Practicing Critical Democracy: A Perspective from Students

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Abstract

Through the experiences and voices of three high school students, this paper contributes to the conversation about utilizing a critical framework for civics education. Findings reveal that the traditional approach to civics education offers a strong content base, but fails to prepare students to expand notions about "good" citizens who are active participants in the democratic process. A critical approach that values civic participation through deliberation better prepares students to find multiple ways to participate in local, national, and global contexts.

Introduction

Democracy is at the core of civics education in the United States. While a textbook might offer students a concise definition, classrooms hold a wide array of meanings for and implications about this term. Presently, debates related to civic education can be configured into two bodies of literature. Experts argue for a set of values or ways of thinking that should be learned through civics. Those espousing the rights and responsibilities approach largely consider democracy as a product that exists and can be acquired by citizens when they have sufficiently learned the structures of rights and responsibilities between a government and its people. On the other hand, critical and deliberative theorists consider democracy as a process. They suggest that democracy may continue, but it will prosper only if people seek to (re)define and (re)describe this process and their role in it. Common to this literature is the notion that democracy requires a certain kind of participation by its citizens. Theorists struggle to define what this participation should look like and to determine how democracy and participation should be taught in civics classrooms. An important voice is missing from this conversation regarding what should be taught, that of the student—the "future" citizen in our own democracy.

This study posed the question, "What kinds of civics education do students think that they need in order to participate in their government, country, or community?" The researcher did not approach students by asking them directly about their views as she could not assume that they had the language, nor the experience to speak to the literature and debates central to this research question. Rather, they were asked how they perceived themselves as democratic actors and how they prepared themselves for these roles. Consideration of this notion suggests a means by which civics educators can encourage student participation and honor student input. In contributing to the literature about effective approaches to civics education in today's U.S. schools, this study moves the conversation out of the university and proposes ways for enacting a civics curriculum that draws from the experiences of students struggling to enact the

civics they learn or want to learn. No matter the theoretical lens at the university, this study enriches the conversation by including the voices of students.

Deliberating About Democracy:
Traditional and Critical Theories of Citizenship Education

A primary goal of civics education is to prepare students to be democratic citizens (National Council for the Social Studies, 1994; Parker & Jarolimek, 1984; Shaver, 1996). While this goal is generally accepted, there is considerable controversy regarding the characterization of a democratic citizen. Theorists continue to debate what it means to be a "good" citizen and how teachers help students gain these understandings (Openshaw & White, 2005; Ravitch, 2001; Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). This debate suggests questions such as the following. Is a good citizen one who votes or one who poses questions about issues in order to become better informed? Is a good citizen one who follows the law or one who poses questions about the nature and implications of the laws? Is a good citizen one who participates in her or his community or one who poses questions about what is best for her or his community? Is a good citizen one who accepts government as is or one who raises questions about the failings of the democratic values in practice?

In order to provide a context for the student responses considered in this study, this literature review examines two approaches. While the traditional approach values personally responsible citizens, the critical approach seeks to develop justice-oriented citizens. Within these orientations there is disagreement about their exact meanings and practices.

The traditional approach describes good citizens as individuals who are personally responsible, understand their civic rights and responsibilities in relationship to their national government, and participate according to their understandings (Lawson & Scott, 2002; Mosher, Kenny & Garrod, 1994; National Council for the Social Studies, 1994; Nie & Hillygus, 2001; Ravitch, 2001). Identifying patriotism as a desirable quality of good citizens, these authors argue that such citizens must understand their common past, as well as their current rights and responsibilities. The responsibilities included in the traditional approach literature are those that maintain the formal institutions of democratic governance including voting, participating in community service, and acting politically noted by activities such as donating money, working on campaigns, and signing petitions (Nie & Hillygus; Ravitch). Examinations of civic education document that this traditional view of the good citizen is prevalent in U.S. civics classrooms today (Barth, 1996; Field, 1997; Kahne, Chi & Middaugh, 2006).

