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Storypath

A Powerful Tool for Engaging Children in Civic Education

Margit E. McGuire (Seattle University), Laurie Stevahn (Seattle University), Shari Wennik Bronsther (Echo Lake Elementary School, Shoreline, WA)

Abstract

This article explains why elementary school children need civic education, identifies common obstacles that frustrate efforts, then describes how the Storypath approach can provide all students with opportunities for powerful civic learning. An actual application in a culturally diverse fourth-grade classroom illustrates how children grappled with Seattle's affordable housing issue as they created and enacted Storypath's five components, namely *setting*, *characters*, *context*, *critical incidents*, and *concluding event*. It also demonstrates how Storypath effectively integrates social studies content, literacy skills, and social-emotional learning (SEL) through cooperative small-group episodes that produce meaningful and memorable lived experiences for students engaged in civic discourse and democratic decision making. The article concludes by listing and explaining how Storypath nurtures multiple positive outcomes. These include (a) providing a feasible framework for organizing complex curricula; (b) stimulating imagination, motivation, investment, and commitment to learning; (c) engaging rigorous discussion for cognitive growth; (d) embodying authentic teaching and learning; (e) grounding effective cooperative learning; (f) supporting successful curriculum integration; (g) promoting accomplishment of national and state standards; (h) enabling individual differentiation for success; (i) developing civic capacity; (j) cultivating transfer of learning within and outside of classrooms; and (k) furthering the civic mission of schools.

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MARGIT E. MCGUIRE is a professor of teacher and social studies education at Seattle University. She has written numerous articles on Storypath as well as published 26 Storypath units on a variety of topics.

LAURIE STEVAHN is a professor of education at Seattle University, specializing in theory, research, and practice of leadership, cooperative learning, conflict resolution, and social justice.

SHARI WENNIK BRONSTHER is an experienced teacher at Echo Lake Elementary in Shoreline School District, Washington, who facilitates hands-on and discovery-based projects for quality student learning. She has taught numerous Storypaths throughout her 18-year career, adapting topics to meet the needs of students.

Introduction

Every child, regardless of background or social position, deserves high-quality civic education and adequate class time to engage with such curricula. However, civic learning in elementary grades is in peril, especially in low-income, highly diverse classrooms across the United States (Baumann & Brennan, 2017). Although every state addresses civic education standards in some manner, accountability measures vary widely, particularly for elementary students (Railey & Brennan, 2016). Given no national tradition for rigorous, comprehensive civic education programs in elementary schools, children risk missing classroom opportunities to develop the skills and dispositions that underpin participation in democratic social life.

This article explains why elementary school children need civic education, identifies common obstacles to such efforts, then suggests how the Storypath approach can feasibly, actively, and meaningfully involve all students in civic learning. An actual classroom application dealing with land use in Seattle illustrates Storypath's five components, namely *setting*, *characters*, *context*, *critical incidents*, and *concluding event*. It also demonstrates how Storypath effectively integrates social studies content, literacy skills, and social emotional learning (SEL) through cooperative small-group episodes that enable multiple learning outcomes and meaningful lived experiences as students engage in civic discourse for democratic decision making and governance.

Civic Learning in Elementary Education

Importance of Civic Learning

The Carnegie Report on the Civic Mission of Schools (Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement [CIRCLE] and Carnegie Corporation of New York, 2003) highlights the importance of children having access to civic education: "Research suggests that students start to develop social responsibility and interest in politics before the age of nine. The way they are taught about social issues, ethics, and institutions in elementary school matters a great deal for their civic development" (p. 12). Research in secondary schools further underscores the role that instruction plays in nurturing civic development. For example, Kahne and Sporte's (2008) research in low-income and culturally diverse high school classrooms highlights the positive influence of open dialogue about controversial topics that connects students to real community issues, concluding that "what happens in classrooms can have a significant impact on students' commitment to civic participation" (p. 754). We posit this is true for young learners as well. Without opportunities for civic education that employ best practices, children in elementary school miss out on learning how democracy works and on acquiring knowledge, values, dispositions, and an array of skill sets early on that support meaningful participation in a democratic society. Waiting until middle or high school may be too late, especially for students in

low-socioeconomic or poverty situations who typically face greater risk for not completing secondary education (Kearney & Levine, 2015; Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009).

Challenges to Civic Learning

Ironically, two areas of learning deemed essential in elementary education—namely, literacy and social-emotional learning (SEL)—tend to work against civic education by competing for time and attention. Whereas literacy and SEL curricula could enhance civic learning through a strategically designed integrated curriculum, several obstacles arise that frustrate efforts.

First, curricula predominately are designed and taught as distinct, separate, and apart from each other. This creates competing interests as teachers make decisions about what to include in daily schedules. Choosing one curriculum tends to exclude others, and mandated requirements such as literacy and mathematics typically take priority, leaving little time for social studies generally or civic learning specifically. Furthermore, mandated standardized tests tend to influence teacher choices, as literacy and mathematics drive measures of accountability. The reality is that taxpayers and legislators who fund education hold schools accountable for demonstrating student achievement in literacy and math and scrutinize test results reported in the news each year. This is the legacy of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (2002), yet all these years later, the opportunity gap in education remains as strong as ever, while social studies and civic education have paid a steep price.

