

Literacy with a Purpose: Competitive Debate as a Tool to Improve Adolescent Reading Comprehension and Critical Thinking Skills

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“I think debate makes kids feel like they have a force that nobody can deny. Sometimes intellectuals aren’t really valued, but debate makes me feel like I’m very smart, and very bright, and that I have a great future ahead of me.”

- Franklin, 8th grader¹

Adolescence is not only a time of rapid physical, social, and emotional growth for young people, but also a crucial transition point in their literacy development. As the demands of adult life approach, students begin to move from decoding to comprehending and analyzing ever more complex texts. A chorus of voices in public education, from the National Governors Association (developers of the Common Core State Standards) to the Partnership for 21st Century Skills, recognizes these years as vital for preparing students for the rigorous demands of college, career, and citizenship.

One literacy practice gaining recognition for its ability to engage adolescents in academic reading, writing, listening, and speaking while also encouraging them to recognize the power of their voices and deliberate about the most important civic issues of the day is organized classroom and competitive debate.

The quote above is drawn from a study exploring the impacts of a competitive debate program sponsored by the New York City Department of Education’s Middle School Quality Initiative (MSQI) on public middle school students’ reading comprehension growth, socio-emotional identity development, and civic agency.

The MSQI Debate program began in the 2013-2014 school year after the 88 schools in the initiative adopted Word Generation, an academic language acquisition curriculum developed by renowned literacy researcher Catherine Snow and her team at Harvard University as part of the Catalyzing Comprehension through Discussion and Debate (CCDD) project. The curriculum aims to increase students’ reading comprehension in grades 4-8 through vocabulary-rich interdisciplinary units that culminate in high-interest weekly debates.

The MSQI team quickly recognized high levels of student engagement in the curriculum’s weekly debates and decided to begin hosting weekend MSQI debate tournaments in partnership with the New York City Urban Debate League (NYCUDL) in order to give middle school students from across the city the opportunity to debate Word Generation topics with their peers. At each MSQI tournament, students debate a resolution drawn directly from the Word Generation curriculum, competing in three rounds and preparing both sides of the resolution.

Major findings from the evaluation of the MSQI Debate program include:

¹ All names are pseudonyms.

- MSQI debaters experience greater reading comprehension improvement on standardized measures than their non-debating peers. Growth is especially strong among 6th graders and among struggling readers.
- The MSQI Debate program contributes to all aspects of students' academic literacy achievement (reading, writing, listening, and speaking).
- The MSQI Debate program bolsters MSQI students' identity development in the areas of confidence, aspirations, peer interactions, and civil dialogue.
- The MSQI Debate program fosters critical literacy and civic engagement skills, including following current events, taking multiple perspectives, recognizing and questioning bias, and standing up against injustice.

This report begins with a review of existing literature on the benefits of competitive debate participation. This review is followed by a description of the methods used to evaluate the MSQI Debate Program. In the subsequent sections, we show that in addition to increasing participating students' reading comprehension skills on standardized measures, participating in debate positively impacts students' analytical writing and critical thinking skills, development of 21st century competencies such as creativity, communication, and collaboration, and a sense of empowerment to develop opinions and provide ideas to address controversial social issues. We conclude with thoughts on debate across the curriculum.

I. Research on the Benefits of Competitive Debate Participation

Classroom discussion/debate has long been considered a best practice in the fields of both literacy and civic education. In addition to fostering reading comprehension and academic vocabulary development across content areas (Applebee et al, 2003; Snow, Lawrence & White, 2009), research has demonstrated that structured talk in the classroom can lead to improved critical thinking skills and interest in learning about public issues inside and outside of school (Hess, 2009; Campbell, 2005).

Zeroing in on the impact that *competitive* debate participation has on students, however, is a more difficult task. A consensus does exist in the educational research community that participation in extracurricular activities leads to higher levels of engagement in school and educational attainment, particularly among high-risk youth (Feldman & Matjasko, 2005); however, teasing out the exact mechanisms through which individual programs or activities contribute to these outcomes considering the variety of other factors also at play in students' lives is a continuous challenge.

Joe Bellon (2000) recently synthesized a body of research reaching back to 1949 on the benefits of debate across the curriculum as a strategy to increase college students' communications skills. He harnesses a range of studies in order to argue that debate provides multiple benefits to students, from increasing their interpersonal communication (Colbert & Biggers, 1985) and problem-solving skills (Johnson & Johnson, 1979) to fostering a sense of empowerment in public

life (Dauber, 1989). He highlights the work of Mike Allen and his colleagues (1999), who used the Watson-Glaser critical thinking test to argue that extracurricular debate increases critical thinking more than public speaking or argumentation classes.

Importantly, however, most of these studies were conducted with college students rather than K-12 youth. It is only in the past twenty years that the impact of debate among high school-aged students has been explored. Much of this exploration has focused on the work of Urban Debate Leagues (UDLs), which have been providing debate programming to nearly 10,000 middle and high school students in 19 major metropolitan areas across the country since 1985. The National Association for Urban Debates Leagues estimates that 86% of the students they serve are students of color and 76% are from low-income families.

Many participants have written first-hand accounts of the power of debate in the lives of urban students. Beth Breger (2000), a Program Officer at the Open Society Institute, a major funder of Urban Debate Leagues, argues that in addition to providing students with critical thinking and academic research skills, debate “provides urban youth with the skills they need to actively participate as citizens in an open society, so that their voices are heard and their opinions are considered in public discourse, both in their communities and beyond” (1).

This focus on helping urban youth discover the power of their voices also resonated with Edward Lee, a former Atlanta UDL debater turned debate coach. In his reflections about the impact of debate in his life, he mused, “Imagine graduating from high school each year millions of underprivileged teenagers with the ability to articulate their needs, the needs of others, and the ability to offer solutions. I am convinced that someone would be forced to listen” (95). Other debate coaches and educational writers have identified debate as a strategy for helping at-risk students gain admission to and succeed in college as they gain academic and socio-emotional skills (Hooley, 2007; Hoover, 2003).