Field (1997) conducted an historical overview of citizenship education. She found that citizenship education has a long history of teaching patriotism and responsible participation. This framework, used today, offers a cohesive approach to teaching civics that is focused around teaching students about the laws and structures of government in which they can participate. This philosophy is so prevalent that it framed the questions included in the 1999 International Association for the Evaluation of

Educational Achievement (IEA) Civic Education Study (Baldi, Perie, Skidmore, Greenberg, Hahn, & Nelson, 2001; Torney-Purta, Schwille, & Amadeo, 1999). The IEA study used the following domains to assess what students understood from or through civic education:

> (1) democracy, political institutions, and rights and responsibilities of citizens, considering the messages in the hidden, as well as overt curriculum; (2) national identity, including treatment of heroes and core documents; (3) social cohesion and diversity, including attention to what students learn about discrimination against a range of groups; (4) connections between political and economic systems (Hahn, 2002, p. 64).

By using this as the framework for evaluating learning, the IEA expressed values about what should be taught in civics classrooms in democratic countries. Hahn's conclusions regarding what students learn in American civics education are consistent with Field's findings. Both reflect a traditional approach advocating a patriotic understanding of American history and institution-oriented curriculum meant to produce an educated citizenry who dutifully fulfill their roles as "good citizens."

Critical theorists challenge the finite nature of the traditional approach. The notion of "good citizens" who vote and work productively to serve the political and economic interests of the country implies that democracy becomes a product that "good citizens" acquire through participation (Openshaw & White, 2005; Ross, 2002; Talbert, 2005). On the other hand, critical theorists are interested in democracy as a process requiring deliberation. Deliberation takes place in the form of rich dialogue and analysis to determine what is best for the community (Gutmann, 1987; Snyder, 2002). Deliberation entails difficult questions about how and why the community is organized as it is and who benefits from this arrangement (Kohli, 2000; Parker, 2001; Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). Critical theorists also expand the notion of participatory citizenship (Noddings, 1999; Parker & Jarolimek; Ross). Citing de Tocqueville, Parker and Jarolimek (1984) write, "…voting was a necessary, but insufficient aspect of citizenship" (p. 1). The collective discourse of these critical theorists supports the importance of deliberative and critical civic participation as a means of retaining popular sovereignty and constantly reevaluating government institutions and practices. This critical view of democracy decenters it from an exclusive national focus and suggests the possibility of local or even global democratic citizenship.

While the traditional approach requires learning *about* structures and institutions, the critical approach additionally requires learning *how* to participate in public spaces and dialogue with other citizens (Greene, 1996). Critical theorists offer some general ideas regarding classroom practice, but this is largely an unfinished piece of the discourse. These theorists acknowledge that critical deliberation is complicated. It involves the interaction of people with diverse experiences and contesting ideas who seek to achieve a sense of the common good. Learning to deliberate or participate in this way requires a unique approach (Parker, 2003; Weber, 2005; White, 2005; Williams, 2003). Preparing students to participate in public spaces shifts educational

emphases from knowledge as a given, to knowledge as a process (Barr, 2005). Critical theorists do not disregard learning about civic structures and institutions. They advocate using this knowledge as students contemplate ideas such as the common good of their local, national, or global communities. While the traditional approach is viewed as a measure of socialization, the questions posed by critical theorists become questions of countersocialization (Barr). Within the democratic process, countersocialization in utilizing public space considers the notions of typically silenced voices and perspectives (Greene; Williams). By supporting counternarratives and critical evaluation of dominant systems, teaching is not reproductive, but rather a means of thinking critically about potential socialization. This paper contributes to the conversation regarding possible approaches for preparing students to become democratic actors. Although the focus of this study is on American civics education, any study of civics education in today's global world has implications for how students view themselves as participants in the local, national, and global systems around them.

Public Space as a Research Method

Through studies of civics education, the literature offers a picture of what is commonly taught about democracy in school settings. Studies that situate civics teaching within traditional approaches use sets of questions that limit the possibility for students to articulate a fuller range of experiences with democracy (Baldi et al., 2001; Hahn, 2002; Torney-Purta et al., 1999). Within this study, I sought to explore ways in which critical theory was (or was not) part of student civic participation discourse and how these ideas might potentially expand civics content or approaches to learning. I entered with an assumption that students had ideas or experiences aligned with views of democracy as a process, but that most likely they had not been given a space in which to articulate these ideas. With a basis in critical theory, I used dialogue as a method to explore students' ideas. Wanting students to think beyond the classroom, I asked them to consider what it meant to participate in democratic institutions, why they might choose to engage or not engage in these institutions, and which skills they need or have acquired enabling this participation.

