

## Student Voice in Elementary School Reform: Examining Youth Development in Fifth Graders

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*The present research examines the developmental outcomes of elementary-aged students engaged in student voice efforts. Using a case study of fifth-grade girls, the authors compare their experiences to research examining secondary school. The authors find marked similarities in the growth of agency, belonging, competence—the ABCs of youth development. The authors also notice two additional dimensions—the need to engage in discourse that allows an exchange of diverse ideas while working toward a common goal. The authors also observed the emergence of civic efficacy, or a belief that one can make a difference in their social worlds. The authors also examine the contexts and conditions that support positive youth development in this case—scaffolding youth learning, establishing inquiry as the framework for teaching and learning, and establishing a clear vision of the school as a place that fosters student voice.*

**KEYWORDS:** student voice, youth development, civic engagement, efficacy, youth-adult partnership

Although some evidence shows that today's youth are more disengaged and apathetic than decades ago (Putnam, 2000), other evidence indicates that they are indeed ready to take on civic issues in new ways (Ito et al., 2008). Research has found that schools do a good job of involving

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young people in community service activities (Flanagan & Faison, 2001; Honig, Kahne, & McLaughlin, 2001); although, they tend to fall short on involving youth in decision making and reform processes (Kirshner, 2004; Larson, 2000; Westheimer & Kahne, 2004).

One way in which youth can be involved in decision making and reform processes is through the development of *student voice*. At its simplest level, student voice can consist of young people sharing their opinions of school problems with administrators and faculty. More extensive student voice initiatives include collaboration between young people and adults to address problems in the school, with rare cases even allowing students to assume leadership roles in change efforts (Fielding, 2001; Mitra, 2005). By providing youth with opportunities to participate in school decision making that will shape their lives and the lives of their peers, increasing student voice in schools offers a way to reengage students in the school community and increase youth attachment to schools (Mitra, 2004). Student voice also can increase the civic engagement of youth, including fostering the belief that young people can make a difference in both their own lives and the lives of others (Ecclēs & Gootman, 2002; Kirshner, O'Donoghue, & McLaughlin, 2005; Mitra, 2004).

While the literature contains a wealth of examples of student voice efforts at middle and high school levels (Mitra, 2008; Stern, Romer, & Jamieson, 2002), the literature contains few examples of student voice at the elementary school level. Student voice efforts in elementary schools tend to be classroom focused (Angell, 1991, 2004; Beck, 2005; Ochoa-Becker, Morton, & Autry, 2001; Paley, 1992; Yeager & Silva, 2002). Elementary school students rarely have opportunities to participate in decision-making processes on schoolwide issues.

The lack of opportunities is noteworthy since the elementary years are a critical time for young people to begin to learn “civic habits” that prepare them for civic engagement throughout their lifetime (Hahn, 1998). Given the lack of understanding of developmental outcomes for elementary-aged students engaged in student voice efforts, our research examines the following questions: What does student voice look like at the elementary level? What types of outcomes does it produce?

## Positive Youth Development Outcomes in Student Voice Activities

While the word *youth* tends to instill a vision of a teenager, some definitions of youth set the beginning point of this developmental stage as early as 8 years old, including the definition used by the William T. Grant Foundation (2011). The use of this more expansive definition begs the question of whether youth development theory is applicable to elementary-aged students. The early years of youth development represent critical transitions in developmental processes. The development of student voice aligns with a youth development perspective, since it encourages a focus on youth as assets rather than as problems.

Youth development is a process that prepares young people to successfully navigate the transition to adulthood. While Piaget (1936/1952) and Erickson (1950) described these developmental shifts as integrated transitions, recent decades of research have found that these changes happen more fluidly rather than in such a lock-step, dramatic fashion (Kuhn & Franklin, 2008; Larson & Hansen, 2005).

Recent research does, however, verify that key developmental growth occurs from the end of elementary school to the beginning of high school. Young people begin to think critically about the world around them and to question injustices that they see. They also develop and deepen strategic thinking, abstract thinking, empathy and taking the role of others, temporal and causal ordering, and metacognition. This more gradual and variable view of development posits that younger children develop positive youth developmental assets at a range of ages; the emergence of these developmental processes often begins in elementary school.

The youth development field generally agrees on the types of assets that youth need to acquire to be prepared to navigate both their current and future situations. By understanding the developmental needs of adolescents and how institutions and organizations might meet these needs, the intent of a youth development perspective is to focus researchers, policymakers, and practitioners on youth preparation (Villarruel, Perkins, Borden, & Keith, 2003). For instance, youth need opportunities to influence issues that matter to them (Pittman, Irby, & Ferber, 2000), engage in actively solving problems (Fielding, 2001; Goodwillie, 1993), develop closer and more intimate connections with adults and with peers (McLaughlin, 1999; Pittman & Wright, 1991), and assume more active classroom roles (Costello, Toles, Spielberg, & Wynn, 2000). The research tends to begin exploring these assets in middle school settings.

This research uses the concepts of *agency*, *belonging*, and *competence* to reflect the assets that youth need to succeed in school and in their lives overall (Mitra, 2004). In this article, we add the concepts of *discourse* and *efficacy* (ABCDEs) to these three concepts based upon previous research. We do not use the ABCDE framework to conjure an elementary or playful tone but rather to highlight the serious capabilities of “younger” youth.

Research on the ABCDEs of youth development (see Table 1 for definitions) aligns with other research that has identified similar factors for adolescents to remain motivated in school and to achieve academic success (Eccles et al., 1993; Goodenow, 1993; Roeser, Midgley, & Urdan, 1996; Stinson, 1993). Other descriptions of specific assets include Lerner’s list of confidence, connection, caring, competence, and character (Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Lerner et al., 2005); the Search Institute’s 40 assets (Benson, 2003); and social skills, leisure time use, connection to adults, and decision making (Klein et al., 2006).

*Agency* in a youth development context indicates the exertion of influence and power in a given situation (Larson, Walker, & Pearce, 2005), which

*Table 1*  
**Definitions of Youth Development Assets**

Youth Development Asset	Conceptual Definition
Agency	Acting or exerting influence and power in a given situation
Belonging	Developing meaningful relationships with other students and adults and having a role at the school
Competence	Developing new abilities and being appreciated for one's talents
Discourse	Exchange of ideas and diverse opinions to work toward a common goal
(Civic) Efficacy	Cognitive belief that one can make a difference in the world, and the responsibility to do so.

can be a source of social capital for youth that can yield opportunities for further education, employment, and other enrichment opportunities (O'Connor & Camino, 2005). Student voice initiatives also provide legitimate opportunities for youth to take on meaningful roles (Camino, 2000), including opportunities to be change-makers in their schools and communities so that they can experience making a difference—especially by helping others in need (Mitra, 2004). Research conducted with middle school students in the United States also found that students valued their schooling the most when their teachers heard their voices and “honored” them (Mitra, 2004; Oldfather, 1995).

