Fostering Democratic and Social-Emotional Learning in Action Civics Programming: Factors That Shape Students' Learning From *Project Soapbox*

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This research examines the factors that shape high school students' experiences with an action civics program—Project Soapbox—that fosters democratic and social-emotional learning. Drawing on pre- and postsurveys with 204 students, classroom observations, teacher interviews, student work samples, and student focus group interviews, the study illuminates how specific features of the curriculum and its implementation are linked to its promising outcomes. Our findings indicate that the curriculum's emphases and structure, along with instructional decisions and context, play key roles in influencing student outcomes. Project Soapbox's power lies in its alignment with many well-established civic education best practices and in its intentional linkage with key social-emotional learning practices, many of which are newly recognized as having particular civic import.

KEYWORDS: action civics, civic education, democratic education, high schools, social-emotional learning

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Civic education, broadly conceived, is widely viewed as an essential part of the K–12 education curriculum by educators and the public alike. This is evidenced by the fact that almost every state has a civics requirement, and it is further supported by surveys where over 90% of high school students report taking at least one civics course (Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement [CIRCLE], 2013). Yet the widespread incidence of civics education conceals a growing concern among researchers and practitioners about the *quality* of most civics programming. Comprehensive studies of civic education programs indicate that the inadequate civics instruction currently available to most students is at least partially to blame for the low levels of civic engagement among youth (CIRCLE, 2013; Gould, Jamieson, Levine, McConnell, & Smith, 2011; Levine & Kawashima-Ginsberg, 2015). Indeed, while there is general agreement on what constitutes best practice in civic education—practice that centers around teaching young people the skills of civic participation and the orientations of lifelong civic engagement, thus moving beyond the political knowledge that tends to be the focus of most curricular efforts (c.f. Campbell, 2008; Niemi & Junn, 1998; Syvertsen, Flanagan, & Stout, 2007; Torney-Purta, 2002; Youniss, 2011)—such quality instruction is not widely available. Perhaps even more disturbing, when quality civics education exists, the best curricular and cocurricular programs are disproportionately available to students who have higher socioeconomic status, are enrolled in more challenging academic programs, and are most likely to go to college (Kahne & Middaugh, 2008; Levinson, 2012). The differential civic opportunities available to students in high schools across America contribute to the differential participation rates among young adults.

High-Quality Civic Education Practices and Outcomes

Despite these inequities, there is general agreement on what high-quality practices involve, as well as compelling evidence of their promising impact when they are implemented. The best curricular practices engage students in discussions of current events, create a classroom climate that promotes the open exchange of ideas, include teacher encouragement of independent thinking and expression of opinions, provide opportunities for service learning and participation in simulations, and promote programs that allow students to select issues that are relevant to their own lives (Gibson & Levine, 2003; Campbell, 2008; Kahne & Middaugh, 2008; Kahne & Sporte, 2008; Syvertsen et al., 2007; Torney-Purta, 2002; Youniss, 2011). Studies designed to evaluate the impact of civic education best practices document an array of positive outcomes, including gains in factual knowledge, increases in anticipated civic engagement, the development of skills of democratic deliberation, and more attention to political news (Kahne, Crow, & Lee, 2013; Longo, Drury, & Battistoni, 2006; McDevitt & Kiosis, 2006).

Moreover, scholars have found that the impact is not limited to students who are participating in civics programming but can spill over into positive influences on parents (in increased attention to the news and a greater propensity to turn out and vote) (McDevitt & Kiosis, 2004, 2006), and it can last years after the program has ended (McDevitt & Kiosis, 2006; Torney-Purta & Amadeo, 2003). And while these best practices are disproportionately available to White, wealthier students in the most selective classes in high-achieving schools, research also shows that disadvantaged youth who have opportunities to engage in high-quality civics education are more participatory as adults (Wilkenfeld, 2009).

Action Civics

Many of the best practices in civic education are common in programs that come under the framework of action civics. Proponents of action civics education contend that one does not learn how to be a citizen by studying processes, watching adults, or reading texts but, rather, by actively taking part in the work of citizenship (Gingold, 2013; National Action Civics Collaborative [NACC], 2010; Warren, 2019). Action civics programming requires students to engage with authentic issues in their communities: Students identify the issues of importance to them and their communities and then are provided with guidance, skills instruction, and opportunities that enable them to "do civics and *behave as citizens*" (Levinson, 2012, p. 32).

Action civics integrates aspects of the strength-based approaches of Positive Youth Development (e.g., Benson, Scales, Hamilton, & Sesma, 2006), the problem-solving and relationship skills of social-emotional learning (SEL), the community orientation and real-world contexts of service learning, the collective power of youth organizing, and knowledge of the political systems of traditional civic education, with the goal of empowering youth in the most marginalized communities (Gingold, 2013). In contrast to civic education practices that focus exclusively on civic knowledge, or service-learning projects in which students participate as volunteers in community organizations, action civics curricula are grounded in four guiding principles: action, particularly collective; youth voice, knowledge, and expertise; youth agency; and reflection (Gingold, 2013; NACC, 2010). Drawing on these common principles, action civics theory posits that when youth voice and expertise are valued, and young people have authentic opportunities for expression, engagement, and reflection, then powerful civic learning can occur, thereby narrowing the civic empowerment gap and strengthening our democracy (e.g., Gingold, 2013; NACC, 2010). While specific action civics programming varies, generally, students progress through six common steps: examining their community, identifying issues of importance to them, conducting research on the issues, developing a strategy for action, taking action, and reflecting on the process (Gingold, 2013).

Although research on action civics is still emerging, there is a growing repertoire of studies of single programs that establish a link between action civics curricula and a host of promising outcomes, including civic skills such as public speaking and community mapping, social capital, political efficacy, and content knowledge. The research—which includes case studies on a schoolwide initiative in Massachusetts (Berman, 2004), the Building Civic Bridges program (LeCompte & Blevins, 2015), the 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, Pasek, Romer, & Jamieson, 2007; Syvertsen et al., 2009)—identifies positive outcomes associated with key action civics components such as an emphasis on student voice and the creation of open classrooms where students discuss and debate current events and are encouraged to speak their minds. In addition, in many of these programs, which are implemented with diverse populations across the United States, students engage with civic leaders and the broader community, often as part of a service-learning opportunity. In our study of the impact of the action civics curriculum *Project Soapbox* on participating high school students (Andolina & Conklin, 2018), students reported gains in rhetorical proficiency, increased confidence for public speaking, and heightened willingness and desire to become involved in political action. In addition, the student participants in our study noted the impact of listening to their peers' speeches: They expressed a greater sense of connection to other students, a deeper understanding of their peers' and their own experiences, and an enhanced appreciation for perspectives other than their own (Andolina & Conklin, 2018). Thus, there is a growing consensus of research linking action civics curricula to positive outcomes.

Yet while scholars have established outcomes associated with various action civics curricula and their features, there has been a paucity of research that has explored variations in implementation or context (for an exception, see Ballard, Cohen, & Littenberg-Tobias, 2016) or the specific factors that shape the curricula's outcomes. Civic education practices are subject to state requirements, district and school support, as well as teacher implementation effects (Kahne & Middaugh, 2008; Niemi & Junn 1998; Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). As Ballard et al. (2016) explain, civic education programs are not "homogenous interventions" (p. 378). Further, much of the research that has been conducted on action civics programs has relied primarily on survey measures. Thus, we know less about the processes by which action civics programs create their positive outcomes and the specific aspects of program implementation that may shape differential outcomes across varied contexts.

Social-Emotional Learning and Relational Skills for Democratic Citizenship

Alongside the growth in attention to action civics has been a growing recognition that listening and other social and emotional capacities are vital for both academic development and civic engagement (cf. Cramer & Toff, 2017; Levine, 2013; Weissberg, Durlak, Domitrovich, & Gullotta, 2015). Scholars have emphasized the relational dimensions of citizenship as central to solving the problems facing us as democratic societies, arguing that we should aim to increase interpersonal practices such as listening, particularly to those different from ourselves, in order to improve trust, develop community, build empathy, and foster equity (Allen, 2004; Cramer & Toff, 2017; Dobson, 2012; Levine, 2013). Democratic theorists as well as experts on social-emotional development suggest that attentive listening engenders empathy, allows for vulnerability, builds relationships, and develops a sense of connection among individuals—democratic orientations that lead, in turn, to broader outcomes such as building trust and bridging political rifts (Allen, 2004; Cramer & Toff, 2017; Levine, 2013; Weissberg et al., 2015). The development of trusting social relationships among teachers and students contributes to youths' sense of belonging, their affective connection to the broader society, their development of a public identity, and their inclination to act in the interest of the common good (Flanagan, Stoppa, Syvertsen, & Stout, 2010).

