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Middle Grades Democratic Education in Neoliberal Times: Examining Youth Social Action Projects as a Path Forward

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Abstract

Although democratic education has long been considered a cornerstone of the developmentally responsive middle school model, current neoliberal priorities in education pose a particular threat to the democratic purpose of education. Due to their emphasis on student voice and civic engagement, youth social action projects present one opportunity to preserve democratic education as a focal point of the middle school concept. In this article, I offer a case description of a middle grades youth social action project. Incorporating student perspectives, I then critically examine the extent to which the project was successful in its goal of promoting student voice and present themes in the lessons students reported learning as a result of their engagement with the social action project. The findings indicate that although middle school students faced significant challenges, the social action project was nonetheless largely successful in incorporating student voice. The majority of middle school participants reported feeling that they had a voice in their school through the social action project. Middle school students also reported learning valuable lessons connected to three themes: 1) hard work and determination; 2) teamwork and leadership skills; and 3) empowerment. In closing, I offer implications for key stakeholders in middle level education concerning the path forward for democratic education in neoliberal times.

INTRODUCTION

The progressive movement, from which the middle school concept evolved, is undergirded by “the firm conviction that democracy is possible, that the democratic way of life can be lived, and that our schools should and can bring democracy to life in the curriculum, in school governance, in community relations, and in the hearts and minds of young people” (Beane, 1998, p.8). As a result, democratic education has long been considered a cornerstone of the developmentally responsive middle school model (Beane, 2005; Stowell, McDaniel & Rios, 1995) and the commitment to the democratic purpose of public education continues to be evident today in the *This We Believe* (Association for Middle Level Education [AMLE], 2015) characteristics and attributes of successful schools for young adolescents which emphasize student voice and empowerment. Student voice plays an especially critical role in democratic education and middle school philosophy. Although the rhetoric around student voice is often centered on its relationship with student engagement (Smyth, 2006), student voice is viewed as a critical feature within democratic education in that promoting students’ voice in their learning and learning environments promotes active participation rather than passive compliance.

At a time in education marked by neoliberal priorities and standardization, however, concepts such as student voice, autonomy, and student agency are at risk of being pushed to the periphery (Apple, 2011; Beane, 2015). In contrast to democratic education, current neoliberal trends in education set forth a vision of public education in which “the ideal of the citizen is that of the purchaser” (Apple, 2006, p. 32) and the perceived objective of education is to promote economic contribution (Giroux, 2009). From this vantage point, the goal of public education is not to empower future citizens but rather to prepare young people to contribute to the workforce and thus the economy through participation in capitalist ventures such as the selling and purchasing of property. In addition, the push towards standardization has also resulted in a “headlong rush into standardized testing and the consequent impoverishment of the middle school curriculum” (Dickinson & Butler, 2001, p. 2). This shift towards standardization of curriculum presents a considerable challenge for those who wish to prioritize student voice in the design of learning experiences. It is no surprise, therefore, that students have been found to experience progressively less autonomy as they move through the K-12 continuum (Hagenauer & Hascher, 2010; Hansen, 2010; Marchand, 2008).

To prepare active citizens, young people need opportunities to practice the messiness of democracy; for example, deliberation, advocacy, disagreement, and collaboration. The decision to either silence or empower student voices in classrooms, schools, and communities sets the stage for student views of what it means to be a citizen in our American society. In the absence of an explicit focus on democratic education, there is the unsettling possibility that prevailing neoliberal and teacher-centered modes of schooling may unwittingly promote passivity, obedience, and compliance rather than activism, agency, and dialogue. Through the design of learning experiences in which students examine and use their voices to take action connected to issues of importance to them, however, education can serve as an early playground for the activists of tomorrow. With that in mind, this article proposes that youth social action projects present a promising avenue for 21st century teachers to bring such experiences into their classrooms.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was three-fold: 1) to provide a detailed case description of a middle grades social action project intended to promote middle grades student voices in their school community; 2) to investigate the extent to which this social action project was successful in its goal of promoting student voice; and 3) to explore the lessons students reported learning as a result of their engagement with the social action project. To this end, this article presents a detailed case description of one iteration of a youth social action project in a large diverse mid-Atlantic public middle school, herein referred to by the pseudonym of Woodview Middle School¹. I then critically analyze the extent to which the youth social action project achieved its goal of promoting student voice using, in part, feedback from middle school students who engaged in the social action project. Next, I present themes in the lessons students reported learning as a result of their engagement with the youth social action project. Lastly, I offer three implications of these findings for the broader goal of promoting democratic education in middle schools.

In the sections that follow, I further discuss the relationship between democratic education and

the middle school concept, present a rationale for using youth social action in middle schools, and define the term “student voice” as it is used in this study.

Democratic Education and the Middle School Concept

Democratic education is built upon the premise that one of the primary goals of public education is to prepare young people for civic participation in our democracy through schools that serve as “sites of social transformation where students are educated to become informed, active, and critical citizens” (Giroux, 2009, p. 443). The Institute for Democratic Education in America (IDEA, 2017) offers the following introduction to democracy education:

The United States of America is founded on democracy and the democratic values of meaningful participation, personal initiative, and equality and justice for all. Democratic education infuses the learning process with these fundamental values of our society. Democratic education sees young people not as passive recipients of knowledge, but rather as active co-creators of their own learning. They are not the products of an education system, but rather valued participants in a vibrant learning community. (p. 1)

In this view, schools should promote active engagement not only in learning but also in the various communities in which they live and learn. Far from promoting passive compliance, democratic schools encourage students to question the status quo and engage in the pursuit of equity and justice in their communities, including their schools. In so doing, young people in democratic schools are provided with early experiences engaging in what Dewey (1940) refers to as our “creative democracy” and Wolk (2004) describes as “democracy as a verb.”

