

# Democracy & Education

## The Measure of Youth Policy Arguments

### An Approach to Supporting Democratic Participation and Student Voice

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#### Abstract

Although experiential approaches to democracy education are gaining increased support from educators and scholars, few educational resources exist to support youth in constructing and delivering high-quality, evidence-based policy arguments to authentic audiences. Such presentations are often the first time that young people step into the public sphere and speak to public officials; they represent rich opportunities for youth political development and activism. In this paper, we introduce an assessment tool, called the Measure of Youth Policy Arguments (MYPA), which is intended to be a resource for community and school educators. Drawing on data from two years of field-testing and iterative co-design in the context of research-practice partnerships (RPPs), we chronicle the development of the tool and provide evidence about its educational uses in classrooms and community programs. In the discussion section, we explain key decisions in the development of MYPA and how those shaped its appropriateness for certain uses and lack of appropriateness for others.

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BEN KIRSHNER is a Professor of Learning Sciences and Human Development at the University of Colorado Boulder. He works collaboratively with educators, community organizers, and students to design and study learning environments that support youth development, activism, and civic participation. In his work with the Critical Civic Inquiry research group he co-develops research-practice partnerships that increase the capacity of schools to support student voice and action civics ([www.transformativestudentvoice.net](http://www.transformativestudentvoice.net)). With the Research Hub for Youth Organizing he co-designs educational tools and research studies with youth organizing groups and networks (<https://www.colorado.edu/education-research-hub/>). Ben's 2015 book, *Youth Activism in an Era of Education Inequality*, received the social policy award for

best authored book from the Society of Research on Adolescence. Dr. Shelley Zion is Professor of Urban Education in the Language, Literacy and Sociocultural Education Department at Rowan University. Her research is situated within a framework of socio-political development, informed by a range of critical theoretical perspectives, and advanced by an understanding of the nature of both individual and systemic change. She is co-PI of a series of student voice research projects—Critical Civic Inquiry, funded by the Spencer Foundation, Measuring Youth Policy Arguments project, funded by Spencer and the Hewlett Foundation, which is charged with developing reliable and valid measures of the quality of youth policy arguments, the Student Voice Leadership Project, which examines the impact of student voice initiatives on School

and District policy and practices, and Critical Civic Inquiry 2.0, funded by KnowledgeWorks, which examines contextual factors and the impact of participation in student voice projects on student outcomes. Daniela Kruel DiGiacomo is an Assistant Professor in the School of Information Science at the University of Kentucky. Dr. DiGiacomo's program of research focuses on how to design formal and informal learning settings in ways that support and extend young people's lived experiences, interests, and expertise. As a learning scientist trained in the sociocultural tradition, her scholarship is guided by a commitment to pursuing research that is both justice-conferring and humanizing—research that proceeds with the assumption that diversity is a resource to be leveraged, rather than a problem to be solved. Ginnie Logan is a

**T**HIS IS A promising moment for youth voice and activism, as reflected in DREAM activism, the Black Lives Matter movement, climate justice efforts, and more (see Alvarez, 2013; Conner & Rosen, 2016; Ransby, 2017). Innovative forms of student voice are also gaining traction in organized school programs, such as action civics and student clubs (Cohen, Kahne, & Marshall, 2018). Although this upswing of youth participation and social justice activism is exciting, in prior work we have observed challenges to the impact and sustainability of youth voice or action civics projects (Kirshner, Zion, Lopez, & Hipolito-Delgado, under review; Zion & Petty, 2012).

The first challenge has to do with the impact when young people present their ideas and policy proposals to decision-makers at the conclusion of an action research cycle. These culminating performances often take on the quality of a theatrical performance: Students develop scripts, they rehearse them with coaching from an adult advisor or teacher, and then during the presentation, the coach fades to the back as student presenters take the stage. Su (2010), for example, described the ways that youth involved in education organizing campaigns in the Bronx shared education policy arguments with teachers and district administrators. Other types of audiences for youth policy arguments could include school principals, newspaper editors, state legislators, business owners, teachers, or community elders (Kirshner & Geil, 2010; Wright & Mahiri, 2012).

Such culminating performances provide a rare opportunity for young people to gain access to policymakers and influencers—but all too often these performances remain just that: performances. Whether because of entrenched biases against youth as legitimate political actors, structural barriers to social justice change, lack of clarity of the call to action in the policy proposal, or limited opportunities for students to prepare, there is wide variation in the quality of these presentations and their impact on policy and practice (Cohen et al., 2019; Ozer & Wright, 2012).

The second challenge, sustainability, happens when teachers are asked to implement new forms of pedagogy and assessment with little coaching or support. Teacher preparation and professional learning to facilitate critical forms of action civics are quite

practitioner-activist-researcher, committed to developing models of praxis that result in emancipatory educational outcomes. Ginnie serves as the founder and executive director of a nonprofit organization called Big Hair, Bigger Dreams, a girl's leadership and financial empowerment organization designed around the experiences of Black girls. In her research, Ginnie utilizes critical humanizing theories and methodologies to examine and design learning environments that redress harm, contribute to sociopolitical development, and minimize the opportunity gap for girls and youth of color. The work described here was supported with funding from the Spencer Foundation and the Hewlett Foundation.

variable, particularly in terms of supporting students to effect policy change (Zion et al., 2015). Further, teachers' concerns about engaging in political conversations with students, or of rocking the boat by critiquing the system, often limit their effectiveness at engaging students in the policy and action elements of justice-centered youth voice work (Zion et al., 2017).

In addition to the lack of teacher supports for facilitating critical conversations about injustice or coaching students in policy-change work, there are challenges to assessing student learning in experiential action civics projects. This challenge looks different for schools and community groups, respectively. In our prior work supporting the integration of Youth-led Participatory Action Research (YPAR) and action civics into academic instruction, teachers doing outstanding projects expressed concern that, although they were confident that their students were learning, they were uncertain how to make that case in a clear and convincing way (Kirshner, Zion, & DiGiacomo, 2017). They worried that when their principal peered into their classroom, it would look like chaos. They worried that their students' efforts—writing letters, speaking in public, collecting and analyzing data, and collaborating on teams—would not translate to success on the conventional tests to which they are held accountable. This is in part because of the inherent heterogeneity of learning opportunities in experiential projects: Students typically work in teams (roles are not uniform); they work on civic problems that vary from team to team (content is not uniform); and project outcomes are dependent on factors extrinsic to the team, such as the complexity of the problem, the local political context, and the response of local policymakers to their proposals (contexts are not uniform). This constellation of factors makes traditional school-based forms of assessment, which typically prize standardization and individualized assessment of student performance, difficult, to say the least. Innovative programs may be hosted by a courageous teacher or principal but face an uphill battle when it comes to institutionalization and systems adoption.