Second, although curriculum integrations may more favorably position civic learning in elementary education, they often do not engage students in genuine civic discourse or lived experiences of democratic decision making. For example, curriculum integrations from a literacy lens typically focus on developing reading skills using civic and social studies content merely as the means to that end. This means that students primarily read to find main ideas and supporting details, make logical inferences, and assess how point of view shapes the content and style of text. Although important, students who practice these literacy skills without being fully engaged in an active civic learning process will not likely acquire civic knowledge and skills foundational for a discerning educated democratic citizenry (Tampio, 2018). We would argue that integrations starting from a social studies framework may be better able to enhance all content learning more equally and authentically across disciplines as students learn how to write about topics made meaningful through genuine civic discourse on issues that matter, constituting powerful lived experiences in the classroom.

Third, as schools emphasize or mandate SEL in elementary education, civic and social studies education slip further off the radar. This especially happens when teachers, scrambling to find time in the school day for yet one more requirement, consider the *social* component of SEL programs as adequate for *social* studies. No doubt SEL is vital to developing healthy and well-educated young people; however, we believe that such learning can happen within the context of a truly integrated curriculum, perhaps even more powerfully than in stand-alone

programs. Indeed, learning citizenship skills, ethical values, and prosocial behaviors—all foundational to a democratic community—means coming to know self and others, which largely develops through social interaction. In fact, such civic learning naturally integrates with the five components that constitute the SEL framework presented by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL, 2019), used extensively across elementary and secondary education in the USA. These include:

1. *Self-Awareness*—knowing one's own emotions, confidence, efficacy, and strengths
2. *Self-Management*—setting goals, self-regulating behavior, controlling impulse, sustaining motivation, and coping with stress
3. *Social Awareness*—respecting and empathizing with others, understanding multiple perspectives, and valuing human diversity
4. *Relationship Skills*—communicating, engaging socially, building relationships, and working in teams
5. *Responsible Decision-Making*—identifying and solving problems, analyzing and evaluating situations, considering the well-being of self and others, and making ethical choices.

These alone, however, do not constitute nor substitute for social studies or civic education.

Storypath as an Integrated Approach to Civic Learning

How, then, can educators teach an integrated curriculum that fully and effectively addresses literacy, SEL, and civic social studies content and skills? Service-learning and project-based learning offer opportunities; yet, another approach, called Storypath—adapted from the Scottish Storyline® used widely in the European context (see www.storyline.org)—also holds promise. This simulation-like approach organizes content into a story composed of five main components, namely *setting*, *characters*, *context*, *critical incidents*, and *concluding event* (see Table 1). Its constructivist nature involves simulation-like episodes that meaningfully capture student imagination and motivation to carry out tasks deemed essential for resolving authentic problems. Specifically, students create plausible detailed characters realistic to the story setting, then actually become those characters as they encounter, deliberate, and resolve critical incidents presented as issues in various episodes. This positions Storypath as a powerful teaching tool for curriculum integration because episodes involve students in the type of role playing that (a) enables meaningful SEL through purposeful collaborative interaction with peers, (b) stimulates motivation for accessing and reading relevant resources, and (c) creates social lived experiences that provide substance for intentional writing. The teacher facilitates each episode by asking guiding questions that follow a narrative framework to involve students in grappling with social issues through cooperative small-group inquiry, civic discourse, and shared decision making.

Table 1

Storypath Summary

Storypath Components	Application Episodes

Setting
    Students create the setting by completing a frieze (mural) or other visual representation of the place.
	Seattle
	    Based on photos and discussion, students collaboratively created a visual representation of downtown Seattle.

Characters
    Each student creates a character for the story and will play this role throughout.
	People/Families Who Live in Seattle
	    Students were organized into family groups who live and work in Seattle. Students created a visual representation of themselves as their character and wrote a biography.

Context
    Students think more deeply about the place they have created by participating in activities that stimulate critical analysis.
	Government Roles
	    Students learned about the mayor and city council and ran for election in those roles as their characters. They also learned about the planning commission and decided who would serve in those roles.
	Understanding Affordable Housing
	    Students learned about Seattle's plans for affordable housing.

Critical Incidents
    Characters confront controversies/issues/problems like those faced by people in the real situation.
	Where to Locate Affordable Housing
	    Students researched options for affordable housing in downtown Seattle. They wrote proposals to persuade the planning commission on where to locate affordable housing, then testified. The commission listened to the testimonies and then made a recommendation to the mayor and city council. The mayor and city council deliberated, then made a decision.

Concluding Event
    Students plan and participate in an activity that brings closure to the story.
	Presentation to Concerned Citizens
	    Students shared their experience with an audience of adults and announced the decision of where to build affordable housing in Seattle.

Coupling role-play simulations about real-world issues with a story narrative framework for classroom instruction makes Storypath a powerful teaching tool. In fact, role-plays and simulations as instructional methods have been shown to be effective in education (Elmore, 2018; Worthington, 2018). When applied to social studies and civic education particularly, the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement (CIRCLE) confirms positive outcomes: "Recent evidence indicates that simulations of voting, trials, legislative deliberation, and

diplomacy in schools can lead to heightened political knowledge and interest" (CIRCLE and Carnegie Corporation of New York, 2003, p. 6). Worthington (2018) further affirmed the effectiveness of simulations for teaching civics, noting outcomes such as increased student engagement, participation, and understanding of content. Unlike traditional simulations that assign predetermined roles to participants, however, students in a Storypath construct their own characters and become those characters in role-play episodes throughout. This increases student motivation and investment because students feel ownership of the characters they construct. Mindful that characters must be believable and relevant, the teacher poses questions and provides resources to keep student development of characters realistic to the story setting.

