

## **The Implementation of Project Citizen in Bolivian Schools: Perspectives from Three Teacher Educators**

**William Medina-Jerez\***

**Carolyn Taylor\*\***

**Carol Bryant\*\*\***

**University of Wyoming**

### **Abstract**

The central aim of the present paper is to examine, from the Social Studies, Modern Languages, and Science Education perspectives, the role of the Project Citizen initiative in school communities of Bolivia. To that end, Project Citizen in Bolivia, during its first three years of implementation will be discussed, followed by views from each field (Social Studies, Foreign Languages, and Science Education) regarding the effect of this educational approach in Bolivian schools. For this purpose, the four core values suggested by Robinson and Taylor (2007) will serve as a framework to explore student voice: 1. A conception of communication as dialogue, 2. The requirement for participation and democratic inclusivity, 3. The recognition that power relations are unequal and problematic, and 4. The possibility for change and transformation.

\* Dr. William Medina-Jerez, a Colombian native and Assistant Professor in the University of Wyoming's College of Education, teaches secondary science education courses. His research explores areas of science education for English language learners, science education in Less Developed Countries, and the field of ornithology.

\*\* Dr. Carolyn Taylor is an Assistant Professor in the College of Education. She teaches modern languages methodology, second language acquisition and learning theories. The focus of her research includes: exploring the cognitive, social and affective benefits of foreign language study; the impact of NCLB legislation on foreign language education; and foreign language teacher education.

\*\*\* Dr. Carol Bryant is an Associate Professor in the College of Education and co-director of the Wyoming Center for Civic Education. She teaches secondary social studies methods and curriculum studies at the University of Wyoming. Her research interests include the use of primary documents in teaching history, historical literacy, and cultures of origin.

## Introduction

A poster, prominently displayed at the 2007 Human Development Fair in downtown La Paz, Bolivia reads:

*“Mi Responsabilidad: Construir espacios de respeto con personas diferentes en edad, origen étnico, religión, orientación y gustos.”*

Paraphrased, it is my responsibility to live respectfully with persons who differ from me in age, origin, ethnicity, religion, orientation, and preferences. This fair raised awareness of issues of violence, discrimination, and intolerance. Early that day in November 2007, secondary students and their teachers from different provinces gathered at their assigned booths along the *El Prado* Avenue to showcase their Project Citizen portfolios. They wore school uniforms and were promptly organized by their sponsoring teachers to present their posters to the passing audience and international visitors. Their projects investigated socio-economic and environmental problems afflicting their communities.

This paper examines the role of the Project Citizen initiative in Bolivian schools and communities from the perspective of three teacher educators in the fields of science, social studies and modern languages. The authors will present an overview of Project Citizen, followed by a description of the socio-cultural context of Bolivia and an exploration of student voice in developing civic dispositions. Four core values suggested by Robinson and Taylor (2007) will serve as a framework for us to explore student voice:

1. A conception of communication as dialogue.
2. The requirement for participation and democratic inclusivity.
3. The recognition that power relations are unequal and problematic.
4. The possibility for change and transformation.

## Project Citizen in Bolivia

Project Citizen, administered by the Center for Civic Education, is designed to enable young people to accept the rights and responsibilities of citizenship. It helps students learn to express their opinions, decide which level of government and which agency is most appropriate for dealing with problems they identify, and influence policy decisions at that level. Students work with each other and with teachers and adult volunteers as they identify a problem to study, gather information, examine solutions, develop public policy positions, and create action plans.

Project Citizen in Bolivia is in its fourth year of implementation. It is a cross-collaborative curricular initiative between Bolivian Educators for Democracy and the Wyoming/Bolivia Partnership under the auspices of Civitas International. It has involved the participation of over 3,000 students representing 43 schools located in four different Bolivian municipalities. In Bolivian Project Citizen schools, students work under the guidance of trained teachers in projects that target problems affecting their local community and that require skills from different disciplines in their design and implementation. Learning outcomes from this educational approach show that Bolivian students not only exhibit leadership skills beyond their school walls, they are also

mastering the content from different subjects (e.g., mathematics, science, and social studies) as they execute an inquiry-based process to solve real-life problems in their communities.

Students participating in Project Citizen are guided and encouraged by a Project Citizen-trained teacher to understand the problems in their communities, and most importantly, to learn about the possible solutions for those problems. According to Stimmann-Branson (1999), Project Citizen “demonstrates to them that government of, by, and for the people is not just a slogan. Government of, by, and for the people is obtainable, if citizens acquire the knowledge, use their skills, and have the will to effect change” (p. 6). Many of the projects presented during the Human Development Fair day in La Paz dealt with respect, fairness, and environmental concerns. These are issues Bolivian students had identified as relevant to them and their communities.

During our visits to Bolivia, we, the researchers, met with a cadre of Project Citizen-trained teachers and other educators. These meetings took place in various schools and buildings in downtown La Paz. Seated on sturdy wooden chairs arranged in a horseshoe formation, we listened first to a number of welcoming speeches, then to their accounts of the power of Project Citizen in their various classrooms.

The educators involved in Project Citizen ranged in age from early-career teachers to seasoned veterans. At least three principals attended the meetings; the project director is also a former principal. There seemed to be a nearly equal balance of men and women, although two of the principals and the director were female. Most of the teachers with whom we interacted taught in either La Paz or neighboring El Alto, usually in public schools. Some taught in one school in the morning and another in the afternoon as a source of additional income.