In order to understand students' learning and experiences, a qualitative study was conducted with a small group of student participants in a public space where we learned together through deliberation. This approach allowed me to spend extended periods of time speaking with, learning from, and teaching students. This study involved nine students, in two high schools in a midwestern state, who had already completed the state required one semester government or civics class. Completed courses were framed by state benchmarks and the content was assessed on a statewide exam during the students' junior years. I chose to work with students who had already completed a government class as I wanted to pose questions related to the nature of democracy. Therefore, adequate democratic background knowledge and experiences were essential in order to discuss the relevance of democratic practices and experiences in their lives.

Participants and Setting

Prior to the study, I worked with the teachers in the two schools considered in this research as a university intern supervisor; thus schools and participants were a sample of convenience. The two high schools were both relatively large and located in neighboring towns. They reflected different philosophical approaches, varying student aspirations upon graduation, and differing levels of ethnic and socioeconomic diversity. West High School (pseudonyms indicate schools and students throughout) assumed a fairly traditional approach to curriculum and featured many general education courses that prepared most students to enter working-class professions. African-American students comprised the majority racial group and lived in either middle-class neighborhoods or low-income areas. South High School participated in the Coalition of Essential Schools and developed a number of unique curricular approaches. Seventy-five percent of their students routinely entered college. Most students came from middle or low-middle income families and the racial profile of the school was predominantly White. These two schools were chosen, not to compare them, but to seek greater diversity among the subjects and student responses. Although attention to diversity in the location, race, and gender of the subjects did not guarantee a wide variety of perspectives and experiences, inclusion of two dramatically different school settings was an attempt to seek diverse responses.

Participant selection included nine students who volunteered to take part in this project. The sample at each school was not necessarily reflective of its racial composition, but did approximate the college/work aspirations typical at each. At West High School, one female and four males participated. One student was Native American, another was African-American, and the other three students were White. Of the five, only one planned to attend college. At South High School, two females and two males volunteered to participate. One student was biracial (African-American and White) and the remaining students were White. All planned to attend either a two- or four-year college.

Procedures

Across a one-month time period, a series of active interviews was conducted with student participants within their school (Holstein & Gubrium, 2002). The initial interaction consisted of an individual interview to familiarize the student with me and the study's expectations. A second interview with each student allowed me to learn more about the manner in which she or he participated in the school and community, to consider how she or he perceived self as an agent of change, and to gain a general sense of how she or he had made use of the formal curriculum taught in civics class. The third interaction involved a group dialogue in which students at each school were encouraged to deliberate with one another about formal and informal learning regarding democratic practices, to be thoughtful and critical about social structures in and out of school, and to follow-up on themes from earlier interviews. All of the interviews were semi-structured (Fontana & Frey, 2000). A particular set of queries framed the

interviews, but allowed elaboration and encouraged the participants to interact and think critically in conversation with me and their peers.

Within this study, the research took place in a public space in which open, thoughtful dialogue was privileged (Greene, 1996). This practice valued the ideas of students and encouraged them to provide deliberative responses. Because the interviews were conducted in school settings, I was concerned that students might provide responses reflective of what they thought would be their social studies teachers' points of view. I sought to demonstrate that my interest was not aligned with those of their teachers and that I was open to ideas that were both supportive and critical of the issues at hand. Questions for clarification about their ideas were posed without offering judgment. While I do not purport to have been wholly successful in developing a public space in three encounters, the level of dialogue in the group interviews was indicative of deliberative and critical thinking and the space was conducive to mutual sharing of all voices. While the conversations began with my questions, students quickly began posing related questions to me and one another. We encouraged each other to think further about ideas and confidently challenged, asked for clarification, and expressed contentious ideas.

