

Building Skills for Civic Engagement: Children as Agents of Neighborhood Change

Nicole Nicotera

ABSTRACT. This study examines civic engagement and social development in children ($N = 73$) from public housing neighborhoods. Much of the research on civic engagement and social development focuses on youths and college students and the influence of participation in community service. This study addresses younger children in the process of social development and acquiring the seeds for civic engagement. Participants (\bar{X} age = 9.25 years) learned to observe, photograph, and assess neighborhood strengths and challenges. They engaged in democratic processes to compile findings and present them to community members. Results indicate statistically significant changes in civic engagement and social development. Qualitative findings expand on these quantitative results. Implications for community practice and research are discussed.

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INTRODUCTION

The concept of civic engagement has been traditionally identified with adult activities such as participation in local and national political campaigns, volunteering to serve at election sites on Election Day, and voting in local and national elections. Golombek (2006) points out that the idea of citizenship “needs to be expanded to include activities that are not reliant on being a particular age or having particular capacities” (pp. 10–11). Jans (2004) further elucidates this view when he suggests that to be useful for considering children’s abilities for participation in civic life, conceptualizations of citizenship or civic engagement need to include a sense of connection and contribution to one’s community on various levels. In fact, Camino and Zeldin (2002) suggest that civic engagement be defined as the role of agency one can take to influence decisions within a group or collaborative effort.

Activities that foster civic engagement in young people, as more broadly defined above, have been related to social development outcomes such as increased self-esteem, a desire to participate in socially positive behaviors, and a heightened awareness of personal capacity (Balsano, 2005). Additionally, promotion of age-appropriate civic engagement among young people may develop their connection to community through what Flanagan and Faison (2001) label civic attachment. They define civic attachment as a sense of one’s importance as a member of a community as well as a sense of having a voice in relation to community concerns coupled with the desire to contribute to the well-being of that community. Connection to community is considered an integral component of positive social development among young people as outlined in the “five Cs” (competence, confidence, connection, character, caring) (Lerner, Fisher, & Weinberg, 2000, p. 15). Hence, opportunities for young people to develop skills for civic engagement through working collaboratively with peers to serve the greater good of their communities or neighborhoods are integral to positive social development and attachment to community. As Driskell (2002) points out, children who play an active part in community development not only increase their self-esteem and sense of self and pride, but they also learn about democracy and develop acceptance for diversity of people and ideas, a sense of caring for their local environment, and a civic outlook.

Much of the research on civic engagement focuses on youths and college students and the influence of participation in community service. The current study involves younger children (\bar{X} age = 9.25 years) living in public housing neighborhoods who are in the process of social development and acquiring the seeds for civic engagement. Acquiring skills and a desire for civic engagement prior to the teen years is especially important among children living in poor, urban neighborhoods because once they enter adolescence, urban youths and those in poor neighborhoods are less likely to be active in community service and have lower levels of civic knowledge than rural and more affluent youth respectively (Atkins & Hart, 2003). Additionally, young people residing in poor, inner-city neighborhoods tend to experience a sense of hopelessness that ranges from moderate to severe, and this hopelessness predicts risk behaviors such as violence, aggression, and substance use (Bolland, 2003). However, Giles and Eyler (1994) found that students involved in community service over time tended to improve their vision that making a difference is possible and that they should contribute to their communities. More generally, Yates and Youniss's (1996) review of 44 studies of youths who performed community service reports that service was related to positive social development in areas such as agency, self-esteem, and personal competence. Therefore, it is possible that civic engagement activities in which young people experience themselves as active participants and have opportunities to create change may counteract the potential for lower levels of civic engagement and higher levels of hopelessness. However, much of this literature was developed from studies with high school and college-age students, and this raises the question of what types of experiences and activities will bolster children's civic-mindedness and sense of agency.

Stoneman (2002) proposes that young people develop the skills and mind-set for civic engagement when they experience themselves as leaders in the development of projects that benefit their communities. She suggests that efforts among adults to imbue young people with abstract ideas about being responsible citizens go unheeded in the absence of real-life experiences of civic engagement. The mind-set necessary for the development of civic engagement is perhaps best described as civic identity.

