
Democracy & Education

That's My Voice!

Participation and Democratic Citizenship in the Early Childhood Classroom

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Abstract

This paper shares a participatory action research study conducted by a team of researchers at a university laboratory school in collaboration with three classroom teachers and 60 preschoolers. The team engaged in this research in order to examine the ways in which school personnel could generate more authentic community service experiences with, rather than simply for, children. Findings illustrate that with the support of adults, children generated ways to address issues, discussed their ideas with adults, reflected on their actions, and understood that their voices were being heard beyond the school community. With this increased participation, young people were able to show and exercise crucial skills and dispositions for democratic citizenship.

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Introduction

AS MEMBERS OF a democratic society, such as the one in which our laboratory school is located, the United States, we, the authors, understand that participation in a democracy does not automatically happen. In an ideal democracy, citizens actively participate in the process of governing. This requires living in association with each other, across differences and boundaries (Dewey, 1916/1966). Teachers in the United States, especially those in the public schools, have held the primary responsibility for teaching children about democracy and citizenship. Yet high-stakes testing—with its emphasis on knowledge, skills, and outcomes rather than processes, combined with a strong focus on literacy and math—has made it more difficult

for schools to include the study of democratic values (Fitchett & Heafner, 2010; Kemple, 2017; Lobman, 2011).

Early childhood classrooms represent the first template of democratic participation for many young children (Astuto & Ruck,

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2010; Kemple, 2017). Democratic processes are promoted through activities like class discussions focused on issues that affect children's lives; carrying-out classroom jobs and responsibilities; and collaboratively creating class rules and agreements (Levinson, 2012). More importantly, a quality, play-based curriculum promotes listening, dialogue, compromise, negotiation, conflict resolution, and problem-solving: all necessary skills for participation in a democratic society (Astuto & Ruck, 2010; Kemple, 2017). In a recent study, Astuto and Ruck (2017) provided evidence that the interrelated competencies of the prosocial skills developed during play and executive functions—specifically inhibition, working memory, and cognitive flexibility—are the building blocks for later civic engagement. These competencies in early childhood predict student participation in extracurricular activities in the eighth grade, which lead to volunteering, voting, and reaching out to public officials in adulthood (Astuto & Ruck, 2017). Erickson and Thompson (2019) also found that early childhood settings are the ideal place for fostering crucial citizenship traits such as reasonableness.

While the findings of Astuto and Ruck (2010, 2017) affirm our beliefs in the value of play for later participation in civic life, we also contend that young children are not simply future citizens. Young children are citizens who are aware of the needs of others in their schools and communities and are concerned with world events (Hall & Rudkin, 2011; Payne, 2018). This awareness is evident in the way that children make meaning about such events through words, art, and play and generate creative ideas about what should be done (Hall & Rudkin, 2011).

The Reggio Emilia approach, which is foundational to our school philosophy, positions children as citizens with a right to an education, equal opportunities, and intercultural coexistence and recognizes their dignity and competence in assuming responsibility for their city (Delrio, 2012). This notion of citizenship has strongly influenced our school and our desire to provide children with authentic spaces for participation. While many doubt children's capacity for acting as citizens, we witness and believe in ways that they are able to be aware of and care for their broader community, take others' needs and desires into consideration, and deliberate about possible solutions to community challenges.

Our goal in this action research project was to increase opportunities for students to participate in their community. Through this increased participation, we hoped to foster their agency and capacity regarding their own citizenship. Students' interactions with teachers in schools shape their civic participation skills, teaching them when and how to speak to adults and those in authority, when to stay silent, and when to be subversive (Levinson, 2012). If the children at the University Lab School could experience some agency and power through participation in not only doing but deciding upon and designing their service projects, they would develop the civic competence and confidence necessary for citizenship.

Our belief that children are capable of participating in authentic community service experiences led us to the literature on children's participation. This literature helped us to create the guidelines for participation that framed our action research study.

In the following paragraphs, we share literature on both participation and approaches to citizenship, the guidelines for participation that we followed, and examples of three community service experiences generated by children and their teachers.

Theoretical Framework

Here we share different models for thinking about young people's participation as well as work done around citizenship. Using this information, we lay out the guidelines we developed to foster participation in hopes of cultivating the type of citizenship necessary for democracy. Then we look at how service has been envisioned, both by ourselves and others, to foster learning and citizenship.

Hart (1992), who has written extensively on how to help children acquire the rights that were laid out at the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child over a quarter of a century ago, provided the following advice:

A nation is democratic to the extent that its citizens are involved, particularly at the community level. The confidence and competence to be involved must be gradually acquired through practice. It is for this reason that there should be gradually increasing opportunities for children to participate in any aspiring democracy, and particularly in those nations already convinced that they are democratic. (p. 1)

Hart's (1992) ladder of participation was one of the first tools developed to evaluate children's opportunities for participation. This model ranges from the first three rungs of the ladder, all considered to represent nonparticipation, and progresses to the very top rung of the ladder—child-initiated shared decisions with adults—when children invite adults to share in the decision-making process (p. 8). Hart's model has been widely used but has also encountered considerable criticism for its sequential nature and the hierarchical way it positions children in relation to adults (Kellett, 2009; Treseder, 1997). In addition, Treseder (1997) argued that Hart's ladder of participation does not take cultural context into account.

