Young Citizens Take Action for Better School Lunches

Stephanie Serriere, Dana Mitra, and Jennifer Cody

> Okay, I can do this now. It's my time to shine.
> Here, I'm going to stand here and fight for what I believe in.
> — *Anika, a fifth grade student, preparing to present her group's "issue" to the school*

Months of civic action began from something as ordinary as the pre-made school salad. At Park Forest Elementary School in State College, Pennsylvania, the daily lunch salad was served with ham, croutons, and cheese. Three fifth grade girls at Forest Park believed this salad didn't serve their health or religious needs. One girl, Anika, could not eat the salad because she was lactose-intolerant.[1] Sana, whose family is from United Arab Emirates, was a vegetarian because of her Muslim background. Another girl, Olivia, couldn't eat the meat on Wednesdays and Fridays during Lent because of her religious beliefs as an Orthodox Christian. The three wanted to eat salad, but initially found the cafeteria workers could not serve it in any different form for them. They brought their issue to their teacher, Ms. Cody, and from there began a journey of student voice and activism.

As teachers, it may be easy to skim over our students' grievances that "things just aren't fair." With an increased importance on standardized testing, it's not surprising that elementary schools remain places where decisions are often made for—and not by—students.[2] Although some evidence may show that today's youth in the United States are more disengaged and apathetic than decades ago[3] other evidence shows that they are indeed ready to take on civic issues in new ways.[4] Moreover, it has been said that, "the early grades represent a critical opportunity to lay a foundation upon which civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions can grow."[5] Other researchers concur that to develop political attitudes of civic engagement, one must begin earlier than high school.[6]

Agents of Change

This article outlines how young learners posed an authentic question from their personal experiences at school, spoke publicly to their entire school body, conducted surveys and research, analyzed data, presented their evidence and arguments to school staff and administrators, and reached a solution. We frame the actions these young citizens took to raise issues in their community using modified steps of the Project Citizen protocol of the Center for Civic Education:[7]

(1) Identify a problem to study

(2) Research the problem

(3) Examine solutions

(4) Propose a new public policy or an action plan

(5) Reflect on the learning experience

Each of these steps can be used to address academic standards. For example, students and teachers are addressing a theme from the social studies curriculum standards—🔟 **CIVIC IDEALS AND PRACTICES**—as they "locate, access, organize, and apply information about an issue of public concern from multiple points of view."[8] The National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) Language Arts Standards also apply as students gather, evaluate, and synthesize data from a variety of sources (e.g., print and non-print texts, artifacts, people) to communicate their discoveries in ways that suit their purpose and audience.[9] Other organizations' standards, such as those in math (by the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics) and science (by the National Science Teachers Association) also apply, but may be more dependent on a project's specific focus.

Step 1. Identifying the Problem: "You Can't Eat the Salad Either?"

The purpose of this initial step is for students to share what they already know about a problem in their community, and to recognize its scope—whether it is a global, state, neighborhood, school, or classroom problem. This process could be initiated a class brainstorm. Teachers must be willing to step outside of a traditional role to allow for the discussion to unfold. It is important to have supporting adults who can take the time to listen and take student concerns seriously, yet still offer possible next steps and guide their efforts if necessary.

In the case of the "Salad Girls" (a name they have affectionately earned and accepted in their school), these students identified the issue together at their lunch table: the dietary choices offered at lunch did not reflect the students' diversity. Anika explained that one day she accidentally signed up for the salad and sat without anything to eat since she was lactose-intolerant. The other girls at her

table couldn't trade her lunches because they couldn't eat it either for their own reasons. With some irritation, the girls banded together and decided to lead a protest. The girls then shared their concern with their teacher, Ms. Cody, and she encouraged them to first request a meeting with their school principal, Ms. Stoicovy, to discuss ways to take action.

In her fifth grade classroom, Ms. Cody often looks for ways to increase student voice through "teach-able moments" that may reflect students interests as well as many of the standards she needs to teach. She reported that during such opportunities, the kids are much "more motivated" and more likely to continue sustained research (reading, writing, speaking) than from a traditional lesson. Notably, Ms. Cody has support from Principal Stoicovy, who also is a strong advocate of democratic practices in the school.

In this step, students recognize the tensions that exist in a democracy. At a very local level, the Salad Girls were able to "identify and describe examples of tension between an individual's beliefs and government policy and laws" (social studies curriculum strand ④ **INDIVIDUALS, GROUPS, AND INSTITUTIONS**). Ms. Cody, with her penchant for social justice, pressed the girls to see how this was an example of "the tensions between the wants and needs of individuals and groups, and concepts such as fairness, equity, and justice" (⑥ **POWER, AUTHORITY, AND GOVERNANCE**) before their meeting with principal.