Community-based youth organizations face their own challenges of documenting student learning and growth. The easiest and most available tools for youth program evaluation are self-report surveys that are either not empirically tested or not

aligned to the unique learning environment of youth organizations (Honig & McDonald, 2005; McLaughlin, 2000). Moreover, assumptions underlying existing civic measures may not match the kinds of social justice and activist goals of community-based programs (Flanagan et al., 2007; Westheimer & Kahne, 2004).

These challenges to impact and sustainability motivated us to develop new resources for curriculum and assessment that could contribute to youth democratic education and heighten the impact of youth voice in the public square. Though we recognize the ingenuity, creativity, and innovation that characterize youth-driven campaigns and movements, we are invested in also designing learning experiences that facilitate the development of skills and critical consciousness that facilitate political voice and impact. In this paper, we offer one contribution to this effort, an educational tool for developing and assessing high-quality policy arguments, called the Measure of Youth Policy Arguments (MYPA). This article is not a conventional empirical study guided by research questions. Instead, we argue for MYPA as a resource for democracy education and provide evidence of MYPA's usability and value as perceived by school- and community-based educators. We draw on recent theorizing about assessment validity to specify the kinds of purposes, settings, and uses for which our evidence suggests that this is a valid instructional tool (Kane, 2009; Maul, 2018).

The remainder of this article is organized in four sections. First, we explain how the authors' backgrounds shaped our approach to developing MYPA through research-practice partnerships. Second, we describe how we arrived at the six constructs that compose MYPA. Third, we report evidence of feedback from teachers and community-based educators about the validity and usability of MYPA. In our conclusion, we discuss challenges and tradeoffs in the development process.

## **Background about the Development Process**

### *Researcher Biographies*

Our approach to assessment development was shaped by the professional backgrounds, social identities, and values of research team members. The research team was led by three primary investigators who have collaborated on a series of funded projects since 2009 focused on critical consciousness and sociopolitical development of K–12 students and teachers. United by a shared commitment to social justice and transformative work, the research team regularly negotiated issues of positionality, power, access, and opportunity in internal team meetings and in relationship with community partners. Here we include a brief positionality statement for each of the four authors of this paper, as a means of making visible the connections between our biographies and the development of the assessment.

The first author, Ben Kirshner, is a White male professor whose commitments to supporting youth voice and activism were catalyzed by his work as an educator in youth organizations in the San Francisco Bay Area. After locating at the University of Colorado Boulder, he sought to develop research partnerships that support the design and sustainability of learning environments

that foster youth voice, activism, and agency, particularly by young people fighting marginalization and structural racism. His positional identity led him to seek out relationships and partnerships with educators and researchers who had strong ties with social justice-oriented groups working in and with communities of color in Denver, Colorado.

The second author, Shelley Zion, is a biracial, queer, female professor at Rowan University, who began working with youth as a community-based social worker with justice-involved youth in Denver. This work led her to work in urban education, as she saw schools as oppressive sites that track and sort students into the justice system or college and saw the potential of young people to develop skills to resist and reform both school and community systems that do not serve them well. As such, her studies focus on systems change, transformational learning, and sociopolitical development.

During the time this study was carried out, the third author was a graduate research assistant on the project; she is now an Assistant Professor at the University of Kentucky. In her partnership-driven scholarship, Daniela DiGiacomo foregrounds the ways in which her identity as a White, Latinx, multilingual female positions her along various axes of privilege and often affords her increased access to minoritized communities of which she both is and is not a part. Her experience as a youth worker, teacher, social worker, and political asylum advocate engendered Daniela's program of research, which is based on building and fostering relationships with youth-serving community-based organizations and schools, and working together to identify and improve upon jointly negotiated problems of educational practice.

The fourth author, Ginnie Logan, is an African American cisgender, female graduate student who began working with youth as a classroom teacher and later became a school leader and nonprofit director serving students of color in Denver. Ginnie lives in Denver and is deeply personally and professionally embedded in the communities where much of the research-practice partnership (RPP) work takes place. She views her role in the academy as being that of strategic bridge builder and cultural broker for the benefit of building community access and power. As a praxis-oriented scholar, her research is focused on designing and implementing programming that result in real-time liberatory benefit to communities of color.

### *Research-Practice Partnerships*

We anchored MYPA's design and piloting in the context of RPPs (Coburn & Penuel, 2016). RPPs center educational practice—and the questions and challenges faced by frontline educators—in the design of research agendas or curriculum tools. In this case, we adapted several principles from the RPP and community-based research literature to our work with partners (Israel et al., 1993; Tseng et al., 2017). These principles include commitment to equity and justice in how we work with partners; in iterative cycles of codesign, piloting, and feedback from educators and youth; and in efforts to align the rubric with specific learning objectives and institutional contexts of practice partners (Kirshner & Polman, 2013). Guided by our values and commitments regarding equity

and transformative student voice, we sought out partners who reflected these commitments.

Three organizations played leading roles in this process of development and pilot testing: Project VOYCE (PV), Denver Public Schools’ Student Voice and Leadership program (SVL), and The Civic Canopy. PV is a youth organization that “partners with youth to cultivate transformational leadership to address root causes of inequity in underrepresented communities by training, employ-ing, organizing, and building equitable youth-adult partnerships” (www.projectvoyce.org). Several members of our team had worked with PV’s then executive director, Candi CdeBaca, on earlier projects and collaborations, which facilitated partnership develop-ment. Because of PV’s mission, its leadership by a woman of color who grew up in the same part of the city as PV’s youth participants, and our shared values around social justice youth activism, PV was an appropriate partner to provide feedback and ensure that the tool would be seen as relevant and useful to their work.