The concept of *belonging* in a youth development frame consists of developing relationships marked by supportive, positive interactions with adults and peers and opportunities to learn from one another (Costello et al., 2000; Goodenow, 1993; PISA, 2003; Roeser et al., 1996). Student voice activities have been found to increase students' attachment to their peers, their teachers, their school, and their broader community (Mitra, 2003; Sanders, Movit, Mitra, & Perkins, 2007), including seeking out and building on the strengths of diverse groups of people (Camino & Zeldin, 2002). When students believe that they are valued for their perspectives and are respected, they begin to develop a sense of ownership and attachment to the organization in which they are involved (Atweh & Burton, 1995). Most notably, scholars have found that an adolescent's sense of belonging to a school is positively related to academic success and motivation (Goodenow, 1993; Ryan & Powelson, 1991).

*Competence* in a youth development context consists of the need for youth to develop new skills and abilities, actively solve problems, and be appreciated for one's talents (Villarruel & Lerner, 1994). Student voice initiatives often also provide a rare opportunity to value a diverse range of talents and leadership styles (Camino & Zeldin, 2002; Denner, Meyer, & Bean, 2005; Sanders et al., 2007), including being a critical thinker, teacher, anchor,

peacemaker, and supporter (Larson et al., 2005; Perkins & Borden, 2003). Student voice initiatives also offer opportunities to learn a broad range of competencies, including physical, intellectual, psychological, emotional, and social skills (Camino, 2000). Specifically, student voice initiatives increase the ability of young people to identify problems and develop action plans to address them, facilitate conversations with adults and youth, and speak publicly to diverse audiences (Mitra, 2004).

This article introduces *discourse* in a youth development context as engaging in dialogue and understanding with others. Discourse is a term used in many ways and for many purposes, so we will take care to describe what we do mean and do not mean by this term. We do not mean to describe a highly specialized discourse community in this article—just the opposite. We describe the ways in which young people alter their language and form of interaction to be appropriate and effective across multiple audiences.

We define this concept of discourse as the exchange of diverse ideas and opinions to work toward a common goal. This asset includes learning how to engage with a difference of opinions as well as differences in backgrounds, working styles, and cultures. Included in this concept of discourse is the building of ongoing dialogue and social cooperation. Amy Guttman (1999) explains:

Because ongoing disagreement among reasonable people of good will is inevitable in any free society, mutual respect is an important virtue. Deliberation manifests mutual respect since it demonstrates a good faith effort to find mutually acceptable terms of social cooperation, not merely terms that are acceptable only to the most powerful, or for that matter to the most articulate. (p. xiii)

Thus, the creation of civil discourse includes mutual respect as a part of the deliberative process. We explain how youth learn and notice multiple social practices and adjust to them. Discourse in this article therefore describes a mode of communication that shapes civic life, “a kind of shared inquiry the desired outcomes of which rely on the expression and consideration of diverse views” (Parker, 2003, p. 129).

We present discourse as an important developmental asset, even for the upper elementary grades, due to the specific ways in which young people speak of learning to get along with others in this research and previous research (Sanders et al., 2007). Inherently, part of the work of student voice activities includes developing shared meaning making. Exchanging perspectives includes hearing others and actively working on how to incorporate, synthesize, and accommodate differences (Sanders et al., 2007). Little research on youth development addresses the importance of discourse, including attention to issues of diversity and cultural competence (Pittman & Wright, 1991).

*Civic efficacy.* Efficacy is a person's cognitively and socially constructed belief in his or her ability to produce results (Bandura, 2000). The broader concept of efficacy is based on the notion that people are social actors and producers of events and experiences. We define civic efficacy more specifically as the cognitive belief that one can make a difference in one's community, school, or related environments. Unlike the concept of agency that entails action, civic efficacy is the belief in one's ability to make a difference. It connotes a sense of confidence, a sense of self-worth, and the belief that one can do something, whether contributing to society writ large or to a specific situation.

Efficacy has broad application in subfields of research, used widely to understand varied academic and social performances from mathematics to athletics (Pajares, 1997). In research with children, foundational studies stemmed from three domains of children's perceived competence or efficacy: cognitive, social and physical (Harter, 1982), and later "general self-worth." Still, we have found no previous research that seeks to measure *civic efficacy*.

The related concept of political efficacy has been discussed in older adolescents, but this concept seems to be too narrow for younger students. While Beaumont (2010) includes the belief that one can make a difference in the definition of political efficacy, the target of this influence is specifically on the political system and is often measured in terms of voting behavior (Kahne & Westheimer, 2006; Syvertsen, Flanagan, & Stout, 2007). Certainly we would expect to see overlap between civic efficacy and political efficacy, but we consider these terms to be worthy of being separate constructs. Other work has measured adults' self-efficacy toward service (SETS), defined as the belief that one can have an impact on one's community. This research shows that for a sense of civic responsibility, one must feel their actions can make a difference (Weber, Weber, Schneider, & Sleeper, 2007).

## Method

*Sample.* This article is based on a longitudinal case study design intended for the purpose of explanation building (Yin, 1994). The research sample is based on representativeness of the concept of student voice (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), rather than representativeness of school sites. We chose a strong example of civic engagement in an elementary school to examine the possible types of positive youth development outcomes for elementary-aged youth. The study examines the emergence of student voice at "Dewey Elementary School" (all names are pseudonyms). Dewey Elementary is not seen as an advantaged school and it did not make adequate yearly progress as a part of the mandated student testing in 2010. It is, however, situated in a high performing district. Set within a district that serves a large college town, surrounded by rural areas, Dewey serves 450

children from kindergarten to fifth grade, ranging from children of professors to children of families on public assistance. Of the students, 27% receive free or reduced lunch. The school has 6% students with special needs, and 14% of the population consists of students of color (primarily African American).

Led by a 20-year veteran principal with a strong vision, Principal S. is leads her school in a manner that facilitates a hub of relationships that uphold the vision of a school that focuses on building a “caring community of learners connecting our classrooms to the world outside.” With her guidance, the school regularly engages students in a variety of democratic pedagogies and forums. The range of activities at the school have afforded the opportunity to develop multiple cases studies, including: service learning efforts embedded in curricular practice, small school advising groups with cross-age groupings, weekly schoolwide assemblies run by the fifth graders, and student participation in schoolwide decision-making processes to modify school rules.

Each case within Dewey offers one way to examine what civic engagement looks like in practice (Mitra, Serriere, & Stoicovy, 2012; Serriere, Mitra, & Cody, 2010; Serriere, Mitra, & Reed, 2011). In this article, we focus on positive youth development outcomes by presenting an in-depth case study of six fifth-grade students seeking to change school and district rules. We describe these students as the “Salad Girls”—a name affectionately earned and accepted in their school. These six girls worked collaboratively with their teacher and principal to change the school lunch menu to include a meat and cheese free salad option so that students with food allergies and religious constraints (including Muslims and Orthodox Christians at Dewey) could have a salad option available to them.

*Data sources.* We conducted extensive interviews with students, teachers, and administrators throughout a 2-year period (and we continue to collect ongoing data at this school). These interviews served as the primary source for all of the quotations in this article. Appendix A in the online version of the journal provides examples of the protocols that were used for this study. Semi-structured protocols during these interviews focused on the types of activities occurring and the types of outcomes for youth and the school that were emerging. The girls in this study were asked how they got involved in the work, the purpose of the work, their experience of the process of the work, and the lessons learned from their experiences. Subsequent interviews included reflections on recent events since the prior interview, including what happened and what they continue to learn from their experiences with their work.

