Make Your Voice Heard:
Fostering Youth Political Empowerment at School

Scott Seider
Boston College

Daren Graves
Simmons University

Word Count: 2429

Please address all correspondence to:

Prof. Scott Seider
Boston College
Lynch School of Education & Human Development
Department of Counseling, Developmental, & Educational Psychology
140 Commonwealth Avenue
Chestnut Hill, MA, 02467
Telephone: (617) 512-2103
Email: seider@bc.edu

Prof. Daren Graves
Simmons University
Main Campus Building W304
300 The Fenway
Boston, MA, 02215
Telephone: (617) 521-2519
Email: daren.graves@simmons.edu

Make Your Voice Heard: Fostering Youth Political Empowerment at School

Preparing young people to be active and engaged citizens has been a core purpose of the American education system since its inception, and *political agency* plays a key role in such efforts (Levinson, 2012). Political agency refers to youths' belief in their ability to effect social or political change within their communities. Political agency matters because it is one of the strongest predictors of a youths' civic engagement, political interest, and attention to current events (Beaumont, 2010). Scholars have also theorized that political agency can transform a young person's understanding of social or political issues into a commitment to social action addressing these issues (Watts & Flanagan, 2007).

What does the development of a young person's political agency look like, and what role can schools play in this process? Our research team recently considered these questions as part of a five-year study of schools and youth empowerment that entailed following more than 400 young people from five different states as they advanced through high school (Seider & Graves, 2020). One of these young people was Adriana, a young woman at Blackstone Academy Charter School in Pawtucket, Rhode Island, whose parents had emigrated from the Dominican Republic shortly before she was born.[1]

As a tenth grader, Adriana described how empowered she felt by the opportunity to lead a Blackstone Academy **community meeting** educating her classmates about the police killing of African American teenager Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri. Following this experience, Adriana explained: "A lot of people might feel like they can't do anything [about social problems], but, in reality, you can do something. It might be just in your community, but it's better to do something locally than not to do nothing at all." One year later as an eleventh grader,

---

[1] All youth in this article are referred to by pseudonyms

Adriana cited her participation in Blackstone's **community improvement projects** as having strengthened her feelings of political agency as well. She explained: "Usually teenagers feel like they can't really do much because they're so young… but there's so much opportunities out there." Finally, as a twelfth grader completing her **senior social action project**, Adriana explained that she now felt empowered to engage in challenging social and political issues beyond her high school building: "My friends and I, whenever there's a march near us, we've been trying to go…just to help with making a difference and making the movement. So honestly wherever I see I can put my voice in, I'm gonna put my voice in."

Our research study revealed that Adriana's steady growth in political agency over four years of high school was representative of the experiences of many of her Blackstone Academy classmates as well. In fact, Adriana and her Blackstone classmates demonstrated steeper growth in their political agency than their peers across the broader sample. So how did Blackstone Academy contribute to their students' growth, and what are the takeaways for other educators committed to fostering their own students' political agency? Below, we answer these questions by bringing in the voices of several more Blackstone Academy students and teachers—and drawing on our field notes from more than 90 days of observations at the school— to highlight the programming and practices that contributed to Blackstone students' outsized feelings of empowerment and political agency as well as the implications for K-12 educators across a variety of schooling contexts.

Positioning Students as Knowledge-Holders

Blackstone Academy is a not-for-profit, public charter high school serving youth in three working-class Rhode Island cities. Located in an old factory building, the school features a student body of just 350 students. More than 80 percent of these young people come from low-

income families, and the majority have parents who immigrated from South or Central America. Once a month on Wednesday afternoons, the entire Blackstone Academy community convenes to learn about a topic selected and led by rotating groups of students. In recent years, topics have included bullying, feminism, micro-aggressions, Islamophobia, and autism. One Blackstone teacher said of these meetings: "I like those [meetings] because it facilitates a whole school-wide conversation. So it's not limited to one teacher's classroom or an honors class…And I think that shapes the whole school culture because it leaves the students to preserve and protect the culture."