Twenty total interviews were conducted—18 individual and 2 group. All were digitally taped and transcribed in order to facilitate analysis. Drawing from the initial research question, the data were coded and themes emerged including what students learned in civics classes, how students perceived themselves as democratic actors, which avenues effected change, and what students wanted/needed to learn in civics class. Using further open coding enabled additional themes to emerge: the notion of voice, how students acquired voice, and the locations in which students conceived of themselves as democratic participants (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995). Data analysis was completed according to Miles and Huberman's (1984) approach to qualitative analysis by looking for patterns and themes within and across individual responses.

Themes from the Deliberation of Students

Student participants readily articulated their ideas and engaged in thoughtful conversations with me and each other. Through individual and group conversations with these nine students, three themes were identified capturing students' thoughts about themselves as democratic actors.

The first theme reflected civics or government teaching methods experienced in students' classes—that learning about democracy and governmental systems was important and that through this learning students were prepared to access the formal institutions available to them. Within the second theme students challenged the aforementioned teaching methods. They felt confident that they understood the structures and institutions of government and how they were supposed to participate in them, but were cynical that their participation would have any impact on the system. Students who voiced this concern sought venues other than those suggested in schools to engage their voices and hopefully facilitate change. Last, the theme of students as

outsiders emerged. Some students regarded themselves as outside the system of influence and began to see themselves as non-participants.

In each of these cases, the students demanded that changes should be made in the civics curriculum desiring greater attention to how they learn to have an active voice and to engage it as a tool of participation. To elaborate these three themes in more detail, the stories of three students, Josh, Erika, and Shawn, are related in the following sections.

Josh: Prepared to Access Formal Institutions Around Him

Josh was a junior at South High School. This was his first year at this school, having transferred from a neighboring high school. This transfer took place in order to gain better access to the academic opportunities available at South. He explained that attending this school offered him more options after graduation. He was athletic and played baseball and football. Josh was biracial, African-American and White, in a predominantly White school. He described himself as a good student by stating:

> I like going to school. I'd describe myself as not the best student but I apply myself as best I can. I think I should be doing better than I am. I have a little trouble focusing sometimes. But as a high schooler I think that's part of the experience—learning how to focus.

Josh placed value on both his academic and athletic pursuits. Both provided him with experiences that he thought would lead to college acceptance where he planned to major in criminal justice.

Josh completed a government course during his junior year and found the content relevant to his future pursuits. Like the other students in the study, and consistent with the literature about civics education curriculum, Josh learned the branches and structures of the U.S. government and commented:

> I think we took each branch of the government—judicial, executive, and legislative—and just broke it down into specifics of each branch in detail. And, once, we had a mock case sort of—a trial. We learned just basically about the different types of government and the conflicts over the past decade or so.

Josh described his course as organized around helping personally responsible citizens know about their government. He had some sense of what democracy meant and recollected the Bill of Rights as part of a conversation about the rights and responsibilities of citizens. He did not, however, refer to voting as a right or responsibility. He was attuned to the processes and procedures of government. He also perceived this course as useful to his future.

> I think it [the government course] was useful…I think most people think that the government just does stuff for their own good but I think it explains why people

> do what they do and the different reasons they do what they do. And just because one person might feel one way about some things, they might have to vote another way because of their party affiliation. I think it was a good opportunity to get a behind the scenes look at the government rather than just taking it for face value…I think it helped me a lot because after high school I want to major in criminal justice so that will help me a lot in learning about the judicial process and defense and things like that. It gives me a different perspective to look at early in life rather than later when I'm in college.

Josh's civics class offered him a preview of how he might participate in government personally and professionally. He did not question what he learned, nor suggest different ways to participate.

In addition to finding his civics education relevant, Josh reported that the presentation and promise of how government works gave him confidence in the political system and led him to believe that change in the system was possible. At a local level, Josh described the structures present within schools whereby students could participate and effect change. For example, he believed that the Student Council could serve as a voice for students to share their views with the school board and administrators. He said:

> I think we have an opportunity—that's how I look at it. Student Council has an opinion and most administrators and Boards of Education look at the Student Council as an opinion in their process to making decisions. I think most of the time it's not really applied but it's just one extra, one added voice in the decision-making process.

