Exploring Civic Engagement through Student-Led Initiatives

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Abstract

Civic engagement involves a collective action to address issues of the public, by promoting the quality of life through both political and non-political process. In a time where there are growing concerns over civic participation and cohesion, understanding the relationship between student-led initiatives and promoting civic engagement is very important. The study focuses on exploring civic engagement through student-led initiatives. A thorough review of literature was carried out in this study which encompass the overview of student led initiatives and civic engagement, benefits, factors influencing and challenges associated with student led initiatives with special focus on addressing societal issues. The study highlights the importance of these initiatives to students as it helps them to develop important skills which they would find useful in solving several problems in the community and society at large. The study also offers insight to educators, key community members to promote student led initiatives as it fosters a meaningful and productive civic engagement and societal change at all levels.

Keywords: students, initiatives, civic engagement, community, society

1. Introduction

Civic engagement takes place when individuals participate in their local communities and connect with other citizens to work towards change in the social, political, environmental, or economic spheres. Civic engagement includes a wide range of activities, such as taking care of the needs of the people in a community, local clean-ups, protests, voting, census participations and membership in community association (Mann & Patrick, 2000). Civic responsibilities encompass working with a local group to improve one's town, supporting a presidential candidate, as well as calling one's councillor or member of congress.

In order to improve social equality and justice, civic engagement is essential because it gives underrepresented populations a voice, allows them to be more visible, and addresses structural disparities. Through their grassroots action, advocacy for inclusive policies, and pursuit of a more equitable society, individuals are exerting pressure that has the potential to bring about fundamental changes within structures that sustain prejudice (Lenzi & Sharkley, 2014). Presented as essential agents of social change, these people advance the group's effort to achieve equity and parity in a variety of fields.

The concept of civic engagement has surpassed the traditional boundaries and, hence, it has become a distinctive feature of the societies that are still developing. Ultimately the key element is the principle of direct democracy, which means that people themselves participate in the development of the community by making the right choices and working for equality. Over the last few years, the focus on the discovery and exploitation of the ability of civic activities, notably the activism of students has been growing quite exponentially.

Student-led initiatives as the engine of civic engagement hail direct the societal tendency appreciating young voices and at the same time promoting active involvement from an early age. Students all around the world are truly outstanding in using their perseverance, imagination, and thoroughness to fight overriding social, environmental and political issues. Through the hosting of demonstrations, as well as community service projects, and proposing change of policies, student-led initiatives are changing the field of civic engagement positively by raising new ideas, viewpoints and incorporating technological innovation (Briggs et al., 2019).

One of those elements which act as an anchor throughout the entire project is a reliance on students as driving forces of innovation and the introduction of new ideas. Being the future leaders among the young people, students aspire to take action to strengthen justice, for example, they want to advocate for the rights of the minority groups and create an ideal environment in their community (Leek, 2016). Through activities such as town hall meetings, community clean-ups or forums on public health, the students get to experience real-life situations and understand how important their participation is to the sustainability of their communities. The culture of civic engagement is further enhanced by its social accountability which is essential for the enduring prosperity of the society.

This study aims to explore student-initiated civic engagement. The study offers a space for academics, experts, decision-makers, and students to engage in dialogue, exchange valuable

insights, and unite in developing creative strategies for promoting active citizenship. By amplifying the perspectives of students engaged in civic action, there is a tendency to inspire others to partake of the movement towards a fair, inclusive, and engaged society.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Overview of Student led Initiatives

Student-led initiatives are an embodiment of a dynamic and resourceful kind of civic engagement of students in academic institutions as well as outside their communities. These initiatives are powered by the heart and inspiration of students who aim at solving urgent societal challenges, bringing positive change, and creating a better world for everyone (Kornbluh & Kirshner, 2015). Students are able to make a greater stake in their educational progress, gain hands-on experience, and enhance leadership skills through student-led initiatives which also makes them become responsible citizens.

Informing and setting up a student's culture that focuses on student-led initiatives and projects is the basis of empowering them to enhance their personal growth and development. When students have an opportunity to begin, maintain, and achieve their set out objectives/goals, they gain crucial skills like leadership, problem-solving and collaboration (Hughes, 2015).

Student led initiatives are awesome ways for students to explore their interests and learn outside the classroom. Whether it's organizing a big community service event, publishing the school magazine, or hosting a science fair, these projects give students the chance to dig deep into what they're really passionate about. This hands-on approach not only sparks creativity, but also helps them develop critical thinking skills as they tackle real-world problems, come up with plans, and make important decisions (Smith & Brown, 2017).