Using these protocols, we interviewed with each of the students in this article individually at least three times (Tameka, Libby, and Ayesha provided us with additional individual interviews). The individual interviews lasted approximately 15 minutes each. We also interviewed the students as a focus

group twice. The focus groups lasted 45 minutes each. During these focus group interviews, individual voices were indistinguishable. If a student is not identified directly in this article, that quotation has come from a focus group rather than an individual conversation. Each of these quotations is described as “The Salad Girls responded collectively . . . .” Otherwise all quotations are attributed to the particular student. Drawing on data from our broader project, we conducted six focus groups of Dewey students representing a cross-section of ages and classrooms. These discussions allowed us to contextualize what it is like to be a student at Dewey and allowed a comparison of the Salad Girls experience with other students in the school.

During our data collection, we met with Principal S. approximately once every 2 months to learn more about how democratic processes were occurring from her perspective. We also have observed Principal S.’s role in faculty meetings once a month, professional development sessions during in-service days, and during interactions with student and teachers over the course of our data collection. The two coauthors of this project have conducted four interviews with Mrs. O. as well as ongoing informal conversations and e-mail exchanges that occur approximately every 2 weeks.

Our research team consisted of two professors at Penn State, plus 10 graduate students and two undergraduate students. The two professors (the coauthors in this article) trained the graduate students in data collection techniques and hosted monthly meetings to discuss ongoing findings and data collection issues as they arose. As a part of our broader data collection efforts at Dewey, members of our research team visited Mrs. O.’s classroom at least once a month and often much more frequently depending upon activities of interest happening in her classroom. Other than these observations, the coauthors of this article collected all of the data for this article.

While we would have liked to have collected data prior to the beginning of their change effort, this particular article arose out of an opportunity to explore a phenomenon as it was occurring. To attempt to learn more about the girls prior to the study, Mrs. O. and Principal S. reflected on the contexts and backgrounds of the girls in the study in order to further our understanding. Their reflections helped to bolster researcher observations and conversations with the Salad Girls themselves. Appendix B in the online journal synthesizes this information by providing demographic data on the six girls, including school roles prior to the project, parent involvement in the project, academic performance, ethnic and religious background, socioeconomic status (SES), and parental activity in the community. We also include descriptions of the girls as they are introduced in the case study.

*Observations.* With a research team of two faculty members and eight graduate students, we conducted weekly observations in the building. We observed critical meetings between students, teachers, administrators, and district staff and recorded field notes during our observations with laptop

computers. We also observed classroom settings and All School Gatherings (schoolwide assemblies).

*Documents and artifacts.* We also analyzed artifacts and documents. The Salad Girls collected student comments and surveyed Dewey students for their opinions of the Salad Girls' project. They developed PowerPoint presentations that they presented to the entire school and they also took photos of students engaged in democratic practices through a range of activities. Mrs. O. also took photos of the Salad Girls in action. All of these data were included in our analyses process.

During all of the observations, researchers sat apart from the groups and did not involve themselves in the activities of the group. The intention of the observations was to capture the experiences of the cases to better illustrate the mechanisms and processes that fostered or hindered meaningful civic engagement, and specifically how leadership mattered. We also looked for supporting and refuting evidence of changes in students and teachers, as reflected in survey and interview data, described in the following.

*Data analysis.* The analysis of the data began through a previously developed positive youth development conceptual framework (Mitra, 2004). Despite encountering the data with an initial framework, we held the expectation that the new data would revise and improve the previous work (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The recorded and transcribed qualitative data were analyzed with a line-by-line analysis and open coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) to identify major inductive and deductive themes by using NVivo software. Moving back and forth between the data from this study and the literature on youth development and student voice led to the creation of an *explanatory framework*, which illuminated the outcomes experienced by the fifth-grade girls in this study (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

Special care was taken to search for discrepant evidence and claims that could be considered contradictory to the goals of the case activities. For example, we interviewed fifth-grade and younger students not participating in the Salad Girls initiative directly to gain their experiences on the case. We also looked across the Salad Girls' experiences to look for differences in developmental outcomes as well as commonalities. We also shared quotations and drafts of this article with students, teachers, and administrators at Dewey as member checks of their own experiences. Our research team also searched for counterevidence to our claims in our NVivo data and during discussions at our research team meetings.

### **Case Study: The Salad Girls**

For a group of fifth-grade girls at Dewey, months of civic action began from something as ordinary as the premade school salad. Dewey Elementary School served the daily lunch salad with ham, croutons, and cheese. Three

fifth-grade girls identified the issue together at their lunch table—the dietary choices offered at lunch did not reflect the students’ diversity. Tameka accidentally signed up for the salad and sat without anything to eat, because she was lactose-intolerant. She tried to trade her lunch with the other girls at her table, but could not because they could not eat it either. Ayesha could not eat the salad because she was a vegetarian as a part of her Muslim faith. Haley could not eat that salad that Friday because she was orthodox Christian. Through shared irritation, the three girls decided to raise concerns about their lack of food choices.

The Salad Girls first brought their concerns to their fifth-grade teacher, Mrs. O. Often classroom teachers are the gatekeepers in elementary school—they have the ability to shut down student requests since young students often lack the capacity to know how to share their concerns beyond their classroom teacher. In this case, when the girls raised their concern, Mrs. O.’s immediate response was “I am proud of you.” She assured the girls that they would work together to learn more about how to improve lunch options.

Mrs. O. encouraged the girls first to request a meeting with Principal S., to discuss ways to take action. A key aspect of this case was the intentional efforts of Principal S. to guide the students to a less contentious start to their process. Principal S. welcomed them to her office and heard their concerns.

When she asked the girls how they would like to proceed with their idea, the girls initially wanted to picket the lunchroom and develop a petition. Principal S. explained, “I told them, ‘Let’s start by developing an inquiry question and gathering information. How do we know that this is important to anyone else without gathering information from the rest of the school? What questions do you think that we should ask others to find out if this is important to them? Protest should be a last resort, not the first step.’”

Inquiry-based practice can offer a particular avenue for civic engagement since it is a process by which teachers and students collectively can become actively engaged in exchanging ideas, providing support, offering critique, and sharing expertise (Copeland, 2003; Lieberman & Wood, 2001). At Dewey, scaffolding of student voice occurred within a context of an inquiry-based approach to teaching and learning. Students, teachers, and administrators frequently posed questions about teaching and learning and then collected data to answer these questions (Mitra et al., 2012).

Principal S. suggested that the girls begin their inquiry process by sharing their idea with the entire school. She helped the girls prepare a short speech and PowerPoint presentation at a weekly All School Gathering (ASG) to introduce their inquiry question to the 450 other Dewey students. Principal S. instituted the All School Gathering (a schoolwide meeting) as a structure for fostering civic engagement in the school. In its third year, the All School Gatherings were an incorporated part of the school week, occurring every Tuesday afternoon for 45 minutes.

The idea behind All School Gatherings in Principal S.'s words is that they are "student to student." Filled with skits, music, and celebrations, ASG constituted a community-building forum in which the students can take active leadership and participation roles, interacting directly with each other in these roles, as opposed to the traditional classroom structure where the teacher is leading and the students are following. Some teachers initially expressed resistance since ASG might take time away from "academic" time, but eventually the faculty developed a shared appreciation for the ASGs as they saw how they impacted the students.