The burgeoning interest in the relational citizenship skills engendered and associated with democratic listening parallels the growing emphasis on cultivating SEL skills. The SEL domains of social awareness and relationship skills include the abilities to empathize, feel compassion, and listen actively (Weissberg et al., 2015), and these are competencies that are well aligned with the developmental needs of adolescence (Williamson, Modecki, & Guerra, 2015). Well-implemented SEL programs—which necessitate teacher practices that offer strong emotional support and opportunities for student voice and autonomy—have demonstrated not only improved academic outcomes but also greater empathy and stronger peer and adult relationships (Weissberg et al., 2015).

While SEL competencies sometimes focus on individual or interpersonal skills, as noted above, many of these competencies are also vital to the development of social trust, civic identity, and democratic orientations (Allen, 2004; Cramer & Toff, 2017; Flanagan et al., 2010; Levine, 2013). Given that a growing number of states have implemented SEL standards (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2019; Gingold, 2013), and schools are thus increasingly called upon to teach SEL skills, the cultivation of SEL that is civically oriented offers numerous potential benefits. Thus, bringing the worlds of civic education and SEL together provides an opportunity to sharpen our understanding of the relational skills that are essential to both.

In sum, there is growing interest in the promising practices and out-comes of action civics—and this interest aligns with the growing interest in the relational dimensions of citizenship and SEL. However, we have lim-ited empirical insight into the process by which specific elements of action civics programs produce their positive outcomes or the ways in which con-text and implementation contribute to the positive outcomes that research has documented. Further, with limited exceptions (cf. Barr et al., 2015), there is little research that explores the social-emotional dimensions of civic edu-cation programming.

Research Question

In this article, we examine an action civics program for high school students—*Project Soapbox*—that fosters democratic learning and SEL. Our prior research established that students' participation in *Project Soapbox* not only increased their confidence in their rhetorical skills and expectations for future political engagement but also cultivated their sense of empathy for others' experiences and their feelings of connectedness to others (Andolina & Conklin, 2018). Building on these findings, here we seek to understand how specific features of the curriculum and its implementation are linked to its promising outcomes. The research question we explore is

- What factors shape students' experiences with and learning from an action civ-ics curriculum?

Project Soapbox in Chicago

Project Soapbox, started by the Chicago-based nonprofit, nonpartisan Mikva Challenge, is a public speaking curriculum comprising five detailed lessons that are designed to be useable as a stand-alone, weeklong curricu-lum for approximately hourlong class periods. The *Soapbox* curriculum includes reproducible handouts, rubrics, and suggested resources and is available for a nominal fee on Mikva's website (see https://secure.mikva challenge.org/project-soapbox). Mikva notes that all of its programs are "grounded in the principles of Action Civics" and are designed to "provide youth with authentic and transformative democratic experiences," "develop agency and future commitment to civic action," and "provide youth with skills and knowledge to be effective citizens"—all key programming goals (Mikva Challenge, 2019).

In the curriculum, students choose a community issue of importance to them around which they will develop a speech. To prepare them for this task, students learn about the structure of good speeches; analyze sample speeches; learn how to use different forms of evidence to support

arguments, how to grab audiences' attention, and to 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. Finally, students deliver their finished speech to their classroom of peers, along with outside adult judges from the community. These adults are recruited through Mikva's networks and include businesspeople, lawyers, public officials, parents, clergy, or other city residents. While the role of these adults varies by community, because *Project Soapbox* in Chicago is structured as a competition, adult judges there complete rubrics to evaluate students' speech structure, content, and delivery.

When students deliver their speeches, 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 completed. The top speakers from individual schools advance to a citywide competition, which is also judged by community members. Given that the curriculum features opportunities for open exchange of ideas, the development of public speaking skills, and the role of authentic youth voice, the curriculum and goals of *Project Soapbox* are well aligned with the best practices of civic education (Campbell, 2008; Niemi & Junn, 1998; Syvertsen et al., 2007; Torney-Purta, 2002; Youniss, 2011).

The curriculum is typically implemented in social studies or English language arts classrooms. A teacher's decision to use *Project Soapbox* is voluntary, and most teachers incorporate it as part of their regular school-day curriculum. Some teachers implement *Soapbox* as a stand-alone curriculum, while others use it as part of a larger district civics curriculum or as part of Mikva's Issues to Action curriculum, both of which include components that link students' *Soapbox* speeches with broader public engagement. To support teachers' implementation of the program, Mikva provides professional development opportunities—in person, online, or both. As the curriculum guide notes, while the lessons can be taught in the span of a week, many teachers take longer in order to allow students to develop their speeches further—often between 2 and 3 weeks. While *Project Soapbox* is now implemented in many cities across the country at different times of the year, in Chicago, it is typically implemented 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- to late November.

Research Method

To study the factors that shaped students' learning from and experiences with *Project Soapbox*, in the fall of 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 the participating teachers were incorporating *Project Soapbox* as part of the regular school-day curriculum. We collaborated closely with Mikva to recruit our sample: When teachers signed up to implement *Project Soapbox* at the beginning of the school year (*N* = 40 teachers), Mikva sent them an email 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 the teachers who completed this consent form and agreed to participate (*N* = 14), we selected those teachers who were starting their curriculum in October (*N* = 11), allowing the lead time to distribute student assent/consent and parental permission forms, return to the classroom to gather those forms, and administer an initial survey (see below) prior to students beginning the curriculum. Because of scheduling constraints, we were unable to include two teachers who had agreed to participate, leaving us with our sample of nine teachers in nine schools.

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. The school sample included the range of types of high schools found within Chicago Public Schools (CPS)—neighborhood, charter, magnet, small, military, and alternative—and served student populations ranging in size from 124 to 2,927 students. The schools also encompassed the range of school rating levels that exist within CPS: Of the five possible performance levels, the schools in our sample included three "below average" (Level 2), two "average" (Level 2+), one "high" (Level 1), and three "highest" (Level 1+).

We administered surveys to students before and after they took part in the curriculum to examine change over time. While 232 students completed the initial survey, 204 completed both pre- and postsurveys. Most measures in the pre- and postsurveys were either replicated exactly or modified slightly from previous studies, including the Chicago Consortium on School Research's (2013) "Five Essentials" survey, the California Civic Index (Kahne, Middaugh, & Schutjer-Mance, 2005), and the Civic Engagement Questionnaire (Zukin, Keeter, Andolina, Jenkins, & Delli-Carpini, 2006). Factor analyses conducted on all scales revealed single factors, and when tested for reliability, all scales posted solid to strong alpha scores (ranging from .64 to .928). 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. Our postsurvey also included an additional set of measures that Mikva Challenge regularly uses to evaluate *Project Soapbox* (program evaluation measures). 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" (see Table 1). This portion

Table 1
Project Soapbox Program Evaluation Measures

Indicator	Response Categories	List of Items
		How much do you agree or disagree with each statement about how you feel after preparing and giving a speech? As a result of the activities and competition I participated in,
More confident		I feel more confident.
My ideas were heard		I feel like my ideas were heard by my peers.
Better public speaker	*Strongly disagree,*	I feel I am a better public speaker.
Expert on my topic	*Disagree, Agree,*	I feel like I am an expert on my topic.
Less nervous to speak	*Strongly agree*	I feel less nervous to speak up in front of a group.
Plan to speak up on issues		I plan to speak up on issues that are important to me in the future.
Plan to work to make a difference		I plan to work to make a difference on the issue I spoke about.
I want to do this again		This is something I want to do again.

of the postsurvey also included open-ended questions such as "What do you think you learned as a result of participating in *Project Soapbox*?" Finally, we incorporated a series of questions designed to capture the ways in which different factors might impact student learning. In addition to demographic information, we assessed student political socialization at home, and we asked the students if they had ever given a speech before, how often they practiced their speech, their level of engagement in the classroom, and their assessment of school and class climate. While some measures were curriculum specific (e.g., the number of times the students practiced), others were adapted from previous studies of youth civic engagement (e.g., Flanagan, Syvertsen, & Stout, 2007). A complete list of the variables and scales is provided in Tables 2 and 3.