Atkins and Hart (2003) suggest that civic identity refers to an individual's link to his or her neighborhood of residence combined with a sense of connection to others who share the neighborhood as well as a sense of responsibility for contributing to the well-being of that community. These scholars note three general experiences that build civic identity: "(a) the

experience of participation in one's community, (b) the acquisition of knowledge about the community, and (c) adoption of fundamental democratic principles . . . the most central [being the ability] . . . to tolerate the expression of views that are outside of the mainstream" (Atkins & Hart, 2003, p. 157). Hart (2002, p. 41) describes a "ladder of children's participation" from which community organizers can draw as they make plans for the inclusion of young people in these three general experiences. As one moves up the ladder, the level of participation for young people increases such that the first three rungs represent experiences that are counterproductive to children as active agents; the next two steps up the ladder depict models that support children as agents, but only as informed by adults; and the final three steps represent children as agents alongside of adults and as directing and consulting with adults (Hart 2002). The capacity of preadolescents to collaboratively participate in their communities of residence so as to garner the three experiences noted by Atkins and Hart is exemplified in the work of Chawla (2002); Driskell (2002); Freeman, Henderson, and Kettle (1999); Gallagher (2004); and Tonucci and Rissotto (2001). However, Flanagan and Faison (2001) note that there are few spaces where young people can practice civic behaviors. Additionally, Western ideas about young people as unreliable accountants of their own experiences runs counter to their taking center stage as engaged citizens (Stasiulis, 2002).

Community practice social workers are in a unique position to develop the spaces for and to implement activities to foster the civic identity or communal agency of young people. One of the initial steps required for facilitating a sense of communal agency among young people involves engaging them in empowerment activities through which they can develop and then act on their own ideas for community improvement (Stoneman, 2002). The project reported in this article involved young people in empowerment activities and experiences that include all three of the elements for the enhancement of civic identity described by Atkins and Hart (2003). The purpose of the research related to these activities is to examine the acquisition of civic engagement skills and social development in participants ($N = 73$, \bar{X} age = 9.25 years) who reside in urban, public housing neighborhoods. The child-centered activities that form the basis for this study engaged young people as active participants in learning rudimentary skills for assessing their neighborhoods, making plans for change, and presenting those plans to local community advisory boards. While these activities were developed to build on the capacities of preadolescents, they align with the Adolescent Empowerment Cycle

(Chinman & Linney, 1998) through which young people's participation in meaningful experiences creates opportunities that simultaneously provide for the development of skills and adult acknowledgment of their efforts and skill development.

The outcomes of these child-centered activities were systematically assessed via pretest and posttest surveys of civic engagement and social development as well as through postproject focus groups. As such, this research responds to Checkoway and Gutierrez's (2006) call for a more systematic examination of outcomes related to youth participation. In addition, the activities related to the project adhere to a definition of youth participation that moves beyond young people as a "passive presence as human subjects or service recipients" (Checkoway & Gutierrez, 2006, p. 2). The visibility of the young people involved in this project as a positive force for the well-being of their neighborhoods also promotes them as community assets as opposed to problems with which to be reckoned (Farkas & Johnson, 1995; Finn & Checkoway, 1998; Public Agenda, 1999).

METHOD

The methods employed in this study are utilized to evaluate the outcomes of an eight-week project, "Neighborhood Explorers," designed to engage children in active assessment of the public housing neighborhoods where they reside. The project activities are described in detail under procedures and measures in this section. In addition, the pretest and posttest survey measures are presented, as well as the protocol for the focus groups that took place at the end of the eight weeks. The quantitative and qualitative analytic strategies and study limitations are also described.

Participants

The participants ($N = 73$) in the "Neighborhood Explorers," which took place in the summer of 2005, reside in urban, public housing neighborhoods. A subsample ($n = 39$) of the young people participated in focus groups that took place at the end of the eight-week project period. The total nonrandom, purposive sample consists of a nearly equal number of boys and girls (52.1% boys) between the ages of 5 and 13 (\bar{x} age = 9.25). The majority of the children are Latino/a (69.9%), and the rest are African American (17.8%), White (8.2%), and Asian American (4.1%). All

participants were part of an eight-week summer program run by a neighborhood after-school program that focuses on increasing school success through mentoring, tutoring, and scholarship opportunities. Three neighborhoods house the sites for this after-school program, but only two of the sites had summer programs in 2005, so the children residing within or near those neighborhoods make up the sample for this study. All the children who attend this after-school and summer programming live at or below the poverty level, and more than 70% of them receive free or reduced lunch. As such, this sample represents the population identified by Atkins and Hart (2003) as less inclined to take civic action and as having lower levels of civic knowledge when compared to their affluent and/or rural counterparts.

Procedures and Measures

Participant Activities

The hands-on experiences of the project were incorporated as part of the summer programming that also included separate learning groups related to reading, writing, and technology skills. The portion of the summer program related to this project was called "Neighborhood Explorers" and involved the participants in small-group activities with eight to ten other children, one hour per week for the eight weeks. Participant groups were divided by age such that there were younger groups (5 to 8 years of age) and older groups (9 to 13 years of age).

