Civic Connections:
Urban Debate and Democracy in Action during Out-of-School Time

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Executive Summary

This paper examines the approach of urban debate leagues, and specifically the New York Urban Debate League, to democracy skill building and civic engagement. In the face of concerns about lack of civic engagement and knowledge among young people, such out-of-school-time programs can often reach youth bypassed by traditional sources of civic and democracy development, providing a vision of what "democracy in action" for underserved youth might look like. Such democracy skill-building experiences can empower youth to become engaged learners and participating citizens.

On a crisp Saturday morning in March in the Bronx, about 200 youth are packing into the Wings Academy school cafeteria for one of many New York Urban Debate tournaments. It's eight in the morning. The teens are in their usual attire, sporting baggy jeans, baseball caps, and knapsacks. They talk on cell phones and keep the soda machine active—but they also are working: holding portfolios, tapping on laptops, and shuffling manila envelopes labeled "Negative" and "Affirmative." One middle-school-aged girl is practicing debate dialogue while her peer listens and then offers some advice: "You should add more emotion to your last paragraph." The girl tries again, this time sounding more convincing. Her peer approves.

These two middle school students are engaging in democracy skill building. The forum in which they are doing it, an urban debate league, may offer a model for using out-of-school time to foster democratic skills. Why is democracy skill building important? Active participation is crucial for the longevity and fidelity of our democracy, while lack of civic engagement contributes to existing educational, economic, and employment inequities. Full participation in democracy skill building is vital for all youth.

Research has shown that young people who do not have regular discussions about politics are more likely than those who do to be African American and Hispanic, while they are less likely to be college bound, Internet users, well-educated, or registered to vote (Soule, 2001). The political advantages of socioeconomic status, stockpiled over a lifetime (Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995), may result, in part, from more opportunity to engage in clubs, youth organizations, and public service. Research on communities and youth civic engagement has suggested that youth-serving organizations—Little League, YMCA, 4-H, Boys and Girls Clubs, and the like—are less represented in poorer neighborhoods. Socioeconomic advantage apparently affords youth opportunities for civic connection and civic practice (Connell & Halpern-Felsher, 1997; Flanagan & Faison, 2001).

By reaching out across communities to youth bypassed by traditional sources of civic and democracy development, democracy skill-building experiences such as urban debate can empower youth to become engaged learners, critical thinkers, and active citizens. This paper investigates the following questions:

- In what ways can out-of-school-time and youth development programs be part of the vision of a more informed and active citizenry?
- What might "democracy in action" look like in out-of-school-time and youth development programs?

The photographs in this article are from the New York Urban Debate League Tournament, Spring 2005.

While periods such as the 1960s were rich in youth political involvement, civic participation of youth has declined over the past 40 years. While participation has decreased, cynicism about our institutions and leaders has increased.

- What program and policy infrastructures are needed to support a civic engagement and democracy skill-building role for out-of-school-time and youth development programs?

In the first section of the paper, I discuss the current thinking and literature on the status of youth democracy skill building and civic engagement, including information on research-based predictors.[1] Then I examine a variety of approaches for civic development, highlighting the unique role for out-of-school-time programs and a positive youth development strategy. In the next section, I explore evidence of democracy skill building and civic engagement gathered through research on youth development and civic engagement programs, particularly urban debate. The paper concludes with recommendations for youth program providers, policymakers, and other individuals and organizations seeking to foster youth democracy development and participation during out-of-school time.

DEFINITION OF DEMOCRACY AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

Historically, educators and government leaders have agreed that preserving a democracy requires developing democratic skills in its citizens. Our society relies on its people to make deliberate choices about the direction of their collective life (Battistoni, 1985). Yet how we think about the formation of democratic citizens depends on the specific conception of democracy we hold, whether it is a set of skills, level of participation, civic discourse, mobilization, or the exercise of certain rights and responsibilities (Galston, 2001).

Political thinkers, educators, and policymakers have described democratic development or civic engagement in a variety of ways. John Dewey (1916) is one of the influential thinkers who articulated that democracy is more than a form of government: "It is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience" (p. 101). Speaking of the importance of developing democratic principles, Ravitch and Viteritti (2001) noted, "Unless they [the public] understand deeply the sources of our democracy, they will take it for granted and fail to exercise their rights and responsibilities" (p. 28). Remy (1980) suggested that civic education "involves learning and instruction related to the development of citizen competence" (p. 1). Denver and Hands (1990) defined political literacy as "the knowledge and understanding of the political process and political issues which enable people to perform their roles as citizens effectively" (p. 263).

While an earlier notion of citizenship was "mastering a body of facts" (Battistoni, 1985, p. 90), a more recent premise is that citizenship should mean active participation with rigorous interpersonal discussion. The earlier notion was easily reflected in the school curriculum through activities such as memorizing the names of presidents, learning the functions of government, or reciting the Pledge of Allegiance or the Preamble of the U.S. Constitution. The more recent notion recognizes the interdependence of society (Battistoni, 1985). Gibson (2001), writing for the Carnegie Foundation, explained that "the heart of a healthy democracy is a citizenry actively engaged in civic life—taking responsibility for building communities, solving community problems, and participating in the electoral and political processes" (p. 1).

