

Monitoring the Effectiveness of Youth Participation in Project Citizen

A Civitas-Russia Evaluation Project Summary of Preliminary Findings

June 2005

Background

In November 2002, Civitas-Russia began a monitoring initiative to evaluate the effectiveness of youth participation in the Russian variation of Project Citizen entitled “I am a Citizen of Russia.”

We decided to focus this monitoring initiative in Samara where Project Citizen has been underway since 1998. In Samara, there is a civics curriculum for all grade levels designed to provide an integrated approach to pupil learning of the values, skills and knowledge required of citizens in a democratic society. The Samara educational system has incorporated the social project approach in general and Project Citizen in particular as one strategy for advancing its civic learning goals. The purpose of this monitoring initiative is to gauge the influence of participation in social projects on Samara’s larger goal of civic learning.

The Samara Regional Center for Civic Education (SCCE) coordinated this initiative in cooperation with the Civitas-Russia partnership. One of the Civitas partners, Charles White of Boston University School of Education, served as a technical advisor because of his expertise in the field of educational research and evaluation. Another Civitas partner, Stephen Schechter, Director of the Council for Citizenship Education, provided administrative support for this initiative.

Design

The research design and instruments for this monitoring initiative sought to replicate the work of CCE in Bosnia and Vontz et al. (2000) in Indiana, Latvia, and Lithuania. These studies employed well-established research methods with validated instruments. The monitoring team designed a pre-test and post-test for experimental and control groups. We modified these methods and instruments as necessary to accommodate Russian variations in Project Citizen.

For our study, the monitoring team selected thirteen schools from six different school districts of Samara Oblast: Samara, Togliatti, Syzran, Kinel-Cherkassy, Sergievsky, and Krasnoyarsky. They selected participating schools so as to represent a variety of school population types. Hence, the team sought to include: schools with large, medium, and small pupil population; urban and rural schools; and schools in economically fortunate and less fortunate districts. In all, a total of 742 pupils were involved in some aspect of the monitoring project.

The monitoring team divided pupils into the following groups:

Group 1: Pupils who have participated in Project Citizen (PC) but were not involved in it at the time of a survey.

Group 2: Pupils who have not participated in PC and were not involved in it at the time of the survey.

Group 3: Pupils who had not previously participated in PC but became involved in it at the time of the survey.

In addition to pupils, other categories of respondents included:

- Parents of those pupils who completed their PC projects
- Teachers who coordinated PC in schools
- School administrators who participated in local and regional PC competitions
- Local government officials who cooperated with PC participants.

The monitoring team prepared a separate survey instrument for each category of respondents. Each instrument included both open-ended and multiple-choice items. The survey of local government officials contained mostly open-ended items. The team included items designed to assess not only the domain of pupil content knowledge (in the fields of government, law, and current politics) but also pupil skills and attitudes. We were interested in the extent to which participation in Project Citizen affected all of these domains since multi-dimensional learning is one of the primary goals of social projects like Project Citizen.

The monitoring team also developed a large group of items to capture personal characteristics of pupils and the opinions of different groups of respondents directly or indirectly involved in PC. We did this in order to identify challenges of project-based learning and the nature of communication among different groups of people involved in PC.

Preliminary Results

On the pre-test, the experimental and control groups showed similar scores relative to the ideal profile. In some cases, the control group's scores were higher than those of the experimental group on the pre-test.

On the post-test, the experimental group scored higher than the control group on virtually all items. The increase in scores was significantly higher for the experimental group than the control group. For some items, this increase was 3 to 7 times higher for the experimental group. On average, the number of the experimental group pupils whose answers correlate with democratic standards and dispositions was 15-20 percent higher than for control group pupils.

As concerns retention, it is interesting to note that pupils who completed their PC projects at least a year ago showed the same level of commitment to democratic and citizenship values as their peers who have just completed their projects. Both groups also showed

firmer beliefs in democratic ideals and values than was the case with pupils who never participated in PC.

The results of this monitoring project seem to confirm the earlier study by Patrick and Vontz and strongly suggest that participation in PC as a social project helps pupils to: acquire and share democratic and civic values, acquire and improve skills of citizenship participation, increase their attention to local community issues and to social and political conditions not only where pupils live but in the country as a whole, and strengthen their motivation to participate in community life.

Survey results also show that the process of project-based learning students also strengthened a cluster of civic qualities that include: organizational skills, communications skills, a sense of responsibility, sensitivity to the problems of others, and working for the benefit of their community.

For example, participating pupils learned to communicate competently and effectively with local authorities and government representatives. Local government officials, in turn, highly appreciated that type of communication. In time, those officials may come to see a more active and aware youth as partners in the improvement of the quality of life on a local level. All local government officials in this survey expressed their preparedness to provide moral, administrative, and financial support to PC. Those officials also stressed the positive influence of social projects on community development and on the development of cooperation between school and local community.

Caveats

This summary is based on a 36-page draft document that reports preliminary results based on analysis of descriptive statistics only. Further data analysis needs to be completed to gauge whether the apparent pre- and post-test differences between experimental and control groups are statistically (and practically) significant. The results described and conclusions stated here are therefore not final, are subject to revision, and should not be widely disseminated at this time.

In conclusion, we believe that an important part of the success of PC lies in its combination of theory and practice for the teacher, as well as knowledge and experience for the pupil. It is gratifying that all categories of participants are interested in continued PC participation and collaboration. However, perhaps the single most important consequence of PC is that realization by pupils that they can change life for the better.

For further information about the Russian-American project “Monitoring Effectiveness of Youth Participation in Project Citizen” contact Professor Charles White at Boston University (cswwhite@bu.edu).