Two second-year Master of Social Work students experienced in work with children and community organizing were the group leaders/research assistants and were supervised by the principal investigator. Attendance by the children was quite regular, as the general program required attendance at each of the on-site programming days in order to attend the once-a-week field trips. During the eight weeks, the children assessed the strengths and challenges of their neighborhoods via written and photographed accounts. A variation on photovoice (Wang & Burris, 1997) was employed as children photographed the assets and tribulations of their neighborhoods, engaged in democratic processes with each other to examine the photos and to choose one or two issues most pertinent to what the group would like to change in the neighborhood, and then create group presentations related to neighborhood problems. Parents and members of the local advisory boards attended the presentations.

One of the group leaders/research assistants, who had extensive youth organizing experience in public schools, operationalized the activities into

the weekly lesson plans that were used during the project. These lesson plans were assessed and approved by the principal investigator. Several of the experiences designed for this project were based on activities used in an international collaboration called *The Growing Up in Cities Project* (Driskell, 2002). The activities used in this project involved teaching the children to (1) make and record their hand written observations of the neighborhood; (2) work in their small groups to summarize and report out their observations; (3) learn about taking photographs; (4) make a plan for taking photos as well as taking impromptu pictures; (5) reflect on their photos and record captions that describe them; (6) use the evidence from their observations and photos to decide, democratically, which one to two issues were most pertinent to the group; (7) use their evidence to create a proposal for changes related to the issue(s); (8) practice presenting the proposal; and (9) present their proposals to local community advisory boards and parents. The activities described above were rounded out with other group-formation games and experiences through which the children could understand their place in a community. For example, during the first week, children played a game in which they placed themselves as if in the center of a ring and then progressively added rings to represent their families, friends, extended family, neighbors, school, and after-school program. A final ring included items such as where their food is bought. These procedures reflect an integration of rungs six and seven on Hart's (2002) ladder of children's participation. While the grant proposal and related programming ideas were initiated by the principal investigator and the lesson plans were developed by one of the group leaders/research assistants, the decisions about what to observe and photograph in the neighborhood and how this evidence would inform the final presentations were child-initiated and child-directed.

Pretest and Posttest Surveys

Skills for civic engagement (CE) and social development (SD) were assessed by pretest and posttest surveys. All surveys were administered in a one-to-one format by the principal investigator and her research assistants to ensure that reading ability was not an obstacle to understanding the survey as well as to account for comprehension among the few very young children in the sample. The items for these surveys were developed and compiled by the Research and Systematic Learning (RASL) team of City Year, Boston (Research and Systematic Learning [RASL], n.d.). The two surveys are under further development and validation as a collaborative

effort between City Year, Boston, and the principal investigator of this study. Initial analysis of the survey data for the sample from this study serves as a basis for discussing the conceptual framework for each one. While the CE and SD survey items were developed by City Year, Boston, to measure CE and SD as two separate entities, the skills required for civic competencies and those related to SD assets are associated with one another (Balsano, 2005; Lerner, Fisher, & Weinberg, 2000). However, in keeping with the original design by City Year, Boston, the surveys are discussed as separate entities.

The CE measure (RASL, n.d.) consists of 16 Likert-type items, and the Cronbach's alpha equaled 0.844 at pretest and 0.901 at posttest. The outcome of preliminary analysis of the items in the CE measure suggests that they are related to the three civic competencies (civic awareness, civic efficacy, and connection to community) identified by the University of California, Berkeley, Service-Learning (Research and Development Center Furco, Muller, & Ammon, 1998; Ammon, Furco, Chi, & Middaugh, 2002). The analysis of data from this sample suggests that the CE items form two components: civic awareness-community connection (alpha = 0.801) and civic efficacy-community connection (alpha = 0.754). These are described in more depth in the following paragraphs (see Table 1 for summary).

TABLE 1. Summary of civic engagement survey

| CE component (alpha) | Summary description* | Related items |
|--|---|---|
| Civic awareness*-community connection* (alpha = 0.801) | Awareness about community concerns and impact on others, ideas about making change and willingness to act plus sense of belonging, specifically for this study's sample, in a heterogeneous community | "Fixing problems in the neighborhood is everybody's responsibility." "I feel like I am part of the neighborhood." "I am interested in learning about people who speak a different language." |
| Civic efficacy*-community connection* (alpha = 0.754). | Recognition of one's capacity to take action toward making change plus sense of belonging, specifically for this study's sample, in a heterogeneous community | "I would take time away from one of my favorite activities to make my neighborhood a better place." "When I help out in the neighborhood I make friends." "I can learn a lot from people who look different from me." |

Sources: Furco et al., 1998; Ammon et al., 2002.

Furco et al. (1998) and Ammon et al. (2002) indicate that civic awareness involves knowledge about community concerns and the effect of those concerns on people within the community, a sense of what might be done to ameliorate community concerns, and a willingness to act to make community changes. Survey items related to civic awareness include “Fixing problems in the neighborhood is everybody’s responsibility” and “My neighborhood needs me to help.” Furco et al. and Ammon et al. depict community connection, the second civic competence, as a young person’s sense of belonging within a community. The ethnic and cultural heterogeneity of the neighborhoods where the “Neighborhood Explorers” took place suggests that the capacity to get along with those who are different is also an aspect of community connection. Community connection is exemplified in these survey items: “When I help out in the neighborhood I make friends,” “I feel like I am part of the neighborhood,” and “I can learn a lot from people who look different from me.”

