

Connecting Civics to Life Around Us: An Experiment with Municipal Corporation Schools in Pune Region, India

A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

Informed, active and responsible citizenry is fundamental for democracy to sustain and flourish. Research suggests that the impetus civic awareness and responsibility start at adolescent age. Hence, it is important that schools use methodologies that make civic education interesting, practical and relevant. Current study explores an educational intervention called Civic Action Project (CAP). The study adopted quasi experimental research design. The experimental group students underwent CAP intervention, whereas the control group students did not undergo CAP and received regular teaching. Purpose of the study was to investigate how students put their knowledge and skills to use while responding to solve a hypothetical civic issue (using a vignette). Further, the study aimed to examine dispositions reflected in their responses. Qualitative methods were used for data collection and analyses. Findings of the study show that hands on experience in interventions like CAP can help teachers encourage competent civic engagement among students.

INTRODUCTION

Civic education in democracy is learning to govern ourselves (Branson 1998, p. 2).

Hence, it follows that informed, active and responsible citizenship is a prerequisite for the democratic self-governance which in turn can

be developed through education (Kahne and Middaugh 2008, p. 1). The political scientists, Sharon Cook and Joel Westheimer, in their essay titled 'Democracy and Education' state that "If people are not born democrats then, surely education has significant role to play in ensuring that the democrats are made (Cook and Westheimer 2006, p. 348)."

Broadly, civic education at schools builds capacities of students to gain civic knowledge, skills and dispositions. Civic knowledge concerns information around polity. It includes understanding about the Constitution, rights and responsibilities of citizens, structure and functions of the state and avenues of citizen participation among others. Civic skills are not to be perceived in isolation but they are closely linked with capacity building of citizens on effective civic engagement (Kirlin 2003, p. 3). Civic skills are further divided into intellectual and participatory skills (Branson 1998, p. 5). The intellectual skills encompass ability of citizens to identify the public issues, build critical understanding of the issues, take a stand point and defend it. Participatory skills are needed to act upon the standpoint. It involves dialogue with fellow citizens and government, monitoring, and influencing political processes around them. Finally, civic dispositions are to be perceived in light of constitutional morality. Citizens are entrusted with not only the responsibility of practicing democratic values in their lives but also with making sure that discourse of

their society and state is in alignment with the democratic values.

CIVIC EDUCATION IN INDIA

National Curriculum Framework 2005 (NCF 2005) clearly states that school education is vested with responsibility of development of citizenry that is conscious of their rights and duties and depicts commitment to the principles embodied in our Constitution (NCF 2005, p. 7). Further, NCF 2005 emphasises on connecting the knowledge to life outside the school in an organic way to ensure that learning shifts away from rote methods.

However, despite up gradations, investigators' formative conversations with schools reveal that students perceive civics to be a lifeless subject with no practical relevance. Similarly, key findings of a recent study by Children's Movement for Civic Awareness — an NGO report that Indian youth scores very low on principles of democratic citizenship and further our education system has not addressed this alarming reality (Yuva Nagarik Meter 2016, pp. 20-32). Hence it follows that teachers must adhere to methodologies that can help students find civics interesting, relevant and important. Considering this concern, current study revolves around an educational intervention called Civic Action Project (CAP).

OBJECTIVE

This study involved introducing CAP as part of political science subject

for 9th grade. As part of the CAP, students select a civic issue from their neighborhood, do research on the issue and work with the concerned government authorities to solve it. Experimental group students underwent CAP intervention while control group students were not introduced to CAP and followed their regular discourse of teaching. The study was undertaken with further mentioned objectives—

1. To investigate how students put their civic knowledge and skills to use while responding to solve a hypothetical civic issue (using a vignette) in the community and examine students' dispositions depicted in their responses.
2. To examine qualitative differences between responses of control and experimental group students.