A report by the National Center for Education Statistics (Niemi & Chapman, 1999) on the civic development of ninth- to twelfth-grade students in the U.S. offered five elements to describe the civic values to be encouraged among American youth:

- Knowledge of government and how it operates
- Awareness of and attention to politics and government
- Skills to participate in political processes
- Confidence in their ability to influence government through political processes
- Tolerance of diverse opinions

DEMOCRACY DEVELOPMENT AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT AMONG YOUNG PEOPLE

Levels of youth political involvement and activity have fluctuated over time. While periods such as the 1960s were rich in youth political involvement, civic participation of youth has declined over the past 40 years. While participation has decreased, cynicism about our institutions and leaders has increased. Some political theorists and researchers believe we are faced with a citizenry that is "less informed," "less interested," and "less inclined" to participate (Berman, 1997, p. 5).

Evidence of Decline

The 2003 report by the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) titled *The Civic Mission of Schools* noted that young people are not only less likely to vote, but also less interested in political discussion and public issues than both their older counterparts and young people of past decades. The same report also outlined several "disturbing trends related to youth civic engagement including a decrease in young people's interest in political discussion and public issues; their tendency to be more cynical and alienated from formal politics, more materialistic, and less trusting; and a decline in their voter participation rates" (p. 5). Voter turnout reports show that less than one-third of young people aged 18–24 voted in the 2000 presidential election, compared to 42 percent in 1972 (Gibson, 2001).

The New Millennium Survey shows that youth tend to focus on American rights and freedoms rather than on responsibilities when asked about the meaning of citizenship. Most young people do not seek out information on government or politics or hold conversations on such subjects with parents or peers (National Association of Secretaries of State, 2000). Young people have scored low on traditional markers of political involvement such as interest in the news, knowledge of current events, voting participation, and tests of political knowledge (Andolina, Jenkins, Keeter, & Zukin, 2002). A national assessment of student knowledge of civics and government conducted by the U.S. Department of Education in 1999 showed that most American youth have a weak grasp of the principles that underlie the U.S. Constitution and lack basic understanding of how government works (Niemi & Chapman, 1999). Surveys and behavioral studies conducted over the past few years have shown "high levels of apathy, low rates of voter turnout, a loss of confidence in government institutions, and poor showing on history and civics tests" (Hartry & Porter, 2004, p. 1).

Political researchers suggest several explanations for decline in youth civic participation:

- Schools are dedicating fewer resources toward educating young people about politics, government, and civic process.
- There is a decline of trust in public institutions and public leaders.
- Youth have become disengaged from institutions such as public meetings, churches, and community-based organizations. (Gibson, 2001)

Mattson (2003) suggested that several major shifts in the social and economic landscape have changed the political outlook of the youth population:

- Student political activism has shifted attention toward diversity and multiculturalism.
- College majors have shifted away from the liberal arts and humanities toward other fields.
- The margin in pay between nonprofit and business careers has attracted young people away from establishing careers in nonprofit organizations.
- Political organizations are much more focused on check contributions than on volunteer contributions.
- Associations connected to churches and community clubs have decreased in membership over the last ten years.
- These organizations have changed to target particular causes rather than more global awareness or efforts for the common good.

Ravitch and Viteritti (2001) add that many voluntary organizations have become more porous, with participants essentially just "passing through."

Alternative perspectives on youth civic engagement and low voter turnout also exist. While Putnam (2000) argued in *Bowling Alone* that indicators such as participation in community organizations, voting, and reading newspapers have declined, others, including McLeod (2000) and Youniss and Yates (1997) have argued that different indicators have increased, showing that types of participation have simply changed over time. Fields (2003) concludes that, while voter turnout and political activism may be low, young people are volunteering at higher rates than ever. Rationale for volunteering may vary from personal interest to fulfilling mandatory school requirements, but the fact that young people are getting the hours done suggests that they do want to be involved (Fields, 2003).

Predictors of Civic Development in Older Youth

Disagreement over the indicators of civic development has made it particularly challenging to identify possible predictors of civic engagement and democracy activity. Data and analysis from the National Household Education Survey (NHES), a large national study of adults and youths, helps us understand factors that relate to civic development for young people (Niemi & Chapman, 1999). In this report, civic development consisted of the five dimensions outlined above: political knowledge, attention to politics, political participation skills, political efficacy, and tolerance of diversity (Niemi & Chapman, 1999). The researchers found that the following factors have positive association with high civic development:

> There appears to be little connection between a cognitive understanding of citizenship and an affective or emotional commitment.

- Grade in school
- Attention to print media and/or television and radio
- Participation in student government
- Parents with high level of political knowledge
- Some level of participation in community service (Niemi & Chapman, 1999)

Researchers from Child Trends examined the research literature to identify predictors of positive citizenship among youth. The indicators of positive citizenship used in the report were community service, voting, and environmentalism. The findings indicate that knowledge of civics and desire to be civilly active do not seem to be the prime predictors of actual engagement (Zaff & Michelsen, 2001). Other factors that showed mixed results as predictors of positive citizenship included stability, gender, race or ethnicity, culture and nationality, empathy, motivation, parenting, society, and engagement in civic-related activities. Because of the lack of experimental and longitudinal data, and the fact that the limited data collection focused on adolescents, definitive conclusions about these factors as antecedents to positive citizenship couldn't be drawn. However, the researchers did suggest that the data pointed to pathways that could promote youth civic engagement: Programs should adopt

multiple strategies, create activities in which adolescents feel engaged, and continue to operate over the long term (Zaff & Michelsen, 2001).