Furco et al. (1998) and Ammon et al. (2002) described the third civic competency, which is labeled “civic efficacy,” as a young person’s recognition of their capacity to take action that might influence community issues. Survey items related to this component include “I would take time away from one of my favorite activities to make my neighborhood a better place” and “As I get older I plan to help my neighborhood, family, or school.”

The SD survey (RASL, n.d.) includes 13 Likert-type items, and the Chronbach’s alpha equaled 0.654 at pretest and 0.744 at posttest. Initial analysis of the SD items suggests that they group together such that they are conceptually related to three of the Search Institute’s (2003; Benson, 2006) developmental assets for middle childhood (social competencies, positive identity, and empowerment). In these initial analyses, two components emerge. One of these components is labeled “social competencies-positive identity” (alpha = 0.625), and the other is labeled “empowerment-positive identity” (alpha = 0.630). The following paragraphs describe the three developmental assets that make up these two components. The Search Institute further delineates the three assets—social competencies, positive identity, and empowerment—by naming qualities related to each. These qualities are listed in the second column of Table 2 and are described in the following discussion of the SD survey (see Table 2 for summary).

Two of the qualities subsumed in the Search Institute’s (2003; Benson, 2006) developmental asset of social competencies are interpersonal competence and resistance skills. Interpersonal competence is described a child’s ability to (1) care about and be affected by the feelings of others, (2) find joy in making friends, and (3) self-sooth in moments of frustration or anger

TABLE 2. Summary of social development survey

| SD component (alpha) | Summary description* | Related items |
|--|--|--|
| Social competencies*- positive identity* (alpha = 0.625) | Interpersonal competence (care for others, make friends, self-sooth); Resistance skills (say no to negative choices); Personal power (sense of agency) | "When playing with others, I quit if I don't get my way." "It is important to follow the rules even if no one is watching." "I learn from my mistakes." |
| Empowerment*- positive identity* (alpha = 0.630) | Community opportunities to provide service to others; Community views child as resource in decisions; Community feels safe for child; Personal power (sense of agency) | "I participate in projects that help my neighborhood." "When I'm in a group others ask my opinion about what we should do." "People in my neighborhood take care of me." "I ask for help when I need it." |

*Search Institute, 2003; Benson, 2006.

(Search Institute, 2003; Benson, 2006). Items on the survey related to these competencies include "When I play with others I take turns," "When playing with others, I quit if I don't get my way," and "When I disagree with others I get into fights or arguments." The other quality within social competencies—resistance skills—is depicted as a young person's capacity to say no in the face of temptation to do what he or she knows is wrong (Search Institute, 2003; Benson, 2006). Items on the SD survey related to this aspect of social competencies are "If my friends try to get me to do something I think is wrong I would . . . [followed by 5 Likert choices]" and "It is important to follow the rules even if no one is watching."

Other items on the survey are related to the Search Institute's (2003; Benson, 2006) asset labeled "positive identity" and more specifically to the quality of personal power subsumed within that asset. The child who possesses this asset of personal power is described as one who experiences a sense of agency about the events in his or her life (Search Institute, 2003; Benson, 2006). Survey items related to this include "I ask for help when I need it" and "I learn from my mistakes." The third Search Institute asset associated with the SD survey items is empowerment. This asset of empowerment is further described with the following qualities: (1) communities viewing children as resources in decision making, and (2) communities providing opportunities for children to serve as well

as (3) a sense of safety. The survey items related to this asset include “I participate in projects that help my neighborhood” and “People in my neighborhood take care of me.”

It is hypothesized that the child-centered activities of the “Neighborhood Explorers” described in the previous section, which provided opportunities for the young people in this sample to work side-by-side with peers and adults to contribute to their communities as well as talk with each other about the process of working together, will support the development of the capacities subsumed within civic competencies (Furco et al., 1998; Ammon et al., 2002) and the three developmental assets discussed here (Search Institute, 2003; Benson, 2006). This hypothesis is supported by the view of several scholars as outlined earlier in this article (Atkins & Hart, 2003; Balsano, 2005; Driskell, 2002; Lerner et al., 2000; Stoneman, 2002). However, given that the development of these competencies and assets is a continuous process of gains and losses across the life-span of a young person, the principal investigator conjectures that changes for this sample may be small and varied across the skill and competency sets assessed through the surveys.

