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# “Who Cares?”: Young Adolescents’ Perceived Barriers to Civic Action

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## Abstract

While civic participation is a crucial component of healthy and sustainable democracies, young adolescents may perceive or experience barriers that limit their civic action. This study draws from focus groups and surveys during a week-long summer civics camp to explore ways in which 47 young adolescents entering Grades 6–9 described barriers they perceive to civic action in their schools and communities. Findings reveal that participants entered camp believing they were capable of making a difference in their communities. Their ideas for youth civic action in schools and broader communities typically represented personally responsible and participatory notions of citizenship. Key obstacles to civic activities included partnerships with peers/adults, peers’ reluctance to exercise civic duty, social-emotional factors, and lack of resources.

*Keywords:* middle level education, middle school, civic education, action civics, social studies

## Introduction

School-based and extramural civic education programs seek to cultivate young people’s interest in and commitment to civic participation throughout the life span. However, one’s interest in civic activities does not necessarily lead to action due to structural and perceived barriers (Balsano, 2005; Romero et al., 2010). Researchers have revealed barriers inside and outside formal schooling that keep young people from acting in more civically engaged ways and seeing themselves as vital members of society (Romero et al., 2010). For example, Balsano (2005) cited “adults’ negative perceptions of youth” as well as “lack of horizontal communication among youth and adult groups” as social impediments to youth civic action (p. 191). Camino and Zeldin (2002) pointed to similar framings of youth as “a source of worry or threat, not potential” (p. 214). These negative views of youth isolate them from larger political structures and restrict their opportunities to engage with society in meaningful ways.

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For young adolescents, some of these barriers may contribute to what Wray-Lake et al. (2014) described as "unengaged" youth whose civic behaviors, commitments, and expectations for future civic action are minimal. The potential of these barriers to develop "unengaged" civic behaviors in young people is problematic because civic participation is key to the quality and sustainability of democracy (Kymlicka & Norman, 1994). Youth civic engagement research has made clear that efforts to involve young adults and adolescents in civic action matters to students and society (Andolina et al., 2003; Balsano, 2005; Bobek et al., 2009)

While this line of research points to barriers that stand in the way of civic participation among young people, most of these studies have focused on the experiences of high school and/or post-secondary youth (Balsano, 2005; Hoang, 2013). This study aimed to explore potential barriers to civic engagement among young adolescents *before* they enter high school because pre-adolescence is considered a significant developmental stage for forming civic dispositions (Linsky et al., 2018; Power et al., 2008; Toledo, 2019). Scholars have noted that young adolescents are at a critical point in their life where they are consistently searching for answers to questions linked to their individual and collective identity (Beane, 1990; Rupenthal & Furuness, 2020).

Educational spaces that are responsive, challenging, empowering, equitable, and engaging can scaffold students' identity journey in ways that lead to civic agency (Bishop & Harrison, 2021). Given the imperative to promote youth civic participation in ways that can lead to sustained civic action into adulthood, we provide a descriptive analysis of how students in Grades 6–9 who attended the first author's summer civics camp discussed perceived barriers to civic action. Unlike research that has examined civic participation among high school or college students, this investigation adds to the limited number of studies involving young adolescents (Castro & Knowles, 2017).

## Literature Review

Much of civic education in the classroom setting is focused on acquiring a specific set of knowledge and overemphasizes the individual and individual acts (Biesta & Lawy, 2006; Biesta et al., 2009; Feldman et al., 2007; Niemi & Junn, 1998; Torney-Purta & Vermeer Lopez, 2006). Despite the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) stated goal of cultivating "knowledgeable, thinking, and active citizens," classrooms are rarely spaces where students explore collective action and how civic knowledge and skills can help one address the root causes of systemic social problems (Swan et al., 2013, p. 5). Rather than considering with students what civic knowledge, attitudes, and dispositions help guide an active and engaged civic life, school systems often prefer to test students' base knowledge of governmental structures and limit discussions of civic engagement to individual acts such as voting and performing jury duty. These approaches to civic education persist despite extensive research on the importance and value of cultivating more active and collective understandings of civic life with students (Avery, 2007; Center for Information & Research on Civic Learning & Engagement (CIRCLE), 2013; Greene et al., 2016; Romero et al., 2010).

The general lack of emphasis on civics in the classroom is partly due to increased pressure schools face from standardized testing and neoliberal policies (DeMink-Carthew, 2018). For example, high-stakes testing has caused a significant decrease in the amount of time spent on civics education during students' elementary years, and time spent focusing on civics only moderately increases at the middle level (Avery, 2007). Additionally, teachers, for a variety of reasons, often opt for value-neutral approaches to the curriculum and avoid discussing controversial issues which, when centered in the curriculum, may help increase civic knowledge, skills, attitudes, and political participation (Avery et al., 1992; Hess, 2002, 2004; Godfrey & Grayman, 2014; Patterson, 2010).

Even without having to overcome institutional pressures, implementing meaningful civics pedagogy is a complex endeavor. Carretero et al. (2015) maintained, "An active civil society requires citizens who have relevant knowledge and deep understanding, but also the skills for reflective and responsible action, willingness to engage, and deep commitment to democratic values" (p. 305). Thus, it is not enough to learn about citizenship, nor is it enough to only partake in activities focused on engaging with the community. Instead, meaningful civic learning occurs at the intersection of knowing *and* doing citizenship (Campbell et al., 2012; Parker, 2003, 2008). Furthermore, research on civic education continues to point to the importance of contextualizing student learning (Clay & Rubin, 2020; Middaugh & Kahne, 2008) as a way to address the civic achievement and engagement gap, which refers to the disparities in the quality and quantity of civic education and opportunities for civic engagement students encounter because of racial, linguistic, and socioeconomic differences (Avery, 2007; Levinson, 2012).

Ultimately, civic learning should help students consider and cultivate their civic dispositions because how one conceptualizes civic life influences their civic actions. Different conceptualizations of civic engagement result in different material outcomes (Baiocchi et al., 2013; Westheimer, 2015). If people conceptualize civic engagement within the confines of individual acts (e.g., voting or acquiring a general knowledge of the functions of government), it is likely they will not actively pursue an engaged civic life where they work in solidary with others toward systemic change, and society should not expect them to inherently value such pursuits.

Voight and Torney-Purta (2013) described civic attitudes as the "predispositions toward some understanding of and appreciation for a common good" (p. 199). Their research on civic attitudes and behaviors of middle grades students provides evidence of the value of cultivating a civic disposition as they found "no cluster of students characterized by action in the absence of social justice attitudes" (p. 209). Additionally, Wood et al. (2018) emphasized the importance of both the affective and cognitive domains in civic learning: "[C]lassroom observations and discussion with students and research partner teachers confirmed that personal impulse and desire to take action was in many ways the 'moving spring' toward forms of citizenship action which were personally and socially significant" (p. 262). Similarly, Linsky et al. (2018) argued for emphasizing social-emotional and character competencies when teaching middle grades students about civic engagement because "education about social justice content is inadequate when it neglects to acknowledge that integration of students' social-emotional skills and character virtues is the basis of students' successful social action" (p. 5).

