

## Article

# Exploring Social Justice Education as a Responsive Middle Grades Pedagogy to Promote Justice-Oriented Citizenship

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**Abstract:** Middle grades students across the U.S. are learning about citizenship both explicitly and overtly through the hidden curriculum, which, in the majority of schools, promotes passive compliant citizenship. Culturally and developmentally responsive teaching in the middle grades, however, necessitates active authentic learning that engages the emerging criticality and sense of justice of young adolescents. For this reason, social justice education (SJE) is an especially promising responsive pedagogy for the middle grades. This study investigates the impact of a social justice project designed to promote justice-oriented views of citizenship on middle grades student perceptions of “good citizenship”. Findings indicate shifts in student perceptions of good citizenship toward more participatory and justice-oriented views of citizenship as well as increased critical consciousness. In addition, the findings indicate two new themes in student perceptions: (a) good citizens work together and (b) good citizens sometimes have to defy norms for justice. We close with a critical analysis of the findings and implications for responsive justice-oriented teaching and scholarship.

**Keywords:** social justice education; middle grades; responsiveness; citizenship; civic education; social action; curriculum and instruction



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“There is no such thing as a neutral educational process. Education either functions as an instrument that is used to facilitate the integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity to it, or it becomes ‘the practice of freedom,’ the means by which [people] deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world.” [1].

## 1. Introduction

The middle years (defined as grades 5–9 for the purpose of this study) have long been regarded as a time of social, emotional, and developmental change. Pursuits such as identity formation, social negotiation, and a quest to make sense of the world have often characterized young adolescence [2]. In the 2020s, middle grades students find themselves navigating both the developmental nature of the young adolescent years and a complex historical moment. This contemporary era is qualified by immense social progress and civic engagement, such as the Black Lives Matter and #Metoo movements, advocacy for New Americans, and a global reckoning around climate and environmental sustainability. Yet, inequities, such as racism and other bigotries, persist powerfully [3] as social systems, within critical institutions, and are codified as policies. Given the sociopolitical context of education [4], it is important to note the extant historical and active present-day impact of systemic inequities upon schooling as a social institution [5]. Scholars and activists have called for social justice (SJ)-oriented pedagogies to challenge and disrupt harmful systems [6] for the teaching of truthful and representative histories [7] and for the explicit acknowledgment of antiracism as a necessary pursuit in the educational context [8]. Yet, in the

literature around middle level education, there is little research about teachers' pedagogical approaches to culturally responsive teaching [9] and about young adolescents' developing social identities in conjunction with traditional framings of adolescent development [10]. Moreover, the historical overemphasis on developmentalism over sociocultural factors has resulted in calls to identify approaches to culturally and developmentally responsive middle grades teaching [11]. Middle grades teaching approaches that emphasize critical inquiry have the potential to be both culturally responsive and developmentally responsive if they are designed to attend to the social, emotional, moral, and cognitive needs of young adolescents while also engaging them in authentic learning aimed at developing critical consciousness [1], which is an essential outcome of culturally relevant teaching [12]. Social justice education, with its emphasis on identity, diversity, justice, and action, is an example of one powerful middle level pedagogy that sits at the intersection of culturally and developmentally responsive teaching [13].

Although the development of critical consciousness is central to both developmentally and culturally responsive approaches to teaching, the vast majority of schools promote passive compliant models of citizenship [14], both through the explicit curriculum of civic studies and in the hidden curriculum delivered more subversively in the way that students are positioned as citizens in their schools. As a result, despite what is known about the importance of criticality, middle grades students across the nation are immersed in systems and curricula that promote the opposite. With this context in mind, this study investigates the impact of a social justice project on middle grades students' perceptions of "good citizenship". The SJ project at the core of this study was designed to disrupt the prevailing narrative of good citizenship as compliance and to move students towards a participatory and justice-oriented view of citizenship [14]. In addition to the explicit focus on issues that impact the lives of historically marginalized groups, the project was designed to promote critical consciousness [1,12] regarding privilege, power, and systemic inequity towards historically marginalized groups in the United States.

To better understand the impact of the SJ project on middle school students' perceptions of good citizenship, this study uses qualitative inquiry to investigate the following research questions:

1. What initial perceptions of good citizenship are evident in middle school student drawings of "good citizenship" prior to participation in an SJ project?
2. What shifts, if any, are evident in student perceptions of good citizenship after participation in an SJ project?
3. To what extent do student drawings demonstrate critical consciousness before and after participation in an SJ project?

## 2. Perspectives

This study is primarily informed by two bodies of educational literature: (1) social justice education as a responsive middle grades pedagogy, and (2) student perceptions of "good citizenship". We explore the relevance of each to this study in the following sub-sections.

### 2.1. Social Justice Education (SJE) as a Responsive Middle Grades Pedagogy

SJE is a pedagogic approach to teaching social justice that is informed by critical theory [1] and thus connected to a range of equity pedagogies such as culturally relevant, responsive, and sustaining pedagogy [15,16], multicultural education [17], and anti-bias education [18]. While these approaches share much in common, SJE offers a coherent framework for curriculum design that can be easily supported by the Learning for Justice Social Justice Standards [19]. SJE also emphasizes the importance of engaging young people in critical social action as an essential aspect of teaching for social justice. To this point, Hackman [20] (p.104) offered the following about SJE:

Social justice education does not merely examine differences or diversity but pays careful attention to the systems of power and privilege that give rise to

social inequality and encourages students to critically examine oppression on institutional, cultural, and individual levels in search of opportunities for social action in the service of social change.

Through its focus on active, authentic learning and the development of criticality, SJE directly addresses the recommended essential attributes of successful middle schools, which include educational approaches that are responsive, challenging, empowering, equitable, and engaging [2].

Developmentally, young adolescence is marked by an upswell in identity exploration and social awareness [10]. In addition, rapidly evolving cognitive development and increasingly complex moral reasoning, including a strong desire for justice and making the world a better place [21] during adolescence, creates rich learning opportunities to examine complex issues with real-world implications. Due to its emphasis on relevant social issues, identity exploration, criticality, and action, a curriculum that centers on SJ outcomes is also responsive to the developmental nature and needs of young adolescents [13]. By centering topics such as identity, diversity, justice, and activism, SJE capitalizes on the developmental readiness of young adolescents for SJ learning while addressing the best practices in middle grades education [13].

The design and goals of the SJ project in this study were informed by two key frameworks for SJ education. The first framework is Picower's [22] Six Elements of Social Justice Curriculum Design, which include (a) self-love and knowledge, (b) respect for others, (c) issues of social injustice, (d) social movements and social change, (e) awareness raising, and (f) social action. The second framework is the Social Justice Standards created by Learning for Justice [19], which includes K-12 standards organized by the following anchor domains: (a) identity, (b) diversity, (c) justice, and (d) action. Taken together, these two frameworks offer a framework for SJ education that includes both curricular themes and key learning outcomes that are developmentally designed. In both of these frameworks, learning about social identity, both one's own and that of others, and developing self-love and respect for others are foundational.

While learning about identity and diversity is critically important, this knowledge alone does not position young people with the knowledge and skills required to address the most critical social justice issues of our time. For this reason, another key ingredient in SJ education is the development of critical consciousness [1,12]. Freire [1] (p. 35) defined critical consciousness as "learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality" and underscored the importance of "coming to see critically the way they exist in the world with which and in which they find themselves" [1] (p. 83). If educators aim to teach young people to identify, analyze, and redress systems of oppression that continue to perpetuate social injustice, they must support students' awareness of the structural nature of inequity as well as the social determinants that impact specific identity groups. For this reason, it is essential for young people to learn about topics such as power, privilege, systems of oppression, equity, inequity, justice, and injustice. Moreover, to develop critical consciousness, this learning must serve to help young people critically examine how these concepts operate within their own lives and communities.

As it concerns the goal of promoting justice-oriented citizenship, however, being conscious of injustice is also not enough. As defined by Freire [1], critical consciousness requires critical action. As such, SJE should not be thought of as a purely intellectual endeavor, but rather action-oriented learning with the goal of social change. Critically conscious citizens must thus view their role as a participatory one in the pursuit of SJ. SJ education must therefore require young people to understand and engage in social action. Informed by these perspectives, this study uses the following working definition of SJE:

SJE aims to support the development of critically conscious and empowered humans who strive to create a more socially just society. With this goal in mind, SJE engages learners in an authentic action-oriented inquiry regarding topics

such as identity, diversity, justice, social movements, power, equity, privilege, oppression, and critical action.

Responsive teaching in the 2020s middle level classroom must address both developmental and socio-cultural implications [10], a goal which can be achieved by embracing pedagogies that are responsive to the development needs of young adolescents while also explicitly taking up “societal and cultural issues in the context of school and learning” [23] (p. 290). Guided by our working definition of SJE and its promise as a culturally and developmentally responsive pedagogy, this study aims to further explore the utility of SJE in the middle grades, with a particular focus on perceptions of citizenship.

## 2.2. Student Conceptions of Citizenship

In American schools, citizenship is both explicitly taught through civic education and implicitly taught through the hidden curriculum of schooling that establishes, for example, expectations for what it means to be a good citizen in their school. Westheimer and Kahne [14] proposed that schools promote “three prevailing conceptions of the ‘good citizen’—personally responsible, participatory, and justice-oriented” (p. 237). Figure 1 provides a summary description of the three conceptions and is excerpted from Westheimer and Kahne [14] (p. 240). The personally responsible conception, which is the most common approach promoted in schools, is of particular concern in the pursuit of SJ since it privileges compliance and, as such, is not inherently democratic. Rather than promoting collective social action aimed at social justice, the personally responsible view emphasizes individual acts of compassion and kindness [24]. Research on student perceptions of citizenship suggests that many students have internalized the “personally responsible” conception of good citizenship [25], and that students with social privilege, even those who identify as justice-oriented, lack a nuanced understanding of their social responsibilities [26]. The existing research on perceptions of citizenship, however, has primarily focused on high school and adult learners, with an absence of research on middle school students’ perceptions of good citizenship. Despite increasing calls for SJ education, there is limited empirical research investigating its impact on students’ perceptions of citizenship. This study thus seeks to address this gap in the literature by investigating middle grades student perspectives on citizenship both before and after engagement with an SJ project.

### Kinds of Citizens

Personally responsible citizen	Participatory citizen	Justice-oriented citizen
<i>Description</i>		
Acts responsibly in his/her community	Active member of community organizations and/or improvement efforts	Critically assesses social, political, and economic structures to see beyond surface causes
Works and pays taxes	Organizes community efforts to care for those in need, promote economic development, or clean up environment	Seeks out and addresses areas of injustice
Obeys laws	Knows how government agencies work	Knows about democratic social movements and how to effect systemic change
Recycles, gives blood	Knows strategies for accomplishing collective tasks	
Volunteers to lend a hand in times of crisis		

Figure 1. Kinds of Citizens (excerpted from [14]).

### 3. Research Methods

In the following sub-sections, we share the context of this study, provide an overview of the SJ project, and describe the data collection and analysis, including our individual positionalities as co-researchers engaged in this work.

#### 3.1. Context

This study examines the perceptions of “good citizens” of 71 middle school students before and after participation in an SJ project. The SJ project took place in a 7th and 8th grade multi-age social studies classroom in a middle school in Vermont, referred to herein as Green Middle School (GMS; school pseudonym). Although Vermont is a vastly White state (94% White), GMS is among the most racially and ethnically diverse middle schools in the state and, due in part to refugee resettlement in the area over the past 40 years, can best be described as having an “urban characteristic” [27]. At the time of this study, GMS was fortunate enough to host students who speak 45 different home languages with 16% of students receiving services as emergent bilinguals. The school’s racial demographics were as follows: 62% White, 16% Black / African American, 12% Asian, and 8% two or more races. In part due to the changing demographics, at the time of this study, GMS was engaged in a critical examination of school-based inequities, prompted by numerous student and teacher concerns regarding racial inequity. In addition, 6th grade students at GMS had been engaged for two years in a youth participatory action research initiative with a local university in which they were learning about identity and equity, conducting research in the school community, and proposing initiatives to address injustice in the school. As such, though this SJ project was new to the 7th and 8th grade students, many of the students were entering the project with background knowledge concerning topics such as identity, injustice, and equity both in general and as it related to their school community in particular.

#### 3.2. The SJ Project

The SJ project was co-designed by Author1 and Author2 using a “hands-joined learning” approach [28]. As the classroom teacher, Author2 taught the SJ project and served in the dual role of a teacher researcher. This consisted of (a) a project launch in which students learned about young activists around the world, (b) an overview of example social justice issues, (c) inquiry into an SJ issue of students’ choosing that impacts a historically marginalized group, (d) engagement in social action designed to address the SJ issue, and (e) a community share day in which students spoke with members of the community about the issue they explored and the action they were taking. A summary of the SJ project stages, example lessons, and example student projects is provided in Table 1. Lessons and discussions were designed to focus on the identity, diversity, and justice standards offered by Learning for Justice [19], and the social action component of the project was informed in large part by the justice and action standards. Prior to the project launch, all students were asked to draw and create a caption that shows what good citizens do. After participation in the project, students were asked to revisit their previous drawing and caption and, if needed, make changes to their picture, explaining why they made each change. The opportunity to draw, in addition to writing a response, was intended to provide students with an opportunity to demonstrate their thinking without having to rely exclusively on writing.



**Table 1.** Overview of the Social Justice Project.

Social Justice Project Stages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Project launch in which students learned about young activists around the world</li> <li>• Introduction to example social justice issues such as racial injustice, gender discrimination, LGBTQIA+ discrimination, ableism, and classism</li> <li>• Inquiry into an SJ issue of their choosing that impacts a historically marginalized group</li> <li>• Engagement in social action designed to address the SJ issue Community share day in which students spoke with members of the community about their issue and the action they were taking</li> </ul>
Example Lessons	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Matrix of marginalization and oppression</li> <li>• Criteria for good action-oriented questions</li> <li>• Social action vs. just being kind</li> <li>• Raising awareness vs. taking action</li> </ul>
Example Student Questions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How can we ensure that women have tax-free feminine hygiene products in Vermont?</li> <li>• How can we help teachers understand how the hoods and hats rule can be racially biased?</li> <li>• How can we help prevent the harassment of LGBTQ+ people in our community?</li> <li>• How can we make our school accessible to people living with physical disabilities?</li> </ul>
Examples of Student-Organized Social Action	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A letter writing campaign to legislators to raise awareness regarding the injustice of the “pink tax”</li> <li>• A study and presentation documenting the punishment of white students vs. black students for wearing hoods in school</li> <li>• A research-based proposal to the local city council to install Blue Light Tower emergency phones in the areas that had the most reported sexual assaults in the city</li> <li>• A GoFund me campaign to install a ramp to make the school’s band room accessible for students with physical disabilities</li> <li>• A lesson about sexual consent, which the students created and then taught</li> </ul>

### 3.3. Positionality, Data Collection, and Analysis

This study was informed by our team’s shared interest in SJE in the middle grades. Like all research, the study and its findings are undoubtedly impacted by the intersecting social identities, perspectives, and experiences we each bring to this work. For this reason, it feels important to surface the following aspects of our positionalities for the reader. Author1 is a white woman who is currently in the role of associate professor in the field of teacher education at a predominantly white land-grant institution in New England. She is a former middle school teacher whose teaching and scholarship are now focused on topics such as social justice education, critical whiteness studies, and teacher advocacy. Author2 is a white man who was in his 17th year of teaching, 4th year at GMS, and a graduate student in education at the time of this study. His teaching is focused on critical approaches to the humanities, using teaching approaches such as culturally sustaining pedagogy, social justice education, and youth participatory action research. Author3, also a former middle school teacher, is a Black woman working in the role of assistant professor at a public state institution in the Southeast. Her work is focused on educational equity, critical approaches to teacher preparation, justice-oriented teaching, and English/language arts education.

In this study, Author1 and Author2 co-developed the SJ project and engaged in data collection throughout all phases of the project. Author 3 then joined our group for data analysis, in which we each used the lenses of our varied positionalities to engage in critical dialogue that shaped the findings and implications. Data collection and analysis were designed to serve two functions: (a) understand and ultimately describe the project itself, including the resulting student projects, and (b) analyze student perceptions of “good citizenship” before and after the project. To address the first function, we collected teaching artifacts associated with each phase of the project (handouts, project planning templates, example student work, and final posters used for the community share), Author2 recorded weekly reflections describing the teaching process, and Author1 observed project work twice and attended the community share day. These data were used to generate the description of the SJ project provided in the previous section.

To address the second purpose, we analyzed students’ pre- and post-project drawings and captions using “three concurrent flows of activity: (1) data condensation, (2) data

display, and (3) conclusion drawing/verification" [29] (p. 12). We first condensed the data by inductively coding the pre-project drawings and captions for (a) assertions regarding what good citizens do and (b) evidence of critical consciousness. When the drawings and captions included multiple ideas, they were coded as both. Subsequently, we compared these with the post-project pictures and reflections and used the same coding scheme to code any changes students made to their original thinking and to identified new emergent codes that were not evident in the original responses. We then arranged the codes into a data display and generated coding categories.

Coding categories were discussed and revised, and anomalies were revisited until interpretive convergence between co-authors was reached. This phase resulted in some changes to the coding scheme. For example, after discussions related to whether protesting should be viewed as a form of "speaking up for others" or "taking action for justice-oriented change", we decided to include interpersonal calling in and out as the former and protesting as the latter. We then used the final data display to draw conclusions. As the findings took shape, we also occasionally revisited the raw data to explore new questions as they arose, which resulted in the "sub-patterns in shifts" that are shared in the findings. For example, we revisited the raw data to explore the following question that arose during the writing: Did students whose responses fell under the "good citizens work together to make the community better" work in groups or alone?

#### 4. Findings

The following findings provide compelling insights into the perceptions of middle school students regarding "good citizenship" as well as the impact of engaging in an SJ project on these perceptions. In the sections below, we describe pre- and post-project themes in student perceptions, including evidence of critical consciousness. Table 2 offers a summary and examples of each of the themes.

**Table 2.** Themes and Examples of Student Perceptions of Good Citizenship.

Themes in Student Perceptions of Good Citizenship	Examples
Good citizens are helpers.	Helping other individuals (ex. helping someone up who fell, picking up a dropped wallet, helping someone cross the street) Helping their community (ex. picking up trash, gardening)
Good citizens are inclusive and kind to all regardless of differences.	Statements such as "Respect everyone equally", "Invite everyone even if they don't look like you", and "Be kind to everyone even if they look different".
Good citizens follow rules, laws, and expectations.	Following rules, laws, and other societal expectations such as working hard, taking care of your property, and voting. For example: "Good citizens follow the law when it is seemingly unimportant or if no one is watching. Because it's the right thing to do".
Good citizens disrupt injustice by speaking up for others	Pictures of bystanders speaking up when someone is being bullied or someone uses racist or oppressive language. Example caption: "The citizen is calling [someone] out for saying something racist and the other one is taking his/her advice".
Good citizens take action to make justice-oriented change	"A good citizen doesn't just think that it is wrong, they think how to fix the problem". "I changed the 'good citizen' from standing still to marching because standing idle does not create change and justice"
Good citizens work together to solve problems.	Changes in pictures from depicting one person to showing multiple people working together to accomplish a goal. "I drew people holding hands because people need to work together and help people who are in need".
Good citizens sometimes have to defy norms for justice.	"I changed from following [the] law to making change for marginalized groups because following the law seldom makes significant social change". "I got rid of the follow the law and don't cause trouble because being a good citizen is not about being happy where you are or lying low. It is about helping other citizens and you cannot do that always by staying quiet".

##### 4.1. Pre-Project Perceptions of Citizenship

Prior to participation in the SJ project, there were five themes in student perceptions of good citizenship (listed in order of frequency): (a) good citizens are helpers ( $n = 31$ ), (b) good citizens follow rules, laws, and societal expectations ( $n = 18$ ), (c) good citizens disrupt injustice by speaking up for others ( $n = 12$ ), (d) good citizens are inclusive and kind to all regardless of differences ( $n = 10$ ), and (e) good citizens take action to create justice-oriented change ( $n = 4$ ).

#### 4.1.1. Good Citizens Are Helpers

The first and most dominant theme in student responses prior to the project was the notion that good citizens are helpers ( $n = 31$ ). Helping was portrayed as both helping individuals and helping the community. Many students drew pictures, for example, of people picking up trash, helping each other across the road, helping someone get up, picking up something someone dropped, or donating to charity.

#### 4.1.2. Good Citizens Follow Rules, Laws, and Societal Expectations

The idea that good citizenship is defined by following rules, laws, and societal expectations was the second most dominant theme in student responses ( $n = 18$ ). In this category, many students drew pictures of people stopping at stop signs, crossing at crosswalks, showing up for work, taking care of their property, and voting. Captions included statements such as “good citizens follow the law and avoid crime”, “follow rules”, “take care of the land they own”, and “even if they have the chance to break that law they still follow it because that law is there for a reason”.

#### 4.1.3. Good Citizens Disrupt Injustice by Speaking up for Others

The fourth theme in student responses was that good citizens disrupt injustice by speaking up for others ( $n = 12$ ). Student pictures in this category included, for example, bystanders speaking up when someone is being bullied, speaking in defense of historically marginalized groups experiencing prejudice, and speaking up when someone uses a racist epithet such as “the n-slur”. Example captions included “good citizens stand up for people that don’t have enough power”, “teach the wrongdoer what they did wrong and why it’s not okay”, and “calling out racism”.

#### 4.1.4. Good Citizens Are Inclusive and Kind to All, Regardless of Differences

The third clear theme in student representations was that good citizens are kind and inclusive of all, regardless of differences ( $n = 10$ ). Student drawings in this category frequently included images such as handholding and people inviting others to join in on an activity. Captions included statements such as “respect everyone equally”, “invite everyone even if they don’t look like you”, and “be kind to everyone even if they look different”.

#### 4.1.5. Good Citizens Take Action to Create Justice-Oriented Change

The final theme in student responses was that good citizens take action to create justice-oriented change ( $n = 4$ ) and although composed of only a small subset of student responses pre-project, included powerful examples of justice-oriented citizenship. In keeping with the justice-oriented conception of good citizenship, to be coded in this theme, student illustrations and/or captions needed to indicate that they believed that citizens needed to take action aimed at creating social change at the system level. Student responses falling into this theme thus moved beyond disrupting injustice at the interpersonal level of oppression to the institutional level. A drawing in which one student calls in another for racist behavior, for example, was coded as “disrupting injustice by speaking up for others”. In contrast, illustrations and captions that referenced protests, advocacy, activism, and/or making systemic changes were coded in this theme. For example, one student showed someone holding a “stop global warming” sign at a protest, and another drew a picture of a group of people engaging in the Black Lives Matter movement.

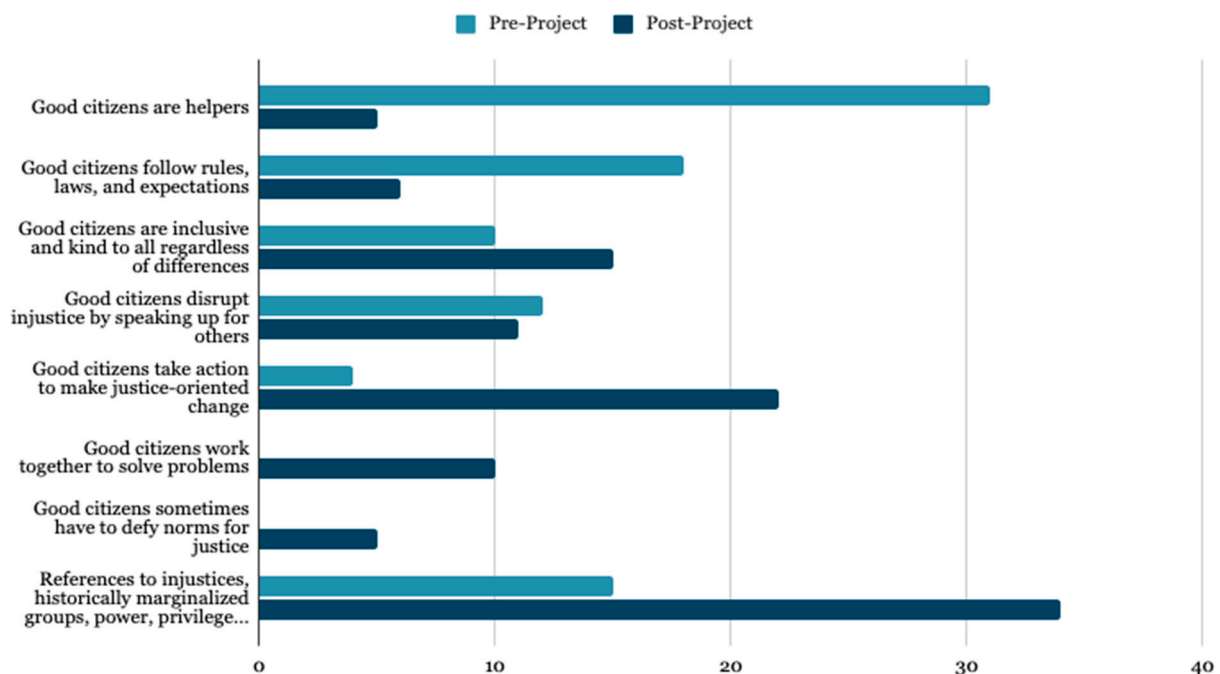
#### 4.1.6. Evidence of Critical Consciousness Pre-Project

Prior to participation in the SJ project, there was some evidence of critical consciousness in student depictions of good citizenship, as evidenced by fifteen references to specific injustices (i.e., -isms), historically marginalized groups, power, privilege, and questioning society. Illustrative student responses that revealed critical consciousness included, for example, “Some people do not have money or voice. I will help them make them [sic] feel wanted” and “Call out racism/sexism when they see it and they try to do something”.



#### 4.2. Post-Project Shifts in Perceptions of Good Citizenship

The changes students made to their visuals after the project pointed to several significant changes in their perceptions of good citizenship. Figure 2 offers a visual summary of the shift in student responses from pre- to post-project. After the project, significantly fewer student responses fell into the categories “good citizens are helpers” ( $n = 5$ ) and “good citizens follow rules, laws, and societal expectations” in post-project representations ( $n = 6$ ). There was also an increase from pre- to post-project in student representations that fell into the third, fourth, and fifth themes in pre-project responses: “good citizens are inclusive and kind to all regardless of differences” ( $n = 15$ ), “good citizens disrupt injustice by speaking up for others” ( $n = 11$ ), and “good citizens take action for justice-oriented change” ( $n = 22$ ). Given the significant shift towards the fifth theme, we offer examples of this shift in the section below. In addition, we also illustrated two new themes that were apparent in students’ post-project responses (listed in order of frequency): (a) good citizens work together ( $n = 10$ ) and (b) good citizens sometimes have to defy norms for justice ( $n = 5$ ).



**Figure 2.** Student conceptions of “good citizenship” pre- and post-project.

##### 4.2.1. Good Citizens Take Action to Create Justice-Oriented Change

While “good citizens are helpers” ( $n = 31$ ) was the dominant response pre-project, “good citizens take action to create justice-oriented change” became the most common theme post-project, shifting significantly from only four responses pre-project to twenty-two post-project. Student pictures and captions in this theme showed people advocating for change by protesting in front of a crowd and made direct references to the distinction between simply noticing injustices and addressing them. The following examples are illustrative of post-project responses that fell into this category: “This person is not just helping one person but he is making change for many people to stop this issue from happening again”; and

I added an inequitable [sic] situation with someone thinking they could fix it. I changed this because this project has changed my outlook on what being a good citizen is, because a good citizen does not just think that it is wrong; they think how to fix the problem.

Both of these examples illustrate the realization post-project that good citizenship requires not only noticing injustice and helping individuals who are experiencing it, but also seeking to change the social circumstances that make injustice possible.

#### 4.2.2. Good Citizens Work Together to Make the Community Better

A new theme in the post-project changes to students' representations of good citizenship was the notion that good citizens work together to make the community better ( $n = 10$ ). In this category, many students changed their pictures from one person helping, speaking out, or taking action to several people working together to accomplish a goal. Captions referenced the realization that change is more effective if people work together and that there are limits to what one person can do in isolation.

#### 4.2.3. Good Citizens Sometimes Have to Defy Norms for Justice

Additionally, the final new theme in the post-project changes students made to their representations was that good citizens sometimes have to defy norms for social justice ( $n = 5$ ). Student pictures in this category included, for example, students taking action even when they were told not to and challenging the rules, norms, and status quo expectations. The captions explained that several students changed their pictures because they realized that following rules might not lead to social change.

#### 4.2.4. Sub-Patterns in Shifts

In our analysis, we identified three noteworthy sub-patterns in the shifts in student responses from pre- to post-project. First, several students ( $n = 3$ ) whose responses fell into the "good citizens follow rules, laws, and societal expectations" subgroup pre-project shifted into the "good citizens sometimes have to defy norms for justice" subgroup post-project. For example, one student who wrote "good citizens follow the law even when it is seemingly unimportant or if no one is watching because it is the right thing to do" prior to the project shared the following post-project:

I changed the message from following the law to making a change for HMGs [HMGs were the acronyms used in class for historically marginalized groups]. because following the law seldom makes a significant social change. I changed the term "good citizen" from standing still to marching because standing idle does not create change and justice.

Second, no students shifted to the "good citizens follow rules, laws, and societal expectations" category from pre- to post-project. And lastly, of the students who shared post-project responses in line with the theme "good citizens work together to make the community better", all but one had opted to work in a partnership or group for their project.

#### 4.2.5. Evidence of Critical Consciousness Post-Project

After participation in the SJ project, some of the changes that students made to their responses pointed to an increase in their critical consciousness. Specifically, post-project responses increased to 34 references to specific injustices (i.e., -isms), historically marginalized groups, power, privilege, and questioning society, compared with 15 references prior to the project (compared to 15 pre-project). In addition, there were also examples of student responses demonstrating a deeper, more nuanced understanding of topics such as inequity, power, and privilege in the post-project reflections. For example, prior to the project, one student wrote that good citizens "go out of their way to help others. This means welcoming someone in when they do not feel heard or just helping them fix one of their problems. A good citizen respects their peers, their environment, and themselves". Post-project, however, the same student wrote:

We need people with lots of privilege and power to use it for helping others who do not have as much. Everyone should be able to speak out and say what they want to help their cause. But if people with the most power use their voices to help these causes, it will

most likely be effective. If white males can use their privileges and power to help others, things could be a lot better.

## 5. Discussion and Implications

The findings indicate that much of the middle grades students' pre-project perceptions of citizenship resonated with Westheimer and Kahne's [14] personally responsible and participatory conceptions of citizenship with limited evidence of justice-oriented views of citizenship. The theme that "good citizens follow rules, laws, and societal expectations", for example, is in strong alignment with the personally responsible conception. The "good citizens are helpers" theme also trends towards the personally responsible conception. While helping could be viewed as a participatory stance, especially if the helping aims to support social change initiatives, student examples that fell under this category were predominantly examples of individual acts of helping (ex. picking up trash, helping someone cross the street), which falls under the "personally responsible" category as defined by Westheimer and Kahne [14]. These patterns in pre-project perceptions, therefore, resonate with previous studies indicating that students have internalized the "personally responsible" conception of good citizenship [25].

Post-project findings, however, demonstrate greater evidence of both justice-oriented views of citizenship and critical consciousness. In particular, the reduction of responses that indicated that "good citizens follow rules, laws, and societal expectations" (from  $n = 18$  to  $n = 6$ ) and "good citizens are helpers" (from  $n = 31$  to  $n = 5$ ) demonstrates a decrease in personally responsible views of citizenship. Likewise, the increase in responses that indicated "good citizens take action to create justice-oriented change" (from  $n = 4$  to  $n = 22$ ) demonstrates a shift towards more justice-oriented conceptions. Since students were asked to not only carefully study SJ issues, but also to ultimately engage in taking informed social action, we suspect that this shift was impacted by the important role that critical action played in the SJ project. We wonder, therefore, whether this shift would have been as apparent had the students not engaged in social action. To what extent does student engagement in critical action bolster shifts toward justice-oriented citizenship?

In our discussion of this theme, we also wondered whether the shift in student perceptions from helping to justice-oriented change suggests that through the SJ project, students came to view taking critical action as a specific way of helping each other and society. If so, SJ projects that center social action may offer an opportunity to channel students' existing commitment to helping into the pursuit of systemic change. In addition, youth who already view helping as an important aspect of good citizenship may be especially primed to move towards critical action and justice-oriented views of citizenship.

The new theme of "good citizens sometimes have to defy norms for justice" paired with the fact that some students shifted into this view from "good citizens follow rules" offers another compelling pattern to explore. In particular, we are struck by the parallels between this shift and theories of moral development. Students who identified this new theme appear to have moved from moral judgment guided by conventional morality—guided by societal laws and rules—into post-conventional morality, which is guided by universal principles such as justice rather than individual laws [30]. As such, we wonder to what extent this shift is related to the SJ project or natural developmental growth and are intrigued by the possibility that engaging in justice-oriented social action could bolster students' capacity to reach more nuanced, justice-oriented stages of moral development.

We are also intrigued by the finding that all but one student who reported that "good citizens work together to make the community better" post-project had also opted to work in a partnership or group for their project. Although it is possible that students who opted to work in groups were more likely to draw this conclusion, the fact that this perception was not apparent in pre-project responses suggests that engaging in the project together made this clear. This leads us to believe that educators who want students to learn that justice-oriented citizenship involves collective action should encourage students to engage with partners or small groups.

We were also somewhat surprised to realize that despite the considerable SJ work being done in the research site school and in the classroom, pre-project responses indicated that the vast majority of students had not integrated their justice-oriented learning into their notions of what it means to be a “good citizen”. A curriculum that strives to develop students’ critical consciousness through personal reflection is extremely valuable. While striving to shift personal beliefs and dispositions regarding social justice is critical work, these findings suggest that it does not guarantee that students will transfer this learning to the work of citizenship. However, we recommend that middle-level teachers engaged in SJE work continue to lean into responsive pedagogies. Ladson-Billings named sociopolitical consciousness as one of the tenets of culturally relevant teaching, noting that “in the classrooms of culturally relevant teachers, students are expected to engage with the world and others critically” [12] (p. 162). We recommend, therefore, that not only do justice-oriented teachers engage in SJE learning designs, but that justice-oriented teachers also help students form conceptual links between justice-oriented learning and justice-oriented citizenship, perhaps guided by critical questions such as “What does this issue call on us to do as justice-oriented citizens?” and “How might justice-oriented citizens take action to address this issue?” In addition, engaging young people in social action, such as that outlined in this project, may help bridge prior learning into critical action.

It is also important to note that even after engaging in the project, not all students demonstrated a shift in their views. This suggests that, not surprisingly, engagement in an SJ project such as the one described herein is not sufficient for cultivating justice-oriented perceptions of good citizenship for all students. We are left to wonder, therefore, if further engagement in SJ learning would lead to greater shifts or if the variation in this sample reflects students who are resistant to justice-oriented worldviews. Given that this study did not probe student thinking in relation to the reasons behind their shifts in perceptions, we are also unsure to what extent student responses are reflective of substantive and potentially lasting internal shifts or short-term learning related to this project and context. We are thus curious to what extent post-project perceptions may be lasting and transferable.

This study also raises several questions regarding the relationship between justice-oriented citizenship, social justice teaching, and positionality. We noted with concern, for example, that some of the students’ drawings showed hints of saviorism with images and captions that suggested that people with historically marginalized identities need rescuing or are helpless. We believe it is important for young people to learn that part of being a co-conspirator requires that those with privilege “put something on the line” [6] for justice, and that this may involve having to leverage power and privilege, such as speaking up with and for those with historically marginalized identities. We also worry, however, about feeding narratives such as white saviorism and paternalism, which serve to reify oppressive ideologies such as white supremacy and patriarchy by positioning one group as saviors and the other as helpless victims in need of rescue. This observation led us to wonder how to teach in ways that recognize and disrupt this tension and engage young people in reflecting on positionality in justice-oriented citizenship. This work therefore requires a responsive teaching praxis, such as “build(ing) a sense of community among students and creat(ing) a classroom ambiance characterized by inquiry, discourse, personal involvement, and novelty” [31] (p. 218).

We also grappled with the distinction between two themes in student responses: “good citizens disrupt injustice by speaking up for others” and “good citizens take action to create justice-oriented change”. The distinction between these two felt both important and complex, resulting in considerable reflection and dialogue within our group. This discussion circled primarily around how to code student responses that referenced protesting as something that good citizens do. On the one hand, protesting could be interpreted as a form of “speaking up for others” in that it seeks to raise awareness about specific issues that impact specific groups. This view is in alignment with the “awareness raising” element in Picower’s framework [22], which is viewed as separate from social action itself. Showing up to rallies and protests has also been criticized as a form of virtue signaling that

in the absence of critical action, participation can be viewed as performative rather than transformative. On the other hand, protesting can be viewed as a critical act of collective resistance that demands social change. For example, the American civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s included a practice of engaging in social protests such as the Montgomery Bus Boycott, the Woolworth's counter sit-in, freedom rides, and the 1963 March on Washington, in which "more than a quarter million people participated, (marching) for jobs and freedom" [32]. It is indisputable that these and other historically significant protests demonstrate and exist as critical actions that can lead to profound social transformation. Protesting can thus be seen as a form of critical action aimed at creating justice-oriented change. For this reason, we ultimately decided to include references to protesting within the theme "good citizens take action to create justice-oriented change". This tension and our discussion illustrate how positionality and purpose can shift the nature of an act, a point that has deepened our appreciation for the importance of both nuance and dialogue in justice-oriented research and teaching.

We recognize that the findings of this study may be limited by its implementation in a single classroom within a single school year. Thus, to better understand the outcomes of this study, we recommend that future studies investigate the impact of specific teaching practices on young adolescents' SJ learning. In particular, we recommend studies that explore the connections between responsive pedagogies, teacher and student positionalities, and shifts in student thinking. We also recommend longitudinal studies that delve deeper into the extent to which students' shifts in perception are lasting and transferable, including investigations that explore why students do or do not shift their perceptions and what these shifts mean to them. Lastly, we believe that humanizing and empowering research approaches, such as youth participatory action research, could be especially powerful in offering insight into student perspectives while also providing opportunities for further youth engagement in critical action.

## 6. Conclusions

Taken together, these findings affirm the potential for SJE and social action in particular to impact middle grades students' perceptions of citizenship in ways that support the ongoing pursuit of social justice in our American democracy. Furthermore, the shift in student perceptions as well as the increased evidence of critical consciousness affirm existing scholarship showing that powerful SJ learning can take place during the formative middle years through responsive teaching pedagogies such as SJE [13]. As such, we encourage others who work with middle grades students and preservice and in-service teachers to join us in radically envisioning middle grades schools and classrooms that are designed around SJE. What would schools look and feel like that were organized around concepts such as identity, diversity, justice, and action? And with the goal of promoting a socially just future, how might we work together in our spheres of influence to embody justice-oriented citizenship in our approaches? What would this mean for the curriculum? For pedagogy and practice? For classroom and school policies? For decision-making and power dynamics? For teacher preparation?

Engaging in critical inquiries about the relationship between social justice pedagogies and student perceptions of citizenship not only informs and refines the critical practice of teachers and teacher educators but also leverages a powerful and necessary connection between the 21st century classroom and larger society. The P-12 students of today's classrooms are the social leaders of tomorrow. Thus, as promising practices for curriculum and instruction acknowledge and support the developmental stages of youth, it is imperative that students' schooling experiences also meaningfully equip them to take up social issues with attention to critical action for social change. These pursuits are not only responsive to students' immediate need for authentic and fierce engagement with the world around them, but they also support students' future identities as justice-oriented citizens. We urge other teachers, teacher educators, and educational researchers to consider similar lines of

inquiry that seek to interrogate, disrupt, revise, and define promising pedagogies for future generations of justice-oriented citizens.

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