Denver Public Schools’ SVL is part of the College and Career Readiness Office and supports youth activism and voice through school-based teams who carry out YPAR projects and share their action research projects in a public showcase at the end of the year. We were introduced to SVL by Ginnie Logan, who brokered a relationship between the research team and SVL’s leader, Solicia Lopez, based on relationships developed as the executive director of a Black girl-serving youth program.

The Civic Canopy is a nonprofit organization that seeks to equip local people with tools to create meaningful and lasting impact in their communities through dialogue, relationship building, and collective action. During the time that we were developing MYPA, The Civic Canopy launched a pilot program to support social studies teachers and community-based educators

leading their students in action civics projects aligned to practices recommended by the Campaign for the Civic Mission of the Schools (2011). The project convened organizations diverse in size, scope, and mission but whose commitments and values aligned regarding supporting young people to participate in democratic processes. We were introduced to this initiative by the leader of the action civics initiative, named Kelli Pfaff, who had served on a nonprofit board with Ben Kirshner.

In addition to these three partner organizations, we also convened a design team made up of teachers, curriculum experts, community-based educators, and high-school age youth leaders, for periodic meetings to envision uses for MYPA and get feedback on drafts. As the development process gained momentum, we often worked on several parallel tracks simultaneously, including pilot-testing existing versions with community partners while refining construct language and decision rules on our research team. Once we had developed a complete version we began seeking feedback about usefulness and testing its feasibility with educators. These phases of work are summarized in Table 1.

### Developing and Refining MYPA Constructs

Over the course of two years, our team developed the Measure of Youth Policy Arguments (MYPA), intended for use by community educators and classroom teachers (see Appendix for 2019 version). MYPA identifies expectations for high- quality presentations by student teams. As such, it is intended as a formative assessment tool in inquiry-based action civics; it provides a road map or heuristic for identifying and assessing shared learning goals across multiple diverse projects. MYPA evaluates presentations in terms of six dimensions: presentation delivery, collaboration, problem framing, research methods, policy proposal, and responsiveness to

**Table 1. Phases of Work (in Overlapping Chronological Order)**

Time Period	Focus	Activities
August 2015–February 2016	Construct map development, testing, and refinement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consult design team of educators and organizers</li> <li>• Review literature</li> <li>• Review public videos of youth policy arguments</li> <li>• Consult with policy experts</li> </ul>
March–May 2016	Rubric development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Convert construct map into rubric that can be used by educators and youth</li> <li>• Video record local youth policy arguments</li> </ul>
June–August 2016	Pilot testing of MYPA as guide for instruction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Partner with youth program: Project VOYCE</li> <li>• Use MYPA to guide program design and activities</li> <li>• Youth develop policy presentations using MYPA as guide</li> </ul>
June–December 2016	Norming and reliability testing (whole team)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Score videos using MYPA and improve interrater reliability</li> </ul>
August–December 2016	Formation of research-practice partnerships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Discuss MYPA with educator colleagues from two networks: one school based, the other a mix of school based and community based</li> </ul>
January–June 2017	Norming and reliability testing (subgroup)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Clarify decision rules, score videos, test interrater reliability</li> </ul>
January–June 2017	Collaboration with educational partners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop and curate curricular resource for YPAR and action civics, aligned with rubric</li> <li>• Lead PD sessions for educators using MYPA</li> <li>• Train judges to use MYPA to assess culminating performances in showcases</li> <li>• Develop materials for teacher-facing website</li> </ul>

questions (see Table 2 for a description of each construct). MYPA is intended for educational contexts where young people are preparing to make policy arguments to external stakeholders, typically as part of a participatory action research or action civics inquiry cycle. For that reason, in addition to the rubric itself, our team also developed curricular resources and examples linked to each element of the rubric (see [www.transformativestudentvoice.net](http://www.transformativestudentvoice.net) for examples). In this section, we describe the construct-centered approach we took to assessment development and the design principles that guided our decision-making about item language.

### **Construct-Centered Assessment**

Construct-centered assessment (Maul, 2018) begins with the identification and specification of constructs, each with different gradations of quality, presented in construct maps. Rather than adhere to the assumption that each construct must be divided into the same number of categories (as is common in educational rubrics), construct maps identify different levels of quality as appropriate to each construct. The MYPA constructs were informed initially by our review of several diverse texts: the scholarly literature on policy argumentation, educator-designed public speaking and debate rubrics, and publicly available video-taped presentations by youth. The construct-centered approach to assessment development uses an argument approach to validation, which makes explicit the interpretations and uses to which an assessment is put (Kane, 2009). So, for example, in discussions of measures of academic learning, in addition to reporting the internal psychometric properties of a set of performance tasks across a sample of test-takers, the developer would also specify if and how the interpretation of scores should be used for decision-making in practice or policy (Maul, 2018).

### **Review of Literature on Policy Argumentation**

#### **Argumentation**

The literature on argument provides guidance for how to conceptualize the key attributes of quality. Mathematics and science education, for example, have recently turned toward an emphasis on learning how to engage in disciplinary forms of argumentation (e.g., Berland & Reiser, 2009; Bricker & Bell, 2008; Forman et al., 1998; Lehrer & Schauble, 2005). This work, which draws on Toulmin's (1958) argument model about the logical relationship among claims, warrants, and backings, examines how students construct and communicate evidence-based arguments to specific discourse communities. This idea of the context-specific norms and standards leads to ideas of storytelling and framing, both of which are central aspects of argumentation by experienced political actors (Benford & Snow, 2000; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980).