Centering civic responsibility and collective action during the middle grades is critical because this age group is at the crux of forming their moral competence. However, as Power et al. (2008) noted, "students are deeply influenced by a culture that prizes individual gain and private interests over helping others or serving society" (p. 8). Unfortunately, because curricular models frequently frame civic education in monolithic and decontextualized ways, the role of one's civic attitude, disposition, and affect as central to the materialization of civic engagement is often discounted.

Current framings of civic education tend to work against students and keep them from constructing more meaningful understandings of self and society. Civic curricula and pedagogical approaches position students as future citizens and overemphasize mastery of the curriculum as a means to attaining a civic identity (Biesta et al., 2009). Curricular models often embody a deficit view of young people, which assumes "that they, *as individuals*, lack the proper knowledge and skills, the right values, and the correct dispositions to be the citizens that they should be" (Biesta & Lawy, 2006, p. 71).

In contrast, civic education programs rooted in positive youth development—with their prosocial, supportive approaches that enable youth to engage in meaningful problem-solving—have been shown to promote youth civic action (Blevins et al., 2016; Bobek et al., 2009; Smith, 1999). The context for the present study was a weeklong summer civics camp where students in Grades 6–9 worked through an action civics cycle of inquiry (Levinson, 2012) to investigate issues in their local communities. Action civics is an intentional approach to youth political socialization that emphasizes the knowing and doing of citizenship by having "students do and behave as citizens by engaging in a cycle of research, action, and reflection about problems they care about personally while learning about deeper principles of effective civic and especially political action" (Levinson, 2012, p. 224).

Research on prior iterations of the camp show students make modest movements from personally responsible (e.g., donating to a food pantry) to more participatory (e.g., organizing a food drive) or justice-oriented (e.g., working to understand why people are hungry in the first place) conceptions of citizenship after participating in the action civics cycle (Blevins et al., 2018; Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). Additionally, more recent studies on the camp explore the emerging civic discourses of campers and how they imagine themselves as civic actors (Baiocchi et al., 2013). This study continues in this work by focusing on how middle school students describe possibilities for and barriers to civic action.

## Conceptual Framework

Our conceptual framework is grounded in youth civic engagement and democratic civic education. Youth civic engagement research highlights critical elements of successful pathways to civic action *and* barriers for youth civic action. By conceptualizing our study within democratic civic education, we intend to provide insight into the possibilities and problems for youth civic engagement within educational settings.

### *Youth Civic Engagement*

Civic acts should address community problems and contribute to the sustainability of American constitutional democracy (Swan et al., 2013). Scholars frequently use the term civic engagement as a measure for civic development because engagement implies action. A broad and complex construct, youth civic engagement can be simplified as “civic action or activities directed toward one’s community or society” (Malin et al., 2015, p. 105).

From the literature, we identified five broad categories of barriers to youth civic engagement: resources (e.g., time, transportation), knowledge/information, partnerships (e.g., adults, peers, organizations), social-emotional factors (e.g., self-efficacy, sense of belonging), and opportunities (Balsano, 2005; Hoang, 2013; McBride et al., 2006; Romero et al., 2010). In order to address barriers such as these, Camino and Zeldin (2002) have suggested three critical qualities of youth civic engagement pathways: “ownership, youth-adult partnerships, and facilitative policies and structures” (p. 218). These elements are necessary for school-based as well as out-of-school youth civic engagement pathways to succeed. We discuss each element separately here, although in practice they are often interconnected.

First, ownership involves youth as authentic actors in civic projects. Here, young people may assume any number of decision-making positions as they immerse themselves as true co-participants. Foundational to ownership are requisite knowledge, skills, and opportunities for action. With ownership, adults do not merely invite young people to assist, but they give young people “decision-making authority,” which can help them become “architects of their communities’ future” (Camino & Zeldin, 2002, p. 218). Importantly, self-efficacy among youth is likely to contribute to their interest in social action (Balsano, 2005). Therefore, setting youth up for success as they take on civic projects should empower them to “feel effective in their civic work” (Balsano, 2005, p. 194).

Second, youth-adult partnerships are a mainstay of nearly all contemporary pathways to youth civic engagement; it is uncommon for youth—particularly in the middle grades—to work alone. Successful partnerships allow youth to have authentic ownership while also incorporating adult support, such as providing access to material and social resources, guidance, and feedback (Camino & Zeldin, 2002). Camino (2005) added that youth-adult partnerships should not necessarily privilege youth over adults but offer means for all involved to learn from each other. Voight and Torney-Purta (2013) noted that for middle grades students, in particular, parents have tremendous influence over civic actions. For example, parents may prioritize studying, family obligations, and physical safety over their children’s participation in community activities (Voight & Torney-Purta, 2013). Partnerships with parents and other adults could make barriers such as access, transportation, cost, and networking easier for young adolescents to become civic actors in their schools and communities (Camino, 2005).

Third, facilitative policies and structures provide the necessary infrastructure to sustain civic engagement. Examples include funding, organizational by-laws, and mission statements that “emphasize youth voice and choice” (Camino & Zeldin, 2002, p. 219). Structures in the context of the present study might also include age requirements for voting or volunteering, clearly defined roles within organizations, access to opportunities, and additional resources such as time and transportation. With adequate structures in place, civic engagement pathways have a better chance at mitigating challenges such as lack of funds, adult and youth burn-out, and adults taking over (Camino & Zeldin, 2002).

### *Democratic Civic Education*

In addition to Camino and Zeldin’s (2002) work with civic engagement, we consider democratic civic education through a lens of situated learning. Biesta and Lawy (2006) call for researchers to listen to youth as they engage in various life activities to determine how they are beginning to understand democratic citizenship. For Biesta and Lawy (2006), “democratic citizenship should not be understood as an attribute of the individual . . .;” instead, it “ . . . invariably has to do with individuals-in-context” (p. 65). Relevant civic contexts for young adolescents, in particular, can be found not only in families but also in peer groups, schools, and community organizations (Torney-Purta & Amadeo, 2011). In the present study, we sought to “listen” to young adolescents as they described perceived barriers to civic action in the contexts of their schools and their communities.

