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Year Four Evaluation of Public Achievement, 2002-2003 Examining Young People's Experience of Public Achievement

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The purpose of this evaluation was to examine young people's citizen experiences in Public Achievement (PA). This was done by visiting seven "classic" sites in Minnesota and Greater Kansas City, interviewing eighty-four students in groups and individually.¹ Transcripts of these meetings are used in this report.

This report is divided into new and cumulative findings. New findings are those that found for the first time or were present before but this time are more pronounced. Cumulative findings repeat themes present over four years of evaluating Public Achievement.

Executive Summary

From our conversations with participants this year we found young people experienced PA as a place where they were efficacious, had a voice, became skillful, did meaningful work, and learned, but they do not describe this experience in political or "public work" language. Instead, PA is often described as a service program. This does not appear to change with multiple years of PA, nor did multiple years appear to have a cumulative effect on their learning (about citizenship, doing citizen, group work, etc.). At some sites, young people and school officials did describe PA as a taken-for-granted program in their school. In addition to these new

¹ "Classic" sites refer to the common PA organizational model, which takes place in K-12 schools during regular school hours. Teams of young people are organized around issues and work with adult coaches. Over the past few years "new" models have been implemented including: college students working as teams (e.g. MCTC), after-school programs (e.g. Eisenhower Middle), formal youth organizations (e.g. Girl's Project), self-contained classrooms with a teacher coaching multiple groups (e.g. Roseville) or cross-grade without coaches (e.g. Hartford). Moreover, international PA has been implemented in a number of new configurations. Some "new" models were evaluated last year (e.g. MCTC, Girl's Project). Future evaluations should be attentive to how these new models play out in practice over time. This will allow comparisons to the "classic" model, which may reveal how different structural constraints impact PA over time. Special attention should be paid to models where PA is integrated into regular curriculum (to test the hypothesis that one of the reasons PA "works" is that it is "not like school").

findings, two cumulative findings continued to be supported through our conversations with adult and youth participants, including: PA has inherent structural constraints; and when fully effective, PA works for all participants, especially first-year participants.

Our major recommendation is to encourage Public Achievement staff, supporters, and friends to formulate a political-structural response to the federal legislation “No Child Left Behind (NCLB),” because we are convinced that PA works for participants, especially those who are new to the initiative, but its effectiveness is often limited by time and other structural constraints found within the “classic” model of PA. While young people have ideas on how it could be a better experience, as do all involved adults, this may not matter, given the new focus on “high stakes” testing as required by NCLB. These constraints are likely to increase and school officials have expressed concern that learning opportunities like PA are unlikely to survive in this educational climate. A second recommendation is to field test and evaluate the accompany “Joining PA to Standards of Student Learning.”

New Findings

1. Youth Participant’s Experience of Public Achievement at “Classic” Sites.

Overall, we found that young people in PA experience themselves as:

- A. Efficacious—the common experience of “getting something done” in Public Achievement.
- B. Having a voice—the common experience of being listened to and taken seriously by other team members and by coaches, school administration, etc.
- C. Skillful—the common experience of learning public skills, especially public speaking, working with others, research, writing proposals and grants, etc.
- D. Doing meaningful work—the common experience that PA “mattered” and was “real.”
- E. Learning—the common experience of learning about a subject, learning how to work in a group, learning how to do public work and learning about themselves.

Clearly, PA is an important learning experience for young people and in these terms is valuable and effective. This is true despite the fact that most participants typically do not conceive of their PA experience in terms of “citizenship” or “politics,” and rarely use a robust notion of “public.”

Public Achievement provided an invitation and opportunity for young people to expand their everyday, small and public worlds and “to do something” for their school and, for a few participants, their “community:”

- *“It’s something where the student’s actually get to do what they want to do, and work with the community.”*
- *“You get to do things that you want to do to accomplish things in society.”*
- *“So, it’s actually teenagers making a difference in the world.”*

In Public Achievement they were allowed to state their ideas and not have to worry about being put down—they had a voice:

- *“It was a lot easier [to speak] because I didn’t know many of them, and if I messed up it’s not like they’re gonna laugh at me.”*
- *“It’s ok to speak what you want and get your ideas out there.”*
- *“I’m more willing to tell my ideas and stuff.”*
- *“I’m not afraid to take charge anymore. I used to be really scared what will people think about me, and now I’m like, who cares, this is what I want.”*
- *“I can talk about things that really mattered to me.”*

Participants described PA as a place where they worked on issues that really mattered to them and were “real” for them and their communities:

- *“I’m passionate for animals. And they’re just getting killed because they’re out there, it’s not fair.”*
- *“Like after he came in, we just kind of stared at each other, and looked at the facts about like how many house fires, or like how many injuries last year, and we kind of just stared in awe about how much we didn’t know about fireworks. And we’re like, if we don’t know that how’s the community gonna know either. Because a lot of them didn’t, and so, we go oh well, safety is always a big issue on everything, so that’d probably be a good one. It was.”*

Public Achievement was a place where they learned how to be efficacious in a group:

- *“Not all your ideas will get picked up and you have to use, respect other peoples’ ideas and stuff.”*
- *A good group is where “everybody participates and speaks up and says well, you know, you should do this...,” and “they work, we work together.”*
- *“But we got to the point where we’d throw ideas out there, and if someone didn’t like it they’d say what they want to do to change it, and then we’d make sure everybody would agree on it, and then we’d write it down.”*
- *“It made me know that like I can work with other people, and figure out stuff, and compromise with them along with my own schedule.”*

They told us that they had developed greater skill in public speaking, working with others, researching an issue, writing letters, and “getting stuff done:”

- *“We’re actually achieving something, we’re doing something.”*
- *“I’m a better speaker.”*
- *“I can make speeches better.”*
- *“I do know how to actually work with adults now.”*

However, only a very few participants name this work in political terms. Rather, the work they do within Public Achievement is often described in an individual service language, e.g. “I am helping others:”

- *“I can help everybody else.”*
- *“I want to be able to help them, and accomplish things for them, but while I’m helping my self.”*
- *“To help the community and stuff.”*

These quotes are the voices of young people. They don’t talk in the language of citizen and politics. Why is this? The simple, clear, and important answer is that they have not been taught these terms, nor have they been encouraged or supported in using these to make sense of their PA experience and themselves as citizens: In what language do they speak?

2. The Language of Their PA Experience

Young people typically described Public Achievement in three different ways (language-worlds): 1) As “service” or “volunteerism,” i.e. as a “way to help” their school or community by giving their time to school, community or community agencies 2) as personal development, and 3) as a way to show the (adult) world that they both care about public issues and are capable of making a difference.

PA is spoken about as service to/for, typically as a volunteer:

- *“You get to help more...”*
- *“You know that, even if people forget your name, or they don’t remember your group, you still, you did something for at least one person.”*
- *“Not just thinking about what could help you, like what could help your school, but what could help other people.”*
- *“At PA, I fell more like, I don’t know, I’m allowed to help.”*
- *“That’s what Public Achievement is about, about helping people.”*

To some, PA is talked about as an opportunity for personal development, now and for their future benefit:

- *“I mean you get to go out and see places that you’ve never seen before. I mean, you can see, I know a group [that] went to a museum once, the Children’s Museum. You just learn all this cool stuff that will help you with your life.”*
- *“You get to meet new people. Sometimes you can get tired of your old friends, and you want to meet new friends.”*
- *“It helps you in your future when you go to college and you say, I was in PA and I talked and I went to conferences and all that stuff.”*
- *“Like in PA, you can actually write down on your college resume.”*

A particularly important language world for talking about PA is as a way to teach and show adults who they were and what they could do—personal and group efficacy. In this way, the young people challenged adult perceptions and assumptions about their capability, competence, and commitment. This way to talking about PA was pronounced in schools where students thought that teachers and staff did not respect them, listen to them, or take them seriously:

- *“They thought it was really cool that a kid my age can speak with that much confidence.”*
- *“It’s where the kids get out there and they show that they can make a difference, despite what other people may think.”*
- *“The reason we think it makes it better is because, its, most people notice you do things now, after you show them.”*
- *“You’re kind of more like yourself, because you’re showing people that I can do this...”*

Remembering that most young people did not have or use a citizen/political language to describe, tell or discuss PA, some indeed did speak in that way:

- *“But I don’t think you’re a true citizen unless you go out in your community and change things that need to be changed, in your opinion, and go out and stand up for what you think is right, and that type of thing.”*
- *“It teaches you how to be a citizen and how to be an individual while being a member of society while still having your own separate voice.”*
- *“[Being a citizen means] like the, a member of the community, that is outgoing enough to have their side of um, a issue or problem heard.”*

In particular PA locations with particular coaches, good practice for “teaching” this language exists. These findings about language can (and we believe should) be read simply as diagnostic: These tell us about what has to be changed in coach training and supervision to insure that PA is experienced, understood, and spoken of in the living languages of citizen, politics, and civic engagement.

