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## Reading and Writing with a Public Purpose: Fostering Middle School Students' Academic and Critical Community Literacies through Debate

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**ABSTRACT:** Middle school is a crucial transition period for adolescents; in addition to beginning to grapple with the academic literacy demands of college and career readiness, they are working to find their place in public life and developing opinions about civic issues. This article presents debate as a literacy practice that is uniquely suited to helping middle school students increase their academic reading comprehension skills while also honing their critical literacy skills and capitalizing on their developing civic identities. Our study extends the established body of literature about the benefits of classroom debate by focusing on the impact of extracurricular, community-based debate among students in a large northeastern public school district. We use a critical literacy framework and mixed methods approach including analysis of standardized test scores of 179 debaters, as well as 34 interviews with students, teachers, and administrators, in order to explore the impacts of voluntary, community debate participation. Our findings demonstrate how debate encourages students to analyze complex texts, take multiple perspectives on controversial issues, and use their voices to advocate for social justice. Our findings speak to the power of community literacy initiatives to support academic development and foster critical literacies.

**Keywords:** debate, academic literacy, critical literacy, civic identity



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*Resolved: The benefits of nuclear power outweigh the potential risks.*

*“In your third contention, you claimed that terrorist attacks can happen on nuclear facilities, but are you aware that, according to my sources, nuclear power can actually protect us from terrorism?”*

*“But do you remember North Korea’s hack on Sony Pictures? Or the attack on Charlie Hebdo? Terrorists could walk right into a nuclear plant and create a disaster. Do you still think nuclear power is safe?”*

*“Those are individual events. Nuclear power is reliable. What about oil? Pollution is destroying the earth and our climate. That could kill us all.”*

This exchange has all the familiar trappings of debates we have become accustomed to seeing during presidential election seasons or in political films. We can imagine the opponents standing at lecterns and the nimble, quick-fire exchange of facts and opinions as each speaker attempts to win over the audience with evidence and persuasive rhetoric.

Yet this debate deviates from the expected script in a few major ways. First, the opponents are 12 years old. Second, these students face each other on a cold Saturday morning in January in a high school classroom, with desks serving as their lecterns and a local community member serving as their judge. Third, a small army of volunteers worked with the school administration to open the building for this tournament and provide breakfast, lunch, and trophies to all in attendance.

These young people, along with over 100 of their peers drawn from middle schools across a large northeastern city, have chosen to spend a chunk of their weekend sparring over some of the most pressing issues of our time, honing both their academic and civic skills in the process.

While middle school students are still in the process of mastering foundational literacy skills, they are also beginning to experience the demands of achieving college readiness; as a result, they require

unique learning experiences that take into account their complex location in the trajectory of adolescent development (Moje et al., 2008). In addition to adjusting to increasingly rigorous academic literacy demands, these students are also cultivating opinions about public issues and developing identities as young citizens—a process that can both contribute to and benefit from their literacy learning (Youniss, McLellan & Yates, 1997; Rubin, 2007; Watts & Flanagan, 2007).

Classroom discussion and debate has long been considered a best practice in the fields of both literacy and civic education. In addition to fostering reading comprehension and academic vocabulary development across content areas (Applebee et al., 2003; Hwang, Lawrence, Mo, & Snow, 2014), research has demonstrated that structured talk in the classroom can lead to improved critical thinking skills and interest in learning about public issues inside and outside of school (Hess, 2009; Campbell, 2005).

This study furthers understanding of debate’s positive impacts by exploring the academic and critical literacy development of urban middle school students involved in a district-wide debate literacy initiative. We also reach beyond the classroom to focus on the benefits of extending participation in debate to *extracurricular and community* learning environments.

We structure this exploration by first reviewing existing studies about the benefits of extracurricular debate and then discussing critical literacy as an extension of academic literacy that imbues reading and writing with a crucial civic purpose. Next, we present our methodology within the critical literacy framework in order to demonstrate how our study makes a new contribution to this literature. Next, our findings focus on the ways that engaging in debate helps middle school students increase not only their reading comprehension skills, but also their ability to consider various perspectives,

identify bias, and connect literacy to the pursuit of social justice. We conclude with a discussion of implications for classroom and extracurricular literacy learning.

### **Literature Review: The Benefits of Extracurricular Debate Participation**

As mentioned above, a robust body of research supports the practice of classroom debate for the purpose of both academic and civic skill development. Indeed, the literacy initiative that we discuss in this article is structured around Word Generation, an academic language acquisition curriculum developed by renowned literacy researcher Catherine Snow and her team at Harvard University as part of the Catalyzing Comprehension through Discussion and Debate (CCDD) project. The curriculum aims to increase students' reading comprehension in grades 4-8 through vocabulary-rich interdisciplinary units that culminate in high-interest weekly debates (Snow, Lawrence, & White, 2009). While Snow and her colleagues focus on the academic literacy benefits of debate, Diana Hess (2009), in her landmark book, *Controversy in the Classroom*, highlights the civic benefits, including the impact of controversial issue discussions and debates on students' critical thinking and interpersonal skills and commitment to democratic values.

Zeroing in on the impact that *extracurricular* debate participation is a more difficult task. A consensus does exist in the educational research community that participation in extracurricular activities leads to generally higher levels of engagement in school and educational attainment, particularly among high-risk youth (Feldman & Matjasko, 2005); however, teasing out the exact mechanisms through which individual programs or activities contribute to these outcomes is a continuous challenge considering the variety of other factors also at play in students' lives.

