Who Can Fix This? The Concept of "Audience" and First Graders' Civic Agency

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As my first graders headed out to their cubbies to grab their jackets for recess, I felt a tug at my sleeve. Eli looked up expectantly at me and whispered, "I keep bumping in to the chairs because people aren't pushing them in."[1] I looked into his very serious face and replied, "Wow, that sounds really frustrating. What can we do?" He replied, "Can we have a conversation?"

Eli had called on one of our "class structures." He was not asking for a chat with me, but for a meeting arrangement that we employ when a problem needs solving right away—a class conversation. After recess, my co-teacher and I gathered all 20 first graders on the rug to hold the conversation. First, Eli posed the problem to the class; then, we opened up the discussion for comments and proposed solutions. After many comments echoing his concern—yes, this issue represented an immediate problem—Jasmine suggested that everyone needed to "remember better." Rafael retorted that he agreed, but it didn't seem to be working to remember, and maybe we needed something to help us remember. Kai suggested that we could make signs to remind people to push in their chairs. Many heads nodded, and students agreed that yes, signs would be helpful. I asked them, "Well, where should we put the signs?" Henry offered up putting the signs on the chairs. We all thought about this and then I asked, "Who needs to see the signs? Who is our audience for these signs?"

"Audience" Means Being Heard

This conversation occurred during a year in which I participated in a teacher inquiry group that focused on students as change makers. (See **SIDEBAR A**, page 20) We examined the concept of "audience" as part of our inquiry into how young students' voices could be heard and included as children described, studied, and solved problems that they had identified. Merriam-Webster defines audience as, "an opportunity of being heard." The concept of audience could support our young students' sense of civic agency. For the first part of our

year together, we explored the concept of audience by asking questions like: Who will want to know this? What do we want to tell them? Students considered to whom they were speaking

and what message would they want to communicate; in other words, they considered both their own desires to act on the world and how the world might receive those actions.

Then we applied the concept of "audience" to problem solving. We asked questions such as: What is the problem? Who can fix the problem? How can we best present our problem to persuade someone to care about it too? Young students needed both to identify the key aspects of a problem and to think carefully about who might contribute toward enacting a solution. Students began to move beyond a quick reaction such as relying on the nearest adult to a more thoughtful process of asking who could make an impact on the problem, who might have influence to make a difference. Students' agency became more nuanced and expansive as they prepared to speak to other actors (both peers and adults) who would hear their concerns and ideas about solutions—and maybe get involved in doing things differently.

Civic Agency and Audience

A recent NCSS position statement asserts, "The purpose of elementary school social studies is to enable students to understand, participate in, and make informed decisions about their world."[2] In the elementary grades, this purpose applies to the whole day, from a morning meeting that builds students' speaking and listening skills, to math investigations that ask critical questions about students' worlds, to reading texts for both information and understanding the roots of our human nature, to writing personal narratives that position students as important and empowered. These opportunities are not happenstance; rather, they represented a concerted effort to expand students' civic agency.

Civic agency is "the capacity of human communities and groups to act cooperatively and collectively on common problems across their differences of view."[3] At the elementary level, civic agency must be broken down into the multiple skills and dispositions that are actualized when students work cooperatively, identify problems, understand multiple perspectives, and take action. Helping students "develop and expand a broad set of capabilities" gives them a valid sense of empowerment and agency.[4]

By focusing on the concept of "audience," my students worked toward understanding multiple perspectives, considering not only what they deemed as important but, also, what other people might find interesting. Thus, students began to think about who would want to know about a problem and what we should tell them, which encouraged students to imagine themselves as part of a larger group, as part of society.

Who Will Want to Know This?

"We care about writing when we write with, for, and about the people who matter to us, and when we write about the issues and experiences that matter to us. Youngsters aren't any different. They, too, will care about writing when it is [both] personal and interpersonal."[5] To develop this sense of writing for other people, we began our audience inquiry by asking, What story do you wanted to tell? Who might want to hear that story? During student writing conferences, we asked students, "Who is this story for?"—jotting that query down on a sticky note to attach to the top of the page. Our follow-up conversations focused on asking questions such as, "What would that person think about this line?" Or, "What do you want that person to feel when they read this story?"