Shier (2001) also generated a model of participation. Shier's model is focused on the role of the adults within the projects rather than children. This is evidenced by the questions adults are asked to consider during each of the Five Levels of his model when planning and assessing participatory projects. For example, under *Level 1: Children are listened to*, Shier asked adults to reflect upon the following questions: Are you ready to listen to children? Do you work in a way that enables you to listen to children? Is it a policy requirement that children must be listened to? Under *Level 5: Children share power and responsibility for decision-making*, Shier asked adults to consider the following questions: Are you ready to share your adult power with children? Is there a procedure that enables children and adults to share power and responsibility for decisions? Is it a policy requirement that children and adults must share power and responsibility for decisions (p. 111)? Shier's model focuses on collaboration between and among adults and children and provides guidance for adults toward developing competence in children. Kirby and Gibbs (2006) critiqued both of these models of children's participation on the grounds that

decision-making is constantly being negotiated, and therefore shifts of power within projects and tasks are inevitable (in Kellett, 2009, p. 47).

Borrowing from literature in the social studies, we were able to consider levels of civic participation through the foundational work of Westheimer and Kahne (2004) in which they described three approaches to citizenship education. The first is personally responsible citizenship in which citizens obey laws, pay taxes, vote, and may donate to a food drive. Personally responsible citizens engage minimally with existing structures of government. The second approach, participatory citizenship, highlights citizens who do all the personally responsible work and then participate more deeply in existing government structures and civic society. Participatory citizens may run for city council, serve on a committee, or organize the food drive to which the personally responsible citizen donates. The third approach is a social justice orientation. While this citizen may do the activities of the other two, they are primarily concerned with changing government and other structures to foster more justice in their community. In relation to the food drive, social justice-oriented citizens would ask why people are hungry. This level of citizenship requires the confidence of deep participation as well as authentic connections to the community to understand complex challenges.

Finally, the work of Dewey (1916/1966, 1938), and of others who have extended Dewey's work, provides insight into what is required for democratic living:

A democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience. The extension in space of the number of individuals who participate in an interests so that each has to refer his own action to that of others, and to consider the action of others to give point and direction to his own, is equivalent to the breaking down of those barriers of class, race, and national territory which kept men from perceiving the full import of their activity. (Dewey, 1916/1966, p. 87)

In breaking down Dewey's ideas on establishing democratic spaces, Collins, Hess, and Lowery (2019) highlighted the need for purposefully created constructivist learning opportunities that engage the community, "experiential and participative democratic activities," and relationships in which students and teachers establish shared concerns. These beliefs in creating democratic learning spaces along with the emphasis on breaking down barriers and sharing experiences also informed our approach to generating community service projects with the participation of young people.

This is by no means an exhaustive review of the models that address the issue of children's and youth participation or approaches to citizenship. Yet none of the models specifically highlight civic participation with young children. A synthesis of these models led us to develop the following guidelines in our work with young children:

1. There is no one correct way of involving children and youth in civic participation (Lundy, 2018). As Treseder (1997) articulated, events involving children's

participation are contextual: Different issues are identified, different questions emerge, different levels of commitment are exhibited by individuals at different times.

2. Children need the support of adults. This means engaging in dialogue with children and really listening to their thoughts and ideas. It also means sharing information with children and/or helping them to locate information they are seeking so that they are able to make informed decisions.
3. Children should be offered various types of opportunities for participation. The role of the adult is to offer experiences for children to become involved that address the capacities of each child.

Defining Service

One of the ways that we have attempted to create spaces for children to participate more fully in our school community and beyond is by providing opportunities for involvement in community service projects with a social action focus. We define service to the community as helping others in ways that benefit those beyond our school. We see our involvement in community service as being different from that of service learning. While there is no single definition of the term "service-learning" and little agreement on aims, objectives, and methods (Bleazby, 2013; Boyle-Baise, 2002), service-learning is distinguished from other types of community service in the way that it is embedded in the curriculum and is intended to have educational benefits for students and communities (Cipolle, 2004, in Bleazby, 2013, p. 161). Writing specifically about service-learning in early childhood settings, Lake and Adinolfi explained:

In early childhood settings service learning provides benefits to children, teachers and the community, such as hands-on service that meets a specific community need, hands-on experiential learning (often addressing multiple standards), real-world connections that enrich the curriculum, and experiences that combine learning with responsible citizenship. (Lake & Jones, 2012; Lake & Winterbottom, 2010, in Lake & Adinolfi, 2017, p. 18)

While we agree that service-learning should benefit the children and adults to whom we are providing service, we also believe that community service projects should be undertaken with an eye toward social change. This means moving beyond merely contributing to existing community service projects through personal responsibility to determining what challenge the community service project should address and how it should be addressed through participatory citizenship (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004).

All too often, service-learning projects leave a need only temporarily filled for those on the receiving end and are accompanied by a deep frustration that no one is willing to engage in the deeper structural work of change that would create a more just society (Levinson, 2012). This does a disservice both for those being served and for those doing the service-learning. Community service projects can and should be a springboard for conversations

about what could and should change in society so that the injustices that create community challenges no longer exist.