Nonetheless, Joe Bellon (2000) recently synthesized a body of research reaching back to 1949 on the benefits of debate across the curriculum as a strategy to increase college students' communications skills. He harnesses a range of studies in order to argue that debate provides multiple benefits to students, from increasing their interpersonal communication (Colbert & Biggers, 1985 as cited in Bellon 2000) and problem-solving skills (Johnson & Johnson, 1979 as cited in Bellon 2000) to fostering a sense of empowerment in public life (Dauber, 1989 as cited in Bellon 2000). He highlights the work of Mike Allen and his colleagues (1999), who used the Watson-Glaser Critical Thinking Test to argue that extracurricular debate increases critical thinking more than public speaking or argumentation classes.

However, most of these studies were conducted with college students rather than K-12 youth. It is only in the past twenty years that the impact of debate among high school-aged students has been explored. Much of this exploration has focused on the work of Urban Debate Leagues (UDLs), which have been providing debate programming to nearly 10,000 middle and high school students in 19 major metropolitan areas across the country since 1985. The National Association for Urban Debates Leagues (2016) estimates that 86% of the students they serve are students of color and 76% are from low-income families.

Many participants have written first-hand accounts of the power of debate in the lives of urban students. Beth Breger (2000), a Program Officer at the Open Society Institute, a major funder of Urban Debate Leagues, argues that in addition to providing students with critical thinking and academic research skills, debate "provides urban youth with the skills they need to actively participate as citizens in an open society, so that their voices are heard and their opinions are considered in public discourse, both in their communities and beyond" (p. 1).

This focus on helping urban youth discover the power of their voices also resonated with Edward Lee (1998), a former Atlanta UDL debater turned debate coach. In his reflections about the impact of debate in his life, he mused, “Imagine graduating from high school each year millions of underprivileged teenagers with the ability to articulate their needs, the needs of others, and the ability to offer solutions. I am convinced that someone would be forced to listen” (p. 95). Other debate coaches and educational writers have identified debate as a strategy for helping at-risk students gain admission to and succeed in college as they gain academic and socio-emotional skills (Hooley, 2007; Hoover, 2003).

In an effort to quantify these impacts, individual Urban Debate Leagues have solicited independent program evaluations. Recent reports from the Baltimore and Houston UDLs have identified similar findings: that, compared to their peers, students who participate in extracurricular debate have higher attendance rates, lower incidence of disciplinary action, higher grades, and higher scores on state-mandated exams (Neuman-Sheldon, 2010; HISD, 2012).

The academic research community, led largely by Virginia Commonwealth University community health researcher Briana Mezuk, is following suit in seeking to demonstrate the relationship of extracurricular debate participation to specific academic outcomes. Mezuk (2009) focused on the experiences of African-American male students in the Chicago Public Schools (CPS) and based on a longitudinal quantitative analysis of UDL participants from 1997 to 2006 demonstrated that debaters had higher GPAs, higher rates of high school completion, and higher ACT scores than a representative sample of their peers.

A follow-up study using the same data set but this time focusing on at-risk students of both genders

found similar benefits among debaters even after controlling for free lunch and special education status, neighborhood poverty, and low 8<sup>th</sup> grade test scores (Anderson & Mezuk, 2012).

Indeed, debate has been connected to a variety of benefits for high school students, ranging from the ability to move between peer-supported and adult-oriented modes of identity (Fine, 2004) to improving school conduct by reducing numbers of disciplinary infractions and suspensions (Winkler, 2011). Cridland-Hughes (2012) makes a valuable contribution to this growing body of debate research by relating it to the development of critical consciousness. She analyzes a program called City Debate to demonstrate how debate helps students develop agency to challenge injustice and use their voices for social action in an environment that is both collaborative and competitive. Furthermore, the work of Littlefield (2001) in his survey of 193 high school debaters suggests that young people are readily able to identify the ways that debate is benefiting them, from communication skills to social life to stress management.

Despite major advances in the research justifications for debate, major gaps remain that this study begins to address by providing data about the impact of debate on middle school students, a population largely absent from the literature thus far, and providing more focus on the critical literacy benefits of debating.

### **Theoretical Framework: Critical Literacy and Civic Identity Development**

Much adolescent literacy education today has narrowed to involve acquisition of standard academic English for the purposes of high stakes testing and economic competitiveness, particularly in struggling high-poverty schools (Faggella-Luby, Ware, & Capozzoli, 2009). In *Literacy: Reading the Word and the World*, Paulo Freire and Donaldo Macedo (1987) define the purposes of reading and

writing in direct opposition to these purposes; they argue that in order for literacy to be meaningful, “it has to be situated within a theory of cultural production and viewed as an integral part of the way in which people produce, transform, and reproduce meaning” (p. 142). They explain that literacy must be judged according to whether it serves to “reproduce existing social formations” or to “promote democratic and emancipatory change” (p. 141).

Theorists of critical literacy stress that texts do not exist in a vacuum but are “situated” products of the world that transmit cultural and political messages; in turn, the act of reading these texts must be viewed as a simultaneous reading of the world and a negotiation of discourses that have significance for social action (Gutierrez, 2008; Barton, Hamilton, & Ivancic, 2000). They argue that, depending upon how texts are treated in the development of literacy, reading can either be a force for cultural reproduction, in which dominant discourses are re-inscribed onto the readers as passive objects, or for cultural production, in which the readers become active subjects combing the texts for connections to their daily lives and experiences in order to forge individual and collective self-determination (Morrell, 2008; McLaren & Kincheloe, 2007).