While the principal initially ran the meetings with assistance from some students, ownership of the assemblies shifted from the principal to the students, with support from the teachers of the fifth-grade classes. Each week a different team of fifth graders took a turn planning and leading the half-hour long assembly. The Salad Girls presented their issue to the school in February of 2010:

Children file into the all-purpose room for the weekly All School Gathering as the song "This Land Is My Land" is being played on the piano. Two of the fifth graders, who act as emcees for that week's ASG, read the agenda for the meeting. The emcees present the weekly citizenship awards and the "Penguin (school mascot) Awards." Then they hand the microphone over to the Salad Girls for their presentation to the school.

The Salad Girls informed the school body of their dissatisfaction with the school salad. Ayesha, Tameka, and Haley stood before the school and explained their struggles with eating the salad. They asked the school, "Should we have a salad without meat or cheese? We want your opinion!"

The girls explained that they would be coming to visit classrooms to get opinions on the new salad. They also invited anyone to help with the project to join them. They ended their talk by saying, "We need your help, Dewey Elementary!"

Based on this presentation, the Salad Girls expanded from three to six when Bella, Libby, and Madison joined the group. Bella was a quiet, average student who did not tend to take on leadership roles. Yet the presentation compelled her to get involved. She explained,

I was watching them up there, and I was listening to all their reasons, because I had heard them over and over again. Them presenting it in front of the whole school made me realize that we were doing something not just for us, but for everyone else. That they would really want to change it!

This expanded group worked with Mrs. O. to collect information from all students in the school. They decided to visit each K-5th-grade classroom to take opinion polls (agree or disagree) on the current salad options. On every morning of data collection, Mrs. O. would e-mail the faculty to learn

which teachers would be willing to have the girls come to their rooms to collect data. Mrs. O. would then tell the girls which classrooms they could visit during the fifth-grade recess period.

The girls posed their inquiry question to the classes, counted raised hands, made tallies by fives with pencil and paper, and calculated the totals for and against a change of salads.

It was a rainy day in March. During their own recess time, four of the Salad Girls (Tameka, Ayesha, Libby, and Bella) entered one of the last classrooms for data collection. The first-grade students were sitting in a circle on the carpet with their teacher. The Salad Girls stood in front of the room in front of the white board.

As was the case with most classroom visits, Tameka tended to do most of the talking. She greeted the class and asked the research question that the Salad Girls were examining. She asked the class, "Have you ever wanted to have different things on your salad at lunch? Or have you ever not been able to eat the salad at lunch?" She then asked the class to raise their hands if they did.

But before the vote was cast, the teacher interjected, "Don't raise your hand if you don't eat salad!" Several hands were lowered.

"It's okay," Libby told the group. "Even if you don't eat the salad you tell us if you think a friend has not been able to eat the salad or wished for different choices."

But the damage was done. Only a few extra students raised their hands again.

Ayesha carried the clipboard for the group and tallied the numbers, her role for most of the data collection. With the help of Mrs. O., the girls had developed a data sheet that included columns for "name of teacher, how many kids in the class that day, how many voted that they wanted to change the menu." Ayesha added up the results. The girls then thanked the teacher and left the room.

Reflecting later on the process of collecting information, Libby responded, "In that class, we didn't get as many votes as we did in other rooms. After the teacher made that comment, the students were reluctant to raise their hands. That was frustrating. We tried to explain it again, but a lot of kids who didn't have their hand up before didn't have their hand up afterwards."

Luckily the experience in this classroom was a rare disappointment for the Salad Girls' data collection process. The girls also adapted their research techniques based on how the process was going. When asked how to collect the data as they tried out their strategy in a few rooms, Ayesha commented, "In the classes, we realized it was so much better [to have] everyone standing up [rather than raising] the hands. [When students raised their hand], people would put it, up and down, up and down so we're like, 'Okay, stand up, if you want to, and then if you stand up, don't move.'"

Tameka added, "We said, 'Stand up *silently*.'"

Madison was one of the Salad Girls who took photos during the data collection process. An exceptional but quiet student, her careful observations helped to improve the group's process. She noted that having the students actually stand if they supported the new salad also made it easier to take photographs of the class support.

Overall, the Salad Girls were pleased with the positive response from the students. Haley, the Salad Girl who perhaps had the greatest parental support for participating in the project, was surprised by the support that they received from their fellow students. She reported that she was surprised to learn from the class opinion surveys that, "Most people thought that it would be a good idea [to change the salad], and it would be better because they'd actually eat the salad then."

After all of the classrooms were visited, Mrs. O. worked with the girls to understand the validity of their data, including examining whether peer pressure to agree with the fifth-grade girls might have influenced the totals.

Mrs. O. invited all six Salad Girls to grab lunch in the cafeteria and join her in their classroom on a sunny April day. The group gathered around a work table tucked in the back of the room next to Mrs. O.'s desk.

The girls added up the tallies from all of the classrooms, with Ayesha taking the lead as the chief recorder during the data collection. The group then worked with Mrs. O. to convert their totals to percentages of the student body.

Based on these analyses, "We found that over 90% of the student body agreed that the salads should be changed to have more choices," Tameka explained. Libby added, "So many kids want to change the menu. It was a good number of kids."

The girls also talked about what they should put in our PowerPoint. As they were talking about it, Ayesha wrote down the ideas. Libby emphasized, "We don't want a full salad bar. We want an area in the line where you could put different things on your salad."

Mrs. O. asked questions about their data collection processes. She also asked questions that the cafeteria personnel might want to know, including "How many kids were absent when you collected the data?" The Salad Girls referred to their data summaries to practice answering her questions. The group kept working until the rest of the class returned from lunch and it was time to begin their science lesson.

Armed with data to support their cause, the girls prepared with Principal S. to meet the school's head cafeteria coordinator. In another example of scaffolding, Principal S. explained to the girls how decisions work and helped them to practice the type of language that they would use to present their issues so that the adults would hear them. The Salad Girls requested a meeting not to demand a change; instead they asked to learn about USDA protein and calcium requirements that impact salad content.

Upon meeting with the school's cafeteria coordinator, they reached an impasse in their hope for change: Mrs. M. explained that although she'd like to help them, her "hands are tied" and she couldn't break from the USDA requirements or do "something special" that children in other district schools would not receive. The girls, although initially dismayed, decided to continue their research and quest for change.

The principal encouraged the group to meet next with the district-wide cafeteria manager, Mrs. Y.

On a humid day in late May, Principal S. hosted a crowd in her office. All six of the Salad Girls, Principal S. herself, and the district cafeteria manager Mrs. Y. were seated around Principal S.'s large conference table. Everyone munched on the apples that Principal S. always had available in the center of her table as the discussion began.

The Salad Girls presented the PowerPoint that they had developed collaboratively. The girls worked on it in the evenings over Google Docs so that they could collaborate even when they were in their separate homes. Each girl had one slide to present as a part of the presentation. The group turned to look at the large screen encompassing a wall of Principal S.'s office as the girls made their presentation.

Mrs. Y. asked, "Are you wanting a salad bar? Those are very difficult to maintain."

Tameka responded, "No we don't. We just want to be able to not have meat or cheese on our salads."

