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**FACILITATING YOUTH CIVIC ENGAGEMENT:**

**CLIMBING THE LADDER OF COMMUNITY**

**AWARENESS & CIVIC ACTION**

A Thesis in

Educational Theory & Policy

by

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**Abstract:**

Youth civic engagement has emerged as a subset of educational research increasing in importance, both in the United States and abroad. This importance is expounded by a school culture obsessed with standardized test performance, which characterizes the current domestic condition. The purpose of education is undergoing a shift—curricula are woven to prepare students to perform well on tests instead of prepare them to be active members of a democratic society. The present case study examines a veteran sixth-grade educator who teaches in a suburban school district in close proximity to a gigantic research university. The data presented in the article have been collected through ongoing classroom observations and personal interviews spanning January-April, 2013, and December, 2013-present. Data include field notes from classroom observations, in-depth interviews with the teacher and her colleagues, brief conversations with students, and written student reflections. The goal of this study is to highlight the work of an experienced and driven teacher in a loosely coupled educational system, describe the decisions made by a street level bureaucrat, and draw implications regarding the benefits and drawbacks to when a teacher chooses to append civic-minded projects to the prescribed curriculum.

**Key words:** teacher autonomy, teacher leadership, youth civic engagement, student voice, service-learning, loose coupling.

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*“The single biggest influence on student achievement is the quality of the teacher.”*

-Arne Duncan, US Secretary of Education

## **Chapter I: INTRODUCTION**

### **Purpose & Research Questions**

The purpose of the present study is to add to the literature on youth civic engagement and student voice. More specifically, this paper focuses on the teacher's role in the civic engagement process. Important to this discussion is the structure of the education system in the United States—more specifically the malleability of educational policies. The primary subject, Virginia Squier, is a sixth-grade teacher. She has been a middle school teacher for nearly three decades. In those years she has consistently attempted to make her students care about more than themselves—to make them understand that they have a responsibility to their communities, and for them to recognize the reciprocal nature of this relationship. Her style of teaching and philosophy focuses on the development of young members of a democracy, not just skilled test-takers.

The goal of this paper is to first lay out, in depth, literature on the topic of youth civic engagement and student voice. It will begin with a discussion of the “purpose” of education as historically perceived, then present research on the importance of a classroom focus on citizenship and youth participation. As a central theme to this study is how a teacher can help facilitate student involvement and civic-mindedness, policy research on the organizational structure of the United State's education system will be explored, and provide for the paper's theoretical framework. The concept of loose coupling will be fleshed out, for without a loosely coupled structure the education system of the United States would afford far less autonomy and flexibility to those at the street level—and arguably the most important actors in education—teachers.

Following the literature review I will present qualitative data collected during six months of the past year. The data will provide specific examples of a teacher facilitating student voice in the classroom—particularly how a teacher enables students to have a say in what and how they learn. My mission is to paint a vivid picture of Virginia as a teacher, and for readers to understand the intricacies she brings to her profession. The data presented were collected in two separate periods. The first collection period took place in the spring of 2013 when Virginia’s class performed a service-learning project. As service-learning is directly related to the field of youth civic engagement (as the literature will explain), the data from this project are of great relevance, and will be drawn on heavily in the present study. I will rehash the details of the service-learning project, and rely on the data to draw implications.

This study is a case of one teacher operating in a system obsessed with standardized tests. It is a case of excellence in teaching. It will show that teaching is so much more than preparing students to find the correct answers to bubble-in on a standardized test. Moreover, it will illustrate the philosophy and mindset of one teacher who wants more for her students than high test scores—it will demonstrate a teacher who wants her students to be socially responsible citizens, perhaps one of the most important traits of any human being. Ultimately, the goal of this paper is to provide a framework for other teachers who want to incorporate the concepts of civic engagement in their classrooms. As no two people and no two teachers are alike, this study is by no means to act as a blueprint; it is the account of one teacher who has carved her own path in the profession, and should provide insight into the character traits and philosophy that enable novel teaching.

The following **research questions** have guided my investigations:

*-What is Virginia's definition of "civic engagement" and how does she teach it?*

*-What about Virginia can teach us about how teachers think about civic-mindedness?*

*-What classroom practices does Virginia actually do that reflect her teaching philosophy?*

*-How does Virginia manage to fit civic-engagement into the curriculum—are there other areas of study she ignores or brushes over?*

## **Literature Review**

### **Historical Purpose of Education**

In 1903, President Theodore Roosevelt delivered a speech at the University of California at Berkley. In this speech he addressed the issue of education, and stated the following:

Where the State has bestowed education the man who accepts it must be content to accept it merely as a charity unless he returns it to the State in full, in the shape of good citizenship. I do not ask of you, men and women here today, good citizenship as a favor to the State. I demand it of you as a right, and hold you recreant to your duty if you fail to give it. – Theodore Roosevelt, 1903

Looking at President Roosevelt's word choice, one quickly sees the phrase "good citizenship" twice in the first two sentences, and a declaration of "duty" in the third. The overall message from this excerpt is that President Roosevelt is framing education as civic issue—the purpose being to create good citizens. If a person is going to accept the "charity" of a free education, he



or she is going to give back to the country by which that free education is provided, by fulfilling the duty of being a good citizen.

Now fast forward over a century. Consider the words used by our current President, Barack Obama, when discussing education:

There are few things as fundamental to the American Dream or as essential for America's success as a good education. This has never been more true than it is today. At a time when our children are competing with kids in China and India, the best job qualification you can have is a college degree or advanced training. If you do have that kind of education, then you're well prepared for the future, because half of the fastest growing jobs in America require a Bachelor's degree or more. – Barack Obama, 2009

The discussion has shifted. The conversation is about “competition” and “jobs” and the economy. President Obama depicts education as preparing youth to become members of the labor force servicing economic needs. Absent is the idea that education should be more holistic, and develop both workers and socially responsible citizens. Instead, the importance of education is framed using a “human capital” argument (Shultz, 1961).

While these are but two examples, and a century of history and shifts in educational policies have taken place between the reigns of Presidents Roosevelt and Obama, the importance is to consider that the issue of education can be framed in multiple ways. Of course, social, political, and economic factors (which are often exogenous to education) will affect how policies are packaged (e.g., the National Defense Education Act of 1958). There are countless historical examples—which will not be explored in the present study to avoid a digression—but the main point is that the importance of producing citizens of a democracy is

no longer the central focus of education. A major trend found by Dick Carpenter (2005), in his analysis on the historical purpose of education as found in presidential speeches is that over the course of the twentieth century, there was a shift from an emphasis on “civic responsibility” towards “economic efficiency”.

### **Youth Civic Engagement**

An important emerging field in educational research is that of youth civic engagement. Central to youth civic engagement is the following question: how can schools, teachers, or curriculum be developed in such way that not only allow but encourage the input and participation of students? The following provides an overview of current literature by scholars on the subject of youth civic engagement.

The shift in the perceived purpose of education is one reason why youth civic engagement is so important, presently. Mirra (2011), in her piece *Teachers as Civic Agents*, notes an exclusion of education as preparation for democratic participation in order to focus on education as an economic issue (e.g., college and career readiness). The dominant neoliberal model has an “overwhelmingly capitalist purpose for education” (Mirra, 2011, p. 408). The author argues that education should not simply teach young people how to succeed economically, but to become “self-actualized and critically empowered civic agents” (Mirra, 2011, p. 409).