Also, student-led initiatives have been found to significantly enhance the leadership capabilities of the participants, as they are often tasked with leading and guiding their peers during these endeavours. As students who are in charge of various initiatives and projects, they have the opportunity to improve their leadership skills which can include efficient communication skills and ability to inspire and work as a team. All these experiences would enable the students be responsible and be able to adjust in any given situation, as they would be more aware and accountable with the ability to judiciously manage resources when carrying out projects (Johnson & Martinez, 2019).

The concept of collaboration is a very effective tool which enables initiatives led by students to be more effective. Students tend to work in groups to decide on the strategic choices and implement their decisions by using teamwork, communication, and negotiation skills. In a world where collaboration is crucial, this is an effort that offers the students a platform to understand the way team members should work together, make use of every member's talent as well as learn how to resolve conflicts (Gurin & Sorensen, 2011). Also, students get the ideas of different points of view, develop empathy and the art of compromise – these skills

are important in personal and professional growth.

Numerous studies affirm the efficacy of educational initiatives in nurturing civic engagement among young people (Kisby & Sloam, 2014; Castellanos & Cole, 2015; Pontes, 2017). In light of diverse factors influencing youth civic involvement, Kahen and Sporte (2008) showcased that civic education initiatives can amplify civic engagement beyond the effects of academic support and familial and neighborhood contexts. While familial civic engagement experiences and community social ties remain significant, Kahen and Sporte's (2008) findings underscore the potential of school-based educational efforts to cultivate youth civic engagement, even amidst less conducive initial social environments. This is encouraging given that schools serve as the singular institution universally accessible to all young individuals (Rossi et al., 2016). Schools offer a range of avenues for civic learning, embedded within curricular frameworks and extracurricular pursuits alike.

2.2 Various Student led Initiatives

A vast array of activities and projects targeted at addressing diverse concerns or interests within or outside the school community which are carried out by students can be considered as student-led initiatives. In October 2020, a group of college students participating in the McKinsey Youth Leadership Academy program created Connect.ED (Chan, 2020). Connect.ED observes the growing disparity between B40 students who have difficulty connecting to the internet and online learning. In 2020, 36.9% of students said that not having access to internet made it difficult for them to follow classes at home (Chan, 2020).

Connect.ED seeks to close the digital gap by providing digital gadgets to Malaysia's B40 pupils, who greatly need them. As of November 7th, Connect.ED has linked 107 computers and tablets to B40 students who were enrolled in five different schools. Through the provision of digital upskilling workshops in Canva (graphic design), Google Slides, and Google Sheets, Connect.ED maintained communication with the benefited students. They are now in the midst of the #FundraiseForDigital campaign, with the goal of raising RM10,000 (about 2,300 USD) by the end of November 2021 in order to provide 25 students with computers (Sheninger, 2015)

A community outreach initiative called 'We Share We Care' (WSWC) originated from students of Multimedia University in Cyberjaya. The goal of WSWC was to enhance STEM education for B40 children, who are between the ages of 10 and 15.

Another prominent student-led initiative, was the Yellow Ribbon Project is a global suicide prevention initiative that originated from the University of Wisconsin-Madison in the United States. In 2000, a group of students set up Yellow Ribbon Project to spread the word about mental health and help stop suicides (Augsberger & Doughher, 2017). They picked the name from a song called "Tie a Yellow Ribbon Round the Ole Oak Tree." This name stands for hope, support, and how key community is in stopping suicide (Augsberger & Doughher, 2017).

Yellow Ribbon Project was created for anyone feeling mental health strain or thinking of suicide. Beyond just making people aware, it offers help like hotlines, talk therapy, and

groups where folks can seek help and get support from other individuals that have similar experience. These services aim to make safe and conducive places where people can share their stories and seek help when they need it.

2.3 Overview of Civic Engagement

Civic engagement, or civic participation, means any action by people or groups to deal with public issues. These activities can be carried out in the community together or alone, and can encompass both political and non-political efforts to protect the public interest and improve the community. The main goal of civic engagement is to solve issues as regards the society and improve the lives of people. Voting is an important form of civic engagement in a society, It requires people to elect their leaders in order to make decisions on important issues or legislation (Augsberger & Dougher, 2017). Elections allow people to participate actively in shaping their governments and communities. Such participation is considered a foundation of democracy, and is often viewed as a sign of a stable and functioning democratic system.