While further research and discussion needs to clarify a broadly agreed-upon set of citizenship indicators, the Child Trends research contributes a valuable framework for a youth development approach to democracy skill building and a foundation for establishing supportive public policy.

APPROACHES TO DEMOCRACY SKILL BUILDING

An early notion of citizenship training coincided with increased immigration during the early 20th century. The public school emerged as an agent of citizenship education in order to promote development of common goals and values (Battistoni, 1985). Horace Mann's ideas—that intellectual education was the foundation of democracy and that the purposes of democracy were best served by offering a common academic education to all children—were firmly established (Ravitch & Viteritti, 2001). Historically, educators and politicians have struggled over the role of schools in preserving democracy. Some have seen school education as a way of preparing young people to shape the future of the state, while others have seen it as a way of teaching young people to protect themselves from intrusion by the state (Ravitch & Viteritti, 2001).

The teaching of civics or democracy in schools has incorporated a range of activities and curricula, including discussions of current events, community service, Model UN, cooperative learning, participatory school governance, and student leadership (Berman, 1997). An overwhelming number of studies have shown that *quantity* of education correlates with participation, voting, political skills, and political knowledge (Ravitch & Viteritti, 2001). However, how the *content* of education is related to these behaviors is unclear. High school government courses and civics curricula have minimal impact on political socialization. There appears to be little connection between a cognitive understanding of citizenship and an affective or emotional commitment (Battistoni, 1985).

A variety of agents influence youth civic engagement, including civic content in schools, parental education, family communication practices, and feelings of social trust (Flanagan & Faison, 2001). Opinions vary when it comes to determining the best strategies for increasing engagement and what outcomes constitute success (Fields, 2003). Many experts believe that an integrated approach to increasing youth civic engagement—combining experiences such as civic education, service learning, political advocacy, and youth development—would work best (Fields, 2003).

This thinking suggests that schools are not the only avenue through which children and adolescents learn about civic and democratic processes. Because of their unique characteristics as youth-serving organizations, out-of-school-time and youth development programs can fill a significant role in promoting civic engagement and democracy skill building.

Civic activism is not only an intended outcome of youth development programs but is itself a valuable strategy to achieve positive youth development outcomes.

Out-of-school-time and youth development programs can function in ways very different from traditional classrooms, featuring, for example, mixed-age groups, small-group learning, flexible scheduling, and real-world connections. Research has also suggested that out-of-school-time programs can promote skills that lay the foundation for academic achievement and healthy social, emotional, and intellectual development (Hall, Yohalem, Tolman, & Wilson, 2003). Miller (2003) explained that out-of-school time programs can offer intangible benefits, such as:

> the opportunity to engage in activities that help young people realize they have something to contribute to the group; the opportunity to work with diverse peers and adults to create projects, performances and presentations that receive accolades from their families and the larger community; and the opportunity to develop a vision of life's possibilities that, with commitment and persistence, are attainable. (p. 9)

Researchers from the Forum for Youth Investment (2004) suggest that "given their flexibility, connections to community, voluntary nature, and ability to engage and motivate" (p. 2), youth development organizations and out-of-school-time programs are logical places to facilitate democracy skill building. Participation is by choice, which challenges program providers to create

and sustain programs that engage the interest and participation of older youth, while at the same time promoting positive developmental outcomes and skills for the 21st century.

In fact, out-of-school-time and youth development programs seem to be a good fit for the pathways described by Zaff and Michelsen (2001), since variety of activity is a hallmark of such programs. Afterschool participants often report that they feel more engaged in their afterschool programs than in their schools. Many community-based programs, such as YMCA/YWCA, Boys and Girls Clubs, and 4H, offer long-term enrollment from kindergarten to middle school and beyond. Extending involvement over a span of years increases opportunities for engagement, leadership development, and realization of civic project goals.

YOUTH DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

While the overlap between youth development programs and civic engagement may seem natural, in reality, partnership has not been so clear. Researchers commissioned by the Ford Foundation, in partnership with the Innovation Center for Community and Youth Development, suggested that many community-based youth-serving organizations fail to see the need for "youth participation, voice, and input," so they lose out on opportunities to engage youth in the organizations' decision-making processes (Mohamed & Wheeler, 2001, p. 11). The research team concluded that civic activism is not only an intended outcome of youth development programs but is itself a valuable strategy to achieve positive youth development outcomes. Participation in civic activism can promote features of positive youth development such as understanding equality and social justice, having a sense of purpose, and peaceful conflict resolution (Search Institute, 2006). The Innovation Center report outlined specific recommendations for promoting civic activism in youth development programs, including supporting youth workers with promising practices networks, leadership training, and global activist connections (Mohamed & Wheeler, 2001).

While there is consensus that civic participation is a needed and natural component of youth development, there is little agreement on the most effective programming strategies. Gambone, Yu, Lewis-Charp, Sipe, and Lacoe (2004) compared the effectiveness of youth-organizing and identity-support programs to traditional youth development programs in promoting community engagement and supporting youths' holistic development. The youth-organizing approaches included political education, community mapping, public protest, letter-writing campaigns, and public awareness movements. Identity-support approaches included political education; interactive and experiential learning support groups; and community outreach, education, and advocacy. On measures of civic activism, "higher proportions of youth in both identity-support and youth-organizing programs report optimal levels" on civic action, efficacy, and community problem solving compared with youth in "traditional youth development agencies" (Gambone et al., 2004, p. 8). Members of the youth-organizing programs "consistently experienced opportunities to give back to their community and reported greater knowledge of their communities" than youth in traditional youth development agencies (Gambone et al., 2004, p. 12). These findings suggest that engaging youth in meaningful opportunities deeply embedded in a rich civic or political context can influence youth development outcomes and promote community involvement and engagement.

