High School Students’ Knowledge and Notions of Citizenship

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This article focuses on high school students’ knowledge and notions of citizenship after taking the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) Naturalization Test. The students’ test results and responses show emerging support for the need to make changes to the test as well as the students’ limited conceptions of citizenship. In addition, this study’s methodological benefits and challenges are discussed with implications for future research and practice.

Keywords: citizenship, civics, naturalization, social studies

Introduction

After Scottish-born CBS “Late Late Show” host Craig Ferguson recently took the U.S. citizenship test and claimed to have received a perfect score, he mused that Canada would need a fence along its borders to protect itself from the many U.S. citizens who would be forced to leave the country after failing the test (Silberman 2008). Countless people may laugh at this point, yet many appear to enjoy watching comedians interview citizens who cannot answer such basic civics and history questions as how many states there are in the United States and who is the current vice president. These jokes are not so funny to social studies educators and others who believe that the content knowledge embedded in the citizenship test is essential to being a good citizen. There are many studies that show high school students are unable to correctly answer basic civics and history questions (e.g., Niemi and Junn 1998; Ravitch and Finn 1987). Similarly, high school seniors have been found to lack a basic understanding of how the American government operates (Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement [CIRCLE] 2003; Ross 2000a, 2000b). In addition, a recent Civic and Political Health of the Nation report found that civic engagement among young people is low, that they have limited confidence in their government, and that their political knowledge is generally poor (Lopez et al. 2006).

In contrast to the gloomy portrait and measure of American citizenship, current federal election data illustrate a continued trend of increased turnout of the voting-age population. With the exception of the 1992 election, voter turnout declined consistently from 63.1 percent in 1960 to 49.1 percent in 1996, but the voting-age turnout rose to the highest level in forty years in 2008 with 56.8 percent (Federal Election Commission 2008). Although these data may be an indicator of a trend toward greater civic engagement among young citizens, concerns about how to well prepare tomorrow’s citizens continue.

The newly revised U.S. citizenship test is not as comprehensive as some of the assessments, such as National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), that are used to measure high school student historical knowledge. Yet, the citizenship test is much more controversial than the average citizen and adolescent may realize. Implicit assumptions that are embodied in the citizenship test are seldom examined or researched. Recent research shows that secondary preservice teachers correctly knew nearly all answers to an older version of the U.S. citizenship test (Bohan et al. 2008). Yet, few individuals in the same study commented on the validity of the test in assessing a person’s potential value as a citizen.

Utilizing simulations is one relevant curricular approach advocated by CIRCLE (2003). Thus, the U.S. Naturalization Test was simulated to explore high school students’ knowledge and notions of citizenship. The primary purpose of this study was to compare citizenship knowledge of students in U.S. government classes through their performance on the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) Naturalization Test. More importantly,
participants reviewed the test items and suggested revisions. In doing so they provided insights into their beliefs about citizenship.

Study Design

In this study, the new USCIS Naturalization Test was administered to a convenience sample of rural and urban high school students. The new test replaced the previous naturalization test for applications received on or after October 1, 2008. According to USCIS Director Emilio T. Gonzales, the old test “lacked standardization and encouraged applicants to memorize facts just to pass a test” and “didn’t guarantee they understood the meaning behind the question” (U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services 2006a). USCIS asserted that the “new meaningful test would encourage civic learning and patriotism among prospective citizens” and emphasize “the fundamental concepts of American democracy and the rights and responsibilities of citizenship” (U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services 2006a).

In the fall of 2008, in the midst of the presidential campaign and without any specific preparation, each student participant in this study took a written version of the entire USCIS Naturalization Test, which included all one hundred sample questions (U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services 2009). Typically, USCIS officers randomly select ten to twenty questions from this master list to orally examine an applicant’s knowledge. However, for the purpose of this study we decided to use all one hundred questions to determine the students’ strengths and weaknesses. Whereas the older version of the naturalization test contained relatively explicit and limited answers, the revised test offers multiple answer possibilities for some of the questions. The test is divided into three primary sections. The first section, “American Government,” is the largest with fifty-seven questions. The second section, “American History,” has thirty questions, and “Integrated Civics” is the last and smallest section, consisting of thirteen questions.