Training of Project Citizen teachers is generally conducted after school, or over an extended weekend in which participants work through all the stages of assembling a portfolio similar to the ones they will teach their students to assemble. Portfolios include: identifying a problem that can be addressed through public policy, possible alternatives, proposed policy, and action plan. Such a training process better prepares teachers to anticipate student difficulties, such as determining issues that can be addressed by public policy, or reasonable alternatives to the problem under investigation. Teachers who participate in intensive Project Citizen training often become trainers themselves.

### **Positioning the Researchers: Perspectives from Three Teacher Educators**

The present paper relates the findings of case studies conducted by three teacher educators from the fields of science, social studies, and modern languages who explored Project Citizen as a tool to empower participating Bolivian students in effectuating positive change in the schools they attend and the communities in which they live. A case study allows researchers to “explore a single phenomenon bounded by time and activity and collect detailed information by using a variety of procedures during a sustained period of time” (Creswell, 1994, p. 12). This investigation came about because, to date, there is a paucity of civic education research in Bolivia. The researchers observed classrooms and Project Citizen presentations, interviewed

participating students and their teachers, and served as participant observers of Project Citizen training from 2006 to the present.

### *Insights from a Social Studies Teacher Educator*

As a social studies teacher educator, teaching pre-service teachers to develop in their students the critical thinking skills and reasoning necessary to become informed citizens is part of my professional obligation. As part of my service to education in the state of Wyoming, and, out of conviction that Project Citizen is a viable program for introducing students to participatory civic engagement, I have served as a judge at Project Citizen showcases, have taught the program to my pre-service students, and have even served as a keynote speaker at the statewide showcase.

Three years ago I accompanied a delegation of teachers and policy makers to Bolivia, where we met with our Bolivian partners in the Civitas International program. We visited urban and rural schools, observing student projects. We also met with teachers and policy makers, including education officials and members of the Bolivian Congress. Our purpose was to support and learn from the work of our Project Citizen colleagues. Although I speak almost no Spanish and depended upon interpreters while watching student presentations, I was struck by both the similarities and differences between their projects and those I had seen in the U.S.

In Wyoming, I had seen student presentations on such topics as school safety, bully-proofing, the need for a recreation center in an isolated community, and proposals for a consistent school discipline policies. In Bolivia, the projects also centered on safety issues, such as the need for school buses so that students could reach school physically and verbally unmolested, the need for protection from harassment and petty theft as students walked to and from school, the need for electricity in a isolated community, and the desire for respect from teachers and parents. Although I do not want to take away from the importance of the problems the Wyoming students identified, I feel that there was a significant difference in urgency and intensity between their projects and those of the Bolivian students.

As an educator, I have shared my perceptions of Project Citizen in Bolivia at conferences and in my classroom, but I have also shared them with secondary school Wyoming Project Citizen participants, hoping that awareness of similar, shared problems might broaden the perspectives of those students.

### *Insights from a Science Teacher Educator*

I have been a member of the Wyoming-Bolivia partnership for the last three years. During this time, I have attended student presentations both in Bolivia and Wyoming, visited Bolivian schools where the Project Citizen curriculum is being implemented, and also served as translator during Project Citizen workshops offered in Bolivia and Wyoming. As a faculty member in a science teacher preparation program, I started exposing my pre-service science teachers to the Project Citizen curriculum as an instructional model they consider for their future interactions in science classrooms. Repeated calls from international science education standards continue to encourage science teachers to promote learning experiences that support



scientific literacy in their classrooms. These reforms suggest cross curricular connections as a way to achieve this goal.

From the science education perspective, there are strong resemblances between the Project Citizen instructional approach and learning science from an inquiry-oriented perspective. In both learning contexts, students reach a consensus on a researchable question they deem worth investigating; learners also gather background information that may help them frame their action plans (experiments). In both cases students also go through continuous deliberation processes that allow them to refine their understanding of the phenomenon under investigation; having a conceptual understanding of the circumstances (variables) surrounding the occurrence of the phenomenon, learners used evidence to propose and defend their explanations in light of alternative explanations.

Based on my interest in the effectiveness of this curriculum, I have begun using it as an instructional model in my environmental and science education courses for pre-service teachers. The first experience took place in the spring semester of 2009 when I engaged my students in a semester-long project in which they were exposed to the same hurdles and success high school students experience when they execute Project Citizen projects. From my students' feedback, I envision an increase in the science-social studies connection that may yield a positive alternative for the teaching and learning of science.

As a Hispanic having experienced myriad learning and teaching environments in my home country, I feel deeply connected with the realities of the Bolivian educational system. I am committed to share my skills as an educator and researcher to better provide my college students, the Bolivian students, and their teachers with opportunities to learn together which may result in significant changes in their lives as learners and teachers of science.

### ***Insights from a Modern Languages Teacher Educator***

In November 2008, representatives from the Wyoming-Bolivia Partnership, University of Wyoming College of Education, *Instituto Normal Superior Simón Bolívar* and *Educadores para la Democracia* signed a memorandum of agreement to pursue the following principal goals:

1. to enhance multi-disciplinary collaboration in the preparation of pre-service teachers;
2. to support the Spanish and English language proficiency and cultural knowledge of Bolivia and Wyoming on the part of student and faculty participants; and
3. to promote and examine the civic engagement of educators in the context of Project Citizen and service learning projects.