Focus Groups

Focus groups were conducted at the end of the eight-week summer program period. The protocol developed for the focus groups included questions to explore what the children had learned about themselves and working with others, what they had learned about their neighborhood, and what they learned about neighborhood change and responsibility for neighborhood change. Each focus group was digitally recorded, had about eight children present, and lasted for about 30 minutes. Notes were also taken on large sheets of easel paper, and participants used the photos they took and drawings they made during the eight-week project period to assist them in relating to the questions and staying on task. In addition, snacks were provided as well as opportunities to draw during the discussion as a means to facilitate their capacity to participate for the 30 minutes of the focus group. Each group was run by the two graduate student group leaders/research assistants who had worked with the children during the eight-week project period. According to Hill (2006), when queried for their views on being involved in research, children indicate that they want it to be fun and relaxing, and they want researchers to ensure that all children will have a chance to share their views. Care was taken to provide these amenities for the children who participated in this study.

Analysis

Items on the CE and SD surveys were recoded so that higher sums on each indicated higher levels of CE and SD. Nearly all the items utilized Likert responses, with the exception of several items that had dichotomous responses. Pretest and posttest results were analyzed for statistical differences with the Wilcoxon signed-rank test (Jaccard & Becker, 1997). The Wilcoxon test is the nonparametric alternative to the correlated groups *t* test and was utilized in this study to account for the several dichotomous items in the surveys as noted above.

Focus group results were transcribed, cleaned, and then analyzed via the constant comparative method (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) following the protocol topics within each focus group. Emergent themes found within focus groups were assessed across the groups for consistencies and differences. Interrater reliability was assessed at 87.4% utilizing the Miles and Huberman (1994) formula, which involves counting the total number of agreements and disagreements between raters and dividing that into the total number of agreements. Conversations that took place after the interrater reliability was completed ended in agreement about the differences that had originally existed. Photos and related narratives from the photo-voice process illuminated the focus group results.

Limitations

The nonrandom, purposive sample utilized in this study is clearly a limitation for the pretest and posttest results. The use of a control group with random assignment would have allowed for stronger statements regarding the significant changes in CE and SD. However, the programming of the host agency does not allow participants from which a control group and random assignment could have been created to be placed on a waiting list.

Additionally, research within a community-based program has limitations such that consistent attendance of participants cannot be controlled. However, the young participants in the host program were required to attend daily in order to be eligible for the weekly field trips, and site directors were effective in locating children and parents to encourage daily attendance. Therefore, while there were some absences, attendance was quite consistent. Another limitation of research in a community-based program is attrition. While the majority of the children remained in programming for the entire eight weeks, program activities at the end of the summer as well as attrition made it difficult to access all 73 participants

to complete the posttests. Therefore, mean replacement of total CE and SD scores for 16 young people was used in the quantitative analysis.

Another limitation results from the fact that both surveys, as noted earlier in this article, are in the development phase. However, these were the most child-centered and age-appropriate measures the principal investigator was able to locate before the start of programming. Future work will determine validation of the measures and the initially related concepts already discussed in this article. The completion of this work will be key to future research on the activities that promote skills for CE and SD among young people. Such work, especially in the realm of measuring CE, is called for because Hart and Atkins (2002) point out that “we know little about the precise nature of civic competence” (p. 229). In addition to the quantitative measure, holding focus groups only at the end of the eight-week project and not before project start-up does not allow for baseline assessment of participants’ views, experiences, and skills related to CE and SD. While some researchers are opposed to the use of qualitative data such as preproject focus groups to support outcome research, others such as Patton (2002) indicate the usefulness of such data for determining outcomes, especially for evaluation research.

RESULTS

The quantitative results are presented first and include discussion of the means for individual survey items at pretest and posttest. This is followed by a description of the themes from the qualitative results in the context of the pretest and posttest outcomes.

Quantitative Results

The pretest and posttest results indicate positive growth in both CE and SD. This growth is indicated by the statistically significant changes in CE (CE pretest $\bar{X} = 58.19$, $SD = 7.79$ and posttest $\bar{X} = 59.71$, $SD = 8.32$, $z = -2.053$, $p = .040$) and SD (SD pretest $\bar{X} = 44.91$, $SD = 4.49$ and posttest $\bar{X} = 45.98$, $SD = 4.65$, $z = -2.108$, $p = 0.035$). While there is a statistically significant change from pretest to posttest on both surveys, the increase in the overall means is small. In part, this small change may be related to the findings of scholars discussed earlier in the article (Atkins & Hart, 2003; Bolland, 2003) who note that urban young people living in poverty tend to be less civically engaged and experience moderate to

severe levels of hopelessness. Nonetheless, these results are further explored by examining the means of individual items at pretest and posttest. Tables that summarize the pre-test and post-test means for CE and SD survey items and related discussion are presented next.

