It instead opted for a slow shuffle that was more focused on stepping away from communism than towards another ideology.

This slow path towards democracy in the political realm was accompanied by a lackluster effort to provide civic education for Romanian citizens. Few initiatives related to civic education were introduced in the early part of the 1990s, and those that were implemented were stifled by policies and attitudes that were uncondusive to the development of civic skills and competencies. The biggest issue was in the teaching methodologies used in schools. Teachers were barred by law from dealing with politics in school, and many of them took that as a ban on any discussion of civic topics. Those that did teach civics largely retained the dictatorial teaching style, imparting information onto students and actively preventing them from debating ideas or exerting agency in the classroom. Students and parents had no control over what happened within the schools and were often treated with disrespect by teachers and school officials. Furthermore, a controversial rewrite of several textbooks drove Romanian civic education towards nationalism and away from the development of democratic skills and the promotion of civic participation.^x

Assessing Civic Education — The IEA Civics Study

While subjective analyses of different countries' approaches to the implementation of civic education can be useful, objective measures can more directly compare the impact of such approaches. Unfortunately, objective global assessments of civic education can be extremely difficult to conduct, for, unlike subjects like mathematics, science, and languages, the content of civics classes (i.e., laws, institutions, governmental structure, etc.) can vary significantly from country to country. In the 1990s, in response to this challenge, the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) began working on a civic education study. Because no internationally transferable framework for civic education existed, they collected curricular case studies from 24 countries in the subject of laws, law making institutions, and the nature of community problems. Through these case studies, they identified the key common expectations of civic education curricula and created a model for global civic education. Based on this model, the IEA developed a civic education assessment—a 38-item multiple choice exam that tested for civic knowledge and skills and, importantly, could be replicated and compared across countries. Approximately 90,000 students from 28 countries took the exam. The results of the assessment provide perhaps the best comparative international information on the effectiveness of civic education.^{xi}

The results of the IEA civics study indicate that the different approaches that Poland and Romania took to civic education had a substantial impact on student performance. One factor that stands out is the countries' classroom environments. Open classroom environments—that is, classrooms in which students felt that they could safely disagree with others students and the teacher and in which controversial topics were discussed—predicted higher civic knowledge and skills outcomes in most country cases, and Poland and Romania are not exceptions. The efforts that Poland put into developing and implementing a holistic and participatory civic education experience for students appear to have paid off. Polish students scored above the international mean in exposure to open classroom environments and, consistent with international trends, this open classroom environment

was linked with above average scores in both civic knowledge and civic skills. Romanian students, on the other hand, were well below the international mean in exposure to open classrooms, and their knowledge and skill scores unsurprisingly fell below the international mean in both categories.

Other results from the IEA civics study identify global trends in civic education. Knowledge of democratic institutions and principles and the skills to effectively participate in a democracy are two distinct elements. Students from well-established democracies like the United States, Australia, and England performed relatively poorly on the questions that assessed knowledge, but they performed well on the skills-focused questions. The trend was opposite for students from post-communist countries, where students performed relatively well on the knowledge aspects of the assessment but poorly on the skills-based elements. The notable exceptions are, of course, Romania (which scored below average on both) and Poland (which scored above average on both). While the IEA study does not purport to measure a causal link, the correlation between high scores in democratic skills and relatively well-functioning democracies is notable. As the literature corroborates, the development of these skills is a critical element of effective civic education and purely knowledge-based civic educational experiences may be neglecting critical skill-building elements of effective civic or democratic education.

While classroom culture and lesson content are critical elements of civic education, students do not spend every moment of their education inside the classroom. The results of IEA civics study show that the school culture outside of the classroom is also important. Schools that cultivate environments in which students have opportunities to actively participate in organizations, clubs, and groups tend to produce more civically knowledgeable and engaged students. One clear example of such participation is student government. The IEA results show that students who engage with school officials and have real decision making power in guiding the direction of the school are much more likely to vote than those who do not. This finding is especially important for schools that serve underprivileged students. Such students are generally less politically knowledgeable and are less likely to vote, so schools with disadvantaged populations could benefit from a specialized focus on enhancing civic opportunities for their students.

The IEA civics study also included measures of civic attitudes of students. One interesting attitudinal finding is related to political tolerance, specifically, support for women's political rights. Perhaps unsurprisingly, countries with female politicians and a tradition of relatively gender-balanced elections were much more supportive of women's political rights than those countries with predominately male politicians. This finding suggests a particular area of emphasis for post-communist countries (which had the lowest scores in this area), where the lack of female political role models may circularly reinforce low tolerance for women's political rights. Without targeted interventions in the educational sector, support for women's political rights may lead to a dearth of female politicians that will, in turn, continue to drive low support for women's rights.