From the perspective of a modern languages teacher educator responsible for preparing future Spanish, French and German secondary teachers, my participation in Project Citizen in Bolivia stems, in part, from my desire to work toward accomplishing the aforementioned goals set forth in the memorandum of agreement. Primarily, I hope to create rich cross-cultural, Spanish language and Hispanic cultural

learning experiences for my pre-service Spanish teachers through participation in home stays with Bolivian families and teaching internships in Bolivian schools. In turn, I hope to make possible similar experiences for my students' Bolivian peers who are pre-service English-as-a-Second-Language teachers at the *Instituto Normal Superior Simón Bolívar*. As future language educators, pre-service teachers must have a strong command of the language they will teach and culturally-rich first-hand experiences living in various countries where their target language is spoken.

So it was with an eye on how my involvement with Project Citizen in Bolivian schools could benefit my own students that I ventured forth into learning as much as I could about the Bolivian people, their languages and cultures against the backdrop of Project Citizen. Being bilingual in English and French, I was able to understand a fair amount of Spanish while in Bolivia. To my frustration, however, I lacked the ability to communicate with Bolivians beyond simplistic conversations. This reaffirmed my desire to learn Spanish and to discover more about socio-cultural aspects of the Bolivian people, both of Hispanic and indigenous heritage.

Having discussed the role of Project Citizen in Bolivian schools and communities from a multidisciplinary teacher education perspective, it is important to provide an overview of the socio-political context of Bolivia and to highlight the research base relative to youth participation in public life. Thus, the next two sections will share insights about the Bolivian socio-political landscape and will underscore the role education can and should play as a vehicle for youth to identify, explore, and pursue solutions to problems they face in their daily lives and immediate social environments.

### **Socio-Political Context of Bolivia**

The history of Bolivia is marked by complex divisions in its society. Starting with the Spanish Conquest that caused cultural and social clashes, Bolivian communities as well as others in the region, went through unstable political times and saw their cultural heritage slip away. Some indigenous groups kept their way of being and living simply by virtue of their geographical location and social organization. In 1825, Bolivia won its independence from Spain but it did not bring about an automatic improvement of its citizens' living standards. Indigenous communities continued their revolution, especially in the countryside, while urban and rural life was characterized by growing socio-economic imbalances. Economically, Bolivia depended on mining resources, initially under the control of a few influential citizens who also shaped the political scenario of the nation. In 1952, the *Movimiento Revolucionario Nacionalista (MNR)* (Nationalist Revolutionary Movement) brought significant changes to the community. For example, Bolivians were no longer required to be literate to participate in public elections; mines were nationalized; and rural education gained the attention of the national government.

In her book, *The Citizen Factory*, Aurolyn Luykx (1999) refers to socio-cultural elements of the Bolivian society that make it difficult to conceptualize a unifying Bolivian nationalism. She notes that:

Bolivia is not well consolidated as a nation, and many see this as a primary cause of its underdevelopment. Some of its most characteristic features are

also its most formidable obstacles to “national unity”: linguistic diversity, a conflictive past, the persistence of indigenous cultures, a strong working-class consciousness, sharp social inequalities, and marked regional differences. These features define *lo boliviano* for many, but also tend to pull any notion of a unified “Bolivian society” away from a common center (p. 18).

Today regional confrontations among members of racial groups and political parties continue to threaten the stability of the Bolivian democracy. Although the current president has made efforts to bring pro-autonomy groups to the dialogue table, his efforts have been received with indifference and even dismissed by members of these communities. It seems then that a national unity potentially liberating Bolivia from internal confrontations may be far away from realization; instead, regional allegiances prevail over a unifying Bolivian sentiment.

The traditional notion that foreigners may have about Bolivia focuses on “media portrayals of the cocaine trade and a vague awareness of Indians and llamas” (Luykx, 1999. p. xi), and more recently, on political tensions with the United States that are linked to internal outbursts of violence in the northern states. Currently, ambassadors of both countries have been removed until political relationships get reestablished. Bolivia is much more; it is a diverse and culturally rich multi-ethnic and a multi-lingual country. While 60% of the people speak Spanish, since 1999 the government has also recognized Quechua, Aymara, and Guaraní, and over 33 other indigenous languages. This country also has a great geographical diversity, including the Andes Mountains, the *altiplano* (Plateau region), the *pampas* (plains), and the Amazon Basin jungle.

In a country of great needs and great potential, substantial socio-economic disproportions place a burden on most citizens who wage a daily struggle to survive (AIN, 2007). Bolivia still maintains one of the highest poverty rates in Latin America. Taking into account income rates, 63 percent of Bolivians are poor, an indicator that is well above that of the region, which is 36 percent (Contreras & Talavera-Simoni, 2003). Much of the social division has been the product of the distance separating the poor indigenous majority and the elite *criollo* minority, and the small middle class *mestizo* group in between, aligning, depending on the circumstances, with either of the first two groups (Luykx, 1999).

In terms of education, there are disparities between urban and rural populations. For instance, while the 2001 illiteracy rate for urban males was 2.5 percent, it was four times greater for urban women (10.1 percent) and 15 times greater for rural women (37.9 percent) (Contreras & Talavera-Simoni, 2003). By the early 1990s, The World Bank described the Bolivian education system as (1) suffering from a weak administration, (2) excluding the primary beneficiaries from the decision making processes, (3) having a poor coverage and quality, (4) practicing an inappropriate management of resources for public education, and (5) dealing with obstacles for educational attainment (i.e., teacher preparation, attention to non-speaking Spanish populations) (Contreras & Talavera-Simoni, 2003).