Researchers from Child Trends provided a synthesis of evaluations of in-school and out-of-school-time civic programs for youth, focusing on the role civic programs can play in contributing to the development of active citizens. The synthesis focused on two questions, among others:

- What do civic engagement programs look like?
- What characteristics of the programs seem to constitute effective civic engagement? (Michelsen, Zaff, & Hair, 2002)

The Child Trends researchers gathered information from experimental, quasi-experimental, and non-experimental program evaluations. The programs' approaches to civic engagement varied, but almost all had some methods in common. Most emphasized the social nature of civic engagement activities and combined life skills or civics curricula with opportunities to become engaged (Michelsen, Zaff, & Hair, 2002).

In this study, evaluations of Kids Voting USA and the Community-Based Planning Project suggested that exposure to a rigorous civics curriculum, with exercises mimicking real-world experience, can increase students' interest in the news and their likelihood of participating in the community in the future. Students in several of the programs evaluated were more likely

Community Programs to Promote Youth Development, which includes a list of 28 personal and social assets grouped into four domains: physical, intellectual, psychological and emotional, and social development. The subcomponents of the domains closely associate with the outcomes found by Child Trends researchers such as community engagement, working in groups, critical thinking, and reasoning skills. *Community Programs to Promote Youth Development* concluded that:

- Each person has various assets in various combinations.
- Having more assets is better than having few.
- Individuals acquire new assets and grow existing ones through exposure to positive experiences, people, and settings. (NRC & IOM, 2002)

than youth in the control group to engage in community service. Students in the Public Works Mapping Project, which emphasized bringing students together with teachers and community leaders, "reported learning about working as a group and about citizenship in the context of school, as well as learning how to apply theoretical work to practical matters" (Michelsen, Zaff, & Hair, 2002, pp. 23–24). Of all the programs evaluated, those that appeared to have the greatest success in reaching youth outcomes were those that included both behavioral and learning components (Michelsen, Zaff, & Hair, 2002).

This research helps to verify the connections between civic engagement activities and positive youth development. Over the last decade, youth development and research organizations, including the Search Institute (2006) have offered many lists of positive youth development assets. Much attention has been given to the task of distinguishing a "set of personal and social assets that increase the healthy development and well-being of adolescents and facilitate a successful transition from childhood, through adolescence, and into adulthood" (National Research Council [NRC] and Institute of Medicine [IOM], 2002, p. 6). In 2002, the National Research Council and the Institute of Medicine jointly produced

A recent study on the Community Youth Research (CYR) afterschool program in Redwood City, California, contributes further to our understanding of program approaches for developing youths' civic involvement during out-of-school time (Kirshner, Strobel, & Fernandez, n.d.). CYR used problem-driven participatory action research to train youth to identify and study issues in their communities and to act on their findings. Activities in the program included data gathering, teamwork, public speaking, problem solving, critical thinking, and policy examination. The study focused on how young people involved in this afterschool program reasoned about their social and political environment. The researchers found that young people were thinking critically about their surroundings and at the same time developing solutions to the problems they identified. The researchers explained that "critical awareness, if left alone, can just as easily lead to apathy as it can to empowerment" (Kirshner, Strobel, & Fernandez, n.d., p. 16). Critical thinking and critical awareness skills can develop more strongly when participants simultaneously have opportunities to take action on their conclusions. In CYR, youth had an opportunity to participate in a meaningful way in promoting change

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and affecting their environment. The study suggests that participatory action research has potential as strategy for promoting citizenship skills, because it asks youth to "work together to study about and act on concerns that affect their own communities" (Kirshner, Strobel, & Fernandez, n.d., p. 16).

BUILDING DEMOCRACY IN URBAN DEBATE LEAGUES

Another national youth development and civic engagement approach is urban debate, which engages youth primarily after school and on weekends. Youth turnout for urban debate leagues has steadily grown since the $9.3 million seed funding initiative by the Soros Foundation in 1997. Youth debate programs are thriving in New York City, Baltimore, Seattle, Los Angeles, Chicago, and other urban centers. They encompass more than 260 urban public high schools and middle schools, with over 12,000 young people participating since 1997 (National Association of Urban Debate Leagues, n.d.). Both high-achieving students and those who struggle academically are enticed to participate. While honing valuable academic skills such as organizing, critical thinking, and researching, urban debate also encourages another dimension: practicing democracy.

During 2005, a team of research assistants and I conducted a qualitative investigation of the experiences of youth in the New York Urban Debate League in order to examine the debate league approach to democracy skill building and civic engagement. The following sections provide an overview of the context and methods of our investigation.

Context

The IMPACT Coalition, a nonprofit mentoring and educational development organization located in Manhattan, manages the New York Urban Debate League (NYUDL). The NYUDL was established in 1997 in partnership with the Barkley Forum and the Open Society Institute. The NYUDL was begun with the goal of making debate, and specifically policy debate, accessible to all city students regardless of their race or

socioeconomic status. With teams in over 70 schools and more than 450 youth participants, the NYUDL is the largest urban debate league in the country.