3. Multiple years in Public Achievement do not lead to cumulative learning

In our first evaluation report, we hypothesized that multi-year involvement in PA does not necessarily lead to cumulatively more powerful changes in young people. To test this we sampled students with multiple years experience in PA. The evidence was mixed. There were few indications that students applied to their later years what they had learned about projects or the public world from earlier PA experiences. Typically, students said that they had multiple years of the “same thing.” This may be due having multiple years of experience with coaches

that are usually new. Several students told us about how they “coached” their coaches. It may also be due to the fact that what happens in groups is not recorded and passed on to subsequent groups. This leads to a continual starting over and reproduction of the same projects:

- *I: So does PA ever get old?*
R: “Yeah. It does. After you like, last year, once we were in it for a while, and we were like towards after the new year, it kinda got boring, and just can we ever just have a week were it stops and you don’t have to go to it. Because it just got so frustrating because jobs weren’t getting done... And it was like, I thought Public Achievement was supposed to be a fun time where you got to do things.”

However, they could easily and skillfully articulate what was a good or a bad year, group and/or coach:

- *“[Our coach] doesn’t give [us] like a progress report or anything, its just like ok, you can set your own goals, you can do what you want, but I’m not gonna grade you on this. You can do whatever.”*
- *“It’s just that it’s us kids deciding what we want to do, and when we need a question, or when we need to ask a question, he answers it, but...it’s just that, he helps us with like permission forms and all that stuff, where we actually need a coach, but otherwise he just supervises us and makes sure we keep on task.”*
- *“If you think the coach has an idea that you just don’t think will work, you can say to him, you can say to him, this is stupid, and they can’t yell at you for it.”*
- *“[Last year they] didn’t like their coaches all that much, because they felt that the coaches got smart, and didn’t really respect them as they should. But our coaches, I think our coaches are pretty alright, like with our ideas and everything, they went along with it.”*
- *I: So you’ve had a lot of different coaches, so you can kinda compare them.*
R: “[When one isn’t listening,] it kinda hurts, cause you’re trying to get your issue across and then they just want to go off and be like just start talkin’ off the task, but then if like you try to say something, then they’ll get all off on you and it just makes you mad”.

We saw some skill transference in the area of group work where several students told stories of how they took on more leadership roles within their groups:

- *“We’re really different in PA, at least I am. Because I tend to talk more.”*
- *I: Yeah. So what’s it like being the veteran in the group?
R: Um, You know, you’re kind of like the person they look to, when the group leader gets stuck. Or like, the PA, the PA coach, is trying to get the group to think of something. You the one they look to, cause you already know what’s gonna happen. And I told them, ya’ll, ya’ll keep sticking with this consistently. You hit it week after week. I want to get something done, like our group did last year. You know, we went on field trip and up to the soup kitchen and stuff like that. Help people out. I was like, you all keep doing it, maybe I can get a field trip to go to other schools, you know what I’m saying. And you all can make an impact, just gotta keep doing it. Cause I was like, just me and the other dude, Andre? Me and him, we veterans, so we was telling them. Ya’ll can do it, ya’ll can make a difference. You just gotta stick to it, keep your minds on it.*

But this cannot be ascribed to PA alone. Many of these students’ particular perspective on leadership seemed to derive also from their experience in sports, school, church and other activities:

- *“I really don’t know what I learned from the group, really. Because I’ve been in the groups all the time, I’m always working in a group with somebody. I always end up doing something, like, I’m in the Community. I lead basically the whole (time?) because, some people, most people play around a lot, or they ain’t there, or they don’t like somebody, or they don’t know how to work together in a group. So most of the time, I’m just like, I’m always one to help somebody out or something. So I don’t really know what I’m learning from my PA group, cause I’m almost in a lot of groups. So, basically already working together with a whole lot of people, working better, and...”*

Obviously, multi-year PA too often becomes a succession of different noncontiguous and non-incremental projects. For deepened learning to occur over time, guided and sustained reflection is absolutely necessary. There are also other implications for program development.

4. PA is a project, even a “program”

The new finding here is that PA is experienced and understood by many young people as a set of “activities,” not as a movement or as something larger. It is experienced as a useful and effective way of learning, a way different than (regular) “school.” To young people as students, PA is like other school “programs”—a day/time/place specific opportunity—albeit, one which is good and fun, typically. Some of the bounce, spirit, and play of PA clearly is lost among many multi-year participants and at some sites. Moreover, at many of the sites we visited, PA is seen and organized in relatively isolated silos within the school. Even in schools with high levels of teacher and staff involvement, there is not much integration of PA outside of the weekly work. This reinforces the idea that PA is an “add-on” program.

