

Moral Purpose and Newcomer Youth: Cultivating Resilience Through Active Citizenship

Suzanne Shanahan and William Tobin

Recent research makes it clear that individuals who have a sense of moral purpose are happier, more comfortable with uncertainty, better able to navigate complexity, and more resilient.¹ The Citizenship Lab of the Kenan Institute for Ethics has taken this finding as a point of departure for its work with newcomer youth in Durham, North Carolina, over the past four years.

The Institute began its long collaboration with the North Carolina newcomer community when Bhutanese refugees from Nepal first began to resettle in Durham in 2009. Ten years on, Durham hosts hundreds of families from Afghanistan, Central African Republic, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Palestine, Iraq, Syria and elsewhere. The Kenan Institute's work has relied on community-based research to address concerns with which Durham newcomers identify and programs that newcomers regularly lead. Health access and educational opportunity have been two prominent focal points of the work.

High school can be stressful for any student. For resettled refugee youth, there are often the additional demands of a new language and customs, the challenge of fitting into a new community and culture, and the need to support their family emotionally, logistically, and even financially. Many of the newcomer youth arrived in Durham with either no formal education or significant gaps in their education.

This confluence of factors created serious academic and psychosocial challenges for newcomers of high school age. Students were struggling in school, and stress and anxiety levels were rising.² Anti-social behavior (outbursts, fighting, and truancy) at school was common, and school suspensions routine. In the words of one student, "I was angry and violence was my response to everything."³ Both substance abuse and depression were new and on the rise.

The Citizenship Lab has addressed the twin challenges of school success and stress reduction through a research-focused, supplemental civic engagement program. This program has aimed at creating a strong sense of community for the newcomer youth that can support them both in their initial transition to life in Durham and in the longer term as they embark on adult lives of work and/or further education.

To meet these goals, the Citizenship Lab brings together several dozen Duke University students and several dozen newcomer youth weekly to inspire community change through individual and collective action. The lab offers an introduction to formal civic responsibilities (e.g., voting and jury duty) and also provides opportunities for community problem-solving. The students (both Duke and newcomer) learn citizenship by *doing* citizenship. Two implicit hypotheses animate this work with newcomers: (1) Robust citizenship promotes feelings of belonging, agency, self-

efficacy, and resilience; (2) Developing a sense of purpose outside themselves helps to reduce stress and anxiety.

Try and then Try Again: Civic Education and the Tools for Change (TfC) Methodology

At first, the Citizenship Lab began its work in a traditional way, with a civic education curriculum designed to promote knowledge and understanding of civic practices in the United States among newcomer youth. We studied the Constitution and Bill of Rights; we went to the polls; and we participated in youth voting exercises. For newcomer youth in the lab, however, formal citizenship was alienating and disempowering. They felt that political authority remained in the hands of others whom they neither knew nor trusted. More significantly, the concerns of newcomers and those of local politicians were poorly aligned. For the newcomer youth, their communities of interest were centered more in neighborhoods, housing complexes, and schools. Their needs were closer to home. Our citizenship work needed to pivot from civic education to civic action.

To cultivate civil society within the newcomer community, the lab adopted the Tools for Change (TfC) methodology, which was developed at the Kenan Institute through its work with both U.S. high school students in New Jersey, New York, and North Carolina, and with newcomer youth in Dublin, Ireland. The TfC methodology is informed by



Citizenship Lab Interview team at Durham Station, Bus Terminal.

the College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework. It combines ethical thinking and doing together with analytic problem-solving to collaboratively address a social problem. It enables students to consider what is right, just, and fair in their own community and then apply social science research methods to create ethical social change. The method teaches students observational skills, deliberation, ethical judgment, and analysis by having them both think and act.⁴ Significantly, ethical reasoning and analytical thinking and action do not require a history of school success.

Case Study: Bus Stop Amenities and the Vocation of Citizenship

The Problem with Identifying the Problem. The Tools for Change method begins when students identify a community challenge that becomes the focus of their citizenship work. But in the context of a highly heterogeneous population of newcomers and Duke students, even this starting point required significant foregrounding. Before students could identify a shared problem, it was necessary that they should see themselves as part

of a single community. It was critical that they understand that, for better or worse, Durham, North Carolina, was in fact their home. They also needed to find within themselves, and become comfortable with, a more proactive and critical perspective on their new-found home. They needed to feel comfortable calling out problems, situations, and structures that did not make sense or appeared unfair. They needed a sense of agency.

In this foregrounding phase, we turned to photo voice methods to help students both affirm their primary connection to their extended family and to consider the range of new “communities” of which they were becoming a part. First, Duke undergraduates did a series of presentations in which they shared photos of their families and the various communities they were a part of—churches, clubs, organizations, etc. Second, the Duke students then paired up with the newcomer students to take and curate photographs that documented their families and illustrated their communities. Third, these photographs and narratives about community were publicly exhibited and shared with the Duke and Durham com-

munities. Even before this project ended, we could see that the perspectives of the newcomer students were expanding to include a broader range of connections. They were beginning to understand that they were part of a broader community that offered privileges and created obligations.