The student sample closely mirrored the demographics of CPS: Our sample was 41% African American, 48% Hispanic, and predominantly low income. Of the students who completed the pre- and postsurveys, 55% were female, and the majority (76%) were between 17 and 19 years old, with the remainder (24%) aged 14 to 16 years.

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

Table 2

Project Soapbox Independent Variables in Ordinary Least Squares Regression

Indicator	Type	Response Categories	List of Items in Measure/Question if Single Item
Year in school	Single item	*9th, 10th, 11th, 12th*	Grade:
Given a speech before	Single item	*Yes, more than once; Yes, once; No, never*	Until today's *Project Soapbox* competition, had you ever given a speech in front of a group of people before?
Number of times practiced	Single item		How many times did you practice your speech?
Family political socialization	Scale; pre only; α = .64	*Never, Occasionally; Sometimes, Regularly*	How often would you say each of the following occurs, if at all?
			I talk to my parents/guardians about politics and current events.
			My parents/guardians volunteer in our community.
			My parents/guardians vote in elections.
			My parents/guardians are involved in local politics (school board/city council).
Classroom climate	Scale; pre only; α = .91	*Strongly disagree, Disagree, Agree, Strongly agree*	Please indicate how much you agree or disagree with each statement *about this class:*
			In this class, students have a voice in what happens.
			In this class, students can disagree with a teacher, if they are respectful.
			In this class, students can disagree with each other, if they are respectful.
			In this class, students are encouraged to express opinions.
Mother's education	Single item	*Less than a high school degree, High school graduate or GED certificate, Some college, College degree, Postgraduate or professional degree*	What is your mother's highest education level?
How much do you care about the topic?	Single item	*Not at all, Not very much, Somewhat, A lot*	How much do you care about this topic?

Table 3

Project Soapbox Dependent Variables in Ordinary Least Squares Regression (for Survey Items With Pre/Post Measures)

Indicator	Reliability (Alpha Score): Pre/Post	Response Categories	List of Items in Measure
Class engagement	α = .824/.771	*Strongly disagree, Disagree, Agree, Strongly agree*	Please indicate how much you agree or disagree with each statement *about this class:*
			I usually look forward to this class.
			I work hard to do my best in this class.
			The topics we are studying are interesting.
Civic competencies	α = .877/.900	*I definitely can't; I probably can't; Maybe; I probably can; I definitely can*	If you found out about a problem in your community that you wanted to do something about (e.g., illegal drugs were being sold near a school or high levels of lead were discovered in the local drinking water), how well do you think you would be able to do each of the following?
			Create a plan to address the problem.
			Get other people together to care about the problem.
			Express your views in front of a group of people.
			Identify individuals or groups who could help you with the problem.
			Call someone on the phone you had never met before to get his or her help with the problem.
			Contact an elected official about the problem.
			Post something on a social media website like Facebook or Twitter to inform people about the problem.
Teacher rating	α = .910/.917	*Strongly disagree, Disagree, Agree, Strongly agree*	Please indicate how much you agree or disagree with each statement *about your teacher in this class:*
			My teacher often connects what I am learning to life outside the classroom.
			My teacher encourages students to share their ideas about things we are studying in class.
			My teacher often requires me to explain my answers.
			My teacher encourages us to consider different solutions or points of view.
			My teacher wants us to become better thinkers, not just memorize things.

(continued)

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Table 3 (continued)

Indicator	Reliability (Alpha Score): Pre/Post	Response Categories	List of Items in Measure
Listening skills	α = .877/.867	*Not at all confident, Not very confident, Somewhat confident, Very confident*	How confident are you in your ability to do each of the following *when listening to someone speak?* Determine a speaker's point of view on an issue. Evaluate how well a speaker uses evidence. Evaluate how well a speaker uses rhetoric, such as word choice, points of emphasis, and tone.
Presentation skills	α = .928/.913	*Not at all confident, Not very confident, Somewhat confident, Very confident*	How confident are you in your ability to do each of the following in *presenting information to others?* Explain a problem clearly to an audience. Provide different kinds of evidence to explain the importance of an issue. Present a well-organized, easy to follow speech. Grab an audience's attention through the opening and closing of a speech. Deliver a speech effectively through clear expression, good body language, and effective pacing and volume.
Intended activism after high school	α = .769/.817	*Not at all likely, Not very likely, Somewhat likely, Very likely*	When you think about life *after high school*, how likely is it that you would do each of the following? Contact or visit someone in government. Vote in an election. Express your opinion on an issue by contacting a newspaper, or radio or TV talk show. Try to raise awareness about an issue by posting an article on a social media site like Facebook or Twitter.

(continued)

Table 3 (continued)

Indicator	Reliability (Alpha Score): Pre/Post	Response Categories	List of Items in Measure
Future activism*	α = .853/.890	*Strongly disagree, Disagree, Agree, Strongly agree*	We are also interested in what you think about your future activities. How much do you agree with each of the following? Being actively involved in community issues is my responsibility. In the next 3 years, I expect to work on at least one community problem that involves a government agency. I have good ideas for programs and projects to help solve problems in my community. In the next 3 years, I expect to be involved in improving my community.

*Adapted from the California Civic Index.

classrooms was to explore dimensions of variation in implementation of the curriculum, drawing from the pool of teachers who agreed to more in-depth study. 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, teachers who were both experienced ($N = 4$) and novice ($N = 1$) at implementing the curriculum, and teachers using *Project Soapbox* in different curricular contexts—as part of a larger 11th/12th-grade civics curriculum, a 9th-grade criminal law curriculum, an 11th/12th-grade sociology course, an 11th-grade social science course, and, in the case of the English language arts classroom, a junior/senior AP Language and Composition course, alongside a civics classroom in a partner social studies classroom. We also chose classrooms that represented differing student demo-graphic makeups and differing school types and ratings, as described above. The teachers in these classrooms spent between 8 and 15 class periods on *Project Soapbox*; three of the teachers followed the curriculum quite closely, making only small modifications (e.g., showing additional video speech sam-ples), while the other two teachers used the majority of the curriculum but made more significant modifications (e.g., creating different rubrics for the speeches).

In these selected classrooms, we observed and recorded detailed notes on 3 days of implementation of the curriculum, including at least 1 day in each classroom when students delivered their finished speeches, to see how the teachers employed the curricular materials, how students engaged with the curriculum, and students' performances when delivering their speeches. We then interviewed these five teachers to better understand their goals for using the curriculum and their pedagogical decision making around the materials; these interviews each lasted between 40 and 50 minutes and were audio-recorded. We collected students' written speeches to examine their topics and evaluate their use of rhetorical elements empha-sized in the curriculum, and we conducted student focus groups in four of the selected classrooms to gain further insight into students' experiences with the curriculum and the teachers' practices. The student focus groups included between 3 and 9 students, depending on how many students from each school consented to participate and were available at the times their teacher designated (e.g., lunchtime or after school); these interviews lasted between 35 and 60 minutes. Finally, we observed the citywide com-petition, recorded observations about the competition and process and examined video recordings of the 10 student finalists' speeches.

Data Analysis

In order to examine the factors that shaped 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. We

employed ordinary least squares regression to determine which factors were most instrumental in predicting key outcomes among the participants. One set of dependent variables was taken from the postsurvey and created by Mikva to measure students' self-assessments of the impact of the curriculum (program evaluation measures), as described above. In addition, we created a scale to measure students' evaluations of their rhetorical skills and a scale to measure students' intended political action in the future. These additional scales were based on questions that were asked of students both before and after their participation in *Project Soapbox*, which allowed us to measure change. When using variables that had both pre- and postsurvey measures, we used students' scores on the premeasure as a control variable for the postscore (as suggested by Molnar, Smith, & Zahorik, 1998; Singer & Andrade, 1997). Our independent variables included self-reported gender, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status (measured by mother's education), political socialization at home (measured by parental role modeling and political discussion), classroom climate (measured by students' responses to presurvey questions), the number of times students practiced their speeches, past history of speech giving, how much students reported that they cared about their topic, and the student's year in school.

Our qualitative analysis included the students' open-ended survey responses and the student focus group interviews, classroom observations, and teacher interviews. We categorized the students' open-ended survey responses into themes, including the broad categories under which the students' speech topics fell. A large percentage of students elected to speak about topics like gun and gang violence in the city of Chicago, police brutality and misconduct, and domestic violence. Students also discussed issues such as college tuition costs, school start times, the importance of education for voting, unemployment, and gentrification. Thus, we created speech topic categories such as domestic violence, community violence, racism/discrimination, and education. Similarly, we grouped students' perceptions of what they had learned from the curriculum into themes (e.g., learned speaking skills, research skills, etc.).