In an effort to quantify these impacts, individual Urban Debate Leagues have solicited independent program evaluations. Recent reports from the Baltimore and Houston UDLs have identified similar findings: that, compared to their peers, students who participate in competitive debate have higher attendance rates, lower incidence of disciplinary action, higher grades, and higher scores on state-mandated exams (Neuman-Sheldon, 2010; HISD, 2012).

The academic research community, led largely by Virginia Commonwealth University community health researcher Briana Mezuk, is following suit in seeking to demonstrate the relationship of competitive debate participation to specific academic outcomes. Mezuk (2009) focused on the experiences of African-American male students in the Chicago Public Schools (CPS) and based on a longitudinal quantitative analysis of UDL participants from 1997 to 2006 demonstrated that debaters had higher GPAs, higher rates of high school completion, and higher ACT scores than a representative sample of their peers. A follow-up study using the same data set but this time focusing on at-risk students of both genders found similar benefits among debaters even after controlling for free lunch and special education status, neighborhood poverty, and low 8th grade test scores (Anderson & Mezuk, 2012).

While Mezuk acknowledges that, based on 8th grade test scores, higher performing students tend to self-select into debate in high school – an argument that could be used to downplay or minimize the positive impacts of debate – she provides the important reminder that the absolute level of these test scores “is not indicative of adequate (let alone superior) academic achievement in middle school” (299), and that benefits can accrue to a wide range of students. Indeed, researchers have studied various groups of high school debaters and identified a range of benefits associated with debate, ranging from the ability to move between peer-supported and adult-oriented modes of identity (Fine, 2004) to improving school conduct (Winkler, 2011). Furthermore, the work of Littlefield (2001) in his survey of 193 high school debaters suggests that young people are readily able to identify the ways that debate is benefiting them, from communication skills to social life to stress management.

Cridland-Hughes (2012) makes a valuable contribution to this growing body of debate research by situating it within the field of critical literacy, a wing of the literacy research community inspired by the work of Brazilian educator and philosopher Paulo Freire (1987) and currently led by scholars including Ernest Morrell (2008), which connects literacy practices to challenging social inequality and empowering marginalized young people to use their words to empower themselves and their communities. In her study, Cridland-Hughes analyzes a program called City Debate, providing student interview and observation data to demonstrate how debate helps students develop agency to challenge injustice and use their voices for social action in an environment that is both collaborative and competitive.

Despite major advances in the research justifications for debate, major gaps remain that this study hopes to begin to fill. This study aims to provide data about the impact of debate on middle school debaters, a population largely absent from the literature thus far, and to examine the relationship between debate and the specific academic literacy skill of reading comprehension. Our work is unique because it describes compelling quantitative test score data, but complements it with the voices of the young people and adult mentors who are experiencing the benefits of debate firsthand to create a portrait of a potentially transformative literacy practice.

II. MSQI Debate Program Evaluation – Data Collection Methods

Our evaluation of the MSQI Debate program relies upon a combination of quantitative and qualitative research methods in order to provide the most comprehensive analysis possible of the impact of competitive debate participation on New York City middle school students’ academic, personal, and civic lives.

Quantitative Analysis: Impact of Competitive Debate on Student Reading Comprehension Skills

Classroom debate plays a prominent role in the Word Generation curriculum because of the research base linking structured peer discussions to increased student reading comprehension. Our evaluation goes beyond the classroom to examine whether MSQI middle school students who participate in the MSQI *competitive* debate program achieve additional gains in their reading comprehension skills compared to their non-debater peers.

One instrument that MSQI schools use to assess student reading comprehension is the Degrees of Reading Power (DRP) assessment, which measures how well students comprehend informational texts at varying levels of text complexity. The DRP consists of informational passages with key words deleted. Students are given a set of replacement words and must use the context of the passage to select the correct answer. The DRP, developed by Questar in cooperation with the Carnegie Corporation, has recently been confirmed as a valid measure of text complexity by the Common Core State Standards. MSQI students took the DRP test at three points during the 2013-2014 school year when this study took place (October, February, and June).

In order to highlight the impact that participation in competitive debate had on students' reading comprehension skills, we analyzed changes in 2013-2014 DRP scores across three groups:

1. *MSQI Debaters* – Students in MSQI schools with active competitive debate clubs who participated in at least one competitive debate during the 2013-2014 school year.
2. *MSQI Debate Schools* – All students - debaters and non-debaters - who attended MSQI schools with active competitive debate clubs. This group was included in order to isolate the impact of debate from the impact gained from other aspects of attending these particular schools.
3. *All MSQI Schools* – All students – debaters and non-debaters - who attended all MSQI schools – those with active debate clubs and those without active debate clubs.

We included 179 MSQI debaters, 5,863 students from MSQI debate schools, and 28,337 students from all MSQI schools in our analyses. Of the 179 MSQI debaters, 76.4% receive free and reduced lunch, 75% are black and Hispanic, and there is an even distribution of male and female students.

While comparing the change in DRP scores over time between students in these different groups can provide some information about the impact of competitive debate on reading comprehension skills, it does not account for the fact that students who self-select into a competitive debate program in the first place may already possess a range of other characteristics that might have more explanatory power over their DRP performance.

As a result, we used propensity score matching to create control groups of students who were demographically and academically similar to debaters across a range of indicators so that we could attempt to isolate the impact of debate on reading comprehension. Indicators used to match students included race, disability status, Free or Reduced Price Lunch status, English Language Learner status, and baseline DRP scores. (See the appendix for more information on propensity score matching)

Qualitative Analysis: Impact of Competitive Debate on Student Academic Literacy Achievement, Identity Development, and Civic Agency

Seventeen MSQI schools had active competitive debate clubs during the 2013-2014 school year. In order to gain a more in-depth understanding of *how* debate influences students' reading comprehension skills, as well as a wide range of other academic, identity, and civic outcomes, we conducted interviews with students, teachers, and administrators at four of the participating schools. We also observed students during the winter MSQI Debate Tournament on January 10th, 2015, at Brooklyn Technical High School.

