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Speaking with confidence and listening with empathy: The impact of *Project Soapbox* on high
school students

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Abstract

This case study investigates an action civics curriculum—*Project Soapbox*—designed to foster key civic outcomes among high school students. Framed by research highlighting profound disparities in civic educational opportunities and the best practices of civic education programs, this article examines the democratic and literacy skills high school students report learning from participation in *Project Soapbox*. Data include pre- and post-surveys with 204 high school students from nine public high schools; classroom observations; teacher interviews; student work samples; and student focus group interviews. Findings indicate that students who participated in *Project Soapbox* reported modest gains in their expectations for future civic engagement and expressed greater confidence in their rhetorical skills. Additionally, although this is a curriculum designed to emphasize rhetorical skills and democratic orientations, some of the strongest impact appeared in students' reports of their listening and empathy skills.

Keywords: action civics, civic education, secondary social studies, democratic education, high school students, listening, civic opportunity

In recent years, scholars have expressed growing concern about the ways in which our democracy fails tests of political equality (Bartels, 2008; Hacker & Pierson, 2010; Gilens, 2012; Schlozman, Verba & Brady, 2012). Researchers have documented uneven participation among the American public, with those with the greatest resources participating at rates (and being responded to at rates) much greater than those who have less access to key resources of “skills, money, and time” (Schlozman, Verba & Brady, 2012, p.17). One critical gap in political participation is age. And, while young adults have always participated less than older Americans, researchers have noted evidence of growing disparity between youth and elders. It is essential, then, that young people have opportunities to engage in learning that fosters their civic capabilities.

In this paper, we examine one such opportunity: an action civics curriculum, *Project Soapbox*, that aims to cultivate both democratic and literacy skills among young people. Started by the Chicago-based non-profit organization Mikva Challenge in 2007, the brief one-to-two week program requires that students write and deliver a speech about a community issue of importance to them. Here, we examine *Project Soapbox* to explore what high school students learn from this particular action civics curriculum. We consider the following central research questions:

- What do secondary students learn from their engagement in an action civics curriculum?
 - What democratic skills and attitudes do students report developing?
 - What kinds of speaking and listening skills do students report developing?

We present findings that indicate that students who participated in *Project Soapbox* made modest but noticeable gains in their assessment of their civic and rhetorical skills. These findings are

consistent with earlier research on best practices in civic education and are significant because of the brevity of the curriculum under investigation—a single, short-term project rather than a longer (semester or year) activity. Additionally, we present the relatively novel finding that although this is a curriculum designed to emphasize rhetorical skills and democratic orientations, a key impact appeared in students' reports of their listening and empathy skills. We begin by framing this study with a discussion of research that highlights the profound disparities that exist in civic educational opportunities among different groups of young people and the qualities of civic education that show promise for fostering important democratic skills, knowledge, and orientations among youth.

Disparities in Youth Political Engagement

Numerous studies over the past decade have documented the waning participation of young adults in public life, particularly in the arena of political action. Compared to earlier generations of youth, teenagers today exhibit less political knowledge, possess fewer political skills, and indicate relatively weak levels of political efficacy (Campbell et al., 2012; Gibson & Levine, 2003; Levine & Lopez, 2002; Wattenberg, 2007; Zukin et al., 2006). Some scholars have attributed the decline in youth political engagement to different civic orientations among younger generations, who prioritize a notion of citizenship that focuses on engagement (e.g., volunteer activities) instead of duties (e.g., voting) (cf., Dalton, 2009). Others have pointed to studies indicating that high school students are not developing the key precursors that are associated with political engagement (Galston, 2001; Gibson & Levine, 2003).

And while renewed attention to and concern about the issue of youth engagement has been accompanied by concerted – and often successful (Green & Gerber, 2004)—efforts to engage youth in public life, research in the field has also documented another perhaps more

pernicious divide among youth, the “civic opportunity gap” (Kahne and Middaugh, 2008; Levinson, 2012). That is, the best curricular and co-curricular programs designed to teach democratic orientations and skills have been disproportionately available to students who have higher socio-economic status, are enrolled in more challenging academic programs, and are most likely to go to college. As Meira Levinson (2012) has argued, this “profound *civic empowerment* gap—[is] as large and as disturbing as the reading and math achievement gaps that have received significant national attention in recent years –between ethnoracial minority, naturalized, and especially poor citizens, on the one hand, and White, native-born, and especially middle-class and wealthy citizens, on the other” (32).

Critically, the existence of differential civic opportunities available to students in high schools across America has also produced differential—and deeply concerning—outcomes. This existence of differential opportunities has been evident in tests of civic engagement and knowledge among disadvantaged students, who have earned lower scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress Civics Assessment scores. It has been reflected in surveys measuring their lower levels of political efficacy. And it has appeared in their political engagement as young adults. For example, in 2012, the voter turnout rate among young people with at least some college was 66 percent; for those without college exposure, the rate was a paltry 35 percent (CIRCLE, 2012). When one evaluates this educational disparity in turnout in terms of each group’s share of the electorate, the numbers for non-college youth are even more stark, and only getting worse. In 2012, 28 percent of the youth cohort was comprised of young adults with no college experience. In 2016, non-college educated youth were just 19 percent of the youth cohort, a drop of almost 10 percentage points (CIRCLE, 2016).

School-based Civic Education

Americans have long turned to civic education as a mechanism for teaching successive generations the habits and orientations associated with a healthy democracy. As Youniss (2011) has written, “schools are not the only source of [civic] renewal, but they are essential because they cultivate the next generation of citizens and civic leaders on whom sustaining democracy depends” (98). Yet, since the implementation of the *No Child Left Behind* legislation in 2001, social studies and civic education have suffered devastating marginalization as schools around the country have devoted increasing time and resources to advance literacy and mathematics education (cf., Au, 2007; Center on Education Policy, 2007). More recently, the widespread adoption of the Common Core Standards (Common Core Standards Initiative, 2014) has furthered schools’ emphasis on English language arts and mathematics, leaving history and social studies-related literacy standards as a small subset of the required curriculum for most students. Given civic education’s vital role in the development of the next generation of citizens—people who can analyze information, make informed decisions about public issues, and think for themselves in a complex democracy—the diminishing opportunities for young people to engage in dedicated social studies learning pose a serious threat to a healthy American democracy (Gibson & Levine, 2003).

The civic education that exists varies considerably from state to state, district to district, school to school, and even classroom to classroom (Kahne & Middaugh, 2008; Niemi and Junn 1998; Westheimer & Kahne 2004). The most common civics curriculum focuses on the acquisition of knowledge of the American political system. And, while knowledge of the system and the rights and privileges associated with citizenship is critical, this focus does not prepare students to be active participants in the public sphere. More recently, researchers have argued for curricular efforts that work to make politics relevant and to engage young people in civic life. In

so doing, they have identified a set of best practices in civic education. Generally, most scholars have agreed that the “best” curricular practices include: discussion of current events; a classroom climate that promotes the open exchange of ideas; teacher encouragement of independent thinking and opinion expression; opportunities for service learning; participation in simulations; and allowing students to study issues that are relevant to their own lives (Campbell, 2008; Kahne & Middaugh, 2008; Kahne & Sporte, 2008; Syvertsen, Flanagan and Stout, 2007; Torney-Purta, 2002; Youniss 2011).

Studies of these best practices—outlined by Gibson and Levine (2003) and tested and retested in national (Zukin et al., 2006) and international samples (Torney-Purta, 2002), as well as a series of particular programs (e.g., Syvertsen, Flanagan & Stout, 2007)—have documented an array of positive outcomes, including increases in factual knowledge, gains in civic commitments, skills of democratic deliberation, and increased attention to political news (Kahne, Crow & Lee, 2013; Longo, Drury and Battistoni, 2006; McDevitt & Kiosis, 2006). Importantly, scholars have found that the impact is not limited to students enrolled in key programs, but that it can spill over into positive influences on parents (in terms of voting and attention) (McDevitt & Kiosis, 2004, McDevitt & Kiosis, 2006) and it can last years after the program ended (McDevitt & Kiosis, 2006; Torney-Purta & Amadeo, 2003). And, while these best practices have been disproportionately available to white, wealthier students in the most selective classes in high-achieving schools, research has also shown that offering high quality civic education to disadvantaged youth can boost their participation as adults (Wilkenfeld, 2009).