Because critical literacy put more focus into critical orientations and outcomes than particular literacy teaching methods (barring, of course, manifestations of direct instruction that Freire (1970) dubs the ‘banking model’ of education), a wide variety of literacy activities fall under its umbrella, from auto-ethnography (Camangian, 2010) and spoken word (Fisher, 2005) to youth research (Mirra, Garcia, & Morrell, 2015) and youth organizing (Kirshner, 2015). The ultimate goal in these literacy practices is not comprehension, or even interpretation and analysis of texts, but social transformation; as such, they are intimately connected to civic identity and engagement.

While scholars have developed different terms to capture this aspect of identity related to public engagement—including socio-historical identity, socio-political identity, and political-moral identity, to name a few - the umbrella term, “civic identity,” generally refers to one’s understanding of and relation to a particular community or polity, as well as one’s sense of agency to act within it (Youniss, McLelland, & Yates, 1997). Many theorists of civic identity build upon Erik Erikson’s (1968) work in adolescent identity development, in which he argues that adolescence is the period in which young people attempt to figure out where they fit within the social structures of their particular communities and countries by engaging with the different available ideologies that offer options for what society should look like.

Educational philosophers Robert Lawy and Gert Biesta (2006) argue that citizenship is a practice rather than a possession and that young people enact their civic identities through their “participation in the actual practices that make up their daily lives” (p. 45). Psychologists Roderick Watts and Constance Flanagan (2007) highlight the fact that adolescents’ daily lives take place within a complex and often unequal society; as a result, they promote a model of civic (what they call socio-political) identity development that centers on a critical rather than normative understanding of the systemic forces shaping society that validates the experiences of young people of color and offers them avenues for developing liberating political efficacy.

Considering the overlapping social influences on students’ civic identities, educators play a huge role in mediating discourses about democracy and influencing how students think about themselves as civic agents. Joel Westheimer and Joseph Kahne (2004) contend that the choices made by educators about the civic learning opportunities they offer students have political implications about the kinds of citizens (and by extension, the kind of democracy) that they are trying to create. The critical literacy

practices mentioned just a few paragraphs ago also represent civic learning opportunities, and the skills that they offer, from media analysis to perspective-taking to empowerment, contribute to students' civic identity development.

Yet, with critical literacy and civic identity embodied through such a variety of literacy activities, how can we operationalize these concepts into concrete practices that can be observed and analyzed? Several theorists have offered frameworks for categorizing critical literacy skills. Luke (2000) presents four core practices of critical literacy, including breaking the 'codes' of texts, participating in textual meaning, determining practical uses for texts, and developing capacities as text analysts and critics (p. 454). Janks (2000) argues that critical literacy educators focus on offering students access to dominant textual forms while simultaneously deconstructing their dominant status, offering a pathway to a more diverse understanding of text, and providing students with the skills to harness the power of various discourses to design their own justice-oriented literacy practices. And Behrman (2006), in his review of dozens of research articles focusing on critical literacy, identified a series of practices related to the development of critical literacy competencies ranging from reading from a resistant perspective and producing counter-texts to conducting student-choice research projects and taking social action.

We argue that debate, with its focus on controversial current issues and its strong connection to social, political, and legal dialogue and action, is a critical literacy practice uniquely situated to encourage the simultaneous development of both academic and critical literacy skills.

## Context and Methods

Our research question was: What are the impacts of voluntary, extracurricular debate participation on middle school students? We took a mixed methods approach to exploring this question in the context of a particular urban literacy initiative, situating ourselves within a pragmatic research paradigm (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2010). We analyzed test scores as markers of academic literacy growth and achievement due to their current prevalence in the landscape of public education for assessing both students and schools; however, we also analyzed interview data to supplement the test scores in order to provide evocative illustrations of the developmental process of academic literacy acquisition. We used these qualitative data to explore the development of critical literacy skills

because of critical literacy's focus on the subjective experience of the learner.

We now turn to a more specific description of the study setting and data collection strategies.

### Setting: The Middle School Jumpstart (MSJ) Program

The Middle School Jumpstart program began in the 2013-2014 school year when a large, urban school district in the northeastern United States sought to identify and support middle schools struggling to prepare students for the demands of college and career reading comprehension. The 88 schools in the initiative adopted the aforementioned Word Generation curriculum, a highlight of which is weekly debates structured around current social issues. Each week, students read a passage that introduced a controversial topic and provided target grade-level vocabulary words. They answered comprehension questions about the passage and responded to open-

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ended writing prompts in which they explored their personal opinions about the topic and used the target words to construct a persuasive argument about it. These writing prompts formed the basis of evidence-based argumentative essays, which students developed and refined through debate.

Based on the high levels of student engagement in these debates, MSJ educators decided to begin hosting weekend MSJ debate tournaments in partnership with a local Urban Debate League in order to give middle school students from across the city the opportunity to debate Word Generation topics with their peers. At each MSJ tournament, students debate a resolution drawn directly from the Word Generation curriculum, competing in three rounds and preparing both sides of the resolution.

Seventeen MSJ schools had active extracurricular debate clubs during the 2013-2014 school year. Overall, 179 students across these schools participated in at least one extracurricular tournament during that school year. We conducted both quantitative and qualitative analyses in order to explore the impact of community debate participation on these students.

### **Data Collection: DRP Assessment**

One instrument that MSJ schools use to assess student reading comprehension is the Degrees of Reading Power (DRP) assessment, which measures how well students comprehend informational texts at varying levels of text complexity. The DRP consists of informational passages with key words deleted. Students are given a set of replacement words and must use the context of the passage to select the correct answer. The reliability of the DRP is .95. The criterion-related validity for the readability of passages correlated with the difficulty of items is .95. MSJ students took the DRP test at three points during the 2013-2014 school year when this study took place (October, February, and June).