The four focus schools were chosen based on their institutional commitment to the MSQI Debate Program. We also considered the geographic diversity of the schools (2 in the Bronx, 1 each in Brooklyn and Queens) and the racial and socioeconomic diversity of their student bodies. (See Table 1)

We conducted a total of 34 interviews across the four schools:

1. *North Star Academy (MS 340)*: Interviews were conducted with 6 debaters and the 2 debate club teachers.
2. *Thomas C. Giordano Middle School (MS 45)*: Interviews were conducted with 4 debaters, the debate club teacher, and two school administrators.
3. *Eagle Academy for Young Men (MS 231)*: Interviews were conducted with 8 debaters, the debate club teacher, and one school administrator.
4. *Hunters Point Community Middle School (MS 291)*: Interviews were conducted with 6 debaters, two debate club teachers, and one school administrator.

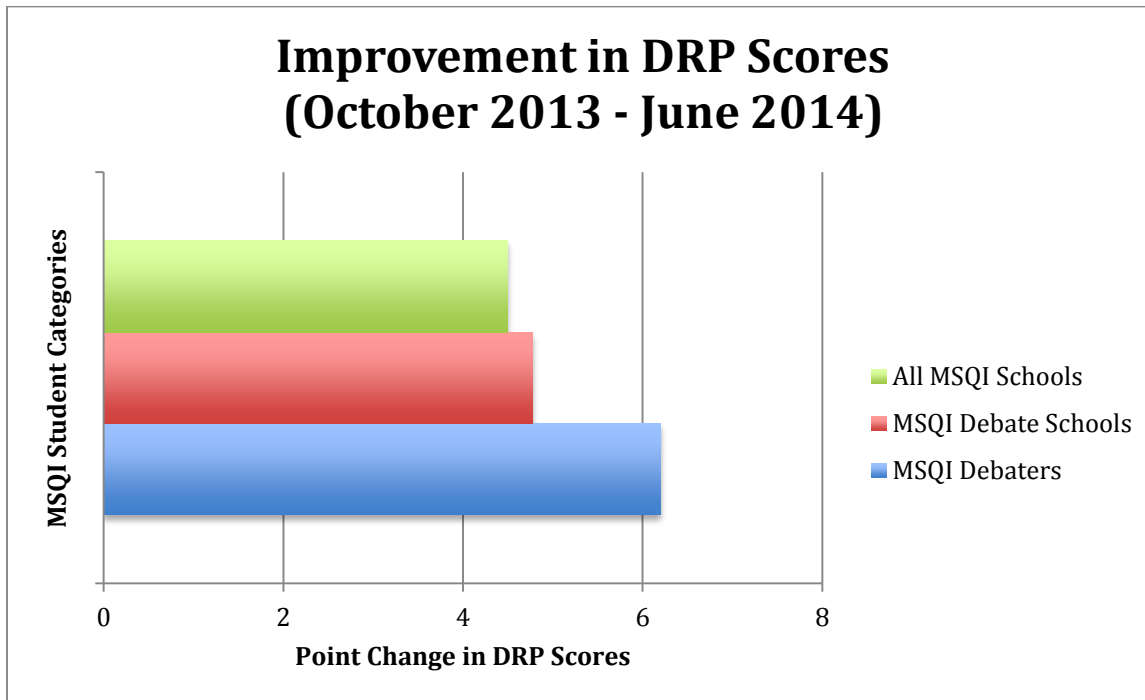
We developed semi-structured interview protocols using both inductive and deductive approaches; while our literature review about the impacts of debate guided us in crafting questions and discussion topics, we also allowed the conversations to evolve based on insights provided by the interview participants themselves. The interviews lasted 30-60 minutes and were conducted on January 7-9, 2015. Interviews were coded based on the four core competencies of academic literacy development (reading, writing, listening, and speaking), examples of positive youth development, and examples of the development of critical literacy competencies. We applied these analytic categories to a first round of coding and modified them during a second round based on new insights from the data.

Table 1: Focus School Demographic Profiles (2013-2014 School Year)

School	Enrollment	% Asian	% Black	% Hispanic	% Other	% White	% SWD	% ELL	% FRL
Eagle Academy for Young Men	645	0.0	61.1	36.7	1.7	0.5	26.8	3.9	80.5
Hunters Point Community Middle School	98	17.3	19.4	49.0	2.0	12.2	20.4	8.2	75.5
North Star Academy	208	1.0	87.5	10.1	0.5	1.0	6.3	0.5	88.0
Thomas Giordano Middle School	797	1.6	13.0	80.8	0.4	4.1	19.8	19.1	97.2

III. Impact of Competitive Debate on Reading Comprehension Skills

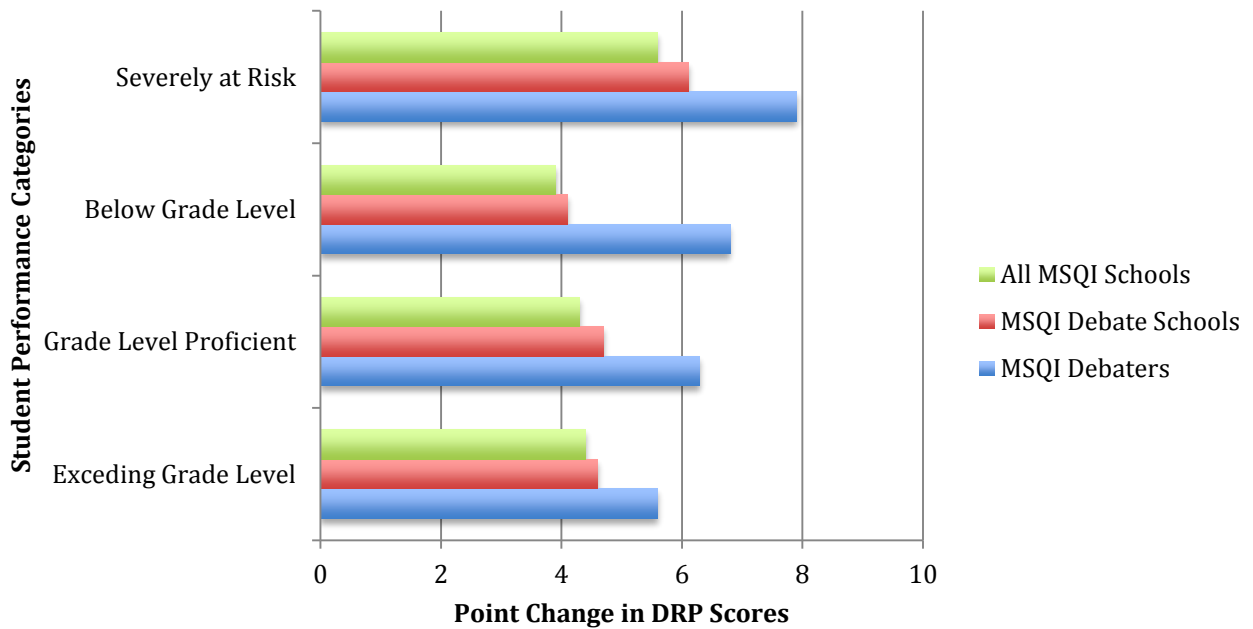
Our analysis revealed that MSQI debaters in grades 6-8 experienced greater growth in their DRP scores than students in MSQI debate schools and all MSQI students over the course of the 2013-2014 school year. The mean difference in growth of 1.7 points indicates that debaters experienced greater growth at comprehending complex texts.