Finally, because this study took place during a civics camp in which participant groups identified root causes of community issues and proposed solutions that would, ideally, lead to structural changes in communities, we also drew from Westheimer and Kahne's (2004) typology of citizens. This typology includes personally responsible citizens (e.g., those who donate, pick up trash, obey laws), participatory citizens (e.g., those who take part in collective endeavors to address community needs), and justice-oriented citizens (e.g., those who identify root causes of problems/needs and act to resolve them; Westheimer, 2015). We knew from our prior research that most youth who attended this camp have tended to hold personally responsible notions of citizenship (Blevins et al., 2018; Quinn & Bauml, 2018). It is important to note that our operational definition of citizenship extends beyond a legal definition and instead includes individuals' identities, rights, and responsibilities as well as social and cultural contexts, critical engagement, and active participation regardless of one's legal status (Knight-Abowitz & Harnish, 2006; Levinson, 2014; McLaughlin, 1992; Ong et al., 1996; Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). Using Westheimer and Kahne's typology, we considered that barriers to civic action might depend on the type of action youth have in mind.

## Methods

Our purpose was to explore and describe the perceived barriers to civic action of students in Grades 6–9. The research questions guiding this study were: (a) How do young adolescents describe the capacity of people their age to make a difference in their schools and communities? (b) What barriers, if any, do young adolescents perceive to their civic action? To answer these questions, we conducted this study in 2019 during a summer civics camp at a private university located in a large urban area in the Southwest.

### *Participants*

To recruit a racially and economically diverse group of campers, we used three recruiting approaches. First, 15 of the available openings in Civics Camp (pseudonym) were filled by contacting parents/guardians from 2016–2018 Civics Camp participants. Those who were still in the camp's target grade bracket (Grades 6–9) were eligible to attend in 2019. Once we reached the cap of 15, we put former campers on a waiting list. Second, the camp director (Michelle, first author) sent information fliers to school principals and counselors at five local public schools—including one elementary school with an after-school civics club—with invitations to nominate up to 20 students. Finally, we reserved 20 openings for students attending a major suburban school district northwest of the university. Middle grades teachers nominated students in this district. Invitations included requests to nominate students for whom summer camp might not be feasible without free registration. A few campers registered through word of mouth or referrals from friends or family members who were attending. Notably, an interest in making a difference in the community, while encouraged, was not required to participate in Civics Camp.

The final camp roster included 47 students in Grades 6–9. About 70% of participants were new to Civics Camp, while the remaining 30% attended a prior iteration of camp. Most campers attended public schools; 44% of parents indicated their children receive free or reduced lunches at school, based on income. Campers identified themselves on the survey as follows: Hispanic or Latino/a, 40%; White/Caucasian, 32%; African American/Black, 16%; Other/Bi-racial, 10%; Native American, 2%. While not required to attend the camp, all camp attendees and their parents/guardians agreed to participate in the study.

### *The Context for the Study*

Civics Camp is an annual free event held for one week in the summer that involves grade-level groups of no more than ten campers per group working with university student mentors who shepherd campers through an action civics project, culminating in a digital advocacy campaign and oral presentations to family and community members. University student mentors participate in two days of professional development before Civics Camp, during which they learn strategies for facilitating the student-centered curriculum, engaging campers in respectful discussions, and managing social interactions with and across campers.

Camp activities are designed to support campers in the action civics cycle and include guest speakers, interactions with community organizers, iCivics digital simulation games, and field trips. Each camper group goes through the action civics process of identifying and researching a community issue, creating a plan for change with attention to the root cause of the community issue, and presenting their plan to the parents and community members. Table 1 shows the action civics projects for each group, their

Table 1
*Action Civics Project Topics*

| **Group Number** | **Grade(s)** | **Action Civics Project Topic** | **Project Goal Statements** |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 6 | Pet care | By creating [an app] that educates pet owners that connects them with local resources, we will prevent overpopulation of homeless animals by ensuring we give our animals a permanent home and proper care for their entire life. |
| 2 | 6 | Mental health support for teens | Our goal statement is bringing awareness to teenage mental health issues, by creating an in school program to be attended by students and staff once a month. Our goal is to connect the local mental health community leaders with our school community to raise awareness. |
| 3 | 7 | Emotional support animals (ESA) | We plan to take action by creating a local program we named “Engage with ESA Training Center” where we plan to have trained professionals volunteer to train domesticated animals for people who are qualified to receive an ESA specifically matched to their needs.<br>Through our program we plan to reach out to the mayor and eventually a Texas Representative to amend the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) to include stricter qualifications for ESAs. |
| 4 | 8 | Immigration | We plan on raising awareness of the issues that lie within the legal immigration process by making a PSA that shows what immigrants coming into America really go through and the hardship they face. We are going to do this in hopes of inspiring reform within the legal system that is so outdated and underfunded that people are waiting decades to start their lives here. |
| 5 | 8/9 | Cyberbullying | We will reduce suicide, anxiety, and depression for children who have sadly been cyberbullied on the internet. By [raising] awareness of this sad fact, we hope to have counseling supplied for both the bullies and the ones who have been bullied. |
| 6 | 9 | Gun safety | We will inform gun owners about the importance of gun-locking devices. By creating an awareness campaign to reveal the dangers of children having access to unsecured guns, and proposing a bill to require trigger locks be included with all gun purchases in the state of Texas, we will reduce the amount of injuries and accidents from children handling guns. |

topics, and topic goal statements written by campers. Civics Camp aligns with many essential attributes and characteristics of *The Successful Middle School* (Bishop & Harrison, 2021). Specifically, the camp curriculum is “challenging, exploratory, integrative, and diverse,” and camp instruction “fosters learning that is active, purposeful, and democratic” (Bishop & Harrison, 2021, p. 9). In addition, the goal of the camp is to empower and engage young people in challenging, responsive, and equitable educational opportunities that address issues of concern for young adolescents.

### *Data Sources*

Primary data sources for this study included six focus groups. We collected participant responses to a pre-camp survey and camp artifacts for triangulation purposes (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The focus group interviews followed a semi-structured interview protocol (Merriam, 1998), lasted approximately 30-minutes, and were conducted on either of the last two days of camp (see Appendix A). The pre-camp survey, administered as camp began, asked participants various questions about civic engagement, civic knowledge, and civic purpose. Questions were adapted from Flanagan et al.’s (2007) civic measurement model survey. Survey data provided us with a baseline of campers’ views on civic life and their identity as civic participants. We analyzed survey questions relevant to our research questions and reported these results in our findings. Camp artifacts included action civics project materials from each group.

All campers participated in the focus group interviews conducted within their project groups—the interview protocol aligned with our research questions and our conceptual framework. During focus groups, we asked campers to identify activities people their age could do to make their schools and communities/the world a better place. We also asked campers to explain why so many people their age do not engage in those activities. Additionally, we invited campers to identify activities they would like to do to make their school, community, or the world a better place and describe what might make it challenging to carry out those activities (i.e., barriers). Finally, we asked campers to imagine if they could carry out their group’s action civics project to address a community issue and identify potential challenges or barriers to actualizing their project. In order to elicit as many original ideas as possible, we asked campers to privately jot down their ideas on sticky notes before discussing ways youth could make their schools/community/world better. We collected sticky notes before the discussion.