In order to highlight the impact that participation in extracurricular debate had on students' reading comprehension skills, we analyzed changes in 2013-2014 DRP scores across three groups:

*MSJ Debaters*— Students in MSJ schools with active extracurricular debate clubs who participated in at least one extracurricular debate during the 2013-2014 school year. (n=179)

*MSJ Debate Schools* – All students - debaters and non-debaters - who attended MSJ schools with active extracurricular debate clubs. This group was included in order to isolate the impact of debate from the impact gained from other aspects of attending these particular schools. (n=5,863)

*All MSJ Schools* – All students – debaters and non-debaters - who attended all MSJ schools – those with active debate clubs and those without active debate clubs. (n=28,337)

We used t-tests to compare these groups. While comparing the change in DRP scores over time between students in these different groups can provide some information about the impact of extracurricular debate on reading comprehension skills, it does not account for the fact that students who self-select into an extracurricular debate program in the first place may already possess a range of other characteristics that might have more explanatory power over their DRP performance.

As a result, we used propensity score matching to create control groups of students who were demographically and academically similar to debaters across a range of indicators so that we could attempt to isolate the impact of debate on reading comprehension. Indicators used to match students included race, disability status, Free or Reduced Price Lunch status, English Language Learner status, and baseline DRP scores (see Table 1).

Table 1  
*Debater Demographics for Propensity Score Matching Analysis*

Demographic Characteristic	Percentage of Sample
Eligible for Free or Reduced Price Lunch	76.4
Students with Disabilities	6.15
English Language Learners	1.68
Race/Ethnicity - Asian	16.85
Race/Ethnicity - African-American	36.52
Race/Ethnicity - Hispanic	38.2
Race/Ethnicity - White	7.3
Gender – Female	50.0
Gender – Male	50.0

*Note. n=179*

**Data Collection: Student, Teacher, and Administrator Interviews**

After analyzing the DRP scores from the 2013-2014 school year, we wanted to gain a more in-depth understanding of how debate influences students’ reading comprehension and critical literacy skills in ways that cannot be easily captured by standardized measures. In order to do so, we conducted interviews with students, teachers, and administrators at four of the participating schools in early 2015. We also observed students during a winter MSJ Debate Tournament on January 10, 2015.

The four focus schools were chosen based on their institutional commitment to the MSJ Debate

Program, the geographic diversity of the schools around the city, and the racial and socioeconomic diversity of their student bodies. (See Table 2 in Appendix A)

We conducted a total of 34 interviews across the four schools:

- *Polaris Academy*: Interviews were conducted with 6 debaters and the 2 debate club teachers.
- *Ripken Middle School*: Interviews were conducted with 4 debaters, the debate club teacher, and two school administrators.
- *Glory Academy*: Interviews were conducted with 8 debaters, the debate club teacher, and one school administrator.
- *Harmony Community Middle School*: Interviews were conducted with 6 debaters, two debate club teachers, and one school administrator.

We developed semi-structured interview protocols using both inductive and deductive approaches. We first developed a series of questions exploring the extent to which students believed that debate had impacted them in terms of academic reading, writing, listening, and speaking. We sought to support student responses by interviewing teachers and administrators. We then developed a second set of questions that elicited responses about critical literacy practices based on categories developed by Luke (2000), Janks (2000), and Behrman (2006). Finally, we included open-ended questions that allowed students to introduce impacts of debate that we had not anticipated. While our literature review about the impacts of debate guided us in crafting questions and discussion topics, we also allowed the 30-60 minute conversations to evolve based on insights provided by the interview participants themselves.

## Data Analysis

Quantitative data analyses involved running t-tests and the comparison of experimental and control groups through propensity score matching (Caliendo & Kopeinig, 2008). All analyses were run through SPSS.

A simultaneously emic and etic coding approach guided our initial analysis of the interview transcripts (Chapman & Kinloch, 2010). We first coded without overarching categories in order to allow themes to emerge from the data. We then conducted a second round of coding in which we used the insights gained from the literature review above to create two analytic categories: academic literacy development (reading, writing, listening, and speaking) and critical literacy development. We compared these two rounds and engaged in constant comparative analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1994) in order to develop a coherent set of findings.

## Findings

We begin this section by discussing the impacts of debate on student academic literacy development, first through an analysis of student DRP scores and then through exploration of student, teacher, and administrator interview responses. We organized the presentation of findings in this way in order to offer a broad overview of literacy gains among debaters and then a deeper dive into the processes through which debaters felt that they gained the skills demonstrated on standardized assessments in the areas of reading, writing, listening, and speaking.

We follow the discussion of academic literacy development with findings regarding critical literacy development in order to expand our exploration of literacy into the domains of social analysis and civic engagement and introduce a rationale for debate that goes beyond classroom impacts and into the community.

## Impact of Debate on the Development of Academic Literacy Skills

Our analysis of academic literacy growth began with an examination of reading comprehension, which we assessed by evaluating how debaters' DRP assessment scores changed over time compared to their peers (both in debate and non-debate MSJ schools). DRP scores are reported on a scale from 1-100, with each number on the scale corresponding to the average difficulty of various reading materials. Most texts fall between 25 and 85 on the scale; for instance, most middle school textbooks rank at 56, while first-year college textbooks rank at 70. A student who earns a DRP score of 56 is presumed to have the ability to read and comprehend at the level of middle school textbooks. Each gain of one point corresponds to a gain in reading comprehension ability.