Further analyses indicated that DRP gains were greatest for 6th grade debaters (7.6 points overall and 2.7 points more than non-debaters). This finding raises questions for further study about what roles the length of time that students participate in competitive debate and the age at which they begin to participate play in the development of reading comprehension skills.

We also analyzed DRP growth among several categories of students, ranging from those identified as 'severely at risk' to those identified as 'exceeding grade level.' Results show that while debaters across all categories improved more than their peers, the gains were more pronounced among the most struggling students. This finding suggests that competitive debate may be an especially powerful activity for boosting the reading comprehension skills of at-risk students.

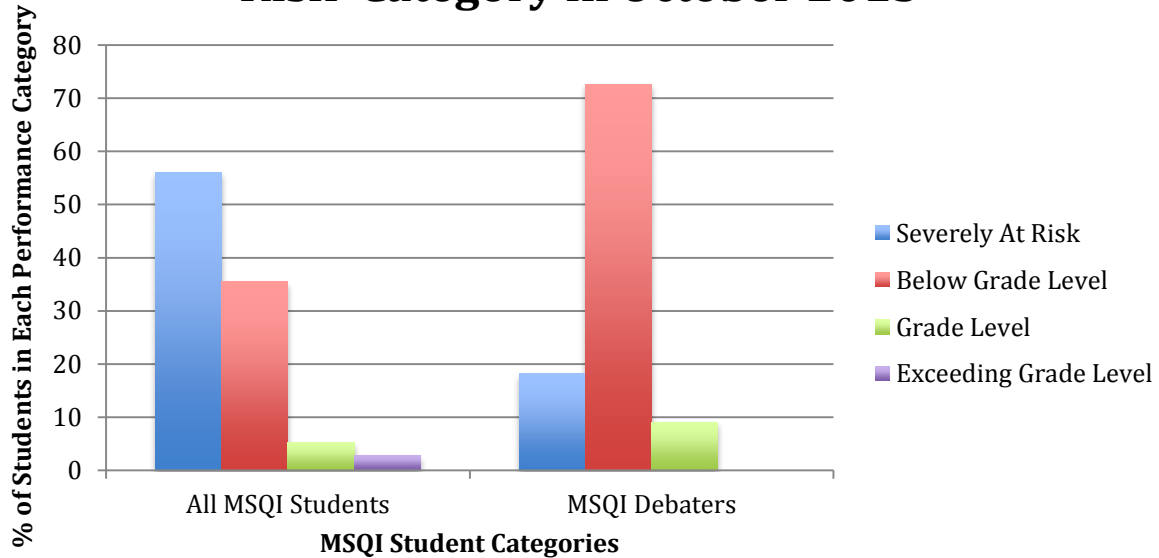
Improvement in DRP Scores by Student Performance



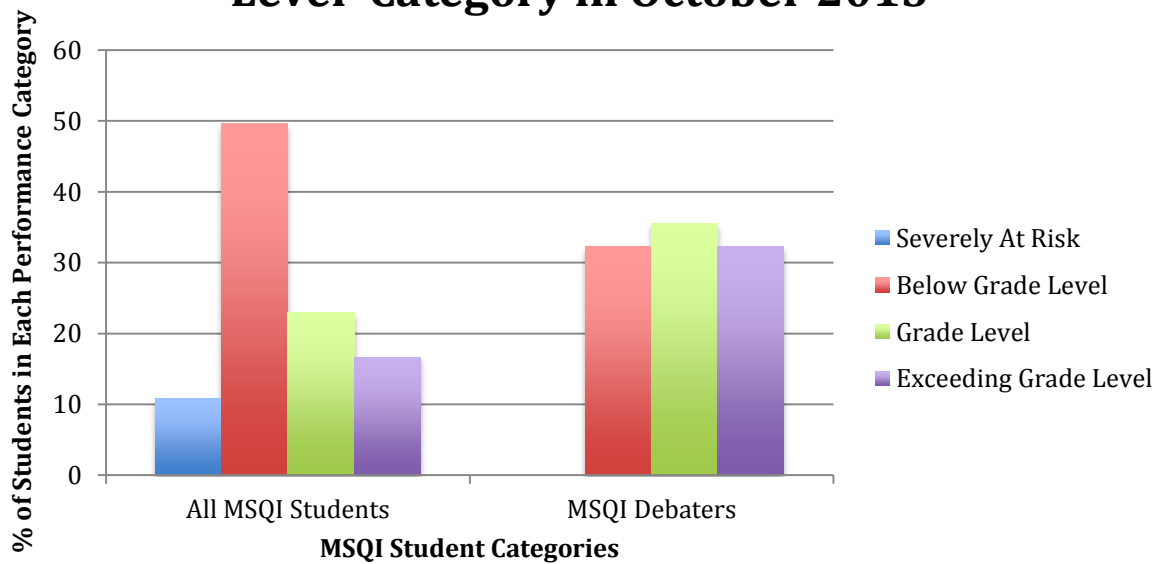
Considering the importance of supporting struggling students, we delved more deeply into the change in students' DRP scores over time in order to compare the performance of debaters to that of non-debaters. We found that 72% of debaters who were considered 'severely at risk' at the beginning of the school year had moved up to the 'below grade level' category by the end of the school year, compared to only 35.6% of all MSQI students. Furthermore, 9.1% of debaters made it all the way to 'grade level proficient,' compared to 5.3% of all MSQI students.

