

An Undeniable Force: Supporting Urban Middle School Students as Scholars and Citizens through Debate

NICOLE MIRRA ■ GABRIEL PIETRZAK

"I think debate makes kids feel like they have a force that nobody can deny."

—Franklin,¹ eighth grader

It is 3:30 pm on a Saturday afternoon and the happy noise of hundreds of middle school students echoes across the cavernous school auditorium. Franklin sits with his coach and fellow members of his debate team reviewing in minute detail the highlights of the day's three rounds, during which they considered whether professional athletes deserve multimillion-dollar salaries. The chattering reaches a crescendo as dozens of trophies are wheeled onto the stage but quickly subsides as the tournament organizers signal the start of the awards ceremony. The long day, which began at dawn as teams traveled together from across New York City to meet at the host school in the Bronx, ends with smiling students clutching their prizes as their teachers and parents cheer them on.

It may seem surprising at first that these students chose to spend half of their weekends engaging in an activity that more often conjures images of stuffy policymakers than boisterous young adolescents. But Franklin's quote begins to expose the motivation behind their participation—something about this debate program is influencing their skills and self-perceptions in ways that make them feel powerful and proud. As a former high school English teacher and debate coach in this school district, I viscerally understand the feeling Franklin is expressing—I've witnessed firsthand how debate can coax reticent students out of their shells and transform their personal and academic lives.

Now, years later as an English teacher educator, I am fortunate to have the opportunity to team up with colleagues from the Middle School Quality Initiative (MSQI), a program of the New York City Department of Education (NYCDOE), to more systematically examine the impacts of debate. MSQI has integrated Word

Generation, an interdisciplinary literacy curriculum that features weekly debates, into over 100 middle schools across the city; MSQI staff members also facilitate weekend debate tournaments to provide interested students with opportunities for further enrichment.

Through our study of the program, we found that when structured to highlight current social issues in which students are interested, value student language practices, and foster collaboration and teamwork, debate has the ability to not only bolster their academic literacy skills, but also to inspire their engagement in community life as developing citizens. In this article, we highlight debate as a best practice that sustains students' linguistic, cultural, and civic identities. We focus specifically on the extracurricular aspect of the program to emphasize that culturally relevant pedagogy often extends beyond the classroom—both figuratively by incorporating student interest and experience into the curriculum *and* literally by taking place in community spaces.

Before jumping into our findings, we step back to consider debate within the wider context of critical literacy and culturally relevant pedagogy.

Debate as a Culturally Sustaining Activity for (Urban) Youth

Many of us English teachers instinctively integrate structured opportunities for discussion into our classes to elicit student opinions about the texts we read, write, and listen to. Our instincts are supported by research demonstrating that classroom talk improves student vocabulary and reading comprehension skills (Snow, Lawrence & White, 2009) and can spark students' critical thinking about social issues (Hess, 2009). A team of scholars from Teachers College found that the dialogic reasoning involved in debating also helps students learn to craft strong written arguments and use evidence to support their claims—skills at the very heart of the Common Core State Standards (Kuhn & Crowell, 2011).

1. We use pseudonyms for all student, teacher, and school names.

These academic benefits have also inspired the creation of extracurricular debate teams at many universities and high schools across the country. Like other activities that require funding for resources and travel, however, access to debate is inequitably distributed and often unavailable to students in low-income urban areas. In response, the National Association of Urban Debate Leagues was established in 1985 to bring the activity to students from marginalized communities. Urban Debate Leagues (UDLs) currently serve 19 metropolitan areas and engage nearly 10,000 middle and high school students in debate (the MSQI partners with the New York City UDL to host its tournaments). (See <http://urbandebate.org/> for more information)

While research on UDLs indicate that, like in debate programs generally, participating students benefit through improved grades, increased attendance, lower incidence of discipline referrals, and higher graduation rates (Anderson & Mezuk, 2012; HISD, 2012; Neuman-Sheldon, 2010), it also reveals that UDLs offer something greater; namely, a promise to students of color and low-income students that their voices matter and that they have important contributions to make to public life (Breger, 2000; Cridland-Hughes, 2012). Indeed, the Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools reports that extracurricular activities like debate that encourage teamwork and community involvement are powerful spaces for youth civic learning (Gould, Jamieson, Levin, McConnell & Smith, 2011).