Speaking and Listening Skills in School-based Democratic Education

One important aspect of school-based civic education involves providing young people with authentic opportunities to speak and listen to others. In the social studies education

literature, classroom discussion, including the discussion of controversial public issues, has gained prominence as an instructional practice that predicts a host of valuable civic outcomes, including increased political knowledge, efficacy, political interest, tolerance, trust, participation, and expected and actual electoral participation (cf., Barton & Avery, 2016; Hess, 2009). Hess and McAvoy's (2015) study of political discussions in high school classrooms illuminated some of these positive outcomes, revealing, for example, that participation in high quality political discussions led students to place significant value on hearing the diverse perspectives of their peers and to see disagreement as a normal part of democratic life. Students in classrooms that featured ongoing, high quality political discussions developed beliefs in the importance of listening to many sides before developing a position, became more open to considering different perspectives, and came to see that hearing different perspectives helped them clarify their own views. Such discussions also led students to view political issues as more complex than they had previously thought.

In addition to fostering these important outcomes, scholars have also highlighted how the act of engaging in classroom discussion—and the speaking and listening required of such discussion—models crucial democratic practices. As Hess (2009) has explained, democracy requires listening and speaking about public problems. Engaging in public, political discussions is vital work of democratic education because it allows young people opportunities to interact with others with differing viewpoints and ideological positions, learn to value those different perspectives, and potentially change society rather than merely reproduce it. Further, as Hess and McAvoy (2015) and Parker (2010) have noted, deliberation of public problems helps young people move toward an understanding of the common good—from self interest to thinking about what is best for society. According to these scholars, public schools are ideal places for

deliberation, because schools bring together young people who wouldn't normally be together in other spaces, thus mirroring the diverse experiences and perspectives in society. Bringing together a broader range of perspectives, in turn, positions those who are making shared decisions to develop better solutions (Parker, 2010).

While the exchange of ideas through both speaking and listening in political classroom discussions is vital, Parker (2010) has also highlighted the particular role that listening plays. According to him, listening is crucial for discussion, and it is particularly important to cultivate the skills for listening across difference. As Parker explained, "Equitable and trustworthy conjoint living is not only a matter of being heard but also of hearing others" (p. 2827).

Thus, providing young people high quality opportunities to speak and listen to one another about political issues in public spaces shows promise for cultivating vital democratic skills. Further, for schools faced with the competing pressures of narrowing the civic opportunity gap and documenting students' achievement in relation to the Common Core Standards, classroom experiences that simultaneously cultivate civic learning and those literacy skills that are assessed stand to make potentially vital contributions, particularly for those young people who are most disenfranchised and marginalized in American society.

Action Civics

Many of the best practices in civic education are found in programs that come under the framework of action civics—a theoretical perspective that suggests that powerful civic learning occurs and democracy is strengthened when youth voice and expertise are valued, and young people have authentic opportunities for expression, engagement, and reflection (ie., Gingold, 2013; National Action Civics Collaborative, 2010). The action civics curriculum is a unique approach to teaching key principles of democracy in that students actually *"do civics and behave*

as citizens by engaging in a cycle of research, action, and reflection" (Levinson 2012, p. 224). A key element of an action civics approach is the focus on making politics relevant by engaging youth in political action as students now and as future adults.

Although research on action civics is still emerging, there have been a number of studies of single programs that have demonstrated promising outcomes, such as a school wide initiative in Massachusetts (Berman, 2004), the Building Civic Bridges program (LeCompte & Blevins, 2015), iEngage summer civics institute (Blevins, LeCompte, & Wells, 2016), Project 540 (Battistoni, 2004), the We The People curriculum (Walling, 2007), the Constitutional Rights Foundation's City Works Initiative (Kahne, Chi & Middaugh, 2006), and the Student Voices program (Feldman et al., 2007). All of these programs share an emphasis on student voice, with open classrooms where students discuss and debate current events and are encouraged to speak their minds. In addition, these programs, which are implemented with diverse populations across the United States, create opportunities for students to engage with civic leaders and the broader community, often as part of a service-learning opportunity. The studies of these programs measured outcomes somewhat differently (e.g., civic skills such as public speaking and community mapping, social capital, political efficacy, and content knowledge), but they all have provided support for the breadth of potential positive results from participation in action civics programs. Despite the range of outcomes measured, however, none has specifically included listening skills in their analysis.

Project Soapbox in Chicago

In this instrumental case study (Stake, 2000) of an action civics curriculum, we investigate a Chicago-based program—Mikva Challenge's *Project Soapbox*—that is designed to foster key civic outcomes among Chicago Public Schools high school students and is aligned

with theories of action civics and Common Core literacy standards. The alarming opportunity gaps in civic learning discussed above are of crucial relevance in the city of Chicago where, in 2013-14, 85 percent of Chicago Public Schools' 400,545 students qualified for free and reduced lunch and 90 percent were students of color (Chicago Public Schools, 2014).

Mikva Challenge (Mikva) is a Chicago-based, non-profit, non-partisan organization that engages youth in action civics. Mikva has programs in over 50 public schools throughout the city, offering civic education opportunities to primarily underserved Chicago Public School students. Recently, Mikva has expanded its programming—and specifically *Project Soapbox*—to Los Angeles, Washington, DC, and numerous other cities around the United States.

Project Soapbox is a public speaking curriculum comprised of five detailed lessons that are designed to be useable as a standalone, week-long curriculum for approximately hour-long class periods. The curriculum includes reproducible handouts, rubrics, and suggested resources and is available on Mikva's website (see <https://secure.mikvachallenge.org/project-soapbox>). In the lessons, students first examine the qualities of a good speech and then choose a community issue of importance to them around which they will develop a speech. The curriculum then provides opportunities for students to learn how to use different forms of evidence to support arguments; learn how to grab audiences' attention and use other rhetorical devices; outline and write rough drafts of their own speeches; learn tools for effective delivery of a speech; and practice delivering these speeches with their peers. Following this instruction and practice, students deliver their finished speech to their classroom of peers, along with outside adult judges from the community. The curriculum encourages teachers to establish clear expectations among students that they listen to each speech without interruption, complete peer feedback forms for one another, and give "wild applause" after each speech is complete. The top speakers from

individual schools advance to a city-wide competition, which is also judged by community members. Thus, given that the curriculum features opportunities for open exchange of ideas, the development of public speaking skills, and the role of authentic youth voice (Campbell, 2008; Kahne, Crow & Lee, 2013; Torney-Purta, 2002; Zukin, et al, 2006), the curriculum and goals of *Project Soapbox* are well aligned with the “best practices” of civic education (Campbell, 2008; Niemi & Junn, 1998; Syvertsen, Flanagan, & Stout, 2007; Torney-Purta, 2002; Youniss, 2011).

In Chicago, students who take part in *Project Soapbox* do so either as part of a larger civics curriculum, or as a single, stand-alone civics opportunity in their school. The curriculum is typically implemented by social studies or English language arts teachers who have chosen to incorporate it in their individual classrooms, although some schools implement *Project Soapbox* more widely across multiple teachers and classrooms. The majority of teachers using the curriculum incorporate it as part of their regular school-day curriculum, but some schools offer *Project Soapbox* as an after school opportunity. Each year, Mikva provides professional development opportunities—in-person, online, or both—to help teachers learn to implement *Project Soapbox* successfully. As the curriculum guide notes, while the lessons can be taught in the span of a week, many teachers spend longer in order to allow students to develop their speeches further: often between two and three weeks. And, while many teachers faithfully follow the curriculum guide and handouts, many others customize and supplement the lessons with their own materials. In Chicago, *Project Soapbox* is typically implemented on a regular timeline in the early part of the school year—usually in September, October, or November—often timed to allow students to connect their speech topics to upcoming elections. The citywide competition occurs in mid-late November.