By 1994, the Education Reform Law came into place. It was an effort to address the aforementioned deficiencies in the education system of the country. The

reform introduced a constructivist approach centered on active learning, bilingual and intercultural education, a new grade level structure, testing to measure academic achievement in the 12,000 schools of the education system, and the expansion of the teaching profession to practitioners in other professional fields.

Having highlighted the socio-political context of Bolivia, let us now consider facets of youth participation in public life and examine the role of Project Citizen as a vehicle to empower students to find their voices through civic education.

### **Youth Participation in Public Life**

Phelan, Davidson and Cao (1991) define culture as “the norms, values, beliefs and attitudes that are characteristic of a group” (p. 228). These authors assume students’ everyday situations at home, school and within their social and personal contexts as occurrences of multiple worlds. Since these worlds are shaped by the attitudes, values, beliefs, expectations and actions that characterize family, school, and social settings, then it is likely that attitudes and contexts with accentuated regionalism, and social and cultural clashes will continue to disrupt the daily life activities of Bolivian citizens. Students, as any other citizens, will inherit and exercise those attitudes and expectations practiced at home and in their neighborhoods. This phenomenon poses a great challenge for schools, parents and community leaders. If a transformative agenda is to be implemented in schools, students must have the opportunity to participate in establishing democratic goals.

Since the habits of mind and dispositions that inform democratic actions are not automatically acquired, it often falls upon educators to instill and nurture habits that will inform future citizens’ decisions and participation in their local democratic scenarios (Pearson & Voke, 2003). From a constructivist educational perspective, open and participatory school scenarios in which students are major investors should be exercised, as they favor meaningful learning opportunities.

As pointed out by Stemmann-Branson (1999) “democracy is not a machine that would go of itself, but must be consciously reproduced, one generation after another” (p. 1). National and international education standards in the social studies, modern languages and science education programs aptly correspond with these goals; these documents have made repeated calls to practice and nurture civic dispositions (NRC, 1996; ACTFL 2006; and NCSS 1994). Likewise, other international organizations such as The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989; UN General Assembly Resolution 44/25) point out how important it is to allow children to play participative roles and express their sentiments with regard to issues affecting their immediate contexts (Robinson & Taylor, 2007). In 1999, the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) tested 120,000 students from 28 countries as part of the IEA Civic Education Study. Students aged 14 -17 responded to two instruments intended to explore how schools in those countries prepare young people to participate in democratic scenarios. The findings of the Civic Education Study indicate that: (1) there is a common core of topics across countries in civic education classes, (2) none of the participating countries are achieving the goals of civic education, (3) teacher preparation is an area of concern in some countries where there is a disjunction between the intended curriculum for civic education and the social and political reality in that society, and

finally (4) despite teachers' efforts to have students interested in participating in public policy and politics, students often show a dissatisfaction for these areas (Torney-Purta, Schwille, & Amadeo, 1999).

### **Students' Voices in Civic Education**

Preparation for participation in civil society is an ongoing theme in social studies education. One premise of Project Citizen is that "civic education is at its best when young people study problems and issues that are [an] important part of their lives in their schools and communities" (Patrick, Vontz, & Nixon, 2002, p. 102). The problems identified by the Bolivian students corresponded to the call in social studies education that supports attention to the common good, individual and multiple perspectives, and the application of knowledge, skills, and values to civic action (National Council for the Social Studies [NCSS], 1994). When Bolivian students shared their projects with Wyoming educators, it helped them reframe and consider their issues in more global terms. Given that the Wyoming delegation related that many of the problems that the students presented were shared in other parts of the world, students had the opportunity to learn to "initiate analysis of the interactions among states and nations and their cultural complexities as they respond to global events and changes" (NCSS, 1994, p. 29). Furthermore, they were encouraged to "think systematically about personal, national, and global decisions, interactions, and consequences, including addressing critical issues such as peace, human rights, trade, and global ecology" (NCSS, p. 29). Additionally, they learned more about power, governance, and authority in their countries.

Research addressing students' participation in school and public policy suggests that "student voice can serve as a catalyst for change in schools" (McGregor, 2007, p. 101). Likewise, Fielding (2004) supports the notion that students' active participation in and outside the school can serve as a form of assessment of civic dispositions and engagement. Posh (1999) found that students need to be given space and opportunities to become active participants in public scenarios where their voices and decisions could positively affect the physical and social contexts of their communities. Others (McGregor, 2007; Ruddock & Flutter, 2000) support this view, identifying students as 'social agents', or 'partners' in the democratic education initiatives.

In the following section we offer a sample of the kind of work being developed by a group of students from the *Armando Escobar Uria* High School in the city of *El Alto*, Bolivia.

#### ***A Solid Waste Management Project Citizen Project***

To document student involvement in Project Citizen, we followed the case of six eighth-grade students from the *Armando Escobar Uria* School of El Alto, Bolivia as they explored the problem of garbage disposal in their neighborhood. The students were mentored by Project Citizen-trained science and social studies teachers, and Educators for Democracy, a Bolivian non-profit organization.

A group of six female students took on the challenge of solving garbage disposal issues affecting their school community. Iveth, an eloquent fifteen-year-old

student and the leader of the committee confided that although they brainstormed other equally important issues (e. g., community safety and drugs) they believed they could contribute more by embarking on a project that could provide a good educational experience to all students that they could carry with them after school.