The results of the IEA civics study have resonating implications for civic education programs around the globe. A focus on civic knowledge growth alone—a practice that is unfortunately prevalent worldwide—is a limited and restricted approach to civic education. While providing practical and relevant information about institutions and political structures is not irrelevant, more attention should be paid to developing student's participatory skills. To do this, teachers should create democratic classroom environments that allow students to practice the skills necessary for democratic participation in society. This student-centered approach to teaching is often foreign to teachers who are more comfortable with didactic methods, which highlights the importance of pre-service teacher preparation and in-service teacher professional development. Like the ideal civic education experience, such teacher preparation and professional development should itself be

participatory and foster democratic skills. Outside of the classroom, administrators should deliberately foster an empowering and democratic school environment in which student's voices are heard. Finally, schools should include targeted emphases on topics related to democratic values that are absent in the society.

Best Practices in Civic Education

Though civic education has been thoroughly studied in academic literature, the global education community has been slow to take up the cause of effective civic education in pursuit of democratic citizenship. The United Nations' Millennium Development Goals of 2000 included a concentration on education, but the focus was on primary school attainment and included little acknowledgment of educational quality and no specific language on civic competencies. It was not until 2015 and the creation of the Sustainable Development Goals that the UN made civic education—or, as they refer to it, global citizenship education—a major priority and connected it to the larger goal of sustainable global development. As they state, “it is not enough for education to produce individuals who can read, write and count. Education must be transformative and bring shared values to life. It must cultivate an active care for the world and for those with whom we share it.”^{xii}

While the renewed focus has spurred some global action on civic education and many jurisdictions now offer, or even mandate, some form of civic education, the implementation of such an education has proved to be a challenge around the world. Often, civic education courses are overly broad, covering too much material in too little depth. Knowledge of people and concepts related to democracy and government are prioritized and little thought appears to have been given to the purpose of gaining that knowledge or the skills to apply that knowledge in practice. In Azerbaijan, for example, despite the official state-sponsored goal to teach democratic principles to students, teachers are paradoxically limited to carefully culled and state-approved teaching materials and have fostered an authoritarian school environment that is distinctly removed from democratic ideals.^{xiii} Civic education courses are also often infused with country-specific citizenship goals that have little to do with true democratic participation and are instead focused on patriotism. In Jordan, for example, citizenship education explicitly seeks to prepare students to become deeply religious and patriotic citizens, but it makes little mention of developing participatory skills and dispositions.^{xiv} Furthermore, civic concepts are often presented in an abstract and theoretical fashion. While many countries have begun to include concepts related to democracy and civic participation in textbooks and lesson plans, those concepts are often detached from the social and political realities on the ground. Finally, the continued use of didactic teaching methods and rote memorization does little to build the civic skills and dispositions of students.^{xv}

Based on the results of assessments like the IEA civics study and extensive research, experts have developed a list of proven practices in the area of civic education.^{xvi} This list represents the research-based best practices in civic education and can serve as a guide for the implementation of effective civic education programs.

1. **Classroom instruction** in law, history, economics, and other civic disciplines has the largest potential impact on students. As the report notes, “schools impact more citizens in a more sustained way than nearly any other institution, public or private, and the classroom experience is one shared by millions of young people.”^{xvii} There is broad consensus that formal instruction in civic topics increases students' knowledge in these disciplines. It is critical to note, however, that the method of instruction is just as, if not more, important than the mere existence of classroom instruction in civics.^{xviii} An informative but narrow

curriculum focused on rote memorization of key facts may bore students and have the perverse effect of discouraging their active engagement in their communities.