Methods and Sample

To study what students reported learning from this action civics curriculum, in Fall 2015, we recruited a sample of 19 classrooms that included nine teachers (six social studies; three language arts) who were implementing *Project Soapbox* at nine different Chicago public high schools, all as part of the regular school day curriculum. The recruitment of our classroom sample involved close collaboration with Mikva: when teachers signed up to implement *Project Soapbox* in late August and September of 2015, Mikva sent an email to those teachers informing them about our research, encouraging them to participate if they wished, and providing a link to our consent form and further information if they were interested. From those teachers who completed this consent form and agreed to participate, we included all teachers who were starting their curriculum in October, thereby allowing us the lead time to first distribute student assent/consent and parental permission forms to the high school students in the classrooms, return to the classroom to gather those forms, and administer an initial survey (see below) prior to students beginning the curriculum.

The nine schools in our sample served either majority Hispanic or majority African American student populations, and all but one of the schools in our sample had 90% or more low income students (see Table 1). The school sample included the range of types of high schools found within Chicago Public Schools (CPS): three were considered neighborhood schools, while the other six were categorized as a charter, magnet, small, military, and alternative school, respectively. The schools served student populations ranging in size from 124 students to 2,927 students, and encompassed a range of the school rating levels that exist within CPS. CPS rates schools from a Level 3, the lowest performance level—meaning that the school is in need of “intensive intervention”—up to the highest performance level of 1+, indicating the school is “nationally competitive” and has the “opportunity to share best practices” with other schools

(Chicago Public Schools, 2017). Of the five possible rating levels, the schools in our sample included three “below average performance” (Level 2); two “average performance” (Level 2+); one “high performance” (Level 1); and three “highest performance” (Level 1+).

[Insert Table 1 – Sample Composition – about here]

We administered surveys to students before and after taking part in the curriculum (N = 204) to examine how, if at all, students’ self-reported civic practices and dispositions, public speaking and literacy skills, and perceptions of classroom climate, changed over time. Many of the measures used in the pre/post survey were either replicated exactly or modified slightly from previous studies.¹ For example, questions about academic engagement and classroom rigor came from the Chicago Consortium on School Research’s “Five Essentials” survey (Chicago Consortium on School Research, 2013). Six of seven questions that asked about various actions in response to a community problem were taken from the California Civic Index (Kahne, Middaugh & Schutjer-Mance, 2005), while a series of questions about potential civic activities “after high school” were adapted from the Civic Engagement Questionnaire (Zukin et al., 2006). We incorporated internal and external political efficacy scales that are commonly and historically used by political scientists (c.f., Easton & Dennis, 1967). Factor analyses conducted on all scales revealed single factors. In addition, reliability analyses were conducted, and all the scales posted strong alpha scores (ranging from .741 for external efficacy to .877 for the community problem series and .928 for students’ assessments of their speaking skills). For a full discussion of youth civic engagement measurement, see Flanagan, Syvertson, & Stout (2007).

We also created survey items corresponding to the Common Core speaking and listening standards, given that the *Project Soapbox* curriculum is aligned with these standards. For example, in relation to listening skills, we asked students about their levels of confidence in

determining a speaker’s point of view on an issue; evaluating how well a speaker uses evidence; and evaluating how well a speaker uses rhetoric, such as word choice, points of emphasis, and tone. Similarly, in terms of speaking skills, we asked students about their confidence in their ability to do things such as explain a problem clearly to an audience; provide different kinds of evidence to explain the importance of an issue; and present a well-organized, easy to follow speech. Finally, our post-survey included an additional set of measures that Mikva Challenge regularly uses to evaluate *Project Soapbox*. These measures included Likert-scale questions asking students for their level of agreement with statements in response to their participation in the program, such as “I feel more confident;” “I feel I am a better public speaker;” and “I plan to speak up on issues that are important to me in the future.” This portion of the post-survey also included open-ended questions, such as “What do you think you learned as a result of participating in Project Soapbox?”.

The student sample closely mirrored the demographics of Chicago Public Schools: our sample was 41% African American, 48% Hispanic, and predominantly low income (see Table 2). Of the students who completed the pre- and post-surveys, 55% were female, and the majority was between 17-19 years old (76%), with the remainder ages 14-16 (24%).

[Insert Table 2 – demographics of sample – about here]

To complement the student survey data, we selected five classrooms—each in a different school—in which to collect qualitative data on teachers’ practices and students’ engagement with the curriculum. Our aim in selecting these five classrooms was to observe and more deeply understand students’ participation in and learning from the curriculum and to explore dimensions of variation in implementation of the curriculum. Thus, we selected English language arts (N=1) and social studies (N=4) classrooms to better understand how the curriculum was implemented

in these differing subject matter contexts. We included teachers who were both experienced (N=4) and novice (N=1) at implementing the curriculum. Finally, we selected teachers who were using *Project Soapbox* in different curricular contexts: as part of a larger eleventh/twelfth grade civics curriculum, a ninth grade criminal law curriculum, an eleventh/twelfth grade sociology course, an eleventh grade social science course, and an English language arts classroom (a junior/senior AP language and composition course), which was taught alongside a civics classroom in a partner social studies classroom. We also chose classrooms that represented differing student demographic make-ups and differing school types and ratings, as described above (see shaded rows in Table 1). The teachers in these classrooms spent between eight and fifteen class periods on *Project Soapbox*. Three of the teachers, including the one implementing it for the first time, followed the curriculum quite closely, making only small modifications (such as showing additional video speech samples), while the other two teachers used the majority of the curriculum but made more significant additions and modifications (such as creating different rubrics for the speeches).

In these selected classrooms, we observed and recorded detailed notes on three days of implementation of the curriculum. We then interviewed these five teachers to better understand their goals, practices, and prior experiences; these interviews each lasted between 40-50 minutes (see Appendix). We collected students' written speeches to allow us to document and evaluate students' topic selection and conducted student focus group interviews in four of the selected classrooms to gain further insight into students' experiences with the curriculum and teachers' practices. The student focus groups included between three and nine students, depending on how many students from each school consented to participate and were available at times that the teacher designated (e.g., lunch time or after school); these interviews lasted between 35-60

minutes. Finally, we observed the citywide competition, recorded observation notes about the competition and process, and examined video-recordings of the ten student finalists' speeches.

Researcher Positionality

We came to this research with some prior knowledge of and experience with Mikva Challenge, but with no participation in the creation of *Project Soapbox* or its implementation. The first author, a political science professor, served on the Advisory Board of Mikva for seven years as a result of her work in the field of youth civic engagement and thus was familiar with *Project Soapbox*, but stepped down from the board prior to beginning this research. The second author, a social studies education professor, was aware of Mikva and its curricula through professional conferences but had no other connection to the organization. In 2014, a funding organization introduced us to each other for the first time and invited us to submit a proposal to study *Project Soapbox*, given the perceived promise of action civics curricula like this one, the limited research base, and our cross-disciplinary sets of expertise. Mikva officers agreed to provide us with background information on the curriculum, included us in a professional development training on the curriculum, and provided us with access to contact information for all teachers who were implemented *Project Soapbox* in their classrooms. In addition, Mikva agreed that we would maintain full editorial control over our analysis and findings.

Data Analysis

In order to examine students' experiences with and learning from this action civics curriculum, we began with an analysis of the student surveys, focusing first on the quantitative measures. To identify areas of change, we conducted bivariate analyses of pre and post survey data, as well as bivariate analyses of the Mikva measures of student self-assessments of the impact of the program, controlling for a number of demographic variables. For clarity of

description, we often report the percentage of students who selected a particular response category in the surveys. To test for statistical significance of any observed pre/post changes, we conducted paired samples t-tests on all items that were included in both surveys (Pearson, 2010).

Our qualitative analysis for this paper focused primarily on students' open-ended survey responses and the student focus group interviews, although we draw from other data sources to supplement this analysis. We categorized students' open-ended survey responses into themes, including the broad categories under which students' speech topics fell and the themes that permeated students' reports of what they learned from the curriculum. We transcribed all teacher and student interviews and then coded all transcripts and classroom observation notes both inductively and deductively using categories aligned with the research question and action civics theory. For example, we began with codes such as "learned speaking skills," "learned listening skills," and "learned civic interest" to correspond with the categories of student learning we expected to find. After reading through transcripts and the open-ended student survey responses, we developed additional codes that captured themes that emerged from the data about students' learning, such as "learned about other people" and "learned about other topics." After coding these data, we wrote analytical memos (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992) that identified patterns and themes about students' learning from the curriculum.