As their problem, students identified the accumulation of garbage and the presence of a dumping site in their neighborhood, drawing dogs and flies and emanating odors. The students compiled background information focusing on the three Rs (Recycle, Reduce, Reuse); they shared these ideas and findings during school assemblies and classroom visits with peers using posters, signs, displays, and drawings to gain support for their position. Next, they consulted with their local Office of Environmental Quality to learn about the legal aspects of waste management, gather printed materials, and receive training on how to select, sort, and dispose of recyclable materials. Students and teachers met biweekly during recess to track their progress.

In the second phase of the project, the students dealt with three alternative solutions to the problem: a community awareness campaign; the enforcement of the Bolivian Environmental Law 1333; and a solid waste management program which received good support from all students in the group. Before drafting their public policy statement, students, with the assistance of their social studies teacher, examined and discussed the Bolivian constitution to determine if their proposal was legal. Upon agreeing on the feasibility of their project, students prepared an action plan to carry the proposed policy to be implemented by a government agency. The action plan also included provisions for dealing with negative responses they might receive from government officials. For instance, they discussed potential ways to win the favor of government officials and address groups that might oppose the proposed program.

After several months of preparation, the students presented their project before the City Council of El Alto; they also shared it with Wyoming students via a Digital Video Conference at the American Embassy in La Paz. The oral presentation was intended to inform the audience of the importance of the problem, to explain and evaluate alternative policies, to discuss the group's proposed policy, and to share how they would garner support. Both the oral presentation and project portfolio was assessed by the teachers and members of the *Educadores para la Democracia* organization.

Several months elapsed after the public presentation without the students hearing back from the government official who promised to study and provide students with feedback regarding their proposal. Unfortunately, feedback never arrived. Nonetheless, students continued their efforts by implementing a recycling program within their own school community. The students set up three colors of recycling boxes around the school for paper and cardboard, plastic materials, and organic compost materials. Similar efforts were made in the surrounding neighborhoods to help eradicate the dumping sites in front of the school. The monies earned through recycling allowed the students to remodel the basketball court and purchase several new library books for their school. The students still hope to expand these efforts to other schools and market areas in their community.

### **Core Values in Understanding Student Voice in Civic Education**

Students' involvement and active participation in public life render many dividends that positively influence their own preparation as future citizens. Contemporary education movements are oriented toward the recognition that effective leadership skills exist among entities and organizations rather than resting with a few members of the community (e.g., community leaders) (McGregor, 2007). Educational practices like those embodied in Project Citizen encourage students to be active and valuable agents in effectuating changes in social networks that may extend beyond the school context. Robinson and Taylor (2007) have suggested a framework that may facilitate the understanding of students' voice as an ethical and moral practice in schools. This approach consists of four core values: (1) a conception of communication as dialogue, (2) the requirement for participation and democratic inclusivity, (3) the recognition that power relations are unequal and problematic, and (4) the possibility of change and transformation. Each core value will be discussed, in turn, within the scope of Project Citizen in Bolivian schools based on the researchers' experiences and perceptions.

#### *1. A conception of communication as dialogue*

Project Citizen in Bolivian schools provides an opportunity for students to exercise democratic values when they work in teams to address pressing issues in their local communities. Communication and oral skills are inherent to the process of identifying and documenting the problem and defending an action plan within the group in the classroom and later in other public scenarios. Project Citizen favors this disposition by means of guiding students through the process of problem solving. In Project Citizen classrooms, teacher-led discourses are replaced with student-led dialogues. Such dialogues are conducive to dynamic interactions that occur through "active listening in joint inquiry which is respectful, attentive and committed to positive change" (Fielding, 2004, p. 8). Likewise, in Project Citizen learning environments, students exercise Freire's (1968) view of communication as a dialogue with respect, a bilateral sharing of ideas in which students work toward the achievement of mutual goals without the imposition of an individual's point of view. Healthy interactions of this sort were cultivated during a two-year period that it took to develop the garbage disposal project. In addition to meeting with their teachers, students also visited the school surroundings to document community members' views on the issue under investigation.

Mr. Gomez, the science mentor teacher, attested to the positive interactions that developed throughout the project. He related, "I feel quite satisfied with the progress my students have made so far. Students have become more grounded; they freely interact with the school community at large and even go into the neighborhoods sharing their project and getting feedback and support from local residents." Mr. Gomez's comments on his students' progress gain special relevance if we consider cultural traditions dictating that students should exhibit a submissive and quiet attitude at home and school.

For students such as Laura, a young seventh-grade student from a neighboring school, Project Citizen became her opportunity to offset her difficult home life. After participating in a Project Citizen project on the humane treatment of animals, Laura

has become more comfortable and confident in her interactions at school. Mr. Orihuela, her mentor teacher, proudly pointed to these kinds of outcomes in his students.

During the course of its implementation, Project Citizen has been well received by many school districts and administrators, teachers, students and parents. As indicated by a Project Citizen mentor teacher, "It is also our belief that Project Citizen has brought Bolivian participating schools a formidable opportunity to help students play a leadership role in their communities; it makes them articulate their thoughts with other members of the community." These are outcomes that address the notion of school goals held by Torney-Purta (2003), whereby students attain "a meaningful citizen identity during adolescent years" (p. 269).