In our school, we have a history of providing opportunities for children to become involved in community service at a personally responsible level (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). During the 2014–2015 school year, the adults planned diaper drives and food drives and helped children raise money to buy blankets for a local homeless shelter, yet toward the end of the year, we wondered what children were really taking away from the projects that adults planned for them. Further, we questioned the authenticity of the experiences. While the projects grew out of needs identified in our greater community, it certainly would not be fair to say that the projects were in any way initiated by students or that they afforded opportunities for children to interact with members of the community in meaningful ways. The words of Franz Bentley and Souto-Manning (2018), discussing their social justice work with children, resonate with us:

If we take it [community service] up entirely as the teacher, we allow no space for our students. In such a case, we engage in colonizing in the name of justice; we impose our agendas and priorities on young children. And we render them incapable in the process. (p. 107)

In trying to foster greater participation with the children in the school, we were also curious to see what would come of this greater participation. Would it foster the confidence and competence necessary for civic action or democratic behaviors? Would we see evidence of children acting as citizens in practice and not merely citizens in training? As Dewey (1916/1966) noted, in order for democracy to work, we cannot depend on natural development—we must always be fostering experiences of connection and action. In seeking a life of associated living, we must break down barriers of class, race, nationality, language, etc. In the context of preschool, barriers of age are particularly important since many adults do not see young people as capable of making meaningful contributions to society. Through this action research, our first hope was to find ways to foster meaningful participation with young children. Our discovery in the following cases is that this also broke down significant barriers to varying degrees and sparked students' sense of agency as members of the community.

Research Methods

We gathered data through a participatory action research study conducted at a University laboratory school (ULS) located in the Midwest of the United States of America. The school uses an inquiry-oriented, social-constructivist program inspired by the Reggio Emilia approach, with a strong emphasis on outdoor exploration and play. The center serves 150 children, 18 months through six years old, in mixed-age classrooms from a variety of cultural, socioeconomic, and linguistic backgrounds. While the dominant language spoken at the school is English, at this time, 20 different languages were spoken by the school community.

This participatory action research study was led by three coinvestigators: a university researcher, an outdoor educator (OE), and a family services coordinator (FSC). In addition to the OE and

FSC, research participants included three classroom teachers and 60 children ages three to six. The OE and FSC are responsible for coordinating the school's community service and social action projects. The university researcher is also the director of the school.

Participatory action research is a collaborative approach to research with the intent that the work result in some action, change, or improvement on the issue being researched (Kindon et al., 2007). Our team engaged in this research to answer the research questions: How can faculty and staff generate more authentic civic participation experiences *with* rather than simply *for* children? Also, how do these opportunities foster the competence and confidence necessary for citizenship?

We collected data in three phases. In Phase I, we observed in classroom meetings in which teachers, working in conjunction with the OE and FSC, led discussions with the children about the potential ways in which they could support their community. From Phase I data, we generated a list of potential projects for the school year. Phase II data were gathered by team members who observed the children and teachers as they participated in these projects. Phase III observations were conducted as adults and children debriefed and reflected upon the activities. All observations and data were collected through field notes. Data analysis included thematically coding typed transcripts of the field notes collected in Phases I–III.

Phase I: Listening to Children

During Phase I of the research project, the OE, FSC, and classroom teachers led discussions with the children around generating ideas for community service projects with a social action focus. Looking at the guidelines generated from our synthesis of the literature on children's participation, we defined our purpose at this stage of the research as engaging with children in dialogue to really listen to their concerns about their community and their ideas for how they could address these concerns.

As children had in the previous year, the first community service project these children took part in was a book drive for a local preschool. This project had been generated by the adults in both school settings. The children who received the books wrote thank-you notes to the children at our school, and the OE and FSC shared the thank-you notes with the children. While sharing the notes, the OE, FSC, and classroom teachers asked the children what ideas they had about service and social action for the remainder of the school year:

FSC: Last year Mrs. C and I came up with ways that we could help people in our school and community. We came up with ideas like collecting books and diapers, cleaning up the meadow, and making clay good-luck wishes for college students during finals week. These are our ideas, but we were thinking you would have a lot of good ideas. Do you have some other things we could do if people were feeling sad, lonely, or ways we could help with the environment? How could we help give service? (October 26, 2015)

A similar version of that excerpt was used in all three classrooms, yet as expected, the children in each classroom took the discussion in different directions. One classroom had the following discussion:

"I helped my sister stop crying . . . I sang her Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star when she was a baby."

"If someone is sad, you could make a picture like a rainbow and give it to them."

"When I was doing something for my sister, I just gave her a bug book I made."

"When someone is sad, you can make funny faces to make them feel better."

"You can draw a rainbow."

The majority of the children in this preschool classroom recognized their potential to help others by utilizing their own skills and talents. This belief in their ability to help is a powerful step in developing and identifying a sense of agency as a citizen. In addition to those comments, three children discussed the possibility of donating items to make others feel better.

"If people are feeling sad, you could give them something you don't use anymore."

"For my birthday, we are donating diapers for little kids."

"My dad took toys to a little girl who didn't have any."

Drawing from experiences in their families, children here were demonstrating both a strong sense of empathy in their participation and a sense of justice in their expressed desire that all children have the things they both want and need.

At the beginning of the discussion in the second classroom, the children were completely focused on the outcome of the book drive, which was a wagon full of books and additional boxes of books that had been collected by the children for a local preschool. The children were so enthusiastic about the book drive that it appeared to be difficult for them to move beyond having another drive.