Students might draft several short statements, and then choose one for "publication." (The teacher would type it, and the student would post it in his or her "Author's Space in the Book Nook.") One student was certain that our class would enjoy reading her story. We invited her to think about why the class would like the story, and we imagined them listening to her draft if it were to be read aloud. These strategies helped the student consider adding details that made her meaning clearer.

Alongside these published pieces, we posted students' audience statements, which also listed who might be interested in reading the piece. The Book Nook made our young authors' work more accessible to classroom visitors and other students. Not only did we want our students to imagine to whom their work might matter, we also wanted see their work become accessible to anyone in the community—to a reading audience whom they might not have predicted. Just as individual citizens are part of a larger democracy, we positioned our students in relation to a larger world.

What is the Problem? Who Can Fix It?

How do you translate this focus on student voice into a problem solving strategy for a class of 20 students? We framed this portion of our work with the question, "If we have a problem, then who is the audience for our concerns?" Eli's call for a conversation about the chairs represented the class's first opportunity to think and write collectively to solve a class problem. After I asked the

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students who would be the audience for the signs, they revised their strategy to put the signs on the table. The students realized that they were the audience; thus, putting the signs on the tables would make them easier to see. They found a solution to their problem and took actions to implement it.

The next problem arose during a lunch period. Because we ate lunch in our classroom, our school lunches, including cartons of milk, arrived in giant blue cooler bags brought up from the cafeteria. Students noticed that we were not getting the correct number of milk cartons. They came to me with their concern. I responded, "Well, how can we help fix this problem?" The students thought about going down to the cafeteria immediately, but then remembered that, when they are working, it is hard to stop, so maybe it would also be hard for the cafeteria workers to suddenly stop their work. Students suggested going down to the cafeteria later in the day. I told them that I worried we would forget about the problem—and it could happen again tomorrow. I prompted them to think of another way to communicate. They decided to write a letter to the cafeteria workers that I could deliver before the day was over.

The following day, we received six milks (the correct number) and a note that said,

> *Dear Class 1-406,*
> *We are so sorry about the mistake! We changed your milk numbers on the form so that you will always get six milks.*
> *Love,*
> *The Cafeteria Workers.*

Interestingly, in this scenario, the problem affected only a few students in the classroom. Their collective indignation at the situation represented a shift in my young students' understanding of civic agency toward a more collective vision. Students understood that issues affecting a small part of the community ought to be addressed by the entire collective. In this situation, students took control of a classroom issue, came up with possible solutions, and implemented one specific action. I could have easily gone down to the cafeteria to solve the issue; however, by stepping away from the role of teacher-as-problem-solver, I gave agency to my students to enact change and see the power of words and actions.

Taking Initiative

The most powerful examples of students seeing themselves as agents of change came from the signs that children began to create on their own. This practice continued throughout the year. One afternoon I noticed Cecilia creating a sign that she put next to the pencil cup labeled "Need Sharpening." Her sign encouraged fellow students to check their pencils before putting them in the cup. I asked her about the sign, and she pulled a handful of barely used pencils out of the cup. She told me that people just wanted "super-sharp pencils" which was "just a waste of the pencil sharpener's time." Without prompting, Cecilia had decided to take action on an issue that affected not only her, but our classroom community. While Cecilia's action was beneficial, there are caveats to consider in allowing an individual student to define what is best for the classroom community. On reflection, I could have asked Cecilia to bring the sign to our class meeting, where she could discuss her reasons for creating the sign. All students could have then deliberated about the issue. Yet, what stands out from this incident was that this student began to see the tools of writing as a means to express civic agency within our classroom community.
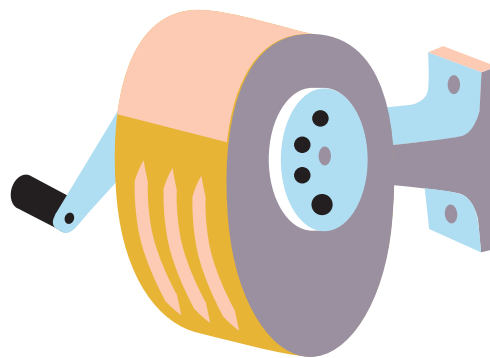
Throughout the year, I looked out for opportunities to use speaking, listening, and writing as a means to solve a problem. Creating signs for the desks and writing to the cafeteria workers were not planned lessons, but they were great opportunities to support civic agency arising from the everyday events of classroom life—and to support the ongoing curriculum.