## *2. The requirement for participation and democratic inclusivity.*

The stability of democratic societies is based on their capacity to cultivate new generations' skills, attitudes, and knowledge for active citizenship (Torney-Purta, 2001). For Iveth and her colleagues from the environmental project group, speaking before each grade level in their school proved to be a true challenge. Despite receiving permission from the school principal to pursue their project, the environmental awareness campaign they mounted in school classrooms did not go as smoothly as they had envisioned. It was not initially supported by the student body; they even had to deal with contentious attitudes that made them reassess their plan and start over. Students' continuous support from and deliberations with their mentor teachers became an integral part of the teamwork, probably the best source of encouragement they could find to support their intentions to make their school a cleaner and healthier place.

In this scenario, Bolivian Project Citizen students are demonstrating, through their own community-based projects, that they can also be part of the decision-making process taking place in schools and at the government level as well. By publicly defending their projects, students have revealed voices that heretofore had not been heard. Moreover, attitudes and literacies have emerged from their own work in the study of socio-cultural and environmental problems in their neighborhoods. It is important to highlight here that despite the manifested commitment and exuberance of participating students, they do not enjoy the full support of all members of the school community, with the exception of social studies teachers. During their presentations, both students and the sponsoring teacher have stated their disappointment in failing to involve teachers from other subject areas in their school buildings.

A positive outcome resulting from the inclusive Project Citizen model is the fact that government agencies are now more willing to listen to student-generated projects and to consider students' action plans to solve issues within the purview of local and provincial governments. That students have already shared their ideas in public venues is, in and of itself, a great advancement in their preparation for participation in public life. Moreover, these efforts go a long way in validating an educational model that seeks to promote civic engagement within the schooling experience of Bolivian students.



*3. The recognition that power relations are unequal and problematic.*

Robinson and Taylor (2007) stated that student voice work begins with a realization that there is a differential in power relationships. Project Citizen encourages students to develop their voices in issues relative to their own experiences, particularly regarding school and community-related issues. The desire to have a voice was reflected in the range of projects students chose. Students presented their portfolios on issues ranging from a desire for increased respect of children and their opinions, to such issues as technology and sanitation in their villages and cities. In cases of community-action issues such as littering, students reported that they had had audiences with city officials or school authorities. Yet in other instances, the problems and solutions they proposed seemed more at the level of awareness building, particularly when they grappled with socio-cultural issues such as alcoholism and mental and physical abuse. In the latter case, it seemed that the verbalization and awareness of respect-related issues was a key first step in “coming to power” (Robinson & Taylor, 2007, p. 13). Supporting the premise that awareness was a critical first step was the recognition, repeated by students throughout the projects, that change takes time, that their action plan was a “first step,” or that a project that would take several years.

Students, however, also seemed aware that their voices could be projected outside the confines of community and school settings. When asked what they might do if policy makers failed to respond to the problems and solutions they proposed, some students said that they would involve the media. Whatever they imagined that might look like, they were aware that they had options for participating in conversations beyond their immediate environment. Although Iveth and her team mates finally gained the support of the student body in their school, it did not guarantee that they would also accomplish their goal at the local level after sharing their proposal with government officials. They were cognizant of the response they might receive from the authorities. As previously mentioned, the garbage disposal program proposed by the group of students was not well received by the local agency dealing with this type of issue. Anticipating this feedback, Iveth and her friends decided to make adjustments to rendering the project doable at the school level. While the students re-oriented their project, they continued contacting public officials trying to get the promised assistance they were offered during the project presentation at the American Embassy. Once again, students were left with no answer to their petitions.

Although it is still premature to determine the overall effectiveness of Project Citizen in empowering Bolivian students to participate in public life—the same students have declared that their project proposals need time and resources to come to fruition—there are assumptions that cannot escape from consideration. It is the recognition that “power inhabits all processes of social communication and that different social groups have differential access to, and in some cases privileged access to, forms of communicative and institutional power not equally available to all” (Robinson & Taylor, 2007, p. 12).

If a transformative agenda, which is at the core of Project Citizen, is to be pursued by youth groups, then it is of paramount importance for educators and community organizations to attend to the possibilities as well as the barriers that students may encounter along the way. It must be acknowledged that tacit relations

established at all levels in society, and treaties to function for the benefit of private interests, may hinder, to some degree, students' participation in public and political debates. These features may go undetected by students as they work toward the solution of a problem that involves power relations.

Subtle, but pervasive schooling practices that illustrate this point are found in classroom settings. It is here that students begin to assume their future roles and where their relationships with other community members are shaped by forces of invisible entities. For instance, from a science education perspective, the debate revolves around whether to embrace Western Modern Science (WMS) or local or 'ethnic' science as the guiding force of instruction in science classrooms around the world (Medina-Jerez, 2007).

#### *4. The Possibility of Change and Transformation*

Several projects presented in the showcase during the Human Development Fair revolved around human-to-human and human-to-land interactions, as reported by a member of the planning committee. Students took full advantage of this opportunity to, "make visible those concerns in their school communities and promote actions that may contribute to their solution." As previously mentioned, any prediction about the future of the students' projects would be inaccurate since most of the project proposals will require time and government intervention, which is subject to pre-conceived agendas. Yet, in other cases, the outcomes will be known only after action plans have been implemented over a given period of time. Nevertheless, there are some questions observers may pose: What is the future of students' work after the public defense of their Project Citizen portfolios? What will happen with the information students have collected and presented to the public? Will students be given the needed attention and support in order to execute their action plans? In Robinson and Taylor's (2007) view, "when pupils' opinions are genuinely sought and when pupils are an 'initiating force in an inquiry process; it is likely that pupil voice work will lead to changes which will enhance pupils' experience of schooling" (p. 14). In the case of the Bolivian students participating in Project Citizen, recent outcomes help us to confirm that Project Citizen does positively affect students' performance because (1) of the nature of the targeted problems are related to the interests and needs of secondary students across the globe, (2) the learning outcomes that result from its implementation show gains in students' citizenship skills, and (3) the problems students solve in their communities require that they practice skills that can be reinforced in different school subjects such as science, social studies, mathematics, and communication (Stimman Branson, 1999).