To provide this group of children with some other ways to think about community service experiences, the OE and FSC shared some photographs of children engaging in service work the prior year. These photos included children putting cans in a box for a food drive, making pinch pots to sell in order to buy blankets for a local homeless shelter, distributing good-luck messages to college students during finals week, and picking up litter during clean-up-the-meadow day. While these adults were still open to the idea of a drive, these photographs led this group of children to focus on the environment, as some of the children who were in the classroom the year before viewed themselves in the photographs participating in a clean-up-the-meadow day.

BRITTNEY: "Oh yeah, I remember that! We cleaned up the meadow."

NATHAN: "Yeah, we could help the earth."

OE: "What could you do to help the earth?"

NOOR: "Well, sometimes I just see litter in my yard, and I pick it up."

ETHAN: "Tell people not to litter, and if you do see litter, you can clean it up."

OE: "How would we tell people not to litter? How would we get that message around?"

XIANG: "Tell them!"

OE: "But do we see them out there doing it?"

BRITTNEY: "No!"

OE: "What can we do to tell them not to do it if we don't see them?"

XIANG: "We could write a letter."

BRITTNEY: "What would the letter say?"

SEVERAL CHILDREN: "Don't litter! Don't litter anymore!"

The children ended the discussion by agreeing that they wanted to be responsible for leading a cleanup effort in the meadow and in the woods bordering the school property. One of the ways several children said they wanted to do this was to write letters to people stating, "Keep the earth healthy."

This discussion not only shows ways in which to engage children in identifying a concern but also ways to both elicit and focus ideas for how to address the established concern. Listening to the children while also supporting them with information and ideas were both a crucial part of this process.

Discussions with the children in the third classroom yielded similar suggestions. These children also talked about making cards, donating food and other items, and cleaning up litter. Yet this group did not center on any particular community service project at this time. They left the Morning Meeting with their preschool teacher saying that they would continue to talk about ideas over the next few weeks. This experience, though different from the others and perhaps a bit unsatisfying for its lack of an immediate result, is also important. Children and adults often need time for further discussion, for gathering information, and for interests to emerge before launching into a community service project that is meaningful and impactful for all involved. Listening to children's need for more time is just as important as listening to their ideas for immediate action.

Acting and Reflecting upon That Action

Through reviewing the data gathered from Phase I, two projects were chosen by the OE and FSC in consultation with the preschool teachers: creating Valentine's Day cards with residents of a local nursing home and addressing the issue of litter in the meadow near the school. Admittedly, the first project had more adult direction in its final conception than the second project. The first group of preschoolers had identified ways to support their siblings and others who were lonely and sad. They also identified their own skills in making pictures, books, and cards. This sense of the importance of building caring relationships was at the heart of the decision to foster relationships between the preschool class and residents from a local nursing home, all while using their artistic skills to share love. The second classroom had identified both concern for the earth and an understanding of their ability to address it through litter collection and spreading their message. This group had already developed a strong sense of direction with

where to put their civic energies. With the third group there was no clear direction initially. It is important to take time for both students concerns and interests to emerge when engaging in authentic civic action. Over time, this group decided that they would prepare food and share it with a local homeless shelter.

Adults took the lead in organizing all three projects based on the directions of the children. The FSC reached out to the director of the nursing home and secured a date when the residents would come to visit the children at the school. Later in the year, the OE contacted the manager of the apartments adjacent to the school where much of the litter had accumulated, in order to alert him to the date and time children would be cleaning up the litter and to ask him if he would be willing to talk with some children from the school about their concerns. The OE also reached out to the supervisor of a local homeless shelter to make plans to carry out the ideas that emerged from a group of six children in the third classroom regarding making food for those who needed it.

Children Using Their Artistic Talent to Work with Others

The first project undertaken was the creation of valentines. The FSC and director of a local nursing home established that three residents would travel to our school to create valentines alongside the children. The cards would be given to the family and friends of the children and the residents. The intent of this project was not necessarily to “help” the residents of the nursing home but to give students an opportunity to engage in their skill of art while building relationships with someone new. The hope was these cross-generational relationships would be mutually beneficial; however, as seen in the following, this was a messy process, and certain constraints limited the extent to which relationships could be built.

Rather than the entire class of children meeting the residents all at once, a small group of six children initially joined the residents and their two activity directors (ADs) in the art studio. The children and residents welcomed one another, but for the first several minutes, the children and residents worked in separate areas of the room. The ADs and the FSC worked hard to get the children and residents to interact, but there was some trepidation from both the children and the older adults. This especially seemed to be the case when the children were near Joyce, a resident who was in a wheelchair. For example, the FSC asked one child if he wanted to help Joyce make her valentine. He looked at Joyce, shook his head, and visibly backed away from her before turning and finding another seat.

As children finished working on their cards, they left the room and other pairs of children arrived. Some children walked right over to the residents and began to interact. One resident asked David, one of the preschool boys, “Who will you give your valentine card to?” David started to list all of his family members, including his grandfather, who he said was in “the battle of World War II.” The residents asked more questions about his grandfather. David continued to answer questions while dancing in a little circle, saying, “This is fun; let’s have a glitter party!” The residents smiled and laughed. David said, “I never run out of gas! This is me!”