5. PA is “taken for granted”

In our testing of the multiple-year hypothesis, we visited many long-term sites (e.g. St. Bernard’s, Humboldt, Dakota Meadows, Holy Cross, Eisenhower). There was a noted “flatness” there to the participants’ experiences, while at the same time, there was a sense that PA is taken for granted, as a part of everyday life at the school: PA has been institutionalized. In many ways this is a positive development, because students and teachers have the expectation that PA is “just part of the school.” At these schools there is less resistance to PA among non PA teachers and staff. However, such institutionalization tends to lessen the degree that PA is seen and experienced as something special or unique.

Summary and Conclusions

In the opinions and voices of young people, PA is indeed a meaningful experience, especially so to first time participants. Multi-year involvement, given current coaching skill and other site-based realities, does not in general lead to enhanced learning and mastery of language, meaning and skill.

Most of these findings can and should be read as clues for improvement. Much of what we learned can be traced to the nature and practices of schools (public and private, elementary to high school, small to large, etc.).

To almost all of the young people, PA works and they enjoy and benefit from it. They have ideas on how it could be a better experience, as do all involved adults, including ourselves. Yet everyone's ideas about improvement must be read in the context of the inherent constraints of the classic PA model and its implementation in schools.

Cumulative Findings

This is the fourth in a series of yearly evaluations of PA, each with its own focus and report. Here, we read across these reports to offer our current take on two topics—what makes PA hard to carry-out and what makes PA work, based on our total cumulative interviews with youth (282), coaches (204), teachers (25), principals (24), site coordinators (28), coach coordinators (11), and staff (16).

1. Classic PA has inherent structural constraints

Classic PA as grounded in the “Green Book” is constrained by the requirements of trained adult “coaches” who typically come from outside the school site and are college students. This simple fact has deep structural consequences for carrying out PA with issues for training, coordination, supervision, “quality control,” and the like, as detailed over the years by participants and in our earlier reports. This makes PA difficult to carry-out, but in no way challenges the validity of its conception.

Classic PA is done in schools and this is the largest single source and site of the difficulties in carrying it out. Schools are notoriously difficult work sites for innovative pedagogies and related practices, given how they are currently organized and managed. Any innovative philosophies and practices, which do not fit the classroom or “program” model rub against everyday practices, rules, procedures, policies, individual preferences, and whim. That PA has survived in schools without being distorted beyond recognition is remarkable; in this context, the finding that in some sites it is institutionalized and hence seen as “ordinary” and taken for granted should not shock. Rather, that it is not fully invisible, submerged, twisted out of its shape or sabotaged is a testament to its inherent soundness and to the vitality it invites in its advocates and leaders.

In the past two years teachers and other school staff have told us how they feel more and more pressured around issues of high-stakes academic testing. We have no doubt that the federal “No Child Left Behind” legislation with its testing imperatives will have profound impact on PA. If PA does not address the realities of testing it may only be able to survive as “extra-curricular,” becoming even more marginalized to the central mission of the school as understood by school leaders. If now it is too often encapsulated in a building, soon this may seem like the good old days!

Time is basic, as we (and others) have long said—time to do PA, time to reflect in PA, time, which must be carved out of rigid school schedules, the time of a school year. Consider this: Most groups meet during a school year weekly for about an hour. Taking into consideration school holidays and the time at the beginning and end of the school year when PA groups do not meet, this means most PA groups have between 10 to 30 meetings (those programs that run on a tri-mester basis meet for 10 sessions or less, those that meet for the whole school year might have up to 30 sessions; none of the sites in the last four years have meet for more than 30 sessions). Translating this into actual meeting time gives each group approximately 10-30 hours to learn democratic group work, research their issue, work on and complete a project, learn through the process, and reflect on their work in public and political ways. Given these constraints, it is no wonder that reflection is often missing!

In each group, the first session focuses on learning about the other group members, the second and third on creating group rules and norms as well as further developing group cohesion. Participants describe this typical beginning meeting schedule as important and necessary. When the group has only 10 sessions, typically half are used for this important work. Direct project work often does not begin until the fourth or fifth session. Even in groups that meet for 30

sessions, participants from across all seven sites this year described PA as never having enough time to accomplish what they are invited to do:

- *“I don’t think [the group meetings are] long enough.”*
- *“We’re always stretched for time.”*
- *“Most PA groups have a project, and we were kind of under pressure to have a project.”*

Again, as in earlier reports, the imperative to carry-out PA in schools makes that very public work most difficult, wearing and wearying: PA loses its site-based leaders to the realities of school life. PA does not change most schools and their practices. At its best, it shows what a school should (and could) become—as a place of serious, playful, and consequential learning and doing—the civic praxis of citizen.