Table 3 indicates an increase in means from pretest to posttest for the majority of the items across both components in the CE survey. These preitem and postitem mean comparisons suggest that the young people experienced growth in civic competence (Furco et al., 1998; Ammon et al., 2002). For example, young people in the sample increased their awareness of the need to help out in the neighborhood as well as their

TABLE 3. Civic engagement item means at pretest and posttest

| CE Components and Items* | Pre \bar{X} | Post \bar{X} |
|---|---------------|----------------|
| Civic awareness-community connection | | |
| I let others know I want to help. (5 pt. Likert) | 4.47 | 4.58 |
| My neighborhood needs me to help. (5 pt. Likert) | 3.90 | 4.01 |
| I should be the one to help. (5 pt. Likert) | 4.14 | 4.17 |
| I am interested in learning about people who speak a different language (1 = no, 2 = unsure, 3 = yes) | 1.94 | 2.97 |
| Fixing problems in the neighborhood is everybody's responsibility (1 = no, 2 = yes) | 1.92 | 1.95 |
| It is important to help others (5 pt. Likert) | 4.92 | 4.87 |
| I like to help others even it is hard work (5 pt. Likert) | 4.55 | 4.53 |
| I feel like I am part of the neighborhood (5 pt. Likert) | 4.38 | 4.29 |
| I am good at solving problems (5 pt. Likert) | 4.16 | 3.89 |
| Civic efficacy-community connection | | |
| When I help out in the neighborhood I make friends. (4 pt. Likert) | 2.88 | 3.02 |
| It makes me comfortable to be around people who look different than I do (4 pt. Likert) | 2.97 | 3.07 |
| As I get older, I plan to help my neighborhood, family, or school (4 pt. Likert) | 3.30 | 3.46 |
| I can learn a lot from people who look different from me (4 pt. Likert) | 3.32 | 3.38 |
| I would take time away from one of my favorite activities to help another person (5 pt. Likert) | 4.14 | 4.20 |
| I try to do what is right (4 pt. Likert) | 3.21 | 3.14 |
| I would take time away from one of my favorite activities to work on a project that makes my neighborhood a better place (5 pt. Likert) | 4.26 | 4.25 |

*All items 4- or 5-point Likert scale as indicated. Other scales noted. Higher scores = positive growth.

general sense that fixing problems in the neighborhood is the work of “everybody.” Their recognition of their capacity to make change also increased as noted in plans for helping as they get older as well as in their willingness to take time out from an activity to help others. It is also instructive to examine items for which the posttest means were lower than those at pretest. For example, participants indicated feeling less like a part of their neighborhoods and less like they could solve problems or would do the hard work of helping to make change. It is feasible that once the young participants completed their neighborhood assessments and plans for change, the amount of work it takes to make change in their neighborhoods became more of a reality and that this affected their perception of their civic competence. This finding suggests certain implications for practice, which are discussed in the conclusion and implications section. The mean changes in these items, however, do not diminish the positive results already discussed. In fact, the ups and downs of the children’s experiences as neighborhood explorers are further delineated in the qualitative results, which are covered after the SD survey items are presented (see Table 4).

The pretest and posttest means for the SD survey items vary in terms of indicating change in expected and unexpected directions. For example, mean changes between pretest and posttest items indicate growth in participant capacity for peacefully disagreeing with others and resisting peer pressure, but another item indicates that taking turns is still difficult. Similar to the CE item mean changes that indicate change in an unexpected direction, there are SD items that suggest that as the participants became more aware of their neighborhood climate, their views on safety and neighbors as potential caregivers decreased. These results are more fully understood within the context of the qualitative results, which are presented next.

Qualitative Results

Qualitative results from postproject focus groups provide the deeper story behind the statistical results. Four broad themes resulted from the analysis: (1) getting along, (2) we can help, (3) who should help, and (4) the neighborhood is. The content of these themes is summarized in Table 5 and is further discussed in the following paragraphs.

The theme “getting along” indicates participants’ knowledge of the skills needed to work side by side with peers (e.g., social competencies; Search Institute, 2003; Benson, 2006) as well as their continued learning

TABLE 4. SD item means at pretest and posttest

| SD components and items* | Pre \bar{X} | Post \bar{X} |
|---|---------------|----------------|
| Empowerment-positive identity | | |
| It is important to follow the rules even if no one is watching. (5-point Likert) | 4.64 | 4.89 |
| I ask for help when I need it. (4-point Likert) | 3.04 | 3.30 |
| I participate in projects that help my neighborhood. (4-point Likert) | 2.81 | 3.20 |
| When I'm in a group others ask my opinion about what we should do. (4-point Likert) | 2.75 | 2.67 |
| It is important to take care of people who are in need of help. (5-point Likert) | 4.76 | 4.75 |
| People in my neighborhood take care of me. (4-point Likert) | 3.01 | 2.88 |
| Getting along with others is important (1 = not very important; 2 = very important) | 1.97 | 1.93 |
| Social competencies-positive identity | | |
| I learn from my mistakes. (5-point Likert) | 4.61 | 4.82 |
| When I'm working with others I'll quit if the others won't do things the way I want. (4-point Likert) | 3.31 | 3.49 |
| I get into arguments or fights when I disagree with others. (4-point Likert) | 3.17 | 3.27 |
| If my friends try to get me to do something I think is wrong. (5-point Likert) | 4.63 | 4.72 |
| When I play with others I take turns. (4-point Likert) | 3.64 | 3.62 |
| In my neighborhood it's safe to play outside (1 = no, 2 = unsure, 3 = yes) | 2.46 | 2.41 |