While there was laughter and conversation taking place among most of the children and residents, there were also children and one of the residents who found it difficult to interact. For example, a kindergartner, Joy, came to the door of the studio, looked inside the room at the elderly women working with the other children making cards, and promptly turned around and started walking back down the hall. A teacher intervened and asked, “Don’t you want to meet some new friends and make some valentine cards?” She shook her head and chose not to participate in the activity. One of the residents from the nursing home was also experiencing difficulties working with the children. The following conversation was between the resident and one of the ADs:

Joyce, one of the residents, looks at the AD after she completed her first valentine: “Are we finished?”

AD: Do you want to make another one?

JOYCE: “No, I’m done.”

AD: “This group of kids is leaving . . .”

JOYCE: “It’s just as well because I don’t know what to do! As long as you are here with me, I will know what to do!”

AD: “There are some more kids coming, and we can work with them.”

Joyce looks skeptical as another pair of children walks into the room. (February 8, 2016)

For the most part, the adults felt that the activity went well, but we were most interested in how the children felt. The following excerpt was recorded with a group of eight children:

FSC: “Let’s think back to making valentine cards. Do you remember who we worked with to make the cards?”

CHILDREN CALLING OUT: “The nursing hospital!” “Nursing home!”

FSC: “What did you think about working with them?”

JEREMY: “It was fun! Especially when we put glitter on the cards. It was fun!”

AVA: “I liked working with the ladies.”

FSC: “What else did you like?”

ETHAN: “It was cool because there were some things they put on our cards and some things we put on their cards.”

TANESHA: “I liked it because we got to make cards beside them.”

AVA: “Can they come back again?” (February 19, 2016)

The OE and FSC asked them what they would like to do if the residents were able to come again, and the children generated several ideas. It was decided that they would invite the residents back to see their outdoor play area and for a singing party. The OE and FSC agreed that they would contact the AD and see if they could arrange for the residents to come back to the school for the singing party once the weather got warmer. Unfortunately, they were unable to coordinate another visit that school year. However, the relationship between the ULS and the nursing home has continued.

Throughout the card-making activity, many children chose to interact with the residents and appeared to enjoy the time they spent together. The children did not see this event as a one-time occurrence; rather, they appeared to want to build a relationship with the residents. There were a few children, however, who chose not to interact with the residents of the nursing home at all. It was not clear why this was the case; perhaps the children had not had much experience with older adults. Some of the children hesitated around the resident in the wheelchair. Derman-Sparks and Edwards (2009) have shown that able-bodied children may feel unease when interacting with differently abled people and need to work on resisting stereotypes that often accompany people who are physically challenged. It is interesting to note that it was this resident who also voiced trepidation when interacting with the children and sought the advice and comfort of her AD.

An important part of democracy and associated living is understanding the experiences of diverse groups of people (Dewey, 1916/1966). These two groups rarely cross paths except perhaps in some families in which they have familial roles that differ in many ways from their citizenship roles. For democracy to work, the experiences and needs of these different groups must be included in deliberations about the common good. Preschool children and those living in nursing homes must be visible to each other and to the broader community. That being said, it is not surprising that this work can be messy and the development seemingly uneven.

The children's participation in this activity most closely aligns with a personally responsible approach in Westheimer and Kahn's (2004) framework for citizenship education. Though the activity reflected the students' ideas about how they could help others and make their own lives better, the students did not plan the activity themselves. However, their participation in the activity gave them a sense of the importance of working alongside others. As noted by the children's expressed desire to work with the residents again, there was a belief in the importance of that relationship and in the students' ability to be a part of that relationship, a relationship that was mutually beneficial.

Stewardship of the Earth

The interest in cleaning up litter from the meadow adjacent to the school continued as the focus of the second preschool classroom. As a group, the children decided that each time they visited the meadow, they would take along garbage bags for collecting litter, and they organized a spring clean-up-the-meadow day for the entire school. The children's concern with litter became evident not only in the meadow but when they were playing outside or walking across the university campus. They were constantly asking, "Who is throwing this litter?" They watched carefully but never saw anyone litter.

Four children, Xiang, Nathan, Brittney, and Evie, became increasingly bothered by the litter along the stream in the meadow, where they often explored. This group asked their classroom teacher to meet with the OE to voice their concerns. They were concerned that "dirty water made the animals sick" and that "litter makes the earth sick." In a small group working with the OE, these

four children made plans to get the message out to the apartment dwellers nearby to stop littering.

As reported earlier, Xiang had suggested that they write letters to the people who were littering. However, since they had never seen anyone litter, they were not sure who they should deliver the letters to, so they tried to think of another plan. Thinking of the nearby apartments, Nathan said, "We have to go in the buildings so we can talk to them." Brittney suggested, "We can make some posters and hang those around the apartments." The children agreed that the posters would get the most visibility. The following excerpt is from documentation recorded by the classroom teacher during the poster-making session:

*Brittney drew the whole meadow, adding dots to represent where the children had found litter. She explained, "The blue dots are where we found litter, and the red dots are a map to find the litter." Brittney then proceeded to draw "a dragon that would eat all of the litter." As they continued to work on their posters, Evie said, "We didn't pick up enough because there was too much litter. We need to have more people." Xiang suggested that they take more bags next time, while Nathan continued to design his "litter machine with grabbers," which he thought would be the answer to picking up more litter at a faster rate. Nathan said, "Our hands are too small. We need like 20 or more." Nathan added a final message to his poster: "Please don't throw the litter because we have to clean it up and we have places to go."
(March 14, 2016)*

Here we see the children collecting and documenting information about the litter and then generating a wide and imaginative list of ideas for how to better solve the litter problem that they have identified.