We transcribed all the teacher interviews and student focus groups and then coded all the transcripts and classroom observation notes both inductively and deductively using categories aligned with the research question and action civics theory. For example, we initially developed codes to correspond with the factors we expected to shape students' learning, (e.g., teacher, students' connection to their topic, etc.); then, after reading through the transcripts and open-ended student survey responses, we developed additional codes that captured the themes that emerged from the data about students' learning (e.g., the structure of the curriculum). After coding these data, we wrote analytical memos (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992) that identified patterns and themes about the factors shaping students' learning from the

curriculum and selected quotes from the various data sources that most clearly represented each of the themes.

Findings

In the following, we build on our previous findings about what students said they had learned from the curriculum (Andolina & Conklin, 2018) to focus on the factors that shaped the positive outcomes students reported from their participation. First, we provide an overview of the factors we explored through our quantitative analysis of the student surveys and discuss those factors that were most salient to student outcomes. Then, we discuss the qualitative data to highlight both those factors that reinforce the quantitative student survey findings and those that emerged from a close examination of the open-ended survey responses, classroom observations, teacher interviews, student speeches, and student focus groups.

Factors That Shaped Curricular Outcomes: Student Survey Findings

Our first analysis of the relative influence of key factors employed the program evaluation variables—items like "I feel more confident" and "I feel I am a better public speaker"—of students' self-reported gains as the dependent variables. For context, most of the students indicated that they had been positively affected by their participation, with the majority indicating in the exit survey that they were "less nervous about speaking" and that they felt their "ideas were heard." In evaluating what factors were most important for predicting these outcomes, we regressed each program evaluation variable on the independent variables detailed above.

The results (see Table 4) indicate the influence of the political environment of the home (where parents talk about politics and they volunteer and vote), the number of times students practiced their speech, and the classroom climate (how students felt about sharing their opinions and disagreeing with others in the classroom) on students' perceived outcomes. For example, students who came from homes where parents discussed politics and modeled civic participation (positive political socialization) were more likely to say that after participation, they felt like an expert on their topic. Similarly, the more students practiced their speeches, the greater their confidence in their speaking skills and their sense that their voice had been heard. And if students felt that teachers respected and encouraged their opinions (classroom climate), then they were more likely to say they planned to speak up on these issues again in the future. It should be noted, however, that the impact of these variables on the various program evaluation measures is uneven. As Table 4 indicates, while political socialization, speech practice, and classroom climate were often key predictors of various outcomes, none of the three was consistently significant across all eight program evaluation equations.

Table 4

Ordinary Least Squares Regressions: Predicting the Program Evaluation Measures Among *Project Soapbox* Participants

	More Confident	My Ideas Were Heard	Better Public Speaker	Expert on My Topic	Less Nervous to Speak	Plan to Speak up on Issues	Plan to Work to Make a Difference	I Want to Do This Again
Constant	-.66(.61)	.24 (.60)	-.23 (.76)	-.86 (.77)	-1.16 (.78)	.11 (.70)	.11 (.65)	-1.42 (.73)*
	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Year in school	.12 (.81)	-.02 (.09)	.03 (.11)	.07 (.11)	.09 .11	-.02 (.10)	-.14 (.10)	.06 (.10)
	.09	*.10*	*.02*	*.04*	*.05*	*-.01*	*-.10*	*.04*
Given a speech before	.01 (.09)	.13 (.09)	-.05 (.18)	.18 (.11)	.04 (.11)	.04 (.10)	-.01 (.10)	.03 (.10)
	.00	*.09*	*-.03*	*.11*	*.02*	*.03*	*-.01*	*.02*
Number of times practiced speech	.42 (.07)	.22 (.07)	.37 (.09)	.09 (.09)	.22 (.09)	.17 (.08)	.24 (.07)	.27 (.08)
	*.37**	*.21**	*.29**	*.07*	*.17*	*.15*	*.21**	*.21**
Family political socialization	.04 (.03)	.04 (.03)	.04 (.03)	.08 (.03)	.01 (.03)	.06 (.03)	.07 (.03)	.07 (.03)
	.09	*.10*	*.09*	*.18**	*.03*	*.16*	*.17*	*.16*
Class climate	.05 (.03)	.07 (.03)	.04 (.03)	.04 (.04)	.08 (.04)	.06 (.03)	.01 (.03)	.06 (.03)
	.11	*.19**	*.09*	*.08*	*.17*	*.14*	*.03*	*.13*
Mother's education	-.04 (.06)	-.04 (.06)	-.02 (.07)	-.00 (.07)	.10 (.08)	.03 (.07)	.03 (.06)	.13 (.07)
	-.04	*-.05*	*-.01*	*-.00*	*.10*	*.03*	*.04*	*.13*
How much cared about the topic	.53(.11)	.48 (.11)	.48 (.14)	.64 (.14)	.58 (.14)	.46 (.13)	.70 (.12)	.60 (.13)
	*.30**	*.29**	*.24**	*.32**	*.28**	*.25**	*.39**	*.30**
Adjusted R^2	.34**	.25**	.20**	.17**	.18**	.17**	.27**	.26**

Note. The cells contain *B* values (unstandardized coefficients) and standard errors (in parentheses) in the first row and *B* values (standardized coefficients, in italics) in the second row.

*$p \leq .05$. **$p \leq .01$.

While these influences are noteworthy, the one factor that was both more influential than the others and most consistent throughout every dependent variable was how much a student cared about a topic. How much students cared about a topic was significantly (and strongly) related to how highly they ranked the impact of the curriculum on all of the program evaluation measures—their confidence (and their decreased nervousness), their desire to want to make a difference, their intention to speak up about the issue in the future, their sense of being an expert, their feeling that they had been heard, and their enthusiasm for participating in *Project Soapbox* again.

Similarly, we found that how much students cared about their topic was a significant predictor of a variety of student self-assessments of their civic and literacy skills after the conclusion of the curriculum. As reported earlier, students made modest but significant gains in their assessment of their post–high school civic engagement, as well as some of their rhetorical skills (Andolina & Conklin, 2018). To determine what best accounts for the observed change, we regressed the postsurvey scale on all the independent variables included in the first analysis, and we added the presurvey measure as a control variable. Again, how much students cared about their topic was a significant and substantial predictor of their postsurvey assessment of how engaged they were with the class (e.g., how much they look forward to the class, work hard, and find the topics interesting) (see Table 5). Similarly, how much students cared about their topic was strongly related to their assessment of their civic competency to address a community problem, their rating of their teacher (e.g., in connecting learning to life outside the classroom, encouraging critical thinking), and their confidence in their academic listening skills. There were three instances in which caring about one's topic did not reach the level of statistical significance: postsurvey assessments of rhetorical skills and two different measures of anticipated political engagement. In these cases, presurvey orientations, as well as how often students practiced their speech and, in the case of political intentions, family political socialization, held sway.

While not uniformly consistent, it is important to note that a student's assessment of the classroom climate showed up as a significant predictor for three of the program evaluation outcomes and the postsurvey scores for students' assessment of their classroom engagement and civic competencies. The questions designed to measure classroom climate were included in the presurvey only and indicated that prior to the implementation of the curriculum, many of the students in the sample felt that their teachers had created environments that supported student voice, allowed them to respectfully disagree with one another and their teachers, and encouraged them to express their own opinions. As illustrated in Figure 1, an overwhelming majority of students in the presurvey agreed that they were given a voice in the classroom, that their teacher allowed them to respectfully

Table 5
Ordinary Least Squares Regressions: Predicting Postsurvey Outcomes Among *Project Soapbox* Participants