He reported that most students in his school knew their Student Council representatives and were willing to approach them with concerns. He was confident that these representatives would listen to student voices and convey related concerns in Student Council meetings.

In contrast to his belief in formal structures as a means of change, Josh acknowledged that sometimes the Student Council system did not work. He questioned whether school administrators actually listened to Student Council representatives and considered student views in policy decisions. At his former high school, the principal was present at Student Council meetings and listened intently. At his current school, however, administrators opted not to attend Student Council meetings and, thus, marginalized student voices. Josh noted an example during basketball season when students and administrators disagreed about the level of energy posed by the students who sat in a reserved section during athletic games. In Josh's view, administrators misunderstood the supportive actions of the students and eliminated their opportunity to sit collectively. Students were denied any voice in the decision-making process. This experience discouraged him from taking future action when he found administrative decisions to be unfair. While Josh expressed skepticism about student participation in

this particular situation, he continued to have confidence in national government and planned to participate in this larger democratic structure.

While discussing Josh's desire to serve as an advocate for change, he cited an example from his baseball team participation. He recognized his discomfort in approaching authority figures in situations where a change needed to be made. While he expected to be in the team's starting lineup, he received less and less playing time as the season progressed. He did not know how to address the situation other than to remain frustrated. Within our discussions, the possibility of talking to the coach was considered and we role-played a conversation in order to alleviate his fears about being perceived as a complainer. We discussed the tone, content, and purpose of a conversation that would question, rather than accuse. Josh appreciated our problem-solving conversation and believed that approaching his coach was a step that he could take. He concluded that he had not learned how to deal with such situations in any previous classroom setting. He found our conversation to be useful and indicated that he had not considered these possibilities before. Josh believed that our discussion gave him confidence to communicate more effectively with people in authority. Thus, this learning offered the possibility for initiating change in this setting, and possibly in others.

Erika: Cynicism in the Function of Institutions

Erika was a White student and senior at West High School. She planned to attend college and remain active in extracurricular activities. She described herself by saying:

> I actually like school and I am kind of a science nut. I've taken a lot of science classes in high school…but, um, I like science a lot and I like to read. People here are cool and it makes me want to come. I am involved, really involved. I am busy all the time. I am in Students Against Drunk Driving which is where I spend a lot of my time and HALE and basketball. I've done that all four years.

HALE was a leadership mediation program where senior students learned to mediate problems with others. Erika gained a great deal from participation in both organizations mentioned in her quote but did not feel that this participation was recognized by the majority of students who did not attend events.

Erika reported that her most important civics lessons were learned outside of class. While her civics class suggested possibilities for participation in national and local government, her experiences in school created cynicism about how the processes were actually practiced. Specifically, Erika was concerned about the administration in her school and how it served as a structure separate from the voices of students. She understood school as an institution and was vocal about recurring problems—fights, lack of policy enforcement by administrators, student absences—and desired a stronger administration that dealt with these problems. Unfortunately she did not see herself as someone who could affect change in her school. She offered:

> I definitely wasn't involved in anything like that and probably should have been but I never did anything like try to overthrow Mr. Smith (the principal) 'cause that would have been the greatest thing ever. Things have gone downhill since he became principal last year. Before he was here things were enforced and things went smoother.

This is not unlike other students who failed to speak up outside of the group interview regarding the problems that they encountered. She noted that this reticence was most likely due to concern that other students might "look down" on them. Erika spoke of this concern as she explained:

> I mean in high school, that's like your worst fear to not have people like you because of what you said. So people just be quiet and that's not a good thing but that's just how it's been since forever and people they just don't want people to think badly of them.

Erika was reluctant to speak up, not only fearing peer pressure, but also believing that no one would hear her voice. On one occasion she spoke to the vice principal about a concern, but their brief conversation confirmed that her voice, indeed, had little impact.