2. What Makes PA Work?

PA works for most first timers and for many with multi-year experience. When it is fully effective, young people thrive because of its pedagogy, because of its call to civic engagement and public work, because young people can experience their efficacy and speak in a voice they hear and claim as their own, because PA participant’s work in small groups with an adult coach makes possible the range of task work and other experiences which are the basis of exploration, experiment, beginning mastery and transcendence for young people (and their coaches). We are convinced that despite real, visible, and endemic constraints, PA works best when there is a five-level experience:

1. PA is a free space
2. Taking (small scale) actions
3. Taking large scale action (public projects)
4. Reflection on 1-3
5. Multiple years/ iterations

1) PA is a free space

Participants experience PA as a “free space,” and this has profound consequences for individual participants and for the group. Earlier reports have shown how important it is that this space is: constituted by choice, new and different than school, co-created by coaches and team members (the process of “muddling though”), a place where everyone’s voices and contributions are valued (there are no right or wrong answers), and focused on “making a difference.”

2) Taking (small scale) actions

PA is also about taking action, and the first and primary actions involve intermediate steps towards a project goal. These can include making phone calls, doing interviews, writing proposals, making posters, etc. The experience of being able to do these activities by choice on a topic of choice is profound. Many projects do not get much beyond the self-enclosed world of the group, classroom or school, given the realities of time, etc.

3) Taking large scale action (public projects)

Some groups do larger actions or projects where they not only act in the broader world, but their projects are designed to impact this world. This public work has profound consequences for students’ understanding how they can make an impact on everyday life and how to navigate though and negotiate with the larger public world. Time, disciplinary constraints, and limited coaching skill contribute to the rarity of this level of public work.

4) Reflection about work on levels 1-3

As is well known from the experiential education and service learning literatures, guided and systematic reflection is the crucial act transforming activities into “learning experiences.” There is very little time given to this, and this work is not at a high skill level. Reflection about the three levels of work is done very rarely. This feeds the findings that participant’s rarely used core concepts in describing their PA experience. Using a conceptual frame to make sense of PA would facilitate the transfer of learning from PA to other domains of their lives, as well as to subsequent PA experiences.

5) Multiple years / iterations

The potential for cumulative, linked and integrative learning over several years should increase the potency and thus the impact of PA on young people. However, for multi-year experiences to be effective, students need to meet new and greater challenges and well as be able to take on new and different leadership roles within PA and the school/organization. At times it surely works this way, but this commonsense belief has not been tested in actual practice.

Summary and Conclusions

Classic PA as a conceptual model makes sense and to a degree works, judging by young people’s experiences. Yet, the model is constrained by its elements and its practices because it is being carried out most often in schools and these sites exact frustration, exhaustion, and possible eventual surrender from most school-based PA advocates and leaders.

Yet PA happens and after four years of watching and listening, we think we know how and why and this we offered in short form.

Given our experience in doing, observing, studying and evaluating PA on its own terms and in contrast to other civic engagement initiatives for/with young people, we offer a final conclusion and two recommendations.

Conclusions / Recommendation

Schools are becoming increasingly pressured to perform in particular ways. The consequences for PA of reduced public financial support for schools, new state standards of learning, and the new federal “No Child Left Behind” legislation will be direct, profound, and possibly disabling. The spaces and times PA creates that encourage and support young people’s democratic public work will continue to be marginalized and possibly eliminated. This structural assault requires a politico-structural response.

Public Achievement is often not understood to be supportive of the larger educational standards schools, departments, and teachers are required to meet each year. The attached “Joining PA to Standards of Student Learning” was created to support PA leaders, coaches, and teacher to be attentive to the learning that occurs within PA groups. A second recommendation is to field-test and evaluate this guide over the next year.

Method

Since October 2002, we talked with youth PA participants (n=84) in three Minnesota school sites and four Kansas City school sites. These sites included public (5 sites) and private (2 sites) junior (5 sites) and senior (3 sites) high schools (one school had both junior and senior high participants). The site coordinators selected participants. We talked with all selected participants in small groups. Evaluators then selected from these groups two to three participants to talk to individually. Group interviews were forty-five to sixty minutes long and individual interviews were approximately forty-five to ninety minutes long. All interviews were audiotape recorded and transcribed (approximately 864 pages).