	Class Engagement Scale	Civic Competencies Scale	Teacher Rating	Listening Skills	Presentation Skills	Intended Activism After High School	Future Activism
Constant	-.64 (.83)	2.71 (2.32)	1.75 (1.44)	4.23 (1.07)	3.81 (1.64)	1.97 (1.52)	1.89 (1.35)
	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Year in school	-.00 (.12)	-.28 (.32)	.12 (.20)	-.31 (.15)	.11 (.23)	-.37 (.21)	-.09 (.20)
	-.00	*-.05*	*.03*	*-.12**	*.03*	*-.10*	*-.03*
Given a speech before	.15 (.11)	-.90 (.33)	.21 (.20)	-.14 (.14)	-.42 (.22)	.09 (.22)	-.01 (.20)
	.06	*-.14***	*.05*	*-.06*	*-.10*	*.02*	*-.00*
Number of times practiced speech	.22 (.09)	.78 (.26)	.03 (.16)	.15 (.12)	.48 (.18)	.62 (.17)	.42 (.15)
	*.18**	*.16***	*.01*	*.08*	*.15**	*.20***	*.15***
Family political socialization	.02 (.03)	.14 (.10)	.11 (.06)	.09 (.04)	.06 (.07)	.22 (.07)	.15 (.06)
	.03	*.08*	*.09*	*.13**	*.05*	*.21***	*.15**
Classroom climate	.21 (.04)	.21 (.11)	.04 (.03)	.00 (.05)	.11 (.07)	.05 (.07)	-.01 (.06)
	*.30***	*.11**	*.10*	*.00*	*.09*	*.04*	*-.01*
Mother's education	.05 (.08)	.13 (.22)	.13 (.10)	-.15 (.10)	.10 (.15)	-.10 (.14)	-.17 (.13)
	.03	*.03*	*.12*	*-.10*	*.04*	*-.04*	*-.07*
How much cared about the topic	.82 (.15)	.85 (.44)	.74 (.26)	.38 (.19)	.49 (.30)	.35 (.29)	.26 (.25)
	*.27***	*.10**	*.15***	*.12**	*.09*	*.07*	*.06*
DV in presurvey	.34 (.05)	.45 (.05)	.53 (.09)	.46 (.06)	.45 (.05)	.46 (.06)	.60 (.06)
	*.38***	*.53***	*.55***	*.50***	*.53***	*.45***	*.61***
Adjusted R^2	*.61***	*.56***	*.52***	*.40***	*.49***	*.44***	*.27***

Note. The cells contain *B* values (unstandardized coefficients) and standard errors (in parentheses) in the first row and *B* values (standardized coefficients, in italics) in the second row. DV = dependent variable.

$*p \leq .05.$ $**p \leq .01.$
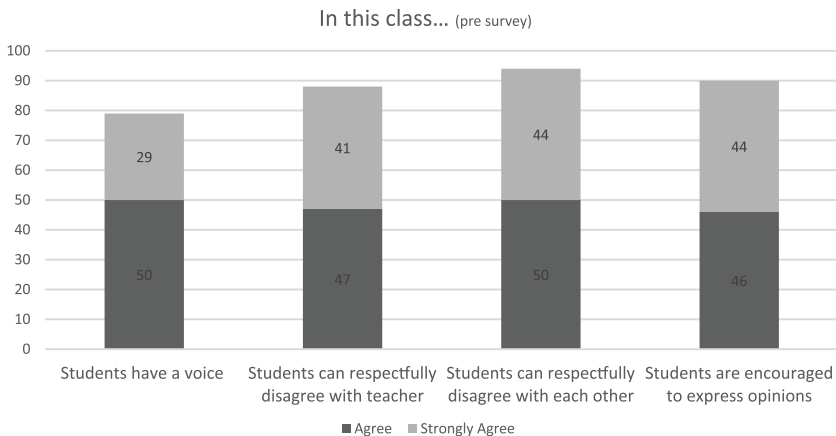
19

In this class... (pre survey)

Figure 1. **Classroom climate.**

disagree with him or her and with one another, and that their teacher encouraged them to express their opinions. Clearly, across our entire sample, the majority of students were experiencing key elements of civic education best practices prior to engaging with the curriculum.

However, not all classrooms were equivalent in the implementation of a positive classroom climate. For example, as illustrated in Figure 2, in Teacher A's classroom, not only did an overwhelming number of students agree that they had a voice in the classroom, but fully half of them strongly agreed with this assessment. Other teachers received higher overall scores for their classroom environment, yet the magnitude of student assessment was weaker, as illustrated by the data from Teacher B, where 96% of the students agreed that they were given a voice but only 17% strongly agreed with this description. And other teachers, such as Teacher C, were not as successful, with only 42% describing the classroom as a place where students have a voice in what happens. As the multivariate analysis described above illustrates, student assessment of classroom climate was a significant predictor for gains in students' class engagement and, importantly, increases in how students rated their civic competencies.

In sum, the quantitative findings from the student survey data reveal that some factors outside the classroom—such as students living in homes where parents discussed politics and modeled civic participation—shaped students' experiences with and learning from the *Project Soapbox* curriculum. However, many of the influences on students' learning—such as how much a student cared about his or her speech topic and the student's assessment of the classroom climate—related to the structure of the curriculum
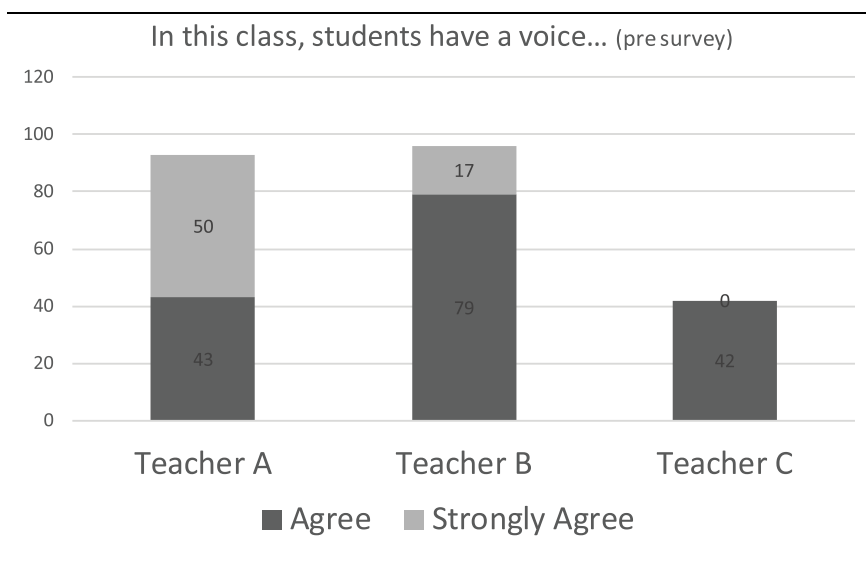
In this class, students have a voice... (pre survey)

Figure 2. **Classroom climate by teacher.**

itself as well as the instructional context in which the curriculum was implemented. We now turn to a discussion of the qualitative data, which provide a deeper and more textured understanding of the ways in which these and other curricular and instructional factors influenced students' learning from *Project Soapbox*.

Features of the Curriculum That Shaped Student Outcomes

Our observations of the five focal classrooms, interviews with the teachers and students, analysis of the student speeches, and examination of the *Project Soapbox* curricular materials suggest that much of the power of the curriculum lies in the elements it includes, the way its creators carefully scaffold students' speech development, and how students' speech delivery is structured. In the first four of the five lessons, the curriculum provides teachers video links to a range of sample speeches, reproducible handouts that enable students to analyze the quality of sample speeches, and additional organizers to lead students from initial speech brainstorming to drafts in which they "spice up" their speeches with rhetorical devices to create polished products. Our classroom observations and teacher interviews illustrated that the teachers relied on these materials and found them very valuable: We observed the teachers showing students many of the curriculum's recommended speech examples and using the curriculum handouts

to have students analyze these sample speeches and craft their own. As Ms. Bowman[1] explained, one of the curriculum's strengths was its structure:

> Walking through how to create a speech . . . the very brief rough draft, and then the ways in which you could add to it with the grabbers and the closers and the rhetorical devices, and making sure that you have the call to action, and making sure that you have explained the assets of the community that they already have . . . [for students] . . . it kind of alleviated some stress that they had of being like . . . "I don't even know where to start."

The curricular scaffolding, then, provided helpful tools for teachers to assist their students in crafting speeches.

Students' speeches, in turn, revealed the elements emphasized in the curriculum: Students incorporated repetition and imagery, attention grabbers, logical and emotional appeals, and calls to action. One student, for example, spoke with emotion about the need for immigration reform, explaining,

> My mom was 8 months pregnant when she came to the States. . . . She was in the desert . . . crossed the river. . . . It was so dangerous. I didn't understand . . . but she wanted me to get an education. We are hurt, humiliated, tired.