2. **Discussion of current events and controversial issues** is another proven way to develop students' critical analysis and communication skills. By leading carefully moderated class discussions, teachers can engage students with intrinsically relevant content and help students develop attitudes of tolerance and understanding toward those who hold different beliefs.^{xxix} Students who develop these skills and attitudes will be better prepared to meaningfully engage in civic activities in their communities.
3. As the goal of civic education is to prepare young people for civic life and provide them with the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to actively engage in their societies, effective civic education must meaningfully connect the classroom to the wider society. **Service learning**, or the instructional method of extending the classroom into the community, has a demonstrated positive impact on both the academic performance of students and their attitudes about civic participation.^{xxx} Importantly, service learning is not simply prescriptive community service. Rather, it entails active engagement in and critical problem solving of community issues, enables the utilization of participatory skills, and provides guided reflection on the work.
4. **Extracurricular activities** are another important aspect of civic education. Although the term “extracurricular” refers to activities that take place outside of the formal academic curriculum, such activities “should not be viewed as peripheral to high-quality civic learning, but rather as indispensable to well-rounded civic learning.”^{xxxi} Students who participate in extracurricular activities not only put into practice the knowledge and skills learned in the classroom, they also form social bonds and networks that can be leveraged for civic engagement. While, unsurprisingly, activities that directly relate to civic education (e.g., moot court competitions, model UN, debate club, etc.) are beneficial to academic performance and civic behaviors, other group-based activities, such as performing arts and sports, also have positive impacts.^{xxii}
5. **Student participation in school governance** is another way for students to be involved in civic and democratic activities outside of the classroom. Research has shown that active and meaningful student governments have wide ranging benefits for the students who are elected as leaders. However, effective student governments that give a voice to students also has a demonstrated positive impact on the wider student population.^{xxiii} The formal and structured mechanism for voicing opinions and engaging with school officials about important matters builds trust in democratic systems and teaches general civic engagement to all students.
6. In addition to extracurricular activities and student governments, other **simulations of democratic processes** are a key way to engage young people and inspire civic action. Classroom activities that allow students to take on the roles of various community actors enable them to practice their civic skills by deeply investing and engaging with the content. Research suggests that simulations—both in-person activities like mock trials and moot courts as well as those aided by technology, such as virtual environments and games—lead to improved knowledge and increased utilization of civic skills.^{xxiv}

These best practices—combined with research from country case studies, regional analyses, and international comparative assessments—provide a useful guide for the implementation of civic education programs in the future. By presenting practical civic knowledge through participatory methods and in democratic settings, schools around the world can nurture citizens who are active

and engaged in the democratic processes of their societies. This task, however, is far from easy. It requires increasing focus on the skill building aspects of education and embracing the use of innovative teaching methods that are often novel and non-traditional.

Recommendations for Civic Education in Ukraine

The global best practices provide general advice for any country attempting in good faith to create or improve the effectiveness of civic education opportunities for its students. However, based on research and experience, the following list provides a more tailored set of recommendations specific to Ukraine:

1. **The goal of civic education in Ukraine should be clearly stated and should align with the internationally recognized principle of preparing citizens to engage in a democratic society.** Specifically, civic education should impart the knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary to meaningfully engage in that process in the Ukrainian context. Particular attention should be paid to civic skills development that empowers individuals to take participatory action.
2. The process of designing effective civic education for Ukrainians should **focus on the methodology that will be employed in the classroom as much, if not more than, the content that will be covered.** Educators should teach civic content in an active and engaging way in a classroom environment that has been deliberately structured to encourage discourse and openness. Civics is both an educational discipline and a teaching pedagogy—one in which students are empowered to think for themselves, make their opinions heard, and practice their participatory skills.
3. **Civic education assessments in Ukraine should measure—both formatively and summatively—students’ abilities in civic knowledge, skills, and attitudes.** Assessments that evaluate one element and not the others fail to capture the comprehensive picture of the students’ civic competencies. As civic education classes should look and function in a manner that is largely different from traditional didactic teaching, assessments in civic education should also be different. Assessments that measure skills and attitudes may be more informal, and teachers should be given some discretion in designing and implementing assessment techniques that are appropriate for their classrooms.
4. Recognizing that student-centered teaching methodology is a significant departure from the didactic teaching style that is prevalent in Ukraine, **significant effort should be dedicated to teacher training.** Pre-service civics teachers should not only learn the body of knowledge that they will need to teach about but also practice the interactive teaching style. Additionally, in-service teachers should be similarly trained and observed to ensure quality. This teacher training effort should not be a one-time event, rather, it should be a sustained and continuous effort.
5. Outside of the specific educational discipline of civics, **civic participation and democratic principles should be included in all aspects of the school.** From student governments to parent-teacher associations to transparent administrations, schools, school systems, and education policy organizations should all infuse civic education skills into all aspects of all educational organizations.
6. All stakeholders—students, parents, teachers, administrators, program designers, and policy makers—should understand that the **design and implementation of civic education**

initiatives should be an iterative process. Policies, curricula, and initiatives should not be static but should evolve based on impact and need.

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