Libby added, "You could get beans instead of meat for the protein!"

Initially, Mrs. Y. cited the same road-blocks (efficiency, equity among schools, USDA requirements) but eventually agreed that Dewey could be a "trial school" for having two more salad options for children: one without meat and one without cheese. Mrs. Y. offered to create two new lunch options—a salad with no meat and a salad with no cheese.

The girls were pleased with the decision, which they proudly announced at the next All School Gathering. After sharing that the school would now pilot six lunch choices instead of four, the Salad Girls concluded by telling the school, "We also want you to know that by working together you can make a difference at Dewey!"

In September of the following school year, the Salad Girls' efforts were further recognized during a school visit from the state's Secretary of Health, nutritional researchers from the local university, and the president of that university. The Salad Girls (now in middle school) took the microphone once more at their old elementary school and told their story to this forum of school parents, teachers, students, and visitors. The Secretary of Health responded, "What's really fascinating is you used democracy. . . . You used the democratic process. I congratulate you for that effort. We'll make sure to take this story and share it with a lot of other people in

Pennsylvania.” The girls also learned that day that the entire district had changed their salads because of their efforts. The girls were interviewed by a local television station and featured in the local newspaper.

### **Positive Youth Development Outcomes for the Salad Girls**

Our examination of the Salad Girls’ experiences looks at younger students than typically considered in youth development research. This section examines the ways in which the Salad Girls exhibited the development of agency, belonging, competence, and discourse in their student voice experience. We also explore the relationship between agency and civic efficacy.

*Agency.* In a youth development context, agency indicates the ability to exert influence and power in a given situation. In other publications, agency can be equated with contribution and confidence as key aspects of youth development (Lerner et al., 2005). The experiences of the Salad Girls align very tightly with agency outcomes in older grades.

In activities with a focus on student voice, a sense of agency includes the notion that youth ideas are *to be heard and respected* (Costello et al., 2000; Eccles & Gootman 2002; Kirshner et al., 2005). Tameka and Haley especially spoke of this shift:

Interviewer: Some people think that kids should just obey the rules and not question the decisions that adults have made. What would you say to those people?

Tameka: We all have rights and . . . if we want to change something, we have to stick up for each other. . . . Fight for your rights! That’s all I got to say.

Haley: You can do whatever you want to, as long as you . . . as long as you try hard enough.

Madison: Just because adults make the rules doesn’t mean that we don’t have the chance to say that. And we all have the rights to stand up for them. And they shouldn’t say that we shouldn’t be allowed to do that, because that’s just against our rights.

This growing sense of being heard also related to a self-empowerment that they have the *right to question authority* and to push for change. This type of citizenship fits with Westheimer and Kahne’s (2004) justice-oriented citizen.

A justice-oriented citizen questions and asks why injustices exist—even if the answer lies within the authority structure itself. One of the Salad Girls reflected a similar sentiment during a focus group, “You don’t always have to go by the rules that someone else tells you, because you can change it if you really want it changed.” Mrs. O.’s teaching style encouraged the girls to speak truth to power. She explained,

I also have an issue with demanding respect because I’m an authority figure. Just because I’m an adult does not make me any wiser. I know I’ve lived more years, but everybody has their own different life

experiences that make them just as wise. There's a level of human-being-ness, that I say to the kids, has to be in a relationship for the relationship to be successful. It's not about age; it's not about a title. Respect me because I am. I respect you because you are. I want you to have the best year. You tell me how I can help you.

Working on the Salad Girls project helped to broaden the identity of the girls so that they saw themselves as *leaders who could make changes*. Part of this leadership development was being willing to stick one's neck out and take risks. When asked how she has changed as a result of being a part of the Salad Girls, Tameka added, "I think now I'm not afraid to take a stand and try to change something that I think should be changed. And fight for what you think should be right."

The success experienced by the Salad Girls also increased their confidence in their ability to be successful at making changes if they took risks to do so. One Salad Girl who particularly developed a belief in herself was Libby, a girl who, according to her mother, dyed her hair purple and tried to wear every color of the rainbow on her body every day because she didn't want any color "to feel left out." Libby had been dealing with difficult transitions in her family since her father had moved out unexpectedly.

According to Libby's teachers and her mother, the opportunity to participate in an activity that validated who she was and respected her for who she was seemed to make a big impact on her. While fairly quiet in focus group interviews, when asked one on one to reflect on how her experience with the Salad Girls affected her, she proudly exclaimed, "I know that I can change stuff now, and if I try hard enough that I can." Reflecting on how she has changed as a result of the Salad Girls experience, Madison similarly commented, "I think it's made me more confident and made me a better leader, because I have to work with all of them to be able to do this." Following up with the Salad Girls the following year, they unanimously expressed plans to begin working with their new teachers and administrators about concerns that they are seeing in this new setting.

*Belonging.* The concept of belonging in a youth development frame consists of developing relationships consisting of supportive, positive interaction with adults and peers and opportunities to learn from one another (Costello et al., 2000; Heath & McLaughlin, 1993; Pittman & Wright, 1991). The Salad Girls did not express initial feelings of disconnection at their school. This increasing disconnection does not tend to happen until middle school (Nightingale & Wolverton, 1993; Pope, 2001). Perhaps, however, student voice opportunities in younger years could help to stave off the decrease of belonging that tends to occur in adolescence. This question could be the basis of future research.

While not showing initial school detachment, the Salad Girls do show evidence of a deepened *connection to caring adults* during their joint

work. These connections were especially important to Tameka. Because her parents were having troubles themselves, Tameka was living with foster parents during the Salad Girls events. She had not experienced many opportunities to connect with a caring adult in her life. Collaboration with Mrs. O. helped to establish a deeper, trusting relationship with her teacher. Tameka explained her first discussion with Mrs. O. “She said, ‘I’m proud of you. We’ll talk to Principal S. about it.’” Mrs. O. provided a special source of connection for Tameka, an African American girl who towered a head taller than the other Salad Girls and most of the children in the school. As a statuesque woman herself, Principal S. believed that “Mrs. O. provided Tameka with a strong role model”—and one who defied traditional stereotypes as much as Tameka did. Principal S. expressed gratitude that Tameka had the opportunity to develop a special connection to Mrs. O. during a turbulent time in her home life.

The rest of the Salad Girls also developed greater overall connections to teachers and the principal in general. The girls interacted with every teacher and classroom in the school to collect data for the project. Ultimately, however, Mrs. O. and Principal S. formed the strongest bonds with the Salad Girls. When the other Salad Girls were asked why they decided to work on this project, they consistently responded, “If it wasn’t for Mrs. O. . . . and Principal S.” they could not have persisted with the project and found success. Mrs. O. described her focus on caring:

I think that they “get” that I really do care about them. And it’s not, “I’m your teacher.” I need them, as much as they need me for this to work in the way it needs to work for everybody to be successful. And successful for me is they’ve left happy and they’ve had an excellent [year]. . . . It’s carried over to the next year.

Through meetings with Mrs. O. and Principal S., the girls were coached on developing a strategy for their effort. “Mrs. O. and Principal S!” supported them and helped them to develop their project, as much because of their own beliefs about the purpose of teaching and school as for the project itself.