### *Data Analysis*

For data analysis, we followed Creswell and Poth’s (2018) qualitative data analysis spiral, in which “the researcher engages in the process of moving in analytic circles rather than using a fixed linear approach” (p. 185). Data analysis included the processes of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification (Miles & Huberman, 1984). Focus group transcripts were first read in their entirety to provide us with a holistic view of participant responses. We then uploaded the transcripts to QSR NVivo 12. From here, we coded the data in three stages.

First, we assigned segments from each transcript to folders in the NVivo 12 program according to the questions asked during focus groups: school improvement ideas, school action barriers, community/world improvement ideas, community/world action barriers, action civics project barriers. This initial organization of the data enabled us to look for differences in perceived barriers to school versus larger community contexts for civic action.

In the second coding phase, school improvement ideas and community/world improvement ideas were coded using Westheimer and Kahne’s (2004) citizenship typology.

The third phase of data analysis focused on participants’ discussion of barriers to civic engagement in the school, community/world, and action civics projects. First, a process of open coding was used to view the full range of participants’ responses and identify patterns in the data that were not already mentioned in the literature (e.g., time, cost, transportation). In this stage of analysis, we identified 35 codes for school barriers and 35 codes for community/world barriers, with some overlapping codes across contexts. Data about barriers that would make carrying out action civics projects challenging were limited (three or fewer barriers or challenges were identified by each group). Therefore, these data were coded in a separate NVivo 12 folder rather than being included with the communities/world data.

We then conducted focused coding to collapse results from open coding (Saldaña, 2016). During this process, we used the five categories of barriers identified in the literature: *resources, knowledge/information, partnerships, social-emotional*, and *opportunities*. For example, during open coding, participants noted lack of adult support, family responsibilities after school, parents withholding permission, and concerns that adults "won't listen to me" as barriers to taking part in school-based civic activities. These data were collapsed into the "partnerships" category.

A new category, *civic duty*, was added to these five categories during focused coding. Bobek et al. (2009) defined civic duty as a construct related to civic engagement as "the desire and mindset to make positive contributions to society" (p. 616). Campers' statements that some people their age did not participate in civic actions because of traits such as apathy, being "selfish," "lazy," or "too cool" were assigned civic duty codes.

Finally, we analyzed the barriers for civic action using Camino and Zeldin's (2002) youth civic engagement supports—ownership, youth-adult partnerships, and facilitative policies and structures—while remaining open to other patterns in the data. Based on the data, Camino and Zeldin's notion of youth-adult partnerships was expanded to include other partnerships that included peer-to-peer partnerships (e.g., collaboration, buy-in) and parental support.

### *Researcher Positionality*

A significant limitation to note is that we developed the annual Civics Camp for our respective universities and carried out this research together. Specifically, the first author directed the Civics Camp that served as the site for this paper and facilitated focus group interviews, and the author team collaborated to design and carry out the study. All authors have leadership experience with prior iterations of Civics Camp. As such, we acknowledge bringing into this project our assumptions about middle school students' developmental needs, our values regarding the importance of civic engagement and social justice, and awareness of our positions of power as the decision-makers for Civics Camp and our research. In order to mitigate this limitation, we engaged in data triangulation, peer review, and researcher reflexivity (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

We used data triangulation by collecting multiple sources of data (e.g., focus groups, surveys, action civics projects) and conducting the focus groups with all six teams of campers (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Peer debriefing involved multiple conversations among the author team about data analysis, study conclusions, and implications and identifying which pre-camp survey questions to analyze given our research questions. Reflexivity was embedded in the study by having multiple researchers involved who could question assumptions and critically examine interpretations of findings.

## Findings

In this investigation, we wanted to know what barriers young adolescents perceive to civic action in their schools and communities. We begin our discussion of findings with an overview of participants' attitudes toward community change based on surveys administered as Civics Camp began. Next, we describe the types of civic activities participants envisioned for their schools and communities and the barriers participants identified within these contexts. Finally, we identify perceived barriers to civic action related to action civics projects.

### *Participants' Attitudes about Community Change*

As shown in Table 2, pre-camp survey results reveal participants' beliefs that they could make a difference in their communities. Overall, camp attendees held optimistic attitudes toward their ability to contribute. Furthermore, as a group, they believed that significant problems in their communities could be corrected when people work together. We believe this data helps us interpret the findings concerning barriers to civic action since they suggest participants entered Civics Camp recognizing their value as potential civic actors.

### *Schools: Actions and Barriers to Action*

**Types of Potential Civic Action.** During focus groups, we asked each camper to identify things people their age—including themselves—could do to make their school a better place. Most participants' suggestions for making their schools better reflected personally responsible and participatory notions of citizenship (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004).

Thirty-five campers representing all six focus groups responded to the question about what they would like to do to make their school a better place. Of their 39 ideas, 44% of participants' suggestions (n = 17) fell into the personally responsible category. There were six comments about volunteering to help others, five wanted to participate in school activities and fundraisers, three campers said they were willing to

Table 2
*Pre-camp Survey Beliefs about Community Change*

| **On a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), how much do you agree with each of these statements?** | **μ** | **SD** |
|---|---|---|
| I believe I can make a difference in my community. | 4.2 | .66 |
| When I see big problems in my community, I think they can be changed if people work hard enough on them. | 4.2 | .72 |
| If people work hard enough, big problems in my community can be fixed | 4.3 | .63 |
| No matter how hard people try to change things, big problems in my community will not go away. | 2.5 | .89 |

pick up trash around the school, and two said they could join student government. One camper said she wanted to "encourage people." Each of these suggestions involves taking personal responsibility to be "good" school citizens, and as such, participants seemed to recognize areas where they could take ownership and improve their schools.

Campers offered 16 ideas (41%) for making school a better place that represented what Westheimer and Kahne (2004) call participatory citizenship. In these cases, participants envisioned themselves soliciting peer involvement in student government, improving existing school policies/structures, organizing fundraisers, and creating new school clubs and programs. For example, recycling was a priority for four campers in this group, with one person wanting to get more students involved and three others wishing to improve or initiate new recycling programs at their campuses. Four campers suggested they could organize fundraisers. One male camper mused, "Maybe [we] can give [the money we make] to other schools that don't have any money to buy pencils, erasers, stuff like that." A female participant suggested another use of funds stating, " … I do cheerleading, so maybe more money [could be raised] for cheerleading so we can go places. Or maybe for school supplies if we need more." Other ideas included organizing a meeting with the principal to advocate for more recess, initiating new art and technology programs, and starting new clubs to discuss school problems or to help students make friends. One camper explained, "There's a lot of people who don't feel like they can fit into a club or a sport … maybe sports aren't their thing or band isn't their things and then they're just left out … " Another camper thought she could "get more kids to join student council" as a way of making her school better.