The commitment to democratic education in middle level education is evident in multiple areas of *This We Believe* (AMLE, 2010). First, the following two goals for middle level education outline the centrality of civic action and democracy education to the middle school concept:

¹ pseudonym

- 1) Understand local, national, and global civic responsibilities and demonstrate active citizenship through participation in endeavors that serve and benefit those larger communities;
- 2) Become actively aware of the larger world, asking significant and relevant questions about that world and wrestling with big ideas and questions for which there may not be one right answer. (p. 10)

Second, one of the core attributes of effective middle schools is that it must be “empowering: providing all students with the knowledge and skills they need to take control of their lives” (AMLE, 2010, p. 14). Lastly, one of the ways in which the middle school concept aims to empower young adolescents is by creating opportunities for students to have a voice in their learning. For example, AMLE (2010) identifies “relevant curriculum” and “active, purposeful learning” as key characteristics of effective middle schools. These characteristics suggest that if indeed teachers aim to make middle school curriculum relevant and purposeful to students, middle school learners should be positioned to make meaningful decisions about how and what they learn.

To fulfill the democratic goals that undergird middle school philosophy, the challenge, therefore, is to create relevant curriculum that engages students in active, purposeful learning as a means to prepare them to be active participants in our American democracy. Youth social action, which is the focus of this study, offers one opportunity to take up this challenge. Youth social action also presents an opportunity to preserve democratic education as a focal point of the middle school concept.

Youth Social Action

Informed by theoretical underpinnings such as critical pedagogies, democratic education, and empowerment education, youth social action aims to empower young people to take action that challenges the status quo. Many definitions exist for youth social action. In a review of literature on youth social action, Unell (2013) posits that despite these multiple definitions, there exists nonetheless a “common interpretation of youth social action as

- Group-based, involving young people in working together and supporting each other towards agreed goals. While some groups

may be locally-based and depend upon face-to-face communication, digital communications free young people to take collective action nationally, internationally and globally.

- Activist in nature. Young people identify an issue of common concern to the group, and work to achieve positive change. Once again, this may be an issue arising from their immediate environment, such as school or community, or it may be something that concerns them at a national or international level.
- Following a step-by-step process. A planned process is integral to youth social action. The young people take responsibility for each stage of planning and activity directed towards an agreed objective.
- Owned by young people. While appropriate adult facilitation is critical, the action is driven and managed by young people themselves. In pursuing their goals, young people acquire real-life experience in managing social change.” (p. 18)

Student voice plays a pivotal role in all stages of a youth social action project. In that youth social action is “activist in nature,” there is also great emphasis placed on examining and questioning the status quo. As such, youth social action typically engages students in learning about and addressing issues of power, which in turn provides them with “real-life experience in managing social change.” While other experiential pedagogies such as service learning, for example, do not preclude the exploration of power dynamics, youth social action is often specifically designed to engage students in deconstructing and rethinking power dynamics.

The literature on youth social action also provides some useful clarification regarding the role of the adult in an approach to learning that is intended to be “owned by young people” (Unell, 2013, p. 18). Unell (2013), for example, refers to “adults as enablers of youth social action,” asserting that although youth social action is by nature student-driven, “successful youth social action requires expert and sympathetic facilitation by adults” (p. 19). In this way, adults who engage in youth social action with their students are expected to play a supportive, facilitative role that does not undermine the young people’s ownership of the work.

Why use youth social action in middle school? Youth social action is associated with numerous positive student outcomes including the development of new skills in the areas of communication, leadership, planning and problem solving as well as socio-emotional benefits such as confidence, resilience, and agency (McNeil, Reeder, & Rich, 2012). In addition, as it concerns the middle grades learner specifically, youth social action presents several unique opportunities to address the intellectual development of young adolescents. The middle grade years are characterized by rapid physical, intellectual, emotional, moral, and social development (Caskey & Anfara, 2007). As it concerns intellectual development in particular, AMLE (2010) offers the following concerning the evolving capabilities of the middle grades learner:

Changes in the patterns of thinking become evident in the ideas and questions middle grades students express about the world and how it functions. These shifts may be apparent in the questions they pose to each other and to trusted adults, in their reflections about personal experiences, in their view on moral issues, and through their perceptions of stories, images and humor. They reveal new capacities for thinking about how they learn, for considering multiple ideas, and for planning steps to carry out their own learning activities. However, because cognitive growth occurs gradually and sporadically, most middle grades students still require ongoing, concrete, experiential learning in order to achieve. (p. 6)

This quote illustrates two aspects of the evolving middle school mind that are especially well-suited to youth social action. First, youth social action is designed to investigate the emerging questions of young adolescents regarding the world in which we live. And second, in that it is “owned by young people” (Unell, 2013, p. 18) but facilitated by adults, youth social action capitalizes on the capacity of young adolescents to plan steps for their own learning while also offering opportunities for concrete experiential learning alongside an adult.

Although youth social action has the potential to address many of the AMLE characteristics, the centrality of youth voice and action in this pedagogy makes it especially conducive to the following two: 1) Students and teachers are

engaged in active, purposeful learning, and 2) Curriculum that is challenging, exploratory, integrative, and relevant.