We also found that 35.5% of the debaters who were considered 'below grade level' at the beginning of the school year had moved to 'grade level proficient' by the end of the school year, compared to 22.9% of all MSQI students. And 32.3% of these debaters moved all the way to 'exceeding grade level' compared to 16.7% of all MSQI students.

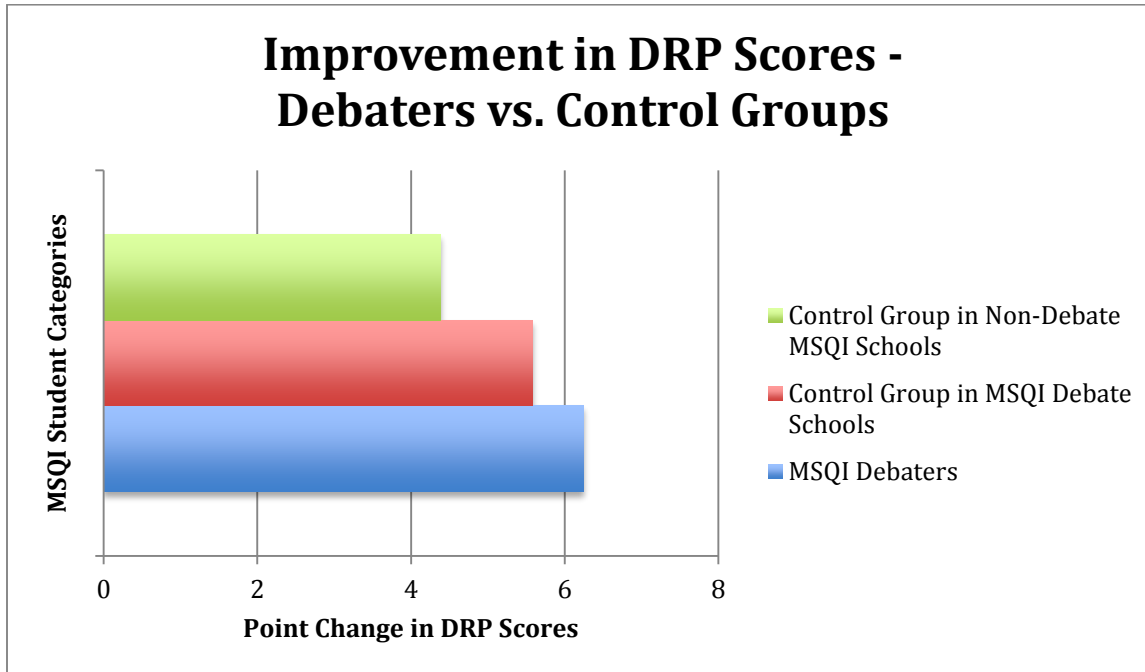
June 2014 DRP Performance Categories for Students Beginning in the 'Severely at Risk' Category in October 2013



June 2014 DRP Performance Categories for Students Beginning in the 'Below Grade Level' Category in October 2013



When we ran these analyses again after controlling for student race, disability status, English Language Learner status, Free or Reduced Price Lunch status, and baseline DRP scores, the higher levels of growth for debaters compared to non-debaters remained. These differences were statistically significant ($p < .01$). The fact that debaters experienced greater growth than members of control groups in MSQI schools with active debate clubs and MSQI schools in general suggests that debate has an impact independent of other student characteristics.



IV. Qualitative Data: Impact of Debate Team Participation on Academic Literacy Achievement

Results of interviews with MSQI debaters indicated that before they joined the debate teams at their schools, they had a variety of preconceptions about the activity. Some anticipated that it involved standing in front of scores of people and passionately pounding on lecterns like the characters did in the film, “The Great Debaters.” Many thought that it was something only adults, like politicians and lawyers, could do. And almost all assumed that it involved arguing – the kind that could easily turn into fighting.

Since becoming debaters, the students have been relieved to find that they are not forced to speak in front of too many people – just a friendly and supportive judge. And they appreciate the respectful tone that their opponents take with them. But what they were most surprised by is the sheer amount of hard work that it takes to be a strong debater – work that reinforces their academic literacy skills in each and every round.

Impact of Debate Team Participation on Students' Reading Comprehension

The activities most associated with debate are speaking and listening, which seems intuitive considering the iconic images of presidential candidates standing behind lecterns arguing their points; however, debate is also an activity grounded in the reading of complex informational texts. Without a great deal of reading, debaters will not possess the content needed to persuade audiences during their speeches.

During our interviews with MSQI debaters, they were preparing for a tournament about the following resolution: Resolved: The benefits of nuclear power outweigh the potential risks. Students had to be prepared to argue both sides of this resolution and, while Word Generation materials formed the basis of the evidence they would use, their desire to win drove them to look for additional sources in order to buttress their claims.

The search for evidence, from both print and online sources, provided an authentic reason for students to read. Students recognized that the texts they found often stretched them beyond their reading comfort zone. As Emma, a debater from Hunters Point Community Middle School, explained, "Some of the evidence is on a college-level, and we're just like, what is this? Sometimes I would cut and paste it to Word document and use a thesaurus because my head would just hurt. But it gets easier over time. So when you're doing the state test, it's like, oh, this is easy." Emma believed that her frequent engagement with debate evidence made the readings that she encountered in grade level exams much more accessible.

Bobby, a debater from Eagle Academy, also connected debate to an increase in his vocabulary; as he told us, "My vocabulary was 'blah' before debate, but in debate when they gave us the Word Generation packets with the stories in them, it always showed us new vocabulary words that were strong and could help you with your speeches. You can also use it in your other classes talking about different topics." Bobby felt motivated to learn new words in order to deliver powerful speeches during his debate rounds, but could see the ways that he could also apply his newfound vocabulary to his academic work.