The National Council for the Social Studies (1994) cites a number of persistent issues and dilemmas in a democratic society that are relevant to the public policy problems presented by the Bolivian students. Represented in the students' portfolios are such issues as individual rights/public safety and national/state/local community control. One issue characteristic of public policy problems is the conversation surrounding community justice. "Community justice, in its traditional form in indigenous Andean villages... emphasizes reconciliation and rehabilitation" involving "re-education of community members who violate collective norms and rules, and the reincorporation of these offenders back into the community" (Goldstein, 2008). Community justice is based on ancient practices that depend on three rules:

Don't Steal; Don't Lie; and Don't be Lazy. Practiced fairly, it ensures that problems are handled expediently and at the local level where they occur.

Students attending the Human Development Fair described the practice differently, citing vigilante practices in regard to theft. They explained that apprehended thieves were often beaten or hanged. They saw the problem as exacerbated by lack of control by the police, lack of control of immigration, corruption, and a lack of respect for human rights. Given that community justice has historically been pervasive in rural and indigenous cultures, it was noteworthy that students from both urban and rural schools presented it as a problem. The former may reflect the migration of people from the countryside into the populated areas of La Paz and El Alto.

The students' proposed solutions reflected their emerging understanding of the importance of Bolivia's Constitution and of the rights for all people. While government leadership has suggested that a revised Constitution reassert the legal practice of community (or communal) justice in indigenous areas, students seemed more concerned about the rights of all people. They supported such actions as local control by communities of police academies, economic incentives to alleviate poverty, and even whistles to alert others in the event of theft. The fact that community justice is an issue addressed in the students' portfolios may also indicate a tug between traditional and progressive views and may signal the potential for future social change.

Recent developments in international assessment initiatives (e. g., IEA Civic Education study) have produced a great sense of confidence among public officials, educators and citizenry from Latin American countries who have joined conversations at the local and national levels to discuss what they see as the true meaning of democracy in their communities (Reimers, 2007). These kinds of actions intersect the educational reform taking place in various Latin American countries, and with it, a germane opportunity to embrace initiatives such as Project Citizen that intend to provide students and citizens with the needed skills and attitudes to participate in public life in their communities. Nevertheless, sustaining these changes in school classrooms also requires embracing and supporting educational change to support teachers' key roles in mentoring cohorts of students in their institutions. This recommendation is offered as a cautionary note in light of the instability that characterizes educational systems in Latin America with the advent of each presidential period (Torres, 2000).

Currently, the environmental project carried out by Iveth and her teammates is in its second year of implementation at the school level. Group members express their satisfaction to see how well the environmental campaign is working in their school. Leticia, another member of the environmental project describes with pride what she believes is a great accomplishment:

Right now students deposit recyclable materials in the right containers, they [containers] are not vandalized...the garbage dumping site in front of the school is gone! It was because the students took the campaign home so they helped eradicate this problem just by sharing at home the school campaign...I did not even know about recycling, I used to throw garbage anywhere, but

now I realize that it is possible. I even practice these measures [recycle, reduce, reuse] at home.

After such a success in school, Iveth, Leticia, Claudia, Jessica, and Judith plan to expand their campaign to other schools in the city. They also intend to target the 'Satellite Market' which they think is a major source of solid waste in their community.

### **Future Research**

A "so-what" question arises with student empowerment and with Project Citizen: Do the skills and dispositions brought to awareness in one school year or one project carry over into future issues of investigation? A longitudinal study of students' civic dispositions and involvement would add much to the discussion of student voice and practices that lead to student empowerment.

Another question is the one raised by Fielding (2001, in Robinson & Taylor, 2007, p. 11). How much of what is heard in Project Citizen presentations is emancipatory, building on "rich traditions of democratic renewal and transformation" and how much is "further entrenchment of existing assumptions and intentions using student or pupil voice as an additional mechanism of control?" Teasing out the variables integral to such a question and posing them in light of the processes of Project Citizen might shed more light on its effectiveness.

Our delegation observed the use of Project Citizen in public schools that were characterized by a lack of resources and poverty and heavily populated by indigenous students. According to Parker (2003), while it is critical for the marginalized and disenfranchised to learn and use the processes of democracy, it is equally critical for the privileged to understand and be involved in the civic process. Therefore, a study of how Project Citizen is taught and used in private schools would also be of value.

Finally, a line of investigation conspicuously absent in the research agenda until now is the incorporation of Project Citizen in pre-service teacher programs. It is our intention to establish, through the existing partnership with our Bolivian colleagues, an exchange program for pre-service teachers in the social studies, modern languages, and science education programs. The goal is to provide internship opportunities for pre-service teachers of both countries so they experience in real classroom scenarios the implementation of the Project Citizen model.