Students and Teachers Are Engaged in Active, Purposeful Learning

Active, purposeful learning is at the core of youth social action since it challenges students and teachers to defy pervasive models of teacher-centered instruction and passive learning through the design of “hands-joined” units of instruction that give students agency in what and how they will learn. The role of “hands-joined” learning in the middle school concept is described by AMLE (2012) as follows:

Developmentally responsive middle grades educators take the concept of hands-on activities further by promoting what might be termed “hands-joined” activities, ones that teachers and students work together in developing. Such activities foster ownership and lead to levels of understanding unlikely to be achieved when students are simply completing teacher-made assignments. (p. 16)

This vision of hands-joined learning aligns nicely with Unell’s (2013) assertion that social action should be “owned by young people” (p. 18) yet facilitated by adults. This balance of student-driven activist work and adult facilitation positions middle level teachers to meaningfully support their students in developing as autonomous 21st century learners.

Curriculum Is Challenging, Exploratory, Integrative, and Relevant

Through the investigation of a community issue of interest, youth social action poses an opportunity for middle level students to explore complex real-world problems, engaging skills and processes that cut across multiple disciplines. This pedagogy thus makes it possible for middle level teams of teachers to develop interdisciplinary units of instruction that are rooted in the exploration of a shared issue of interest, yet nonetheless standards-based. Rigor is elevated by a commitment to active, purposeful learning, which challenges students to engage higher-order thinking skills to understand, analyze, evaluate, and create throughout all phases of the work. In this way, social action projects make the development of a relevant curriculum possible by engaging

students in work that is not only relevant to their lives, communities, and own ideas, but also relevant to the cognitive work required of 21st century learning skills such as critical thinking and problem-solving (Trilling & Fadel, 2009).

Student Voices

Empowering student voices is a shared goal in both democratic education and middle level education. In youth social action, student voices inform what and how they are learning. They are also actively engaged in the decision-making process as the work evolves and next steps are crafted. Student voice, while oft-touted, can be a slippery concept to define (Cook-Sather, 2006, 2014). Mitra (2007), however, offers the following distinction between typical student involvement in school activities and “student voice”:

Simply put, student voice initiatives push schools to reevaluate who gets to define the problems of a school and who gets to try to improve them. Typical student activities in U.S. high schools include planning school dances and choosing a homecoming court. Student voice denotes considerably different opportunities for young people. It describes the many ways in which youth could actively participate in the school decisions that will shape their lives and the lives of their peers. (p. 727)

Creating space for student voices to be heard in school-based decision-making as well as the design of their learning experiences is especially critical to democratic education since in its absence, students are being implicitly taught to be passive members of their learning communities and this implicit passivity, or worse compliance, is antithetical to the active citizenship that democratic education aims to promote.

Methodology

Context

The youth social action project that is described in this article was developed in the context of a collaborative inquiry group of four middle school student teachers and one teacher educator (myself). Since the collaborative inquiry work is not the focus of this article, I have chosen not to extrapolate on this work beyond what is needed to make sense of the

findings of this study. As part of their participation in the collaborative inquiry group, the student teachers aimed to create a hands-joined learning experience as a means to experiment promoting student voice. Based on the input of their students, their work eventually took the form of a social action project. Throughout this study, the student teachers served as co-investigators as we sought to understand the extent to which our project was achieving its goals. For those readers who may be interested in reading more about the collaborative inquiry process and the student teacher experiences, these findings have been reported in detail in “How Can I Do *This* There? Reform-Oriented Collaborative Inquiry as a Pedagogy for Student Teaching in Middle School” (DeMink-Carthew, 2017).

Participants

The youth social action project described in this article was collaboratively enacted with a group of middle school students at a large diverse mid-Atlantic public middle school, herein referred to by the pseudonym of Woodview Middle School (WMS). At the time of this study, WMS enrolled approximately 1,000 sixth, seventh, and eighth grade students in a large suburban Mid-Atlantic public school district. One hundred four students participated in the social action project across four seventh/eighth grade homerooms. According to publicly available demographic data, at the time of this study, the WMS student population was approximately 50% Black/African American, 30% Hispanic/Latino, with fewer than 10% each of White, Asian, and two or more races, and the remaining unspecified. Approximately 65% of the student population was eligible for free or reduced lunch.

Data Sources

Inquiry group audiotapes and memos.

Each inquiry group meeting consisted of dedicated time for inquiry group members to report on recent project-specific events and plan for upcoming activities. I recorded and took detailed notes on each inquiry group meeting, which I then reformatted after each meeting into a memo for the student teachers to review for clarity and accuracy.

Student work samples. Throughout the social action project, the middle school students completed and/or created the following types of

work samples: input regarding project ideas, student interest surveys, a summary of class survey results, a dream list of school-wide initiatives to promote positive school culture, a variety of student-created proposals, and advertisements for upcoming events.

Post-classroom visit memos. I observed in each homeroom at least twice at various intervals of the social action project. These observations were informal and for the purpose of seeing the social action project at work to assist me in writing the case description of the project. After each observation, I recorded a short memo describing classroom activities and any additional information shared by the student teacher and students regarding the work.

Final reflections. At the end of the social action project, the middle school students completed a final reflection designed to collect student input regarding (1) positive and negative experiences with the project, (2) the extent to which they felt the project gave them a voice in their school, (3) whether or not the students felt the project made a difference in their school, and (4) what lessons they felt they learned through participation in the project. A full list of prompts is provided in Table 1. Although 104 students participated in the social action project, we only received parental consent and student assent for 28 students. Due to absences and various interruptions to homeroom time, several students were unable to complete the final reflections, resulting in a final sample of 21.