METHODS

Sample

Sample included 150 students studying in 9th grade of municipal schools of city of Pimpri Chinchwad and city of Pune respectively. Pimpri Chinchwad and Pune are neighboring cities of western Maharashtra and each have a municipal corporation of its own. The selection of the municipal

schools from these cities has been purposive. For the academic year 2016-17, when the current study was administered, investigator's team was already working on introducing CAP with municipal schools of Pimpri Chinchwad and Pune. From these schools, one experimental group school per corporation was selected. Further, 9th grade was selected for the study because state board curriculum of 9th grade matched the topics to be covered under the CAP. Further, investigators team found 9th grade students to be age appropriate (average age – 15 years) to carry out the CAP. One control group school per corporation was selected from the list of schools that was not part of the CAP. After the selection of control and experimental group schools, it was decided that the administration of study will be limited to one division of 9th grade. The control and experimental group students belonged to the same category of schools public municipal schools. Selecting both groups from public municipal schools allowed us to reduce the potential confounders and match the students on their key demographic characteristics, such as parental socio economic status. The final selection of students is as follows (Table-1).

Table-1

Group details	Number of students (Total= 150)	Grade	Division	Location of the school
Control group one (C1 group)	48	9th	1	Pimpri Chinchwad

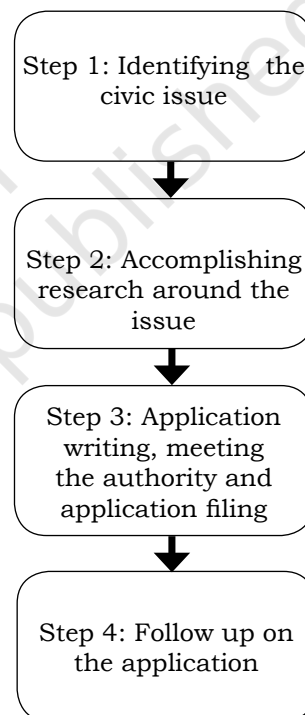
Experimental group one (E1 group)	43	9th	1	Pimpri Chinchwad
Control group two (C2 group)	31	9th	1	Pune
Experimental group two (E2 group)	28	9th	1	Pune

INTERVENTION

CAP is an experiential program in which students choose a civic issue from their surrounding and work with the concerned government authority to solve it. The adjacent diagram (Figure-1) describes steps of CAP. Experimental group students worked on CAP during school hours and in their respective school itself. Eleven sessions were held at frequency of one session per week (or) fortnight between January and March 2017.

Based on the original study design, teachers of experiment group classes were to administer CAP under guidance and observation of the investigators. Both the teachers received the training for the same. Teacher responsible for E1 group followed the original study design. In E2 group, however, right after the initiation, the associated teacher was unavailable to administer the CAP. Hence, CAP was administered by the study investigators (BB and KS). Following are the major milestones of CAP achieved by experimental group students by the end of study period.

Figure -1 : Steps in CAP



Step-1: Identification of the issue

E1 group students chose issue of the school furniture scrap that was dumped on their school playground for more than two years. E2 group students chose the issue of overflowing garbage bin outside their school.

Step-2A: Field research around the issue

E1 group students interviewed citizens from the surrounding on the issue of scrap and probed on its impact and inquired if citizens had initiated any action on it. E2 group interviewed teachers, school staff and citizens from the surrounding.

Step-2B: Desk research around the issue

E1 and E2 group students found out following references and documents (with help of internet and books) concerning the issue and studied them.

- Articles from the Indian Constitution concerning the issue
- Relevant laws/rules/guidelines/other government documents pertaining to the issue
- Identification of the concerned government authority for issue redressal
- (In E1 group, where teacher was administering CAP, investigators team helped her accomplish desk research with the students)

Step-3: Application writing, meeting with the authority and application filing

In their search for finding concerned government authority, E1 group students identified secondary education officer for issue of scrap whereas E2 group students identified sanitary inspector of their ward office. Students wrote the complaint applications and supported them

with the documents gathered through research. A meeting was arranged with the concerned authorities. Students presented their project work to the authorities, submitted their applications and discussed possible solutions on the issue.

Step-4: Follow up

Education officer told E1 group students about the recently held auction and confirmed that within 15 days, the dismantling and removal of scrap will happen. Soon, the scrap was removed and a follow up was not required in this case.

E2 group students met sanitary inspector just before final examination of the year. Hence, no immediate follow up was possible after the end of school year. In the next academic year, investigators could not obtain permission from the school to follow up on CAP. When visited last, compared to the times when the work on CAP was underway, investigators did not find much difference in the issue site.