Finally, the story form as an organizing framework for grappling with civic content through simulation-like episodes authentically engages students in learning; children are motivated to solve the social problems that surface (Emo & Wells, 2014; Fair Go Project, 2006; Mitchell-Barrett, 2010). Merging simulation with story, therefore, enhances meaningful participation along with sense-making of the issues and events that children encounter (McGuire & Cole, 2010; Morris, McGuire, & Walker, 2017). Egan and Judson (2009) highlighted this very point:

> The first simple inference we can make is that the story-form itself somehow engages children's imaginations. Human beings tend to make sense of the world in narrative ways. For example, we more readily remember a story—who was involved, what happened and how it ended—than we do lists. The unique thing about stories is how they are interconnected with our emotions. (p. 129)

Storypath Classroom Application: Engaging Children in Understanding Local Government

Let's consider an actual Storypath application to illustrate how it involves children in valuable civic learning while also effectively integrating literacy and SEL skills in the process. A highly diverse fourth-grade class in Shoreline School District, near Seattle, was studying Washington State. One learning goal was to understand how geography affects the economy of a region. The teacher, therefore, decided to immerse students in examining local government and affordable housing by organizing a Storypath unit focused on issues of livability for Seattle residents and economic viability for Seattle businesses.

The teacher wanted students not only to understand the structure of local government, but also how democratic governments respond to community needs. Therefore, she framed the narrative structure of the Storypath unit through the lens of an actual current local issue: affordable housing. The setting was present-day Seattle. The characters were city residents and business owners, as well as those in local government roles including the mayor and members of the city council and planning commission. For the story, students imagined themselves as local government leaders and community members with vested interests in the outcome of the plot. The teacher framed the plot of the story by asking this essential question: "How should Seattle respond to a need for affordable housing so that community members of many different backgrounds and incomes can live and work together within this city?" Table 1 summarizes the story episodes that the children enacted to address this question and illustrates how the episodes comprise the five main Storypath components of *setting*, *characters*, *context*, *critical incidents*, and *concluding event*.

Setting: Launching the Story

Storypath units usually begin with a setting to establish the story in a specific place and time. In Seattle, there were many media reports about affordable housing and students had a general awareness of this issue. However, they lacked an understanding about specifics, such as why the problem existed and possible solutions, as well as the role of local government in addressing such issues. To lay the groundwork for student understanding, the unit began by providing students with the tangible reference point of downtown Seattle. Students brainstormed and researched iconic features of the city, including the Space Needle, Pike Place Market, the sports stadiums, and Puget Sound. They also identified other key features, such as streets, office buildings, stores, and modes of transportation. Students then formed small cooperative groups to help create various components of downtown Seattle, each team contributing to the creation of one large class mural that became the visual setting for the Storypath (see Figure 1). The students quickly came to realize that trying to place all key features of downtown Seattle on the mural was tricky due to limited space. In concrete terms, limited space was exactly the problem facing the city of Seattle.

Visually depicting the setting for the story is an important first step for learning because this anchors students in a concrete experience while they build background knowledge for the civic education topic that grounds the story. Through the collaborative process of creating the setting, all students can contribute successfully to constructing the place. For example, students who had more firsthand experience in downtown Seattle recalled what they knew, while those who had never visited contributed by recalling local news and sports programs, listening to classmates, and accessing information from the Internet. No matter what each child brought to constructing the setting, all had some knowledge about downtown Seattle, whether direct or indirect. This created conditions for successful instructional differentiation across the

Figure 1. Creating the setting and understanding the context of Seattle.

diverse range of student experiences, abilities, and languages because all children were able to contribute in meaningful ways. SEL skills such as communication, teamwork, and social interaction were all in play as students negotiated the creation of the setting. Storypath research also suggests that entering into the story by creating the setting enhances student buy-in, engagement, and efficacy—all foundational to meaningful learning (Ahlquist, 2015; Fair Go Project, 2006; Morris et al., 2017; Stevahn & McGuire 2017).

With the setting created, the teacher then facilitated student conversations and writing activities to tap into multiple ways of knowing and understanding the concept of city. Through a questioning process, the teacher reinforced key understandings about the city of Seattle as students discussed the setting they collectively created. Meaningful literacy activities followed, such as writing letters (or more simply postcards) sent home to families describing the setting and including a photo of the mural that students mutually constructed. This not only supports the development of literacy skills; it also reinforces student understanding of content as well as successful individual and cooperative contributions to the first episode in the learning process.

Characters: Creating Roles for Participating in the Story

With the setting established, the students next imagined they were living and working in Seattle and each developed a character realistic for this context. The teacher provided guiding questions that compelled students to address specific details, such as occupation, leisure activities, and roles in the community. Again, tapping into multiple intelligences, students created a visual representation of their character by making a paper doll cutout, then wrote a brief biography and role-played an introduction to the class of their imagined adult character. These activities deepened classroom discourse and expanded student thinking about community roles, as well as living and working in a city. It also motivated students to have a strong connection to the unit, resulting in students viewing future events through the eyes of their characters, thus making learning personal and engaging. The literacy dimension of writing narratives for imagined experiences as they developed their characters made writing purposeful. Students also enhanced speaking and listening skills as they prepared for and participated in a range of conversations and collaborations with classmates, building on others' ideas in introducing their own character and asking questions about the other characters developed for the story.