Table 1

Final Reflection Prompts

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1. **Do you feel that this project gave you a voice in your school? (Circle one: Yes No) Why or why not?**
 2. **Do you feel that this project made a difference in your school? (Circle one: Yes No) Why or why not?**
 3. **What lesson are you taking away from this project?**
 4. **Think about the work you did in your homeroom period to promote a positive school culture at your school. What were some of the highlights of this experience for you?**
 5. **Describe your favorite part of this project. What was so great about this part?**
 6. **What was your least favorite part of this project? Why did you dislike it?**
 7. **Would you want to do a project like this again? (Circle one: Yes No) Why or why not?**
 8. **If you had to do this project again, what would you want to do differently?**
-

Table 2

Research Questions and Data Sources

Research Question	Data Sources
1. How was a social action project enacted with middle school students at Woodview Middle School?	Inquiry group audiotapes and memos Student work samples Post-classroom visit observation memos
2. To what extent did the social action project achieve the goal of promoting student voice?	Inquiry group audiotapes and memos Student work samples Post-classroom visit observation memos Final reflections
3. What lessons do students learn by participating in a youth social action project?	Final reflections “Lessons to remember” banners

“Lessons to Remember” banners. On the final celebration day of the social action project, the students also completed a banner activity in which each homeroom created a banner on which each student recorded one lesson they felt they were taking away from the experience of participating in this project.

Data Analysis

Table 2 presents an overview of which data sources were analyzed for each of the following research questions.

1. How was a social action project enacted with middle school students at Woodview Middle School?
2. To what extent did the social action project achieve the goal of promoting student voice?
3. What lessons did students learn through participation in a youth social action project?

Data analysis for the first research question consisted of reviewing the data sources and writing a description of each phase of the social action project. To accomplish this task, I sequentially organized units of data from relevant data sources into a data display consisting of two parallel outlines – one describing the phases of the social action project and another identifying units of data associated with each phase. I then shared an abridged version of this table with the student teachers, who reviewed the table guided by the following questions: *Does this capture the stages of the youth social action project? What might we need to take out or add in?* Based on their feedback, we then revised the table until we felt it accurately captured the key events in each phase of the social action project. Informed by Marshall and Rossman’s (2010) assertion that in “choosing words to summarize and reflect the complexity of the data, the researcher is engaging in the interpretive act, lending shape and form—meaning—to mountains of raw data” (p. 222), interpretation continued through the writing of the final case description.

Data analysis for the second research question consisted of qualitatively analyzing all data sources associated with the case and coding units of data that were related to “student voice,” either those that promoted or limited student voice. Middle school student perceptions were

then incorporated into the analysis using the middle school student feedback. To analyze student feedback, I began by tabulating the yes and no responses to the final reflection prompts that explicitly targeted “student voice” (prompts #1 and #2). I then inductively “pattern coded” (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014, p. 86) the responses to the follow-up questions for themes. As themes began to take shape, I also made note of solitary responses that did not seem to fit in with developed themes. I then deductively coded student responses from other sections of the final reflection, incorporating units of data into existing themes, and creating new themes as they emerged in the new data. I then organized all units of data into a “data display” (Miles et al., 2014, p. 105), which was subsequently used as the basis of my writing of the results.

Lastly, data analysis for the final research question was guided by Miles and colleagues’ (2014) framework of “three concurrent flows of activity: 1) data condensation, 2) data display, and 3) conclusion drawing/verification” (p. 12). To this end, I inductively coded student responses to Prompt #3 and individual statements on the “lessons to remember” banners, displayed the resulting units of data by emergent codes, and used this display to draw conclusions concerning themes in student responses.

The Case Description: The Social Action Project

In the sections that follow, I provide a descriptive case to illustrate how the social action project was enacted at WMS by the student teachers and their middle school students. To assist in clarity, I present their work in five phases: 1) selecting a project focus; 2) investigating the essential question; 3) sharing and refining ideas; 4) taking action; and 5) reflecting and celebrating.

Selecting a Project Focus

As the first step in developing a hands-joined learning experience, the student teachers solicited student input to inform the selection of the project focus. In each of their homeroom classes, the student teachers facilitated a whole class discussion concerning the following prompts: *What issues concern you personally? What issues concern you in your community? What issues concern you in the world?* Individual student responses to these prompts

were then collected and analyzed for themes per class. Upon comparing themes across classes, there were several points of overlap, many of which related to student concerns regarding a lack of community in their school, frequent negative rather than positive interactions among students and teachers, as well as a general desire to change something about their school to “make it more fun” (e.g., getting rid of school uniforms, making lunch less stressful, less yelling and more positive discipline, less time spent on test preparation). The group therefore decided to engage the students in a social action project driven by the following essential question: *How can we promote a positive school culture in our school community?* The openness of this question was intended to allow individual students and groups to explore a wide range of issues concerning school culture that were of personal interest to them.