But there was a second challenge. Newcomer students struggled to realize that it was not just O.K., but expected and important that they should be able to identify situations and structures in their lives that were not working or that were unfair. No one had ever asked them the classic ethical question, “How ought we to live?” Many of the newcomer students came from countries in which there was literally no space or opportunity for people to identify public problems, no history of government responsiveness, no tradition of civil society activism, and no tradition of voluntarism or grass roots change. We quickly realized that the students had no scaffolding with which to understand or engage questions of advocacy and public agency. The connection between critique and action was entirely absent. However, we also understood that this connection could not be made vivid by talking and telling. The newcomer youth needed to experience civil society in order to understand it and be a part of it.

This participation in civil society initially took the form of identifying arrangements in the lab that “weren’t working” for both newcomers and Duke students. Both were coming hungry to the lab on Tuesday nights. We needed more substantial snacks. Both wanted more sharing of cultures. Duke students and newcomers partnered on presentations about holidays and traditions. And then there was the dangerous crosswalk on campus that students had to negotiate to get to the lab. It was a constant frustration to all. But what could any of us do? We could call campus security, who did not respond. We could call the university vice president in charge of campus safety, who was slow to respond. We could take

photographs of the problem, interview program participants about their concerns, and write a memo to the university president. And then, when still not satisfied, we took responsibility for the crosswalk ourselves and situated students in orange vests and traffic wands to ensure safety. Crossing guard is now a highly coveted role within the lab.

Next, we moved from safety on campus to the broader city. We took field trips around the city looking for things that weren't working, had speakers come in to talk about what wasn't working, and held contests to identify what wasn't working. All this led the students to identify public transportation as something that wasn't working for their families and the other underserved families that they lived with in large housing complexes around the city. In particular, the students talked about bus stops where their mothers and elderly neighbors had to wait for the bus to go to the supermarket, or to doctor's appointments or to visit friends. These bus stops were dangerous. They were often on the edge of the highway and were poorly lit. Few of the stops were sheltered or had any kind of seating. It didn't require much discussion for the students to see these arrangements as less than ideal. But what could they or anyone else do?

Talking to City Leaders. Once the students had identified bus stops as a problem, we focused on three steps in the flexible Tools for Change method. First, we found out what, if anything, had already been done about this problem. We thought of this step as the equivalent of a literature review and helped students develop the ability to have *conversations* with members of the community. We spoke with business owners who were upset that their employees arrived for work soaking wet from waiting at bus stops that didn't protect them from the rain. Then, we talked to the regional transit authority, GoTriangle. We learned that while the transit authority had sought input from their riders, they were using a confusing survey and that only

120 riders out of the thousands of people who rode the city buses each day had completed the survey. After the students analyzed the survey, we asked the transit authority if we could help them fix the survey and get more respondents. They said they did not need our help.

Collecting New Data and Analysis. Undeterred, we then decided to collect our own data. This was step two. Drawing from what we learned from the existing survey, we developed our own interview protocol and introduced our students to ethical research practices—from how to obtain informed consent to how to be respectful and gracious interviewers. Then we went to the main bus station in interview teams—made up of a Duke undergraduate and a refugee high school student—and conducted interviews with riders. When we analyzed our data, one key finding emerged: more than anything, riders simply wanted to be able to sit as they waited for the bus.

Bringing New Knowledge to Bear. We began step three by producing a report documenting our findings and took it to the Durham Department of Transportation, which had authority over transit in Durham City and County. The officials were exceedingly nice to our team, but they provided a long list of reasons why it was impossible to provide bus seating in the near term. These reasons ranged from lack of money to the fact that the city shared jurisdiction over roads and bus stops with the state and, in some cases, with national railroad companies. No changes could be made to bus stops without the prior approval of the state. Missing was any real recognition of the urgency that riders felt.

We were discouraged but not daunted. As with the crosswalk on campus, we turned back to ourselves for solutions. We started exploring the idea of placing our own bus seats at stops. The team learned about bus cubes from Reconnect Rochester, a grass roots not-for-profit organization that focused on innovative transit solutions.⁵ The cubes were a cheap and effective way to provide

urgently needed seating. Best of all, they sparked conversations about bus stop seating and safety. We built three cubes and placed them in key locations around the city.