Other students cited statistics alongside personal stories, such as one who wrote her speech about domestic violence:

> A woman is beaten every 9 seconds. Two million injuries and 1,300 deaths are caused each year as a result of domestic violence. . . . My sister is a domestic survivor; she was 6 months pregnant when she was abused by the father of her childeren [*sic*].[2]

Speeches like these indicate that the students were using the suggestions featured in the curriculum to create powerful speeches.

Students' increased confidence in their rhetorical and presentation skills, along with the speeches they produced, are indicators that the teachers' use of the scaffolded curriculum enabled students to develop valuable speech-writing and delivery skills. While the general sequence and structure of the curriculum appeared to be key factors shaping the teachers' practices and students' learning, two related elements of the curriculum stood out as particularly influential: students being able to choose their own topic and the curriculum's emphasis on the use of emotional appeals.

Students' Choice of Speech Topics

As the quantitative analysis highlighted, how much students cared about their speech topic was a significant and powerful predictor of positive

outcomes from the curriculum; the fact that students care about their topics, in turn, is directly connected to the curriculum's emphasis on having students choose their own topic. The first lesson includes a brainstorming handout for students that asks them to first think of what they are proud of in their school/community/city/society and what they wish they could change; the handout then asks them to "name an issue that is very important to you and explain why it is important to you." Because of this curricular requirement, students' *Soapbox* speeches centered on topics that were closely connected to their daily experiences and about which they cared a great deal.

Both the quantitative and the qualitative data indicated the salience of choosing a topic for students in the *Soapbox* experience. From the survey, we learned that three quarters of the students—that is, most of them—reported caring a lot about the topics they had chosen to speak about. And in response to an open-ended survey question that asked, "What was the best part about preparing and giving a speech?" about one in six students replied, "Choosing the topic." When asked in the focus group interviews what it was like to participate in *Project Soapbox*, many students focused on their opportunity to choose a topic that had personal meaning. Students said things like "I liked that I got the chance to speak about something that I care about" and "I really liked picking the topic and then breaking it down and really doing a lot of research on it."

The opportunity for high school students in these schools to choose a community issue of importance to them appeared to be a crucial factor in their engagement with the curriculum, thereby facilitating their speech writing and delivery skills. Many students explained that their connection to the topic motivated them and made them willing to develop and deliver their speech—something that they might have otherwise not been interested in or willing to do. For example, in the focus group interviews, students made comments like the following:

> I thought it was really fun, because I'm not really much of a public speaker, so just because it's difficult for me. But yeah, it made it a lot easier that I know the subject that I wanted to talk about and express how I felt about it.

> I wrote about killing, and I added my cousin's death up in there. So that connection—it really meant something to me. That's how come I was passionate about it and willing to share with everyone else, because it was something that I felt very strong about.

The teachers, too, indicated that the *Soapbox* curriculum was motivational to their students. Mr. Cahill spoke of one student who decided to write about bullying, based on the student's own experiences: "I was pleased particularly with one student who has given me trouble all year long in terms of

motivation and being on task in class. . . . He won the classroom and school-wide [*Soapbox* competition] and [is] going on to citywide.'' Ms. Bowman indicated that choosing a topic helped students connect more deeply with what they do care about. She said,

> It forced them to actually consider things in their life that they do give a crap about. . . . And a lot of times they're not asked about that. . . . The fact that the majority of the kids really got up and . . . gave their speeches showed that they took this project seriously.

Thus, being able to choose a topic that was meaningful to them spurred many students to participate willingly in the activities of *Project Soapbox* and enabled them to develop new confidence, skills, and understandings through the process.

Incorporation of Emotional Appeals

Students' ability to choose a topic dovetailed with their incorporation of emotional appeals to persuade their audiences—something that the curriculum encouraged and appears connected to the curriculum's impact in fostering connection and empathy. The curriculum, which emphasizes the rhetorical skill of knowing one's audience, suggests that personal stories enable a speaker to appeal emotionally to an audience. Given students' close connections to their topics, many students integrated such personal stories, often with very moving effects. Student speeches included statements such as "I was bullied for years," "My cousin got killed," and "We shouldn't have to be afraid of being deported." Some students delivered speeches through tears, such as one who spoke about domestic violence and described her aunt not feeling safe, until "one day, she just stopped calling." Another student began to cry as she spoke about her father: "You came, you left, you left my life a mess."

In our classroom observations, the emotional impact of many students' speeches was palpable. In some cases, audience members voiced this impact, such as one student who, after hearing a classmate's speech about a friend who was bullied and died, said, "I feel kind of shitty because I myself have been a bystander. I could possibly change a life . . . so thank you for telling me that story." When we observed the citywide competition and audience members were given the opportunity to share reflections from the speeches, many students and adults in the room responded with great emotion. After hearing a speech on domestic violence in which a student shared that "I'm here with no father and no mother. . . . They are both in the same cemetery," several parents in the room as well as other students were moved to tears. Thus, the curriculum's emphasis on the use of personal stories and other emotional appeals seemed to cultivate audience members' sense of connection along with their appreciation of the experiences of others.[3]

Features of the Speech Presentations

While the elements described above appeared salient in shaping the development of students' speeches, the data suggest that the way the curriculum structures the speech presentations themselves is also crucial for fostering students' confidence, developing their sense of agency, and cultivating empathy and connection through attentive listening. All students are expected to deliver their speeches in front of one another as part of the classroom competition, and the *Soapbox* curriculum encourages teachers to establish an authentic audience—including adult judges such as parents, other school staff members, and community members—that is highly supportive of all student speech givers. The curriculum directs teachers to explain that "all speeches should receive wild applause when they are completed," meaning that "everyone cheers loudly and enthusiastically." The curriculum also recommends that students complete peer feedback forms as they listen to one another; these forms are provided in the curriculum and ask students to focus on the content, delivery, and effectiveness of their peers' speeches.

Although we discuss below how teachers varied in their implementation of "wild applause" and peer feedback, for those who adhered to it, the curricular emphasis on creating supportive, attentive audiences appeared to foster students' confidence and sense of agency. Several teachers discussed the effect of this support for their students. Mr. Gilroy spoke about a new student from the Dominican Republic:

> She's incredibly nervous. . . . she's learning not only about her topic, but she's gaining the confidence. . . . but she's going to have so much support from her peers when she goes up there because we have this norm that you clap wildly for everyone . . . and then just really be energetic and supportive of one another. . . . I think that they get a lot of criticism . . . from a lot of the adults in their life. And just to be wildly applauding them for being them and for the work they're doing is great.

Similarly, Ms. Bowman described how "heartwarming" it was to see students' "respect and appreciation for each other." These teachers' comments mirror our observations; in many of the classrooms and at the citywide competition, students offered one another enthusiastic support.

Further, in all of the classrooms we observed, students appeared very engaged with and focused on their peers' speeches. Students corroborated this observation by noting the power of having others hear their stories, an idea echoed by many students in the focus group interviews. One student explained,

> At first I had a big weight on my heart. It was like when I spoke to everybody how I feel, I felt kind of better, because I felt like

> everybody was listening to me. I really didn't have no one to really talk to me to really get it off my chest. So I felt more open and relieved.

Another student noted, "I learned how to speak out my opinion, and how, in different ways, people may hear me. About my point of view about my community and how I may change it." Because the students were focused on one another's words, student speakers felt "heard."

In addition to feeling heard by having the opportunity to present their speeches publicly, many students also indicated a developing sense of agency by virtue of delivering their speeches to audiences that included their peers and adults from the community. In the focus group interviews, students said things like "I learned that as an individual we have a voice and a voice that could potentially give us power in the future." One student who participated in the citywide competition commented,

> There was [an adult] lady behind me, and it pretty much made me know that I came for a reason. She basically told me that—because I picked abortion—that my speech had got through to her. She said she had never seen abortion in that light.

Similarly, Ms. Bowman explained how a fellow teacher in her school was impacted by hearing one of her students' speeches on the problematic nature of the term *Black on Black crime*, noting, "The teacher across the hall, he's a young Black teacher, [said], 'I use that term all the time. . . . After that speech, I will never use it again. . . . I had never thought of it like that.'"

Students could see that giving their speeches had the potential to influence others. Teachers also noted the empowerment for students that came from speaking out in front of their peers. Ms. Bowman explained that her students were "really, really proud of themselves"; many had been very nervous and doubted their abilities to deliver the speech, and "then they went up and you couldn't tell that they were nervous at all." Mr. Gilroy pointed out the particular value that speaking out publicly had for marginalized students:

> I think there are general benefits that are evident when you have a large group of disproportionately Black and Brown students who are disproportionately nonvocal leading up to 16 and 17 years old. . . . There are some situations in which children are still raised in families where the expectation is that children are seen, not heard. And this . . . should begin to turn that on its head.