Investigating the Essential Question

The social action project kicked off in each student teacher’s assigned homeroom class. They introduced the essential question – *How can we promote a positive school culture in our school community?* – explaining this focus was rooted in student input. The student teachers also presented an overview of the activities they envisioned as part of the process (i.e., researching, proposing, and enacting various initiatives), emphasizing that students make decisions throughout the project. The student teachers then helped the students explore a “positive school culture,” engaging their classes in (1) individual and small group reflection on what the term meant to them, (2) online research using the key term “positive school culture,” and (3) initial brainstorming concerning how the class could promote a positive school culture. Students at this stage began to propose various ideas, many of which expressed their desire to influence aspects of schooling (e.g., lunchroom policies, school uniform policies, discipline systems, schedules). A few students expressed frustration that WMS did not have an elected student government or voluntary student leadership club.

At this point, the group decided to share a survey with the students from the Institute for Democratic Education in America (IDEA, 2017b) entitled *What’s Happening at Your School?* since there was considerable overlap between items in the survey and the characteristics of “positive school culture” they had been

identifying. To inform their next steps, students in each class then anonymously completed the survey, developed a system for tallying the results, and interpreted the findings. Using items from the survey for which there were especially low scores, the student began to narrow their research with the aim of developing concrete ideas for addressing this issue. Throughout this process, students were encouraged to consider do-ability and perspective taking as they considered why certain rules were in place. Students also frequently challenged one another to re-think ideas that were too “out there,” too radical, resulting in some lively debates that challenged students to consider a range of factors that influence school policies.

Sharing and Refining Ideas

Once each class had settled on a master list of ideas, time was set aside for sharing across classes, with the goal of helping students refine their list of ideas before proposing specific student-led initiatives. An assistant principal was invited to listen to some of the students’ ideas during this sharing session as a means to solicit some informal feedback. This assistant principal, who had been enthusiastic about the project so far, readily agreed and, at the last minute, chose to also invite the school principal to join. Unfortunately, although the project had been approved by members of the school leadership team, the school principal had a limited understanding of the social action project and was quick to criticize the ideas presented by the groups in the sessions he attended. In one class, the student teachers reported the principal appeared frustrated and took over one of the sharing sessions entirely, delivering a stern lecture regarding the failing grades and bad behavior of some students.

After this interaction, the students were distressed. To debrief, in the next project meeting, the student teachers gave the students an opportunity to share their concerns. They also reassured the students that they did nothing wrong, emphasizing that it had been a miscommunication. Nonetheless, the student teachers also seized on the teachable moment to make it clear that conflict is an expected part of changing the status quo. Despite this upsetting incident, the sharing sessions did present an opportunity for students to compile ideas across classes and a “Dream List” (Table 3) was created that represented all of the ideas.

Table 3

“Dream List” of Student Ideas for Promoting Positive School Culture

Idea/Goal	Specific Possibilities
School Uniforms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Last week of school- no uniforms ● Student-designed T-shirts ● Khakis but you choose your top ● Incentive program to earn a free dress day <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Coupons on Monday AM based on previous week’s grades/behavior ○ Pay coupon on Friday to get a free dress day
Class Selection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● More choices for creative arts and career readiness courses ● Enrichment choices across whole school ● Introducing an advisory/morning meeting to build relationships between students and student-teacher relationships
Student Voice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Student leadership group/club that meets with the administrators
Locker Time	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Additional time to go to lockers between classes and before/after lunch
Lunch	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Line up by first class that gets there (Get there first, exit first) ● No cutting time short ● Music ● Sit where we want and be permitted to socialize
Positive Reinforcement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Phone calls for good behavior ● Bring back token system for positive behavior (e.g., coupons redeemable at snack line) ● Quiet transitions for a week=homework pass ● Grade level “pick-your-party”
Spirit Week	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Theme days (Ex. Twin day, “What you looking at?” day, Pajama day, 90s day, Dress your best day, Celebrity day, Favorite color day) ● Activities <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Deck the Halls ○ School dance ○ Random acts of kindness ○ Music in the cafeteria ○ Student-teacher basketball game
Teacher Appreciation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Teacher Appreciation Week ● Positive comment cards during Teacher Appreciation Week <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Throughout the year, profile and commend exceptional teacher allies with an announcement, banner and certificate

Due to this tense interaction, the student teachers decided to protect the students strategically from further incidents by acting as go-between advocates for the middle school student perspective. This meant that student ideas were subsequently communicated to administration by the student teachers. To this end, the student teachers then decided to meet with the school principal to reiterate the intentions of the social action project, begin a conversation regarding the student Dream List, and seek his input on proposed ideas. From this

meeting, the student teachers were able to gain insight into the history of various initiatives at their school as well as the current political context within which the school was operating. Some student ideas were deemed not viable by the principal (e.g., any changes to school uniforms), others were explained as potentially problematic (e.g., shifting class selections, adding locker time), and the remaining ideas were given the green light. The group also first learned of an upcoming school-hosted “Community Day” and were invited to engage

students in helping to organize this event. In the end, the group was given permission to move forward with the following ideas:

1. Helping to organize a Spirit Week
2. Helping to organize a Teacher Appreciation Week
3. Helping to organize Community Day
4. Developing ideas for a positive behavior system
5. Developing ideas for a student leadership club

Taking Action

Having received the green light on five proposed ideas, the student teachers reported back to the students and worked together to determine how to proceed. The following sections describe the work associated with each of these ideas.