At the beginning of the school year, MSJ student scores covered a wide range, with most scores between 40 and 70. Our analysis revealed that by the end of the school year, MSJ debaters in grades 6-8 experienced greater growth in their DRP scores than the general student bodies in MSJ debate schools and all MSJ students. The mean difference in growth of 1.7 points was statistically significant ( $M=6.2$  for MSQI debaters;  $M=4.5$  for non-debaters ( $p<0.05$ )) and indicates that debaters experienced greater growth at comprehending complex texts when compared to students across all MSJ schools. (See Figure 1 in Appendix B)

When we ran these analyses again after controlling for student race, disability status, English Language Learner status, Free or Reduced Price Lunch status, and baseline DRP scores, the higher levels of growth for debaters compared to non-debaters remained, though at a much smaller scale. (See Figure 2 in Appendix C) While the difference in growth did not rise to the level of statistical significance, the fact that debaters experienced greater growth than members of control groups in MSJ schools with

active debate clubs and MSJ schools in general suggests that debate could have an impact independent of other student characteristics.

Our analysis of the DRP score data left us with a desire to learn more about *how* students were benefitting from extracurricular debate participation academically in ways that might and might not be reflected in test scores. We turned to our interview data to explore how debate fostered growth in reading, writing, listening, and speaking.

**Reading and writing.** During our interviews with MSJ debaters, they were preparing for a tournament focused on the resolution about nuclear power described at the start of this article. Students had to be prepared to argue both sides of this resolution and, while Word Generation materials formed the basis of the evidence they would use, their desire to win drove them to look for additional sources in order to buttress their claims.

Students told us that the search for evidence, from both print and online sources, provided an authentic reason for them to read. A full 100% of the students we interviewed indicated that participating in debate had improved their reading comprehension skills. Students recognized that the texts they found often stretched them beyond their reading comfort zone. As Emma, a debater from Harmony Community Middle School, explained,

Some of the evidence is on a college-level, and we're just like, what is this? Sometimes I would cut and paste it to Word document and use a thesaurus because my head would just hurt. But it gets easier over time. So when you're doing the state test, it's like, oh, this is easy.

Emma believed that her frequent engagement with debate evidence made the readings that she encountered in grade level exams much more accessible.

Bobby, a debater from Glory Academy, also connected debate to an increase in his vocabulary; as he told us,

My vocabulary was 'blah' before debate, but in debate when they gave us the Word Generation packets with the stories in them, it always showed us new vocabulary words that were strong and could help you with your speeches. You can also use it in your other classes talking about different topics.

Bobby felt motivated to learn new words in order to deliver powerful speeches during his debate rounds, but could see the ways that he could also apply his newfound vocabulary to his academic work.

Students informed us that debating requires a great deal of attention to detail; in order to win a round, they explained that they must not only present their arguments persuasively, but also methodically address each of their opponents' arguments and explain to the judge why they are unconvincing. Since debaters must be able to argue both sides of any topic, they must constantly think about the validity of the evidence authors use to support their claims and the weaknesses that they can exploit in counter-arguments.

Simone, a debater from Polaris Academy, realized that she began using this debate habit of mind each time she encountered a new text in class. As she explained, "We were reading the passage as a class and every single contention, every single reason that [the author] had as to why this was right I'd automatically think in my head why this was wrong. Or if [the author] had why it was wrong, I'd automatically think of why it was right. So it kind of – after a while, it does become second nature to us."

Debaters consistently attributed improvements in their reading comprehension to the efforts they put into preparing for their debate rounds. Their initial motivations – to effectively compete (and hopefully win) – conditioned them to read in ways that benefitted them academically. A debate teacher at

Ripken Middle School described how the kind of reading that debate calls for matches well with the expectations laid out in literacy standards: “I think they’re reading more now with a purpose. Instead of just reading to get through something, they’re now reading for understanding, they’re reading to look for text evidence, and that’s – you can’t get more Common Core than that.”

While the focus on speeches and cross-examination may create the appearance that debate is not a writing intensive activity, the student debaters were quick to point out the amount of writing they did during debate rounds and the ways this writing improved their essays and research skills. Again, a full 100% of the students we interviewed indicated that debating had improved their writing skills.

Benjamin, a debater from Glory Academy, explained, “Debate has helped me write my essays because now I’m able to flow. I’m able to put myself, my personality, into my words and put it into my essays in class.” Benjamin referred to ‘flowing,’ a term that debaters use to describe note-taking; as a team’s opponents give their speeches, the team furiously jots down each claim and the evidence presented so that when it is their turn to speak, they can fluidly address (and discredit) every argument that they heard. Benjamin recognized the way that the organization of a debate flow mirrored the structure of an academic essay; importantly, he also attributed his ability to find his own personal voice in his writing to his debate experience.

Alexander, a debater from Eastside Community High School, concurred, stating, “It improves my essays. I didn’t do counter-claims before, like what other people would say. Now I do, and I understand it better. And I expand more in my essays and explain things better.” Since debaters want to offer counter-claims that will throw their opponents off-balance, they often gather evidence from beyond the Word Generation curriculum. In the process, they gain the valuable research skill of recognizing

reliable sources. As Krystle, another debater from Eastside, told us, “Debate taught me how to research things well, because when I used to research topics for school, I just looked at what popped up first in Google and I’m like, “Okay, that’s it.” But now you have to make sure the sources are reliable and everything. You can’t go on Wikipedia and you can’t go to Ask Yahoo and stuff.”

One of Alexander and Krystle’s teachers explained that, while she had never debated herself, she found herself drawn to the activity and eager to expose her students to it precisely because of the way it provided students with authentic reasons to conduct rigorous research; as she told us, “I was so impressed by the research and the delivery of research that I was just like, “How could I not give my students this opportunity?”