Debating requires a great deal of attention to detail; in order to win a round, students must not only present their arguments persuasively, but also methodologically address each of their opponents' arguments and explain to the judge why they are unconvincing. Since debaters must be able to argue both sides of any topic, they must constantly think about the validity of the evidence authors use to support their claims and the weaknesses that they can exploit in counter-arguments.

Simone, a debater from North Star Academy, realized that she began using this debate habit of mind each time she encountered a new text in class. As she explained, "We were reading the passage as a class and every single contention, every single reason that [the author] had as to why this was right I'd automatically think in my head why this was wrong. Or if [the author] had why it was wrong, I'd automatically think of why it was right. So it kind of – after a while, it does become second nature to us."

Debaters consistently attributed improvements in their reading comprehension to the efforts they put into preparing for their debate rounds. Their initial motivations – to effectively compete (and hopefully win) – conditioned them to read in ways that benefitted them academically. A debate teacher at Thomas Giordano Middle School described how the kind of reading that debate calls for matches well with the expectations laid out in literacy standards: “I think they’re reading more now with a purpose. Instead of just reading to get through something, they’re now reading for understanding, they’re reading to look for text evidence, and that’s – you can’t get more Common Core than that.”

Impact of Debate Team Participation on Students’ Writing

While the focus on speeches and cross-examination may create the appearance that debate is not a writing intensive activity, the student debaters were quick to point out the amount of writing they did during debate rounds and the ways this writing improved their essays and research skills.

Benjamin, a debater from Eagle Academy, explained, “Debate has helped me write my essays because now I’m able to flow. I’m able to put myself, my personality, into my words and put it into my essays in class.” Benjamin referred to ‘flowing,’ a term that debaters use to describe note-taking; as a team’s opponents give their speeches, the team furiously jots down each claim and the evidence presented so that when it is their turn to speak, they can fluidly address (and discredit) every argument that they heard. Benjamin recognized the way that the organization of a debate flow mirrored the structure of an academic essay; importantly, he also attributed his ability to find his own personal voice in his writing to his debate experience.

Alexander, a debater from Hunters Point, concurred, stating, “It improves my essays. I didn’t do counter-claims before, like what other people would say. Now I do, and I understand it better. And I expand more in my essays and explain things better.” Since debaters want to offer counter-claims that will throw their opponents off-balance, they often gather evidence from beyond the Word Generation curriculum. In the process, they gain the valuable research skill of recognizing reliable sources. As Krystle, another debater from Hunters Point, told us, “Debate taught me how to research things well, because when I used to research topics for school, I just looked at what popped up first in Google and I’m like, “Okay, that’s it.” But now you have to make sure the sources are reliable and everything. You can’t go on Wikipedia and you can’t go to Ask Yahoo and stuff.”

One of Alexander and Krystle’s teachers explained that, while she had never debated herself, she found herself drawn to the activity and eager to expose her students to it precisely because of the way it provided students with authentic reasons to conduct rigorous research; as she told us, “I was so impressed by the research and the delivery of research that I was just like, “How could I not give my students this opportunity?”

Impact of Debate Team Participation on Students’ Speaking and Listening

Several of the administrators we spoke to highlighted the importance of debate as a means to help students improve their speaking and listening skills. An administrator at Giordano Middle

School acknowledged that these skills often take a back seat in the classroom because they are not as easily assessed on standardized measures as reading and writing are; however, she insisted that they are important indicators of college and career readiness. As she explained,

It's also, you know, a piece that we do not always get to, which is that speaking and listening portion of the debate. That it's in the standards, but because it's not an assessed standard, it's not as focused on as we really need it to be. It really, I think, helps the students to be college and career ready, because they need to know how to speak thoughtfully and support what they say with evidence if they really want to have a career and be able to go to college.

An administrator from Eagle Academy echoed this praise for debate as a mechanism for getting students talking, linking it to the common classroom practice of Socratic dialogue: "I see [debate] as part our push to make Socratic seminars more of a school-wide experience in classes. I think that the whole preparation for a debate involves a lot of what you would need to do to prepare for a Socratic seminar in terms of reading different articles, really understanding the issues, and being able to make your point."

Much of what administrators celebrated about debate involved the added value that it brought to traditional classroom academic work by injecting students' personal interest and excitement about healthy competition. Tyrone, an Eagle Academy debater, detailed the evolution in his thinking in how to support an argument during a classroom discussion; as he explained, "You can't just say, 'You should go for my idea because I like it.' You've got to say why."

V. Impact of Debate Team Participation on Identity Development

While debate offers students strong external benefits for participation through improved academic skills, grades, and test scores, our interviews demonstrated that what got students out of bed on Saturday mornings to travel across the city for tournaments was something much more intrinsically motivating; namely, how debate made students feel about themselves.

Adolescence is a turbulent time as young people try to figure out who they are, what they want, and how to interact with others. Many of the young people we talked to lit up as they shared the feeling of belonging they experienced as they engaged in this activity with hundreds of their peers, whether they were joyfully accepting trophies or recovering from tough defeats. These feelings speak to the power of debate as not only an academic activity, but also one that contributes to positive youth development.

Impact of Debate Team Participation on Students' Confidence

All MSQI students have the opportunity to participate in debate in their classrooms through the Word Generation curriculum, but the students we spoke to choose to spend additional time after school and on weekends engaging in debate. When we asked Benjamin from Eagle Academy why he makes that choice, he responded, "Debate makes me feel like I'm actually good at something that I never thought I would have the chance to do."

Benjamin's words remind us that when many debaters heard about the activity for the first time, they thought it was something that only adults did – not something that young men from the Bronx could 'have the chance to do' and 'be good at.' Participation in debate gave Benjamin a sense of competence that led to confidence.

One of the teachers from North Star Academy identified the blossoming confidence of her students as the driving force behind her participation as a debate coach; while thinking about a particular student who had transformed through participating in debate, she said, "That drives me, knowing that he's so into it and that this is his connection place. This is where he blooms, this is where he smiles, and this is where he laughs." When coaches shared the reasons they continue investing their time in debate, they continually returned to the inspiring personal growth and development of their students.