### **Conclusions**

Darder, Baltodano & Torres (2009) aptly relate, "As students develop the interest and ability to discuss and reflect on their lives, communities, and the broader world, questions inevitably arise as to how people change the world" (p. 317). The future of Project Citizen initiatives in school classrooms, particularly in Bolivia, will depend on how aspects of school culture (e.g., teacher involvement, backing from school administrators, etc.) either continue to support or neglect student-generated projects. By sustaining synergistic efforts among Wyoming Bolivia Partnership participants, the researchers hope that bilateral collaboration among Wyoming and Bolivian students, educators, and others will provide opportunities for participants to

further explore Project Citizen. In the end, the potential to benefit residents of both countries is substantial resulting in empowered, civic-minded youth who engage in measures to seek improvement of their quality of life in their respective societies.

### **Acknowledgements**

The authors would like to express their appreciation to the following entities for their support in conducting research in the context of Project Citizen: The Center for Civic Education: Civitas International; Educators for Democracy, La Paz, Bolivia; and The Wyoming Bolivia Partnership.

### **References**

- American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL). (2006). *Standards for Foreign Language Learning: Preparing for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*. Yonkers, NY: ACTFL, Inc.
- Andean Information Network (AIN). Retrieved from [http://ain-bolivia.org/index.php?option=com\\_frontpage&Itemid=1](http://ain-bolivia.org/index.php?option=com_frontpage&Itemid=1) 06/02/08.
- Contreras, M. E., & Talavera-Simoni, M. L. (2003). The Bolivian education reform 1992-2002: case studies in large-scale education reform. *The World Bank Education reform and management publication series*. Vol. II, No. 2.
- Creswell, J. (1994). *Research Design Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- Darder, A., Baltodano, M. P., Torres, R. D. (Eds.). (2009). *The Critical Pedagogy Reader*. New York: Routledge.
- Fielding, M. (2001). Beyond the rhetoric of student voice: new departures or new constraints in the transformation of the 21st century schooling? *Forum*, 43(2), 100-110.
- Fielding, M. (2004) 'New wave' student voice and the renewal of civic society. *London Review of Education*, 2(3), 197-217.
- Friere, P. (1968) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York, NY: Continuum.
- Goldstein, D. (2008). Community Justice in Bolivia: Beyond the Misconceptions. Retrieved from [http://www.democracyctr.org/blog/archives/2008\\_03\\_01\\_democracyctr\\_archive.html](http://www.democracyctr.org/blog/archives/2008_03_01_democracyctr_archive.html) 11/30/08.
- Luykx, A. (1999). *The Citizen Factory: Schooling and Cultural Production in Bolivia*. Albany, N.Y.: SUNY Press.

- McGregor, J. (2007). Recognizing student leadership: Schools and networks as sites of opportunities. *Improving Schools*, 10 (1), 86-101.
- Medina-Jerez, W. (2007). Conceptualizations of nature from science students in northeastern Colombia. *Bulletin of Science, Technology and Society*, 27(5), 377-385.
- National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS). (1994). *Expectations of Excellence: Curriculum Standards for Social Studies*. Silver Spring, MD: NCSS, Inc.
- National Research Council (NRC). (1996). *National Science Education Standards*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.
- Parker, W. (2003). *Teaching Democracy: Unity and Diversity in Public Life*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Patrick, J. J., Vontz, T. S., and Nixon, W. A. (2002). Issue-centered education for democracy through Project Citizen. In Parker, W. (Ed.), *Education for Democracy: Contexts, Curricula, Assessments* Greenwich, CT: Information Age Publishing.
- Pearson, S., & Voke, H. (2003). *Building and effective citizenry*. American Youth Policy Forum. Washington, D. C.
- Phelan, P., Davidson, A. and Cao, H. (1991) Students' multiple worlds: Negotiating the boundaries of family, peer and school culture. *Anthropology and Education Quarterly*, 22 (3), 224-250.
- Posch, P. (1999). The ecologization of schools and its implications for educational policy. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 29(3), 341-8.
- Reimers, F. (2007). Civic education when democracy is in flux: The impact of empirical research on policy and practice in Latin America. *Citizenship and Teacher Education*, 3(2), 1-17.
- Robinson, C., & Taylor, C. (2007). Theorizing student voice: values and perspectives. *Improving Schools*, 10 (1), 5-17.
- Ruddock, J. & Flutter, J. (2000). Pupil Participation and pupil perspective: Carving a new order of experience. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 30(1), 75-89.
- Stimmann-Branson, M (1999). Project Citizen: An introduction. Center for Civic Education: Articles, Papers and Speeches. Retrieved from [http://www.civiced.org/index.php?page=papers\\_speeches](http://www.civiced.org/index.php?page=papers_speeches) 05/31/08.
- Torney-Purta, J., Schwille, J., & Amadeo, J-A. (1999). The IEA Civic Education Study: Expectations and Achievements of Students in Thirty Countries. *ERIC Digest*, EDO-SO-1999-10. 2 pages.

- Torney-Purta, J. (2001). Civic knowledge, belief in democratic institutions, and civic engagement among 14-year-olds. *Prospects*, 31(3), 279–292.
- Torney-Purta, J. & Amadeo, J. (2003). A cross-national analysis of political and civic involvement among adolescents. [www.apsanet.org](http://www.apsanet.org) Retrieved 04/03/11
- Torney-Purta, J., Barber, C. Wilkenfield, B. & Homana, G. (2008). Profiles of civic life skills among adolescents: Indicators for researchers, policymakers, and the public. *Child Indicators Research*, 1(1), 86-106.
- Torres, R. M. (2000). From agents of reform to subjects of change: The teaching crossroads in Latin America. *Prospects*, 30(2), 256-273.