Context

In order to contextualize the data that follow, it's important to note that, in 2015, there were 468 homicides in Chicago and 2,939 shooting victims, making it the city with the most homicides of all U.S. cities in 2015 (Gorner, 2016). Much of this violence was concentrated in the parts of the city where most of our school sample was located. Further, in November of 2015, the Chicago Police Department released footage of a police officer shooting 17-year-old Laquan

McDonald, an African American teenager, 16 times as he walked away from police, an event that precipitated the firing of the police Superintendent, began a U.S. Justice Department civil rights investigation into the police department's use of force, and deepened community turmoil and distrust, especially in those neighborhoods most plagued by this violence. Because of the timing of *Project Soapbox*, we conducted the majority of our student post-surveys within one week after the McDonald footage was released. In one case, students were in the computer lab researching the McDonald case as part of a class activity immediately prior to our post-survey administration. As the findings below will illustrate, this city context was closely connected to the topics many students chose for their speeches.

Findings from the Student Surveys

Students' *Soapbox* speeches centered on topics that were closely connected to their daily experiences and about which they cared a great deal. As Figure 1 illustrates, a large percentage of students elected to speak about various forms of violence and discrimination. Many students spoke about gun and gang violence in the city of Chicago, police brutality and misconduct, and domestic violence. Other students chose to discuss public policy issues such as college tuition costs, school start times, the importance of education for voting, unemployment, gentrification, and the legalization of marijuana.

[Insert Figure 1 – student speech topics – about here]

Turning to what students reported that they learned from their participation in *Project Soapbox*, we found that students themselves perceived to have made gains in many of the speaking and literacy skills we anticipated from this public speaking curriculum, along with gains in some precursors to political engagement. When asked to evaluate their own experiences in the post-survey (the Mikva variables detailed above, which are post-survey only) students

were overwhelmingly positive (See Figure 2). Seven in ten asserted that they believed they were better public speakers (21% agreeing strongly to this) and almost as many (66%) said that as a result of *Project Soapbox*, they felt less nervous to speak up in front of a group. Even larger majorities (57% agreeing and another 25% agreeing strongly) felt “more confident” after their participation in the curriculum. A large majority of students also anticipated political activities in the future: eight-in-ten said that they will work to make a difference on the issue, with similar numbers (79%) saying that they will speak up on the issue in the future. Clearly, these self-assessments indicate that students felt that they had gained skills and expertise, as well as the motivation to continue to speak out and to speak up in the future.

[Insert Figure 2 – Student Self Assessments – about here]

When we evaluated these self-assessments along gender lines, we found some statistically significant differences in the perceived impact of *Project Soapbox* reported by girls and boys in the study. Girls responded more positively than boys in the post survey to the notion that they had been “heard” by their peers (35% of girls strongly agreed to this, compared to 17% of boys). Moreover, girls were more likely than boys to indicate that their experience with the *Project Soapbox* curriculum had positively influenced their future activism. As noted in Figure 3, girls were more likely than boys to strongly agree that they would speak up on the issue again in the future (30% vs. 15%), to plan to make a difference on the issue they spoke about (31% vs. 16%) and to express a desire to participate in *Project Soapbox* again (31% vs. 16%). These gender differences stand in contrast to our analysis of responses by race and ethnicity, which showed little to no impact.

[Insert Figure 3 – Gender Differences on Self-Assessments – about here]

Impact on Democratic Skills and Attitudes

We turn now from students' post-hoc self-assessments of the impact of *Project Soapbox* to an analysis of various measures of students' democratic skills and attitudes taken both before and after implementation of the curriculum. Some areas show little movement, but there are other indications that participation in the *Soapbox* curriculum resulted in students holding greater civic commitments for the future. While not dramatic, we consider these changes to be consequential given the brevity of the curriculum and the fact that many of the students showed signs of political and civic engagement prior to implementation of the curriculum, which can create ceiling effects. We did not measure changes in actual student political behavior before and after their participation in *Project Soapbox* since the short time frame would have required students to become politically active at a rate that outpaced normal adult political activity. Instead, we collected pre- and post measures of their anticipated political activism. Previous studies have indicated that this is an appropriate focus for adolescents because of the strong correlation between youth answers to such questions and their actual political engagement as adults (c.f., Torney-Purta et al., 2001).

To begin with the areas of less impact, based on student answers in the pre/post surveys, the curriculum did not seem to inspire greater enjoyment about talking about political issues. Approximately two-thirds (65%) of students began the curriculum reporting that they liked to talk about political issues, a number that remained largely unchanged in the post-survey. Students also did not indicate a greater willingness to vote, once eligible. The lack of impact on voting intentions, however, is probably more of an indicator of a ceiling effect, given that over 90% initially reported an intention to go to the polls as adults. Similarly, in the pre-survey, overwhelming majorities (82%) of students reported that they thought it was likely they would

vote after high school, about the same number (84%) who said so in the post survey.² Paired samples t-tests (see Table 3) confirmed the lack of movement on these items.

[Insert Table 3 – Interest in Politics – about here]

However, in a series of questions asking students about their intention to participate in a number of possible civic activities after high school, there was evidence of modest change. As seen in Table 4, measures of students' reported likelihood of contacting or visiting someone in government or expressing their opinion via traditional news media had modest but statistically significant gains. Changes in students' reports concerning voting in the future or their anticipated use of social media to raise awareness were not statistically significant. While *Project Soapbox* does not appear to be a silver bullet for immediately engaging young people in political action, given the brevity of the program, the fact that there are any effects is noteworthy.

[Insert Table 4 – After high school activities – about here]

Impact on Speaking and Listening Skills

We found similarly modest, but significant evidence of change when evaluating students' self-assessments of their speaking and listening skills. Again, while there were not sharp increases across the board, the survey data did reveal some evidence of movement in key areas. For example, as evident in Table 5, following the implementation of the curriculum, paired samples t-tests revealed increases in students' self-confidence in three speaking skills: their ability to provide evidence in a speech, their ability to grab an audience's attention, and their ability to use clear expression and body language in their delivery. Other measures of students' confidence in their listening skills (such as determining a speaker's point of view, evaluating the use of evidence or rhetoric) were either unchanged or the observed differences did not reach

levels of statistical significance. Similarly, some measures of students' assessments of their presentation skills did not change.

[Insert Table 5--confidence in speaking/listening skills – about here]

There is also qualitative support for the quantitative improvements in students' speaking skills based on their responses to an open-ended question on the post-survey. Answers to, "What do you think you learned as a result of participating in *Project Soapbox*?" illustrated that many students felt they gained valuable speaking skills. More than one third (39%) reported a variety of ways that their speaking skills were augmented by participation in *Project Soapbox*. Students explained, for example, that they learned "...how to organize my ideas to make a point to the audience," how "tone and speed of talking really affect the outcome of the speech," "how to get the crowd's attention," and "how to give evidence for a point."³ Students also developed appreciation for the complexity of delivering an effective speech, such as one student who commented, "creating a speech is not as easy as it looks...Picking a topic, doing research to gather evidence, including rhetorical devices, and then presenting it clearly and with emotion to get your topic out there."

Students' open-ended responses to the question about what they learned from participation in *Project Soapbox* also indicated that a large proportion felt that they had gained both knowledge and a greater sense of confidence and agency. In addition to speaking skills, the most common responses to this question were from students who said they learned about the value of their voice and expertise (see Andolina & Conklin, 2017, for further discussion), learned more about their own topic, and learned more about other topics and other people. For example, students wrote that they learned "I have a voice. I can use it freely" and "that people do listen and respect youth and their voices." Students also wrote things like "I learned more about the

topic I spoke about, enough to teach someone else about the issue” and “I learned that there are plenty of different issues. Not everyone will have the same issues that you think about because they come from different places.”