#### **Storytelling and Framing**

Research in public policy settings, such as school board meetings or community organizing actions, raises additional dimensions of quality beyond argumentation of the sort found in classroom settings (Kock, 2009). The types of evidence people draw upon in public settings are more varied than in scientific argumentation. For example, a well-told personal testimony, such as in a hearing

**Table 2**  
**MYPA Constructs**

<b>Construct</b>	<b>Description</b>
Presentation & Delivery	High-quality presentation skills show the audience that you are prepared and care deeply about the topic. Specific elements include voice projection, eye contact, body positioning, and gestures. Strong presentations convey students' passion for and ownership of the topic.
Collaboration	High levels of collaboration are observable when presenters share speaking turns, help each other, use plural possessive pronouns, and are attuned to each other. Low levels of collaboration are seen when one team member dominates the stage or there are clear signs of confusion among speakers.
Problem Identification	Problem identification refers to whether the young people's culminating performance offers a clear perspective or framework by which the audience can understand the extent and scope of their focal problem. How well does the presentation identify a problem, provide evidence about that problem, and situate that problem in a broader context or system? Strong presentations articulate the relevance of the problem to students' lives.
Research Methods	To build a case for the existence or severity of a problem, presenters provide evidence based on research. Types of evidence vary widely. Presenters may provide survey data, archival data, testimonials, interviews, or multimedia displays. Rather than rank specific types of evidence or methods over others, in this construct what matters is (a) that the speakers are explicit about their methods and why they chose them, (b) that their methods are aligned to their topic, (c) that they share their evidence in a way that is credible to the viewer.
Policy Proposal	A "policy" is a set of rules or commitments adopted by schools, governments, or other public agencies. Unlike a one-time event, a policy proposal creates new structures or systems that are sustained over time. A high-quality policy proposal offers clear action steps. Youth might propose a new policy, change an existing policy, or hold people accountable for implementing a policy. A quality culminating performance will include a policy proposal that can be enacted by people in official policy-making capacity (e.g., principals, school board members, state legislators, governors, etc.).
Responsiveness to Questions	This is an opportunity for young people to further expand on their arguments, provide new points, or reaffirm their positions or ideas. High-quality student responses will show a good handle on their evidence, an effort to fully address the question, and deep conceptual understanding of their topic. Presenters will be able to depart from their prepared notes in their responses.

on access to higher education for undocumented immigrants, can be highly compelling to policymakers (Seif, 2004). Also, social movement literature points to the importance of framing in terms of appealing to the interests of the target audience or diagnosing the problem in particular ways to mobilize supporters (Benford & Snow, 2000; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Salinas & Fraser, 2012).

A second resource regarding storytelling pertains to long-standing work in rhetoric and speech that draws on Aristotle's triad of ethos, logos, and pathos. Rhetoric and speech both have a distinguished tradition in research on political rhetoric (Higgins & Walker, 2012) and are often used in K–12 instruction for literacy and speech (e.g., Brett & Thomas, 2014).

### **Demands and Action Steps**

Community organizers have developed specific strategies when voicing demands in planned interactions with policymakers (Oakes & Rogers, 2006; Schutz & Sandy, 2012). They point out that it is necessary to explain who is accountable for implementing a policy and a timeline for implementing the policy: Never leave a meeting with a policymaker without a clear set of steps that they are expected to follow.

### **Critical Perspectives on Power and Positioning**

Of particular relevance to our work—in the design of an educational tool that could be used by youth to amplify their voices in the public square—was the explicit recognition of how power and positioning affect young people as they develop and deliver their policy arguments (Su, 2009; Warren & Mapp, 2011). Attention to “counter-scripting” and “counter-staging” (Su, 2010)—that is, purposefully reframing how a problem or issue has been normatively conceptualized and repositioning oneself and one's community in relation to that problem or issue—is especially valuable for youth from marginalized communities, given how they are normatively positioned in the public square.

Taken together, these traditions and areas of scholarship point to key elements of high-quality policy arguments. General conventions of argumentation adapted to the rhetorical practices of the political sphere, in tandem with critical perspectives on power and privilege, informed our thinking about what ought to be included in an assessment tool. We then put this prior scholarly work in conversation with our own educational values and goals, which we discuss next (Bang & Vossoughi, 2016).

### ***MYPA Design Principles***

#### **Authenticity to Mature Practice**

Our decisions were guided by the goal of preparing young people for effective participation in actual policy settings where decisions are made. This design principle had two consequences: It meant, first, that we maintained an open-ended view of the kinds of topics and audiences that should be included as use cases, ranging from policy arguments about school lunches to proposals to address gentrification or water shortages. This posed challenges for writing items (statements that distinguish higher or lower quality within a dimension of an assessment protocol) that were general enough to accommodate a range of cases, while still being specific enough

to enable reliable scoring. The second consequence was that we sought to maintain high expectations for what the highest level of quality looked like. Our research team had multiple debates about the criteria by which to both define and score the presentations; generally we resolved those debates in terms of maintaining a high “ceiling,” by reserving the highest score for arguments that would be convincing to external audiences. In discussions about the policy proposal construct, for example, we found few examples where speakers provided a timeline for implementation, but we knew this was an important part of holding decision-makers accountable, so we kept it in the rubric.

To define what we thought of as high-quality mature practice, in addition to published scholarship, we asked for feedback by policy experts, including policymakers and social justice educators. Early in the project we recruited two policy experts to assess the extent to which they reflected authentic policy arguments in their work. The panelists used the rubric to rate videotaped presentations and then discuss their ratings with us. In this conversation, recorded in field notes, one of the panelists, the mayor of a neighboring city, shared positive feedback about the constructs overall, saying “he would find these very useful outside of the education context” (such as in city council or professional spaces). This same policymaker also provided feedback that shaped subsequent iterations of the constructs, suggesting that “we think about emotion or affect and passion in the language, because this holds a lot of import.” Subsequent iterations added an item called “Commitment/Passion,” which differentiated three levels of quality (see rubric in appendix). Unlike most of the other items in the rubric, this one called for a subjective judgment by the observer. We decided, however, that even if it is difficult to measure this reliably, if it is important to the mature practice of policy arguments, then we should include it. This is an example where we prioritized authenticity to the practice over ease of measurement.

Later in the development process we met with the head of a program funded by the state legislature that creates opportunities for youth from across the state to lobby state legislators. After we discussed the rubric with her and showed her the various constructs, she reported that it would indeed be a useful guide for preparing students to meet with policymakers at the statehouse. She contracted with one of our graduate students to train the students in key aspects of the rubric, which we take as a further sign that she saw it as valuable. On her recommendation, we were contacted by a federal congressional staffer who directed a youth policy advisory council, who also requested use of the rubric.