*All items 4 or 5 pt. Likert scale as indicated. Other scales noted. Higher scores = positive growth

about how to do this. For example, children note that it is hard to work with others because you have to listen to others and you have to decide who gets to go first. At some points in the focus groups, the young people demonstrate the use of this skill while at other points adult focus group facilitators need to remind children that one person speaks at a time. This echoes the pretest and posttest item comparison in that while some item-mean changes indicate capacity for getting along, the one item that lags is that which assesses capacity for taking turns.

Other quotes that represent this theme of getting along indicate knowledge of the skills required for social competencies (Search Institute, 2003;

TABLE 5. Summary description of qualitative themes

| Theme | Description |
|---------------------------|---|
| Getting along | This theme was indicated in the data by examples of positive social skills in action as well as recognition among the children of the need for respecting differences in both ideas and cultures. |
| We can help | This theme was evident in the ideas the young people had for actions they could take to improve their neighborhoods as well as acknowledgement that, as residents, they know what's going on and therefore are implicated in assessing and changing it. |
| Who should help | Discussions among the young people that exemplify this theme pointed to their knowledge of neighbors who could lend a hand as well as their awareness of local actors outside of the neighborhood who could be called on for assistance in change efforts. |
| The neighborhood is . . . | This theme encompasses both strength- and challenge-based descriptions of the neighborhood. The theme was evident in focus group conversations in which the young people noted places of beauty in the neighborhood as well as places of degradation. The data also revealed the young people's knowledge of the players who create these positive and negative places. |

Benson, 2006) and community connection (Furco et al., 1998; Ammon et al., 2002) with those who represent diverse ethnicities. This is exemplified in the qualitative results when a child suggests that “you can’t just say no [I won’t be your friend] because they’re a different color from you.” On the whole, the children’s final presentations of their plans for neighborhood change are a testament to their capacity to work together to make decisions, create group presentations, and successfully communicate their views to adult groups. This work on the part of the children exemplifies the theme “getting along” and suggests that the young people in this study are implementing SD skills and civic competencies while simultaneously building on their aptitude for operationalizing them. This simultaneous process is also indicated in the pre-test and post-test means for individual survey items, which suggests both growth and lag in growth.

The theme “we can help” is related to civic awareness and civic efficacy (Furco, Muller, & Ammon, 1998) as well as positive identity and empowerment (Search Institute, 2003; Benson, 2006). The children discuss what they personally can do to make things different in their neighborhoods—“pick up

trash . . . help other kids solve problems”—as well as note that because they live there, they “know what’s goin’ on” and therefore are responsible for change. The theme “who should help” is also evident in that while participants recognize their responsibility for making change, they name adults who reside inside and outside of the neighborhood who need to help make change. This attests to their connection to community (Furco, Muller, & Ammon, 1998) as well as their social competencies for knowing and accessing these adults (Search Institute, 2003; Benson, 2006). For example, during one of the focus groups, the children discuss what to do about getting the “bad people” (homeless people) out of the park. At first, one of the young people suggests that they could chase them off by throwing sticks and stones at them. However, this idea is tempered by several other children who point out that this is a “bad idea” and that perhaps they should instead help them get up and take them to where they belong. Finally, two other children suggest that getting a security guard or a fence for the park will then keep the “bad people” out. Other skills for CE and SD are also exemplified in this exchange. The children do not agree wholly with each other on the initial solution for getting the “bad people” out, but no arguments break out; instead, they practice social competencies (e.g., the ability to tolerate the expression of differing views and to not give up if they are not viewed as having the best idea). They feel empowered enough to consider that they might be able to help the “bad people” go somewhere that they belong and have the awareness that in order for the change to be maintained, external forces such as a security guard and a fence are necessary.

The fourth theme, “the neighborhood is,” depicts the children’s connection to community and civic awareness and demonstrates that their knowledge of the neighborhood encompasses the strengths and the challenges within it. They point out the natural beauty of gardens and flowers as well as a colorful mural that graces an area in one of the neighborhoods. The young people note the important social relationships they have with peers and adults who reside in the neighborhood as well as helpful people from outside the neighborhood (e.g., volunteers in the after-school and summer programming) who have knowledge to offer. However, they are also keenly aware of the neighborhood challenges, from litter and trash, to graffiti, to gang fights and shootings.