The “American Government” section contains the only question that specifically addresses the participatory nature of citizenship (Westheimer and Kahne 2004, 241). Although ninety-nine of the one hundred questions require future citizens to demonstrate factual knowledge, one question asks applicants to list “two ways that Americans can participate in their democracy.” Thus, only this single question allows respondents to express what kind of citizen they might be and what actions they might take to be a good citizen. Yet, some of the test required answer choices that are indicative of being a personally responsible citizen, such as “vote.” Whereas other answer options are potentially participatory, such as “join a community group” or “join a civic group,” there is no assurance whether joining a civic or community group entails participatory citizenship. Still, membership is an important step toward the likelihood that active participation will occur. In addition, there is no evidence that USCIS requires any elaboration by the applicants to determine whether their responses are truly participatory.

After completing the naturalization test, the students were asked to respond to the following written survey items:

- In your opinion, what are the characteristics of a good citizen?
- Do you think the naturalization test is fair? Please explain why or why not.
- Do you think the questions on the naturalization test represent what every immigrant who is applying to become a citizen of this country should know? Please explain why or why not.
- Do you think the questions on the naturalization test represent what every citizen born in this country should know? Please explain why or why not.
- Based on what you believe are the characteristics of a good citizen, how would you test a person on whether he or she should be allowed to become a U.S. citizen?
- What do you like about the naturalization test? Please explain.
- What do you dislike about the naturalization test? Please explain.
- If you could change the naturalization test, what would you change? Please explain.

Participants

This study was conducted in a racially and ethnically homogenous region of southeast Ohio and a diverse metropolitan area in northern Georgia. The participants comprised a total of 108 rural and 82 urban students. Not surprisingly, the 108 rural Ohio participants were overwhelmingly Caucasian (94.4 percent) whereas the remaining 5.6 percent included one African American, one Hispanic, one Native American, two Other, and two students who chose not to answer the question. In contrast, the 82 metropolitan Georgia participants were much more diverse, but primarily African American (59.8 percent). The remaining students were Caucasian (18.3 percent), Hispanic (7.3 percent), Asian American (4.9 percent), Other (8.5 percent), and Native American (1.2 percent). Both groups of students were relatively comparable in age with approximately 65 percent indicating they were seventeen years old, and close percentages for those who reported being eighteen years old in Georgia (28 percent) and Ohio (29.6 percent). The remaining students in Ohio reported being either sixteen years old (1 percent) or nineteen years old (3.7 percent). In Georgia there were nearly equal percentages of sixteen-year-olds (2.4 percent) and nineteen-year-olds (2.4 percent) with one adolescent, age fifteen (1.2 percent), and one student (1.2 percent) who chose not to disclose this information. The gender demographics were
similar with females being more prevalent (59 percent) in both populations in this sample.

Knowledge of Citizenship

Assessing an immigrant or student’s potential for being a productive citizen is challenging (Nash 2005; Parker 2003; Thornton 2005). The USCIS Naturalization Test provides a litmus analysis because immigrants are required to know this information to become U.S. citizens. The analysis of the responses was based on either more than 80 percent of the students answering a question correctly or more than 40 percent answering a question incorrectly.

American Government

In this section, the rural students performed better and knew the answers to questions about the Bill of Rights and the number of constitutional amendments, but both the rural and urban students struggled with questions related to the purpose of the U.S. Constitution, the Declaration of Independence, and the U.S. economic system. Both the urban and rural students were able to list the branches of government and name the president and vice president as well as the two major political parties. However, both groups failed dismally to correctly answer questions about the composition of Congress, the term length and names of their U.S. senators and representatives, the role of the Cabinet, the purpose of the judicial branch, the composition of the U.S. Supreme Court, and the name of the chief justice. Furthermore, they were unable to distinguish between state and federal powers. Interestingly, the urban students were less likely to know when to register for Select Service. Yet, both the rural and urban students knew the purpose of the Pledge of Allegiance and who can vote. However, they could not list the responsibilities and rights that are reserved for U.S. citizens or when taxes are due.

When specifically asked to list “two ways that Americans can participate in their democracy,” a total 140 out of the 190 students who participated in the study provided a complete or partial answer. A total of 95 students (50 percent) provided two responses while an additional 45 students (24 percent) provided one response only. The remaining 50 students (26 percent) provided no response at all. The students listed a total 215 ways in which Americans can participate in their democracy. The most frequent response was “voting.” It made up three-fifths of all responses (130/215 or 60 percent) and was listed by nearly all respondents (130/140 or 93 percent). Although “voting” is considered an adequate answer by USCIS, this response simply fits the notion of a personally responsible citizen (Westheimer and Kahne 2004). In contrast, one-third of the total number of responses (71/215 or 33 percent) represented the notion of participatory citizenship. For example, some students recommended running for a political office (22/140 or 16 percent), volunteering in a campaign (15/140 or 11 percent), or joining a political party (9/140, or 6 percent). Even fewer responses (14/215 or 7 percent) exemplified a potentially justice-oriented response such as “protesting” or “peacefully protesting” and “boycott[ing].”