Debate is a competitive activity, and while it is easy to develop confidence when you win, this task becomes more daunting when you experience defeat. Both students and teachers commented on the lengths that the MSQI Debate program went to in order to ensure that students felt supported, win or lose – from the thoughtfully crafted feedback offered by volunteer judges to the bounty of prizes honoring participation.

Alexander from Hunters Point told us about how winning debate rounds makes him feel confident, but he found that he learned an even more valuable skill in defeat; as he explained, "When you don't win an argument and you lose, the judge tells you what you need to work on, and I haven't really had any criticism before debate. Like, everybody was just, "Oh, you're doing well," and now it's kind of like the real world where not everybody is going to say you're good at everything."

A teacher from Eagle Academy also spoke to the supportive nature of MSQI Debate tournaments, sharing, "They really send this message that we're all winners at the end of the day, so no matter what place you come in you always get some sort of a trophy or you always walk away with something. Maybe I didn't get the top prize this time, but next time we're going to get it."

One of the teachers from Giordano Middle School summed up the reasons he finds the debate community so invaluable:

It's probably one of the most rewarding things that I've done with my students in the past ten years. To see the kids on a Saturday, to see the energy, the excitement and the passion that the kids had . . . I remember seeing them run back from a debate to their friends to talk to them about how they did, what they need to work on, what they thought did well. I think just to see how the kids react to it - you don't see that in a normal social studies class or normal math class, science class. I think the kids are really passionate.

Impact of Debate Team Participation on Students' Aspirations

When students feel confident about themselves, they begin to allow themselves to dream about their futures – high school, college, and beyond. Many students told us that debate had introduced them to people, places, and ideas that were influencing the next steps they wanted to take in their lives.

Kelly, a debater from Giordano Middle School, recalled that one of the first debate tournaments she attended took place at the Bronx High School of Science. She had heard about the selective high school, but never truly considered it as a school she might attend until she visited the school for the debate. As she told us, “I had never been to Bronx Science, and now I actually think it’s a nice place and I might want to go there for high school.” Just as the tournaments were structured to increase student confidence, so were the tournament locations chosen to expose students to new possibilities.

When we asked Peter from Eagle Academy what winning a debate round felt like, he responded, “It feels like I won the Nobel Peace Prize, or just completed an accomplishment in life, because all these things will be helpful in my future as a lawyer.” Peter felt that debate had put him on a path toward his chosen career and was helping him to develop the knowledge and skills he would need to reach that goal.

The legal profession proved especially attractive for debaters. Katrina from Hunters Point shared Peter’s aspiration to become a lawyer and saw debate as a means to that end: “Because of debate I now know the career I want to take, which is law, and if I hadn’t experienced debate I probably wouldn’t have been studying the course of law. I really, really want to follow that passion.”

The MSQI Debate program offered students a space to explore their passions surrounded by knowledgeable adults who were willing and able to support them and provide them with information to move them along the educational pipeline. One of Katrina’s administrators at Hunters Point commented on the types of professionals that students were modeling themselves after: “I think they really see themselves as future leaders of this country, and they know that most of the presidents and senators were debaters at one point. And I think they’re setting their sights really high.”

Christopher, a debater from Eagle Academy, summed up the feelings of self-worth that debate had inspired in him to pursue any path in life: “Debate is an opportunity for people who actually want to be something.”

Impact of Debate Team Participation on Students' Positive Peer Interactions

The MSQI Debate program is structured so that students debate in pairs, with specific roles for each speaker regarding when to speak, whether to introduce new arguments or reinforce existing ones during their speeches, and who to address during cross-examination (known in MSQI debates as ‘crossfire’). A typical debate tournament includes three rounds, which means that a pair of debaters will meet at least 6 other students from several schools around the city on any given Saturday.

Many debaters spoke about the fun involved in debating with a partner and getting the opportunity to develop debate friendships. As William, a debater from Eagle Academy, told us, “We have friends at different schools because of debate, and I like debate because we have partners. When you don’t catch something, they might, and you’re like, ‘oh, I’m glad you caught that.’” William learned to rely on someone else during a debate round - a level of trust that can lead to friendship.

Simone from North Star Academy described how debating sparked a friendship between her and her partner: “Me and my partner, we weren’t really close, but when we started debating, we really got close because we would talk more to each other about the debate stuff. And then we started hanging out more.” What started as an academic activity when Simone and her partner were paired up quickly led to the discovery of shared interests.

Thomas, a debater from Hunters Point, put his finger on one of the biggest benefits of debate for an adolescent eager to connect with peers as much as possible: “Usually during the weekends I would never see my friends, but now I get to see my friends on Saturdays, so it’s kind of fun for me. “

Impact of Debate Team Participation on Students’ Perspective-Taking

Teenagers are often characterized as self-centered – so focused on their own identity development that they find it difficult to imagine life in someone else’s shoes. Debate, which forces students to argue both sides of controversial topics and passionately defend perspectives that they may not personally hold, encourages students to consider alternative points of view in their lives and in society.

Katrina, a debater from Hunters Point, described how she applied perspective-taking from debate to interactions with her parents and friends: “Sometimes my parents will pose a question, and I’m really strong about one side, but then I’m like, wait, there’s a second side to it. Or sometimes when my friends are getting into an argument I try to listen to my best friend’s side of the story, but then I’m like I still need to listen to the other person’s, because you have to see both stories to understand what is really going on.”

Antoinette from North Star Academy had a similar take on how taking an alternative perspective could help foster stronger relationships; as she stated, “When you have a different point of view, you know how to approach everything differently. So you know how to adapt to more people.”

The ability to understand the motivations of another person can also help defuse conflict, especially when those people are feeling pressure to perform in a competitive event. Bobby, a debater from Eagle Academy, explained how the supportive nature of the debate team made criticism easier to take: “Even when we do criticize each other in the group, it’s constructive criticism, not hurtful. We just say what we can do to get better.” For Bobby, the relational trust built through the debate community helped him to let down his defenses and accept suggestions.