The National Forensic League (NFL) sponsors and organizes youth debate at the national level, setting the rules and regulations for competition. School debate teams compete in tournaments organized by their local leagues and travel to invitational tournaments held around the country. With a focus on policy debate, the NYUDL gives New York City students access to a national activity in which students from around the country debate the same national resolution. For instance, the 2004–2005 resolution was "The United States government should establish a foreign policy substantially increasing its support of United Nations peacekeeping operations." In a debate contest, one pair of students argues the affirmative side while another argues the negative. Both pairs must prepare both sides, as they may be assigned the opposite position in their next debate.

The IMPACT Coalition provides teachers and students from selected high schools with intensive summer training in policy debate, weekend tournament competitions, ongoing mentoring, debate materials and curricular resources, scholarships to national summer debate camps, and special end-of-year culminating events. Debate coaches include college students, AmeriCorp volunteers, teachers, and other professionals.

Methods

The research for this paper was conducted using a qualitative approach. The primary methods for data collection were observation, a youth focus group, and personal interviews with youth participants and program leaders. Two observations were conducted: one of an NYUDL tournament at Wings Academy in the Bronx on March 5, 2005, and the other of a debate club meeting and practice session at the Bronx Preparatory Charter School on May 5, 2005. The Wings Academy tournament included both middle school and high school youth, while middle school students were the participants in the Bronx Prep debate club meeting. After the practice debate and discussion session at Bronx Prep, students participated in a focus group. In addition, phone interviews were conducted with high school debate team participants and program leaders from across the city. Interviews were also conducted with citywide league administrators of the New York, Boston, and Baltimore Urban Debate Leagues.

Though this investigation included a limited sample, it is valuable because it provides insight into a youth-focused program model that fosters development of democracy skills. The following section summarizes the findings from this research and points to the substantial contribution that out-of-school-time programs such as urban debate can offer toward building an effective and informed youth citizenry.

Urban Debate Leagues as Democracy in Action

We used a report developed during the "Creating Citizenship" conference under the auspices of the Stanford Center on Adolescence (Torney-Purta, 2000) as a framework for examining the personal testimony we collected from urban debate youth participants, program leaders, and citywide administrators. The report provides a list of youth capacities believed to be essential in achieving a society in which democratic governance and civil disobedience thrive. Those qualities and capacities, as written in the "Creating Citizenship" conference executive summary, are:

1. A civic identity that includes commitment to a larger sense of social purpose and a positive sense of affiliation with the society
2. An awareness that decisions made in the public political process directly and indirectly affect their private lives and futures
3. The knowledge and capacity to acquire information necessary to navigate the social and political world, including an understanding of democracy and the functioning of its institutions, current issues of importance and modes of participation that are likely to be effective
4. A balance between trust and skepticism and a constructive tension between support for legitimate authority and willingness to dissent in relation to the political system and civil society
5. The capacity for making autonomous choices and decisions
6. The capacity and willingness to engage in shared discourse which is tolerant of other opinions and dissent
7. Respect for other individuals and the groups to which they belong
8. Skills of cooperation and negotiation, including the ability to work in a team and present an effective argument for one's views without denigrating the views of others
9. The willingness and ability to assume leadership roles when appropriate

10. Belief in their ability to make a difference by acting alone or with others, including a belief that institutions should be responsive to such actions (Torney-Purta et al., 2000, p. 3–4)

These capacities are embedded in the youth development assets outlined by the National Research Council (Committee on Community-Level Programs for Youth, 2002). For example, the National Research Council's "intellectual development" asset includes critical thinking and reasoning skills, knowledge of more than one culture, and good decision-making skills. The psychological and emotional development assets include a sense of larger purpose in life, pro-social and culturally sensitive values, and a sense of personal autonomy and responsibility for self. Assets such as connectedness, sense of social place, ability to navigate in multiple cultural contexts, and commitment to civic engagement, from the NRC's social development category, coincide closely with the "Creating Citizenship" civic engagement capacities. This crossover between youth development assets and civic engagement capacities confirms the value of considering the potentially powerful connections between participation in democracy skill building and positive youth development.

Based on our belief that urban debate serves as an example of democracy skill building for youth, we hypothesized that we would hear themes in the personal testimony of youth participants and adult leaders related to these capacities. Using this list as a framework, we examined the stories and testimony of the youth participants and their club leaders to understand how participation in debate embraced active democracy.

SENSE OF SOCIAL PURPOSE AND AFFILIATION WITH SOCIETY

While current-event discussions are likely to come up in typical school classrooms, "owning" an issue, as students do in debate, prompts a different type of intellectual and emotional understanding. In order to argue both the affirmative and negative positions, debaters have to take in the issue and know it as their own. Twice during meetings and interviews with youth, we were struck by how participation in debate had become personal for the young person with whom we were talking. We asked one of the middle school debaters what role debate had played in his understanding of democracy. He said, "It's our democracy and not George Bush's democracy or Bill Clinton's

democracy, or even George Washington's democracy or Abe Lincoln's democracy; it's our democracy and that's what counts." Participating in debate had helped him understand that he had active ownership in the democracy he knew.