The Salad Girls deepened *connection to peers* throughout the process as well. They explained in a collective response, “It brought us all closer to do this project and made us feel more like sisters or best friends.” Tameka added as she reflected back on the year, “I think from seeing like how all of us have grown into being like better friends and like understanding each other more. That’s [the relationship has] grown a lot. And it’s just been a great experience to be with my best friends. But before we didn’t know any of each other, but now we’re like . . . we’re like this! [fingers crossed].” In a focus group, the Salad Girls collectively used the words *sisters* and *friends* frequently when referring to one another. The girls learned to

develop friendships with new and different types of people through their joint work.

*Competence.* In a youth development context, competence consists of the need for youth to develop new skills and abilities, actively solve problems, and be appreciated for one's talents (Goodwillie, 1993; Mitra, 2004; Villarruel & Lerner 1994). Critical to their successful campaign was the process of strategically *collecting, analyzing, and presenting data*. Working with Mrs. O. and Principal S., the girls abandoned a potentially more contentious strategy of petitions and pickets. They instead embarked upon a journey of data collection as a way to establish their point and communicate it effectively with district officials. Tameka reflected that after meeting with Mrs. O. and Principal S. they decided that "a petition would be so much harder to do . . . I thought less amount of people would sign it, and so we came up with survey."

Reflecting back upon their experience, the Salad Girls highlighted additional competencies that they had developed through the project. One of the biggest lessons was *time management*. The Salad Girls responded collaboratively during a focus group, "If we were to develop a new project we would be more organized with our idea. We would want to plan ahead more and not wait until the last minute to pull things together." Having experienced a change process once, they could see the full picture of the many steps toward moving forward from an idea to action

Additionally, through All School Gathering presentations and the surveying of classrooms, the girls gained much experience in *public speaking*. The girls presented their results to the 400+ students and faculty in the school. The girls also spoke with the media and public officials throughout the project. The girls had come to understand the political process of how policy decisions occur, how to gain strategic information, and how to frame communications to particular audiences (Larson & Hansen, 2005). Adults played important roles in this process by supporting the girls' competencies in negotiating multiple audiences for various purposes.

*Discourse.* While we find the term *discourse* potentially to be problematic as it has meant so many things in the literature from a relatable and repeatable sets of knowledge (i.e., Foucault, 1969) to the unwritten rules of a common group (i.e., Nystrand, 1982), Principal S. specifically used this term *discourse* to describe the outcomes of the Salad Girls. She told us that "improving discourse among students" is a core part of her philosophy of what elementary school should encourage in young people. She explained, "Students need to learn how to talk with others who have different opinions than their own. They need to learn how to compromise and to make decisions collectively." The principal's vision and group dynamics align with the definition of discourse described previously that describes a mode of communication that shapes civic life, "a kind of shared inquiry the desired outcomes of which rely on the expression and consideration

of diverse views” (Parker, 2003, p. 129). Within their inquiry project, the Salad Girls faced that very struggle—learning how to combine six ideas into one project.

Indeed, a central focus of the coalescence of the group was learning how to work collectively as a team—a team of girls from a wide range of backgrounds, beliefs, ethnicities, and experiences. The Salad Girls project represented one of the first times that these fifth graders worked collaboratively on an extended project—with peers or otherwise. When asked what it was like to work collectively on the project, Libby explained,

You have people with all different abilities on a team; so one person can help another person with something they may be struggling with. It's not just one person, so you have many different ideas floating around. A larger group size makes it easier to persuade more people, whereas it would be more difficult for one person to convince the others. We can do many things at a time when we are in a team; we can all count on each other for different things. It is easier to multi-task where there are more people around.

The range of academic abilities, background, and experiences of the girls helped them to see the different ways in which people can contribute to group tasks.

The experience was not without its struggles. The girls talked about working on a collaborative Google document remotely from their homes and seeing their words erased as another person was trying to edit at the same time. During a focus group, the Salad Girls responded collectively,

There are many different opinions, which make it easier to argue. When working on a team, there are different personalities and in large groups situations it is easier for personalities to clash. It is also hard to realize that everyone will get their way and so we would sometimes fight about small things. We wish we could work together more as a team and realize that we have one goal even though there are several people on the team. We think we should try to give and take with our ideas and not just stick to our own ideas. We would need to be more open minded and realize that we cannot all be leaders at the same time.

Despite collaborative frustrations, the girls realized the value of group process and learned how to work together. The girls deliberated alternate courses of action. This process not only set the tenor for the change process but also served as a centerpiece of establishing civil discourse.

Mrs. O. noted that owning up to one's mistakes is a critical part of developing mastery in this sort of discourse. She explained,

Part of this process of taking risks and showing leadership is to admit mistakes as well as to celebrate successes. It's important for me that they feel good about themselves. Not in a cheesy, “Student of the

Month” way, but all the time. I mean, they feel confident in the decisions that they make, and that they start to recognize that if the decision that they made does not lead them to wasn’t a successful choice, that they recognize they made a mistake and to own up to it. And they are able to articulate how it could have been better, and what they could do differently the next time.

Learning to work together created many opportunities for owning up to one’s mistakes. One Salad Girl reflected, “We also did really well at working together, even though we argued. We got something big accomplished and we always made up after we had disagreed. We think we really persevered and we never gave up even when we hit roadblocks.” The process of collaboration created new respect for each other and learning to adapt to the needs and working patterns of the entire group.

When asked how she changed as a result of participating in the Salad Girls, Ayesha explained that the process made her “listen better and not take charge as often, I guess. [laughter].” Very small in stature and from a strict Muslim family, Ayesha would begin wearing a headscarf in public settings the following fall. Ayesha had strong support from her parents to get involved with the Salad Girls project and in general with academic matters. She never shied away from speaking out during her career at Dewey. Principal S. reflected that the Salad Girls project helped Ayesha to grow in her “ability to listen and hear the viewpoints of others.”

The essence of the activities of the Salad Girls was their conviction that the diversity of their needs and backgrounds made the case for change in their school district. These experiences highlighted to the girls that *working together can create a synergy of needs and talents that cannot occur alone*. In civic discourse, each citizen brings their own interest as well as their own talents to the public square to listen, talk, and deliberate in order to solve common issues (Parker, 2003). When asked how this project might be different if done by just one person, the girls pointed to their collective strength and the strength in their diverse skills. Ayesha commented, “If I was doing this alone . . . I would probably back out.” The girls also pointed to times when they disagreed, which made it difficult to work together. In the end, they said that they hope to have experiences like this as they move to middle school next year.

The girls originally began their campaign due to their own needs, but came to realize that they were representing the needs of something much bigger than themselves. They demonstrated an *appreciation of connectivity to others*. When asked, “Why has this process been important to you?” Tameka explained,

There are so many other kids in this school who can’t have [the salad], because they’re lactose intolerant or can’t have it because of the ham, because of their beliefs. I really started getting more and

more into it. And I'm like, "It's not just about us, it's about the whole school." And that's what Mrs. O. pointed out yesterday. She was like, "When you first started, you just thought, you were just thinking about yourself." And now there are so many kids who want to change the salad too.

Tameka came to realize the collective needs of her community and became a leader to address these needs. Discourse created an understanding of how her needs related to the larger needs of the community.