**Listening and speaking.** Several of the administrators we spoke to highlighted the importance of debate as a means to help students improve their speaking and listening skills. An administrator at Ripken Middle School acknowledged that these skills often take a back seat in the classroom because they are not as easily assessed on standardized measures as reading and writing are; however, she insisted that they are important indicators of college and career readiness. As she explained,

It’s also, you know, a piece that we do not always get to, which is that speaking and listening portion of the debate. That it’s in the standards, but because it’s not an assessed standard, it’s not as focused on as we really need it to be. It really, I think, helps the students to be college and career ready, because they need to know how to speak thoughtfully and support what they say with evidence if they really want to have a career and be able to go to college.

An administrator from Glory Academy echoed this praise for debate as a mechanism for getting students talking, linking it to the common classroom practice of Socratic dialogue:

I see [debate] as part our push to make Socratic seminars more of a school-wide

experience in classes. I think that the whole preparation for a debate involves a lot of what you would need to do to prepare for a Socratic seminar in terms of reading different articles, really understanding the issues, and being able to make your point.

Much of what administrators celebrated about debate involved the added value that it brought to traditional classroom academic work by injecting students' personal interest and excitement about healthy competition. Tyrone, a Glory Academy debater, detailed the evolution in his thinking in how to support an argument during a classroom discussion; as he explained, "You can't just say, 'You should go for my idea because I like it.' You've got to say why."

While the academic benefits that debaters accrued were clearly substantial, they were supplemented by a set of critical literacy competencies that we argue are just as important and that emerged more organically as the result of peer interactions within a community learning space. We turn now to an examination of these findings.

### **Impact of Debate on Critical Literacy and Civic Identity Development**

Debate resolutions encourage students to consider provocative social issues about which reasonable people could be expected to disagree. During the 2013-2014 school year, students considered the merits and potential harms of mandatory service, the use of trans fats in school food, renting pets, and minors on reality television shows.

By engaging students in discussion about authentic, real-world issues, we found that the MSJ Debate program treated young people as civic agents whose opinions and beliefs deserve to be taken seriously. Our interviews indicated that students apply the critical thinking skills gained from debate to analyzing the society in which they live and imagining the role that they hope to play in

challenging inequality and seeking justice. Our analysis demonstrated that 65% of 34 interviewees talked about developing critical literacy skills through debate. We organized their responses thematically to tease out the specific critical literacy skills they identified, which included the ability to see issues from multiple perspectives, recognize bias, and advocate for social justice.

**Perspective-taking.** Students explained to us how debate, which forces participants to argue both sides of controversial topics and passionately defend perspectives that they may not personally hold, encouraged them to consider alternative points of view in their lives and in society. Katrina, a debater from Harmony, described how she applied perspective-taking from debate to interactions with her parents and friends:

Sometimes my parents will pose a question, and I'm really strong about one side, but then I'm like, wait, there's a second side to it. Or sometimes when my friends are getting into an argument I try to listen to my best friend's side of the story, but then I'm like I still need to listen to the other person's, because you have to see both stories to understand what is really going on.

Antoinette from Polaris Academy had a similar take on how taking an alternative perspective could help foster stronger relationships; as she stated, "When you have a different point of view, you know how to approach everything differently. So you know how to adapt to more people."

Students also spoke to how this ability to understand the motivations of another person could help defuse conflict, especially in the adrenaline-rich context of a competitive event. Bobby, a debater from Glory Academy, explained how the supportive nature of the debate team made criticism easier to take: "Even when we do criticize each other in the group, it's constructive criticism, not hurtful. We just say what we can do to get better." For Bobby, the relational

trust built through the debate community helped him to let down his defenses and accept suggestions.

As an administrator from Ripken Middle School summarized, “Well, I think it provides a little empathy. It gives them that sense of, ‘Not everybody has to think like I think, and it’s okay.’” Empathy is a key competency in a democracy made up of a diverse citizenry possessing different experiences, opinions, and values. The next section explores how debate influences students not only as students or individuals, but also as citizens striving for a more just society.

### **Recognizing bias and challenging assumptions.**

Freire and Macedo (1987) assert that literacy is about reading both the word *and* the world; that the academic literacy skills needed to understand texts become meaningful when they are applied to critical analysis of the society in which we live in order to promote justice and equity.

Debaters told us that they found themselves analyzing troubling social events from multiple perspectives, including the multiple recent cases of officer-involved deaths of black men, and attempting to understand how multiple parties were influencing the media narrative. Tyrone from Glory Academy described how he put the skills of debate to use in weighing emotional social issues:

I can use [debate] towards life, because now I will be there as a reminder when it comes to things like the Eric Garner case and the Michael Brown case. Now I understand both sides. Even though I stand strong to one side, I understand where the other side is coming from, so now it’s a two-sided thing.

Jenna, a debater from Polaris Academy, mulled over the renewed attention in the news to instances of racial inequality and wondered how she could use debate skills to speak up for her community. She mused, “Well, I’ve always heard the saying that history repeats itself. So if racial inequality and segregation and all that other stuff is happening again, I’m just like, ‘Well, what if I get affected by it?

Because I’m clearly African American and they’re going to target me and my race’.” While Jenna had not worked out a solution to this intractable social problem, she attributed her burgeoning social consciousness to her participation in debate.

One of the teachers from Harmony tried to clarify the process of critical civic awakening that debate inspired in students; as he explained, debate encourages students to, “think about the fact that everything that I hear in the media and everything that people have told me my whole life is not necessarily true, and that there are biases in the world. They start to question society.” He continued:

I think it’s the art of recognizing deceit. That’s what is so intriguing about debate. It’s trying to see if someone is lying to you. And in debate, you’re lied to all the time. They want to see what is the truth here, and I feel like that’s the hook that most of the kids latch on to. ‘Are people lying to me? What is the real truth?’