A third set of school improvement actions campers identified as things they could do were justice-oriented. Six ideas (15%) emerged from campers who wanted to improve their schools by addressing what they believed were injustices present at their respective schools; one or two campers offered these ideas in all groups except Group 2. Social concerns of three campers included bullying, shaming, and wanting to "make everyone feel equal." Two campers wanted to address structural problems: one aspired to get the student council "to work properly" while another camper wanted to change the school's floor traffic patterns so students could avoid being late to class. He explained, "I feel like it would just be a lot easier if [8th graders] could just go directly to their classes" instead of having to "walk all the way up to the third floor regardless of where they have to go in the morning." Finally, a Grade 9 student expressed a desire to organize ongoing student-faculty meetings to discuss and resolve tensions prompted by students' use of popular "distractions" such as fidget spinners and air pods.

**Perceived Barriers to Civic Action.** Focus group data showed that participants could readily identify barriers to their own and their peer groups' engagement with civic-oriented activities at school. Although participants cited limited resources (e.g., cost, time) and opportunities (e.g., someone else might address the need before we do), as well as lack of knowledge or information as barriers to making schools better places, the most common types of barriers campers described were associated with peers' limited sense of civic duty, and social-emotional concerns. Put differently, key obstacles to civic action at school were ownership and partnerships. These data primarily came from participants' responses to questions about what people their age (in general) might do to make their schools/communities/the world a better place and responses about what they would like to do (individually) in these contexts. To a limited degree, facilitative partnerships emerged as additional barriers.

**Ownership**. Ownership as a barrier emerged in the data less as a function of participant's capacity to lead and more of a challenge to get peers to take part in their ideas (i.e., partnerships). Participants in all of the focus groups cited apathy as a reason people their age choose not to participate in activities to improve their school. Common phrases to describe apathy included, "[believing] it's not my problem," "not wanting to [participate]," and "they don't care." Participants also described the reluctance of people their age to engage using phrases such as "lazy," "selfish," "too cool," and having a "bad attitude." A few campers expressed feeling powerless to elicit peers' concern for civic action to make school a better place, lamenting the challenge that, according to one camper, "[Other students] won't listen to me … They'll be like 'Whatever. Who cares?' But I care … "

Other comments addressed a lack of peer buy-in in less scathing terms. Instead, these remarks pointed to other priorities such as family obligations, inability to drive themselves to school events, or watching television and playing video games. For example, several participants suggested creating new clubs (e.g., social, academic, service) to make their school a better place. When asked to identify what might be challenging about this, one Grade 6 student replied,

> Probably getting people to join because they might not want to join because it might be, like, during school when they have something better to do. Or, it might be something after school when they're like, I just wanna go home and do all my homework and watch TV.

In these examples, participants recognized that their peer group is often reluctant to take ownership of problems in their schools due to apathy and other priorities. At the same time, campers could envision themselves owning initiatives to improve their schools (e.g., picking up trash, organizing fundraisers, improving student council operations) while acknowledging obstacles to buy-in by their peers.

**Partnerships**. As indicated in our discussion of ownership, partnerships with others emerged as a vital concern within and across focus groups when taking action that could make schools a better place. The data revealed that social and emotional concerns related to partnerships, in particular, were perceived barriers to taking part in civic action at school. Campers expressed fears that in the process of soliciting volunteers for fundraisers, club participation, or other school-based activities, they might feel rejected, misunderstood, or nervous. For example, during a discussion about picking up trash around the school as a way to make it better, one camper said someone might " … feel like an outsider because sometimes if you're hanging out with your friends, you don't want to be thinking about picking up trash. You don't want to be the one good kid." In a different group, a Grade 9 camper explained that when trying to organize a fundraiser at school, an obstacle would be that "not everybody that you go up to might be nice or friendly." Another camper worried that offers to help others might be met with anger: "They might say they don't need help, but … they're too proud to admit [that they do], and they get mad when you try to help them." These types of concerns signal social and emotional barriers young adolescents perceive when it comes to eliciting the kind of buy-in that would enable them to partner with peers in civic action.

In a few cases, partnerships with parents—or the lack thereof—emerged as a barrier to youth civic action at school. Participants described parents as gatekeepers resulting in barriers to resources (e.g., transportation, money) and opportunities. When describing how parents could limit opportunities to civic participation at school, one camper commented, "Some parents have [kids] super busy or they just don't let them go out because they have babysitting or chores." Another said, "Their parents are their only transportation … and they're at work." Similarly, a camper explained that helping out after school would not be possible because "their parents work and they have to go home immediately." These comments reveal that campers did not believe the only reason people their age do not engage in school-based civic actions is apathy or other priorities. Instead, they highlighted that youth often have little control over their choices about participating.

**Facilitative Policies and Structures**. Limited resources and opportunities for engagement were evident as barriers to civic action in the school contexts. For example, campers noted that lack of time was a significant reason people their age did not participate in activities such as volunteering, donating, recycling, and participating in student government. Obtaining funds was another barrier to action (e.g., purchasing new recycling bins, initiating new school programs, or launching fundraisers). One student mentioned “getting the school approval” to start a fundraiser would be a barrier. In a few cases, campers said opportunities might be limited because others already engage in the proposed actions. According to the data, perceived barriers to civic action at school related to facilitative policies and structures were evident but less frequently cited as a concern than barriers concerning ownership or partnerships.

### *Communities: Actions and Barriers to Action*

**Types of Potential Civic Action.** Campers who participated in a focus group were asked to name things people their age (including themselves) could do to make their community or the world a better place. Participants were not asked to identify the community they were referring to—local, regional, state, national, or global. Our findings reflect patterns across responses regardless of community locale. In accord with our findings of barriers to school-based civic actions, most participants’ suggestions for making their communities better reflected personally responsible and participatory notions of citizenship (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004).

Thirty-three students offered a total of 42 things they would like to do to make their communities better. Of these actions, 57% (n = 24) represented personally responsible citizenship. One camper captured several personally responsible actions as he stated that he would like to “help others, donate money to the poor, and pick up trash.” Another example of a personally responsible comment came from a Grade 9 student who noted that people his age are close to voting eligibility. This student said, “We’re three years away from being able to vote. So, you can start educating yourself on the next election.” A total of 10 campers wanted to volunteer, and three said they could “help others.” Three campers mentioned they could clean up trash, and three mentioned they could educate themselves or become more informed about issues. The remaining suggestions came from three campers interested in donating—one in taking in homeless animals, one in being kind and one in attending community events.