American History

In this section, the rural and urban students correctly answered that Native Americans lived in America before the Europeans arrived, that slaves came from Africa, that Washington was the first president, and what happened on September 11. But they did not know answers to questions related to dates, the Constitutional Convention, the Federalist Papers, Benjamin Franklin, Lincoln and the Emancipation Proclamation, Susan B. Anthony, or the names of presidents during World War I and II. The rural students scored lower on questions about the “Father of Our Country,” the Louisiana Territory, and wars that were fought in the nineteenth century. The urban students were more likely to miss questions about Eisenhower and the Cold War.

Integrated Civics

In this section, the rural students exhibited stronger knowledge of the Statue of Liberty’s location and the flag’s symbolism. In contrast, the urban students performed much better on the geography questions as they were able to name the longest river, the states that border Mexico, and the capital. Interestingly, two-fifths of the rural students could not name the ocean on the west coast whereas three-fourths of the urban students did.

Notions of Citizenship

To analyze the students’ responses to the survey questions about their notions of good citizenship and the relevance of the naturalization test in measuring citizenship, we used Joel Westheimer and Joseph Kahne’s (2004, 241–242) spectrum of three kinds of citizens. The personally responsible citizen acts responsibly in his or her community. He or she contributes to causes when asked, volunteers to help the less fortunate, and emphasizes character traits such as honesty, integrity, self-discipline, and hard work. For example, in a food-can drive, the personally responsible citizen would contribute to the drive. The participatory citizen engages in collective, community-based efforts, and knows how government and community-based organizations work, and actively organizes efforts to care for others. In a food-can drive, the participatory citizen would not only contribute to the drive but also help to organize it. The justice-oriented citizen analyzes and understands the interplay of social, economic, and political forces and calls explicit attention
to matters of injustice and to the importance of pursuing social justice. Thus, in a food-can drive, the justice-oriented citizen would not only contribute to and help organize the drive but also critically examine the reason for its need as well as actively seek solutions to the social injustice.

Analysis of the students’ answers to the research question of what constitutes a good citizen suggested there were no qualitative differences between the two groups. We blindly evaluated written responses to determine the most suitable level of Westheimer and Kahne’s (2004) spectrum of citizenship. Both populations for this sample exhibited notions of good citizenship that were overwhelmingly those of the personally responsible citizen (96 percent). They emphasized such character qualities as being honest, caring, and charitably, working hard, paying taxes, serving on a jury, voting, and being patriotic. In a typical response, Matt, a rural student, wrote, “A good citizen obeys the laws . . . for the benefit of the nation.” Similarly, Jovana, an urban student, wrote, “A good citizen is loyal to our country [and] a follower of the law.” A few students provided some notion of participatory citizenship suggesting that people should be involved in their community, be politically informed, and run for public office. For example, Laylii, an urban student, wrote, “A good citizen . . . is a person who is involved in the community.” Although three students suggested that good citizens engage in protest, the nature of such protest would determine whether it might be justice oriented. For example, a citizen could protest taxes out of a selfish desire not to pay rather than to seek social justice. Thus, none of the students explicitly expressed a justice orientation in response to this question.

When participants were asked to consider the fairness of the test, nearly two-thirds thought the test was fair. They felt that the questions were relevant and that future citizens should know this information. Some simply thought the questions were too hard or irrelevant. In an unusual response, one rural student suggested that applicants should have to submit to a “background test” and be required to attend “mandatory classes to educate them” after receiving their citizenship. Currently, background checks are required, but it appears some students are not aware of this detail.

The students were evenly divided about whether the test represents what every citizen should know. In a typical affirmative response, Maya suggested that “if they do not understand our history, they cannot understand our present.” Others, such as Zach, disagreed and wrote that there were too many history questions or “questions that had nothing to do with the American lifestyle.” More than two-thirds of the students held native-born citizens to a higher standard than immigrants and argued, like Ashley, that, “they should know most of the answers [especially] if you were born in the United States.”