As students became more immersed in understanding the city, the teacher introduced the role of local government. Students learned that Seattle has a mayor and city council that govern the community. They also learned that Seattle's planning commission provides a service to the city by examining land use issues and, specifically in this Storypath unit, affordable housing. Introducing these government roles within the context of a Storypath—roles that students will play as events unfold—made abstract roles concrete and developmentally meaningful for fourth graders' understanding. Students considered attributes, knowledge, and skills important to such roles, and contemplated whether their

characters would serve in the local government. Students campaigned and held elections for the roles of mayor and city council, after which students considered appointments to the planning commission. In Seattle, the mayor and city council appoint the commission. However, in this classroom, the teacher wanted the students who didn't win elections for mayor or city council to be members of the planning commission, affirming students' desire to perform government roles. Ultimately, the students learned that the commission is responsible for making recommendations to the mayor and city council about "issues that are vital to livability" (Seattle Planning Commission, 2019).

Context: Grounding and Deepening Understanding

During the campaign and election of the mayor and city council, students began to think about critical issues that concern Seattle voters. These issues included affordable housing, which originally surfaced during the creation of the setting and maintained focus as candidates spoke during election campaigns. For example, students initially made observations about a crowded downtown when they recognized the limited space on their mural of Seattle. In addition, many students made connections from personal real-life visits to downtown Seattle and/or from hearing frequent news reports, confirming that lack of space was a major issue. To further focus student attention on the issue of a housing shortage, the teacher asked the class questions about types of jobs available in downtown Seattle, comparative salaries of those jobs, and housing for the people who worked there. Students then viewed videos about the history of Seattle that included information on subsidized housing, read articles about current affordable housing options specific to Seattle, and considered how other cities and countries addressed this issue. Possible solutions to affordable housing included tearing down or renovating buildings currently occupied by businesses, changing the rules about the allowable height of buildings, and expanding the city's boundaries.

Critical Incidents: Examining Issues of Livability in Seattle

Children understand the concept of fairness and tend to quickly voice objections when they perceive inequities (Rizzo, Elenbaas, Cooley, & Killen, 2016). Teachers can leverage this for learning by creating developmentally appropriate situations in which young students examine particular issues to determine what is fair, or not. In Storypath, such issues become critical incidents that students grapple with, typically presented as questions that pose controversy. For example, in this Storypath episode, the teacher focused students on the issue of livability in Seattle by asking, "What buildings in this crowded city should be replaced or repurposed to allow for affordable housing?" Overall, students felt strongly that a person's job and salary should not affect the ability to have an affordable place to live. Students also passionately argued for which businesses they believed should (or not) be torn down based on what the businesses had to offer the city. For example, students unequivocally expressed that the hospital and bank should stay because people could not live without health services or money. However, students deliberated extensively about Starbucks (Seattle's well-known coffee company) and

an aerospace engineering office, both of which had strong customer support and multiple competitors offering similar services. Defending their points of view from the perspective of their characters deepened students' understanding of the nuances inherent in dealing with the issue of affordable housing in civic education. Here is how one student made sense of the controversy (see presentations on TVW at http://www .socialstudiesk8storypath.com/latest-news.html):

The issue of affordable housing was a popular topic during the election. We learned that it's very expensive to live downtown and that there aren't enough places for people to live because a lot of people live downtown. This is a really big problem in Seattle because we have a lot of tech businesses like Amazon and Facebook and Microsoft. So, a lot of people have moved to Seattle, but there aren't enough houses. . . . Also, a person who works in a tech job often makes more money than someone who works at a Starbucks. If people who worked in both jobs tried to get a house, the Starbucks employee wouldn't have as much money, so the tech person would probably get the house. That isn't fair for the people who make less money at their job.

This reveals the student's basic understanding of the issue and demonstrates that she can articulate her position on what is fair. She continues by drawing on her knowledge and understanding of how the city is attempting to address the problem:

Seattle is trying to solve this problem. We learned that the people who build homes have to build a certain percentage of places that are affordable, which is called MHA (Mandatory Housing Affordability). . . . Also, in 2016 Seattle passed a housing levy where $290 million dollars will be paid by taxpayers to build more affordable housing. The goal is to build 20,000 affordable units over the next 10 years. This is part of HALA, which stands for Housing Affordability and Livability Agenda, a plan in Seattle to provide more homes for people.

Notice how this student (like others) drew upon prior meaningful and memorable experiences to ground the deliberation of various opinions. Remember, students had already created a mural showing key features of Seattle, as well as their imagined characters living and working in this setting. When faced with deciding which buildings to replace or remodel for affordable housing, students naturally had vested interests in the outcome. Just like real cities must grapple with land use trade-offs, the children in this Storypath were learning similar lessons. In addition to each student writing a persuasive letter to the planning commission, a few students advocated their position at the meeting to convince commission members to make recommendations to the city council that would best represent the wishes of community members. Testifying at the planning commission meeting integrated important literacy skills as students prepared their statements to present to the commissioners. Speaking and listening skills were necessary to present a compelling point of view on the issue and respond to opposing viewpoints. Here is how another student described what happened at the planning commission meeting:

It was suggested that two businesses could possibly be torn down or remodeled to create more housing. The businesses that were owned or run by our families and could be taken down included a Starbucks, an office building, a hospital, an FBI office, a bank, and an aerospace engineering firm. . . . During the community discussion, people shared their opinion about which ones to tear down. It was a very loud conversation, especially about the Starbucks since many people seemed to either hate coffee or love coffee! Lots of people talked about the fact that there are tons of coffee places, so losing one wouldn't matter, but many people had very strong connections to the business. . . . Most people did not want to take down the hospital because lots of people wouldn't have a place to go if they were sick or hurt. People also felt safer having the FBI office stay in Seattle. The bank seemed important to community members who had their money there and the aerospace engineering business seemed like it needed to stay because Boeing provides so many jobs here.