Step 2. Researching the Problem: "It's Not Just About Us!"
The Salad Girls knew that their fellow classmates might share their concern and be an important resource for information. After a classroom meeting, the girls chose to widen their circle for three more fifth grade students to join their action group. With support garnered from the meeting with the principal, they also educated the larger school as steps towards action. The girls prepared a short speech and an accompanying PowerPoint presentation at one of the weekly "All-School-Gatherings" to tell the 450 other students about the issue. The girls followed-up their presentation by visiting each K-5 classroom to take opinion polls (agree or disagree) on the current salad. The girls counted raised hands, made tallies with pencil and paper, and calculated the totals for and against a change of salads. They contemplated the validity of their data with potential peer pressure to agree with the fifth grade girls, especially when (with the help of their teacher), they converted their totals to percentages of the student body and found that over 90 percent of the student body agreed that the salads should be changed to have more choices (the exact set-up of salad-choices was yet to be determined). Still, they deduced that the overall indication was that the salad was not suitable.

One salad girl, Hannah Y., reported that she was surprised to

Presentation at an all-school gathering.
Photo by Donnan Stoicovy

learn from the class opinion surveys that, "Most people thought that that it would be a good idea (to change the salad), and it would be better because they'd actually eat the salad then." Sana realized that the problem was bigger than just their three friends who were unable to eat the salad. She commented, "First, I was only thinking about myself, but then when I started to get more and more into it...there are so many other kids in this school who can't have it, because they're lactose intolerant or...because of their beliefs." She summarized, "Now, it's not just about us, it's about the whole school." In this step, the girls experienced a goal of civic education, also reflected in language arts standards: gathering and understanding multiple points of view-learning that the problem scope extended beyond their own individual concerns.

Including All Key Players: "Who Might Help?"
Also with the help of their principal, the girls realized that another important informant for their project was their school's head cafeteria coordinator, Mrs. M. They met with Mrs. M. in the principal's office to learn about the cafeteria's reasons for the single choice of salad. The girls discovered that there are certain protein and calcium requirements from the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) that impact the staff's decision to put meat and cheese in the salads. At this step, the girls met an impasse in their hope for change. At the end of the meeting, Mrs. M. explained that although she'd like to help them, her "hands are tied" and she couldn't break from the USDA requirements or do "something special" in this school that children in other schools in the district would not receive. Plus, she explained, the process of students going through the lunch-line needed to be efficient. The girls, although at first dismayed, decided to continue their research and quest for change.

This step of "researching the problem" may take many forms from books, Internet resources, interviews and archival research in order to "gather and synthesize information and to create and communicate knowledge." (NCTE)

Surveying students about their diets and preferences.
Photo by Donnan Stoicovy

Perusing multiple and diverse data sources is important to understanding the diversity of opinions in a community. Teachers can guide this step by asking students, "Who knows more about this problem?" Additionally, students can prepare for meetings by creating good interview questions and conducting relevant background research (with guidance from teachers or other adult helpers). From this preparation, students may also want to invite knowledgeable members of the community to visit their class.

Step 3. Examining Possible Solutions: "Progress So Far"

In these steps, when the class or group is satisfied that they have learned as much about the problem as they can, they compile their findings into a presentation and offer potential solutions to a person, group, or organization that has some responsibility over the matter (government officials, organizations, companies, school staff, etc.). In the case of large groups or a classroom project, a three or four person "panel" can be chosen to represent the project to a particular audience. Project Citizen recommends that students prepare a portfolio that they can use to present the most significant information orally.

Two months into the project, the salad girls had analyzed and compiled the bulk of their data (from the surveys, interviews and internet research) with the help of their teacher and classmates. This is consistent with the curriculum theme calling for students to use "appropriate resources ... to generate, manipulate, and interpret information."[10] Upon seeing their new data in PowerPoint form, the principal encouraged them to give the presentation and proposal to the next higher level: the district-wide cafeteria manager, Ms. Y.