Another theme explored by Mirra (2011) is the link between teacher identity and a teacher’s classroom practice. The way that a teacher thinks about herself affects how she runs her classroom. This gets into a deeper crevice of teaching as a “job” versus as a “profession”. In order for teachers to have agency themselves, they need a sense of pride in their profession.

One way this can evolve is through a strong professional community of teachers. Teachers can manifest their agency by having a “productive identity”.

The term “youth civic engagement” has been defined in several different ways. Mitra & Kirshner (2012) define “civic engagement” as “an active interaction with democratic society” (p. 5). The authors go on to explain: “In such initiatives, students have the agency to participate in discussions about the core operations of schools, including teaching and learning and class or school wide decision making practices” (Mitra & Kirshner, 2012, p. 5). Mirra (2011) writes that to engage students “schools must provide students with the skills and opportunities to work with other citizens in authentic situations to solve problems and create change” (p. 412). A similar theme between these two conceptions of student civic engagement is that students must have some interaction or connection to the community. An important characteristic of this interaction, as written by Mirra (2011), is that the interaction must be “authentic”—it cannot be forced or tokenistic.

In their article *What Kind of Citizen*, Westheimer and Kahne (2004) present three different conceptions of citizenship: personally responsible, participatory, and justice oriented. The “personally responsible citizen” exemplifies good character, by being responsible to his or her community. This requires basic actions, such as contributing food to a food drive. The “participatory citizen” takes civic action a step further, and makes efforts to improve society by finding ways to solve social issues. The third category, “justice oriented citizens”, question and find ways to solve social problems by making systemic changes. Thus, moving from personally responsible to participatory to justice oriented citizens involves more in-depth understanding of and willingness to solve social issues on a deeper level.

Mitra & Kirshner (2012) discuss the difference between student leadership and student action—the authors use the terms “short haired” and “long haired” to describe leadership and activism, respectively. Leadership can exist in different ways in a school, such as student councils, or other ways students can form partnerships with teachers and administrators to reform their school. This youth leadership focus occurs inside the school. The youth activism approach focuses on students partnering with teachers and administrators to focus on systemic school reform. Both the leadership approach and the activist approach can occur outside of the school in the community (Mitra & Kirshner, 2012).

Mitra & Kirshner (2012) provide the example of Whitman High School in the San Francisco Bay Area. Whitman received a grant of \$112 million to improve the school. The school used an “insider strategy”, through which teachers and students worked together to determine the ways in which the school needed to be improved. This allowed both students and teachers to understand the perspectives of the other group. The take-away message from the Whitman is experience is that, in order for improvements to be realized, parties working together need to have empathy for each other. The students have to understand what it’s like to be in a teacher/leadership role, and vice versa. Furthermore, by allowing input by both students and teachers/administrators, Whitman was able to address a wider variety of issues than if student input had been left out.

The social movement theory discussed by Mitra & Kirshner (2012) provides an avenue for student voice to be enhanced in the future (and is somewhat comparable to Fielding’s “radical collegiality”, discussed below). As student voice initiatives become more and more prevalent within schools, it must follow suit that students become more valued members of the

school community, particularly as invaluable resources who offer indispensable perspectives on education. The shift towards a more egalitarian school setting is largely important in order for students to be heard, listened to, and taken seriously. Student empowerment, however, comes with some consequences—in particular, boundaries need to exist in terms of who is in charge at schools. While it could be fun to romanticize about students having control over schools, it is necessary to consider the existence of a hierarchy essential to the functioning of schools.

In order to increase student voice, it is essential for the communication between the teacher and student not be overdidactic. Fielding (2001) stresses the importance of a “dialogue” culture—moreover, that the key to student voice (or students being heard) is the level and form of communication between students and teachers/administrators. It is a two-way street—in order for student voice initiatives to be effective, they require the support of teachers, and others who are in charge or in positions of power (e.g., administrators). Fielding (2001) uses the term “radical collegiality” to describe a form of student-teacher relationship that fosters student voice. Within the framework of radical collegiality, teachers learn not only from parents and the community, but also from students (Fielding, 2001). Moreover, radical collegiality is marked by an overt openness between a teacher and her students.

The importance of dialogue between students and teachers—and especially being HEARD as valued members of the education society—is also emphasized by Cook-Sather (2002). There are many ways in which effective dialogue between students and teachers/administrators can be accomplished (and, at the same time, many changes that must take place before the dialogue can be properly established). The structures of educational relationships are a very important part of the puzzle. In particular, the power relationships and

dynamics within members of the school community (again, mainly between teachers and students) need to dissolve and enable students to be considered less as inferiors and more as equals (Cook-Sather, 2002).

On a broader scale, other work has focused on the concept of democratic education. Biesta (2007) discusses the importance of school conditions in making democratic action possible. Biesta (2007) explores the ideas of education *for* democracy, versus education *through* democracy. The former focuses on preparing children for their role as members of a democracy; the latter emphasizes that the way children learn to be members of a democracy is through democratic forms of education. Thus, education *through* democracy is directly related to education *for* democracy, but as a specific application.

The question of why students should have greater levels of participation in education reform is addressed by Levin (2001) in his paper *Putting Students At The Centre Of Reform*. Among Levin's arguments is that: "Students have unique knowledge and perspectives that can make reform efforts more successful and improve their implementation" (Levin, 2000, p. 156). A main discovery from Levin's study of 13-14 year-olds in the UK is that school outcomes are more likely to improve for students if they have a say in the process. However, Levin concludes that current student participation is low because students accept that educators are in control of the schooling process, and expect for the roles to remain the same.

Fine et al (2004), in their study of California public schools, examine how schools in the state that educate poor and working class students not only reproduce race/class stratification, but also lead to civic alienation. The authors discuss how school context speaks to a student. The "voices" of the school give students feelings about themselves. A main conclusion of the

study is that school contexts that suppress student voice will cause students to lose (or never develop) a civic identity.

Roger Hart (1992) developed a “ladder of participation” which is frequently referenced in literature on the subject of youth civic engagement. The top half of the ladder contains “degrees of participation”, with “child-initiated, shared decisions with adults” at the very top and “assigned but informed” in the middle; the bottom of the ladder is labeled “non-participation”, and includes “manipulation”, “decoration”, and “tokenism”. The intention of the ladder is “to show that there are different degrees to which children are allowed, enabled, and supported to initiate their own projects and make decisions in carrying them out with others” (Hart, 2008). For youth engagement to be meaningful there is a need to ascend beyond tokenism, or mere symbolic student involvement.

It is important to consider all aspects of the ladder of participation. At the top of Hart’s ladder (2008) is “child-initiated, shared decisions with adults”. This is significant because for a youth civic-engagement experience to be meaningful, and for the student to take something away from project, the student(s) must have a certain degree of ownership over the project. If the project is teacher- or adult-driven, it takes away from student ownership over the process. The bottom of the ladder—non-participation—includes concepts that might be construed as student engagement but are not. “Tokenism”, for example, implies that students are purported as having a voice but only for public perception.