While Erika was cynical about her participation in school and national institutions, she expressed her concerns on an individual basis. Although she was not likely to challenge more powerful authority figures, Erika possessed a strong, well-developed voice that was used in certain spaces to challenge perspectives held by her peers. She acknowledged that classrooms were spaces where one might attempt to facilitate change through conversation. While her government class did not offer opportunities to dialogue and debate, her social studies class and some English classes did. Within these opportune settings, Erika challenged ideas that contradicted her beliefs, even though her peers often disagreed with her. During the group interview session, she stepped forth as a leader in critical discourse. In the following interview excerpt, Erika interacted with Shawn, whose comments are featured in the next section. Brad, another study participant from West High School, chimed into the conversation.

> *Shawn:* Yeah, pretty much all the same kind of stuff.
> *Erika:* I think there's more tradition than them overruling anybody else, though. Like if you guys were to try to get on the prom committee then your kind of music would be played and stuff like that. But you guys don't try. (They mumble.) But you guys don't try. So you really can't say majority rules when you don't try to be part.
> *Shawn:* There's no point in trying.
> *Erika:* Like you personally—everybody loves you and if you were to try to get on prom committee you would be on prom committee.
> *Shawn:* I doubt that.
> *Erika:* I don't doubt that, seriously.
> *Shawn*: When you say it is a tradition, what do you mean by that?

> *Erika:* Say like you guys are talking about the music? What are you guys talking about?
> *Shawn:* Yeah, like music, for example.
> *Erika:* [This high school] has a reputation for being ghetto and the people that are on prom committee are ghetto and you guys don't try.
> *Shawn:* So that's majority rule then.
> *Erika*: It's the same people…
> *Brad:* That's not tradition. Tradition would be like (mimics violin), don't you think?
> *Erika*: No, I don't think the tradition is like that because the people that are doing prom committee are the same people doing the pep rally, same 5 or 6 people that do everything at [this high school]. That's why it's the same, all the time. 'Cause nobody else tries to get involved in that kind of stuff.

While Erika's ideas differed dramatically from those offered by the males, she acknowledged and elaborated upon this difference. While they blamed lack of change on "the majority", Erika believed that Shawn and Brad could participate in and change the system if they sought to do so. Her differing opinion in this passage is important to note, as well as the strength of her voice and her willingness to disagree with her peers.

Another avenue of change providing voice to the participants in this study was slam poetry. Slam poetry is a competitive performance during which poetry or the spoken word is read or recited by authors. For Erika, slam poetry provided a structured means of expressing her feelings. Poetry had the potential to serve as political voice challenging the system, a means of influence recently discovered by Erika. She spoke about a recent political piece she recited during a slam session.

> Me personally, I only wrote one in my whole life. That was after [an event at school last year] and about how everyone treated us, stuff like that. It just ended up being a rant on how much I hate everyone in the world. It wasn't meant to be but that's how it turned out. It was actually a really good piece…. It was more or less what I felt about the situations that were going on and I think I wanted people to hear my point of view, definitely. And a lot of people I know, the first time I did it, I did it at the club which is downtown and people were just in awe afterwards. One of our high schoolers…I definitely think it moves other people. I know when Ricky read his piece everyone was just awed afterwards as well. It makes you think what's really going on. One of our missions you know, what's going on. You get other people's points of views, definitely.

Slam poetry provided an outlet for Erika's expression; it also served as means of sharing her point of view with others. Although slam poetry may not have helped her change the school problems that she addressed, it provided a space in which she could develop her voice and express her opinions.

Shawn: Outside the System of Influence

Shawn was also a White senior at West High School. Shawn described himself as follows:

> Art is my number one thing…I am part of the NAHS—the National Art Honor Society. Obviously I am big into art…I am not a part of any classes. I have independent study so that gives me a little more artistic freedom and I get to do what I want, express myself artistically and not have to follow assignments, be able to actually be an artist and do what I want.

Art was not only a primary academic and extracurricular pursuit for Shawn; art was also a mechanism through which Shawn was able to express ideas and emotions. He used charcoal to represent the human anatomy in abstract form. When asked what he expressed in his art, he replied:

> I guess it is emotion, any form of emotion because it's a good emotional outlet whether you're happy or upset affects your art and how you do it. And sometimes I use, like, politics actually. My view on where the world's going and that kind of stuff cause they're going to affect the world in the future and I kind of portray that in my art.