Step 4. Propose A Solution: "Let's Experiment"

Initially, Ms. Y. cited the same apparent roadblocks (efficiency, equity among schools, USDA requirements), but went onto say that as a team they might be able to brainstorm solutions. After discussing ideas, they agreed that their school could be a "trial school" for having two more salad options for children: one without meat and one without cheese. Even though they were hoping for a

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RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

Websites for Teachers
Adam Fletcher, writer, researcher, and trainer re-envisions roles for young people throughout society.
www.youngerworld.org

Need in Deed: Connecting the Classroom with the Community. This website provides activities and resources that encourage classrooms where "students apply academics to real life problems-asking questions, conducting research, and working together."
www.needindeed.org

Websites for Teachers and Young Learners
The FreeChild Project provides tools and training to young people and adults that engage children and youth in social change.
www.freechild.org

What Kids Can Do combs the country for compelling examples of young people working with adults in their schools and communities on real-world issues.
www.whatkidscando.org

Youth Activism Project is a national nonprofit that supports youth leadership development activities.
www.youthactivism.com

"Girls Gone Activist! How to Change the World Through Education" is a bilingual handbook on taking action written by youth for youth, available for free.
www.schoolgirlsunite.org

Books for Young Learners and Teachers
Field, Jon Eben. *Get Involved! Social Justice Activist*. New York, NY: Crabtree, 2009. Written for older elementary students, this book approaches social issues such as poverty, homelessness, and inequality from a human rights perspective with examples of activists such as Nelson Mandela.

Hoose, Phillip M. *It's Our World, Too*. St. Louis, MO: San Val, 2002. This book gives over a dozen accounts of children working for social change. It also gives practical suggestions for planning and implementing a project. Reading the accounts aloud to elementary students, followed a class brainstorm of issues, could inspire kids' own ideas for action projects.

Kielburger, Marc and Craig Kielburger. *Take Action! A Guide to Active Citizenship*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2002. This book leads kids through steps of taking action with inspirational quotes, examples of issues, and suggestions of where to obtain information. For younger elementary students, this book should be used with adult-guidance due to the number of pages (140) and words.

Lewis, Barbara. *The Kid's Guide to Social Action: How to Solve the Social Problems You Choose—and Turn Creative Thinking into Positive Action*. Minneapolis, MN: Free Spirit, 1998. This book is a simple, vibrant and easy to follow guide that would be useful for even early elementary grades.

Schwartz, Heather. *Political Activism: How You can Make a Difference*. Mankato, MN: Capstone Press, 2009. This guide for kids describes what political activism how one might engage in social activism for change.

salad bar, the girls were pleased with the decision, which they proudly announced at the next All School Gathering. Here, the girls had the opportunity to, "practice selected forms of civic discussion and participation consistent with the ideals of citizens in a democratic republic."[11] As the new salads were served, the girls continued to collect and analyze data. How many students chose the new salad options? The curriculum standards strand ❹ **INDIVIDUAL DEVELOPMENT AND IDENTITY** cites the importance of working cooperatively to accomplish goals. Simultaneously, the Salad Girls had practiced communication skills, explained reasons for their position, and backed it up with data.

Step 5. Assessing and Reflecting on the Learning Experience: "The Common Good"

Last, it is a satisfying and important component of any type of service learning to build in time to reflect on the learning process. Reflection is a way to help students think about skills they want to build for future civic action. Furthermore, it is one way for teachers to do a summative assessment of the learning that has occurred, in addition to formative assessments that should occur during the process. Project Citizen suggests the following questions for students upon their project's completion:

- What are the advantages of working on a team? Disadvantages?
- What did I do well? What did we do well?
- How can I improve my problem-solving skills? How can we improve our problem solving skills?
- What would we want to do differently, if we were to develop another project on another issue?

The girls responded to these questions in both written (individually) and verbal (group-interview) forms. One of the salad girls reflected aloud, "You don't always have to go by the rules that someone else tells you, 'cause you can change it if you really want it changed." Ms. Cody connected this and other similar reflections to ❿ **CIVIC IDEALS AND PRACTICES**: recognize how the "common good" can be strengthened through various forms of citizen action.

The students also pointed to their collective strength, which arose in part from their diverse skills. One girl said, "If I was doing this alone ... I would probably back out." They also remembered times of disagreement that made it difficult to work together, especially when one girl temporarily lost their data.

In September of the following school year, the Salad Girls' efforts were further recognized during a school visit from Pennsylvania's Secretary of Health, various nutritional researchers, and the President of Pennsylvania State University, Graham Spanier. The Salad Girls (now in middle school) took the microphone once more

Everette James, secretary of the Pennsylvania Department of Health, congratulates student leaders in the effort to expand the variety of salads served in the school cafeteria.
Photo by Jennifer Cody

at their old elementary school and told their story to this forum of school parents, teachers, students, and visitors. The Pennsylvania Secretary of Health, Everette James, responded, "What's really fascinating is you used democracy … you used the democratic process. I congratulate you for that effort. We'll make sure to take this story and share it with a lot of other people in Pennsylvania." The girls also learned that day that the entire district had changed the salads available on school menus because of their efforts. The girls were interviewed by a local television station and featured in the local newspaper.