In addition to learning how to work collectively, the Salad Girls also entered into a discourse with the school system. To present the idea of the new salad options during the survey time and afterward, the Salad Girls had to devise a process of *communicating their message to those in power*. Tameka explained, "We started going through our [initial] data and we started thinking, 'Oh this isn't going to work. We need to come up with a better plan.'"

Principal S. explained to the group that they needed to explain their position more clearly. Tameka explained that Principal S. told them, "If you say salad bar, they're going to think a whole big new table filled with all this other stuff." The girls worked hard to develop a script explaining what they would say when they shared their ideas with the students in the school and when they spoke with district officials.

Part of this communication strategy was learning *how to critique policy without getting shut down*. While the group initially wanted to present a petition to the cafeteria staff, Principal S. worked with them to think of alternative ways to get their message across. The group decided to survey the school to strengthen their position. Explaining the process of data collection, Ayesha noted,

For a petition we'd have to go around the whole school, and everyone would have to write their name on it. And we can't have . . . there are 485 students in the whole school, and we can't have so much paper wasted on that. We tried to come up with ideas. And then suddenly, we decided to do [an oral] survey. That would be easier. So we would go just tally it, then we would add it all together. And that was it.

Principal S. provided scaffolding that helped guide the Salad Girls toward a strategy that could garner success.

Learning communication skills includes understanding the process of how decisions are made in bureaucratic places such as schools. Principal S. helped the girls to set up meetings; although, ultimately she had the students themselves request the meetings with the adults. First the group met with the school's lunch official, but learned that she did not have the power to make the changes that they sought.

The Salad Girls then requested a meeting with the district lunch official. During the meeting, the Salad Girls explained their concerns to the district

representative using their data to make their point effectively. The Salad Girls explained collectively during a focus group their effectiveness at communicating their position using data, “We were good at persuading [the district official] to let us actually go through with the idea. We also were good at getting people behind us that would be able to support our ideas.” As they talked to everyone, from kindergartners to district-level staff, the girls learned how to tailor their modes of discourse for their various intrapersonal and political purposes.

*(Civic) Efficacy.* We observed a persistent theme of civic efficacy in the observational and interview data with the Salad Girls, their teachers, and their principal. Or put more simply, these girls believed they could make a difference in their school. The civic efficacy outcomes align tightly with agency outcomes that are usually not explored in the research until older grades (Lerner et al., 2005; Perkins & Borden, 2003). Based on this initial study, we are unclear whether civic efficacy is a developmental asset in itself or rather a specific form of agency. We list civic efficacy as a separate asset for this research due to the salience of the concept within the interviews with the Salad Girls. Future research will be necessary to empirically test if the two concepts are conflated; in fact, we are in the process of testing a survey instrument that can help to assess the conflation of these terms.

For the Salad Girls, civic efficacy consisted of two components—*social consciousness* and *social responsibility*. The combination of these two concepts merged together for each girl into an “a-ha” moment when the girls that coalesced these concepts into a belief in civic efficacy—that they could make a difference in their lives, the lives of their peers, and school policy.

The girls began their quest to change the school menu due to self-interests, but as they began to work together, they developed a collective sense of social consciousness, or sense of awareness of the needs of the broader school. The Salad Girls experience turned Tameka into a leader in her school and spurred her to think about her school community as a place in which she could and should make a difference. She reflected, “It’s not just about us; it’s about the whole school. We started going around more and more classrooms, and I’m like, ‘Oh my gosh, there’s so many other kids.’” This awareness in others was echoed by other Salad Girls, including Madison. When asked “Why was this process important to you?” she responded, “I think it really means a lot to me, because when you realize how many people just don’t really . . . [can’t eat the salad either].” Social responsibility began by developing an awareness of a world bigger than themselves.

The girls not only became aware of an injustice, but they developed responsibility to remedy the situation. Most often schools reinforce preconceived expectations of youth and sort them into categories (Eckert, 1989). The Salad Girls demonstrate ways in which their experiences helped them to develop new identities as change makers and sources of support in the

school. The Salad Girls developed the social responsibility that they were the people to get the job done.

Ayesha served as another strong leader of the Salad Girls. She realized she could really make a difference in her school when she told her mom about reporting their results to the All School Gathering. When asked to retell the chronology of the events, Ayesha recalled sharing the experience with her mother as an important moment of awareness for her. She said, “When I went home, and I started talking about it with my Mom. I was thinking, ‘Oh my God, I can actually like change it.’”

The girls not only realized that their problem was bigger themselves, but they agreed they needed to be the ones to seek the changes. Her persona is nearly opposite to Tameka—while Tameka learned how to lead as a part of the Salad Girls, Ayesha was always outspoken about her beliefs but instead learned how to integrate her ideas with a group. Ayesha felt strongly that she needed to stand up for this issue on behalf of her fellow students even if the challenge was hard. She explained:

If people don't go for what they believe, and then if some people didn't go and say, “I don't want slaves,” there would still be slavery today, and all these other things that people stand up for. And imagine if it kept the same [and we didn't change the salad policy] . . . a lot of them wouldn't buy the food. But if we actually changed it, it would be like, “Oh my God, thank you guys!”

Through talking with fellow students and collecting data, the Salad Girls had collected hard numbers and a deeper understanding of being spokespeople for a broader group.

This theme of accepting responsibility to make changes aligned with the comments of the other Salad Girls as well. When asked why this process was important to her, Bella, another Salad Girl, explained, “I think it's important because we're kind of standing up for all those other people who are kind of shy, and they think, ‘Oh, I have this opinion but I'm going to be too afraid to state it in front of everybody.’” Madison also spoke of speaking up for those students who might not feel comfortable speaking out. She commented, “I realized that there are lots of people who never really thought of standing up for it. And we could actually help other people.”

A growing sense of social consciousness and social responsibility crystallized into an “*a-ha moment*” for each Salad Girl. The similarity of language for each of the girls was remarkable as they described an almost transformative moment in which they observed civic efficacy developing in themselves. Over the course of individual interviews and during focus groups, each student pointed to a moment when they realized they could make a difference in their schools even though we did not prompt or ask when they realized this about themselves. Reflecting on the chronology of her experience in the Salad Girls, Bella noted that she felt an *a-ha moment*

during her original conversation with Ayesha and Tameka when they realized a common problem with the salads. She explained, “When me and Tameka were sitting at the table. We [thought], ‘Maybe if we start this thing, maybe we can actually change something.’”

Tameka’s a-ha moment occurred during the next step of the process when the three girls approach their teacher. When explaining the important events that occurred as a part of the Salad Girls project, Tameka highlighted the support that they received from their teacher:

When I started talking to Principal S., Mrs. O., and my class. I just thought like I can . . . *we* could actually change something. Then I started talking to my parents about it. They were like, “We’re so proud of you. You’re going to do this. You’re going to change it.” I just started thinking, “I am.” I can actually . . . *We* can actually do something about this!

Reflecting on her experiences as a leader of the Salad Girls, Ayesha’s reflection on how she has changed led to her describing an a-ha moment that occurred later in the process when the group began collecting data. She explained,

When we started . . . to do this last year, we were all like joking about it. . . . But then after we started going round and taking the survey, and then we actually met with some people, we actually realized that we can do this. We just have to try harder. . . . We met with the head of the food for the district, and . . . we actually realized that we could make a difference. . . . If we try and actually believe, that we can do it.