I talked with Shawn about the government course that he had completed during his junior year. His description was similar to Josh's, although he remembered less. In the following exchange between Shawn and me, he described some of the same uses for what he learned in the course.

> *Shawn:* The basic foundation of government like the different branches and stuff.
> *Sandra (the researcher):* Was this a useful class for you?
> *Shawn:* I guess it was useful 'cause it got me more knowledgeable about how the government works, but interest wise, it bored me to death. It just completely bored me. But I guess it did help me to be more knowledgeable about government and how it works.
> *Sandra:* Is it helpful for you to know about the government and how it works?
> *Shawn:* I think so. Maybe not necessarily right now but maybe a couple of years down the line when it is time for me to vote and what not. Having those basic ideas could help me.

Shawn described a government class that focused on preparing students to become responsible citizens. He learned the branches of government, core democratic values, and the action that he viewed as a right and responsibility—voting responsibly for government leaders. The course was useful for teaching information about structures of government, but not necessarily useful for helping Shawn participate in this government. He knew of governmental mechanisms, but did not hold faith in them. He distanced himself from this class, but demonstrated strong political awareness. He was

intensely opposed to the war in Iraq and acknowledged participation in heated conversations with his friends about the last presidential elections.

During the group interview, we discussed the core democratic values taught in government class. Shawn was vocal about the inconsistency of these values and his experiences. He felt that although the ideas of liberty, justice, diversity, and equality were presented in a matter-of-fact manner, he noted consistent absence of these values in relationships among people. According to his own description, Shawn expressed himself in ways that sometimes made other people uncomfortable and were often outside the realm of "normal." He believed that society did not respect diversity, equality, or justice. The learning that took place in his government class did not provide him with opportunities to discuss or challenge these ideas.

Shawn's experiences in and out of school moved him to the periphery of democratic conversations where he functioned as a non-participant. He acknowledged lack of voice in his contributions and was acutely aware of preference for the ideas of student leaders within his school. Shawn did not believe that schools were democratic, thus he often accepted decisions of administrators and teachers even when he disagreed. He believed that democratic systems beyond the walls of his school were more inclusive. While this belief hampered his school participation, it gave him more confidence in the fairness of larger institutions and people, in general. Nationally, he acknowledged that the government was supposedly democratic, but did not feel that his local actions could have any impact.

> You are more controlled in this environment [school] because of the school board and obviously it wouldn't be appropriate for the environment but outside of school, your rights are more open, your expressions can be a little more expressive…[In school] I guess they're trying to keep a certain level of respect, maybe. Maybe if your expressions, your ideas, are going to be disrespectful to someone else then since it is school they don't want that to happen with all these new laws…I think for school it's okay, but once you get into the real world, I think it's good that those restraints are kind of lifted and you are given more freedom, I guess, because you are getting a wider audience and more different views. So I think it is okay for schools to have these constraints.

Students who wielded influence in his school setting were restricted to what he termed "the majority." He was not able to distinguish whether or not this majority was actual or perceived. He believed that school administrators anticipated problems if students in the majority group were disgruntled, but similar concern would not exist if he and his friends were unhappy. The line that he drew between "the majority" and his own voice was where Shawn began to make a strong distinction between school and the real world. Thus, he chose to be silent about the issues that made him uncomfortable in school.

In one particular incident, Shawn could have made his voice known when school administrators censored his school art exhibit, arguing that it was too controversial. He did not take action, nor voice his concerns, because he felt that his effort would be

wasted. Had the art exhibit been featured outside of school, Shawn surmised that he would have taken action and expressed his concerns. Beyond the walls of his school, he perceived greater diversity of opinion and consideration of more ideas as "acceptable." Given an art exhibit in the broader public space, he suspected that individuals were less threatened by his work. Within his school setting, he decided that it was better to simply "do his art" and leave change and decision-making in the hands of people who held the power to make a difference.