Essential for student engagement to not be tokenistic is for students have ownership over the project they are performing. Camino & Zeldin (2002) write that student ownership over a project is “perhaps the most important element in creating new pathways in that youth

should own the assets with which they work, and the fruits of their success or failure in solving the collective problems they face". Ownership not only incentivizes students to put forth more effort, but also allows them to feel a greater sense of accomplishment during the project (especially if goals are met). One important development in service-learning projects is a sense of "civic efficacy". Civic efficacy has been defined as a "cognitive belief that one can make a difference in the world, and [has] the responsibility to do so" (Mitra & Serriere, 2012).

### **Pathways to Civic Engagement: Service-Learning**

While there are several pathways to youth civic engagement and increasing student voice (e.g., youth-adult partnerships) I will focus this section of the literature review on service-learning. The primary reason for this focus is because, through my data collection, the first period was spent observing a service-learning project. Therefore, fleshing out the literature on service-learning will provide a framework for readers to use when considering the service-learning data. Furthermore, it will allow me to compare and contrast service-learning according to the literature versus my observations of service-learning in an actual classroom.

A form of pedagogy called "service-learning" has emerged as an "essential component of citizenship education" in schools across the nation during the 21st century (NCSS, 2011). Service-learning has been defined in various ways, but scholars agree that two essential components are involved: a form of service, and academic learning (Camino & Zeldin, 2002; Kahne & Westheimer, 2004; Serriere, Mitra & Reed, 2011). While it contains the basic elements of service and learning, service-learning is a more complex, esoteric educational method that is difficult to capture using a simple definition. Moreover, there is no recipe, or prescribed balance of "service" and "learning". Alternatively, service-learning exists on a



continuum along which service and learning can be emphasized to varying degrees (Furco, 1996).

Furco (1996) explains that different service-learning projects might have different goals: some might focus service (SERVICE-learning), while others emphasize learning (service-LEARNING). Different service-learning projects can focus on the two elements in varying degrees, but contain both. It is critical to understand that service-learning is complex, and does not always look the same. Scholars have been struggling to fully characterize service-learning for the past several decades.

Important to the service aspect is students serving the needs of their communities. As explained by Kahne & Westheimer (2004), "Service learning makes students active participants in service projects that aim to respond to the needs of the community while furthering the academic goals of students". Helping the "community" does not necessarily limit service-learning to a local cause; it can include service on a micro (local) and/or macro (global) level (Serriere, Mitra & Reed, 2011). Using the framework provided by Kahne & Westheimer (2004), service can be seen as the primary goal of service-learning. Other scholars emphasize more of a balance between service and learning: "School-based service learning is an instructional method that seeks to maximize individual learning while concurrently addressing community needs" (Camino & Zeldin, 2002). Here, service and learning are given more equal weight (or perhaps a bit more is given to learning).

The idea of "service" is often thought of as a part of community service. There are distinct differences, however, between community service and service-learning. Community service focuses primarily on serving, where the primary beneficiary is the recipient of the

service (Furco, 1996). Placing the service activity in a classroom (or similar academic setting) distinguishes service-learning from community service. Furthermore, there is a greater sense of reciprocity involved in service-learning, because the students' work helps others, but in return the students also experience personal gains (Davis, 2006). Critical to service-learning projects is that students learn not only from the academic components, but also from the service. The recipients benefit from being served; the students benefit from serving. It is thus a reciprocal, mutually-beneficial process for the server and recipient (though the two groups likely benefit in different ways).

There is debate over whether the outcomes of service-learning are additive/informational or transformative. Charles Strain (2006) explores this debate, explaining that additive learning is "providing new content within habitual ways of viewing reality". Similarly, informational learning "can develop new skills and apply old categories to new terrains of inquiry". Many in favor of service-learning argue that it provides transformational learning, in which the act of serving others causes students' perspectives to be altered.

Any service-learning project that takes place in a classroom will inevitably involve a teacher. While student ownership over a service-learning project (or any youth civic engagement project for that matter) is important to ascend beyond tokenism, the teacher is hard to remove completely from the process. Serriere, Mitra & Reed (2011), in their case studies of three fifth grade classrooms involved in service-learning, developed a framework of roles taken on by teachers. The roles they coined are the commander, the catalyst, and the synthesizer. While the study focused on service-learning, the leadership roles developed by the authors are transferrable to the present study's focus on youth civic engagement.

The “commander” is similar to an authoritarian type of teacher, and is the primary leader of the project throughout. Student input is kept to a minimum, and is even discouraged and viewed as deviant. In projects where the teacher is the commander, her social action agenda takes priority, and she considers student voice to be disruptive in achieving the teacher-defined project goals. As a result, the teacher-centric project evokes only tokenistic student participation.

A leadership method that fosters student involvement but helps to maintain project structure is that of the “catalyst”. The catalyst plays the role of project initiator, but allows the students agency during project implementation. The teacher plays an active role in the process to maintain project momentum and reach the clearly defined goals while sharing leadership with the students. When the teacher plays the role of the catalyst, there is an emphasis of product over process, where the students achieve clear “visible victories”. A visible victory occurs when students achieve some tangible success through their work, which keeps them excited and engaged in the project (McLaughlin, 1993; Mitra, 2009). It might seem as though the teacher, as catalyst, has greater ownership over the project than the students, but this is not the case; the catalyst is active in scaffolding to provide support so students are able to take on leadership roles and develop a sense of project ownership.

Finally, the “synthesizer” plays a role that allows the project to be student-led from the beginning and throughout implementation. Here, there is a greater emphasis on process versus product, because the students learn from their significant leadership roles. Throughout these student-led projects there is open deliberation and an emphasis on group decision-making. The

students define the goals of the project and the teacher synthesizes student input, putting aside his or her own personal social agenda.

Under this framework of different teacher leadership defined by Serriere, Mitra & Reed (2011), the catalyst is the equilibrium between student-centered and adult-centered leadership (with the synthesizer and the commander on the other two respective ends of the spectrum). The catalyst is considered to be the “traditional” method of leadership, because it affords students the ability to lead without putting them in the position of full responsibility, which could be stressful. The commander is clearly the least beneficial for fostering student ownership and voice, and the synthesizer might cause a project to lack structure if students do not have the capacity to effectively take on the leadership role. It is important to consider the leadership framework created by Serriere, Mitra & Reed (2011), and other aspects of service-learning as integral and related to the broader subject of youth civic engagement. Particularly with the leadership roles, youth civic engagement (that isn’t grouped into service-learning) still requires a balance between student participation and adult leadership.

### **Conceptual Framework: Education as a Loosely Coupled System**

In order for teachers to accomplish the goals described in the youth civic engagement and service-learning sections of the literature review, one of two things must be true—either civic engagement is part of the curriculum, or the teacher has enough flexibility/autonomy to make room for special projects/lessons. In most cases, the latter is probably the case. The following will provide a framework for how teachers are able to add student engagement initiatives to the curriculum, based on the structure of the United States’ educational system.

The education system in the United States has a bureaucratic structure. There are several levels of command: at the top are members of the federal government who devise legislation to promote top-down reform; at the bottom are teachers. Of course, there are many levels of control in between—government officials at the state and local level, school principals, administrators, superintendents, and so on. Thus, educational reform does not happen in a strictly top-down fashion (e.g., Ness & Noland, 2003), but can result from grassroots movements from the bottom-up (e.g., Murnane & Levy, 1996). Furthermore, interactions take place between actors at different levels of control. Recently, the subject of student reform has been of interest to scholars (e.g., Mitra & Serriere, 2012). Should students have control over what they learn or how they are taught, and how much of a say students should have in their own education are questions of current interest.