Conclusions

While it may be impractical to take on all of our students' public issues and concerns, taking on one as a class project every year may be a feasible goal—especially if it involves an idea that is tied to students' passions and interests. As educators, we can keep our ears and eyes out for issues that matter to our students or brainstorm with them, and then consider a topic's potential for authentic and integrated learning opportunities. The "issue" may range from the most basic level of a problem in the classrooms (ex., bullying) to a larger problem in the school (ex., decisions about cafeteria food). We can eventually encourage students to take the lead on seeking change in their communities and beyond (ex., using local foods in cafeteria meals). In this process, it is important to recognize the ways in which students who may not be generally given a voice in school settings may participate in such projects. These opportunities have the potential to increase young people's efficacy and empowerment, the belief that they can make a difference in their lives and the lives of others.[12]

However, it is important to note that projects that fail may discourage students or make them feel further alienated in their school or society.[13] Dealing with the reality that not all actions result in

acceptable solutions within days or weeks (or even years) is another learning opportunity and can be tied to issues in the larger society (ex., the oil spill off the coast of Louisiana). Especially in settings where young children are not accustomed to having leadership opportunities, these new roles of leading a project can be challenging for them. Teachers can take care to co-construct responsibilities with students and to see the project through to a satisfying conclusion.

Since the founding of the United States, public schools have held the key role of renewing our democracy through citizenship and civic education. This mission must include young learners, starting with their first schooling experiences. Even within the constraints of meeting Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) goals in the NCLB-era, such civic action projects remain an authentic way to meaningfully connect standards to civic action in elementary schools, and to support children's developing skills as leaders with the power to learn about and change their world. 🔖

Notes

1. The name "the salad girls" was given to the group affectionately by their classmates. The group included Sana A., Lauryn G., Anika M., Hannah N., Hannah O., and Hannah Y. Read a *Centre Daily Times* news article about the project at www.centredaily.com/2010/09/09/2197074/students-give-food-some-thought.html.

2. Stephanie Serriere and Dana Mitra, "Critical Issues and Contexts of Children and Youth Student Voice in the United States," in *International Handbook of Teacher and School Development*, R. Leitch, ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, in press).

3   Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2000).

4. M. Ito, H. Horst, et al., *Living and Learning with New Media: Summary of Findings from the Digital Youth Project* (The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation Reports on Digital Media and Learning, November 2008)

5. Bernadette Chi, J. Jastrzab, and A. Melchior, *Developing Indicators and Measures of Civic Outcomes for Elementary School Students*. CIRCLE Working Paper 47 (The Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning & Engagement (2006), 5.

6. Carole L. Hahn, *Becoming Political: Comparative Perspectives on Citizenship Education* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998); Judith Torney-Purta and S. V. Lopez, *Developing Citizenship Competencies from Kindergarten through Grade 12: A Background Paper for Policymakers and Educators*. (Education Commission of the States: National Center for Learning and Citizenship, 2006).

7. Center for Civic Education, *Project Citizen* (Denver, CO: National Conference of State Legislatures, 1996), new.civiced.org/programs/project-citizen.

8. National Council for the Social Studies, *Expectations of Excellence: Curriculum Standards for Social Studies* (Washington, DC: NCSS, 1994), 73.

9. National Council of Teachers of English, "NCTE/IRA Standards for the English Language Arts," 2010, www.ncte.org/standards.

10. NCSS, 54.

11. NCSS, 73.

12. J. Eccles and J. A. Gootman, *Community Programs to Promote Youth Development* (Washington, DC: National Academies of Science, 2002).

13. Dana L. Mitra, "The Significance of Students: Can Increasing "Student Voice" in Schools Lead to Gains in Youth Development?" *Teachers College Record* 106, no. 4, (2004): 651-688; Mitra, "Adults Advising Youth: Leading While Getting Out of the Way," *Educational Administration Quarterly* 41 no.3 (2005), 520-553.

Stephanie Serriere *is an assistant professor of elementary social studies at Pennsylvania State University in University Park, Pennsylvania.*
Dana Mitra *is an associate professor of education theory and policy at Pennsylvania State University in University Park, Pennsylvania.*
Jennifer Cody *is a fifth grade teacher at Park Forest Elementary School in State College, Pennsylvania.*