We were not surprised to find that students who participated in *Project Soapbox* reported learning key competencies and orientations that are aligned with speaking skills. However, what is notable about their responses is that, along with important lessons learned from creating and delivering their speeches, students reported lessons that emanated from *listening* to their peers’ speeches. Specifically, we found evidence that listening to their peers’ speeches fostered students’ sense of empathy and connection to one another. For example, in the open ended post-survey question that asked students what they learned from the curriculum, almost one out of every five responses (19%) addressed listening and learning about the issues that other people face. For example, students wrote:

I learned a lot about my classmates struggles that they have been through and things they think are important.

I learned that many other people also care about the same problem as you therefore you’re not alone and you can help fix it together.

Clearly, for these students, the key takeaway from this curriculum was not necessarily their skills of presentation or their increased knowledge of their topic, but the human connection to their fellow students.

In sum, the findings from the student survey portion of our study indicated that the curriculum appears to have given a modest boost to student self-perceptions of their future political activism, their reports of anticipated civic engagement, and their confidence in their rhetorical skills. And, importantly, student assessments of the curriculum suggest that

participation in the program may have developed students' sense of empathy and the listening skills associated with these socio-emotional orientations. As we turn to the findings from the student focus groups, we focus in greater depth about students' learning about other topics and other people.

Findings from the Student Focus Groups

Learning from Listening: Empathy and Connection

In the focus groups, students made many comments indicating that their participation in *Project Soapbox* allowed them to relate to their peers, find a sense of commonality in their shared struggles, and also gain a deeper understanding of some of their peers' experiences. For example, many students expressed the sense of strength they found from understanding that others share their concerns and experiences, such as one student who said:

...we all know that we all have problems or things that we go through, but I just kind of see how every person goes through something different...maybe sometimes you might be able to relate to that, or it just makes you more aware of what people go through.

Another student said:

...this girl from [another school]...her speech - it was so deep and it actually brought me to tears because I can relate to that. I can't relate to her losing both her parents and her father killing her mother, but I can relate to the abuse that her father put upon her mother.

In another focus group, two students illustrated their recognition of the commonality of stereotyping after listening to a fellow student's speech:

S1: So a speech in particular...She talked about...stereotypes of black people only going into certain professions, like rappers and singers, or NBA players...I really connected with her, because it was just like - that is so true, it's the honest to god truth...Nobody

knows the reason why people only go into those professions, it's because they are not accepted in different fields, or different professions that they would love to work in...So I really connected with her, and I was lost in her words. As she kept talking I was just like, yes, yes, yes...that just made me want to be a psychologist even more, just made me want to be a forensic psychologist even more. You don't see too many African-American psychologists...

S2: ...that African-American speech, and I was looking at it through a Hispanic lens, because I am Hispanic [finger snaps]. It's practically the same issues for Hispanics...so many people talk about black versus white, but there's nothing being said about Hispanics. We talk about immigration, but what about those Hispanics that already live there...they're not going into fields that you'd never expect them to be in. Again, that stereotyping - they're in car washes, they're mechanics...But there aren't many lawyers, there aren't many - I think there's one Hispanic judge in the Supreme Court, which is Sotomayor. I think she's the only one and she's a woman too, the rest you know, there's not much of it. It's amazing looking at it through different perspectives and learning from that too.

Comments from these students about “connecting” with the speaker and “getting lost in her words” or learning through “different perspectives” illustrate how the impact of *Project Soapbox* was not limited to participation and performance of a speaker, but extended to the experience of listening – and connecting with the speaker – as an audience member.

In addition to finding a sense of connection with others by listening to their peers’ speeches, many students indicated that their thinking was expanded by recognizing experiences and perspectives beyond their own. One student, for example, noted:

...it kind of broadens your horizon, or your way of thinking, when you interacting with somebody who had different experiences from you. Like [one girl] - I would never think I could go through what she went through. So now it's like I feel a little bit more sympathy for the topic than I did before the speeches.

Another student explained:

It was interesting because I heard topics and stuff I never knew about, and it made me learn new things about - it made me see a different perspective about other people's opinions.

In this way, *Project Soapbox* also held merit for students as audience members because it introduced them to new issues and ideas to which they had not been previously exposed.

Additionally, as these quotes suggest, listening to their peers' speeches not only fostered students' recognition of perspectives beyond their own, but also their perception that learning about these new perspectives was valuable.

Thus, the findings from the student focus groups bolster the conclusion that students saw themselves gaining important understanding about others through listening to their peers' speeches. By not only being participants in *Project Soapbox* but also acting as attentive audience members, students reported deepening their sense of connection to others and enhancing their sense of empathy for experiences beyond their own. Attending to classmates' speeches also helped students learn about and develop appreciation for new perspectives, all vital skills in a pluralistic democracy.

Discussion

Our analysis indicates that students who participated in *Project Soapbox* reported limited but significant gains in anticipated political engagement, in their reported confidence in their

presentation skills, and in their expressed willingness to engage in political issues in the future. These findings were by no means across all measures, nor were they uniformly strong. As noted above, students' self-assessments of their interest in politics, their intention to vote in the future, and their academic listening skills remained largely unchanged. Nonetheless, we argue that even the modest gains that were evident in students' surveys are consequential given the fact that the curriculum itself lasted only a few weeks. To see any movement from a short, five to fifteen day implementation is encouraging. Such movement suggests that a longer curriculum, or a program embedded in a broader civics curriculum with similar learning outcomes, could hold even further promise for building democratic skills and orientations among high school students.

Importantly, our study was implemented in majority-minority and low income schools, where one typically does not find high quality civic education (Kahne and Middaugh, 2008). Our findings on the impact of *Project Soapbox* suggest that even a brief curriculum can offer students in underserved schools and communities opportunities to engage in an action civics program that can successfully advance students' confidence in their civic and literacy skills. Just as in the "best practice" classrooms featured in the civic education literature, students in *Project Soapbox* classrooms have opportunities to examine issues relevant to their lives, discuss current events, participate in an open exchange of ideas, think independently, and express their opinions in an authentic context. And, consistent with findings from previous studies of best practices, students who participated in *Project Soapbox* report gaining confidence, motivation, and rhetorical skills to speak out about important issues. Given the gross disparities in youth political engagement and the parallel disparities in high quality civic learning opportunities, these positive outcomes are very promising, especially when one considers Wilkenfeld's research that indicated, "that students who may traditionally be deemed at a disadvantage (either because of poor school or

neighborhood conditions) experience more benefits from increases in civic learning opportunities than do more advantaged students" (2009, p. 4).

In addition, our findings indicate that the opportunity to choose topics that are closely connected to their lives provided students a platform to discuss problems facing their communities and to connect to and learn from each other through these shared stories. The focus on political voice in the *Project Soapbox* curriculum aligns with growing support for civic education practices that are framed around participatory politics, or "interactive, peer-based acts through which individuals and groups seek to exert both voice and influence on issues of public concern" (Kahne, Hodgin & Eidman-Aadahl, 2016, p. 2).

While these findings are noteworthy and consistent with *Project Soapbox*'s explicit goals as a public speaking curriculum, this study also suggests that *Project Soapbox* furthers crucial goals of democratic education that emphasize the listening people must do as deliberative citizens working toward the common good. For example, although it was not an explicit goal of *Project Soapbox*, students' discussion of what they learned from the curriculum indicated that, through listening to their peers' speeches, they began to see connections across their experiences and valued learning about their peers' struggles and concerns. As such, our findings suggest that the curriculum fosters the development of feelings of shared, communal interests—the sense of a "we" working together to address public, shared problems that Hess and McAvoy (2015), Parker (2003; 2010), and others have discussed. Thus, although participation in the curriculum did not appear to substantially enhance students' beliefs about their *academic* listening skills (e.g., determining a speaker's point of view), it did appear to promote students' reports of *empathic* listening.

Part of what appeared to shape students' gains in listening is that the structure of the curriculum puts students in the position to hear each other and learn from one another. That is, by virtue of setting up a situation in which students need to listen to each other's speeches, they have the opportunity to hear powerful stories, connect with each other, and listen to diverse perspectives on issues. In all the classrooms we observed, students delivered their speeches in front of their peers and also listened to classmates' speeches. Unlike the structure of classroom discussion in which participants often listen to each other in order to develop a response, the structure of *Soapbox* speech presentations encouraged participants to listen solely to hear.