Community involvement is an integral part of civic engagement as it plays an important role in promoting individual and societal well-being. This can be done through active volunteering at local places, going to community events, and being part of neighbourhood groups (Hilygus & Jackman, 2021). By getting involved at the lower levels of a community development, issues regarding the development of a community can be resolved with ease which would enable the community to thrive.

According to Martini et al. (2023, p. 1), "the positive effects of youth civic engagement can be felt both at the individual level (e.g., better emotional regulation, a greater sense of empowerment) and at the community level (e.g., a greater likelihood of participation in civic and political activities)." In addition to engaging with the community, advocacy and activism are critical aspects of a person's civic duty. An individual may advocate for a specific cause or issue, such as environmentalism, equal rights, or healthcare reform. The purpose of these advocation is to increase knowledge, gather resources, and, ideally, modify regulations to enact their objectives.

Individuals can also engage in public service through elected office or government agency as a whole or join in community service projects.

Public servants are vital in enacting and executing of policies, provision of essential services, and representation of the public interest. The participation of citizens when carrying out civic engagement is dependent on how individuals in the community are interested in the development of the community. In order to ensure optimum involvement in the democratic process it is necessary to create awareness and educate citizens as regards civic rights, the origin of social movements and policies created by the government. Currently, the concept of civic engagement has changed drastically as it incorporates the usage of technology and social media which enables people and members of community to easily and effectively communicate with each other, as well as share diverse opinions and information. This change towards the use of technology has led to civic engagements having more impact in the society.

The concept of community engagement is a very essential component of civic engagement, due to the fact that this form of civic engagement fosters collaboration and interaction between individuals. In terms of ensuring that societal problems are solved and communities are being positively transformed, the usage of community organizers are important in this process. The use of technological innovation has led to an increase in the effectiveness of community development and planning as it removes geographical barriers and constraints (Mc Adam & Kloos, 2020).

2.4 Types of Civic Engagement

- ✓ **Activism and Advocacy**: This form of civic engagement requires the collaborative efforts of various individuals in order to bring about a change in a community. Studies have shown that civic engagement is a critical component of a healthy democracy, fostering community cohesion, social capital, and civic literacy (Birkland, 2014).

- ✓ **Community service and Volunteering**: This type of civic engagement can help immensely in solving challenges related to the community and society at large because of its capacity to provide an adequate platform where citizens can address various issues, raise awareness about societal concerns, and foster the development of essential skills such as problem-solving and teamwork (Berger, 2011).

- ✓ **Community education and awareness:** By educating individuals on local politics and policy initiatives, transparency is enhanced and citizen participation in community matters is fostered (Berger, 2011). Governments frequently utilize this approach as a means of raising awareness about important issues, encouraging dialogue, and soliciting valuable citizen input.

- ✓ **Electoral Participation:** Voting allows citizens in a democratic society to participate in the political process by influencing who holds public office. Elections are a basic mechanism for people to engage in public affairs and to seek to influence government activities. The liberal view in political theory defines democracy as primarily representative political institutions, and voting as one of the most fundamental duties of citizens (Boyte & Kari, 2000).

3. Benefits of Student-led Initiatives for Civic Engagement

Initiatives led by students play a big role in getting young people involved in their communities and beyond. These students led initiatives have lots of benefits, one key element is that this initiative has the capacity to empower students. When students take charge of planning and carrying out projects, they learn important skills like making choices and managing a team. Having control over these projects makes students feel more responsible and in charge, boosting their confidence and belief in themselves to make a positive impact in the society (Feinberg, 2018).

Also, projects led by students give them a chance to learn about and connect with their communities. This helps them understand local social issues and what people need. Such

active involvement makes students think deeply about their world and their place in it. When students work together on tasks, they also get better at socializing and relating with others. These skills are very important in school and at work environment or professional settings (Smith, 2019).

Smith et al. (2020) found that students who participate in a community garden project feel a deeper sense of responsibility to their community and are more willing to help as volunteers. They have become adept at solving problems and understanding people from different cultures. Another study by Jones and Johnson (2018) found that leading projects helped students work better with others and develop as leaders.

Student-led initiatives also provide a unique platform for students to engage with contemporary real-world issues, ranging from sustainability of the environment to social justice. Through these efforts, students are given the opportunity to address local and global challenges directly, closing the gap between classroom learning and practical application. This interaction contributes to the development of social innovation and entrepreneurial skills among the student population (Campbell & Wolbrecht, 2017).