Dantow and Park (2009) present three perspectives on how education policies are formed and implemented. The first perspective, “technical-rational”, is a top-down/hierarchical formalization of policy development and implementation. This approach puts control in the hands at those at the top—e.g., actors who are government officials—and downplays the importance of contextual conditions at the local level. Furthermore, instead of considering adjustments to policy implementation at the street-level as an inherent quality of the policy process, the technical-rational position holds variation to be problematic. This perspective considers a unilateral top-down flow to be the model for policy formalization and implementation.

The second perspective on policy development and implementation presented by Dantow and Park (2009) is called “mutual adaptation”. Mutual adaptation considers policy

formation and policy implementation as two separate processes. This allows for more adjustments to be made by teachers at the street-level, and emphasizes the importance of contexts at the local level in how a policy will be shaped by those who are implementing it. The major implication from the mutual adaptation perspective is that, as mentioned above, policies can be both top-down and bottom-up.

The third perspective, “sense-making/co-construction”, posits the policy formation and implementation process as a synthesis between top-down and bottom-up approaches. Sense-making occurs by each actor who is actively implementing a policy—figuring out what the policy is saying and how the words can be transferred into action in the classroom. When a teacher implements a policy in her classroom, her experiences and the context of her classroom will invariably impact how the policy looks at the street level. Thus, teachers, even if they are not conscious in doing so, co-construct policies to fit the context of their schools or classrooms. Because of this, education policies must be written in a way that affords some flexibility in implementation on a classroom-by-classroom basis. This perspective accepts as fact that context affects policy implementation.

In the same vein of the mutual adaptation of policies is a theme that will run throughout this paper—the concept of loose coupling as it pertains to educational organizations and individuals within these organizations. “Loose coupling describes the relationship between levels of an organization through which policy directives ostensibly flow” (Shulman, 1983, p. 500). The “street level bureaucrat” is the actor who takes the action mandated by the policy directive (Brodkin, 1990). In a given school that operates within the educational system of the United States, the street-level bureaucrats are teachers. Policies flow down, and are ultimately

implemented by teachers in a classroom of students. However, because no two schools are the same—and neither are two teachers or two students—the way policies are implemented by teachers is not consistent. Furthermore, if one accepts the sense-making/co-construction approach, teachers manipulate policies. While laws have guidelines, they lack specific directions for implementation.

Shulman (1983) raises an important question: “Can we devise a system in which the teachers are both responsible and free?” (Shulman, 1983, pg. 486). In a loosely coupled system—such as educational organizations—credentialing is a way to ensure that those implementing policies, the street level bureaucrats, are knowledgeable enough in their practice to properly implement the policy (Weik, 1976). In a school culture where policies permeate from the top-down, the teacher’s interpretation of a given policy will determine how exactly that policy is implemented at the micro level. Therefore, how a teacher receives her credentials, her values and opinions towards what aspects of education are most important, and her understanding of a policy will affect how she implements a policy in her classroom.

Important to Shulman’s explanation of loose coupling is how it can occur when considering a single actor. For our purposes, that actor is the teacher. The teacher has an idea of what he or she wants to accomplish in the classroom. However, often times there are discrepancies between what that teacher intends to do and what they actually do (Shulman,1983). Weik (1976) expands on this idea: “The basic methodological point is that if one wishes to observe loose coupling, then he has to see both what is and is not being done. The general idea is that time spent on one activity is time spend away from a second activity” (pg. 10). This point, while intuitive, is extremely significant to the present study. It has

implications for the system as a whole, but also for each individual actor: if a teacher chooses to spend time on something that is not related to the curriculum, she must do so at the expense of something else (provided there is not a surplus of time).

A prime example of both loose coupling and the sense-making conception of policy implementation is a case study written by David Cohen (1990) about a teacher named “Mrs. Oublier”. The story of Mrs. Oublier is quite simple: a policy shift occurred within her school/district that required her to teach “math for understanding”. However, as Mrs. O had been teaching for many years, she simply stuck to the way she had been teaching math (perhaps because she felt she was a veteran teacher and that her practices were sound). Mrs. O felt as though she was doing a great job aligning her practice with the new form of instruction even though she was using traditional methods.

Cohen (1990) writes: “It is one thing to embrace a doctrine of instruction, and quite another to weave it into one’s practice”. Mrs. O is a great example of the difficulties faced by a teacher to implement a specific policy (e.g., a policy dealing with instruction) that forces her to stray away from the way she feels comfortable performing instruction. Cohen (1990) emphasizes the difficulty to carry out changes as “historical beings”: “They cannot simply shed their old ideas and practices like a shabby coat, and slip on something new. Their inherited ideas and practices are what teachers and students know, even as they begin to know something else” (pg. 323).

The important takeaway from this section of the literature review, which has focused on the characteristics and flow of education policies, is that they are not (always) set in stone. Policies are malleable, interpretable, and often times need to be adjusted to fit a specific



context. Furthermore, educational policies do not always funnel down, linearly, from the top to the bottom; they undergo changes at each level, and can even begin from the bottom. This structure not only affords teachers the ability to interpret and adjust how a policy is implemented, but also to grow policies from the ground up. Thus, the education system in the United States is structured in a way that allows teachers autonomy—when the door closes and class begins, teachers have a control over what goes on in their classrooms.

## **Chapter II. DATA PRESENTATION**

### **Methods**

The data included in the present study have been collected from January-April, 2013, and from December, 2013-March, 2014. The initial round of classroom observations from the spring of 2013 amounted to a pilot study of the service-learning project Virginia's sixth-grade class completed. It is important to note that the students who were a part of this service-learning project are not the same students in the class during the more recent series of observations, beginning in December of 2013, as the latter observations took place in a new school-year. The central subject and, Virginia Squier, the teacher, remains.

Virginia teaches sixth-grade at Mount Nittany Middle School (MNMS) in State College, PA. The school is roughly five miles from Penn State University's main campus, University Park. It is reported that 17% of MNMS students qualify for free/reduced price lunch, 3% above the State College Area School District average, but half of the state average. Eighty-nine percent of the school's (roughly) 740 students are White, 5% Asian, 3% Hispanic, and 2% Black (LaFleur, 2011). By virtue of being in a relatively affluent community—and having many community members employed by or affiliated with the university—the State College Area School District can be considered a high-performing district (and MNMS is no exception).

In the spring of 2013, Virginia's class performed a service-learning project. The goal of the project was to increase awareness of illiteracy in central Pennsylvania—which had alarming rates—and to raise money for the Mid State Literacy Council, a local NPO that teaches illiterate adults to read for functional purposes, such as to take a driving test or follow a food recipe. While the research questions that guided the pilot study were not identical to those focused on

in the present study, they were in a similar vein (e.g., what does service-learning look like in an actual classroom; what is the teacher's role in the process?). The data from the pilot study are valuable to this broader piece, because service-learning is a definitive component to the field of youth civic-engagement (as discussed in the literature review). Furthermore, Virginia's leadership role during the service-learning project translates to her leadership style with smaller, less formal projects that go on in her classroom, and her teaching style in general.