Concluding Event: Applying Civic Learning

Every story needs a sense of closure. In this story, the conclusion revolved around the mayor and city council's decision to address the issue of affordable housing in Seattle. Based on the persuasive letters that students had written from the perspective of their character, the planning commission recommended to the city council that the buildings where Starbucks and the aerospace engineering firm were located should be closed and converted to affordable housing. As the planning commission presented its decision to the mayor and city council, students spontaneously chose to make their voices heard through impromptu picketing using posters they had initially created to display around the room to persuade others regarding specific affordable housing solutions. After much discussion and a vote, the city council and mayor decided that the most sensible and economically feasible choice was to renovate the office building that housed the aerospace engineering firm because it offered the largest space and could readily be redesigned for housing rather than being demolished and rebuilt. They also decided to expand the boundaries of Seattle to allow for more land to build housing. Finally, they decided that Starbucks, the most controversial business being discussed, would not be demolished since its footprint would not result in substantial new housing and clearly was a popular place for Seattle residents. Ultimately, the mayor, city council, planning commission, business owners, and residents all learned that pleasing everyone is difficult. Therefore, when considering options, everyone had to be clear about their reasons for positions, choices, and decisions. Everyone also learned that persistently articulating positions through spontaneous picketing actually did alter final decisions. This *lived action* made the democratic process real.

Nurturing Multiple Learning Outcomes through Storypath

Boyle-Baise and Zevin (2009) have noted that elementary students can develop a "well-informed political orientation" (p. 43) and, from reviewing research, also stated that "children's conceptions of politics are emotional and personal" (p. 41). However, such learning must be planned to engage students authentically

in learning the knowledge, skills, and dispositions that underpin committed action and capable participation in a democratic society. Reading textbooks or watching videos is not enough. Instilling in children democratic values that are deepened through actions such as voting, speaking up on matters of public interest, searching for relevant information, advocating for policies, making informed choices, and negotiating shared decisions are foundational to building a citizenry capable of effectively participating in democracy. Using Storypath as the curricular framework for planning and delivering such powerful civic education, especially in elementary classrooms, provides numerous advantages and nurtures multiple outcomes.

Provides a Feasible Framework for Organizing Complex Curricula

Teachers and learners alike intuitively grasp the major Storypath components of *setting*, *characters*, *context*, *critical incidents*, and *concluding event*. Using these as the framework for organizing civic content and instructional activities provides concrete scaffolding for teaching and learning complex knowledge, skills, and dispositions inherent in public issues, social discourse, and democratic governance. In fact, feedback from teachers—experienced, new, and preservice—consistently reveals how Storypath enables concrete sequential planning and implementation of instruction, materials, activities, and assessments (Stevahn & McGuire, 2017). As each episode builds on the previous, students engage in lived experiences played out as simulations focused on resolving real-world problems. Simply put, this makes active participation in civics doable, even for elementary school children, as demonstrated by the classroom application previously described in this article.

Stimulates Imagination, Motivation, Investment, and Commitment

Educators cannot force students to learn; however, they can create classroom conditions that capture student attention and ignite a desire to learn. Actively involving students in meaningful tasks on relevant topics tends to create situations where students *opt in* and devote energy to learning. The narrative form of the Storypath approach actively involves children in grappling with authentic civic issues, thereby also stimulating imagination and enhancing motivation for, investment in, and commitment to learning. Civics through Storypath especially becomes meaningful as students create and concretely construct characters realistic to the setting and year in which the story takes place, whether current or historical. They then play that role in story episodes. For example, the children in the affordable housing Storypath became concerned residents or business owners in Seattle, or government leaders serving either as mayor or members of the city council or planning commission. The children clearly became emotionally invested as they carried out their character roles in story episode tasks and activities. For example, one student noted the "loud conversations" over the fate of Starbucks in the planning commission testimony episode. Such intense discussions occurred frequently, as did students asking if Storypath was on the daily

agenda, hoping it would be. This aligns with research on how playing characters in simulations influences student engagement in learning. For example, results from a recent study on use of an online classroom-based simulation in middle school suggest that how students perceive character (a) *relatability*, (b) *immersion*, and (c) *voice and agency* shapes their engagement in the simulation, for better (more engaged) or worse (less engaged) (Rector-Aranda, Raider-Roth, Glaser, & Behrman, 2017). In Storypath, children create their own characters, thereby increasing the probability of playing relatable roles likely to enhance immersion in each interactive episode through voicing ideas and exercising agency.