#### **Alignment with Academic Standards**

Reflective of our goal for MYPA to be useful for public secondary school teachers, we made some design decisions to connect indicators of quality with academic standards. In particular, we wove expectations around evidence use throughout the rubric, which aligns with Common Core standards (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2014; Kornbluh et al., 2015). We also worked with our district partners in Denver Public Schools to show alignment to English standards, which require students to be able

to “convey complex ideas and information clearly and accurately to logically support an argument,” “sustain the use of varied, relevant evidence,” and “write interpretation that compellingly connects the evidence with ideas” (see standard for Argumentative Writing, <http://thecommons.dpsk12.org/Page/824>).

### Honoring Multiple Ways of Knowing and Communicating

A tension that showed up early and often in developing the rubric was the tension between the imperative to standardize/measure and the imperative to honor multiple ways of knowing and communicating. Language, public speaking, and various registers of speech are not neutral and are shaped by institutions that privilege dominant White, middle-class ways of communicating (Alim, 2011; Baugh, 2000). This notion of language ideologies informed and complicated our efforts to rate levels of quality. For example, is high-quality speech one that conforms to academic English, or is it variable depending on audience, context, and speaker? Who decides? If code-switching is prized, what type and in what direction? If emerging bilingual students move confidently between their primary language and English in their presentations, how should that be recognized in the rubric? We pose these as questions because they motivated many of our conversations and they remain open questions for us.

**Linguistic Code-Switching.** When assessing public speaking, we did not want the rubric to implicitly or explicitly endorse academic English as the “best” way of communicating in public forums. For example, Alim and Smitherman (2012) wrote about how President Obama demonstrated how code-switching across linguistic modes could be an effective way for public leaders to reach and mobilize diverse audiences. Various research members and design team members brought their own culturally informed analytical frames to bear in support of this point. At our second meeting of the project (December 2015), we broke into groups and asked people to define what a high-quality presentation would be. One of the groups included in their report: “recognize & value code switching” and “not valuing normative technical skills but encouraging learning & using technical skills for particular contexts.” These values informed our efforts to define items for the *Presentation and Delivery* construct in a few ways. First, we designed and normed the rubric using a video library we assembled for which the majority of presentations were delivered by African American or Latinx young people. Second, we tried to ensure that items did not privilege academic English or reward narrow conceptions of professional or civic speech, and this emphasis was made explicit when training raters. Although it might have been useful, we did not develop items that would identify what a high-quality instance of code-switching would be; this was beyond the scope of our first version but could be added for future versions.

**Types of Evidence.** We also built in an appreciation of diverse ways of knowing by recognizing multiple types of evidence as valid. This shows up in two items in the *Problem Identification* construct—*Naming the Problem* and *Relevance to Speakers*—and also in *Research Methods* (see appendix for Constructs and Items). *Naming the Problem* asks students to identify the problem by

providing evidence documenting the prevalence and analyzing the root causes within a social context or system. The *Naming the Problem* construct includes a variety of evidence types in its highest-quality column, including “personal testimony.” Moreover, the *Research Methods* construct does not name a type of method as superior to others and lists personal testimony as a potential method.

One example of how this played out can be seen in the summer academy we helped design with Project VOYCE (PV). The PV youth in the 2016 summer academy split into two teams and chose to focus their action civics projects on gentrification and civic education, respectively. Youth who presented about gentrification at the end of the summer did an excellent job of addressing the “storytelling” and “personal relevance” items in two ways. First, one of the speakers recited a poem about gentrification, in which she expressed how gentrification had adversely impacted her city and her family (storytelling). And, later, two speakers talked about the impact that gentrification had on them and their families (personal relevance). This example illustrates the ways in which the rubric was a useful tool to elevate these aspects of personal experience as part of a larger argument about gentrification and its impacts.

### Summary

Three design commitments informed the development of the rubric: authenticity to mature practice, alignment with academic standards, and honoring multiple ways of knowing and communicating. We have told the story of how we implemented these commitments and highlighted some of the ways these commitments showed up in the context of RPPs. We now transition to a different body of evidence about the rubric, focusing on feedback we received about usability and value from educators and youth.

### An Argument for MYPAs Usability and Value in Practice

In the remainder of this paper, we advance an argument about the ways that MYPAs can be a resource for young people, and educators guiding young people, who aim to develop policy arguments shared verbally with decision-makers. In this paper, we focus on the value of MYPAs educational uses. A separate paper (Hipolito-Delgado et al., 2020) focuses on MYPAs psychometric qualities, including evidence of inter-rater reliability among trained scorers.

### Feedback on Usability and Value from Educators and Youth

We discuss feedback received in three contexts: pilot testing MYPAs with an out-of-school youth organizing group (Project VOYCE), focus groups with teacher “coaches” for a school-based action civics and student voice program, and an online survey of educators. We reviewed those sources of data and looked for data relevant to questions of usability, value, and limitations.

### Pilot Test with Project VOYCE (July 2016)

During our first year of construct development, we encountered some challenges with finding examples of high-quality youth policy arguments in our local area to videotape and learn from for rubric development and training. In response, Shelley Zion

(second author) suggested we partner with a community group to see if we could support their program goals and also videotape youth policy arguments, both as a resource for getting feedback on the rubric and also to develop some high-quality exemplars to share on our website. Because of the longstanding relationship with PV, as well as trust developed by two members of the research team, Vanessa Roberts and Daniela DiGiacomo, the PV leadership invited our team to collaboratively redesign and help facilitate PV's summer academy. This coincided with our own goal of testing out the value and usefulness of the tool in practical work with youth.<sup>1</sup>

We learned a great deal from the experience of facilitating the academy, particularly in terms of the kinds of curriculum supports that should complement the MYPA rubric, which we later developed. Here we focus on feedback we received from youth participants in a focus group with youth who used the MYPA tool; we asked them to talk about their experience using it, how it informed their thinking, and their assessment of its strengths and weaknesses. Strengths tended to focus on how the rubric offered a guide to how to present well and address the various aspects of quality policy arguments. Weaknesses included its length, inaccessibility of some of the language, and repetition. Because strengths and weaknesses were woven together in people's comments, we present examples here as shared by five participants who provided feedback (referenced as PV1, PV2, etc.):

PV1: When we first got it, it was 7 pages, it was too long. I said I wouldn't do it, I'm a slow reader, so I didn't like it. But when I got filled in on the other 6 pages, I liked it, and I see it as helpful. It teaches you how to present properly . . .