In this way, the conditions of *Soapbox*—albeit better structured in some classrooms than others—facilitated what Parker (2010), building on Allen (2004), called “reciprocity” in listening: “[privileging] the speaker’s vantage point and [listening], knowing the speaker understands better than I his or her social position, experiences, emotions, and beliefs” (p. 2829). Although Parker (2010) wondered how teachable such skills are, he also noted that “...would-be listeners require some sort of scaffold, and an education in these practices may prove helpful to that end (p.2830).” *Project Soapbox*, then, might be seen as a scaffold for learning effective democratic listening practices, because it creates the conditions for and practice with listening with reciprocity.

Thus, although *Project Soapbox* is a curriculum that appears to be focused on speaking, our data suggest that an important part of its impact actually comes through listening. And, as noted above, the kind of listening that the curriculum engenders is a form that has not garnered much attention in the civic education literature. That is, the kind of listening that the high school participants in this study reported learning from *Project Soapbox* was not listening to support their own further academic development, such as listening to an opposing viewpoint in order to

strengthen or clarify one's own position. Nor was it the kind of listening prized in the Common Core Literacy Standards, which also prioritizes a more academic form of listening—such as evaluating how well a speaker uses evidence. Rather, the kind of listening that participants reported learning from *Project Soapbox* is a form of empathic listening that can not only help students value other perspectives as other research has found (e.g., Hess & McAvoy, 2015), but also can also help students connect directly with others' experiences. We propose that this form of empathic listening that *Project Soapbox* fosters warrants consideration as a central democratic skill that should be taught in classrooms.

Indeed, the conditions and outcomes of *Project Soapbox* share many features of the potentially transformative citizenship of political friendship that Allen (2004) has advocated. Allen (2004) has argued that political friendship is fostered when we “talk to strangers” in the context of established trust, reciprocity, turn-taking, equity, and vulnerability, all in the service of a shared—not common—life. Our findings suggest that in *Project Soapbox*, as classmates listen to each others' speeches, each one in turn, they develop a sense of trust in one another and feelings of reciprocity as they each make themselves vulnerable through deeply personal stories and arguments for change. In this way, *Project Soapbox* may lay the groundwork for greater political change, given Allen's argument that, “each interaction with a stranger holds the seeds of transformation” (p. 168). Such interactions are powerful, she noted, because “political friendship cultivates habits of imagination that generate politically transformative experiences out of ordinary interactions among strangers” (p.171). Considering the political gridlock and partisan antipathy that characterizes our current political climate, a curriculum that helps students carefully attend to the experiences and perspectives of others and develop not only an

understanding of these perspectives—but an actual concern—may hold important seeds of political change.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Work

While the findings from this study are promising, we recognize that there are limitations in our understanding of this action civics program and its impact on the students who participate. For one, while we were able to survey students before and after the curriculum in order to have measurements of change, we do not have a control group of students who did not participate in the curriculum with which to compare our results. While our qualitative data suggest that the impact we measured is due to the curriculum itself and not any outside forces or general student growth over time, any future study of this program (or similar action civics programs) that could include a control group would provide additional support for the power of an action civics curriculum.

In addition, while we found modest change in some areas, as reported above, there were other areas, also reported, where we found no evidence of change either in the aggregate or among individual participants. Some of these findings were not surprising given both students' initial assessments (e.g., their intention to vote in the future) or the brevity of the program. Other non-findings were less clearly understood. For example, previous research (McDevitt and Kiosis, 2006) has documented that school-based civics curriculum can increase students' propensity to discuss politics with their parents, a finding that was not supported by our analyses. This lack of impact could be the result of the brevity of the program. Perhaps a longer curriculum (or a longer measurement period) might provide more time for such parent-child discussions to occur. At this time, we cannot say.

Similarly, given that our study examined students' reports of their learning immediately after completing the curriculum, we do not know if and how its impacts are sustained over time. Thus, it is vital to explore the longer term impact of *Project Soapbox*. Future research could also explore potential differences in longer term impacts for students who participate in *Project Soapbox* as a standalone curriculum versus those who participate in *Project Soapbox* as part of a broader civic education curriculum. Additional research could address other contextual factors, such as the findings (and non-findings) on gender and race, teacher characteristics and student preparation, among others.

Further, our study focused on *Project Soapbox*'s impact with economically disadvantaged and minority youth, but we do not know how its impact among this demographic cohort might compare to its impact among other groups of young people. We have argued that this study suggests that *Project Soapbox* can be an effective tool for working with marginalized youth, who are disproportionately represented in the Chicago Public Schools in which it is implemented. As mentioned above, the premise of the curriculum, which allows students to select and choose issues of importance to them and their communities, aligns with best practices. The impact of the ability to select one's own topic, however, may be even more significant for economically disadvantaged and minority youth, who have not been given the same curricular opportunities to speak – or listen – as their wealthier, whiter peers. At the same time, given the gross disparities that have been documented in civic outcomes, it is notable that in this study of *Project Soapbox*, those students most impacted by poverty and violence were primarily sharing their experiences with one another. While this was a generally affirming experience for the students we studied—and that affirmation of common experience carries tremendous value—this also means that more affluent students were not hearing about the impact of poverty and

violence, nor were the students we studied hearing the experiences and concerns of their more advantaged peers. As Allen (2004) noted, "Engage a stranger in conversation across a racial, ethnic, or class divide and one gets not only an extra pair of eyes but also an ability to see and understand parts of the world that are to oneself invisible" (p. 167). Thus, the impact of the program could be broadened by including students in diverse communities all across the country (where *Soapbox* is now being implemented), so that youth can listen across regional, economic, and racial differences, and potentially help bridge some of the divides that currently characterize our political (and news media) environments. And, of course, research to accompany changes in the student population would further our understanding of the power of listening.

Moreover, a broader implementation and accompanying research would allow us to better determine how the impact of *Project Soapbox* may have been affected by the larger political environment. As explained earlier, the city of Chicago is struggling with a rise in violent crime and tension between minority communities and the police, as evident in the shooting of Laquan McDonald. Although we do not have data to demonstrate a relationship, we surmise that this city context and the release of the McDonald footage within a week of the administration of our post-survey may have also shaped students' responses on the post survey, particularly on those questions relating to students' anticipated political participation.

Finally, in our desire to use measures from previous studies for comparability or to assess the learning outcomes of the curriculum, the quantitative measures in our student surveys did not explore areas of listening that our qualitative analysis illuminated, which limits our ability to quantify the impact reported by students. Future studies of action civics programs, especially those that incorporate the best practices of listening and exchange in the classroom, should

explore the use of measures that could capture the qualities of empathic listening and relational connection that our analysis surfaced.

Implications

At a time when new legislation has taken hold at both federal and state levels to reinvigorate and require civic education (e.g., Senate Resolution 150, 2015; Illinois General Assembly HB 4025, 2015), the results from this study inform civic education policy and programming, and also offer insights into the preparation of teachers for implementing similar civic education programs. *Project Soapbox* appears to be a promising scaffold for fostering democratic deliberation skills: this curriculum offers students opportunities to practice speaking publicly about important community issues and also practice listening attentively to others in order to fully hear and empathize with their perspectives. In this way, *Project Soapbox* includes crucial elements of deliberation because it requires students to speak and listen, yet without the need for students to immediately respond to the substance of the speech, paving the way for a more open opportunity for hearing and empathizing. Given the unique contributions of *Project Soapbox*, it is a curriculum that warrants consideration as a necessary part of a larger curriculum aiming to develop students' democratic capabilities. And, although *Project Soapbox* is being formally implemented in many cities across the country, given the availability of the curriculum on Mikva's website, individual teachers working outside of these cities could also potentially reap the benefits of *Project Soapbox*, albeit without the same local support.