**Standing up against injustice.** Taken as a whole, our findings indicate that debate is contributing to the growth of young people who feel confident and empowered to raise their voices and speak loudly about the issues that matter most to them. The students we talked to credited debate with helping them stand up for what they believe in. Katrina from Harmony considered herself “shy” before beginning to debate, but asserts that,

debate really brought me out and into the world, and it exposed me—that’s why I love doing debate. Because I can show what I’m feeling, and not just keep it inside to myself, and stand up for people and their rights.

For Katrina, the first step to social action is social speech, which she expresses through debate.

Katrina’s classmate, Thomas, described one of the ways that debate had inspired him to stand up for others:

If I think someone’s doing something wrong, I’ll say, ‘You shouldn’t do that.’ Before, I used to be a bystander, like, ‘Okay, so this kid’s getting bullied. It’s not my fault.’ But now it’s like, ‘Stop it. What are you doing? What if somebody did that to you?’ You know?

Antoinette, a debater from Polaris Academy, also shared her commitment to use debate in order to face social challenges:

I'm just like, wow. This is the world we live in. I can do something to help, even if it's like a little thing. Like I said, I like writing. I can do something to reach out to people. Talk to my peers.

For these students, debate activated their critical consciousness; while not yet old enough to vote (or attend high school), they used their voices to advocate for themselves and their communities. As Bobby from Glory Academy concluded, "We're inspired to be better people, inspired to make a change in our world."

### **Discussion**

Our findings demonstrate the unique power of debate to motivate young people to engage in the reading and analysis of complex texts, both through the social, competitive nature of the activity and the connection to real-world topics. By refusing to allow students to remain on the sidelines of controversy, debate mandates that they take stands; however, by mandating students to advocate for both perspectives, it also refuses to allow them to hunker down on one side of an issue. Through the exercise of arguing issues in black and white, debate actually helps students see the shades of gray. The understanding of complexity fostered by debate translates not only into reading comprehension, but also into the development of critical thinking across all facets of literacy development.

An analysis of the DRP scores indicated that many students in the MSJ program benefitted from debate within their classrooms as a result of the Word Generation curriculum regardless of whether they participated in the extra-curricular element of the program. We argue, however, that students who chose to engage in debate outside of school reaped particular academic and critical literacy benefits

stemming from the community context of the Saturday tournaments. Over and over again, the students we interviewed told us that they were motivated to expend tremendous amounts of effort preparing for debate tournaments because they wanted to be prepared to face their peers and they wanted to win. Recall how Krystle from Eastside would settle for Google searches when it came to class assignments, but engaged in more in-depth research for her debate rounds. The performative nature of the Saturday tournaments offered an authentic motivation for using literacy skills – it was powerful precisely because it was an activity that reached beyond school.

We argue that community literacy initiatives like the MSJ debate program are valuable not only because they support academic literacy development in ways that appear on standardized assessments, but also because they offer community-connected experiences that school-based literacy opportunities alone cannot. They remove the formal educational structures of grades and replace them with the informal thrills of impressing peers and making teachers proud. They build bridges between curriculum and current events as students see that the same skills used to comprehend passages of informational text on the DRP assessment can be used to deconstruct debates about police brutality and racial profiling.

Our findings suggest that rather than viewing community literacy initiatives as supplements to formal learning, they should be understood as foundational experiences that imbue literacy with a renewed civic purpose, particularly for young people from historically marginalized communities whose voices are too often muted in public discourse (Bartels, 2008). Community debate represents a crucial way to amplify these voices.

### **Implications and Suggestions for Future Research**

Classroom teachers across subjects can take advantage of debate considering its reliance on informational non-fiction texts and its interdisciplinary nature – controversial social issues touch upon a variety of content areas, and analyzing the intersections of these content areas can spur the type of college and career ready critical thinking that the Common Core State Standards encourage.

Out-of-classroom educators can also utilize debate as an engaging form of extended learning time that can reinforce classroom learning while helping young people develop 21<sup>st</sup> century ‘soft skills’ of relationship-building, teamwork, and perspective-taking.

Further research is needed that explores the nature of the relationship between formal and informal literacy learning, including the transferability of skills between school and community learning environments. We also have more to learn about the role of adults in developing and structuring these learning experiences and the impacts that participating in community literacy experiences impacts the beliefs and practices of formal educational actors like teachers and administrators.

## Conclusion

Middle school students, searching for their place in public life and beginning to grapple with serious issues of civic concern, are perfectly positioned to respond to debate as a classroom literacy practice. Furthermore, extending debate into after-school and community learning spaces capitalizes on the need for connection with peers and adults that they are experiencing at this stage in their adolescent development. Our findings indicate that students who choose to extend their participation in debate beyond the classroom and into extracurricular, community spaces experience meaningful benefits in their academic and critical literacy development. We argue that these findings speak to the importance of community literacy programs as both crucial supports to academic learning *and* as catalysts for critical literacy development in their own right.

Perhaps the most important benefit of debate is the recognition and celebration of young people as civic agents with ideas and opinions about the society they will soon lead. Debate is a profoundly democratic practice grounded in the idea that impassioned but civil dialogue can produce policies and practices that make our society more just and equitable. By welcoming middle school students to this form of dialogue, we elevate them from the status of children to the status of fellow citizens.