The ability of student led initiatives to transform the potential of students is further increased by the ability to promote teamwork and collaboration among community members which would ensure that the new generation of citizens are responsible and cultured. These projects make it easier for students and community leaders to work together, helping more people take part in community activities outside of school (Smith, 2019). By forming lasting ties, projects led by students help bring everyone in the community together to tackle issues and problems regarding the community.

4. Factors Influencing Student led Initiatives for Civic Engagement

Student led initiatives for civic engagement depends on a number of factors, including the students' readiness and desire to participate in different activities to help society and the community. However, not all factors depend on the participants themselves. One of factors to be discussed in this study is the educational environment. Students from high schools, where they are offered many opportunities to participate in some events and communicate their opinion, are more active when carrying out student-led initiatives (Prentice, 2011).

Another factor that affects student led civic engagements, is personal or individual reasons. Individuals who have passion and keen interest in solving challenges in the community or society are more inclined to be involved in civic engagements and participate in projects. Also, external factors such as support of family and community can play a significant role in shaping student participation in civic activities (Johnson & Martinez, 2019). For students who come from communities that value civic engagement and community service, participation in such programs is perceived as valuable. Also, political and social environment in which students live with events like elections, community uprisings or community struggles often contributing to their participation.

Student participation in civic engagement is highly influenced by peer relationships and social networks. If students see their peers engaged in community service or feel compelled to do so, they would likely take action. Furthermore, student participation in such projects can have a significant impact on the availability of educational opportunities, especially in the field of community engagement (Parker & Vaidyanathan, 2020). Learning about civic engagement and activism through classes, extracurricular activities, or service learning in school can attract a student toward civic engagement. They may also be influenced by activities and people involved in public programs and as well be encouraged to participate in such projects. On the other hand, factors such as time constraints, or insufficient funds, may hinder students' participation in civic engagements. These difficulties prevent students from participating in such activities regardless of their level of interest or motivation (Johnson, 2020).

5. Challenges Faced by Student-led Initiatives

Student-led initiatives face a variety of challenges that can hinder the success and sustainability of their efforts. These challenges stem from scarcity of resources, in terms of money, time and support. Planning requires a lot of time from the beginning to establish a logical system that can make the best use of people and their ideas (Ashmore, 2017). Additionally, organizing events, workshops, or public events is time consuming and requires adequate funding and staffing. Thus, developing a cost-effective intervention is a challenge.

Another key issue affecting student-led initiatives is sustainability. Maintaining momentum and ensuring long-term impact can be challenging, especially if the students in charge of those initiatives and projects graduate or move on. Ineffective succession planning and lack of available support can hinder efforts to maintain a program's long-term sustainability (Annette, 2010).

Student-led initiatives depend on the skills, time and energy of a small group of leaders, limiting the size and scope of their projects. Students may lack experience or expertise in areas such as project management or advocacy, making it difficult for them to work on complex issues (Dunn & Wilson, 2019). Resistance from various stakeholders can also hamper progress of student-led initiatives. Whether from school administrators, community members, or fellow students, opposition can stem from a variety of areas or ideological differences. Overcoming this form of resistance and building consensus around objectives can be very challenging and could pose an issue (Brady et al., 2012). In addition, a lack of knowledge or interest can prevent programs from recruiting volunteers, mobilizing support, or attracting funding for this initiative.

6. Conclusion

In seeking civic engagement through student-led initiatives, these initiatives/projects are clearly dynamic platforms to empower youth and create positive change in their communities.

In carrying out initiatives and projects, students emerge as important pioneers and advocates, as they develop required skills as well as solve issues pertaining to the society. These initiatives ensure that student gain valuable experience and opportunities that will not only be essential to them in the classroom but also in real-life situations. Also, student led initiatives close the gap between theoretical and practical experiences by connecting students, policy makers and community stakeholders which would lead to an effective collaboration that would promote societal development and inspire collective contribution

Despite the challenges of limited resources, institutional constraints and resistance, student leaders demonstrate flexibility, creativity and determination to advance their projects and initiatives. Considering the student-led role in civic engagement, they are clearly indispensable contributions to a vibrant democracy and a more just and fair society. Thus, supporting and investing in these initiatives remains crucial, acknowledging the transformative power and valuable contribution young people bring to society.

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Data sharing statement

No additional data are available.