SIDEBAR B. *Dimensions of the C3 Framework's Inquiry Arc*

1. Developing Questions and Planning Inquiries
2. Applying Disciplinary Concepts and Tools
3. Evaluating Sources and Using Evidence
4. Communicating Conclusions and Taking Informed Action

Source: NCSS, *The College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards* (Silver Spring, MD: NCSS, 2013), **www.socialstudies.org/c3.**

Connecting to the C3 Framework

While this inquiry occurred prior to the publication of the College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework,[6] there are multiple connections to that document's Inquiry Arc. (See **SIDEBAR B**, p. 21) Under Dimension 2, students engage in civics that considers how they and others participate and take informed action. Indicators within Civic and Political Institutions ask students to identify what roles people play in communities (D2.Civ.2.K-2), as well as how those communities can work together to accomplish tasks (D2.Civ.6.K-2). Indicators (D2.Civ.7.K-2; D2.Civ.10.K-2) under Civic Virtues ask students to compare their perspective to those of others, a key to understanding audience, and applying virtues, such as "honesty, mutual respect, cooperation, and attentiveness to multiple perspectives" (p. 33).

Key to supporting students' civic agency is Dimension 4: (particularly D4.7.K-2; D4.8.K-2). Taking action becomes an exercise of voice, of recognizing that students' everyday lives hold important ideas, experiences, and problems. From this space of being heard, of being and finding an audience, students became integral in communicating and solving their individual and collective problems.

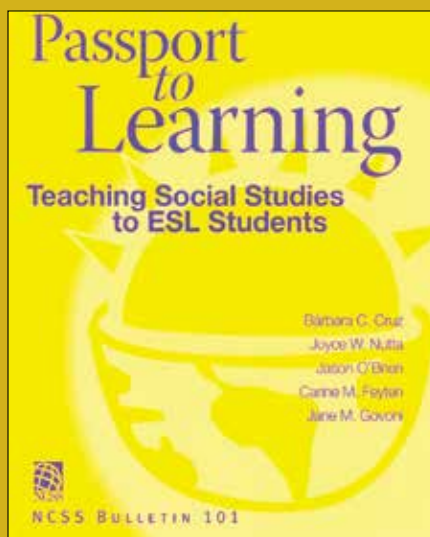## From the Individual to the Collective

Walter Parker argues, "Democratic citizens need both to know democratic things and do democratic things."[7] To develop civic agency, students need to be familiar with the tools (e.g., writing, speaking, listening) and to make changes in the world (e.g., to make a sign, write a letter, or hold a conversation). By putting these tools to use, students expanded their capabilities and sense of agency.

Focusing on the concept of "audience" pushed my students toward thinking about how their actions relate to others, as well as how other people can work alongside them to solve a problem. When we involve others in defining problems at the start and working out solutions, those solutions are likely to work better and be longer lasting. Students not only developed a critical eye for recognizing problems, they also expanded their capabilities as citizens of a democracy that might benefit from some of their "fixing." 🌐

Notes

1. All names of students have been changed.
2. NCSS, "Powerful and Purposeful Teaching and Learning in Elementary School Social Studies" (Position Statement, 2012), www.socialstudies.org/positions/powerfulandpurposeful.
3. Harry C. Boyte, "Building Civic Agency: The Public Work Approach," www.opendemocracy.net/articles/democracy_power/deliberation/citizen_creators.
4. Jennifer Keys Adair, "Agency and Expanding Capabilities in Early Grade Classrooms: What It Could Mean for Young Children," *Harvard Educational Review* 84, no. 2 (2014): 217–241.
5. Lucy M. Calkins, *The Art of Teaching Writing* (Porstmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1986).
6. NCSS, *The College, Career, and Civic Life (C3) Framework for Social Studies State Standards* (Silver Spring, MD: NCSS, 2013).
7. Walter C. Parker, "Knowing and Doing in Democratic Citizenship Education," in *Handbook of Research in Social Studies Education*, Linda V. Levstik and Cynthia A. Tyson, eds. (New York: Routledge, 2008): 65-80.

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