Engages Rigorous Discussion for Cognitive Growth

Parker and Beck (2017) have indicated that effective discussion requires students to personally and coherently engage with real differences of opinions:

> A good discussion about an engaging problem with a diverse group of children stimulates cognitive growth . . . and it is more likely to have this effect if each child (a) encounters and (b) listens to and grapples with reasoning that is different from and, in comprehensible ways, challenges his or her own. (p. 71)

The critical incident episodes in Storypath frame such discussions, all the more meaningful when focused on relevant public issues.

Harris (2002) further pointed to both substantive and procedural dimensions for effective discussion of public issues. He established such substantive dimensions as identifying issues; being knowledgeable about particular issues; taking, elaborating, and explaining positions with reasons and evidence; and, perhaps most importantly, recognizing conflicting values. The children in the affordable housing Storypath demonstrated these attributes, as illustrated by the student who described the Starbucks controversy, explaining the pros and cons of tearing down the coffee shop. She also provided reasons for and against removing other businesses and services that were under consideration to make room for affordable housing. As students discussed and grappled with various sides of the issue, they also engaged in the procedural dimensions of discussion as they listened to, acknowledged, affirmed, or spoke against the statements and reasons of others. Proposals for what to demolish, save, or repurpose were rigorously (yet civilly) challenged as children presented and considered counter arguments for keeping or doing away with one business over another.

Embodies Authentic Teaching and Learning

Storypath enables children to do civics authentically as they grapple with real-world issues. Literature on *authentic instruction* predominantly defines it as requiring (a) connection to the world, (b) higher-order thinking, (c) substantive conversation, (d) social support, and (e) depth of knowledge (Newmann & Wehlage, 1993). These factors overall align with those in a narrative review on *authentic learning* that analyzed 45 journal articles from an array of disciplines, revealing these foundational components: (a) real-world problems, (b) open-ended inquiry, (c) social discourse in a learning community, and (d) empowerment through self-directed

choices in learning (Rule, 2006). The Storypath approach focused on affordable housing immersed children in all of these components as they became Seattle residents playing realistic roles in the community and government, grappled with the open-ended problem of land use, deepened understanding of context and alternatives through episodes demanding groupwork, argued pros and cons for suggested solutions, and made reasoned decisions toward responsibly resolving the issue.

Grounds Effective Cooperative Learning

Although not typically or formally labeled cooperative learning, Storypath naturally creates strong *positive interdependence* among students who work in small groups to enact each of the story episodes. In fact, historically, positive interdependence has been the essential defining element of cooperative learning, at the heart of its theory, research, and practice (e.g., see Cohen & Lotan, 2014; Deutsch, M., 2014; Gilles, 2007; Johnson & F. P. Johnson, 2017; Johnson & R. T. Johnson, 1989, 2005, 2009; Kagan & Kagan, 2015; Sharan, 1994; Slavin, 1995), anchoring the many cooperative methods, models, and approaches that exist. When students truly believe they are positively interdependent—that they absolutely need each other to successfully complete a task—they are motivated to work together to make sure everyone succeeds. Although all Storypath episodes naturally create conditions to various degrees for cooperative interaction among learners, positive interdependence strongly grounds the groupwork required to successfully complete each critical incident episode. For example, the children in the application previously described clearly understood that the circumstances they faced in the affordable housing controversy required participation and contributions from everyone. The children strongly perceived that each of their characters needed to contribute to resolving the land use issue that they mutually faced, and everyone stepped up to do their part by playing their role.

Supports Successful Curriculum Integration

Perhaps the most effective curriculum integrations equally teach the included disciplines. Noted previously, integrations stemming from a literacy lens mostly focus on reading and writing, using content from other disciplines such as social studies for substance. However, such literacy-based integrations that use social studies or civics for reading content tend not to involve students in activities that meaningfully cultivate civic learning. Put differently, reading or writing about civics does not entail doing civics, such as engaging in rigorous discourse on public issues. Truly learning civics means actually and meaningfully experiencing various dimensions of it. Similarly, integrations primarily grounded by SEL tend to favor stand-alone SEL curricula that primarily nurture those skills, yet do not on their own adequately substitute for social studies or civic education. In contrast, Storypath provides a curricular framework capable of more equally integrating civics, literacy, and SEL—just as adults experience these as integrated in civic life. Storypath enables students to accomplish key learnings in each area, as did the students in the affordable housing application. To resolve the land use controversy, students grappled with options

in simulated decision-making episodes, wrote about the Seattle context and their positions for resolving the issue, and practiced as well as processed the social and emotional skills especially useful for living and working together.

Promotes Accomplishment of National and State Standards

National and state standards have been developed for many academic disciplines in elementary and secondary education. In fact, the C3 Framework adopted by the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS, 2013), the Common Core Language Arts Reading Standards (Council of Chief State School Officers [CCSSO] and National Governors Association [NGA], 2010), adopted by Washington State, and the Core SEL Competencies (CASEL, 2019), adopted by many schools/districts across the USA, each respectively list student outcomes for teaching social studies and civics, reading and writing, and social and emotional skills. Although it is beyond the scope of this article to detail all of the social studies, literacy, and SEL standards that can be accomplished through Storypath, suffice it to say that the Storypath approach as an integrated curriculum is capable of enabling children to accomplish many of the specified standards and competencies. For example, consider the following sample outcomes and how the affordable housing Storypath involved students in accomplishing each.