When asked how they would test immigrants based on their notions of good citizenship, some students thought immigrants should be screened for mental problems and possession of good moral character, as well as undergo a background check, work hard, and speak English. Only a few students responded to the question about what they liked about the test. They suggested they liked the history questions or that those questions made them think. For example, Ashton wrote, “scoring well . . . show[s] that you have passion for living here.” Students who did not like the test thought it was boring, repetitive, too long, too hard, and had too many short answer questions and no multiple choice questions. In an unusual response, Doug wrote that he felt “there should have been more questions about everyday life in the United States.”

Finally, when asked how they would change the test if they could, the students would have shortened the test and made it easier with multiple choice questions. Few of the students offered some germane insights. For example, Nicole wondered “why knowing what oceans border on the U.S. make you more eligible to be a U.S. citizen.” They suggested, as one student wrote, “ask[ing] more relevant questions” by “tak[ing] out all the long ago history questions and put the 21st century questions in it,” by “add[ing] more cultural aspects.”

Implications

One of the primary roles of social studies education is to promote democracy and good citizenship in a diverse society, and schools are an ideal place to do so (Parker 2003). Although the creators of the new and “meaningful” USCIS Naturalization Test suggested there is a desire to move away from memorization and ensure that prospective citizens understand “the meaning behind questions,” our findings suggest they may well have failed to accomplish such a goal (U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services 2006a). The USCIS Naturalization Test contains one hundred sample questions, and only one of those requires applicants to articulate how they might participate in our democracy. Many of the high school student participants did not know the answers to the numerous trivia-type questions, which were part of the old test as well. The new test fails to encourage applicants to articulate what type of citizen they might be other than a personally responsible citizen (Halstead and Pike 2006; Westheimer and Kahne 2004). Similarly, this study’s participants did not show well-developed notions of citizenship because the overwhelming majority of their responses were not indicative of active participation, let alone social justice perspectives (Abowitz and Harnish 2006; Banks et al. 2005; Ladson-Billings 2005; Lynch 1992; U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services 2006b).

The majority of the students’ responses and suggestions for changes failed to capture the importance of action in the world’s oldest participatory democracy. Their statements fell short of being able to recognize to what extent the naturalization test encourages prospective citizens to participate in the public decision-making process (see Allen 1996; Clark and
Case 1997; Westheimer and Kahne 2004). Nonetheless, it seems important that students, who soon will be entrusted with participating in a democratic system, be aware that informed participation and willing participants are essential in maintaining a healthy democracy. In their study of rural students, Leisa A. Martin and John J. Chiodo (2007) argue that students function as citizens within environmental and age-appropriate limitations. Within school settings, students participate in many curricular and extracurricular activities that directly and indirectly function to prepare them as citizens. Few of the participants in this study showed recognition of the value of citizenship participation and leadership. The participants’ responses were limited and need additional investigation.

Despite their poor performance on the naturalization test, these U.S. government high school students may well be the kinds of citizens we would want living in our communities. What is missing in many of their responses is an acknowledgment of the rights and responsibilities that are entailed in being an active member of a democratic society. Westheimer and Kahne (2004) caution that “obedience and patriotism” are not necessarily democratic goals and would also be desirable qualities under a totalitarian regime. Indeed, they say, some of the current citizenship education conceptions are “narrow and often ideologically conservative” and reflect “political choices that have political consequences” (2004, 237). Thus, good intentions by teachers to facilitate citizenship education are not always realized and may not promote participatory democratic principles. The findings from this study’s sample of high school students highlight a narrow notion of citizenship. Ending this idiocy (Parker 2003) is especially incumbent on social studies teachers who are uniquely situated and qualified to actively educate future citizens for democratic participation.

The USCIS Naturalization Test is a powerful pedagogical approach for teachers to explore citizenship, immigration, and conceptions of good citizenship with their students. As one participant in our study suggested, “We should ask [the applicants] what they believe are the characteristics of a good citizen.” Why not ask all our students to explore this same essential citizenship question? Ideally, such a discussion would engage them in synthesizing the various approaches to citizenship and embracing a broader notion of citizenship to include a participatory and/or justice oriented approach.

Future studies should examine whether the creators of the new citizenship test achieved their goal of developing a “new meaningful test [that] encourage[s] civic learning and patriotism among prospective citizens” (U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services 2006a). Additional studies should also interview and examine whether immigrants and recently naturalized citizens have different conceptions of the naturalization test and citizenship. Finally, more research on students’ knowledge and notions of citizenship is necessary to further clarify the findings from this study.

Notes
2. Pseudonyms are used to protect the identity of the participants.

References