These four themes came together in the final presentations the children gave about what they would like to change in their neighborhoods. In addition, the outcomes suggest that the young people experienced the three elements for building civic identity described by Atkins and Hart

(2003). Through participation in the neighborhood, they acquired and formalized knowledge about the community and utilized democratic principals to create and present cohesive plans for neighborhood change. Their real-world efforts as observers and reporters, as well as the views they represent in the qualitative results, promote a vision of young people as assets as opposed to problems (Checkoway & Gutierrez, 2006).

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The work of “Neighborhood Explorers” continued beyond the eight-week project described in this article. Follow-up activities included young people presenting community advisory boards with seed funds (accessed through the grant that supported the project) to work toward their change ideas. Additionally, social work students interning at the sites during the academic year that followed the summer program carried out related activities that involved further neighborhood exploration and a field trip to a local community organizing event to promote voting on issues related to schools and health care. In summer 2006, further funding was garnered and two levels of “Neighborhood Explorers” continued. Younger children learned the skills described in this article and older children added to those skills, resulting in the collaboration of the younger and older children to plan and host neighborhood action days through which they engaged residents and outside resources to make neighborhood changes.

While there are clearly limits to the science of this study, as presented earlier, the results provide important implications for community practice and research. Future studies that employ the CE and SD surveys (RASL, n.d.) among samples that include urban young people living in poverty and affluent and/or rural children may unpack the concerns noted by Atkins and Hart (2003). Additionally, such studies will be useful for further exploration and delineation of the two surveys.

For the community practitioner, these results suggest that children have tremendous capacity to engage in productive neighborhood assessment and planning for change. In addition, practitioners can use child-centered activities such as those described in this article not only to empower young people as assets in their neighborhoods but also to build their civic identities and SD. However, as the examination of the pretest and posttest means for individual survey items suggests, practitioners need to be aware of the ways in which young people’s perceptions of themselves and their neighborhoods can change as their keen assessments make neighborhood

challenges more of a reality in their lives. As such, facilitators of activities similar to those used in the “Neighborhood Explorers” may want to include conversations through which participants can reflect on self-perceptions of their agency in the context of the neighborhood challenges that they have named. For example, discussions related to tenacity in the face of making neighborhood changes as well as provision of local and/or national exemplars of steadfast change agents may serve young participants who begin to question their own agency as a result of daunting challenges. In fact, children may provide an opening for such discussions when they mention leaders of social change such as the child who made the following comment in one of the focus groups: “One day, like, I wish, like, one day, like Martin Luther King said I have a dream like Africans and Americans are going to get along and they did . . . well . . . I kinda do have a dream too. I have, like, a dream one day, um, like the liquor stores will be out. And if I become, if I become president I would take all the bad stuff out, whatever happens to people. The people [that live] on the street, we’re gonna get a food service for them.” In the eyes of a child, heroes reminiscent of Martin Luther King, Jr., and figureheads like presidents may appear to be omnipotent change makers. Hence, comments like this child’s can be used as a base for discussing the trials faced by human rights leaders, such as Cesar Chavez, and the ways they had to think and act so as not to lose heart in the process of attaining their goals.

Focusing on young people as integral to community practice and organizing will enrich their personal outcomes and promote their interest and skills as future organizers. It will also transform the way in which neighborhood change is viewed as Carlson (2006) points out in reference to teens as active citizens: “We *need* them at the table because they contribute a unique perspective on today. They alone have the experience of living as young people in this time and place”(p. 91). The age group addressed in this project and study represents the future active citizen teens described by Carlson. Their inclusion in the community practice enterprise readies them to take their positions as organizers when they reach adolescence and later adulthood. Community practitioners with the skills and ethos for facilitating child-centered and empowered participation can further pave the way for authentic children’s participation by teaching and training other community leaders who may not have the necessary skills and mind-set required for this work (Freeman et al., 1999).

Community-oriented research is expanded when the voices of young people play a central role in that research. While research of hands-on activities with young people in community-based programs does not lend itself to tradi-

tional intervention science, it does provide critical information about practice activities and outcomes in real-world settings (Lerner, Fisher, & Weinberg, 2000). It addresses the analysis of “human functioning . . . as socially interdependent, richly contextualized, and conditionally orchestrated” (Bandura, 2001, p. 5). As such, this study and others similar to it provide blueprints for replication and implementation in other practice settings while considering the challenges of execution in an uncontrolled environment. Finally, from both a practice and research view, this study suggests a bridge between micro and macro concerns. It demonstrates the potential for utilizing community practice with children to address micro concerns such as SD and individual skills for CE within community change activities in an effort to build the next group of community leaders.

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