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**Appendix A**

Table 2  
*Focus School Demographic Profiles (2013-2014 School Year)*

School	Enrollment	% Asian	% Black	% Hispanic	% Other	% White	% SPED	% ELL	% FRL
Glory Academy	645	0.0	61.1	36.7	1.7	0.5	26.8	3.9	80.5
Eastside Community Middle School	98	17.3	19.4	49.0	2.0	12.2	20.4	8.2	75.5
Polaris Academy	208	1.0	87.5	10.1	0.5	1.0	6.3	0.5	88.0
Ripken Middle School	797	1.6	13.0	80.8	0.4	4.1	19.8	19.1	97.2

### Appendix B

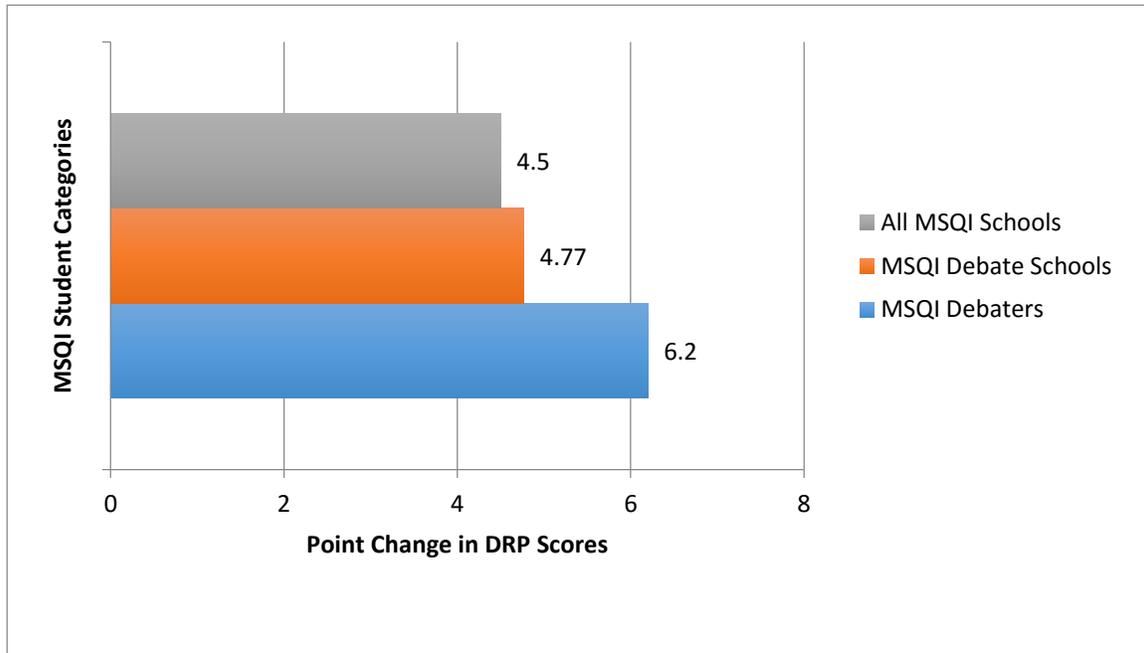


Figure 1. Improvement in DRP Scores (October 2013-June 2014).

Appendix C

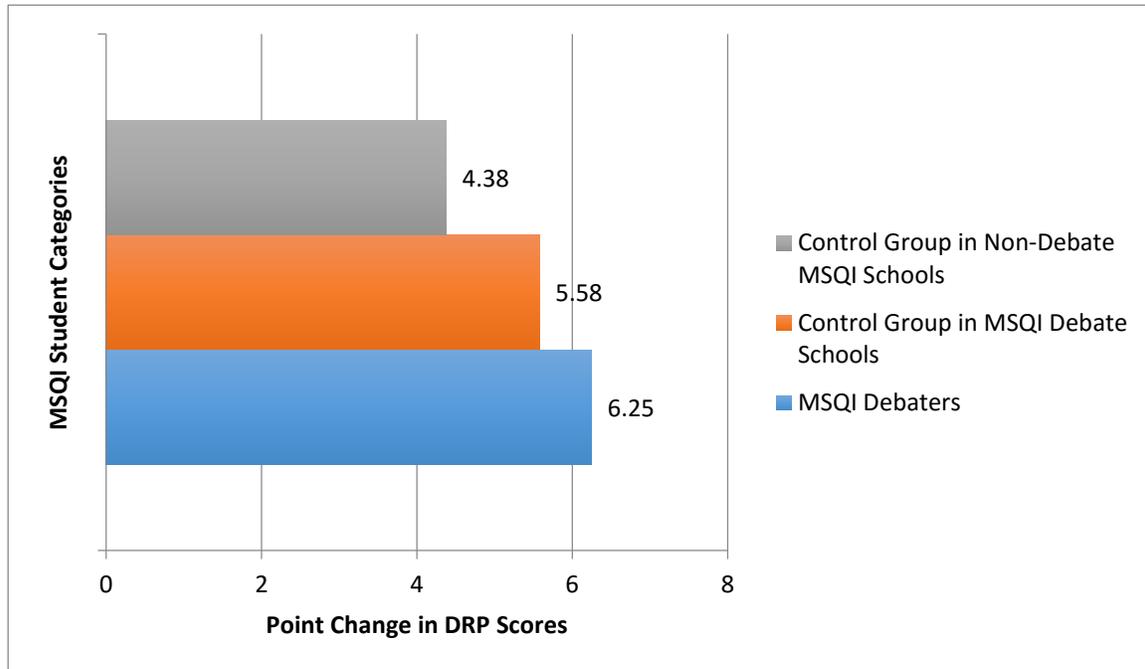


Figure 2. Improvement in DRP Scores – Debate vs. Control Groups