For the community meeting focused on Islamophobia. Blackstone students leading this meeting shared video clips with their classmates that illustrated some of the stereotyping and discrimination experienced by Muslims in the United States. Blackstone student Destiny was one of the young people leading this presentation. She explained that the goal "was just teaching about how…terrorists are nowhere close to being Muslim. If you are a terrorist, you are not Muslim because Allah has nothing to do with violence. He wants nothing to do with violence… So it was really a strong topic, and a lot of kids came up to me and my teacher and said that was amazing to learn about. Just seeing how different it was from what they grew up thinking."

This experience was an empowering one for Destiny and her classmates leading this presentation because they had the opportunity to influence the beliefs and attitudes of their classmates about an important social issue. Likewise, the rest of the Blackstone student body had the opportunity to see their peers taking on this leadership and instructional role. Accordingly, one of the key recommendations coming out of our study is for educators and school-leaders to develop learning experiences that position students in the role of teacher and knowledge-holder. Scholar Albert Bandura (2006) has reported that such opportunities for youth to influence their

school community increase their belief that "political systems are also responsive and influenceable" (p. 30).

Modeling Skills and Commitments to Social Change World

Academic classes end at 1 PM on Tuesday and Thursday afternoons at Blackstone Academy so that students and faculty can spend the last two hours of the school day working together on community improvement projects (CIPs). Blackstone students are required to complete at least four of these semester-long projects prior to graduation, and they can choose amongst projects with names like Housing & Homelessness, the Poverty Project, Born to Run, Healthy Teens, Project Earth, Diver-cities, and Facing History. Blackstone principal Kyleen Carpenter emphasized that these projects—which include both academic learning and service in the community— are not extracurricular activities or enrichment experiences, but, rather, "one of the things that's helping our students get this understanding of their own power in the society we live in."

In the Housing & Homelessness CIP, Blackstone students learned about issues of affordable housing within their city, and then participated in a campaign led by a local organizing group to prevent utility companies from shutting off heat during the winter months on poor families behind on their bills. The Blackstone teacher leading this CIP explained of the phone-banking his students did for this campaign: "They were all nervous about phone-banking at first, and then they all loved it. Cause they loved the human component, talking to people and hearing people's stories. I think they like being outside the classroom and like still being in their community. Like we're not taking them to a community that they don't know or they're not familiar with, you know. We're going back into their own communities." Learning experiences like this one deepened Blackstone students' feelings of political empowerment and belief in their

4

own ability to effect social and political change. Consequently, another recommendation coming out of our research study is for educators and school leaders to structure service-learning experiences so that they introduce young people to specific skills involved in social-change work, expose them to adult mentors committed to such work, and offer practice in actually carrying out the work themselves.

Effecting Change in School

Blackstone students typically complete their CIPs during their ninth and tenth grade years of high school, which help them to develop the skills necessary to carry out more independent social action projects during their final two years of high school. In eleventh grade civics, for example, Blackstone students work as a group to identify a policy in the student handbook with which they disagree, and then engage in the organizing and advocacy work necessary to challenge the policy. Blackstone students in the Class of 2017 aimed their sights on changing the school's technology policy, which prohibited the use of smart phones, tablets, and headphones during the school day.

Over several weeks, Blackstone students spent their time in civics class researching the effects of technology on student-learning, developing a proposal for a "media pass" that would allow students to utilize technology at particular times in the school day, seeking buy-in from the rest of the student body, and creating a presentation for the school's faculty and staff. They debated and worked hard to come to consensus about questions ranging from whether the media pass should be usable during lunchtime to how Blackstone administrators should keep track of students who had lost their media pass privileges.

Ultimately, the civics students made their pitch to change the technology policy at the school's monthly faculty meeting. "In summary," a young man explained at the end of the

twenty-minute presentation, "the technology policy is outdated and incorrect, particularly in regard to tablets. So the media pass allows the use of phones and headphones at certain times… And it helps us prepare for college because in college you have more freedom to decide what you want to do." Faculty applauded their students' efforts, promised to consider the proposal seriously, and ultimately voted to try out the proposed technology policy for the remainder of the school year. If things went smoothly, the change would become a permanent one.