Thirteen (31%) of the ways campers suggested they could improve their communities were participatory according to Westheimer and Kahne’s (2004) citizen typology. Three students wanted to start an organization or event to benefit children or people in need in their communities. For example, one boy expressed a desire to organize a 5 K run to benefit people experiencing homelessness. He explained, “I want to find a charity to work with and then I can start [the 5 K] because there are a lot of people in [city] who struggle with homelessness and I want to help them.” Three students thought fundraising was something they would like to do, and three others talked about organizing people to pick up trash. Four other campers—each in a different focus group—shared original ideas that would garner support from peers/community members to address general community needs or offer emotional support.

Four campers (10%) had aspirations to engage in justice-oriented actions. These campers situated their suggestions at national and global levels, and they addressed large-scale issues such as protecting marine animals and stopping pollution. For example, a Grade 7 student explained his concern that greenhouse gases have increased global warming, and he would like to address the issue by encouraging people to “stop using gas and coal and start going electric.” Similarly, a Grade 6 student in a different group concerned about pollution wanted to “stop people from driving cars … maybe get long-lasting batteries for electric cars.”

Finally, one camper (2%) offered an action that was a career choice; based on the data, we could not classify this response as personally responsible, participatory, or justice-oriented.

**Perceived Barriers to Civic Action.** As with school-related topics, participants could quickly identify barriers to engaging in civic-oriented activities in the community/the world. To a limited degree, participants identified barriers of opportunity (e.g., too young; the magnitude of the problem), knowledge/information (e.g., people not knowing there is a problem), and social-emotional factors (e.g., physical safety concerns; immigration status). The most commonly reported obstacles to community-level civic actions included a limited sense of civic duty, challenges with partnerships, and lack of resources. Collectively, these obstacles reveal barriers in the areas of ownership, partnerships, and facilitative policies and structures.

**Ownership**. In many ways, barriers identified for the community contexts mirrored those at the school level. For example, apathy was a significant obstacle to youth owning civic projects in the community. According to participants, civic duty is not enough of a priority for people their age to overcome apathy, laziness, or protecting a "cool" image. Comments like "they don't want to be involved" and "not everyone is willing to help" illustrate the reluctance of youth to pick up trash in the neighborhood, volunteer at a homeless shelter, organize a fundraiser to benefit the community, and the like.

**Partnerships**. Echoing findings of barriers to school-based activities, partnerships with youth and adults was another strong theme in the data for the community context. Many campers believed people their age could improve their communities by reaching out to individuals beyond their friend groups from school. However, establishing networks with other youth and adults and then convincing those people to join their efforts was seen as a challenge. For example, one Grade 6 student lamented, "I don't know a lot of people in my neighborhood," as she reflected on what would be challenging about getting people to "volunteer … to pick up trash and make your neighborhood look nice." Another camper expressed an interest in dialoguing with city hall representatives to "talk about what we need in our community." When asked what might be challenging about this, he responded, "Trying to get them to agree." "[I'd be] good at talking to them," he continued, indicating that the *persuasive* act of communication would be difficult.

**Facilitative Policies and Structures**. Challenges associated with resources emerged as another strong theme in the community context data. Time was the most pressing obstacle to putting ideas into practice. Explanations for time as a barrier to civic action in communities mirrored those at school: youth are involved in sports, have family obligations, and "school and stuff" takes time. Students more frequently cited time as a challenge in the context of community—rather than school—civic action. Campers also acknowledged that projects like "going electric," organizing a 5 K run for charity, and establishing "cheaper recreational places" for kids to go in their neighborhoods all cost money. Additional concerns over resources dealt with obtaining and distributing materials, getting projects started (e.g., "it's going to be hard … to set up programs"), transportation, and capacity limits.

Other campers brought up social risks in the community context that sounded different from those in school-based improvement discussions. For example, a few participants noted that people their age might be reluctant to volunteer if a neighborhood was "scary" or if their immigration status might put them at risk of being deported. These social concerns point to barriers associated with environmental and legal structures that could prevent youth engagement in civic action.

**Action Civics Project Implementation Barriers.** Because campers situated their small group action civics projects in communities (broadly defined) and because project topics were self-selected by participants, we examined perceived barriers to project implementation. Participants in five of the six focus groups described what they thought would make it difficult to carry out their action civics projects if they could continue working after Civics Camp. This section describes the aims of these projects and potential barriers to carrying them out as reported by participants.

One camper group selected a school-based issue for their action civics project. This group targeted teenage mental health, and their advocacy plan was "bringing awareness to teenage mental health issues by creating an in-school program to be attended by students and staff once a month … during the students' elective period." When asked to comment on potential challenges to implementing their project, campers talked about buy-in at the school and the individual level. Participants explained, for example, that people might be "too scared to say they have mental health issues" or they "might be offended" if asked about their mental health. One camper worried about being sued for inquiring about mental health status as part of her group's campaign. Additionally, campers talked about how it might be difficult to "get the schools on board" with their school-wide project. Thus, for this project, partnerships emerged as the primary barrier to implementation.

The other groups explored topics that affected people their age, but the issues were outside of school contexts. For example, two groups were concerned about animals. First, one group wanted to address a root cause of overpopulated animal shelters by creating a digital app to educate new pet owners. Their idea was to ensure new pet owners had the resources to be successful with their new pets and avoid sending unwanted or misbehaving animals to shelters. This group named multiple challenges with their plan, including apathy of potential users, limited knowledge (e.g., "we're actually only going into 6th and 7th grade and we might not know how to make it"), competition, advertising, and "getting the right investor." The other animal-focused group wanted to address what they called “misuse” of emotional support animals. They planned to create a local animal training program and ultimately amend the American Disabilities Act to include “stricter qualifications for emotional support animals.” Participants in this group said challenges would be “that you have to go to the government to get the law changed,” and that “it’s a very big problem, and not a small, easy problem. It’s not things we can . . . volunteer for, it’s more we have to go and talk to people to try and help the problem.” In these examples, partnerships and resources were potential obstacles.

Another group of campers wanted to address cyberbullying both in and out of school settings, which they found through their research is one cause of teen suicide, anxiety, and depression. They planned to set up counseling resources for victims and offenders. When asked to describe barriers to carrying out their plan, these campers cited the costs and challenges associated with identifying who has been a victim and who has engaged in cyberbullying. In other words, resources and information were potential barriers to carrying out their project.

Finally, one group chose to study a topic they believed called for legislative action to address root causes related to gun safety problems. This group planned to raise awareness about “the dangers of children having access to unsecured guns” and to “propose a bill to require trigger locks be included with all gun purchases” in the state. One Grade 9 student in this group explained potential challenges to implementing the project this way:

> I think things like actually getting [a bill proposal] to government and trying to speak to actual representatives . . . and knowing what we’re really talking about—those are gonna be challenges of like, really knowing how to approach this.

Fellow campers added challenges of spreading the word and buy-in from adults, noting, “Adults are usually like, ‘Oh, they’re little. They don’t know what they’re talking about.’” Here, obstacles included partnerships and opportunities for access and sufficient knowledge to speak to representatives.