This study also suggests that, if teachers make choices about how to adapt the curriculum for their own classroom needs, they should be sure to emphasize not only the preparation of students' speeches but also the conditions for students to listen to each other, recognizing that the opportunity for students to listen to each other yields valuable democratic learning, too. Thus,

both the curriculum itself and the professional development that accompanies it might build in explicit aims that focus on empathic listening so that teachers can be sure to capitalize on having students hear and learn from the multiple perspectives and experiences of their classmates.

More broadly, this research suggests that we should expand the kinds of democratic education practices we implement in classrooms and the related learning outcomes and skills that we study. That is, in addition to incorporating established practices such as the discussion of controversial public issues into classrooms, our study indicates the potential value of civic education that features dedicated opportunities for students to listen to each other solely for the purpose of understanding other perspectives and experiences. And, as noted above, researchers of civic education might incorporate more measures that aim to capture the ways in which students develop empathy through educational experiences and how such empathic development might correspond to democratic development. Expanding how we engage young people in democratic education and how we study the curricular opportunities we provide may open the door for the next generation of citizens to bridge the divides that plague our schools and our nation.

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Notes

¹Anyone interested in the full text of the surveys may contact the authors.

²We also analyzed the data in terms of paired samples t-tests, which replicated the non-findings reported here. Since both forms of analysis were not statistically significant, we use frequencies in the text for ease of interpretation.

³All student comments, both written and verbal, are included here exactly as students expressed them.

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Table 1. School Sample Demographics

School and subject	Percentage of student survey sample	School type	# of students	CPS rating	% Low income	% Diverse learners	% Limited English	% Asian	% Black	% Hispanic	% White	% Other
English Language Arts 1	21 %	small	303	1+	77.6	18.2	8.6	1.3	20.5	66	10.6	1.7
English Language Arts 2	15 %	military	317	1	89.9	11.4	2.8	0	74.8	23	1.6	0.6
English Language Arts 3	11 %	military	507	1+	96.3	7.7	6.9	0.4	23.9	75	0.2	0.6
Social Studies 1	15 %	charter	532	2	93.4	17.9	0.8	0	97.9	0.9	0	1.1
Social Studies 2	11 %	neighborhood	1,595	2+	94.8	14.9	15	0.8	3.2	94.5	0.7	0.8
Social Studies 3	10 %	neighborhood	857	2	98.7	20.7	25.9	0	12.6	86.7	0.4	0.4
Social Studies 4	6%	neighborhood	565	2	94.7	19.8	1.1	0.2	97.9	1.2	0.2	0.5
Social Studies 5	6%	magnet	2,927	2+	93	9.7	9	2.8	12.1	82	2.3	0.7
Social Studies 6	5%	Option (formerly “alternative”)	124	1+	97.6	17.7	7.3	0	29	69.4	1.6	0

Note. Shaded rows indicate focus schools.

Table 2. Student Sample Demographics

	Student Sample (Fall 2015)	Chicago Public Schools (2014-15)
African American	41%	39.3%
Hispanic	48%	45.6%
White	2%	9.4%
Multi-racial	2%	1.1%
Other groups	2%	4.1%
Not available	4%	0.6%
Economically disadvantaged	Mother's highest education level (proxy for socio-economic status): 19% college degree or higher 53% high school degree and/or some college 28% no high school degree	

Table 3: Political Engagement

	Change	Pretest	Posttest	Significance Level
I enjoy talking about politics & political issues	-0.0099	2.739	2.729	0.839
Once old enough, I intend to vote in every election	-0.0657	3.258	3.192	0.197
I never/occasionally/sometimes/regularly talk to my parents/guardians about politics	0.0439	2.468	2.512	0.459

* $p < .05$

Table 4: Anticipated Political Engagement

When you think about life AFTER HIGH SCHOOL how likely is it that you would do each of the following?	Change	Pretest	Posttest	Significance Level
Contact or visit someone in government	0.2277*	2.153	2.381	0.00
Vote in an election	-0.0149	3.254	3.239	0.81
Express your opinion on an issue via news media	0.2020*	2.320	2.522	0.00
Raise awareness about an issue via social media	0.0746	2.811	2.886	0.29

* $p < .05$

Table 5: Self-Assessments of Rhetorical Skills

	Change	Pretest	Posttest	Significance Level
Confidence in your ability to do each when LISTENING				
Determine a speaker's point of view on an issue	-0.0657	3.237	3.172	0.22
Evaluate how well a speaker uses evidence	0.0606	3.187	3.247	0.25
Evaluate how well a speaker uses rhetoric	0.0304 6	3.036	3.066	0.61
Confidence in your ability to do each when PRESENTING				
Explain a problem clearly to an audience	0.0099	3.030	3.039	0.86
Provide different kinds of evidence	0.1232 *	3.084	3.207	0.04
Present a well-organized, easy-to-follow speech	0.0945	3.085	2.99	0.09
Grab an audience's attention in opening & closing	.2611*	2.867	3.128	0.00
Deliver a speech effectively through expression	.1386*	2.99	3.085	0.03