Spirit Week. Students were very excited to hear about the prospect of Spirit Week and due to time constraints and student enthusiasm, each of the classes were subsequently assigned a chunk of the planning. Tasks included: 1) deciding on daily themes for Spirit Week dress-up; 2) helping to orchestrate a Deck the Halls activity; 3) creating posters and flyers; and 4) advertising and communicating key details to other teachers and students. Throughout planning, student teachers worked closely with school administration, filling them in on student progress and communicating new ideas back and forth. Student teachers advocated for students' favorite themes for Spirit Week dress-up days, for example, and the school principal in turn requested that the group orchestrate a "Deck the Halls" activity in which teams researched and decorated their hall with information about a designated college. While the idea for this activity did not originate with the students, the student teachers and students took on the planning of this event as well. The resulting Spirit Week was an exciting time. Music was played during school announcements, students enthusiastically dressed according to daily themes, the halls were decked, and the week culminated in a school dance.

After the excitement of Spirit Week, the student teachers decided to reorganize the students in all classes into four interest groups (based on student preference), each focusing on one of the most popular approved dream list ideas. This resulted in the option to learn about, propose, and in some cases, enact ideas associated with

each of the following initiatives: (1) Teacher Appreciation Week; (2) Community Day; (3) positive reinforcement/reward system; and (4) student leadership. What follows is a brief description of how each of these interest groups proceeded.

Teacher Appreciation Week. The group of students in this interest group initiated a campaign to collect positive comments from students about their teachers and then deliver these to teachers on a designated day. To orchestrate this undertaking, the students distributed comment sheets to all classes, gave instructions, and collected completed comment sheets. They then sorted through all comments, ensuring they were appropriate, and creating piles for each teacher. Since this was a new and rather large undertaking, this group encountered several logistical problems and engaged in a great deal of trouble-shooting. Collecting comments on all teachers, for example, resulted in a tremendous amount of paper to sort through, ultimately resulting in some students collecting and others forming an assembly line of sorts to review each comment and organize them into piles. Nonetheless, the students were able to complete the task (with a few students and student teachers volunteering additional time throughout the day) and delivered the comments to teachers on a designated day. In the end, they received many words of thanks from individual teachers for taking the time to orchestrate this work.

Community Day. Although this was the most popular event selected by students, resulting in the largest group of students spread across two classes, this group faced numerous challenges. As previously mentioned, students were invited to help plan activities for this upcoming event that was to be hosted at the middle school. The community partner in charge of orchestrating this event, however, proved difficult to reach and failed to turn up for an in-person meeting to discuss the event. In the meantime, the student teachers supported students in brainstorming activities for the event, including an idea they were especially excited about – a teacher v. student basketball game. In the midst of this, however, the group received the disappointing news that the community event organizer had moved the event to another location several miles from the school. While they attempted once again to find a way for students to be involved, the combination of the shift in location and the lack of communication resulted in the

work of students being reduced to advertising for the event by creating and hanging posters around the school. Students and student teachers were understandably frustrated by this change of events.

Positive Reinforcement and Student Leadership. This interest group was by far the smallest, consisting of 15 students, and was purposefully placed with a student teacher who was working with a mentor teacher who had expressed an interest in initiating a student government and/or revitalizing the school-wide positive behavior incentive system. Unfortunately, the students and student teacher, who had intended to develop a proposal for a positive reinforcement/reward system, struggled to maintain focus, resulting in planning sessions that were generally unproductive. Although some students continued to investigate ideas and the mentor teacher offered input occasionally, they were ultimately unsuccessful in proposing a coherent vision.

A small group of five students, however, was committed to developing a proposal for a student leadership club of some sort, which in the end they hoped would continue to advocate for some of the other ideas that remained on the dream list. As they worked, the student teacher offered support, assisting them in organizing some of their ideas in writing and challenging them to think through not only their rationale but also the specifics as much as possible. The students ultimately decided to propose a weekly after-school club, which they envisioned would engage students in continuing the work of promoting a positive school culture while learning valuable leadership skills. The student teacher served as an editor for their final product and the resulting proposal was a two-page document with subheads such as, “Why we want this club,” “Who will be in the club” and “What will the club do?” At the end of this study, discussions concerning how to start this club for the following year were ongoing and next steps remained up in the air.

Reflecting and Celebrating

In this final phase, all students returned to their original homeroom classrooms to reflect on their experiences with the social action project by way of the final reflection. On the official last day of the project, all homerooms had a popsicle party and award ceremony. Each student was called up to the front of the class and awarded a

certificate for their participation in the hard work of promoting a positive school culture. Three additional awards were also given to students for exceptional contributions in the following categories: 1) most creative ideas; 2) leadership; and 3) enthusiasm and dedication. As a closure activity, while students enjoyed their popsicles and socialized, they were also asked to write one memory or lesson they would always remember onto a “Lessons to Remember” banner that was displayed in the classroom.

A Critical Analysis of Student Voice Within the Social Action Project

Throughout the social action project, middle school students were given numerous opportunities to express their opinions and inform the direction of the work. Although the students did not always get the outcomes they had hoped for, the project nonetheless provided a new venue for student voice. First, in identifying a project focus, the social action project began by collecting student input regarding topics that were important to them. This critical first step placed student voice front and center from the very beginning of the project and ultimately resulted in a project focus that was informed by student ideas. Second, when launching the project, the student teachers emphasized the integral role that student voice would play in the social action project itself by introducing the essential question and the IPARDC process. This gave students a sense of the big picture and positioned them to engage in the process rather than passively participate in tasks as designated. Third, the students researched and brainstormed multiple initiatives that they felt would be beneficial, shared these with a range of audiences, and eventually compiled a dream list of ideas. These ideas were generated by students and thus a strong example of student voice. Fourth, this dream list was shared with the school administration. While this was a disappointing experience for the students in some regards, the sharing of these ideas nonetheless meant that the students were given a voice in a conversation in which they were typically unrepresented. And, in the end, some of their ideas were well-received and given the green light (Spirit Week and Teacher Appreciation Week). Lastly, student voice was incorporated in the implementation of those approved initiatives that came to fruition as well as in the creation of the proposal for a student leadership group.