PV2: At first glance, I thought it was going to be too complicated, but after reading all 7 pages, it was very easy to understand but very hard to actually do. It's a really good foundation for something that could be really great and helpful throughout the school system, but these are the hardest things for people and kids to do, so they need support. I think it could be used in all classes, because in all classes you have to present and present well, and you need this to be successful in life. The MYPA tool was a good thing to reference as we developed our policy arguments, as a thing to go back to make sure we hit everything, and if we didn't do it, reflect on why we didn't do it.

PV3: Initially some things and language was repetitive and unnecessary across and within the seven constructs. And I feel like it's not too different from what I've seen elsewhere, like in my school.

PV4: The tool helped us reevaluate our arguments and presentations, and to evaluate quality and what makes quality and how we could make it better.

PV5: The rubric was really something a college professor would use. Not even my communications class in college was this complicated. It needs to be at 1 or 1.5 pages.

These comments gave us some confidence that youth who were working on policy arguments saw the information in the rubric as useful and relevant, while at the same time realizing that it was cumbersome and could be off-putting to some because of its length and language. Moreover, we took seriously the feedback about the value of curricular scaffolds and guidance. After this PV summer institute, we completed another iteration of the document that made it shorter and more accessible in terms of language and linked to scaffolding activities and curriculum resources—thereby responding to each of the major articulated points of concern raised by the youth in terms of the tool's usability. We also created a second version of the rubric, called a scorecard, formatted to fit on one 11x17 piece of paper and be more accessible to users (see appendix).

### Educator Focus Groups (August 2016)

One month after the PV academy, we organized a series of feedback sessions to which we invited teachers, program leaders, and current graduate students who had been classroom teachers. There were twelve participants over three sessions. The agendas followed a similar structure: First people were asked to score two videos and discuss what was challenging about scoring. Then we had a general discussion about the usability and value of the tool for their educational context. In each focus group, participants voiced clarifying questions about the rubric and the language of specific items. They had a variety of suggestions and questions, such as the need for us to clarify MYPAs definition of a "policy," provide examples of what represented a counter-argument, and address the challenge of observing eye contact or collaboration in videotaped examples. When it came to the second part of the conversation, focused on questions of practical uses for work with students, the consensus was positive toward the educational uses of MYPA. Here is an excerpt from field notes recorded during the second focus group:

### Meeting notes: August 2016, 2nd Teacher Feedback Session

FACILITATOR: What about the utility and usability?

TEACHER 1 (T1): Definitely, it could be throughout the process; as a group is preparing the present to a community group of school board, this would be a great way to frame their work in the present, while they're practicing, and as a post-evaluation tool . . .

T2: I would love to have this at the beginning of a teacher training process; would love to see an added section on feedback. Esp. if using it for a tool for students. But I think the sections are really clear; if you were a community leader it would be easy to use/adapt.

T3: I think it's a tool that transfers over for students to analyze political policy and policy that is recommended out locally and nationally as well . . . maybe a couple things you'd want to alter, maybe not just measuring one presentation but holistically . . .

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1 Vanessa Roberts, a doctoral student in sociology at the time, was lead facilitator for the summer program. Daniela DiGiacomo (third author) helped with some facilitation and documented the summer project through field notes and interviews.



These excerpts, along with feedback in the other two groups, suggest a general sense that the teachers saw value in using MYPA in both formative and summative ways. For example, with regard to formative uses, T1 talked about using it to “frame” their work during practice. T2 talked about using it at the beginning of a teacher training process. Similarly, teachers also saw how it could be used at the end of a unit, for a “post-evaluation” (T2) or for measuring students “holistically” in terms of their ability to deliver policy arguments.

The conversation continued as people raised suggestions for how to make it useful in their work with students or how to support teachers in understanding how to use it, such as training resources and video exemplars. One teacher suggested having students score some videos using the MYPA so that they have practice before developing their own arguments. Mindful of the feedback from PV, we also asked if the length would be acceptable in classrooms and community education spaces. Distinct from the youth, no one thought it was too long, with one teacher saying, “It’s not that overwhelming.” Another said, “Because the distinguishers are so clear and language is precise, I think students would be able to use it authentically and intentionally.” At the same time, one said that they would “build stamina” with their students by only introducing one section at a time when they are learning how to use it. This teacher said they would wait to introduce the entire rubric as a “capstone” at the very end. Another teacher said, “It’s probably just the right [amount of detail]—I can’t imagine doing more . . . And it fits the type of big project it is; it’s not a one-day project.”

At the third focus group, with a mix of teachers and community educators, the conversation mostly focused on clarifying and refining language of individual items. When the conversation turned toward how people might use it, the comments showed a similar sense that this would be a useful educational tool. For example, one speaker, who represented a community-based group that supported teachers doing yearlong “community action projects” with their students, said, “A lot of this is really applicable . . . and we haven’t totally figured this out, but ideally they are presenting their work in front of a panel. I’d say the majority of it would be useful for us.” When this educator was asked to elaborate, they said that the MYPA “matches well with our citizenship rubric and communication rubric” and “links up to competencies we’ve been focusing on.”

Overall, these teacher feedback sessions, which took place roughly one year after the beginning of the development process, gave us confidence that we were on the right track and that expert civics educators in and out of school saw value in it.

### **Online Survey with Teachers (November 2016)**

To explore teacher perspectives on MYPA beyond our immediate circle of collaborators, we developed an online survey and shared it broadly via our professional networks. Twenty teachers anonymously completed the survey, in which they watched a video, rated it using the rubric, and then provided feedback on the rubric. With regard to usability, 85% stated that they would be either “likely” or “somewhat likely” to use the protocol in their own work with

youth; 95% stated that they would either be “likely” or “somewhat likely” to recommend the protocol to colleagues. When asked what the greatest strength of the protocol was in an open-ended question, the majority of answers revolved around the theme of its usability. Examples included “Simple category choices,” “Ease of use,” “Strong examples to help guide rating,” “Clear instructions,” “Easy to evaluate,” “Good explanation of different sections,” “Clarity of measures.” We also asked respondents to state the greatest weakness of the protocol; we discerned three themes in the criticisms. Four people expressed concerns about the response options, such as finding the item language too limiting or needing to also include “other” as a response option. Three people said it was really difficult to assess collaboration based on the video recording. Two people said the rubric was too long. We also got valuable feedback about which constructs were the easiest to understand and score (Presentation and Delivery, Problem Identification) and which were the hardest (Research Methods and Policy Proposal).