Moving the Conversation Forward:
What this Means for Civic Education

The literature regarding the education of personally responsible citizens argues that students should learn to be responsible actors in their local, state, and national governments. They acquire behaviors necessary to assume this role by learning about the aforementioned levels of governance within school settings. If students understand how their national government functions, including their civic rights and responsibilities, then they can act accordingly. While this orientation is focused on the relationship between individuals and a national government, it does not disregard the importance of local participation. The student voices featured in this study express ideas consistent with Hahn's (2002) report of the IEA Civic Education Study and Ravitch's (2001) description of what is or should be taught in civics education. All nine students in this study could identify branches of government, name most core democratic values, identify the purpose of the Bill of Rights, and acknowledge voting as the primary responsibility of citizens. Only four of the students could provide a definition of democracy or other key concepts. The rights and responsibilities of conscientious citizens were examined in the civics classes completed by study participants. However, the influence of state benchmarks and examinations may preclude the possibility of teaching civics through anything other than a traditional approach. Acknowledging this influence, however, does not address the question of whether or not the teaching and learning examined in this study was suitable for students.

Conversations with these high school students raise important questions about what should be taught in high school government and civics courses. Study participants could recall the names of governmental systems and list responsibilities and means of civic participation such as voting, joining the military, and writing petitions. However, these means of participation were not sufficient for changing perceived imbalances and injustices that students witnessed in the systems around them. Like the core democratic values that they critiqued, students conceptualized government as merely an ideal, but they did not perceive themselves to have the tools for shaping their government into a better entity. Some of the students failed to see themselves as possible civic agents of change. Additionally, eight students lacked understandings regarding how to effectively facilitate change or even produce conversation that might potentially lead to change.

The themes discussed throughout these student conversations have implications for how students conceive of themselves as civic actors. First, even though civics teachers taught study participants about civic structures, institutions, and related

participation, governmental systems were perceived as formidable and inaccessible to students. This issue surfaced within each theme as students spoke of experiences in which they questioned their abilities to voice concerns or their opportunities for being recognized as democratic participants. Second, the issues perceived most tangible and important to students were those at the local school or community level, rather than at the national level. Students more easily understood and addressed local problems and the actors involved with decision making. For study participants, it was easier to contemplate the display of controversial political artwork in their town, than to become involved in civic participation related to the war in Iraq. Issues inside the school that directly affected their daily lives were most important. Students' local context will change after graduation, but lessons learned from their daily experiences will not fade away at the schoolhouse doors. Hopefully, the broadening of students' civic education experiences will lessen the disenfranchisement felt by people throughout the nation as such students become mature democratic citizens.

The themes addressed in student discussions featured in this study demonstrate a desire to learn tactics for resistance or participation beyond the opportunities offered in their civics and government classes. Voice, the ability to thoughtfully contribute to, listen to, and respond to the exchange of ideas, may be the untapped factor vital to expanding civic participation. It may be the mechanism enabling students to access local and national systems and to show resistance. But as study participants suggested, student voice is typically marginalized within traditional approaches to civics education. These mechanisms challenge the focus of citizenship education and draw our attention back to what it means to consider democracy as a process in which students learn to participate.

Democracy may be a national or even a local entity, but it is increasingly global. Students who look critically at themselves and how they participate in local and national institutions will likely see that these systems transcend boundaries. At this global level students can imagine other forms of participation and see the world beyond their doorstep. As they engage in conversations and consider the world around them, seeing democracy as a process in which they are involved has the potential to connect them with people in their community, nation, and world. The students in this study add to the literature of critical theorists by imagining a democratic process in which good citizens ask difficult questions about the system as it is and seek methods for improving that system. The inquiry of these students into the democratic process has implications beyond their local or national context. As U.S. citizens, these students likely take for granted that they live in a democratic country. Democracy may be challenged within this context, but students do not need promises about its existence in order to feel secure in its presence. This form of governance is assumed in the U.S. to the extent that it is held up as a model for other countries. Democracy may be a national or even a local entity, but it is increasingly a global one. With such possible potential in mind, it is logical and ethical to ask a new set of questions about the comparative nature of democracy and the way in which context matters and draws us together. Students looking critically at themselves and the institutions around them locally and nationally will likely see that

these systems transcend national boundaries. At a global level students can imagine other forms of participation and see the world beyond their doorstep.

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