My classroom observations during the spring of 2013 occurred two-three times per week, for roughly an hour each visit. During visits I brought a notebook and pen and took extensive field notes, which I later transcribed using a laptop. I took the role of participant observer (Creswell, 1994) at Virginia's request—if I was going to spend so much time in her classroom, I would not be idle. During my visits, I actively engaged with students in her class, sat with them at their tables, and helped out when asked to (e.g., reading over student work, helping them when they had questions). I attended two class events related to the service-learning project—"read-a-thons". One was held at the middle school's library on March 23, 2013, and one at the local mall on March 24, 2013. After the culminating events, I received copies of written student reflections on the service-learning project; I also sat down with Virginia for a 40-minute, one-on-one interview, which I recorded on an iPhone and transcribed using a laptop. This interview, which is the first of several quoted within the present study, took place on April 3, 2013, and is labeled accordingly.

During the more recent observations the class has not been engaging in a service-learning project. I maintain my role as a participant observer when in Virginia's class. My visits to her class take place on average one-two times per week, but last for two-three hours. I have

conducted two lengthy interviews with Virginia—the first took place on December 27, 2013, and lasted for just over an hour; the second interview included both Virginia and Madeline Large (Virginia’s student teacher during the 2012-2013 school year and an integral part of the service-learning project), and lasted for 40 minutes. During these interviews, I focused on Virginia’s mission and philosophy as a teacher—what is important to her and why, how does she go about implementing civic-minded projects into her classroom, etc. Because of the nature of my relationship with Virginia (as a former student, and someone who spends a lot of time in her classroom) she was very receptive to being interviewed, and quickly opened up. She shared specific stories from her teaching career—which provide insightful points of data—which will be explained and analyzed in the following sections.

Another interview has been conducted with David Rockower, who was Virginia’s partner teacher from 2010-2013, before he switched professions (and lasted for 40 minutes). The purpose of this interview was to learn more about Virginia as a teacher from a person who had worked with her for several years. We discussed Virginia’s focuses as an educator, and how David and Virginia were able to collaborate at MNMS. My last interview took place on March 13, 2014, with Brian Ishler, the building principal at MNMS, and was fifteen minutes long. Principal Ishler gave me his perspective on Virginia as a teacher, and the presence of student voice and youth civic engagement as well teacher autonomy in the building. All interviews were recorded on an iPhone and transcribed using a laptop.

The bulk of my data exists in the form of interviews. I coded my data by identifying themes that ran throughout. After defining the themes, I grouped the themes into broader categories, which will be explained below. Because of the amount of time I spent with Virginia

over the past year—and in particular during data-collection periods—some of the data is expressed in narrative form. My goal in doing this is to present the subject in a way that allows the reader to understand who she is, both as an educator and a person; I aim to portray her as accurately as possible by objectively considering the data that has been collected.

## **Findings**

By virtue of being a street-level bureaucrat in a loosely coupled system, Virginia Squier operates with a certain degree of autonomy. There are several factors that affect the amount of autonomy she has. One is the leadership structure within the school. Different schools might have different philosophies in terms of how much freedom they allow their teachers to have to manipulate curriculum or create their own set of classroom practices. Another factor is a teacher's track-record of success. This can be measured in a number of ways—from the standardized test scores of her students, to success in more occult ways, like the civic and social cognizance of a teacher's students. Finally, the length of time a teacher has been teaching, her mastery of the profession, and idea of what works must allow for more freedom to operate within the bounds of experience and erudition.

What follows are several themes that stand out from my data, coded from field notes from classroom observations, conversations with Virginia, and the interviews with Virginia and her colleagues using the aforementioned methods. The goal is to present my findings in a comprehensive way, tie them to the literature on education policy, student voice, and youth civic engagement, and provide implications for how one veteran teacher's methods are transferable to teachers in other schools. Thus, the material should provide something from

which to glean from Virginia's philosophy and methods, even if they teach in schools that serve a different demographic of students, or have more limited resources.

### **The Teacher**

A former English major at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, Virginia Squier is a prime example of what I would call a "veteran teacher", and even an "unconventional teacher". In her twenty-seven years of teaching experience—primarily teaching middle school—she has undoubtedly seen success in the classroom. I can attest to this, as Virginia was my sixth-grade teacher in the school year 2001-2002. I vividly recall sitting in her classroom the day before my twelfth birthday—on September 11, 2001—listening to announcement after announcement somberly noting that afterschool activities were cancelled due to "the tragedy". But we, as students, weren't told exactly what had happened. Teachers were instructed to not tell their students, and to leave off televisions and radios. But Virginia quietly closed the door to our safe classroom, turned the television to a news channel, and as a class we sat and watched footage of the World Trade Center Towers collapse in an unprecedented and gut-wrenching display of terrorism.

While I'm not sure exactly how much I absorbed that day—did it really sink in what it meant for thousands of innocent, hard-working people to be killed on an average workday, in their offices as usual, caught in a catastrophic coincidence?—it serves as a poignant memory. Virginia was not going to protect us from the truth. We live in a world where terrible things happen—in our homes, in our communities, in our country, and on our planet—but we learn to live here as best we can, irrespective to danger. Without our knowledge, she took advantage of a loophole of sorts in the education system: when a teacher closes her door to teach, she can

do things that are not encouraged (or, in this particular instance, clearly discouraged, as teachers were told they **could not** show news footage or listen to radio coverage of the terrorist attacks). Virginia made a conscious decision as an educator that it was her responsibility to enlighten us as students as to what was going on the world, no matter how horrific.

Virginia “came into teaching late” as she explained during one of our interviews (V. Squier, Personal Communication, December 27, 2013). She received her teaching credentials from Prescott College in Prescott, AZ—a program with a strong alternative education feel. Concurrently, she was working as an aid teaching computers in a school in Jackson Hole, Wyoming. In the school she was also a paraprofessional for Mica, a young girl with Down’s syndrome. It was during this time the principal of her school said, “You—you need to become a teacher. My office is going to be open this morning, I want you to go in there and find a school [to get certified]” (V. Squier, Personal Communication, December 27, 2013).

Virginia explains that Prescott College “hit everything I wanted to do—they were going to give me credit for the work that I had already done with my English major, they were going to allow me to design my own courses, so it was great” (V. Squier, Personal Communication, December 27, 2013). She took a variety of courses, in Curriculum and Design, Educational Leadership, Adolescent Psychology, Physical Education for Elementary Educators, etc. The program allowed her to take courses at different universities—such as Brigham Young University and the University of Wyoming—and use those credits towards her teaching credentials. She was also able to do independent research on relevant topics in education and

meet with different teachers or academics in her area with at least a master's degree in education and discuss her research for course credit.

During the first teaching job Virginia held, the principal did not like her. “. . . he did not want to hire me—he said, ‘I don’t want to hire you, I don’t like you’.” The reason this particular principal did not “like” Virginia was because of an answer she gave during her interview. The principal asked, “is it important that your students like you?” Virginia replied, “not really, so long as they respect and trust me; I’m not working for them to like me right off the bat, I’m working for them to respect me and trust me” (V. Squier, Personal Communication, December 27, 2013). Because of this answer, Virginia did not receive the teaching job. However, with the other principal pulling for her (from the school that employed her), she was given a second chance to interview for the position. During the second interview, conducted by the same principal (not the one pulling for her to be hired), he opened with the same controversial question—“is it important that your students like you?” Virginia answered exactly as she had previously—that it was not really important that her students like her, so long as they respect and trust her.

Virginia managed to get the job, to that principal’s dismay, because she had others pulling for her to be hired (such as the principal at the school where she taught computers and was a para). What is curious and impressive about these two interviews is that Virginia knowingly answered the same question in a way that was not going to help her get the job. She easily could have said that yes, it was important for the students to like her—the answer that the principal was clearly looking for. But she didn’t. She held her ground, and answered the question honestly, in accord with her system of beliefs as an educator.



A similar snafu took place when Virginia first moved to State College, PA, and interviewed for a position in the district by which she is currently employed. The principal asked Virginia—if there was a proposal to try something new in her team that she thought was a good idea, but an idea that other members of her team voted to not implement, would she go on with it? Virginia responded that if she thought the proposed idea was good for her students she would implement it in her classroom, even if her team members had voted against it. This answer ultimately placed Virginia outside the “pool” of prospective candidates in the district (she only got a teaching job in the school because the MNMS principal at the time—who was not the person who conducted the interview—knew of her, and asked her to fill a vacancy on very short notice).

These two instances show a character trait that has both its ups and downs. Virginia is very firm in her beliefs and not afraid to stand her ground. She was prepared to not be hired for her first teaching job because she was not willing to change her answer to one question—she would not go against her beliefs just to get the job. The second time around, there is a chance that she didn’t know her answer would leave her out of the pool of candidates by saying she would do something if she thought it was in the best interest of her students, no matter what her team thought—but it does show that she is willing to defy her team. It also shows that she puts her students above all, and will go against the opinions of her colleagues if she believes something will benefit her kids. Virginia recognizes her stubbornness to be one of her weaknesses as a teacher, and something she has been trying to work on since joining the profession. She admits that she has “stepped on toes” over the years, but argues that she does

so in the best interest of her students. To Virginia, the kids truly do come first, and if she can find anything to do in her classroom that will help, she will do it.

One fact cannot be avoided: Virginia Squier loves her job. One of the first questions I asked her during a formal interview was: “If you could have any job in the world, what would you be?” After quipping that the question implied she had to work, she took a deep breath and answered: “Probably a teacher” (V. Squier, Personal Communication, April 3, 2013). This is a significant piece of data regarding Virginia—she is doing the job that she wants to do, and “happily, for the most part” (V. Squier, Personal Communication, April 3, 2013). It is hard to say whether she would have the success she has had over the years if she wasn’t truly passionate about what it is she does.

When I asked Virginia to describe her goals as a teacher, she responded:

I believe it is my responsibility as a teacher to have students understand that they have a commitment to their community, and their community is the classroom, the school, their community, and that I do want my students to understand they are tools of social change (V. Squier, Personal Communication, 4/19/13).

Here, the theme of youth civic engagement becomes relevant. She followed up by asking me what I remembered from sixth-grade—something I learned, or a book I read. She knew where she was leading me: to admit I couldn’t think of much except for a project we did to raise money to benefit 9/11, and send to a charity we chose as a class. Virginia’s point was that if she can get her students to do something altruistic that comes from them—that is their idea

and the result of their work—they will take something away from the year they have spent with her.

### **Caring for the Kids**

Virginia’s motivation for being a teacher is the kids. During one of her first years teaching her own, self-contained classroom, one of her students, Carlos, was an illegal immigrant. This was in Jackson Hole, Wyoming, at a time when the city was experiencing a large influx of illegal immigrants seeking employment in the service industry. Authorities would execute local sweeps in the area to pick up illegal immigrants and transport them out of the state. One day, a sweep took place in the school Virginia where was then teaching. She put Carlos in the closet, to save him from deportation. It didn’t occur to Virginia at the time that what she was doing was a crime—only that it was the right thing to do. Carlos was her student, and she was going to protect him.

Virginia has a solid track record of perseverance when it comes to getting what she wants for and from her students. She told me about the first unit she put together as a teacher, which focused on adventure. She wanted to get in touch with Ed Viesturs, a man who was up in Mount Everest, and get him into the classroom to talk to her students. She was sitting in her classroom, thinking, “I want my kids to have the experience of talking to this guy” (V. Squier, Personal Communication, Jan 10, 2014). It turns out the principal’s best man at his wedding was Ed Viesturs. “So I kept thinking, how can I do this for my kids?” (V. Squier, Personal Communication, Jan 10, 2014). They set up a conference call with Mr. Viesturs, and he sent Virginia video footage of him and his crew during the Mount Everest climb.

After this experience, Virginia wanted her students to understand that they could become writers and actually do what people like Ed Viesturs do. She contacted Tim Cahill, a writer living in Montana, who had just published a book entitled *Jaguars Ripped My Flesh*, recounting his run-ins with nature. She offered to pay for his travel expenses, and Mr. Cahill quickly agreed to come in and talk to the class and the community. As Virginia explains, “it was just that—this is what I want from my kids, and this is why I didn’t do well with [specific principal—name redacted]. Because I wanted this for my kids, and [principal] said I should have given up. But my kids, in Jackson, that made a huge impression on them, and it made a huge impression on me. Saying, ‘no, I’m not going to stop, this is what I want for my students and I’m going to get it for them’” (V. Squier, Personal Communication, Jan 10, 2014). It was by no means a curricular requirement to have a writer come in and talk to the kids about his professional experience—but, again, it was something Virginia wanted her students to experience, so she went out of her way to do it.

In her second year of teaching, Virginia wanted her kids to learn about making mistakes—more importantly, for them to understand that it was OK to make mistakes. To do this she “contacted people in the community and said ‘would you be willing to come in and talk about a mistake that you have made that’s had a profound influence on your life, and share it with a group of kids?’” (V. Squier, Personal Communication, Jan 10, 2014). The head of the local hospital in Jackson Hole came in and talked about a drug addict who would consistently come to the hospital after overdosing on drugs. The head of the hospital discussed how he had to decide whether or not to offer the addict treatment in the face of tightened resources. The chief of police came in and told the story of an armed situation he found himself in, where a

man he knew (it is a small community) pulled a gun; the police chief did not shoot the man, and moments later the man turned the gun on himself and committed suicide.

During my interview with David Rockower, Virginia's former partner teacher at MNMS, he explained how Virginia interacts with her students:

She's a real teacher—she's a real person with the kids, that's what I'm trying to say. There are so many teachers out there, that I had, that were my teacher, and I never knew them personally. Virginia lets—she opens herself up to the kids—there's no messing around with her in terms of, she's not trying to portray something she's not with the kids. She tells them personal stories when it's appropriate, if she's frustrated about something at home she lets the class know—and I think they appreciate that. So as you go through a whole school year with someone, if you can know them as a person, everyone is going to benefit from that—it's a relationship, it's not just a teacher delivering to the students. (D. Rockower, Personal Communication, December 16, 2013).

According to David Rockower, Virginia does not interact with her students in an authoritative way (at least not all the time). She brings herself to their level, and speaks with them as people, not as adult-child or teacher-student. Because of this, she is able to gain the trust of her students—because she is humanized. As David says, it is a “relationship”, and relationships go both ways—not just the teacher talking to her students, but vice versa.

### **Community in the Classroom**

When you walk into room 115 at MNMS, there is a lot to take in. The calendar on the board shows the objectives for the day and week. Student pictures hang from the walls, with captions

including their name and favorite book. There are posters and dozens of books; the desks are tables that seat four-six students and are scattered about in a seemingly disorganized way.

What catches my eye is a big piece of paper on which the following is written:

We, the people of Room 115 at Mount Nittany Middle School promise to ensure a safe and peaceful environment where everyone has equal rights without favoritism; by including everyone, listening to the speaker, respecting all, staying fair, creating a judgment free community and by being friendly. Therefore we promise to work to bring out the best in everyone. Dated August 30, 2013 (Classroom Observation, 3/3/14).

Below the message—which, as a class, Virginia and the students articulated during one of the first lessons they had together in the present school year—are the signatures of each member of the classroom. Several words of the classroom mission stand out. One key component is “listening”, and another is “community”. These are two classroom values that are irreplaceable for Virginia. Everyone in the classroom is expected to “respect” each other, and each member holds “equal rights”.

It is important to consider how this lesson fosters student voice in the classroom. On the most basic level, the lesson shows how much Virginia values creating a space within her classroom where students feel comfortable speaking. In order to do so, norms must be devised and understood by the students. To foster student voice, students must first feel as though they belong to a community that values their voice. They must not be afraid to speak—to make suggestions, to propose ideas. Conversely, in order for voices to be heard, students must listen; the teacher must listen, too.

It is crucial to hone in on how important, to Virginia, it is for her to listen to her students. Virginia told me one of the best compliments she ever received as a teacher was that when a student talks to her, she truly listens—there is no one else in the hallway for her, just the student who is speaking. As Virginia noted: “when you’re dealing with a kid, they need to understand that they have your complete attention” (V. Squier, Personal Communication, December 27, 2013). By paying so much attention and respect to her students, Virginia is able to create a learning environment where students feel safe. She can also push them.

When I had the opportunity to sit down with both Virginia and her student teacher from the previous school year—Madeline—I made inquiries about any effects Virginia has had on Madeline as a teacher (from Madeline’s perspective), and general reflections on working so closely with and learning from Virginia over the course of an entire school year. Madeline stated:

One of the things I liked most about her was she didn’t just worry about teaching kids the academics. And while that’s important, she was more focused on developing them as people—getting them to care about others, getting them to take responsibility for themselves, and putting more of an emphasis on them bettering themselves, their community, their school, over pounding them on academic information—I liked that (M. Large, Personal Communication, Jan 10, 2014).

Madeline’s words reinforce David Rockower’s opinion of Virginia, as well as Virginia’s mission to have students care about and understand the importance of community (and not just in the classroom).

On Friday, February 7th, 2014, I visited Virginia's class. On this specific date, the class was doing something unusual. The desks were covered in tablecloths; students wore formal attire (many boys wore ties—and even a few had on blazers; girls wore dresses). And tea was served. This “tea party” was an effort by Virginia to teach her students proper etiquette. Other adults from the building visited—teachers, paraprofessionals, guidance counselors—and students greeted each adult formally and with a proper handshake. The boys pulled out the chairs for visiting women. Then, as we sipped tea and snacked lightly on baked goods, the students facilitated conversation—asking guests about themselves, guiding casual conversation. The tea party was held as a social lesson for the students. Virginia has mentioned many times that this is one of the most challenging groups she has ever had, and they needed to learn the basic principles of how to interact with others—with both peers and elders.

Consider this idea of creating a community in the classroom and how it pertains to student voice in particular. When you have a strong sense of community within a classroom—something David and Virginia both seek to create (I will lump them together for this discussion because they are like-minded and worked closely together for several years)—students will be more comfortable voicing opinions. Creating a classroom community where students feel safe, are listened to, and are not afraid to pose suggestions, increases student voice. In order for students to speak, they must first feel comfortable doing so.



## **Creativity with the Curriculum**

Virginia has had the same goals as a teacher since she had her first self-contained seventh-grade class in Wyoming—to make students understand they are tools of social change. In her first year, she explained a project the class did:

...the Anne Frank exhibit came to Jackson, and so I designed this whole special project with the kids that we would do about the Anne Frank exhibit. Sneaking that by—I mean I had permission to do it—but I was able to tie it into reading, and literacy, and the project that we did had a social part to it. The kids wrote personal belief statements that were one line, and we painted them on people—plywood people—and we put them all over the town of Jackson, so you could walk around and see them: this says ‘I will stand up to bullying’ (V. Squier, Personal Communication, April 3, 2013).

This ties into the theme of caring for the kids—one of the first discussed above. The two examples of going out of her way to bring in guest speakers with poignant messages to talk to the class is certainly creative—and, as evidenced by the interview transcripts, Virginia went out of her way because she thought it was of value to her students. Furthermore—it goes back to the question she was asked in her first interview within the State College Area School District (if her team didn’t agree with something, but she felt it was good for her students, what would she do—she responded that if she felt like it was good for her students she would do it anyways). This is defiance, perhaps, yes, in a sense—but it’s also something bigger. Going all the way for her students. Not letting obstacles stand in her way of doing good by her students.

## **Youth Civic Engagement & Student Voice**

During one of our interviews, I asked Virginia to define “youth civic engagement”:

...civic engagement for my kids means that they recognize that they are a part of a community, and that that as a member of the community they bring something to the table, to contribute, as well as take something away. So, civic engagement for my part means they are paying attention to their classroom community, their school community, and their State College community, and they recognize that they have a responsibility to all three of those places and they get something in return. (V. Squier, Personal Communication, 12/27/13).

Virginia cited a couple specific examples of students finding ways to do community-based projects. One was a girl she had in class, who, after the tsunami hit at Fukushima, approached Virginia and asked if she could do something about it.

...so this girl Melanie contacted me that weekend and said that she wanted to do something about it (the tsunami) and I said what do you want to do? And she said ‘what about making paper cranes’, and I said tell me more—give me more—making paper cranes isn’t going to do, how is that going to help these people? (V. Squier, Personal Communication, 12/27/13).

Virginia saw that Melanie had a good idea, and wanted to do something to help out. What Virginia wanted was for the student to think even deeper about the issue—making paper cranes would be symbolic, but how could they actually help the people in need?

After further thought, Melanie came up with a plan. Virginia recalls:

...she gradually came up with this idea of making paper cranes, and for a \$1 donation you got your crane with your name on it hung up in the hallway, and the entire hall, blue and yellow, had cranes hanging from the ceiling, and they raised \$2,500 and bought a

shelter box that was a shipping container that has tools in it for life, like a little non-electric washing machine and a clothesline, and a shovel and sleeping bags and food and a little oven—this was what a British organization was taking over to Japan; and that was just me saying, ‘what are you going to do?’ (V. Squier, Personal Communication, 12/27/13).

What is so important about this specific project is that Virginia did not simply take Melanie’s idea to help tsunami victims and develop the plan for her. She pushed Melanie to take her idea a step further. Importantly, Virginia’s actions do not show dismissal of an idea—or the suggestion that the student’s idea was impossible or meaningless. By scaffolding, and pushing the student further, a plan was developed and the project was carried out.