Civics. The C3 Framework (NCSS, 2013) specifies that students should be able to discuss issues and make judgments based on information and evidence. Reading, writing, speaking, and listening are intertwined with becoming thoughtfully informed about community issues and engaging substantively in democratic practices to deal with such issues. In fact, when students rehearse these behaviors and actions in the classroom, they are more likely to be active participants in democratic processes later in life (CIRCLE and Carnegie Corporation of New York, 2003). The Storypath application described in this article constantly involved children in gathering information about Seattle and its affordable housing problem, formulating and reformulating workable solutions, and arguing well-reasoned positions in written and spoken formats. Whether serving in government roles or participating as concerned citizens in community activism, Storypath provided accessible ways for all children to meaningfully live democratic processes, thereby developing knowledge and skills foundational to social studies and civic education.

Literacy. A sampling of Common Core English Language Arts Reading Standards for Informational Text Grade 4 specifies that children should demonstrate the ability to:

> Refer to details and examples in a text when explaining what the text says explicitly and when drawing inferences from the text. . . . Determine the meaning of general academic and domain-specific words or phrases in a text relevant to a grade 4 topic or subject area. . . . Interpret information presented visually, orally, or quantitatively . . . and explain how the information contributes to an understanding of the text in which it appears. (CCSSO and NGA, 2010, p. 14)

The teacher in the Storypath application described in this article intentionally selected a variety of grade-level appropriate reading materials on how Seattle and other countries were addressing the issue of affordable housing. As a dimension of Storypath, reading became purposeful to the students because they had a need to know and understand pertinent information to participate in the simulations and carry their story forward. This desire resulted in students eagerly reading for details, examples, explanations, and interpretations that they could apply to their positions and arguments toward resolving the Seattle housing controversy. It also resulted in expanding civic vocabulary.

SEL. The five major social and emotional core competencies in the CASEL (2019) framework—namely *self-awareness*, *self-management*, *social awareness*, *relationship skills*, and *responsible decision-making*—highlight the inescapable interplay between self and others, as well as the importance of both for psychological health and social well-being (Johnson & Johnson, F. P., 2017). The human condition is one of living, learning, and working together in families, schools, professions, and communities. This makes learning about oneself and being sensitive to others important for everyone. In fact, interpersonal interactions and emotions are inseparable; social situations always evoke feelings that either support or impede the development of healthy relationships and resiliency in times of struggle. Storypath provides a feasible way to teach, practice, debrief, and develop these skills because they naturally occur as students work in cooperative groups to achieve common goals.

Consider these specific SEL relationship skills detailed in the CASEL (2019) framework: "The ability to communicate clearly, listen well, cooperate with others, resist inappropriate social pressure, negotiate conflict constructively, and seek and offer help when needed." As the Storypath application described in this article attests, children cognitively and affectively engaged and applied all of these skills as they cooperatively grappled with crafting, arguing, defending, and trying to reach consensus on how best to solve the affordable housing issue in ways most beneficial to everyone in the community. Working together for the *common good* becomes a priority, and foundational to both civics and SEL, students must use social and emotional skills to play their roles and carry out their responsibilities in figuring out solutions to the problems encountered through the plot of the story. Simply put, SEL naturally and repeatedly occurs throughout Storypath as children interact with each other to complete cooperative tasks in each episode. Repeatedly carrying out social and emotional skills *in character* followed by *out-of-role* reflection (see Figure 2) makes SEL salient, further nurturing and reinforcing development. In fact, playing characters creates a safe space for effectively debriefing use of these skills because children are in character during role plays, yet can talk when out of role about skills and feelings experienced. For example, children in the fourth-grade classroom application discussed skills that were helpful (or not) during the planning commission meeting, how they felt, and what adjustments could be made to enhance interpersonal interactions without personally calling anyone out; after all, the children were in character during that episode.

Figure 2. Processing social and emotional dimensions of learning.

Enables Individual Differentiation for Success

Differentiating teaching to meet the diverse learning needs of students can be accomplished by structuring learning tasks and activities that provide multiple avenues for tapping and attending to the knowledge, strengths, and opportunities for growth that each individual brings. Storypath provides multifaceted tasks that enable all children to meaningfully contribute in a wide variety of ways. For example, in creating the setting visually constructed as a mural, students can access information by recalling and sharing past firsthand experiences, reading articles or books, searching the Internet, observing photos or other visual media, and so on, to gain knowledge about that place. All these ways of focusing and furthering knowledge meaningfully contribute to the creation of the mural and students learn from and with each other as they share what they bring. This makes Storypath especially useful in classrooms where diversity in languages, abilities, and backgrounds exists. Storypath provides multiple ways to participate successfully, thereby also helping students to grow according to their learning needs, whatever those may be. In fact, teachers who have used Storypath in their classrooms often express appreciation for this aspect of this approach to teaching and learning (Stevahn & McGuire, 2017).

Develops Civic Capacity

If we want young people to be confident and committed citizens who care about having their voices heard on public issues, then rehearsing these experiences in the classroom develops the

capacity for future participation in society. Westheimer (2017) has argued that teachers can nurture civic capacity by "teaching students how to ask questions; exposing students to multiple perspectives; and rooting instruction in local contexts" (p. 16). We posit that children are more likely to participate in civic life as adults if they learn about their rights and responsibilities for living in a democracy through classroom simulations. This also enables children to learn and practice various protocols for engaging in public forums, some as simple as, "Where do I sit? How do I 'sign in'? How do I know when it's my turn to speak? Can I read what I want to say, or do I have to speak without notes? How much time will I have?" The fourth-graders in the affordable housing Storypath described in this article learned all of these skills, especially as they crafted and presented their positions to the planning commission, then protested the initial recommendation to the city council and mayor.