In a later conversation, a high school junior recalled how debate had given her a greater sense of purpose. The peacekeeping debates had struck a chord. The student was moved to bring her opinions to a bigger stage. She and debate friends prepared a formal presentation of their ideas and arguments for a trip to the United Nations. They believed strongly enough in the solutions and suggestions they had dutifully researched and debated to want to share them in a real and substantial forum. While they were welcomed at the UN, they were realistic about the impact of their conversation with an official there. Their actions clearly demonstrate the personal impact debate had on their lives and the connections they had made between the larger public democracy and their own civic identities and responsibilities.

CONNECTION BETWEEN PUBLIC POLITICAL PROCESS AND PRIVATE LIVES

Debate topics, which are national or global in scope, immediately challenge participants to think beyond the confines of their own family, school, and community, leading them to consider the local implications of global issues. For example, youth participants quickly recognized, according to program leaders, that the spring 2005 resolution to increase U.S. support for UN peacekeeping operations would have an obvious effect on local communities as more soldiers were assigned to cover obligations overseas.

Debate program leaders noted that youth debaters increased their ability to think about both domestic and global political issues. While becoming experts on large issues, they were also making connections from the debates to their own lives and taking their new knowledge "to the streets." Program leaders insisted that youth debaters wanted to use their political skills, vote, and get into the political life of the community. One coach said that debate participation "allows for the making of substantial connections between school classes, the news, debate topics, personal values/ethics, and broad social concepts." Some participants later started their own community-service projects related to debate issues.

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UNDERSTANDING DEMOCRACY AND CIVIC PARTICIPATION

Overwhelmingly, the literature on youth civic engagement suggests that most middle and high school youth struggle to define democracy and government. In order to participate in debate, young people must become knowledgeable about forms of government and be able to incorporate relevant information into their debate content. Through debate, youth practice a key component of civic participation: gaining knowledge. Laura Sjoberg, citywide leader for the Boston Debate League, refers to the learning students get from participating in debate as "real-time learning." Students learn about political issues in the here-and-now; they investigate and prepare information about topics that are important to the world they live in today.

Preparing to debate requires collecting information from various sources, analyzing and organizing the information, and articulating a point of view. Debate coaches take an active role in building knowledge about democracy. One high school coach reflected, "On a daily basis, I scaffold learning so we can build upon the basics and begin thinking critically about the subject matter." The very nature of debate affirms the value of diverse opinions and dialogue, which are central to understanding democracy.

SUPPORT FOR AUTHORITY AND WILLINGNESS TO DISSENT

It comes as no surprise to hear middle or high school youth disagreeing with rules and policies. Current literature notes the high level of cynicism young people express about the federal government and public policies (Flanagan & Faison, 2001; Soule, 2001). Finding the balance between supporting authoritative structures and constructively articulating opposing opin-

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ions is a challenge. One of the enriching aspects of participation in youth debate is that students learn the language of political criticism. Not only do debaters have to be able to defend both sides of an opinion, but they also have to construct persuasive arguments. They learn to use language to resolve conflict in a positive way. Debaters find a voice for dissent and an ability to craft that voice in ways that are respectful and that others can value.

CAPACITY FOR AUTONOMOUS CHOICES

Few of the comments from youth provided direct evidence that they associated participation in debate with capacity for autonomous choices; it was hard, older students suggested, to separate the effect of debate participation from their general maturation in their ability to make choices and manage their lives. However, the association between the skills that debate hones and students' capacity for autonomous choices is not hard to discern. We frequently heard from coaches that the teams were student-centered and self-sufficient. Several coaches suggested that the students really managed the program. Additionally, once a debate begins, debaters must make decisions on their own. Their ability to listen, organize, and make informed strategy decisions is critical to team success.

SHARED DISCOURSE TOLERANT OF OTHER OPINIONS

Shared discourse is the foundation of policy debate. In a standard debate tournament structure, a given team goes back and forth between arguing the negative and the affirmative opinion. A high school debater shared that after she and a teammate "argued both opinions so many times" they "became very open to accepting both opinions." The process of investigating, preparing, and arguing opposing opinions provides a unique experience that goes beyond the traditional experience of preparing a one-opinion persuasive essay.

We found that middle school debaters had a great zest for shared discourse. While accepting other opinions, they were lured by the thrill of persuading others to their convictions. One middle school debater remarked:

> If somebody goes against what I am saying, I just pull out more facts and more facts to let them know that I am right. And speak out clearly. So they'll know "he's aggressive and he's got his facts straight so I can say nothing about it and I got to agree." What you have to do in a debate is make sure you are very clear, that you understand what you are arguing and why you are arguing it. Sometimes you have to make a compromise.