Debate, as conceptualized by UDLs, extends beyond traditional academic literacies by integrating social issues and honoring student voice to contribute to a more equitable vision of civic life. This activity embodies Brazilian educator Paulo Freire's (1970) concept of critical literacy, in which the skills of literary analysis are applied to social critique and action. Critical literacy practices represent crucial opportunities for urban youth to express their identities and experiences (Morrell, 2008), which are key principles of culturally relevant pedagogy (Howard, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 1995). This approach to literacy reminds us that culture is not a static entity, but rather a constantly shifting set of values, behaviors, and orientations; as a result, Django Paris (2012) has argued that it is time for teachers to move beyond simply *responding* to student culture through their practices to *sustaining* it—a commitment that requires a willingness to listen to students and allow them to take leadership roles in our classrooms. We believe that debate is a

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practice that can help foster this commitment, and our desire to learn more about how students experience this activity led us to our study.

Our Study

Our study, which took place during the 2014–15 school year, explores the research question, What are the impacts of extracurricular debate participation on middle school students? While the MSQI debate program involves both classroom and extracurricular elements, we consider

only extracurricular debate in this article to highlight forms of culturally sustaining pedagogy extending beyond the traditional classroom context. I (NM) led the data collection efforts, which involved observing a Saturday debate tournament and conducting a total of 34 interviews with students, teachers, and administrators from four MSQI middle schools. I chose 4 focus schools that shared a demonstrated commitment to the MSQI debate program but differed in terms of their geographic location within the city and the socio-economic makeup of their student bodies (see Table 1).

I (NM) coded the interview transcripts twice—once inductively without any overarching categories, and once deductively in which I used my analysis of the existing debate literature to create two categories: academic and culturally sustaining impacts. We use these categories to share our preliminary findings.

Academic Impacts of Debate

The MSQI Saturday debate tournaments draw their topics from the Word Generation curriculum that students experience in their English classes, creating a bridge between classroom and extracurricular learning. (See Figure 1 for more information about Word Generation)

MSQI uses a style of debate called “Public Forum” in its tournaments (See Figure 2). Within this structure, students debate in pairs and progress through a series of speeches punctuated by opportunities to engage in direct question and answer sessions with their opponents (i.e., *crossfire*).

All of the students we interviewed told us that participating in the Saturday debate tournaments helped them improve their academic literacy skills. Alice, a seventh grader from Eastside, focused on the way that learning about debate topics spurred her to tackle tough

TABLE 1. Focus School Demographic Profiles (2013–2014 School Year)

School	Enrollment	% Asian	% Black	% Hispanic	% Other	% White	% SPED	% ELL	% FRL
<i>Glory Academy</i> (8 students, 1 teacher, 1 admin)	645	0.0	61.1	36.7	1.7	0.5	26.8	3.9	80.5
<i>Eastside Community Middle School</i> (6 students, 2 teachers, 1 admin)	98	17.3	19.4	49.0	2.0	12.2	20.4	8.2	75.5
<i>Polaris Academy</i> (6 students, 2 teachers)	208	1.0	87.5	10.1	0.5	1.0	6.3	0.5	88.0
<i>Ripken Middle School</i> (4 students, 1 teacher, 2 admin)	797	1.6	13.0	80.8	0.4	4.1	19.8	19.1	97.2

articles; as she explained, “I read so much because I have to research and my vocabulary expands, and I’m able to comprehend more difficult texts.” William, a sixth grader from Glory Academy, said of his writing, “My use of evidence has improved, because in debate you have to back up what you’re saying.” And Catherine, an eighth grader from Polaris, detailed her ability to develop counter-claims when listening to opponents: “We were talking about a passage in class and every single reason someone had about why this was right, I’d automatically think in my head why this was wrong. Or if they said it was wrong, I’d think why it was right.”

Mr. Price, the debate coach from Eastside, laughed

as he explained how the competitive nature of debate engaged even the most reluctant of readers: “You couldn’t pay some of them to talk about texts before they started debating. And now they have a context for doing that and they’re using higher-level vocabulary. It’s a beautiful thing.”

Culturally Sustaining Impacts of Debate

Two themes emerged from our interviews that supported our characterization of debate as a culturally sustaining activity—first, students expressed that their literacy abilities were honored through debate; and second, they connected what they learned from debate to analyzing society.