## Discussion

We begin our discussion by briefly summarizing our results, followed by three points for researchers and educators to consider. First, when working with youth using a civic engagement instructional model, like action civics, efforts should be made to build strong partnerships among youth, youth and adults, and the community. Secondly, we discuss the importance of working with youth to cultivate a sense of civic duty, highlighting how an action civics instructional model provides meaningful opportunities for students to *do* citizenship while learning about democratic life. Finally, we discuss the importance of working with youth to unpack systemic root causes of community issues and extend their thinking to more participatory and justice-oriented civic dispositions (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004).

### ***Summary of Results***

First, findings from the pre-camp surveys showed that participants entered Civics Camp feeling confident in their capacity to make a difference in their communities. Survey data also revealed optimism among participants that community change is possible when people work together. This finding sheds some light on the range and volume of responses campers offered when answering our focus group questions about how they could improve their schools and communities. With confidence in themselves as civic actors capable of making a difference, all participants could identify and discuss ways to make a difference in the school and broader community contexts. This finding pushes against deficit framings of young people as *citizens in the making* rather than individuals who deeply care about their communities and can take action (Biesta et al., 2009; Camino & Zeldin, 2002).

Second, our findings show that most campers’ ideas for improving their schools and communities reflected personally responsible notions of citizenship (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). This second finding is in accord with previous research that has revealed the prevalence of personally responsible understandings of citizenship among middle grades students (Blevins et al., 2018; Chiodo & Martin, 2005; Hickey, 2002). Interestingly, the frequency of ideas representing participatory citizenship in our data was not far behind ideas of personal responsibility. This trend in the data is possibly a result of our conducting of the focus groups near the end of Civic Camp, after campers spent four days working together on an action civics project and learning about advocacy. On the other hand, when we asked campers to identify things people their age can do to make their communities better, no participants referenced the type of work they were doing with their action civics projects. We wonder if campers assumed our questions about how people their age could improve their schools and communities were limited to individual acts since we did not overtly lead them to consider collective action. For example, the recurrence of "picking up trash" as a personally responsible response to our questions might reflect the ways civic education curricula in schools emphasize individual actions rather than community action (Biesta & Lawy, 2006; Journell, 2010). This finding may also highlight the critical role that self-efficacy and autonomy play in adolescent development, particularly regarding the development of civic efficacy (Hart & Wandeler, 2018). Some young adolescents' sense of civic action and agency may remain more individually focused, while others may think about changing society more broadly simply because of their developmental stage.

Finally, we found that participants readily identified barriers to civic action during focus groups. The two most frequently mentioned barriers to civic action were peers' reluctance to exercise civic duty (e.g., apathy, other priorities) and lack of support through partnerships with adults and peers (DeMink-Carthew, 2018). Resources (e.g., time), social-emotional factors (e.g., fear of rejection), and opportunities for access (e.g., age requirements, getting to talk to legislators) were additional barriers campers identified. Less frequently, participants mentioned knowledge and information as barriers to action. Our findings are consistent with the categories of barriers found in the literature that relate to high school and college students (Balsano, 2005; Hoang, 2013; McBride et al., 2006; Romero et al., 2010)

### *Limitations*

In addition to the limitation mentioned previously about the authors' roles as creators and leaders of Civics Camp, there are at least two other limitations to consider in light of our findings. First, Flanagan et al. (2007) developed the survey for Grades 7–12 students we used to obtain self-reports about civic life/identity, but they relied primarily on responses from Grades 11 and 12 students to create the survey. This study's participants included rising Grades 6–9 students. Second, although an interest in civic action was not required in order to attend Civics Camp, it is likely that many participants (or their parents/guardians) chose this program because of its focus on civics/community action. Our findings, while informative for other civic education programs, should be interpreted with the voluntary nature of the camp in mind.

### *Implications*

**Need for Strong Partnerships.** Regardless of context (i.e, school/community/world) and audience (i.e., peers/adults), securing buy-in from others was seen as a significant challenge to young adolescents' civic action. The need for strong youth-adult and youth-youth partnerships was made clear during focus groups, particularly as participants discussed their action civics projects. Each group had members who discussed the need for alliances with adults. Campers realized that to carry out their action civics project plans (e.g., create an app for pet owners, change legislation, form a school-based mental health awareness program), they would depend on adults to provide access, opportunities, and information. Findings also show that soliciting buy-in and collaboration with peers is also a barrier for young adolescents seeking to make a difference in their schools and communities. Romero et al. (2010) attested to this perceived barrier in their report in which 31% of 500 Grades 7–8 students surveyed from the Sacramento area expressed "feeling unwelcome by other youth" as a barrier to civic action.

Given the literature on adult perceptions of youth, the need for strong partnerships expressed by our participants is not surprising, and, in fact, this finding affirms other scholars' calls to move past deficit framings of adolescents as apathetic or incapable of enacting community change. As our survey and focus group data show, young adolescents have confidence and a desire to engage with their communities. Action civics is a curricular model that draws on adult partnerships by building connections between students and adult community actors. Additionally, action civics emphasizes principles of collective action and solidarity. With action civics, young adolescents learn how to build consensus with others and build coalitions with both adults and their peers. Thus, a key message participants receive during Civics Camp is the importance of working in solidarity with others for change (Fox et al., 2010).

The desire for youth-adult and youth-youth partnerships as described by participants in this study also speaks to problematic framings of civic life presented to students in traditional social studies curricula. In addition to framing civic life as a set of individualized acts or simply being a good person with strong interpersonal skills, social studies curricula often overlook the role of collective action in bringing about systemic change. For example, when students learn about historical movements for change, they are often left assuming a single actor is responsible for an entire movement. These actors are typically portrayed in an unrealistic light and seem far removed from the average citizen's life. Furthermore, curriculum models frequently give little attention to the actions of everyday people collectively fighting for their communities (Loewen, 2007; Van Kessel & Crowley, 2017; Zinn, 2015). Therefore, middle grades students may leave educational experiences with little historical evidence and practical guidance regarding how everyday citizens might work together to bring about change. In addition to using an action civics model for students to practice working in solidarity with others, our findings highlight the need to support students in learning to build partnerships and enact change through collective rather than individual efforts (Magill & Rodriguez, 2021). These findings align with the characteristics of effective middle level education, including the need to ensure that an adult advocate guides students' "academic and personal development" and that schools "collaborate with community and business partners" (Bishop & Harrison, 2021, p. 9). Action civics projects offer an opportunity for youth to work with adults and their peers to foster collective action.

**Importance of Cultivating Civic Duty.** While our survey data highlighted participants' confidence in their capacity to make a difference in their communities, our analysis of focus group interviews also revealed beliefs that apathy and other priorities often prevent youth from becoming engaged in school-based and community-based civic actions. Campers characterized their peer group as apathetic, too concerned with appearances, and unaware of community needs. Similarly, in Romero et al.'s (2010) study of Grades 7–8 students, nearly 60% of participants reported interest as a barrier to their civic participation. Given the current political climate in the United States, we cannot help thinking about how lack of interest, apathy, and a sense of futility (i.e., my vote does not count) will affect future voting patterns.

Participants recognized and spoke boldly about the need to cultivate a sense of civic duty among young adolescents. This finding underscores the necessity of helping students develop agency for civic action by doing the work of engaged citizens. Balsano (2005) posited that "For most youth, civic engagement requires first a personal transformation, and we need to accept the responsibility of aiding youth through that transformation" (p. 199). We think engaging youth in action civics projects such as those described in this study is one powerful avenue for fostering the kind of transformation Balsano describes. With action civics, youth apply conceptual tools for an engaged civic life as they learn the importance of talking to experts about community issues, collaborating to devise specific action plans that address root causes of those issues, and reaching out to the right people for partnerships.

A valuable aspect of action civics is cultivating passion among students by bolstering their confidence for action in solidarity with other engaged citizens. As our survey data shows, middle grades students may already possess some level of confidence to engage in their communities. If this is the case, educators can leverage that confidence to boost interest in civic action by introducing more active civic education approaches, such as action civics. Additionally, action civics curricular models center youth voices by asking them to identify issues in their community. By inviting youth to identify issues they can relate to, action civics draws on students' civic funds of knowledge (Magill, 2019; Moll et al., 1992) and connects to both the affective and cognitive domains that Wood et al. (2018) considered critical to working with young people to cultivate a more engaged civic disposition. In addition, action civics curricular models also support essential attributes of education for young adolescents, including empowering "students take responsibility for their learning and contribute positively to the world around them" and engaging young people in a "learning atmosphere that is relevant, participatory, and motivating for all learners" (Bishop & Harrison, 2021, p. 8).

**Connections between Action, Context, and Barriers.** We noticed some differences in the types of barriers campers anticipated, depending on whether the actions campers proposed were personally responsible or participatory. For example, when participants discussed civic actions within their schools and their communities that required taking personal responsibility (e.g., picking up trash, volunteering, donating, educating oneself), barriers to action were often grounded in a sense of civic responsibility (e.g., I should pick up trash, and if I don't, it's a reflection of my priorities). However, when participants spoke of soliciting assistance from peers or adults in participatory or justice-oriented actions (e.g., creating new social clubs, organizing fundraisers), barriers to action focused more on social capital (i.e., partnerships), access to opportunities, and resources.

Regardless of the context, participants described similar types of civic action they believed youth their age could and would take. The descriptions provided by participants consistently fell within the characteristics of personally responsible and participatory civic dispositions (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). Participants frequently mentioned personally responsible efforts such as volunteering, donating, picking up trash, and taking part in established clubs or organizations as ways they could improve their communities. Campers also named participatory citizenship actions they could take in both contexts (i.e., school and community), such as organizing people around shared interests or causes. These clusters of personally responsible and participatory activities across school and community contexts reveal a somewhat narrow range of approaches to civic action. We wonder if participants might have offered additional types of civic actions that could improve their schools and communities (e.g., proposing structural changes at school board meetings) if we had better scaffolded their understanding of systemic root causes and justice-oriented civic dispositions (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). With Civics Camp lasting only five days, we also wonder if extended time working on action civics projects would have resulted in participants' ability to offer new and more justice-oriented ideas about civic engagement for their age group.

The main differences in the data between school-based and community-based civic action concerned social-emotional factors and resources. School-based plans such as inviting friends to help pick up trash or join a new club involved social risks that were much less concerning in the community context. With school-based civic action, campers feared they would be rejected, misunderstood, or feel nervous when approaching peers to join their efforts. On the other hand, resources such as scheduling meetings with local agencies, gathering and distributing materials, or identifying sponsors were more concerning to participants at the community level than at the school level.

Here again, we see value in action civics projects conducted in peer groups. First, action civics projects can be a means of nurturing young adolescents to move beyond notions of individual civic duty and cultivate a skillset for building solidarity and coalitions. We wonder if many older youth and adults who are reluctant to engage in their communities are overwhelmed, without knowing how or where to begin, unable to see themselves capable of initiating collective action. Second, action civics approaches to civic education can teach students how to work with others to identify and reach out to target audiences with a specific action plan. Perhaps as educators and other adult partners provide youth with positive civic action experiences, they can cultivate civic duty while focusing on supporting youth with partnerships, opportunities, and resources. Finally, using action civics projects to address school-based issues could be fruitful in helping young adolescents learn social skills to persuade peers to engage alongside them. A benefit of action civics is its potential to empower students as they form peer-to-peer alliances around school and community issues relevant to their lives.

## Conclusion

By illustrating that young adolescents are willing to become civically active, our findings challenge deficit notions of youth civic engagement that position young people as unable to contribute to their communities (Camino & Zeldin, 2002). This study seeks to capitalize on young adolescents' ideas about civic action to inform educational approaches that can help youth view themselves as civic actors despite perceived barriers. Many youth may assume that they cannot be more participatory and justice-oriented citizens (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004) outside of the Civics Camp context because of the barriers they describe. However, we believe participants' awareness of their own needs for strong partnerships and interpersonal skills to solicit peer engagement in the face of apathy or other priorities is a good sign (Biesta & Lawy, 2006; Biesta et al., 2009).

Westheimer (2017) asked, "What kind of citizen" does our democracy need? We concur with his bottom lines—we need well-informed youth who can ask hard questions, entertain diverse perspectives, and "gain the knowledge, capacities, and dispositions associated with a robust democratic life" (p. 18). Barriers to action are inevitable aspects of civic engagement in a democracy. When supporting young adolescents as they navigate those barriers, we must seek to understand what kind of civic action youth believe they are ready to pursue. As seen in this investigation, both the contexts (e.g., school and community) and the nature of civic actions (e.g., individual and collaborative) make a difference in the kinds of barriers young people anticipate when engaging in democratic citizenship.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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## Appendix A

Focus Group Questions

1. What kinds of activities can people your age do to help make your school a better place?
2. Some people your age do not do any of those things. Can you help me understand why?
3. What is something you would like to do in order to make your school a better place? Is there anything that would make it hard for you to do this?
4. What kinds of activities can people your age do to help make your community or the world a better place?
5. Some people your age do not do any of those things. Can you help me understand why?
6. What is something you would like to do, to make your community or the world a better place? Is there anything that would make it hard for you to do this?
7. What is the community issue you are studying this week, and what is your plan? Imagine your group could actually carry out your ideas to address the issue. What might make it hard for you to do this?