RESPECT FOR OTHERS AND THEIR GROUPS

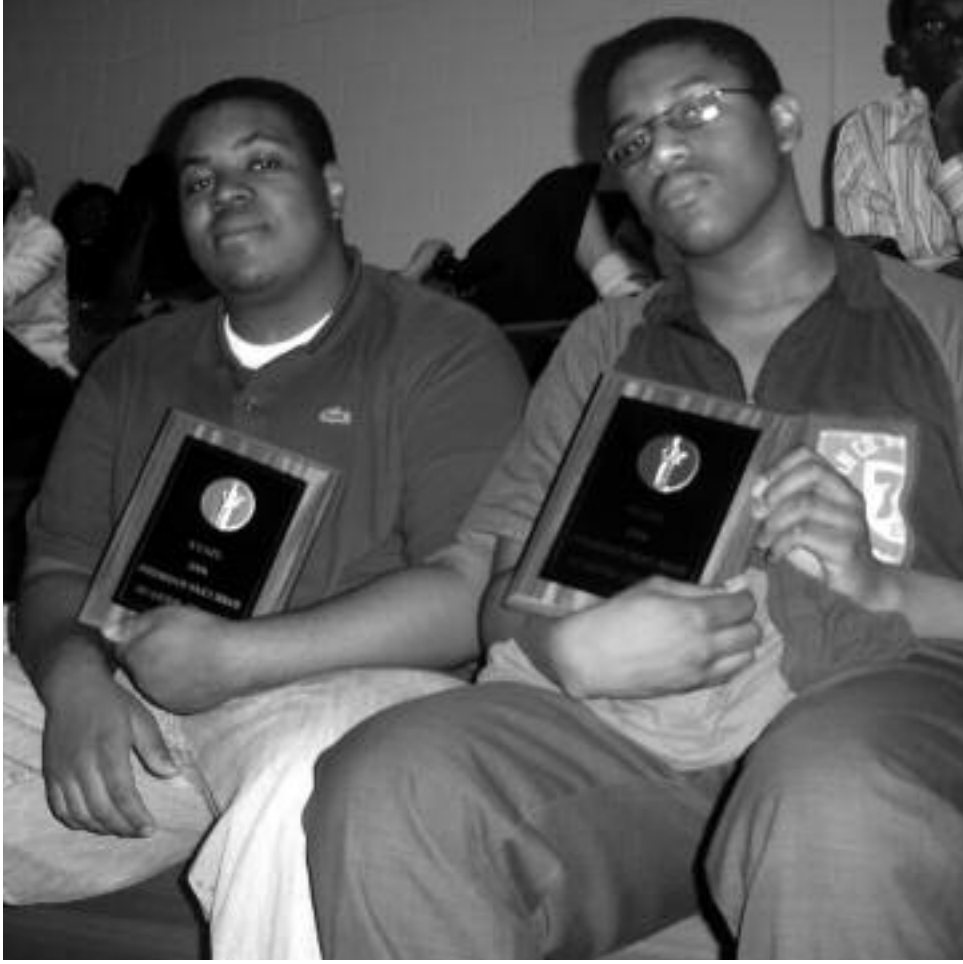
Many youth talked in interviews and the focus group about the attractive social aspects of debate participation. Debate tournaments are held throughout the city, which necessitates visiting areas outside students' home neighborhoods and meeting youth from other parts of the city. As teams improve, their tournament schedule may take them to regional and national tournaments. Teams of debaters from different schools can meet frequently over the course of a season.

During our visit to a middle school debate practice, the arguments became heated. One debater later explained, "Sometimes with the arguments…sometimes we get really loud and sometime people get really emotional over this stuff." While competitive feelings exist, teams also develop a respect for each other, as one high school debater explained: "On a personal level, not actually debating, I learned so much from everyone. I am able to see classism and racism in new ways, through exposure to so many different people, situations, and experiences."

SKILL BUILDING

During a debate, students practice all of these skills: organizing, problem solving, public speaking, working in teams and negotiating, persuasive speaking, critical thinking, summarizing, and strategizing. Cooperation with a debate partner is essential to a strong presentation. Coaches noted that the youth often dedicated their free time to debate practice because they had a passion for honing their speaking and arguing skills.

The skill coaches most hoped to develop was critical thinking. Being able to think through problems and try out possible solutions opens the door to students' learning how to advocate for themselves and their communities. The youth themselves described many skill-based benefits from their participation in debate. A high school debater remarked:



> I have become a lot more comfortable with presentations in class. At school we have to present a portfolio. We have to write really persuasive arguments in a short amount of time. We spend a lot of time building our arguments. Debate helped me writing essays using the same techniques: going through evidence, using that to prove something.

LEADERSHIP

Youniss and colleagues (2002) noted that putting in hours toward a political cause or a service activity has limited meaning unless change happens within the individual and the individual understands the change. Consistent examples of longitudinal commitment to debate and political activity show that participation in debate can stimulate personal change related to active democracy and leadership.

For example, during our tournament observation, the judges' orientation room was full of former high school debaters, now college students, who were volunteering as judges. High school practice sessions are frequented by alumni debaters who assist advanced debaters on writing arguments while novice debaters focus on oral practice. Many coaches we interviewed had experience as high school or college debaters. A former debater, now a law student, recently founded the Boston Debate League with the help of friends.

Participation that transcends graduation and college or career shifts speaks to the strength of the association many young people feel with urban debate leagues. Debate alumni consistently credit debate experiences with fostering success in higher education and influencing their career choices and achievements. The model for urban debate participation is a seamless transition from novice debater to college debater to volunteer coach and active citizen.

BELIEF IN THE ABILITY TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE

Pearson and Voke (2003) concluded that "educating for democracy requires more than the transmission of discrete knowledge and skills" (p. 33). Students must also learn that they are valued and contributing members of a community. Urban debate leaders view themselves as

Debate alumni consistently credit debate experiences with fostering success in higher education and influencing their career choices and achievements.

agents of change working to develop more informed and actively engaged young citizens. Program leaders in the Baltimore Urban Debate League (UDL) made sure to talk about influencing change, deliberately promoting to youth the conscious link between developing skills and transferring those skills toward improving their own lives and communities. The Baltimore UDL leader noted that the league extended experiences beyond the debate tournament by sponsoring debate exhibitions at venues such as popular open markets and city hall—a reminder to participants that debate is about real people and real life.