Each of the Salad Girls had their realization of making a difference at a different step in the process, but they all in the end had this awareness. The moment was profound enough for each that they could point to it as a significant event—a shift that occurred within their own development.

### Supports That Enable the ABCDEs

While research exists regarding how such assets develop through student voice activities (Larson et al., 2005; Mitra 2004; Sanders, Movit, Mitra, & Perkins, 2007; O’Connor & Camino, 2005; Perkins & Borden, 2003), this section discusses some of the contexts that enabled the development of assets at Dewey. We focus on three concepts—scaffolding, inquiry as a way of teaching and learning, and a clear school vision.

The adults at Dewey intentionally *scaffolded* (Larson & Hansen, 2005; Lave & Wenger, 1991) the learning of Salad Girls. In the case presented here, the Salad Girls received assistance from Principal S. and Mrs. O. to successfully complete their project. This assistance included Principal S. helping them to reframe their project from being a protest to an inquiry and coaching

them on how to present their ideas to adults in power in a manner that their voices would be heard.

Mrs. O. strengthened the girls' research skills as they collected and analyzed their data. Previous youth development research highlights the importance of adults helping to scaffold the work of youth by providing strategic support and sharing expertise (Camino, 2005; Larson & Hansen, 2005; Mitra, 2003). The Salad Girls case emphasizes that such scaffolding activities take time and require a space for reflection on activities that are not a part of the formal curriculum.

*Inquiry as a way of teaching and learning.* Inquiry-based processes occurred at multiple levels as Dewey students, teachers, and whole-school efforts engage deeply in simultaneous inquiry processes (see also Mitra et al., 2012). Mrs. O. encouraged the questions of the Salad Girls. It is important to understand that Mrs. O. herself was engaged in her own inquiry processes with her teacher colleagues and with teacher interns whom she supervised, focusing on how to increase the connection for students between social events happening globally and events occurring in their own lives. At Dewey, the cycles of inquiry mutually reinforced one another and therefore strengthened student voice and teacher practice. As space existed for them to ask questions at a professional level, they encouraged similar spaces for their students; they knew their own professional learning grew from this possibility and students deserved the same.

The culture of Dewey also highlights the *importance of multiple, reinforcing layers of opportunities* to foster ABCDEs. The opportunities at Dewey encourage student voice and provide a focus on inquiry-based practice. While this case focused primarily on the Salad Girls' inquiry process, it also showed the connections between this process and other structures and contexts at Dewey that reinforced civic efficacy, especially, but all of the ABCDEs. These structure and contexts included the weekly All School Gatherings, the teaching philosophy of Mrs. O., and the administrative philosophy of Principal S. Having multiple, reinforcing messages helped to create a culture of support that enabled the ABCDEs in the Salad Girls.

*Clear vision of school that is incorporated deeply into practice as "the way we do things here."* While the principal sees flexibility as important, Principal S. possessed a strong sense of the vision of the school as a space for student voice and inquiry. Along with this vision, she encouraged efforts by teachers and students alike to develop projects that fit within this vision. When possible, Principal S. funneled resources, time, and public praise on efforts such as the Salad Girls as examples of the ways that the school fosters learning and democratic practice.

She also worked to create structures to encourage and enhance such opportunities. For example, the fifth graders ran the weekly All School Gatherings that celebrated the successes of the school and especially sought to highlight examples of civic engagement, service learning, and democratic

*Table 2*  
**Summary of Youth Development Outcomes**

Asset	Salad Girls' Development of Asset
Agency	(1) Articulated opinions and felt “heard”; (2) learned to respectfully question authority; (3) developed leadership, including an increasing sense of responsibility to help others in need
Belonging	(1) Greater connections to caring adults in their school; (2) greater connections to peers
Competence	(1) Communicating their message to those in power; (2) collecting, analyzing, and presenting data; (3) developing time management; (4) speaking publicly
Discourse	(1) Work as a team; (2) work together can create a synergy of needs and talents that cannot occur alone; (3) value of connectivity with others; (4) learn how to communicate with those in power
(Civic) Efficacy	(1) Social consciousness, or sense of awareness of the needs of the broader school; (2) social responsibility, belief that one has the ability and need to address these needs (3) “a-ha moment” when civic efficacy becomes a conscious process

practice through student presentations and public celebration. Indeed, sustaining democratic initiatives is only possible if at some point these practices become embedded in the day-to-day functioning of how the school operates. These All School Gatherings were one example of structures that provided ongoing opportunities for student voice and the sharing of inquiry processes with the entire school.

### Discussion

We have presented the outcomes of the Salad Girls as a form of student voice in an elementary school setting. Salad Girls' experiences align strongly with youth development—concepts of agency, belonging, competence, discourse, and (civic) efficacy. These experiences illuminate the possible benefits of student voice activities for fifth graders. Future research can hopefully measure these concepts in a pre- and post-data collection strategy to better determine the influence of student voice activities on youth development concepts. Table 2 summarizes these outcomes, which align very strongly with previous research on student voice activities occurring in middle school and high school settings. The alignment of these outcomes for the Salad Girls suggests that student voice activities can foster positive developmental assets—even at the age of 10 years old.

Of particular note in this list of developmental assets is the “a-ha moment” that occurred for the Salad Girls as a part of their development of civic efficacy. This part of the developmental processes appeared to be critical to the trajectory of the development of all other assets for the Salad Girls as it seemed to crystallize self-understanding of the importance of their collective work. From a researcher perspective, the a-ha moments were particularly intriguing since they were mentioned by several girls without a prompting or expectation that such a moment existed in their experiences. Because these a-ha moments seemed to consistently connect to civic efficacy specifically, more research is necessary to ascertain if perhaps the development of civic efficacy is a catalyst or a gateway to the development or enhancement of other assets.

Future research also should consider whether the acquisition and deepening of developmental assets occurs in differing patterns for early versus late adolescence. While one could argue that developmental differences between upper elementary and middle school students can be overstated (Kuhn & Franklin, 2008), such a premise begs the question of why a focus on building youth developmental assets has not had a strong focus in research and practice in elementary years. And, indeed, while this research has focused on fifth graders, more research is needed to see how these concepts can translate into younger years as well. Specifically, it will be important to explore the relationship between civic efficacy and agency to learn more about whether these concepts are conflated or distinct in a range of contexts and conditions. Such research could be very promising for an early start in the promotion of positive youth development outcomes for young people.

Within elementary schools, potential activities for fostering positive youth development could occur in formal curricular processes such as social studies education or at the organizational level related to issues of planning, decision making, and climate. The question remains of how to enable such contexts for younger children, including the roles of adults and institutions in fostering student voice, rather than silencing young people. While research exists on contexts that enable student voice in high school settings (Ginwright, 2005; Mitra, 2009) and an even more extensive literature on high school aged youth in after school settings (Camino, 2000; Camino & Zeldin, 2002; Denner et al., 2005; Zeldin, Camino, Calvert, & Ivey, 2002, Zeldin, Camino, & Mook, 2005), more research is needed to understand the contexts specific to elementary schools that could encourage such positive developmental outcomes for young people.

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