There are multiple opportunities for participation already in this process through selecting a challenge and both thinking about the immediate problems, litter in the woods and waterways, and also questioning the root of the problems, who litters here and why. Students are then given the opportunity to participate in brainstorming multiple ways of addressing these problems. Students are already moving beyond personally responsible citizenship to participatory citizenship in organizing a school wide cleanup day and are approaching the justice orientation to citizenship by questioning what mechanisms lead to so much litter in the first place (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004).

Having decided to share their posters with the apartment residents, the classroom teacher, the OE, and the four children took their posters to the apartment complex office to meet with the superintendent and assistant superintendent. The superintendent began the conversation by saying, "We have noticed litter is a problem too, and we are not sure what to do about it." Nathan asked the superintendent if they could put a poster in the mailbox of each resident. The superintendent told them that he was not allowed to put things in the mailboxes. The children then asked if they could put a poster on each car. The superintendent said that he would not be able to do that either. He suggested that the children leave the posters on his desk and promised that he would show them to the college students as they came to pay rent or ask him

questions. He thanked the children again for cleaning up the litter and encouraged them to continue.

Once the children returned to school, the OE debriefed the visit. As the children reflected, they all felt like the superintendent had listened to their concerns. However, one child wasn't sure that the posters were enough:

XIANG: "The posters are in a too-small voice."

TEACHER: "What do you mean? Can you explain that?"

XIANG: "My voice is too small for everyone to hear it."

TEACHER: "How could you make your voice louder?"

The children thought for a bit but did not have an answer to this question.

OE: "One time when I was a classroom teacher, my class visited the radio station on campus. It is the [university] radio station for students and everyone who works here to listen to. Do you want me to ask if we can visit?"

XIANG AND OTHER CHILDREN: "Yes!!" (March 16, 2016)

Through this conversation, the students were able to think about the information they had gathered from the apartment complex visit and consider other avenues of advocating for change. The OE then provided them with information about another possible platform for their message, creating an additional opportunity for participation.

The OE contacted the student-run university radio station, who agreed to develop a public service announcement with the children. The children wrote what they wanted to say and practiced it before they left for the radio station. They then traveled across campus, and their messages were recorded into a commercial. The message was broadcast on the radio station. The recording was also played on the public announcement system at school the next day so that everyone would have a chance to hear the children's voices.

Throughout the anti-littering campaign, all the children in this preschool classroom were involved to some degree. Individual children chose to pick up litter on the grounds of their school, as they walked across campus, and in their backyards at home. Families commented that their children became increasingly aware of litter in their backyards, while traveling, and during family outings. The children didn't see picking up litter as a project with a beginning and an end; it became a part of their daily routine. The children also began to understand how individual actions have consequences. For example, during one discussion, Anthony said, "Our actions can cause big problems." Four children became deeply involved in this effort through creating and delivering posters to the apartment complex and the creation of a commercial that was broadcast from the campus radio station. As Xiang said after hearing his voice on the radio (March 18, 2016), "That's my voice! I am telling everyone to stop littering, and they can hear me!"

Of the three projects, this is the one in which children had the most participation in regard to decision-making and the one in which they most deeply navigated the systems through which citizens can make change. As noted, students identified the problem, they informally researched its root causes as they tried to

look for people in the act of littering, and they also mapped the litter. They thought of solutions to not only clean up the mess but to try to prevent the mess from happening in the first place. In organizing others to clean up the mess, they reached a level of participatory citizenship, and in trying to address the root causes, they were going even beyond this level (Westheimer & Kahn, 2004). Further, they were able to experience their own agency as citizens who care for their environment through the use of their voice. In the process, they also discovered the limitations that can be encountered through systems.

Cooking for Those in Need

As noted, the third classroom was not immediately ready to identify a community service project. Instead of imposing an idea, the adults in the room made the important choice to wait to see what might emerge from the children's interests. In January 2016, the teacher noticed a group of six children spending long periods of time in dramatic play cooking. They often were the first to volunteer to help her make playdough and were very engaged in cooking experiences such as making applesauce and muffins. This small group of children determined that they wanted to cook for people.

In response to the children's interest in cooking, the classroom teacher and the OE introduced the small group to children's literature that addressed issues of food insecurity and homelessness. Some examples of books the group read are *Uncle Willie and the Soup Kitchen* by Dyanne Disalvo-Ryan, *Fly Away Home* by Eve Bunting, and *A Shelter in Our Car* by Monica Gunning. The intent of bringing these books to the children was to bring an aspect of diversity that was not present in the class to the children. This is an approach that is not uncommon when various aspects of diversity are absent from a class. Children's literature can serve as a powerful lens into the experiences and lives of others and can foster a sense of understanding and empathy in young children. It was the students who then made the connection between an activity that brought them joy, cooking, and the opportunity to share the fruits of that activity with those who might need it.

On February 4, 2016, the classroom teacher and OE facilitated a discussion with the children about the purpose of the small group, which Ashley described as "making food for people who don't have food." Kendall said, "We are making food for strangers," and Luke quickly added, "It's for people who don't have a home, but even though they're strangers, we can still give them things." These comments reflect both a boundary that even the very young are aware of and a desire to connect across that boundary with their skill and gift of cooking.

During group cooking sessions, the children discussed cooking techniques as well as what it would be like to be homeless or food insecure. The following interaction took place while the children were making the first batch of food they decided upon, heart-shaped cookies, which the OE would deliver to the soup kitchen:

OE: "Do you remember the book we read, *A Shelter in Our Car*, about the girl and the mother who don't have a car? How did they get their food?"

ASHLEY: “When people don’t have food, people who have money could give them money for some food.”

LUKE: “Her mom *tried* to get money from work.”

OE: “Yes, but sometimes she couldn’t work—there was no work for her—and sometimes she could, so she could make money and get food. We talked about the people who live in our area who might not have food, and last week we decided—”

RENE: “We’d make food for them!”

ASHLEY: “We’re making the heart-shaped cookies!”

ASHLEY: “I was thinking about the book when they lived in the car, and when they got in a hotel to sleep in.”

LUKE: “I wouldn’t like to live in my car.”

OE: “So, we are making food for people in [town] who don’t have a house or a car to live in. Where do you think they sleep?”

KENDALL: “On the ground.”

ASHLEY: “They could sleep on a picnic table.”

OE: “What do you think that would be like in the cold weather?”

CATHY: “So cold, so cold! I would not like that!”

KENDALL: “Can we taste these cookies?” (February 11, 2016)

Throughout this cooking session, children and teachers struggled together to better understand homelessness. The children expressed confusion over why people were homeless when others have homes they could share. Their teacher asked, “What if no one welcomes them to their home? Where would they go?” Ashley responded, “Well, I would welcome people into my house.” Other children in this small group quickly echoed her sentiment, saying, “Me too!” The teacher explained that sometimes people who want to work cannot find jobs, and there are shelters and soup kitchens in the local area to help those in need. Homelessness is a complex topic that even adults struggle to understand. However, these conversations are important for the children to think through and try to understand these complexities as well.

The original idea was for this small group to meet weekly for twelve weeks to cook food that would be taken by the teachers to the shelter. Teachers asked the children to generate ideas of foods that they believed individuals who were food insecure would enjoy. Children suggested pizza, soup, quesadillas, fruit salad, breadsticks, vegetables, and zucchini bread. The teachers used these ideas and provided the children with ingredients and guidance to make the foods of their choice. This reflects the adults’ attempts to listen to the children’s thoughts and ideas as well as provide information and resources for cooking.

After the first week, the children were asked to reflect upon their cookie-baking session. The children talked about how they learned to “crack eggs,” “put in ingredients,” and “cook because we worked together.” They were excited about the pizza they were going to make for the food kitchen the following week. Kendall asked, “Can we go down to give the food to the people?” This was a crucial moment in which the teacher could have replied that it was too complicated or time-consuming. However, she listened and

committed to creating opportunities for multiple forms of participation in response to student requests.

The children’s classroom teacher contacted each of the children’s parents over the next several weeks, and all parents gave permission for their children to serve food at a local food kitchen. On April 29, the children made zucchini bread and traveled to the food kitchen with their parents and teachers. The children were initially excited to serve their zucchini bread, but as the line formed and recipients for the food came closer, some children appeared nervous, stepping back or standing behind the table or a teacher. Their teachers reassured the children and encouraged them to ask the individuals if they would like some zucchini bread. The children grew in their confidence, asking, “Do you want our zucchini bread? We made it!” Some of the individuals receiving food took their bread quietly while others said, “You guys made this?!” Kendall asked, “Are these people homeless?” Her teacher responded, “I don’t know; they might be.” The children worked for an hour serving food.

Cathy, one of the children who was the most enthusiastic about cooking for those in need, stood back from all the activity and told her parents that she did not want to serve the zucchini bread. Her parents encouraged her, and she did, reluctantly, hand out one piece of bread, yet she appeared uncomfortable. She chose to sit back and observe for the remainder of the time. It is important to note that cooking food and serving food are two different types of service—the children chose to participate in different ways.

On May 5, 2016, the children reflected on their experience at the soup kitchen:

OE: “How did you feel about passing out the zucchini bread?”

MULTIPLE CHILDREN: “Happy!”

OE: “Why did it make you happy to do that?”

KENDALL: “I gave them zucchini bread. I wanted them to get some food because I wanted them to grow and be healthy.”

LUKE: “Because I fed the people!”

ASHLEY: “Because they got to try the zucchini bread and see what it tastes like. There was a man—I gave him a big piece. I choosed a really big piece for him . . . There were hundreds of pieces, and I wanted to give him a big one.”

OE: “Why else were you happy?”

KENDALL: “I wanted my daddy to see what I made. I wanted him to try it.”

The children expressed a sense of satisfaction and accomplishment through making and serving the zucchini bread. They understood that people in their community were hungry and that they needed nourishment to stay healthy. The children also exhibited a sense of competence and wanted to share that with members of their family.

While the bulk of this project stayed within the citizenship approaches of personal responsibility and participatory, the discussions students engaged in approached the social justice orientation (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). A crucial part of

the social justice orientation is asking big difficult questions. The students in this group wondered why there were homeless people in the first place and why those with space in their homes did not invite the homeless in. While the group and the teachers did not pursue this topic in-depth, the students had the information and the space they needed to ask the questions. Furthermore, by delivering and serving the food, they increased their connection across diverse groups and boundaries, going to be with people as opposed to a merely participating in a transactional process. While it is true that the students could have explored these issues more or they could have engaged with people at the soup kitchen more, the steps they did take were important. The students were not capable of inviting people into their homes, even though many wanted to. Nor were they able to create jobs with a living wage for those who needed them. They were, however, able to bake zucchini bread and share it with people themselves.

Conclusion

Throughout this research, we attempted to work *with* children to identify and design community service projects of interest and to offer various opportunities for participation. In all three preschool classrooms, children actively participated in generating project ideas that emerged from their interests. The projects that were ultimately decided upon—making valentines with residents of a local nursing home, creating an anti-littering campaign, and cooking and serving food to those in need—were all diverse and developed over time. While some children chose not to directly interact with individuals from the community, such as the child who chose not to make cards with residents from the nursing home, they were involved in the democratic process of participation in other ways. These included discussing their ideas and the ideas of others in the Morning Meeting, coming to consensus or voting on projects in which their class was interested in pursuing, being involved in decision-making as the projects developed over time, and contributing their time and effort, such as making zucchini bread, for the homeless shelter, even if they chose not to serve the food.

Ben-Arieh (2014) in his work on international child participation has stated that “in order to realize the true citizenship of children, we must encourage child participation. To do so, we need to be creative and devise a variety of participation methods and tools appropriate for different children of different ages” (p. 578). Developing a school environment that provides opportunities for young children to engage in the process of participation takes thoughtful planning on the part of adults. Children deserve to be provided with the time and space to share their interests and ideas about ways to become involved in their greater community.

One of the tensions in doing this work is that power and action will always be shifting between the adults and the children, particularly in cases where children are still developing their civic capacities. In each of the three projects discussed, adults took on the role of leading initial discussions and the responsibility of directly reaching out to community members on behalf of the children. Adults also made time to keep the discussions going and to provide materials and information to support children in their

decision-making. While all children were involved in initial discussions about which projects to pursue, teachers followed the lead of the children pertaining to how much or how little they wanted to be involved.

Throughout the study, children generated ways to address issues that were important to them, discussed their ideas with adults in the greater community, such as the superintendent of the apartment complex or the representative of the radio station, reflected on their actions, and felt that their voices were being heard. Each child became an activist in a way that made sense to them. Making the decision to not engage in an activity and having adults honor that decision is just as powerful as having your message on the environment heard by thousands of radio listeners. No child’s voice is too small to be heard in a school that truly respects and values children’s participation.

Engaging in service work of any kind at any age has its tensions, and that was true here as well. There is always a risk of developing us/them dichotomies that often result in a feeling of superiority for the ones serving while leading to no substantive change, particularly for those on the receiving end of the service. Freire (1970/2007) critiqued this as a sense of false generosity, one that leaves those in power feeling good about themselves and those receiving the generosity feeling powerless. In school settings, the danger of this happening is amplified by the possibility that while some students in a classroom might donate to a school canned food drive, other students in the same class may be in need of and receiving that food at a food bank. It is important to create honest and open spaces for everyone’s experience in the classroom (Cowhey, 2006; Jones, 2004).

Ideally there would not be one group that is seen as the giving or helping group and another that is seen as the receiving group. Instead, these projects should be an attempt to improve a community, our community, one in which everyone is a part and one in which everyone is able to work for a common good. In some ways, the group that made valentines with the nursing home residents, and the group that made and distributed food at the soup kitchen were able to expand their sense of who is a part of their community.

Others have done important work in discussing and addressing inequality with young people in ways that include everyone’s experiences. Cowhey (2006) was able to foster this in some ways. In working with her first- and second-graders, she shared stories from her own experiences living in poverty; she had her students meet with a local advocate for the homeless, who was able to explain both why people can struggle with homelessness and some of the specific challenges homeless people face. Understanding the systemic causes of homelessness can help mitigate the stereotypes about why people are homeless. Jones (2004) has written about the importance of making space for open discussions about both poverty and incarceration while working with first- and second-grade students. One important thing she recommended is to never stop a conversation when students bring their stories of poverty or family members being incarcerated into the classroom. She also highlighted how important it is for teachers to have a strong understanding of the reasons that poverty and incarceration so frequently go together. Cowhey and Jones both recommended

using children's literature, some of which was used with the cooking group at the ULS, as a way to bring understanding and empathy for members of the community that are often stereotyped or seemingly invisible.

The preschool students at the ULS were not able to enact large, systemic changes in the semester under study. However, they did realize the power of their own ideas and voices. In addition to having their ideas and voices heard, the children were given the opportunity to take on participatory citizenship, moving beyond personal responsibility to having a role in organizing themselves and others to act. They, further, were able to engage in discussions that approached a social justice orientation (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). Finally, the increase in participation allowed for more breaking of boundaries between the children and the community. With all three of the projects described here, the children of the ULS spent time interacting with others in ways that could foster deeper connection, understanding, and sharing of experience (Dewey, 1916/1966). This created the "the widening of the area of shared concerns, and the liberation of a greater diversity of personal capacities which characterize a democracy" (Dewey, 1916/1966, p. 87).

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