Youth and coaches spoke about their belief in their ability to influence change. A high school debater said:

> I think that I am more likely to speak about controversial things in class—more likely to help other people, to think that I can help people with other things. I am not necessarily smarter or better because of debate, but may be in a better position to help.

A high school debate coach reinforced the notion that students were learning to effect change:

> Through debate youth are shown how their voice can make a difference, and how to argue their point of view productively. The most important lesson they learn is not to give up, to set goals, and put forth effort. They will continue debating and learn to articulate their voice.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMMING AND PRACTICE

In the ways outlined above, urban debate programs reflect a positive youth development philosophy. As defined by the National Collaboration for Youth Members (1998), the youth development approach "is a process which prepares young people to meet the challenges of adolescence and adulthood through a coordinated, progressive series of activities and experiences which help them to become socially, morally, emotionally, physically, and cognitively competent." By developing these competencies, youth are able to lead healthier, more productive lives as well as to positively influence others and their surroundings.

Because civic participation and the exercise of democratic skills are so important, we must look to a variety of settings in which youth can experience and build civic skills—not only schools. As is evident in the findings of this research, out-of-school-time programs, such as urban debate leagues, can play an important role in providing opportunities for young people to nurture and practice these skills. During out-of-school time, youth development organizations can help young people understand how politics works, see themselves as political agents, become involved in the community, make choices, practice conflict resolution, form a civic identity, and experience social diversity (Gibson, 2001).

American Youth Policy Forum (Pearson & Voke, 2003) conducted a series of forums and field trips focused on issues related to the development of effective citizenry and youth civic engagement. A few of the resulting recommendations were to:

- Increase the quality and quantity of activities in schools that support engagement skills including oral reports, persuasive debate, discussion, and group services activities
- Expand the number of schools and community programs that support youth civic engagement and service and civics instruction
- Promote a more supportive cultural environment for teaching democracy (Pearson & Voke, 2003, pp. 31–33)

Such a "supportive cultural environment" might be one in which all members feel valued and diversity is celebrated.

Several similar promising approaches program providers can use to encourage youth civic engagement are outlined in *The Civic Mission of Schools:*

- Promote discussion of current local, national, and international events, including a variety of viewpoints
- Encourage students' participation in simulations of democratic processes and procedures such as voting, trials, legislative deliberation, and diplomacy (CIRCLE, 2003).

In addition to reflecting the elements of a positive youth development philosophy, approaches to democracy skill building such as urban debate also connect to learning standards. Such activities stretch across the syllabus, including learning covered in, for example, these New York State English Language Arts and Social Studies standards:

> **New York State English Language Arts Standard 3**
> Students will listen, speak, read, and write for critical analysis and evaluation. As listeners and readers, students will analyze experiences, ideas, information, and issues presented by others using a variety of established criteria. As speakers and writers, they will use oral and written language that follows the accepted conventions of the English language to present, from a variety of perspectives, their opinions and judgments on experiences, ideas, information and issues.
>
> **New York State Social Studies Standard 5**
> Students will use a variety of intellectual skills to demonstrate their understanding of the necessity for establishing governments; the governmental system of the United States and other nations; the United States Constitution; the basic civic values of American constitutional democracy; and the roles, rights, and responsibilities of citizenship, including avenues of participation. (New York State Academy for Teaching and Learning, n.d.)

The connection between urban debate and these standards is clear. Youth development programs such as urban debate can serve as vehicles for bringing

these different strands of learning together in meaningful ways that communicate both the content and responsibilities of democracy.

Providing engaging civic and democracy development experiences during out-of-school time is challenging. Many infrastructure components are necessary to support such active civic engagement programs as community service learning, community mapping, youth organizing, and urban debate. Delivery of program activities and opportunities to youth during out-of-school time would be enhanced by a systemic community-wide approach with such infrastructure elements as:

- Buy-in from school principals and teachers
- Technology to support connections to news sources and relevant databases
- Linkages between high schools, communities, and local government organizations
- Financial support for expert facilitators and leaders
- Planning and cooperation among stakeholders
- An agreed-upon set of objectives
- Capacity-building intermediaries to provide citywide coordination and linkages between participating programs around common challenges such as resources, staffing, and sustainability

Supportive public education policy is a critical component of the development of engaged youth. Policies should expand opportunities for youth leadership and civic education, create stronger connections between schools and communities, and support the development of model democracy skill-building programs. Supporting democracy skill building for youth requires public policies that create experiences such as civic leadership internships and job shadows, promote school credit for participation in community organizing and community service, and enable development of genuine venues for youth voice such as youth councils and youth-run civic advisory boards.

Research on the current status of youth civic engagement has suggested the importance of an agenda that prepares young people to fully participate in our democracy as informed, competent, and responsible active citizens. The work of providing enriching democracy-in-action experiences for young people will take enormous collective effort by schools, government agencies, youth-serving organizations, policymakers, religious organizations, and others. Programs such as urban debate leagues serve as dynamic and inspired models that have demonstrated their value to urban youth and the broader community.

The work of providing enriching democracy-in-action experiences for young people will take enormous collective effort by schools, government agencies, youth-serving organizations, policymakers, religious organizations, and others.

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NOTE

[1] While political science literature may distinguish among the terms *democracy, citizenship, civic education*, and *civic engagement*, for the purposes of this paper, I use these terms interchangeably.