* $p < .05$

Figure 1. Student Speech Topics

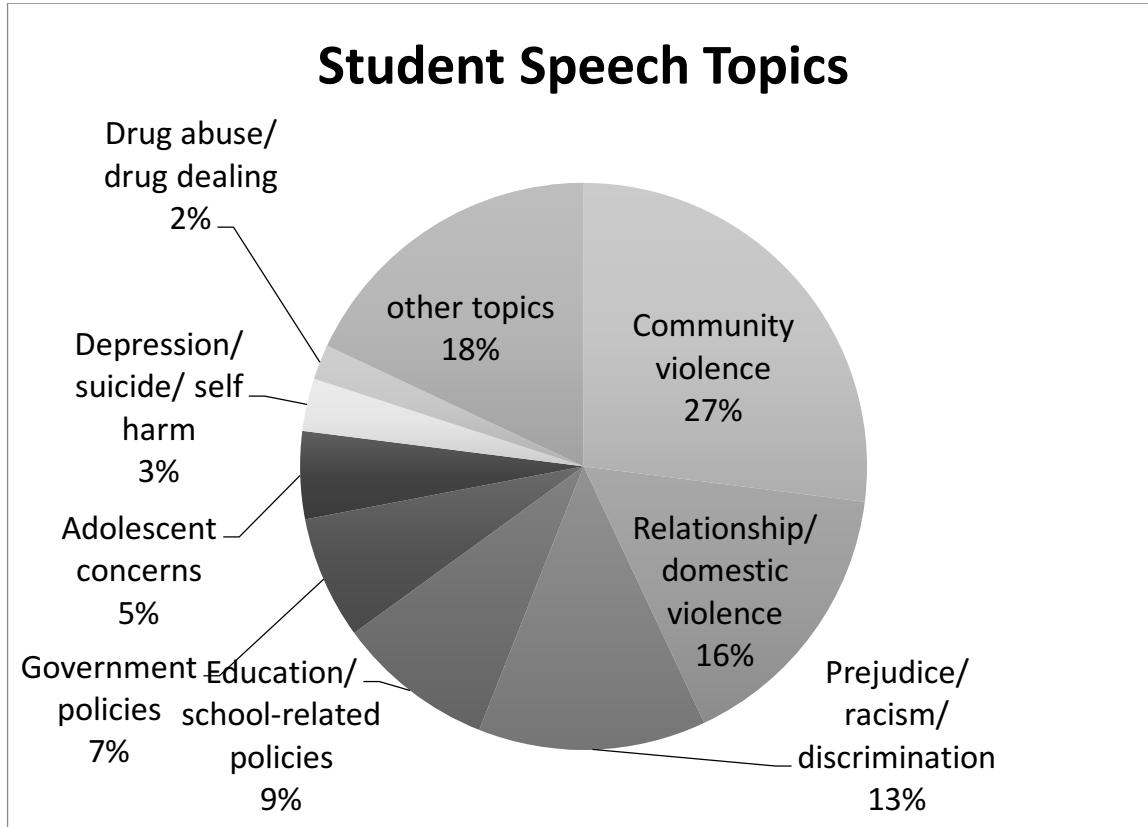


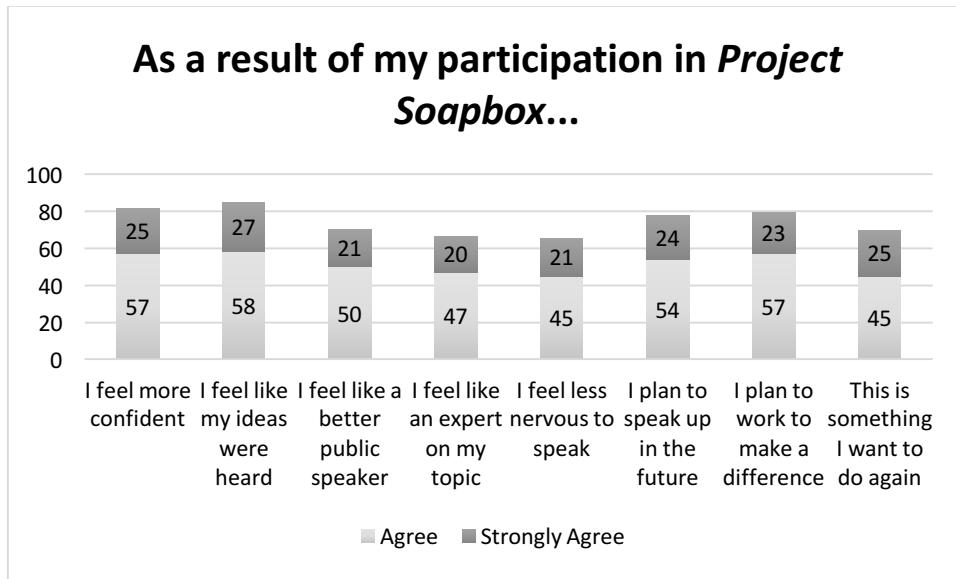
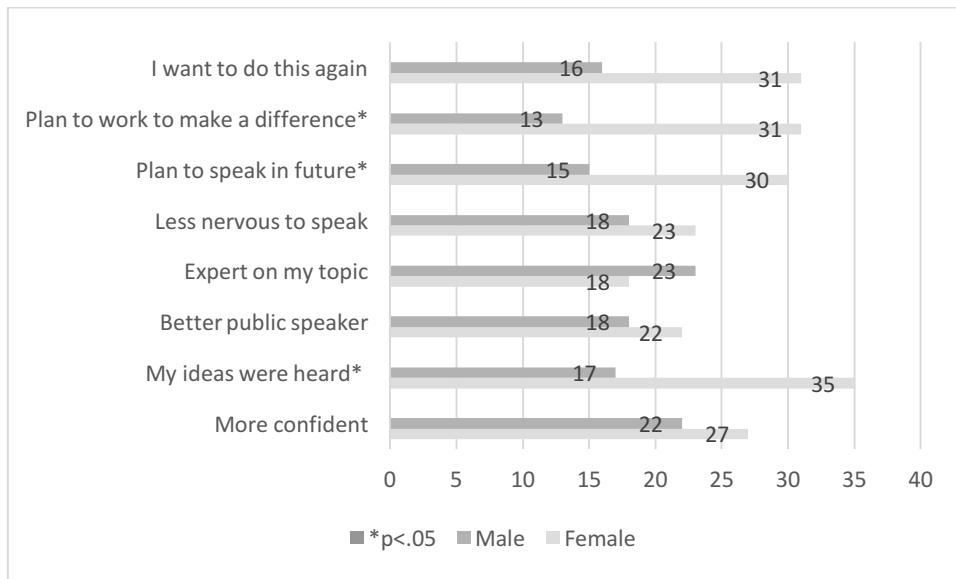
Figure 2. Student self assessments of impact of *Project Soapbox*

Figure 3. Gender differences in self assessments.



Appendix

Student Focus Group Guide

Thank you all for agreeing to be here today to discuss Project Soapbox. Your participation is not mandatory, and you may refuse to answer any question. You should also know that your answers will be kept completely confidential and that what you say here will not have ANY impact on your grade in this class. Any questions?

We are interested in hearing you talk about your experience with Project Soapbox.

1. What was it like to participate?
2. Was it difficult/easy? Why?
3. What was the best part?
4. What might you recommend as a change?
5. Would you recommend this program to a friend?
6. What do you think you learned by participating?
 - a. What are some of the most important things you learned about giving a speech?
7. Do you think your attitudes toward anything were affected by participating?
 - a. Did this make you feel like you were more interested in politics?)
 - b. Do you feel like you might be more likely to speak out about some issues?
 - c. Did this make you more confident? (about what, in particular?)
8. What was it like to hear other students' speeches?
 - a. Did you learn anything new from listening to other students' speeches?
 - b. Did listening to other speeches make you want to take action on any issues?
 - c. Did you clap for anyone you disagreed with? What was that like?
 - d. Did participation in PS make you feel any differently about your classmates?

9. How do you think this would have been different if it weren't a competition?
 - a. What parts might be better or worse?
10. Was there anything your teacher did that was particularly helpful or important to you as part of PS?
11. Is there anything else you think is important for me to know about your experience with Project Soapbox?

Teacher Interview Guide

Thank you for agreeing to spend some time today discussing Project Soapbox. Your participation is not mandatory, and you may refuse to answer any question. You should also know that your answers will be kept completely confidential.

Any questions?

We're interested in hearing you talk about your experience with Project Soapbox.

1. Tell me a little about the social studies/language arts curriculum you are teaching this year.

- What is the content you are *required* to teach?
- Are you planning on teaching any additional content or units?
- Remind me what grade level students in this course are. (Are any classes AP or Honors?)

2. From this general SS/LA curriculum, what do you think is most important for students to learn? Why?

3. Tell me about your students this year.

- What are you noticing about them as learners?
- How would you characterize their political awareness or engagement?

4. Why did you use Project Soapbox in your course?

- a. (Were you required to use the curriculum, or did you choose to use it?)

- b. Did you attend any Mikva PD this year or in years past?
- What do you *hope* your students learn from taking part in this curriculum?
5. About how many class days did you devote to the preparation part of the curriculum (as opposed to the speech giving days)? (Can you remind me how long your class periods are?)
6. What instruction led up to students' participation in the Project Soapbox curriculum?
7. How closely did you follow the Project Soapbox curriculum?
- What modifications did you make to the curriculum, if any?
 - Why did you make these modifications?
 - How much of what you implemented is your own, and how much did you use directly from the materials Mikva provided?
 - What do you see as the strengths and limitations of the Mikva curriculum?
8. Are the activities of Project Soapbox similar to what you and students typically do in this class?
- If no: How were these lessons different from usual?
9. How did you feel Project Soapbox went in your class?
- What do you think your students learned from Project Soapbox?
 - How do you know that they learned this?
 - Do you think all students benefit similarly from Project Soapbox?
10. How did things compare with what you expected? Did anything surprise you?
1. Was there anything you were particularly pleased about? What? Why?
 2. Did anything disappoint you? What? Why?
11. What instruction will follow (or followed) Project Soapbox?
12. If you were to teach Project Soapbox again, would you do anything differently?

13. Can you talk about what you noticed in students' final written/ oral speeches?

- What stood out to you about their speeches?
- What do you think students did well in their speeches?
- What do you think students need to still work on in their speeches?
- Can you give me an example of an exemplary student speech? What made it good?
- Can you give me an example of a typical student speech? What made it typical?
- Were there any speech themes that stood out? Do you think students had trouble coming up with issues? (Why/why not?)

14. One thing I'm interested in is how teachers select the particular activities, tasks, examples, explanations that they use or how they decide to explain things to students.

- I noticed that you said/did _____.
- Where did this (idea, example, story, task, explanation) come from?
- Why did you decide to do this?
- Does it have any particular advantages or disadvantages?

15. Were there any things in the class I observed that might not be obvious to an observer but that you think are important for me to know?

Just a few more questions and we can wrap up.

Part III. Past experience and conclusion

16. Have you used Project Soapbox or Mikva curricula previously?

- How many times/ years?/ How long have you been using Mikva materials?

17. Do you anticipate using Project Soapbox next year? Why or why not?

18. How long have you been teaching?

- At this school?

- In this subject area?
- At this grade level?

19. Do you have any other comments about your use of Project Soapbox or your students' experience with this curriculum?