As an administrator from Giordano Middle School summarized, “Well, I think it provides a little empathy. It gives them that sense of, ‘Not everybody has to think like I think, and it’s okay.’” Empathy is a key competency in a democracy made up of a diverse citizenry possessing different experiences, opinions, and values. The next section explores how debate influences students not only as students or individuals, but also as citizens striving for a more just society.

VI. Impact of Debate Team Participation on Civic Engagement and Critical Literacy

Debate resolutions encourage students to consider provocative social issues about which reasonable people could be expected to disagree. During the 2013-2014 school year, students considered the merits and potential harms of mandatory service, the use of transfats in school food, renting pets, and minors on reality television shows.

By engaging students in discussion about authentic, real-world issues, the MSQI Debate program treats young people as civic agents whose opinions and beliefs deserve to be taken seriously. Our interviews indicated that students are applying the critical thinking skills gained from debate to analyzing the society in which they live and imagining the role that they hope to play in challenging inequality and seeking justice.

Impact of Debate Team Participation on Students’ Interest in Current Events

Many students told us that while they did not possess a great deal of knowledge about the topics explored in debates until prompted to learn about them by upcoming tournaments, debates encouraged them to begin paying attention to current events more generally. As Alexander from Hunters Point told us, “I read newspapers now.” Alexander’s classmate, Amaya, explained, “I did not look at current events before debate. But recently when I went to my grandparents’ house, I watched the news a lot and it was interesting to me. Current events are always exciting, but before I didn’t have my eyes open to it.”

One of the teachers at Giordano Middle School expressed his amazement at the sophisticated topics that middle school students were willing to engage in through debate and the ways that debate encouraged them to be aware of the world around them: “I don’t know too many sixth-grade students who would talk about nuclear power during lunchtime. Now, I mean, they’re definitely more in-tune to current events and what’s going on in the world.”

Impact of Debate Team Participation on Students’ Ability to Recognize Bias and Question Assumptions

Critical literacy theorist Paulo Freire asserted that literacy is about reading both the word *and* the world; in other words, that the academic literacy skills needed to understand texts become meaningful when they are applied to critical analysis of the society in which we live in order to promote justice and equity.

Debaters told us that they found themselves analyzing troubling social events from multiple perspectives, including the multiple recent cases of officer-involved deaths of black men, and attempting to understand how multiple parties were influencing the media narrative. Tyrone from

Eagle Academy described how he put the skills of debate to use in weighing emotional social issues: “I can use [debate] towards life, because now I will be there as a reminder when it comes to things like the Eric Garner case and the Michael Brown case. Now I understand both sides. Even though I stand strong to one side, I understand where the other side is coming from, so now it’s a two-sided thing.”

Jenna, a debater from North Star Academy, mulled over the renewed attention in the news to instances of racial inequality and wondered how she could use debate skills to speak up for her community. She mused, “Well, I’ve always heard the saying that history repeats itself. So if racial inequality and segregation and all that other stuff is happening again, I’m just like, “Well, what if I get affected by it? Because I’m clearly African American and they’re going to target me and my race.” While Jenna had not worked out a solution to this intractable social problem, she attributed her burgeoning social consciousness to her participation in debate.

One of the teachers from Hunters Point tried to clarify the process of critical civic awakening that debate inspired in students; as he explained, debate encourages students to, “think about the fact that everything that I hear in the media and everything that people have told me my whole life is not necessarily true, and that there are biases in the world. They start to question society.” He continued:

I think it’s the art of recognizing deceit. That’s what is so intriguing about debate. It’s trying to see if someone is lying to you. And in debate, you’re lied to all the time. They want to see what is the truth here, and I feel like that’s the hook that most of the kids latch on to. ‘Are people lying to me? What is the real truth?’”

Impact of Debate Team Participation on Students’ Ability to Stand Up Against Injustice

All of our findings up to this point – gains in students’ academic literacy skills, identity development, and civic awareness – indicate that debate is contributing to the growth of young people who feel confident and empowered to raise their voices and speak loudly about the issues that matter most to them. The students we talked to credited debate with helping them stand up for what they believe in.

Katrina from Hunters Point considered herself “shy” before beginning to debate, but asserts that, “debate really brought me out and into the world, and it exposed me - that’s why I love doing debate. Because I can show what I’m feeling, and not just keep it inside to myself, and stand up for people and their rights.” For Katrina, the first step to social action is social speech, which she expresses through debate.

Katrina’s classmate, Thomas, described one of the ways that debate had inspired him to stand up for others: “If I think someone’s doing something wrong, I’ll say, ‘You shouldn’t do that.’ Before, I used to be a bystander, like, ‘Okay, so this kid’s getting bullied. It’s not my fault.’ But now it’s like, ‘Stop it. What are you doing? What if somebody did that to you?’ You know?”

Antoinette, a debater from North Star Academy, also shared her commitment to use debate in order to face social challenges: “I’m just like wow. This is the world we live in. I can do

something to help, even if it's like a little thing. Like I said, I like writing. I can do something to reach out to people. Talk to my peers.”

For these students, debate activated their critical consciousness; while not yet old enough to vote (or attend high school), they used their voices to advocate for themselves and their communities. As Bobby from Eagle Academy concluded, “We’re inspired to be better people, inspired to make a change in our world.”

VII. Conclusion

Since the completion of this study, MSQI competitive debate participation has expanded. Six MSQI schools have started new active debate teams since the start of the 2014-2015 school year, and overall registration increases at every tournament. Students, teachers, and school leaders seem to intuitively recognize the benefits of debate that we analyzed in this study.

Our quantitative analysis showed that participating in competitive debate increased both reading comprehension and writing growth, with growth most pronounced among struggling readers. And our qualitative analysis showed that this growth is no mystery. Students consistently referenced the amount of time on text that was required with debate, and students noted differences in *how* they read, indicating that they take a more critical stance as readers.

Students also spoke about how debate made reading, writing, and analysis fun because it couched the activity within a social context. Teachers and school leaders commented that debate also fostered social-emotional growth, noting that debate helped students’ academic confidence.

The stated goal of the Middle School Quality Initiative is to graduate every middle school student reading at or above grade level. Participation in competitive debate can play an important role in making this goal a reality.

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