Cultivates Transfer of Learning within and outside of Classrooms

Learning about democratic rights can result in powerful dividends as students transfer their learning to circumstances that arise within and outside of their classroom. For example, without prompting, children in the Storypath on land use in Seattle spontaneously transferred their knowledge and understanding of civic participation in several ways. Within the classroom and for the Storypath, they had created signs to express their opinions about how to address the issue of affordable housing. These signs were to be posted around the room. However, before that occurred and without teacher prompting, students made the decision to use the signs to picket at the classroom city council meeting when it came time for final decision making. Students had learned that making their voices heard could influence change in the world, and therefore acted on that principle when they saw an opportunity to do so, even though such action was not preplanned. In addition, later in the academic year, two student campaigns emerged in the elementary school: one about equality for women and the other about being yourself. Transfer of learning occurred when students created and marched for equality wearing sandwich boards, then again as they made and displayed signs for the school-wide *Be Yourself* campaign. As educators, we hope that students apply their learning to real-life situations, and these examples of student-initiated actions directly related to their Storypath experience.

Furthers the Civic Mission of Schools

Many believe that a fundamental goal and responsibility of schools is to prepare youth for participation in public life, including civics (Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools, 2011; Malin, Ballard, Attai, Colby, & Damon, 2014; National Council for the Social Studies, 2013). Some programs, like Generation Citizen, strategically aim to advance the civic mission of schools by involving students in action civic projects that have yielded overall positive gains in student-perceived *civic engagement*, *civic self-efficacy*, *civic knowledge*, and *local political knowledge* (Ballard, Cohen, & Littenberg-Tobias, 2016). This is hopeful, yet like most civic curricula, it is designed for secondary education and, unlike

most civic curricula, it is carried out through university (democracy coaches) and school (teacher) partnerships to guide class-directed semester-long action civic projects. Numerous challenges preclude many schools—secondary and elementary—from participating in such rigorous civic education. Noted previously:

> *Public schools in the US are currently not well-equipped to provide meaningful civic experiences and many students leave school unprepared for civic life. . . . Schools largely prioritize subjects covered on standardized tests; civic learning is too often squeezed out. . . . Opportunities that do exist are unequally distributed across schools and neighborhoods, and race and socio-economic status are strongly predictive of civic preparedness and participation. (Ballard et al., 2016, p. 377)*

The Storypath approach provides a feasible way to involve children and adolescents in meaningful civic experiences in school, which may be especially important for students whose families tend not to engage in civic life or are recent immigrants from countries without democratic traditions. In fact, Storypath's purpose and process align with many features of the Generation Citizen curriculum that is "student-centered and action-oriented, and works to promote a democratic classroom climate and empower youth" (Ballard et al., 2016, p. 379) yet can be managed entirely by the elementary or secondary classroom teacher.

Storypath can also successfully involve students from diverse backgrounds who bring a range of skills and needs because episodes provide multiple ways for students to interact with material and each other, all of which supports individual growth and achievement. Demonstrated by the affordable housing Storypath, children built their base of knowledge episode by episode as they sought information to portray the context (mural of Seattle), constructed characters (residents and business owners, some elected as city officials), and grappled with conflicting interests inherent in determining urban land use (which buildings to save, repurpose, or demolish to create affordable housing). Furthermore, the episodes created motivation for constructive interpersonal interaction and various types of writing, thereby simultaneously strengthening children's development of SEL and literacy skills along with civic learning. In fact, the Storypath process incorporates many of the factors that operationally define *positive youth development* programs, including promoting social, emotional, cognitive, behavioral, and moral competence; fostering self-determination, self-efficacy, and prosocial norms; and providing opportunities for prosocial involvement (Catalano, Berglund, Ryan, Lonczak, & Hawkins, 2004). The children in the affordable housing Storypath lived these factors as they constructed the place, characters, and context for their story, cooperatively grappled with each critical incident, and participated in the concluding event at which the mayor and city council finalized, presented, and explained the final policy adopted.

Looking to the Future

Civic education cannot be happenstance; it must be deliberate with a planned sequence of learning opportunities that engage students in significant and memorable ways. Storypath provides a curricular

framework that does just that by organizing civics into meaningful lived experiences that simulate grappling with real-world community issues. In fact, evidence of voting in the USA speaks to the urgency of equipping all students with civic knowledge, skills, and dispositions that support active involvement of all citizens.

> Civic education opportunities in school have been shown to increase the likelihood that a young person will vote. These opportunities range from social studies classes to simulations of democratic processes and discussion of current issues. Unfortunately, many youth do not have these civic education opportunities, as research has shown that those in more white and/or more affluent schools are more likely to have these opportunities. (Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, 2019)

Storypath is one approach that can provide equitable access by actively engaging all students in quality civic education, regardless of geographic location, cultural background, language, family income, or other individual differences such as ability, aptitude, and so on. It also has the advantage of making quality civics accessible to young learners and, as an integrated curriculum, simultaneously nurtures literacy and SEL. The future of our democracy may well depend on what children learn about civics in school and, particularly, how they learn it. Let's start early and implement powerful practices.

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