This learning experience was a deeply empowering one for many of the participating civics students. As Blackstone student Carla explained: "Being able to make change here, it does impact my future because I believe, like if I can make change within a small group, I can make change over a big group throughout a long period of time." Consequently, our third recommendation for educators and school leaders committed to fostering students' political agency is to offer them opportunities to effect change within their own school community. For many young people, their school community feels as much— or more— like their "real" community as their neighborhood, county, or city.

Effecting Change in the "Real World"

Finally, all of the civic knowledge and skills that Blackstone students develop over four years of high school culminate in their senior project. For this yearlong capstone experience, students can choose any topic about which they are passionate, and they then proceed through a series of steps that include authoring a research paper, interviewing people in the community, working with an organization, and ultimately carrying out a project that seeks to address their chosen topic.

One Blackstone student, Marco, who had immigrated to the United States as a middle schooler, chose to focus his senior project on challenges facing English learners (ELs).

Specifically, Marco interviewed English learners across the city about schooling practices that had and had not been helpful to their learning, and he compiled this information into a resource guide for educators across the city. As Marco explained, "My major goal was to make teachers aware of what is more effective on ELs because I'm an EL too. But I feel like some strategies that maybe teachers don't know about would have helped me more. And I feel like if they were aware of it, they would do something about it."

Marco sought through his senior project to have a tangible effect upon the English learners coming up behind him in primary and secondary schools across Pawtucket. And the effects of his project was further amplified when Blackstone's executive director, Carolyn Sheehan, arranged for Marco to testify before a state congressional committee about the importance of protecting funding for English learners in the state education budget. Though he had arrived in the United States only six years earlier with just a few words of English, Marco graduated from Blackstone Academy with a deep sense of having contributed to the success of English learners across his city and state. Accordingly, a fourth recommendation coming out of our research study is for schools and educators to develop opportunities for students to effect change in the world beyond their school community as well. The senior year, in particular, seems to offer a powerful moment for a capstone experience that allows students to exercise in the "real world" the knowledge, skills, and capacities they have spent four years developing.

Conclusion

Children's Defense Fund founder Marian Wright Edelman (1992) once observed that, "Education is for improving the lives of others and for leaving your community and world better than you found it." In these words, Edelman reminds us of an essential goal underlying the work taking place in K-12 schools across the United States. However, for young people to actualize

Edelman's vision of education, they must not only possess civic knowledge and skills, but also a sincere belief in their ability to effect social and political change. By sharing several of the promising practices taking place at Blackstone Academy, we have sought to offer both actionable takeaways for— and also to ignite the imaginations of— K-12 educators committed to developing the next generation of engaged and empowered citizens.

References

Bandura, A. (2006). Adolescent development from an agentic perspective. In T. Urdan & F. Pajares (eds.), *Self-efficacy beliefs of adolescents* (Greenwich, CT: Information Age Publishing).

Beaumont, E. (2010). Political agency and empowerment: Pathways for developing a sense of political efficacy in young adults. In L. Sherrod, J. Torney-Purta & C. Flanagan (Eds.), *Handbook of Research on Civic Engagement in Youth* (552-558). New York: Wiley-Blackwell

Edelman, M. (1992). The measure of our success: A letter to my children and yours. New York: Harper Perennial.

Levinson, M. (2012). *No citizen left behind.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Seider, S., & Graves, D. (2020). *Schooling for critical consciousness: Engaging Black and Latinx youth in analyzing, navigating, and challenging racial injustice.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.

Watts, R., & Flanagan, C. (2007). Pushing the envelope on youth civic engagement: A developmental and liberation psychology perspective. *Journal of Community Psychology, 35*(6), 779-792.

About the Authors

Scott Seider is an associate professor of applied developmental psychology at Boston College's Lynch School of Education & Human Development, and **Daren Graves** is an associate professor of education at Simmons University. Together, they are co-authors of numerous articles on youth critical consciousness development as well as the forthcoming book, *Schooling for Critical Consciousness: Engaging Black and Latinx Youth in Analyzing, Navigating, and Challenging Racial Injustice* (Harvard Education Press, 2020).