### **Summary**

Data from a subset of feedback sessions provide some evidence of a positive reception to the tool from educators in and out of school who facilitated either YPAR, action civics, or related forms of youth leadership and voice initiatives. We acknowledge with that that there was some element of self-selection in play, with the exception of the online anonymous survey. In other words, those giving feedback were recruited because they had expertise and experience with facilitating or leading youth activism, and we valued their feedback as people doing that work or supportive of that work. We did not, with the exception of the online survey, seek feedback from a general population of teachers.

### **Adoption by Programs**

A different type of evidence of usability and value can be observed in the decisions of our three partners to adopt and use the rubric after the pilot year. Each of the three groups, Project VOYCE (PV), The Civic Canopy, and DPS Challenge 5280 adopted some combination of the rubric, curriculum, and scorecard to prepare students for high-quality action civics. With regard to PV, after the first summer, they asked the facilitator, who had been a member of the MYPA research team, to return the following summer to run their workshop and use the MYPA rubric as a guide for the policy presentations. PV is now approaching its third summer and plans to continue to use the rubric and work with youth facilitators who can “deliver curriculum that is aligned with the MYPA rubric” (personal communication with current executive director). With regard to The Civic Canopy, after using both the rubric and scorecards for their first statewide year, they indicated to us their plan to use the scorecard again for the showcase in May. Last but not least, with Challenge 5280, we are in the third year of a more intentional research practice partnership that involves scaling up the work, curricular development and support, codesigning youth and coach training, and data collection. According to the program director, in a letter of support for the project:

*the partnership is valuable because it has enabled 5280 teachers to orient their work to a comprehensive rubric that has qualitative and quantitative dimensions. This emphasis on assessment, along with the curriculum materials that accompany it, enables student voice and action civics learning to align with the academic goals of the district.*

Overall, one use that seemed to cut across programs, which emerged in talking with partners, but which was not an explicit design goal, was that for some program leaders and directors the rubric was of substantive educational value because it could provide an anchoring goal, or a shared destination, for diverse student-led projects. Though projects might vary in their topics, types of research, and policy proposals, MYPA provided a shared framework and telos. For others, however, we inferred from some conversations that they were eager to adopt it because of its “symbolic use” (Weiss & Bucuvalas, 1980). By this we mean that it had the imprimatur of being from a university team, funded by a prestigious grant. This partnership with our universities was something they could cite in their own reports in ways that were advantageous to them.

## Discussion

Youth voice and agency are crucial elements of democracy education. Young people learn how to participate in collective decision-making and self-governance through authentic opportunities for participation. While recognizing the power of grassroots youth-led activism, we also see value in intentionally designed learning environments where more experienced others (often teachers) scaffold and support young people’s skillful and critical participation, such as through school-based action civics, university-supported YPAR, or community-based youth organizing campaigns. As part of a well-designed learning environment, preparation for culminating performances, where young people advocate for policy change to public audiences, is key. MYPA offers a resource that we believe can be useful for teams of young people getting ready to share their ideas and arguments with public audiences.

In this paper we have offered a rationale for MYPA and evidence of its validity for educational use in community and school spaces. In particular, consistent with recent approaches to assessment argument (Kane, 2009; Pellegrino, Dibello, & Goldman, 2016), we adopt the view that the validity of an assessment tool is based on the goals and functions to which it will be put; one must offer a *validity argument* that acknowledges these goals and appropriate forms of evidence aligned to those goals. In this case, our evidence suggests that educators supporting student voice in and out of school see the need for an assessment of policy arguments and that this particular assessment includes relevant dimensions of quality and is feasible to be used in educational contexts. We offered evidence by sharing examples of feedback from educators throughout the development process. In a separate paper, other members of our team describe the technical process of gaining reliability in ratings and evidence of its psychometric properties (Hipolito-Delgado et al., 2020).

In addition to sharing the MYPA rubric with the democracy education community, we also want to underscore the value of

developing the assessment protocol in the context of equity-centered research practice partnerships. Anchoring our work in relationships with democracy education groups enabled us to ensure that there was an audience for the protocol and that we received constructive feedback throughout the development. Although pilot testing has been a longstanding practice in assessment development, we gained valuable insights in this case by embedding our work in iterative cycles of design, testing, and feedback with partners in and out of school. These design cycles helped us to keep end users front and center and also see ways that the protocol could be taken up in ways we did not intend, which we discuss next.

## Limitations and Tradeoffs

One limitation of the version of the protocol discussed here stemmed from dilemmas we had about whether and how to center social justice values in the language of items pertaining to problem-framing and policy proposals. Early in our process, we sought to develop a tool that could be used widely, across a range of school districts and sociopolitical contexts. We struggled with how to align our ideas about critical consciousness with varied types of audiences and educational contexts. For the version iterated here, we foregrounded the importance of context and systems thinking in problem framing, while leaving out explicit naming of social justice in the item language. We left more explicit social justice elements to the supporting resources, including lesson plans. We continue to iterate the protocol and recently added more-explicit language about critical social analysis as a dimension of quality.

A second dilemma that we experienced throughout the process of developing this tool was the question of if it could be used in ways that are counter to our goals, which are to create spaces where young people develop the skills and knowledge to engage critically with their world by identifying issues that impact their lives, researching those, and making policy arguments that honor their lived realities and desires for social change. The focus, however, on accountability and high-stakes testing in our education system elevates the risk that MYPA become used as a measure to grade, and find wanting, the critical work of young people. We do not want this rubric, intended to scaffold youth participation and voice, to instead become a way to measure and sort young people. We worry that, without guidance for assessors, subjective judgments grounded in racist, classist, or sexist ideologies could reinforce the power of dominant culture students, and further marginalize minoritized students. Finally, we envision this as a tool that supports a particular approach to pedagogy—one that shares power and voice with students, takes a critical approach to teaching and learning, and allows for push back against the status quo—which calls for strong teacher learning communities to accompany adoption of MYPA. Such learning and coaching have been possible through RPPs but are less likely in efforts to “scale” the use of the tool.