Other teachers echoed these sentiments, such as Ms. Vogel who spoke about a very quiet, shy student:

> She got up and gave a really, extremely personal, and I think really well-done speech on immigration. . . . her family has a really dramatic

> immigration story. She's a DREAMer, and this is an issue that's really close to her heart. It was just amazing to see her do it. . . . I think it's empowering to them in different ways.

These comments indicate that speaking publicly through *Soapbox* gives students a sense of agency, which may be especially empowering for those students who have been traditionally disenfranchised.

A key aspect of students feeling heard and feeling that their words had impact was their sense that their audiences were actively listening. In the focus group interviews, students made comments like the following:

> When people was giving their speeches, I seen people shaking their head and just showing . . . that they're listening and that they got something from that *Soapbox* speech, basically. . . . It probably did change somebody's life or improve their image of how they looked at stuff.

Another student explained, "By other people clapping for you, you saw that you were able to get the message across of what the problem you were dealing with was."

Indeed, part of what appears to be powerful about *Project Soapbox* is that the curriculum puts students in a position to hear, learn from, and connect with one another. Unlike the structure of classroom discussion, in which participants often listen to one another in order to develop a response, the structure of *Soapbox* speech presentations encourages participants to listen solely to hear. Mr. Gilroy spoke about this unique aspect of the curriculum shaping his choice to use it: "It's the first time for many of the young people to be able to structurally listen to their peers, and for adults to listen to their students about the issues that matter to them. . . . There's a structure for listening." Because the format of the speech presentations encourages listening, students have the opportunity to hear new perspectives and develop a deeper understanding of one another and the issues important to their peers.

Furthermore, because the *Soapbox* speech presentations encourage listening, several teachers noted that the curriculum actually serves to foster a sense community—both among students and with the teacher. Ms. Vogel explained that one of her reasons for using *Soapbox* is that it's "good for building classroom community." Other teachers commented that the curriculum not only helps students learn about and connect with one another but it also helps them as teachers learn about their students. Mr. Cahill explained how *Soapbox* informs his AP class content: "Through *Soapbox*, I find out what they care about, and it often . . . directs my course for the rest of the year." He went on to explain that being able to learn about his students through the *Soapbox* speeches had a profound effect on his view of teaching more broadly:

> [*Project Soapbox*] changed my teaching. It made me realize that if you don't listen to students, it's one of the main reasons they don't listen to you. . . . Students have knowledge, and that knowledge can impact change, and it's unique and important. . . . When they're listened to, they feel taken seriously, and they take things seriously.

The way in which the *Soapbox* curriculum structures the opportunity for students to speak publicly about issues they care about—and listen to one another—produces powerful outcomes for them, their peers, and the adults who hear their speeches.

Instructional Choices and Context

While the curriculum, as written, provides the opportunities described above for students to experience powerful learning, the qualitative data revealed that the teachers' varied instructional choices and contextual factors shaped students' experiences. Not surprisingly, the teachers we interviewed had differing goals in their teaching, generally, and also for using *Project Soapbox*, which led them to emphasize different aspects of the curriculum. Some teachers were most interested in fostering public speaking skills, some particularly valued the research skills cultivated, while others prioritized the listening to and learning about one another that come from participating in the curriculum. Ms. Vogel, for example, noted the match between *Soapbox* and her law class, explaining, "One of the things I'm really enforcing this year is everybody has to talk. . . . Your voice has value. You have something to contribute." Similarly, Ms. Estrada focused on the cultivation of public speaking and research skills in her social science course:

> I want them to feel more confident speaking up so that their professors [in college] will know them. . . . I think public speaking skills are just important if you ever want to advocate for yourself . . . but . . . my primary interest is research . . . and I like the idea of strengthening an argument with evidence.

For these teachers, *Soapbox* offered practice in particular skills that were relevant to their broader curricula. Yet, as referenced earlier, teachers like Mr. Gilroy use *Soapbox* intentionally because it cultivates listening among students as well as in adults, while Ms. Bowman and Mr. Cahill similarly value learning about their students through the speeches.

The teachers' differential goals and emphases, in turn, showed up in the differences in their instructional practices and in the strength of each classroom climate—findings that are consistent with the quantitative data that revealed distinctions in classroom climates. In some cases, the teachers had intentionally invested significant time in cultivating a classroom community in which students developed trust and respect for one another. Ms. Bowman explained that, leading up to *Project Soapbox*, she had engaged

students in many community-building activities in which they practiced "diplomatic skills . . . being able to see someone's else . . . point of view and appreciating others' viewpoints," which she believed helped them feel less nervous when they spoke in front of their peers. Because of these exercises, she observed an increase in students' respect for one another:

> I think a big contribution to that has been because of the amount of activities that we do where you have to talk to each other and you have to listen to each other. . . . And they're also appreciating each other and respecting each other more, which is just making everything better.

Similarly, Mr. Cahill, after observing that some of his students were primarily focused on the competitive aspect of *Project Soapbox*, led his students through a series of compassion meditation exercises in which he asked them to

> [imagine] people further outside our circle and the things they go through and how their needs might be met . . . to get thinking about the emotional reasons of why we're doing this. . . . It fed into the idea of considering your audience too, of having that step back to think empathetically about someone you really disagree with in order to figure out how to better argue with them.

In both of these classrooms, the teachers actively cultivated a sense of concern for others among their students. These were also the classrooms in which, based on our observations and our focus group interviews, students appeared the most energized by participation in *Project Soapbox*.

Similarly, the teachers we observed made varied instructional decisions on how closely to follow the curriculum—with some following it closely, some omitting parts, and others enhancing it—and these decisions too influenced students' experiences. For example, Mr. Cahill asked his students to "throw praise" on each other to make the speech competition feel "celebratory of [students'] voices," Ms. Vogel implemented the "wild applause" after each speech, and Ms. Bowman designated a student for each speech to give feedback and a compliment. Yet in Ms. Estrada's class, there was silence after each student's speech. While Ms. Estrada did require her students to provide written evaluations for two of their peers' speeches, the silence after each speech created a much more subdued atmosphere than in the more celebratory classes. Particularly in cases where students' speeches were deeply personal and emotional, the absence of applause or verbal affirmation left an air of emotional uncertainty. Likewise, in our observation of the semifinal round of the citywide competition, in one classroom, the use of polite applause instead of wild applause appeared to reduce the sense of community within this space.

Finally, some teachers' instructional choices on how to adapt the curriculum were shaped by their curricular context—another factor that influenced students' experiences with *Project Soapbox*. Of our five focal

teachers, Mr. Cahill was the only English Language Arts teacher; because he was implementing *Soapbox* in American literature and AP Language and Composition courses, he emphasized the craft of writing for a specific audience and modified the *Soapbox* rubric to align more closely with his course goal of "focusing on the use of pathos, logos, and ethos in arguments . . . specifically tailored to a specific audience." According to him, the focus on a specific audience helped his students craft their emotional appeals more powerfully.

In some of the classrooms, the broader curricular context in which *Soapbox* was embedded also appeared to reinforce its impact. Ms. Bowman's course, for example, used a districtwide curriculum focused on democratic participation. The first unit was about power, participation, and democracy, and *Soapbox* was its culmination; the curriculum then went on to a unit on public policy. In Mr. Cahill's course, although his was an English class, the school in which he taught was part of a network of "democracy schools," which meant that the students, as he explained, are "already very familiar with *Soapbox* and the idea of using your voice to make change, being politically active, the avenues through which they can have civic discourse and civic engagement."

In sum, the qualitative data reveal how both the structure of the *Project Soapbox* curriculum and the teachers' instructional decisions played key roles in influencing student outcomes. The scaffolded lessons encouraged and provided students the tools to write speeches that include rhetorical devices like attention-grabbing openers, statistics-based evidence, emotional appeals, and calls to action. The emphasis on student choice of topics appears to have engaged and motivated students and enabled them to craft and deliver personally relevant speeches with powerful emotional appeal. The focus on student choice also provided teachers an opportunity to learn about their students, which allowed them to better understand their students as people and, in some cases, influenced their instruction. Meanwhile, the curriculum's attention to supportive audiences through the use of wild applause and focused listening provided a supportive environment for students to share vulnerable stories of personal import, which built their confidence, sense of agency, and feelings of connection with one another. Finally, this research reveals the ways in which students' experiences with action civics programming such as *Project Soapbox* may differ depending on the learning goals and instructional choices of various teachers.