When we asked Benjamin, a sixth grader from Glory Academy, why he attended weekend debate tournaments, he responded, “Debate makes me feel like I’m actually good at something that I never thought I would have the chance to do.” He told us that when he heard about the activity for the first time, he thought it was something that only students in more affluent communities did—not something that a middle school student from a struggling community in the Bronx could “have the chance to do” and “be good at.” Participation in debate gave Benjamin a

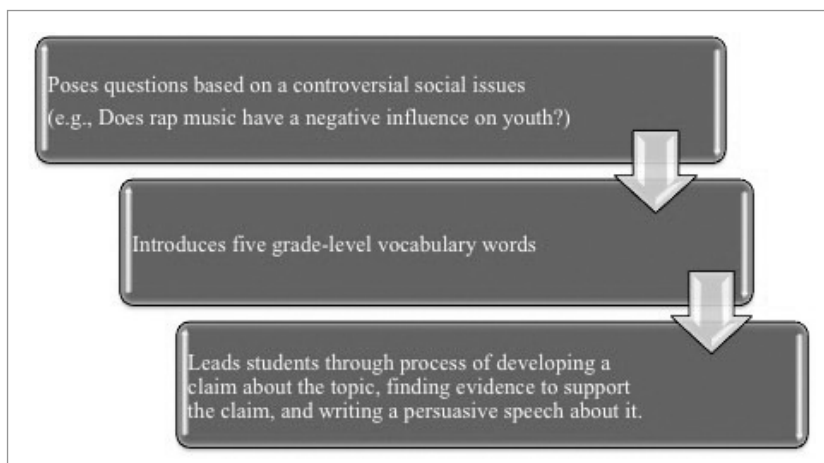


FIGURE 1. *Word Generation Weekly Unit Organization*

Speeches and Time Limits

Speaker 1 (Team A, 1st speaker).....	4 min.
Speaker 2 (Team B, 1st speaker).....	4 min.
Crossfire (between speakers 1 & 2).....	3 min.
Speaker 3 (Team A, 2nd speaker)	4 min.
Speaker 4 (Team B, 2nd speaker).....	4 min.
Crossfire (between speakers 3 & 4).....	3 min.
Speaker 1 Summary.....	2 min.
Speaker 2 Summary.....	2 min.
Grand Crossfire (all speakers)	3 min.
Speaker 3 Final Focus.....	2 min.
Speaker 4 Final Focus.....	2 min.
<i>Each team may use up to two minutes of prep time.</i>	

FIGURE 2. MSQI Public Forum Debate Format

sense of competence that led to confidence when he saw that members of this community valued his identity, his style of speaking, and his opinion about social issues.

Ms. Ingram, Ripken's debate coach, smiled as she told us about a student who came out of his shell because of debate; as she explained, "That drives me, knowing that he's so into it and that this is his connection place. This is where he blooms, this is where he smiles, and this is where he laughs."

Because students must be prepared to argue both the pro and con sides of any topic at every debate tournament—sometimes defending perspectives with which they personally disagree—debate encourages students to consider multiple points of view when they encounter controversial social issues in life (Mutz, 2006). Antoinette, a seventh grader from Ripken, told us, "I did not look at current events before debate. Current events are exciting, but before I didn't have my eyes open to it." Tyrone, a seventh grader at Glory Academy, explained how debate helped him process the recent incidences of police brutality that he was seeing on the news: "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." And Karla, an eighth grader from Eastside, said, "I love debate because I can stand up for people and their rights."

Implications for Practice

Debate is well suited for the current landscape of literacy education considering its focus on evidence-based

claims and informational text. Our findings remind us that after-school spaces can be just as important as classrooms for encouraging students' critical thinking skills and fostering Common Core college and career readiness. Debate provides a framework for discussion that can be integrated into activities encompassing all content areas and interests.

Debate has the potential to bridge classroom and community learning contexts and provide young adolescents with an outlet for exploring their values, beliefs, and opinions about public life during a turbulent time in their development through a collaborative team activity. As educators, we can imagine the possibilities—arranging opportunities for students to debate community members or students from other schools or cities. Debate can help us see beyond the classroom and recognize our students as powerful young citizens.

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Nicole Mirra is a former New York City public school teacher and an assistant professor of English education at the University of Texas at El Paso.

Gabriel Pietrzak is the evaluation manager for the Middle School Quality Initiative (MSQI) at the New York City Department of Education.

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In this lesson, students analyze their own schooling experiences by imagining what their education would be like if service-learning was a requirement for graduation. They engage in a preliminary classroom debate—either agreeing with the proposed change in curriculum, opposing it, or taking a middle-ground stance—before they have all of the facts. From here, students research service-learning and work in groups to prepare informed debates. At the end of this lesson, students reflect on the implications of making uninformed vs. informed arguments as well as what it takes to build a strong, successful argument.

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Lisa Storm Fink
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