The Limits of Political Efficacy: Educating Citizens for a Democratic Society

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"You can try and change things, but basically it will just make you feel bad for trying. They didn't even want to hear what I was saying. They don't care."
—Justin, a high school senior, when asked about the semester he spent working to improve his community

Justin is not alone. In a recent study of high school seniors from California, for example, only 28% agreed that "I think people in government care about what people like me and my family need" (Kahne and Middaugh 2005). Related findings are common. A survey by the National Association of Secretaries of State, for example, revealed that two-thirds of all young people agreed that "our generation has an important voice, but no one seems to hear it." Moreover, those youth who were least trusting were also the least likely to vote, to believe

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that government can affect their lives, or to pay attention to politics (National Association of Secretaries of State 1999). These findings, combined with numerous other indicators that show low and in many cases declining civic and political participation, indicate that forms of engagement required for a participatory democracy to thrive are in need of attention (Macedo et al. 2005).

In response to such concerns, educators and policy makers have stepped up efforts to promote young people's participation in political and civic affairs. A common strategy for doing so has been through service learning curriculum and community service activities that provide youth with readily-accessible opportunities to make a difference in their communities: elementary school students have cleaned up local parks; middle and high school students have brought food baskets to homeless shelters and volunteered in local hospitals, old-age homes, and recycling centers; college students have wet their civic feet by organizing and participating in a host of community projects to assist those in need. Indeed, unlike many measures of formal political engagement, rates of volunteerism among young people have risen dramatically over the past decade (Putnam 2000). Those hoping to foster civic and political engagement have often been supportive of these developments, believing that they will help young people recognize the value of giving back, will teach important skills, and will build their commitment to further engagement. One principal way this will happen, the argument goes, is by developing students' sense of efficacy. Eyler and Giles (1999), for example, argue that a sense of efficacy is a key building block for civic commitment. Indeed, many educators believe that if we shore up young people's sense of efficacy (their confidence that they can make a difference), then their levels of civic and political engagement will rise.

In this article, we discuss some surprising findings from our study of 10 nationally recognized programs that engaged youth in community-based experiences and aimed to develop democratic

values. Many, but not all, of these initiatives employed service learning activities. We should note at the outset that our study was not intended to measure the relationship between efficacy and civic and political engagement. However, data from the two-and-a-half year study led us to question the common assertion that efficacious community experiences will necessarily prepare youth for participation in the democratic life of the community. The observations we detail below do not constitute a definitive proposition about the relationship between efficacy and rates of civic and political engagement. Rather, we offer a cautionary tale of some potential shortcomings of programs that emphasize efficacy and, likewise, highlight some possible value to experiences where students encounter roadblocks rather than success. We conclude by describing some ways educators might respond to some of the limits of efficacy when preparing citizens for life in a democratic society.

The Relationship between Efficacy and Civic and Political Participation

Researchers have identified a strong connection between an individual's sense that they can make a difference—their sense of efficacy—and their level of civic participation.[1] As Almond and Verba write in *The Civic Culture*, their 1963 landmark study:

> [T]he belief in one's competence is a key political attitude. The self-confident citizen appears to be the democratic citizen. Not only does he think he can participate, he thinks others ought to participate as well. Furthermore, he does not merely think he can take part in politics; he is likely to be more active." (257)

Similarly, Conway found that those with high levels of political efficacy are 20–30% more likely to vote than those with low levels of efficacy, and similar relationships have been found to other forms of civic participation (in Berman 1997, 44; also see, Niemi and Associates 1974;

and National Association of Secretaries of State 1999).

The strong relationship that social scientists have identified between young people's sense that they are competent civic actors and their desire to participate seems to provide a clear rationale for promoting positive educational experiences that can be shown to boost participants' sense of efficacy. Evidence from our study, in fact, supports these conclusions. But we will also show that these relationships are not as straightforward as they may seem. We will make two points in this regard:

- Exposure to certain kinds of constraints, although frustrating, can also help students learn about the ways power structures, interest group influences, and technical challenges can limit the ability of concerned citizens to bring about change.
- Shining the spotlight exclusively on efforts to promote efficacy may lead educators to emphasize non-controversial charitable activities. When charity and voluntary direct-service activities become the primary way in which educators teach about citizenship in a democracy, such curricula can reinforce the assumption that if individual citizens would just help out where help is needed, that these acts of kindness and charity (multiplied across a citizenry) will transform society and offer redress for complex social problems.

Indeed, emphasizing efficacy may promote a false victory by obscuring the need to understand how various governmental policies and market structures can both create and respond to different social problems. This focus may also distract attention from examination of various controversial social topics even though learning to thoughtfully and respectfully engage controversial issues is a fundamentally important component of schooling in a democracy (Noddings 1999; Oakes et al. 2000; Hess 2002). We will explore these limits of efficacy in some detail below. First, however, we turn to the supportive role an emphasis on efficacy can play in developing students' civic capacities and dispositions.

Opportunities for Efficacy Are Often Desirable

Our two-and-a-half year study of 10 programs that aimed to instill democratic values in youth and young adults included dozens of observations, 116 interviews, and just under 600 pre/post surveys that focus on changes in attitudes related to civic participation. We visited each program for a few days at least once each year to interview students and teachers and to observe the program in action. To illustrate our observations about efficacy we focus on two of these programs. Both programs were created through partnerships between the respective schools and outside curriculum developers. We were not involved in the design of the programs. We focus on these two programs because (a) they both worked with high school seniors in social studies classes and (b) the teachers who designed and implemented these programs employed strategies that had differing impact on students' sense of efficacy.[2] By reflecting on our findings from these two programs, we are able to consider potential benefits as well as unintended consequences of a curricular emphasis on efficacy in relation to civic and political engagement.

Madison County Youth in Public Service

The story of Madison County Youth in Public Service demonstrates the ways an emerging sense of civic and political efficacy can contribute to students' civic and political commitments. As part of a Jefferson High School government course, students in this program worked in small groups with various government agencies on community-based projects. These internships required that small groups of students work on public service projects in their county's administrative offices. One group, for example, studied the feasibility of curbside recycling. They conducted phone interviews of 150 residents, undertook a cost analysis, and examined maps of the city's population density to determine which parts of the city should be served in this way. These students examined charts of projected housing growth to estimate growth in trash and its cost and environmental implications. Another group identified jobs that prisoners incarcerated for less than 90 days could perform and analyzed the cost and impact of similar programs in other localities. Other students helped to develop a five-year plan for the fire and rescue department.

In all of these projects, students were responsible for interacting with government agencies, writing reports, and presenting findings. The students' considerable successes were aided by a great deal of administrative footwork beforehand. For each of the projects, the school district's instructional supervisor coordinated contacts at the appropriate government agencies, worked with those agencies to structure appropriate and engaging projects, and found liaisons who were excited about working with students. In short, Madison County Youth in Public Service was *structured for success*—designed so that students succeeded in what they set out to do.

And succeed they did. The group of students organizing the recycling drive wrote an editorial based on their analysis that was published in their local newspaper. Making the case for improved funding for the fire and rescue department, one group of students calculated the number of minutes it would take for fire trucks to reach the widely disparate elementary schools in their rural district. Their calculations were publicized and the community responded with interest. Another group made a presentation about their efforts on behalf of the community to the county's Board of Supervisors.

Consistently, when discussing their experiences in this program, students expressed satisfaction with all they had accomplished and with the recognition they received for these accomplishments. As one student explained, "I thought it was just going to be another project. You know, we do some research, it gets written down and we leave and it gets put on the shelf somewhere. But, this [curbside recycling] is . . . really going to happen." A different student told us, "I didn't realize this was going to be as big as what it is. I mean, we've been in the newspaper . . . four times." And another student reported, "I didn't expect it to have such an impact. I thought it would be one of those classes where we all talk about it and . . . they'd nod and smile, [but] we really had an effect on what is happening."

The Madison County program provided numerous opportunities for students to learn skills and to be exposed to information that, in addition to their accomplishments, enhanced their sense of political efficacy. For example, when high school students needed to make their presentation to their county's Board of Supervisors, each group worked with their teacher and with their field site supervisor to plan their presentation. They got tips on how to make their brief presentations interesting, on how to generate visual aids with computer software, and on how to insure that their primary message was communicated.

Perhaps most important from the standpoint of civic involvement, students linked their sense of efficacy (stemming

Table 1
Madison County Youth in Public Service

Factors (Chronbach's Alpha pre, post)	Sample	Change	Pre-Test	Post-Test	Significance Level	Number of Students
Personal responsibility to help others (.62, .74)	Intervention	.21*	4.00	4.21	.01	61
	Control	−.06	3.99	3.92	.63	37
Commitment to community involvement (.54, .71)	Intervention	.19^	4.27	4.46	.06	61
	Control	−.10	3.89	3.99	.54	37
Desire to work for justice (.65, .73)	Intervention	.07	3.07	3.14	.31	61
	Control	.03	2.84	2.88	.81	37
I will volunteer (.80, .86)	Intervention	.10	3.59	3.70	.14	61
	Control	−.09	3.28	3.18	.43	37
Interest in politics (.81, .81)	Intervention	.03	3.41	3.44	.55	61
	Control	−.05	2.76	2.71	.63	37
Civic efficacy (.66, .71)	Intervention	.34**	3.78	4.12	.00	61
	Control	.10	3.38	3.48	.34	37
Knowledge/social capital for community development (.67, .72)	Intervention	.94**	3.95	4.89	.00	60
	Control	−.23	3.13	2.90	.25	37
Leadership efficacy (.78, .81)	Intervention	.31**	3.60	3.91	.00	61
	Control	.03	3.57	3.60	.72	37

^p < .10; *p < .05; **p < .01

from their emerging sense of capacity and from the impact of their work) to their desire for continued civic participation. For example, Eddie noted, "I didn't realize we had as much influence as we did. One person can really make a change in the community." When we asked him whether this changed the way he thought about being a citizen, he replied that, after the experience with local government agencies, he thought that,

> [All citizens] have a responsibility to voice their opinion by either writing letters or talk[ing] to people who control the county government, or state and federal government. Just let them know what you think about something that they're trying out. Maybe give new opinions or new ideas that you think would help.

Other students expressed similar satisfaction from what they accomplished as well as commitments to remain engaged in civic affairs in the future.

Our quantitative data was consistent with what we heard during interviews and saw during site visits. As detailed in Table 1, there were statistically significant changes in pre/post-Likert scale scores on several of our measures. In fact, we found a significant increase in all three measures related to efficacy: civic efficacy, leadership efficacy, and students' sense that they had the knowledge and social capital needed to effectively promote community development.[3] These gains were matched by increases in reports of personal responsibility to help others and a marginally

significant commitment to community involvement.[4]

Youth Action

Youth Action provides an interesting contrast to the Youth in Public Service program. The program, part of a district-wide collaborative effort, was created by the teachers at Woodrow Wilson High School.[5] One class enrolled "Academy" students who were considered to be at risk of dropping out while another worked with students preparing for advanced placement (AP) exams. The Academy classes are populated primarily but not exclusively by African-American, Latino, and Asian-American students while the AP classes enroll mostly but not exclusively European-American and Asian-American students. Students chose their own projects based on discussions in class, readings, and research about problems facing their communities. One group of students investigated the lack of access to adequate health care for women and sought to get the city Board of Supervisors to allocate funds to erect a new women's health center in an under-served area. Another group sought to challenge a State Senate bill that could put students and their parents in jail for truancy and try juveniles as adults for certain crimes. Other groups investigated child labor practices and bias in standardized testing. In addition to work in the community, students also participated in three "summits" where they publicly presented their projects and what they accomplished.

Students' experiences working on these community-based activities were

uneven. Some students were engaged in in-depth projects that were powerful; others were engaged in projects that were badly thwarted. Their problems stemmed from two related dynamics. First, none of the government, school, and community agencies was prepared beforehand to expect contact from the students. Consequently, when students sought to investigate issues they frequently were turned away, ignored, or, in the students' words, "not taken seriously." In addition—and more important for our purposes here—the projects students pursued challenged the status quo. While students in Madison County worked with city officials on projects, those in Youth Action criticized and sought to change various governmental and educational policies and programs from outside the system. Not surprisingly, Youth Action students encountered resistance.

Both qualitative and quantitative data regarding the students' frustrating experiences indicate that these experiences decreased their commitment to future civic involvement. In interviews, students reported high levels of frustration and a growing sense of hopelessness. They expressed a diminished sense of efficacy related to community improvement and questioned whether it is their responsibility to try. One student recalled her frustration this way:

> We were trying to get anyone to listen to us but never got all the way through because we kept running into all this red tape that said "no you can't do that" [or] "Oh, you want to do that, well you'll

Table 2
Youth Action

Factors (Chronbach's pre, post)	Change	Pre-Test	Post-Test	Significance Level	Number of Students
Personal responsibility to help others (.62, .74)	−.41**	4.17	3.76	.00	54
Commitment to community involvement (.54, .71)	−.23^	3.98	3.75	.10	54
Desire to work for justice (.65, .73)	−.14^	3.05	2.91	.10	55
I will volunteer (.80, .86)	−.10	3.27	3.17	.26	54
Interest in politics (.81, .81)	.08	2.97	3.04	.31	61
Civic efficacy (.66, .71)	.12	3.24	3.35	.29	55
Knowledge/social capital for community development (.67, .72)	.03	2.87	2.89	.81	52
Leadership efficacy (.78, .81)	−.21*	3.31	3.10	.03	55

^p < .10, *p < .05, **p < .01

have to go to that office over there." [We] kind of got the impression that nobody really wanted to do anything about it.

This sense of frustration was widespread. In response to other interview and in-class reflection questions such as "What did you learn from these activities?" other students answered "If you go out into the community and try to do good, someone will pull you down," "Basically, they were wasting our time and theirs too," and "it's hard to get anyone to listen to you."

In most cases, the survey results, as shown in Table 2, were consistent with the interview data, reflecting the frustration students experienced in connection with their community-based activities. Numerous measures of students' orientation toward civic participation and community engagement declined. For example, students reported a sizable (−.50) and statistically significant decline when asked to indicate their level of agreement with the statement, "I want to become an effective leader in my community." Students' sense of leadership efficacy also declined significantly. In addition, students' sense of personal responsibility to help others declined markedly and there were marginally significant declines in their commitment to community involvement and in their desire to work for justice.[6] These declines occurred despite the careful work of the teachers involved in Youth Action to develop classroom curriculum in which students would emerge ready to work to improve society as active leaders and citizens.

Thus, while efficacious experiences promoted civic commitment among Madison County students, frustrating experiences resulted in diminished self-confidence and diminished commitment to future civic involvement in Youth Action students.

The Limits of Political Efficacy as a Curricular Goal

Given that Madison County's approach promoted civic commitments and Youth Action's program did not, a logical plan of action would be to promote the Madison County approach over that employed by Youth Action. In other words, educators interested in promoting young people's political engagement might focus their efforts exclusively on civic education experiences that provide students with the sense that they can make a difference. We would argue, however, that the choice between these two programs or approaches is not straightforward. While giving students a chance to make a difference clearly may have benefits, this approach may also have costs. Our perspective on the issues can be clarified by considering the difference between *internal* and *external* efficacy as educational aims.

The Difference between Internal and External Political Efficacy

Those who study attitudes toward political engagement draw a significant distinction between internal and external political efficacy (Balch 1974). Internal political efficacy refers to a person's sense of his or her own ability to participate effectively in the political process. People with high degrees of internal political efficacy believe they are capable when it comes to civic affairs. Measures of external political efficacy, on the other hand, reflect perceptions of governmental and institutional responsiveness to citizens' needs and demands.

Although findings are not uniform, internal political efficacy has generally been found to have a positive relationship to political activity and the closer the alignment of a specified measure of efficacy to the form of activity, the stronger the relationship (Wollman and Stouder 1991). Measures of external efficacy, on the other hand, have not exhibited a consistent relationship to activity. Indeed, Shingles (1981) and others have found high internal political efficacy and low external political efficacy prompted political activity among African Americans (see also Ennis and Schrener 1987; Harris 1999). Feeling both personal competence *and* that government is not responsive to the needs of African-American citizens prompted many African Americans to participate in political affairs (often through activities such as litigation and protest) to bring about more just laws and increased government awareness and action.

Implications for Civic Education

In many cases, it seems reasonable to structure curriculum to promote students' sense of internal efficacy—their sense of personal competence. This goal might be pursued by developing that competence (and recognition of that competence) through a variety of both experiential and traditional educational activities.

Structuring curriculum so as to promote students' sense of external efficacy, however, may be problematic. African Americans and Latinos, for example, have tended to have a lower sense of external political efficacy than do their White counterparts (see Niemi and Junn 1998; Abramson 1983). Such results likely reflect the fact that government and community institutions are less responsive to African Americans and Latinos than to European Americans. The appropriate response, therefore, is to increase government responsiveness—not to try and convince a disempowered group that mainstream institutions want to respond to their concerns. To do otherwise is to alter *indicators* of a healthy

Table 3
Notable Individual Item Scores in "Interest in Politics" Scale for Youth Action

Factors/Items	Change	Pre-Test	Post-Test	Significance Level
Interest in politics	.08	2.97	3.04	.31
I enjoy talking about politics and political issues	+1.00**	3.16	4.16	.00
I expect that I will vote in every election	−.38*	3.79	3.40	.03
In the next three years I expect to work on at least one political campaign	−.31*	2.77	2.46	.04

democracy without challenging the underlying ills.[7]

What makes attention to broad notions of efficacy as a goal particularly complex, therefore, is that curricular strategies that deal sensibly with external efficacy may not promote internal efficacy (Youth Action students may have learned valuable lessons about external efficacy, but their sense of internal efficacy suffered). Conversely, curriculum that attends primarily to internal efficacy may not help students consider issues related to external efficacy (Madison County students may have gained a greater sense of internal efficacy, but they did not consider many issues related to external efficacy). We elaborate on these dynamics below.

Revisiting the Evidence[8]

The Youth Action projects engaged high stakes problems that students found difficult to solve. While many school-based programs might have students clean up a nearby park or collect clothing or food for a local charity, the Youth Action students were engaged in ambitious projects that sought to expose structural injustices, sometimes forgoing more typical and bounded projects that do less to challenge existing power structures. Whether to support a publicly funded health care center for women or how to investigate bias in standardized tests, for example, are controversial and unresolved social policy questions. In addition, students were trying to mobilize for change on their own—rather than by working with an organization (governmental or otherwise) that was a legitimate player in the given context. Not surprisingly, when their efforts failed to illicit a meaningful response—let alone a change in policy—students' desire to participate in political and civic endeavors declined, as did their sense of leadership efficacy (a measure which emphasizes internal efficacy).

At the same time, however, that these experiences may have diminished students' sense of internal efficacy and thus undermined their commitment to civic action, they also appear to have sparked

valuable insights related to questions of external efficacy. Kira reported, for example:

> I think it's really hard to get things done that count for anything. I mean we can pick up litter all day long and get something done [that is temporary], but to try and get them to build a women's health center in our community, that's a tough task and no one wants to do it.

In interviews and in class, students expressed an often-realistic assessment of how difficult it is to accomplish meaningful and, at times, controversial tasks. And, interviews and observations reveal that students were deeply engaged in these activities and that most took them very seriously. For example, Tony observed that

> "We really had no clue that so many people would be *against* a [publicly funded] health center, but when we started to see where people stood on this, it seemed like, well those who wouldn't get nothing from it, they were the ones who didn't want it."

When asked what it would take to get a women's health center built, Kira responded, "You'd have to change a lot of people's minds about stuff and organize.... You'd have to fight for it."

In addition, analysis of the survey data reveals important distinctions as well. For example, the scale measuring interest in politics showed no change. However, if we consider three of its items (see Table 3) we find movement in opposing directions. Two items related to political action ("interest in voting" and "interest in working on a campaign") showed statistically significant declines of 0.38 and 0.31, respectively. At the same time, students reported a dramatic (+1.00) and statistically significant (p < .01) increase in "talking about politics and political issues." In fact, this was the largest pre/post change of any item across all the programs we studied. Thus, the curriculum appears to have diminished students' sense of internal efficacy and, as a result, to have diminished their interest in related political activity, but not their over-

all interest in politics. Indeed, their interest in politically charged concerns and debates increased substantially.

The Madison County Youth in Public Service curriculum offers lessons in this regard as well. While both qualitative and quantitative data indicate that these students showed impressive gains in their sense of civic and leadership efficacy, their interest in political discussion remained constant (see Table 1). We did not find evidence in student interviews, our observations, or our analysis of survey data that student projects examined ideological and political issues related to interest groups and the political process, the causes of poverty, different groups' access to health care, or the fairness of different systems of taxation (even though two projects focused on issues related to health care and taxation). Students focused on particular programs and policies and aimed for technocratic/value neutral analysis.

De-Politicizing Political Engagement: A Widespread Trend?

What is particularly troubling about this dynamic is that educators often are making this choice—emphasizing curricular strategies that develop internal efficacy but that obscure many issues related to external efficacy. For example, a great deal of curriculum fails to ask about the ways governments and other institutions respond to various individuals and social problems. What role is played by power, by interest groups, and by politics in structuring responses of key institutions to those who seek reform? What obstacles—political, social, and economic—hinder the collective pursuit of systemic change? (see Robinson 2000; Barber 1992). Data that the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) collected on 599 college service-learning programs, for example, revealed that 50% were direct service (tutoring, serving food, clothes collections, blood drives), 42% provided technical assistance such as leadership classes and computer training, 7% emphasized

physical revitalization such as tree plant-
ing and housing renovation, and only 1%
were for political advocacy such as draft-
ing legislation or building tenant councils
(in Robinson 2000, 145). In addition,
surveys of young people indicate move-
ment in exactly this direction. For exam-
ple, a study commissioned by the
National Association of Secretaries of
State (1999) found that less than 32% of
eligible voters between the ages of 18
and 24 voted in the 1996 presidential
election (in 1972, the comparable num-
ber was 50%), but that a whopping 94%
of those aged 15–24 believed that "the
most important thing I can do as a citi-
zen is to help others." In a very real
sense, youth seem to be "learning" that
citizenship does not require government,
politics, or social action.

Indeed, in a separate analysis related
to these issues, we found that the vision
of citizenship embedded in particular
curriculum mattered. Whether or not a
curriculum emphasized structural issues
or questions of social justice significantly
influenced the kinds of civic and politi-
cal insights and commitments that stu-
dents developed (Westheimer and Kahne
2004). Walker, drawing on her teaching
experiences with service learning at Rut-
gers University's Eagleton Institute of
Politics, labels this phenomenon a
"service/politics split" (2000). She de-
scribes the disposition of the students she
has worked with this way:

> [M]ost of them were filled with disgust,
> disillusionment, and even dread toward
> politics. They wanted to "make a differ-
> ence" and they believed that the best
> way to do that was by helping another
> person one-on-one.... [C]hallenging
> decision-making structures ... rarely
> entered their thinking.

Walker goes on to note that students in-
volved in non-controversial activities that
allow young people to "'get things done'
and immediately see results" tend to
think of civic engagement as "results
driven activity" that do not challenge
institutions in power. They are eager to
feed the hungry but not to think about
the causes of poverty or injustice; they
tutor inner-city children, but do not ask
why the schools have little in the way of
resources. She concludes that her stu-
dents learned a great deal about how to
serve but little about affecting political
change (2000).

Thus, while many programs that pro-
vide opportunities to work in the com-
munity may foster internal efficacy and
may well be an effective way to increase
students' enthusiasm for civic engage-
ment, crucial questions of external effi-

cacy and the skills needed to be effica-
cious in politically charged contexts get
scant attention. Moreover, these pro-
grams may diminish or obscure both the
importance of politics and the need to
think about the impact and design of so-
cial institutions and structures.[9]

The pursuit of a more just and equita-
ble society requires more than individual
efforts to make a difference. Students
need to consider issues of external
efficacy—to whom and in what contexts
do government and other institutions re-
spond. Attention to politics and to the
ways institutions respond to or create
social problems is also essential.

The Challenge for Civic Educators

Faced with this tension, what might
educators do? In particular, how might
good programs promote commitments to
both politics and participation? Given the
importance of experiences that promote
internal forms of efficacy, how might
these be promoted without obscuring
structural issues and attention to social
justice? We briefly note several promi-
nent strategies here (also see Kahne and
Westheimer 2003).

The kind of successful strategy em-
ployed in Madison County—placing stu-
dents in efficacious organizations and
having them join others in meaningful
work—can be structured to emphasize
root causes of problems while minimiz-
ing the potential sense of frustration and
alienation that can occur when students
work on their own on often intractable
social problems. A clear and powerful
example of this approach is provided in
Youniss, McClellan, and Yates (1997)
study of mostly African-American stu-
dents enrolled in a Washington, D.C.,
catholic school. These students worked
in soup kitchens and thus became part of
efficacious institutions. This, combined
with classroom analyses of poverty and
homelessness did not necessarily provide
them with a sense of complete success—
but rather a vision of an ideal for which
they and others could collectively strive.
Frustration did not take hold of these
students despite the fact that homeless-
ness was not eliminated. Students be-
came engaged in thinking about these
issues and began to see themselves as
capable of responding to a meaningful
social problem.

Other strategies help carry students'
sense of hope and vision as well. The
Highlander Folk School in New Market,
Tennessee, for example, seeks to engage
students in a supportive community that
can motivate and affirm the importance

of challenging political structures and
working for systemic change even
when—or especially because—partici-
pants encounter strong resistance from
governmental and non-governmental in-
stitutions. Numerous studies suggest that
social bonds, a sense of affiliation, and
support from a community with shared
commitments can nurture and sustain
civic involvement despite intimidating
challenges and frustrating experiences
(McAdam 1988; Youniss, McLellan, and
Yates 1997).

Another program we studied at Berea
College in Kentucky called the Over-
ground Railroad had participants meet
with individuals who were active in the
civil rights movement. These individuals,
who in some cases are still active in so-
cial change efforts today—individuals
who stayed true to their convictions de-
spite the challenges of their work—
seemed to inspire students and buttress
their sense of hope and civic commit-
ments. They offered a compelling vision
of a meaningful life and of the potential
efficacy of collective social action.

Another program brought high school
students in a Spanish language class to-
gether with Spanish-speaking adults to
help the adults prepare for their upcom-
ing citizenship exam—a highly satisfying
and efficacy-building volunteering expe-
rience. Simultaneously, the students
toured the community and studied the
social, political, and economic conditions
of the local town, and of other Hispanic
communities in the United States and in
Latin America. Through this work, stu-
dents gained an increased awareness of
underlying political concerns. Students,
spoke (in Spanish), for example, about
the high incidence of lead paint in
houses in this community, about cycles
of poverty, and about inadequate public
services.

Rethinking Political Efficacy as a Curricular Goal

Young people today have too few op-
portunities to recognize their potential
contributions to civic and political life.
The Madison County Youth in Public
Service program highlights the substan-
tial impact that experiences of success
can provide. But this is not the complete
story.

The impact of the frustration Youth
Action students experienced is also
worthy of careful attention. While the
experiences of students in Youth Action
demonstrate that exposure to some
authentic community dynamics can di-
minish students' sense of internal effi-
cacy and in the process limit their

commitment to future civic or political involvement, other indicators demonstrate the value of engaging students in analysis of significant and difficult-to-solve social problems. Part of the frustration Youth Action students experienced resulted from real world barriers to change. Students appeared to report low external efficacy because, in fact, external factors were barriers to change. We are reluctant to reject the value of these authentic experiences even though the recognition of their limited external efficacy may have also diminished students' internal efficacy as well as their motivation for active involvement in civic action. Emphasizing only efficacious acts because they permit students to experience success in helping others without confronting constraints on their external efficacy can advance a limited understanding of civic and political engagement. Such practices obscure the need for politics and for confronting root/institutional causes of social problems. This is made more worrisome by the fact that numerous societal norms and incentives will lead teachers and students to focus on civic activities that avoid major social problems and analysis of root causes of injustice and inequality. Such service activities are less controversial, easier to fund, and enjoy widespread public support. They also provide opportunities for promoting internal efficacy. While increasingly common, we are concerned that such activities will not provide sufficient preparation for the often contentious and difficult challenge of working to understand and change the social, economic, and political dynamics that surround complex issues such as poverty, caring for the environment, or racism. If teachers and students decide that such problems are hopeless or, alternatively, that it is easier to pursue a vision of citizenship that avoids conflict, the full promise of democracy will not be realized.

At the same time, authenticity alone—to the extent that it conveys a sense of hopelessness—is not desirable. The Youth Action curriculum aimed to promote commitments to active civic engagement. The democratic promise of such curriculum is not fulfilled if students "learn" that civic and political engagement is pointless. Rather, educating citizens for a democratic society requires that students gain a sense that they can make a difference and also identify, analyze, and challenge social and institutional practices as they work to create a more just society.

Notes

1. We adopt a relatively traditional conception of efficacy in political and civic endeavors: the belief that what you or those in the community do can bring positive change (see Bandura 1977).

2. For additional details on our methods please see Westheimer and Kahne 2004). For information on other programs in this study, please contact the authors.

3. Our measure of civic efficacy included items which asked if students felt that they, "can make a difference in my community." The measure of leadership efficacy assessed students' sense of their effectiveness as leaders—assessing their level of agreement with statements such as "Once I know what needs to be done, I am good at planning how to do it." Our measure of social capital for community development assessed students' sense of their own knowledge and ability to promote community development. It asked, for example, if students feel they "know how to contact and work effectively with organizations in their community such as schools, businesses, and social service organizations." For a complete list of items for these scales or for other measures used in the study, please contact the authors.

4. Our use of a control group adds to our confidence in these results. The control group had similar academic skills and was taught by the same two teachers. This control group did not show statistically significant changes on any of the items we measured.

5. We are using the pseudonym "Youth Action" to denote a program that takes place in a school we have written about elsewhere (Westheimer and Kahne 2004). In this article we focus on the first year the program was implemented. After this first year, the curriculum was entirely restructured, bearing little resemblance to the curriculum analyzed herein. In writing that concerns subsequent years, therefore, we gave the program a different pseudonym so that the two instantiations would not be confused.

6. Our sense, as is discussed later in the paper, is that this decline in the desire to work for justice was due to a diminished desire to be engaged and not to a diminished sense of the importance of such work.

7. Highlighting a similar set of issues, Thomas (1970) identified a conservative bias in measures of personal efficacy. He found that those holding a conservative political ideology were more likely to express personal efficacy than those holding liberal beliefs. Since these judgments may reflect reasonable interpretations of lived experience, he argued that it therefore makes no more sense to try and convince liberals that they should have more efficacy than it does to convince conservatives that they should have less.

8. Since, as we noted earlier, our study was not designed to examine the differential significance of internal and external efficacy, our survey measures of civic and leadership efficacy blended attention to internal and external efficacy—though our measure of leadership efficacy focused primarily on internal efficacy. Our interviews, however, contained much rich detail about students' changing perceptions of both internal and external efficacy. Given this limitation, we view our findings as suggestive, but far from definitive. Clearly, more in depth and focused attention to these issues would be valuable.

9. We also suspect that an emphasis on experiencing efficacy can sometimes lead to a focus on doing rather than thinking. Specifically, since careful analysis takes time away from action and since such analysis often highlights potential shortcomings of efforts that, on the surface, appear desirable, a commitment to efficacy may lead some educators to downplay analysis. This outcome is not inevitable, however. The programs we studied all emphasized academic and analytical work related to students' experiences.

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