Data collection and analysis

Post the intervention, data collection among control and experimental groups took place. Using a vignette, investigators drafted a hypothetical issue and developed an instrument of writing— an action plan to solve it.

Text of the instructions that students received is as following—

“This year, as part of your political science subject, you have got a project assignment. In this assignment, you will be working on solving below given civic issue. There is an open drainage near the footpath of your school. Due to this, you are suffering from the foul odour in your school. The drainage water flows on the road as well. Along with you, other citizens from surrounding are affected as well. With reference to what you have learnt in civics or political science subject, how will you solve this civic issue? Prepare an action plan and describe it in 10-12 sentences here.”

Dr. Suhas Palshikar (mentor of this study) assessed the instrument to ensure that it allows investigators to evaluate students' civic knowledge, skills and dispositions from the responses.

Students wrote their responses in Marathi language. Investigators translated the data verbatim in English. Data was entered and coded using Dedoose software and was analysed using content analysis based on grounded theory. After thorough and repeated reading of responses, investigators created an initial codebook to analyse the data. The codebook developed by the investigators is entirely based on the data collected. Hence, it omits the possibility of biased interpretations and assures the interpretive and evaluative validity.

RESULTS

Before the start of the study, all selected experimental and control group students were given a civic test containing 13 multiple choice questions. The questions in questionnaire were such that they could test the then civic knowledge, skills and dispositions of the students, were deemed appropriate for their school level and were based on the syllabus. All responses were graded and a final score was calculated for each student. A t-test was run to evaluate whether there are any differences between control and experimental group students. The t-test was not significant ($p > .05$) indicating that there was no difference in civic knowledge between experiment and control group students pre intervention. On average, control group students scored 4.03 out of 13 and intervention group students scored 4.93 out of 13.

From the data collected for qualitative analysis, civic knowledge, skills, dispositions and impact emerged as principal codes in codebook. The sub-codes in each main code captured further nuances of responses. Responses of control and experimental group students portray some qualitative differences and few similarities as depicted in Table 2.

Table 2

Frequently appearing codes in the codebook	Prevalent among Control group n=79 (C1-48,C2-31)	Prevalent among Experimental group n=71 (E1-43,E2-28)
Civic knowledge		
Approaching councillor as a first step to solve the issue	n=30 (C1-18,C2-12)	n=20 (E1-15, E2-5)
Approaching municipal corporation as a first step to solve the issue	n=16 (C1-9,C2-7)	n=16 (E1-13, E2-3)
Approaching sanitary inspector of ward office at municipal corporation as a first step to solve the issue	n=1 (C1-1,C2-0)	n=20 (E1-2, E2-17)
Reference to the Constitution	n=0 (C1-0,C2-0)	n=20 (E1-10, E2-10)
Knowledge of civic rights	n=4 (C1-1,C2-3)	n=22 (E1-20, E2-2)
Civic skills		
Use of written communication methods to address the issue with authorities	n=23 (C1-18,C2-5)	n=56 (E1-30, E2-26)
Use of non-written communication methods to address the issue with authorities	n=48 (C1-34,C2-14)	n=16 (E1-14, E2-2)
Desk research on the issue	n=0 (C1-0,C2-0)	n=49 (E1-23, E2-26)
Field research on the issue	n=0 (C1-0,C2-0)	n=52 (E1-27, E2-23)
Application supported by evidence	n=0 (C1-0,C2-0)	n=16 (E1-3, E2-13)
Maintaining records for follow up	n=0 (C1-0,C2-0)	n=9 (E1-0, E2-9)
Keeping councilor in loop on the action	n=0 (C1-0,C2-0)	n=10 (E1-0, E2-10)
Civic dispositions		
Holding authorities accountable	n=8 (C1-5,C2-3)	n=6 (E1-1, E2-5)
Less faith in authorities	n=12 (C1-10,C2-2)	n=6 (E1-1, E2-5)
Solving the issue themselves and raising funds for solution	n=9 (C1-5,C2-4)	n=7 (E1-6, E2-1)
Impact of the issue on different aspects of life	n=47 (C1-32,C2-15)	n=22 (E1-15, E2-7)

Following quotes are some representative responses of control and experimental group students. The quotes are typed verbatim.