Limitations

While we deliberately employed a mixed-methods research approach to gain the benefits of both quantitative and qualitative data, our qualitative sample may not be representative of the range of opinions in the full sample. We were not able to observe every classroom or every instructor, so we cannot establish the incidence of key implementation processes. Further, given

that our student sample included predominantly low-income students and students of color, we do not know how representative the experiences of our sample with this curriculum are of other student samples. Indeed, it would be valuable to know the extent to which the same factors are salient in shaping the learning of students who are more demographically diverse than the students in our sample (e.g., a sample that includes greater socioeconomic or racial/ethnic diversity).

In addition, we did not include our measure of classroom climate in the postsurvey, so we cannot document how *Project Soapbox* may have contributed to increases in students' assessments here. Initially, we believed that this would be a static condition, established prior to implementation. Our qualitative data reveal otherwise. Further, while social-emotional factors emerged throughout findings, our instruments did little to specifically probe these relational dimensions. Subsequent research would do well to design instruments that are more focused on assessing these relational dimensions and their impact.

Discussion

The growing consensus that varied action civics curricula are consistently associated with positive student learning outcomes has allowed us to turn greater attention to the factors that shape these positive outcomes and the ways in which context and implementation may influence students' experiences with such curricula. Our quantitative analysis, which is able to control for many individual variables, such as gender, socioeconomic status, and family political socialization, provides additional support for the impact of many of the best practices in civic education on positive outcomes such as gains in anticipated political engagement. For example, the data from this study add empirical evidence to the notion that student autonomy, or the practice of allowing students to choose topics of importance to them, is directly related to their outcomes (e.g., Kahne & Middaugh, 2008; LeCompte & Blevins, 2015), a finding that holds up here when various predispositions are taken into account.

More important, however, our qualitative data allow us to go beyond the quantitative analysis to consider key elements of this action civics curriculum and its implementation that are not easily captured by survey questions. The data from this study provide insight into the process by which student learning from *Project Soapbox* occurs and illustrate the differential experiences that result from the ways in which a common curriculum may be shaped by instructor implementation. Our analysis of the curriculum and our comparison of the various ways in which the teachers implemented their lessons provide a fuller understanding of the power of action civics and what factors may boost or undermine the general student outcomes documented by the empirical evidence.

Many of our findings about the importance of various features of the *Soapbox* curriculum are consistent with theories of motivation, as well as the features of action civics and high-quality civic education more broadly. The centrality of student choice of speech topics in the *Project Soapbox* curriculum and the importance of its impact are not surprising given the well-established understanding that providing opportunities for choice and self-direction supports students' need for autonomy and spurs intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Prior research has established that such choices must be related to students' personal interests, values, and goals; optimally challenging; and given in a warm, empathic, and accepting context (Katz & Assor, 2007). Framed this way, *Project Soapbox*'s success lies in the way in which it blends action civics' emphasis on youth voice, expertise, and issue identification (Gingold, 2013) with the motivation that is enabled by the positive environment provided by the wild applause (and, in some cases, explicit praise) of peers.

Further, *Project Soapbox*'s carefully scaffolded curriculum appears to fulfill many elements of action civics' broader programming goal that "adults scaffold opportunities for students to launch youth-driven civic projects through a multi-step process" (NACC, 2010). Although the brief *Project Soapbox* curriculum does not lead students through all six steps of the action civics framework as comprehensively as other programming does, students who participate in the curriculum are practicing the habits and orientations of citizenship within a social context (McIntosh & Youniss, 2010; Torney-Purta, Amadeo, & Andolina, 2010). They are examining their community to identify issues of importance to them, conducting research on these issues, and articulating strategies for action through their speeches and calls to action. And while some may contend that *Soapbox* participants are not taking action in their communities, the act of voicing their ideas publicly among their peers at school as well as other adults is in itself a public action. Flanagan et al. (2010) argued that schools are mini polities—public spaces where we engage with one another about the choices we are making about the type of society we live in. In giving these speeches and making their views public, students are "enter(ing) in the political realm" (McIntosh & Youniss, 2010, p. 26). Thus, students themselves (and their classrooms and schools) constitute a community of public, competing ideas, opinions, and values. In addition, the explicit inclusion of adults from the community (not just peers) to listen to students' speeches sends a powerful message about the value of youth voice. By participating in the carefully scaffolded *Project Soapbox* curriculum, students are practicing democracy within their classrooms.

In addition, research has documented that speaking out on issues that matter in the presence of trusted others fosters strength, connecting people to one another and providing the foundation for civic engagement. Connections to one another, as Flanagan (2003) has argued, have an inherently civic component because "the ties that bind young people to the polity

are based on participating in local community groups where they feel respected and where their voice is taken seriously" (p. 257). Thus, students' willingness to express their—often deeply personal—views publicly, among trusted adults and peers, is a component of acting and developing politically. Indeed, when implemented under optimal conditions, our data suggest, *Soapbox* may have the potential to build the kind of "public" that Flanagan et al. (2010) describe: Youth experience trusting relationships and are allowed to express their opinions in open classroom climates, and these trusting relationships enable them to develop a sense of belonging that leads to the development of collective, civic identities oriented toward the common good.

Finally, this research helps us understand the process by which an action civics curriculum can foster the listening and relational capacities that scholars and the public alike increasingly recognize as vital to SEL and democracy. *Project Soapbox*'s curricular elements position students to listen supportively and actively to those different from themselves, and in doing so, they offer the potential to increase trust, empathy, and equity—the democratic orientations, social awareness, and relationship skills that are increasingly prized and necessary in our world (Allen, 2004; Cramer & Toff, 2017; Levine, 2013; Weissberg et al., 2015). At the same time, teachers can amplify these outcomes through deliberate community-building exercises, overt and audible enthusiasm and support by students for one another, and other experiences that reinforce the democratic orientations emphasized in the curriculum.

Thus, *Project Soapbox* is powerful in part because it is well aligned with many of the well-established best practices in civic education. Our analysis contributes to the growing understanding of action civics curricula by identifying the key factors that shape student experiences with the curriculum and the differential impact created by the various ways the program is implemented. However, *Project Soapbox* is also powerful because the curriculum is intentionally linked to key SEL practices, many of which are newly recognized as having particular civic import (Levine & Kawashima-Ginsberg, 2017). When action civics programming is embedded with SEL practices, the potential payoff is even greater. As McKay Bryson and Warren (2018) argue, "Social and emotional learning and action civics are not just compatible, they are necessary and interdependent academic complements." With today's hyperpartisan politics, the crippling deadlock of political institutions, and the increasing violence in political rhetoric, civic education that addresses both key civic skills and important SEL competencies is critical.

Implications

This research provides evidence for clearly identifiable practices in the context of action civics learning that teachers can adopt that will contribute to the learning outcomes of their students not only in terms of the key skills

they need to be successful in school but also to provide them with the critical skills that will allow all students, regardless of their status in society, to participate fully in our democracy. For example, the findings of this study suggest the importance of providing verbal feedback and enthusiastic snaps and claps for speakers; creating supportive, attentive classroom environments; and—especially notable in our era of increasingly standardized curricula—giving students the opportunity to choose their own topics to explore. In addition, the findings indicate that educators would be well served to spend time on community building prior to implementation of the curriculum.

While research on action civics programs is growing (e.g., Blevins et al., 2016), scholarly work on the various factors that make such programs successful remains in its early stages. This study uses quantitative data to deepen our understanding of the key influences that are associated with student learning across two different domains—civic engagement and rhetorical skills. At the same time, the qualitative data from this study illuminate those factors that shape students' learning. And, perhaps most important, this research draws directly upon the voices and insights of those students who are traditionally left out of high-quality civic engagement opportunities, thus providing evidence of the efficacy of the curriculum for populations that are in most need of the instruction.

Notes

[1] All the teachers' names are pseudonyms.

[2] All the student comments, both written and verbal, are included here exactly as the students expressed them.

[3] Because some students' speeches include stories of personal trauma, the most recent version of the *Project Soapbox* curriculum has been updated to include guidelines and recommendations for teachers on trauma-informed practice.

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