Mindful of these concerns and tradeoffs, we have focused our work in relationships and partnerships that enable shared goals and connect the use of the MYPA to an array of attached resources, including curriculum, video examples, and teacher learning

communities. This kind of modified scaling, which situates education innovations in local communities of practice, may be key to realizing the potential of democracy education resources that challenge injustice and engage young people as transformative sociopolitical actors.

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MEASURING YOUTH POLICY ARGUMENTS SCORECARD



The Measure of Youth Policy Arguments is a rubric that assesses the quality of youth public policy presentations and is designed to provide youth with formative and summative feedback. For each item select the box that best describes the quality of the groups' presentation.

PRESENTATION AND DELIVERY	STRONGER -----WEAKER			
	OPENING HOOK	brief and draws in the audience		does not include an opening hook
	TOPIC	introduction establishes the topic		introduction does not establish the topic
	INTRODUCTIONS	All speakers introduced at the start		not all speakers introduced at start
	CLARITY OF SPEECH	all speakers project their voices, speak clearly and use few filler words (e.g. like, um, so)	quality and clarity varies across speakers	
	BODY LANGUAGE & GESTURES	use body language to emphasize specific points or communicate ideas	body language does not add nor subtract from the message--if you did not notice body language.	body language distracts from the presentation.
	COMMITMENT/PASSION OF SPEAKERS	show commitment to or passion for the content of presentation	engaged but do not "own" their words or demonstrate passion	appear uninterested in the material
PROBLEM IDENTIFICATION	<b>FOCAL PROBLEM IDENTIFIED (write here):</b>			
	STRONGER -----WEAKER			
	NAMING THE FOCAL PROBLEM	clearly names a problem and provides two or more types of evidence about the extent or importance of problem(s)	names problem and provides one type evidence of extent or importance of problem(s)	names a problem, but offers no evidence of extent or importance of problem(s)
	CONTEXTUALIZING THE PROBLEM	discuss causes and situates problem in a broader policy or social context--this connection is clear and explicit	attempt to situate the problem in broader context. Discussion is unclear in places and observer is uncertain how connections are being made	Does not offer interpretation of cause or what is contributing to the problem; It is treated in isolation
	CRITICAL ANALYSIS	group identifies a root cause of focal problem and frames analysis in terms of access or equity to resources or opportunities	group attempts to describe a root cause of focal problem, but connection between the root cause and problem is unclear	group does not go beyond a superficial naming of the problem and does not describe a root cause
	RELEVANCE TO SPEAKERS	description of the problem includes discussion of relevance to everyday lives or aspirations of the speakers		description of the problem makes no reference to impact on everyday lives or dreams of the speakers
RESEARCH METHODS	STRONGER -----WEAKER			
	METHODS FOR DATA COLLECTION	presenters talk, in detail, about their method(s) (e.g. literature review, personal testimony, survey, interview, observation), how they gathered the data, and type of data analysis	presenters mention their method(s) but do not provide detail how or why they went about their data collection or analysis	presenters do not mention their methods or mention any data to support argument
	CONNECTION OF METHODS TO PROBLEM AND/OR POLICY	youth provide reasons why their choice of research methods is relevant to understanding their problem/ policy proposal		youth do not provide reasons why their research methods are relevant to understanding their problem/ policy proposal
	PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS/ RESULTS	thoroughly describe data or results of their inquiry (ex. extended quotes & survey results)	presenters mention some data but do not provide detail	data is absent or unclear, argument is largely based on opinion
	WAS THIS EVIDENCE CONVINCING?	evidence presented was credible and convincing	offered data but it was not credible or convincing	offers no evidence to support importance of problem

PRESENTERS' PROPOSED POLICY (write here):					
		STRONGER -----WEAKER			
POLICY PROPOSAL	RATIONALE FOR PROPOSED POLICY	articulate a clear policy proposal and provides evidence or reasoning in support	offers incomplete or confusing evidence or reasoning in support of policy	no evidence or reasoning is provided in support of policy	no policy proposal is offered
	CONNECTION TO FOCAL PROBLEM	explain how the proposal will address the focal problem and its root cause	explains how the proposal will address the focal problem, but not its root cause	proposal does not relate to focal problem or contradicts what was said	
	PROPOSED IMPLEMENTATION	articulate who is responsible for enacting policy and a timeline for when and how to implement	articulates either who is responsible for enacting the policy or a timeline for policy implementation, but not both	does not articulate who is responsible nor does offer a timeline	
	POLICY VALUES FRAMING	make an explicit connection to a set of values that are meant to resonate with the audience	do not make an explicit connection to a set of values that are meant to resonate with the audience		
	CALL TO ACTION FOR AUDIENCE	audience is offered clear action steps to implement or support the proposed policy	audience is asked to take action; specific steps are vague or not directly related to advancing the policy	audience not asked to do anything	
			STRONGER -----WEAKER		
COLLABORATION	TALK TIME AMONG SPEAKERS	everyone on the stage delivers part of the presentation (even if length of parts vary)		some team members speak for the whole group; remaining team members do not speak or just say their names	
	TRANSITION AMONG SPEAKERS	presenters coordinate their turns with each other and provide smooth transitions between speakers	presenters are mostly on same page, but 1 or 2 transitions among speakers show confusion or uncertainty (long pause of more than 5 seconds)	3+ moments when speakers show uncertainty about whose turn it is and the transitions are delayed by 5 or more seconds	
	ASSISTANCE IF SOMEONE FALTERS	if a team member falters for more than 5 seconds, others lend assistance (such as whispering some guidance, showing physical gesture of support, or stepping in)		when a team member falters for more than 5 seconds, presenter is left to struggle for too long without help or is prematurely preempted by another speaker	
		STRONGER -----WEAKER			
	OVERALL RESPONSE TO QUESTIONS	response shows presenter understood question; response addresses question directly, is clear, and coherent	presenters appear to have misunderstood part of the question or only responded to part	presenters ignore the question, appear unable to respond, or respond in a hostile way	

NOTES/FEEDBACK: