

## **Pedagogical Freedom through Hope: How Communication Centers can Instill Actionable Hope through a K-12 Citizenship Education Model**

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Within the past decade, instead of citizenship education, the youth mental health crisis prompted an influx of social emotional learning with a universal model that failed to attend to the particular. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) lowered standards for developmental benchmarks instead of working to address the academic and emotional crises, resulting in students feeling hopeless and lacking resiliency (Bracho-Sanchez, 2022). This paper argues Communication Centers as a core space for revitalizing citizenship education through dialogic interaction and the encouragement of outside civic engagement. Developing informed and sustainable hope requires education (Lake, et al., 2012). Learning how to develop habits of hope can lead to students becoming more informed and civil citizens because it attunes students to their civic potential and enables them to cultivate visions for future democracies.

### **Citizenship Education vs. the Current Crisis in Public Education**

The isolation that students inhabited during COVID-19 lockdowns and virtual learning have caused what were mild or latent feelings of anxiety, social phobias, attention deficits or depression to manifest to a level that they now impede a student's ability to function and learn throughout the school day (Fontenelle-Tereshchuk, 2021). In response, some U.S. schools developed a model of citizenship education (an extension of Civics) to teach children the notion of hope within a concept often described as "grit." This model serves as a foundation for students to live their best public lives within the contexts of their individual communities, as it serves to help "create learning conditions that enable all children to develop to their fullest potential" (Stitzlein, 2020, p. 81). Citizenship education includes a discussion of how the concept of citizenship has changed over time and still differs depending upon social status and position over power. Through studying this variance, students realize that citizenship, or what constitutes a "good" citizen is a fluid, ever-evolving concept, allowing students a sense of empowerment that their actions can help mold the ongoing evolution of what it means to be a good citizen.

### **Grit as Essential Locus of Citizenship Praxis**

Grit is a combination of hard work and commitment to a greater goal that umbrellas a set of smaller goals, pursued with passion and determination. Grit helps us persevere as we pursue our goals (Bracho-Sanchez, 2022). One way to teach grit is to perform or engage in an act repetitively until it becomes a habitual way of life, and adopting a "growth mindset" throughout this practice (Stitzlein, 2020, p. 90). Through this mindset, students develop a positive response to adversity and are able to view shortcomings as temporary instead of permanent. Students learn

to focus on what they can control and bring positivity or hope into focus, specifically in times of struggle.

The caveat with teaching grit and achieving action-oriented hope is that educators ensure students still engage in the process of questioning and challenging societal norms instead of simply learning to endure hardship. Those who come to school and learn despite experiencing trauma at home certainly have grit, but they must also use that grit to challenge the system and make a long-term goal on how to improve their community to address the policies in place that aided their trauma or hindered their success. Students must learn to be “democratic citizens who speak out in dissent against injustice and work to assuage it for the sake of oneself, others, the present, and the future” (Stitzlein, 2020, p. 95). Ultimately, civic education teaches students how to engage people of different backgrounds, cultures, ethnicities and beliefs and cultivate relationships focused on growth, change, and progress.

### **Communication Centers: Putting the Pieces of Hope Together**

When hope is privatized, this sense of discussion becomes relegated to an internal monologue. However, when hope becomes embedded in democratic discussion and rational debate, stakeholders, in this example students, can unite to determine the best path forward in a given community or situation (Lake, et al., 2021). To be successful, citizenship education should be implemented with fidelity, meaning that it be applied using best-practice guidelines as explained by its researchers (see Fontenelle-Tereshchuk, 2021; Lake et al., 2021; Stitzlein, 2020). A pragmatic way to ensure citizenship education succeeds in higher education is through Communication Centers. Cuny et al. (2012) explain that Communication Centers support emotional and social well-being. These centers are paramount in citizenship education as they provide a space for authentic experiences and stories amongst peers (Prentiss, 2022). Communication Center directors could use their existing spaces or centers to serve as the nucleus for fostering models of citizenship education. It is here that students can practice speaking out in dissent against injustice, share stories about common obstacles, and help one another work toward their smaller goals.

If space is limited within a Communication Center, directors could possibly pair with another department or organization and utilize a common area as a temporary or “pop up” Communication Center for a specific meeting or forum. For example, student unions, lobbies, or classrooms could be jointly staffed by department members as well as Communication Center directors to host co-sponsored workshops where students are encouraged to come and implement the citizenship model and set/manage/monitor their own goals, debate pertinent issues or even work together to strategize how to rectify interdisciplinary challenges that they encounter. For example, students who are learning to engage in deliberation can use a Communication Center to come together and discuss differing ideas, practice the process of debate and align these ideas with their short- and long-term goals. Without Communication Centers, students might learn the basic tenets of citizenship education, but lack a space to apply what they learn, specifically the inquiry-based models, which require students to actively engage with and question their peers.

This facilitation would not require additional training, but rather ensure that students are engaging in civil civic engagement focused on positive language and increased agency instead of leaning back into a model of opinion and vitriol which is often seen on social media and mainstream media.

### **Conclusion**

Using Communication Centers as a common vessel means that students have a place to gather to apply the model of citizenship education and engage in civic engagement. Through these forums, workshops or casual gatherings at Communication Centers, students can generalize their ideas and discussions and apply them in their communities. This model is advantageous because it does not require the Communication Centers to spend any money or exasperate any of their current resources. In other words, using Communication Centers as spaces for civic engagement allows students to make short and long term goals, thereby gaining a stronger sense of hope and grit, which data shows is significantly lacking in youth, specifically after the COVID-19 Pandemic. The Communication Centers also allow students to gather in groups and engage in civil discourse and debate to address systemic concerns, which can then be applied for the betterment of their greater community.

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