Some events and decisions, however, limited the role of student voice in the social action project. First, striking the appropriate balance between student ownership and adult facilitation was challenging, especially given that social action was new to the student teachers and the students. While students played an active role in key decisions throughout the project, it would be untrue to say that the students were in charge of the process. In the end, the student teachers played a larger role in facilitating the process while the students played a larger role in the development of the ideas. Although this was perhaps an appropriate balance given the circumstances, it also meant that there were limits to the extent to which students “owned” this work.

Second, the incident in which the school principal responded negatively to student ideas was in conflict with the express goal of encouraging students to use their voices. Two students referenced this meeting as their least favorite part of the project, explaining that “it felt bad” and “I dislike[d] it because we had been planning the meeting for a long time.” This incident also resulted in the decision that the student teachers would act as go-betweens, protecting students from any further possible confrontations. While this was a well-intentioned pedagogic move, it also meant that while student voice was represented via the ideas that were shared, students often did not have a literal voice in the discussions. This serves as an important reminder of the power that adults have to use their actions to encourage, discourage, or silence student voices.

Lastly, the rejection of some student ideas could be interpreted as minimizing student voice. Certainly, this was a disappointment and suggests that the outcome of student efforts to make their voices heard is important. That being said, as is true in democratic societies, speaking up and advocating for a cause does not necessarily result in desired outcomes. To the contrary, operating in democratic spaces often means that compromises must be made.

Student Perceptions Regarding Student Voice

Student feedback regarding their perceptions of whether or not the project gave them a voice were largely encouraging. In response to prompt #1 (*Do you feel that this project gave you a voice in your school?*), 18 students responded

yes and three responded no. In response to prompt #2 (*Do you feel that this project made a difference in your school?*), 19 students responded yes, one responded no, and one did not respond. Across student responses, a vast majority of students cited the fact that their ideas were actually implemented as evidence that they had a voice in the experience. Such responses included, for example, “because we got most or half of our ideas accepted” and “our ideas were heard and put into action sooner than I expected.” Students who felt the project made a difference in the school also reported that they felt this way because “our ideas were accepted by teachers and changed school.” Spirit Week and the block party were cited as examples of “some things we have never done before.” The emphasis in these responses on student ideas (e.g., “my ideas,” “our ideas”) suggests that the use of student-generated ideas played an important role in students’ perceptions of having a voice. If the classes had been instead tasked with helping to implement pre-designated school-wide events, I suspect that fewer students would have responded yes. One student response in particular underscores this point – “I felt like this project not only gave me a voice, but all students in general because it was a student-run project basically.”

Many students also directly referenced school leadership in their responses, explaining that they felt they had a voice because, for example, the “administration listened to my ideas” and because “we got admin to help us!” These responses suggest that student perceptions of having a voice in school was tied not only to opportunities to express their ideas, but also to the extent that school personnel were open to and responsive to their ideas. The largely positive tone of these references to the school administration also suggests that the initial let-down of the sharing meeting with the school administrators was overshadowed by the eventual approval of some of the student-suggested ideas.

Not all students shared the perception that they had a voice in their school through the social action project, however. Three students responded “no” to prompt #1, two of whom offered the following explanations: “People still act crazy and a little has changed,” and “Either way there are still things that we can’t do.” These responses seem to indicate that these students felt like the small changes that were made were too inconsequential to warrant a “yes.” Likewise,

one student circled “no” in response to prompt #2 and offered the following explanation: “the school got stricter.” Unfortunately, we are left to guess at the experiences that led this student to respond in this way. Nonetheless, these responses serve as a reminder that while the youth social action project may have been a step in the right direction, for some students it might have felt insignificant in the bigger school picture. This also further underscores the extent to which students are cognizant of implicit power dynamics in the school communities in which they learn.

Lessons to Remember

Although students responded with a wide range of lessons, three themes were apparent across their responses: 1) hard work and determination; 2) teamwork and leadership skills; and 3) empowerment. Lessons concerning “hard work” appeared frequently across data sources and the consensus seemed to be that hard work and determination can pay off. Some illustrative examples included, “If I set my mind to do something and I work for it I can do whatever I want,” “When you work hard for something, it happens,” and “If you work hard, good things will come out of it.” Students also shared various iterations of the phrases “Never give up on your dreams” and “Anything is possible,” although one student also tempered this with the lesson, “Don’t expect to get everything you want.”

The phrase “teamwork” occurred most frequently across data sources. While many students simply wrote “teamwork” and one student wrote “teamwork=fun,” other responses indicate that students learned about the importance of teamwork as well. Students wrote, for example, that “when we work together we can make AWESOME things” and “teamwork brings success.” One student responded that she also learned “how to work with people and how to have better teamwork” and another student asserted that the project helped him learn “how to be a good leader.”

Lastly, students shared a variety of empowering lessons concerning the importance of their voice. Such lessons included “believe in yourself,” “how to speak up,” and “don’t be afraid to ask (Spirit Week).” One student wrote in bold letters on the banner that the project was a “boost self of steam [sic].” Additionally, students reported valuable lessons concerning the role they can

play in change, writing in responses such as, “I can make a change and do something good” and “We can change the world.” One student chose to borrow from the famous words of Carl Bard to write the following on their class banner: “Though no one can go back and make a brand new start, anyone can start from now and make a brand new ending.”