Approaching councillor as a first step: “In order to solve this issue, I will ask for help from the councillor of this area. And I will explain the issue that near the footpath outside our school, there is an open drainage.”

Approaching municipal corporation as a first step: “There is an open drainage near the footpath outside my school. In order to repair it, I will write a letter to municipal corporation. If they do not repair the drainage and children fall sick because of the drainage, then I will write a letter again and inform municipal corporation that children are falling sick, do the work at earliest.”

Knowledge of civic rights: “The reason for writing this application is that clean environment is related to our right to life; we are submitting this application after research and discussion.”

Reference to the Constitution: “In order to solve this issue, we will firstly see the concerned right from the Constitution and will look for the laws made for these rights.”

Written form of communication: “We will write an application to the sanitary inspector of that area. In that application, we will write about the work which we have done regarding this issue and as evidence we will attach the copies of citizen interviews.”

Non written form of communication: “We will tell the councillor that outside our school, there is an open drainage near the footpath and the foul odour is spreading in our school because of that. This should be cleaned. This is my request.”

Discussions around preliminary research before approaching the authority: “Firstly, we will try to understand whether citizens and students are suffering from this. We will take interviews of citizens in neighbourhood, students and teachers. Through interviews we will come to know about the trouble caused by this open drainage.”

“In order to solve this issue, we will firstly see the concerned right from the Constitution and will look for the laws made for these rights.”

Application supported by evidence: “We will meet the Commissioner of the municipal corporation and tell then about this issue and we will also inform then about the information like laws, rules and duties of municipal corporation that we have gathered about the issue. With all these papers, we will write one request asking then to address the issue.”

Holding authorities accountable for their duties: “If the councillor does not listen to us, then I and we all living there, will not vote for then. If they don't do our work then what makes them our councillor.”

Less faith in authorities: “We will go to the municipal corporation

office and we will register a complaint and we will watch if they make note of our complaint or not. If they do not accept our complaint, then we, all the students of the school will collect money and we will get the drainage work done.”

Solving the issue themselves:

“We all citizens should clean the drainage so that the surrounding of our school will remain clean and hence school children will not fall sick.”

Impact on different aspects of civic life: “The drainage is outside the school premise. Because of this, the foul odour is spreading in our school. Children coming to school can fall sick because of this.”

DISCUSSION

This study evaluated a novel approach to teach political science to 9th grade students using a quasi experimental study design. Our results show that experimental group students who underwent CAP intervention, gained more civic knowledge, skills and experience than control group students who did not undertake CAP.

As indicated in Table- 2, experimental group students focused predominantly on procedural part of civic action. Control group students wrote elaborately about the impact of the issue on their lives. They also mentioned about approaching the authorities to solve the issue, but lacked in writing out details of how they would do it.

The hypothetical issue presented to the students points out gaps in the implementation of the duties of municipal corporation – the urban local governance unit. The executive arm of the municipal corporation and the elected representative that is councillors are the key authorities responsible for issue redressal. However, their roles are different when it comes solving such issues. It is expected that for such issues, students approach the concerned executive authority at the municipal corporation and keep the councillor of their ward informed on the same. However, the students lacked the nuanced understanding of different roles and responsibilities undertaken by the authorities. It could be attributed to the factor that a councillor is part of the ward with possibility of their office being in neighbourhood and is often accessible for multiple issues as compared to the municipal corporation which is a structured institution with several departments under it.

A written communication with government authorities surely has an edge over an informal way of communicating. Written application when drafted well is a structured document that clearly states the issue, is addressed to the exact authority and also sets out the expectation on the possible action to be taken by the authorities. Experimental group students have preferred to use written mode of communication while control group students have stuck to non-

written communication methods. Thus, experimental group students displayed understanding of the importance of written communication as compared to control group students.

Furthermore, experimental group students also extensively discussed field and desk research as a part of filing a written application. Advantages of research activities are multi-fold. Field research gives a good insight into the opinions of other citizens about the issue and can possibly create room to engage them in the action. In addition, the field research can serve as an evidence of existence and implications of the issue. In desk research, finding out laws, rules and other government documents concerning the issue bears lot of significance. An action based on information can give citizens an added advantage while working with the authorities. However, undertaking research based activities appears to be almost non-existent among responses of control group students.

The Constitution is a foundation of any civic action. Therefore, reference to the Indian Constitution is indispensable. Experimental group students made references to Constitution in ways like mentioning about violation of Article 21 that is right to life. They were also more aware about the civic rights they possess and were able to connect the violation of rights with the hypothetical issue presented to them.

Control group students have neither perceived the issue in light of civic rights nor have they mentioned about the Constitution. This particular trend of control group students raises an important concern. Especially considering the fact that 9th grade students had topics like Constitution of India and fundamental rights to study as part of political science curriculum.

There is a spectrum of dispositions that has got reflected in the responses. Despite the awareness of civic rights and civic procedures, it appears that attitude of holding government accountable is yet to get nurtured among the experimental group students. While control group students did not depict much knowledge of civil rights, a small number of students ($n=8$) wrote about holding authorities accountable. This shows that these students have the required dispositions to solve the issue however it requires to be substantiated by the essential knowledge and skills.

On the contrary, some control group students wrote about solving the issue themselves ($n=9$) or raising funds for it ($n=7$). While taking ownership for actions like these is appreciative, there is a clear deviation from the ideal role of citizenry where citizens claim their rights with the state. Alarmingly, some control group students ($n=12$) also wrote about having less faith in authorities with regards to issue redressal.

The data for experimental groups was further analysed to find out the differences among E1 and E2 group. As Table 2 indicates, E2 group students wrote about contacting sanitary inspector of the ward office. They are is the same authority that E2 group students had worked with during their CAP project on waste management. This particular aspect hence stands as a limitation for this part of the study. E1 group students rarely mentioned about contacting sanitary inspector.

Further, E1 group students linked hypothetical issue to violation of civil rights whereas E2 group students did not focus on civil rights. Under civic skills, among E2 group, good number of students wrote about taking up steps like supporting application by evidence, maintenance of records for future follow up and keeping councillor in loop to solve the issue. E1 group students have almost missed considering these steps in their civic action.

The responses of the experimental group students depict that they have been able to produce an action plan based on the activities they undertook during their CAP. Control group students depict the willingness and right attitude to solve the issue; however, they struggled with the necessary knowledge and skills to substantiate their civic actions. This indicates that CAP intervention increased students' civic capacities as compared to the control group students.

Interventions similar to CAP can combat the gap between 'ideal' stated in the textbooks and 'reality' of the world (George 2005, pp.71-74). Evidence suggests that even a short intervention can bring about significant improvement in the civic knowledge, skills and public policy issue solving skills of the participant students (Root and Northup 2007, pp. 6-23). Although the implications of our study are tremendous in civic educational field, this study has some caveats. Ideally, the interventions in both the experimental groups should have been carried out exclusively by the associated teachers. In E2 group, the unavailability of the associated teacher compelled the investigators to carry out the intervention themselves. It is also imperative to measure the change in the capacities of teachers who facilitate such interventions which has been missed in current study. Thus, future research needs to also understand the role of the teacher to increase civic skills and knowledge among students. Our study used one of the most relevant civic issues faced by citizens on daily basis — waste management. The students not only learned about the civics and political structure of their cities but they also learned to effectively engage with the civic bodies. The intervention took place during school hours and without any additional financial or administrative impact to the school and the teachers.

CONCLUSION

Many studies suggest the importance of civic education and the challenges encountered by the teachers. In context of India, the most critical challenge for teachers has been to make civics interesting and a subject that has an application value. Current study shows that intervention like CAP can serve as an aid to teachers in contesting the above challenge in an organic

manner. When planned in advance, CAP is highly feasible in a school setup. A well-resourced library, availability of infrastructure for use of Information and Communication Technology and few changes in the classroom sessions can enable schools conduct CAP smoothly. However, it is the capacity building of teachers and their willingness to experiment is what forms the prerequisite for its success.

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