The city of Durham removed our cubes because they “had not been approved” and were considered a safety danger. We picked them up from the removal site. We then turned to a different form of collective action and voice. We wrote an op-ed that appeared in the *Durham Herald Sun* that highlighted the fact that the city was removing bus seating at a time when there was an urgent need for seating.⁶

The op-ed and the bus cubes caught the attention of the Director of the Durham Department of Transportation and the leadership at GoTriangle. Transit officials invited us to work with them to address the seating issue urgently. Soon 25 “simme-seats”—which provided seating for two people and could be easily placed on sidewalks—were purchased. We agreed to help select the first bus stops that would receive these seats. Several simme-seats were eventually placed at bus stops we identified. They even placed one of the seats on a state road *prior* to obtaining state approval. No one had to tell the newcomer students (or their Duke student collaborators) that their thinking and doing had helped bring about bus seating for their Durham neighbors. No one had to (but many people did) tell the students that they had demonstrated what engaged citizenship looks like.

What We All Learned. Over the course of the bus project our students—newcomers and Duke alike—heard a familiar refrain over and over again: *It is so amazing that refugees and ‘blow-ins’ are showing us how to be citizens of Durham.* It was amazing and it reveals something important about both civics education and newcomer education.

First, citizenship is a skill that needs practice but not lots of formal education. Whatever their educational background, students have the ability to

identify a problem, design research to better understand it, and propose solutions to fix it. It is simply assumed that even active citizenship requires some knowledge of American civic traditions. We wonder if there are not multiple paths to civic action and U.S. citizenship. Our students lacked any understanding of U.S. history, and were unfamiliar with civic traditions, and the notion of civil rights was alien to them. What they did have was a clear sense of what was right and just, a deep sense of moral purpose, and the ability to recognize work that had value and significance. These traits animated the civic action from the start and made it possible to learn U.S. citizenship by doing it. And honing the analytic skills required for this civic work led to greater interest in and success at school.

Second, active citizenship is empowering. For all student participants, exercising the rights and obligations of citizenship helped build self-confidence and resilience to take on challenges big and small. This point was clear in self-reports. What the Citizenship Lab concretely did through the bus stop project was create social capital embedded in functional networks. It then provided a moral toolkit upon which the newcomers continue to rely. The experience enabled them to understand that they were not “bowling alone” without a sense of rules or rewards. Being an active and committed part of a community that is their own—for which they take responsibility—enables them to better and more confidently discuss an academic challenge with a teacher, bring a bullying problem to the school bus driver, negotiate an overdue electricity bill for their parents, discuss a disagreement with a neighbor, or apply for a job. It also enables them to persist when things do not work out as planned the first time around—e.g., when the teacher is tired or the job goes to another person. Anger and violence are slowly being replaced with glimmers of hope and resilience. ●

Notes

1. Tim Clydesdale, *The Purposeful Graduate* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015); William Damon, Jenni Menon, and Kendall Cotton Bronk, “The Development of Purpose During Adolescence,” *Applied Development Science* 7, no. 3 (2003): 119–128; Ryan D. Duffy, Bryan J. Dik, and Michael F. Steger, “Calling and Work-Related Outcomes: Career Commitment as a Mediator,” *Journal of Vocational Behavior* 78 (2011): 210–218; Amy Wrzesniewski, Clark McCauley, Paul Rozin, and Barry Schwartz, “Jobs, Careers, and Callings: People’s Relations to Their Work,” *Journal of Research in Personality* 31 (1997): 21–33; Sonja Lyubomirsky, Laura King, and Ed Diener, “Benefits of Frequent Positive Affect: Does Happiness Lead to Success?” *Psychological Bulletin* 131, no. 6 (2005): 803–855.
2. Pathways to Wellness, *Refugee Health Screener-15*, http://refugeehealthta.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/09/RHS15_Packet_PathwaysToWellness-1.pdf.
3. Mustafa Mohammad, Interview by Suzanne Shanahan, Durham, NC, March 27, 2017.
4. William Tobin and Valerie Feit, *Tools for Change: Ethical Student Research for an Uncertain World* (New York: Teachers College Press, forthcoming).
5. Reconnect Rochester also provided counsel and instructions on how to make the cubes, <https://reconnectrochester.org/2014/12/bus-stop-cubes-are-winning-community-support/>
6. Olivia Simpson and Snehan Sharma, “How to Build a Better Bus Stop,” *Durham Herald Sun*, (June 15, 2017).

SUZANNE SHANAHAN is the Namerl O. Keohane Director of the Kenan Institute for Ethics where she also directs the Kenan Refugee Project—a community based research study on refugee wellbeing in Egypt, Jordan, Ireland, Nepal and Rwanda. In other research, she explores the causes and consequences of racial violence in the United States and character formation and moral development in young people. WILLIAM TOBIN is a civil rights attorney and a research fellow at Duke University, where he is creator and director of the Citizenship Lab at the Kenan Institute for Ethics. He has taught and written on American history, social science, and educational reform.



Citizenship Lab students building bus cubes.



Citizenship Lab bus cube on Main St. and Gregson St, Durham, around the corner from resettlement agency.