Discussion

The findings indicate that although not all of the initiatives proposed by students were successful, the social action project was nonetheless largely successful in incorporating student voice. This suggests that the process involved in social action is perhaps more important than the outcome. While at first glance one might worry that the sometimes difficult and disappointing experiences the students faced in this project would result in disenchantment, the final reflections indicate that the vast majority of students felt they had a voice in their school as a result of participating in the social action project. This is an encouraging finding since it means that fear of disappointment should not dissuade middle school teachers from embarking on social action projects with their students. While the outcome may be out of their control, the process of engaging in social action has value in and of itself.

Nonetheless, the role of adults in social action projects remains an important consideration. Adults who aim to support students in social action projects should be prepared to serve multiple roles that may feel unfamiliar. The student teachers in this study, for example, anticipated that they would be the facilitators of the social action project but also found themselves fulfilling the roles of advocates, guides, and protectors as needed. After the initial tense interaction between students and the school principal, for example, the student teachers decided to take student ideas to the school administrators themselves as a means to protect the students from future confrontation. In this role, they advocated for student ideas, shared the response with students, and offered guidance regarding how to proceed.

Similarly, the role of the school principal in the decision-making around student ideas underscores the prevailing power structure within schools – namely, that students have little, adults have more, and that school administrators have most. Students are not

naïve to this dynamic. To the contrary, the students in this study were very aware that to make any change in their school, they would need the approval of the school administrators. The fact that they were pleasantly surprised that some of their ideas were well-received suggests that, in this particular school, the students believed that they had little decision-making power. Regardless of whether or not this perception was accurate, the perception itself is of significant concern since the assumption that the individual is powerless undermines the central premise of our American democracy.

Lastly, despite the mixed results of their social action project, the students gained first-hand experience in challenging the status quo. In doing so, they reported learning valuable lessons. Notably, these lessons resonate with some important realities of citizenship in our American democracy in that (1) active citizenship is indeed hard work, (2) effectuating change often requires collaboration, and (3) democracy is built upon the premise that an individual voice matters and can make a difference. This suggests that youth social action projects such as the one investigated in this article present a rich opportunity for students to gain first-hand experience in the hard but important work of active citizenship and subsequently learn valuable lessons that may be otherwise absent in their school day.

Envisioning a Path Forward for Democratic Education in Middle Schools

The findings of this study serve as a reminder that our schools are not devoid of power dynamics and that adults in positions of power within schools have the opportunity to either empower or silence student voices throughout the school day. If the aim is to prepare active citizens who do not passively accept the status quo that they inherit, school communities should present students with opportunities to disrupt this power dynamic. School communities must create purposeful opportunities for students to practice “democracy as a verb,” challenging students to interrogate the world around them, their school included, and take action. Youth social action projects that position teachers and students to engage collaboratively in social activism, such as the one at the heart of this article, present a rich opportunity to engage in this work.

To carve out spaces for student voice and social action within schools, there is much work to be done on many fronts. In keeping with the premise of democratic education, this work calls on us to embrace our own roles as active citizens by advocating and taking action within our circles of influence. Middle school leaders and educators, for example, must remind each other of the broader purpose of democratic education and work together to ensure that decisions that impact schools and classrooms are in keeping with these principles. The necessity of authentic student voice (not merely input or involvement) in school leadership and decision-making, for example, should be a non-negotiable. Likewise, middle level teacher educators should examine the extent to which their teacher preparation programs are preparing preservice teachers to create democratic learning environments and make adjustments accordingly. And middle level special interest groups should partner with other groups committed to democratic education (e.g., Institute for Democratic Education in America) to ensure that policymakers are aware of the critical importance of democratic education.

Those of us who are educators in middle schools and middle level teacher education programs have an especially vital role to play in that we must be mindful to practice what we preach. Middle school teachers should intentionally select pedagogic approaches such as social action that provide opportunities for students to interrogate the world around them and engage in social activism. Middle school leaders must strive to create organizational structures that facilitate these pedagogies as well as professional learning opportunities that can serve to deepen the capacity for teachers to embrace and enact youth social action. Likewise, middle level teacher educators must emphasize the centrality of pedagogies such as youth social action to the middle school curriculum and prioritize the preparation of preservice teachers to enact such pedagogies. Given the challenges of current neoliberal trends in education, it is also imperative that preservice teachers be prepared to serve as advocates for democratic education in their future schools. This preparation should include, for example, the explicit teaching of advocacy skills as they apply to the unique challenges of democratic teaching in today’s schools (DeMink-Carthew & Bishop, 2017). In other words, preservice teachers must also be prepared to engage as active citizens in their future schools, investigating issues of critical

importance in education and using their voices to take action.

Democratic education is critical to middle level education but, on a more fundamental level, it is also critical to our American society. The erosion of democratic education poses a risk to American democracy in that it leaves future generations of citizens ill-equipped to engage in the democratic process and, when needed, use their voices to challenge power. If the past is any indication of the future, the challenges of tomorrow will call on American citizens to play a crucial role in carrying the torch of core democratic values such as equality, justice, and diversity. As neoliberal reform-efforts shape K-12 education in ways that reflect shifting priorities, it is up to this generation of educators and all who support them to ensure that the democratic purpose of schooling is not forgotten.

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