During a different school year, Virginia’s class was doing a research project on different countries throughout the world, and she noticed one of her students had become very interested in a completely different topic—local chicken ordinances. This particular student, Britton, lived in College Township, where residents were not allowed to raise chickens. However, the nearby Borough of State College allowed residents to have chickens. As Virginia recalls:

Britton researched chicken ordinances and he went around his neighborhood and he got petitions and he explained to people all about chickens and talked to them and he appeared before the township supervisors, and he made a presentation (V. Squier, Personal Communication, December 27, 2013).

Britton’s ultimate presentation to the College Township Board of Supervisors proved to be unsuccessful, but the project as a whole still had many positive qualities. The student found an

issue he was interested in, and Virginia found a way to allow him to pursue it in lieu of the class project because it met the requirements (e.g., performing research and making a public presentation).

I asked Virginia what advice she would have for a teacher who wanted her students to care or have a sense of civic responsibility. Her response was: “If she—or he—is imposing the project on the kids, it’s going to be tough. She or he needs to listen to the kids to hear what they’re talking about—what are they concerned about” (V. Squier, Personal Communication, December 27, 2013). To Virginia, for students to be engaged, it needs to come from them. She cannot be the one telling them to care about something. She provides students with the space to pursue their civic interests, and provides scaffolding through the process.

I asked Virginia a series of questions aimed to tease out how she goes about implementing a community-minded project in her classroom. She responded:

Have a good relationship with the parents, close your door and do it. If the kids come to you with an idea and you have a good relationship with the parents you can’t turn that down . . . I would think as a sixth-grader you would remember the things that you did that were above and beyond—you wouldn’t remember the spelling lessons, do you remember any books you read? So, I wonder . . . (V. Squier, Personal Communication, December 27, 2013).

The most important part of the above quote is Virginia allowing the kids to come to her with an idea. For any project to have student ownership, it is crucial that the students come up with the idea.

This translates to other aspects of more traditional learning that happen in the classroom. Virginia believes students need to have a say in how their work is measured, or assessed. As she explains:

...part of it is when the kids ask you 'is this good enough, is this what you want?' turning it back on them and saying, 'what do you think?' Letting them design—asking them 'what do you think an A-paper would be?' I don't remember if you had something to do—I mean I was a different teacher then than I am now, but I still think that there were still times with your class that I would say, 'OK, this is the assignment, what do you think are the important aspects of it, how do you think you should be graded on it?' (V. Squier, Personal Communication, December 27, 2013).

Virginia pushes her students to have a say in what goes on in the classroom. She wants them to care, and to self-advocate. What is evidenced by the above quotation is Virginia pushing her students to be active rather than passive learners. She encourages them to voice their opinions about how the classroom and lessons should operate and be assessed.

### **A Testing Culture**

Starting on Thursday, March 13, 2014, my visits to Virginia's class have been different than usual. During writing (second period), the students have been writing short poems or newspaper-like headlines. The students write their short poems or newspaper headlines by hand, and then use words cut out from newspapers to paste onto another piece of paper. The idea being his exercise is for students to see how words can be manipulated—using cut out words allows students to physically move words to achieve new wording in their poems.

After reading, during math, the focus is on preparation for the Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA). It is that time of the year when students across the state of Pennsylvania in grades 3-8 take the standardized test in English Language Arts and Mathematics (and students in grades 4 and 8 take a test in science). I asked Virginia via email to divulge her feelings about standardized tests—and focused on the following question: is standardized test prep taking away time that you could be using more efficiently? Her response was as follows:

Oh Blast, of course! Especially this winter! Efficiently? What is efficient in teaching?

Nothing. Teaching is messy and inconsistent and the real work occurs, like most of life, at the verge/the edge/ that strange line between chaos and order, confusion and comprehension. But... enough. Prep time for the tests is taking away from time that is too valuable in the classroom. Time spent dealing with ideas, issues, friends, conflict, confusion, chaos. This year we have lost so much teaching time to snow days, I am shocked at how much I have not been able to do...

(V. Squier, Personal Communication, March 17, 2014).

Virginia displays a view of education that puts more importance on the social aspects than learning to take tests. Especially with sixth-grade students, who spend a great deal of time interacting with the same group, it is essential for them to learn to coexist with others.

### **Service-learning: The Illiteracy Project**

The following is an account of the data collected between January-April, 2013, while Virginia's class was performing a service-learning project. It includes a description of the goals of the project, how it began, and ways in which students were involved.

During the times allotted for the students to work on the class illiteracy project, they divided into small groups to work on different tasks. Virginia began each period by asking every student what he or she was going to work on that day; most of the work was ongoing, so the students had particular groups they worked with regularly. One of the central aspects of the project was to spread the word about illiteracy in the region. The students worked to inform people on multiple levels—first those in their school, and then the whole community.

At the school-level, the students created a video of themselves discussing the issue of illiteracy in Centre County. They wrote a script, and acted it out to make a “commercial” that aired on several occasions during the school’s morning announcements. Other students made posters that hung around the school, providing information about illiteracy. The posters rely on an image of the local university’s football stadium, explaining that the town’s population would fill the stadium, and those in the upper decks would represent all of the illiterate people in the area (11% of the population). A third group rewrote lyrics to the tune of popular songs, full of information about illiteracy (e.g., “Don’t stop reading” to the tune of Journey’s “Don’t Stop Believing”). Those working on the song rewrites planned to circulate the school and perform them for other classes, but this never came to fruition.

The school competes in a “penny wars” competition, where each grade has a bin to fill with coins; the grade with the most money in coins (subtracting paper currency) in their bin at the end of the competition wins a prize. With Principal Ishler’s approval, the money earned through the penny was added to the money the class raised for the Mid-State Literacy Council—another item discussed in the students’ commercial. While Mrs. Squier’s class

initiated the project, the penny wars competition provided the entire school an opportunity to play at least a small role.

One day, Julie Miller, the district spokesperson, came into the class to teach the kids how to write a press release. She gave a formal lesson of the information that was essential to a press release, and instructed the students on the most effective ways to get their word out through a news source. Several students were responsible thereafter for writing press releases as events approached.

On top of raising awareness of illiteracy in the area, and the fundraising efforts through the school “penny wars”, the class held two “read-a-thons”. For each read-a-thon, the students collected donations, or pledges, to read for an extended period of time. Thus, just like a marathon runner receives donations to run, the students received donations to read. The events provided a unique way for the class to benefit illiterate adults in the area in a way that represented the cause—by reading.

The first read-a-thon was held at the school library on a Friday after school (March 22, 2013). The event lasted from 3:30-9:00 pm. Most of the students in the class chose to participate in the school read-a-thon; however, it was not a compulsory class activity (e.g., they did not receive a grade for participating). During the event, around 6:00 pm, an anchor from a local news station arrived. His news broadcasting company had received one of the press releases the class had written to raise awareness in the larger community (extending beyond the school). Upon the newsman’s arrival, quietness turned quickly to boisterousness.

The kids could not contain their excitement to have a real newsman in their presence, and to cover the very event they had orchestrated. Many of the students wished to be on TV,



and two were interviewed for the spot. Owen was shown on the 11-o-clock news saying: “I definitely read a lot, and it’s important—it’s really important, actually—to read as much as you can”. Olivia, too, had a few words on the program: “Because, now that I know that there’s hundreds of people out there that can’t read, it’s just like—oh my god”. Between the two brief interviews, Owen and Olivia emphasized two key aspects of the illiteracy project: the importance of reading, and the shocking reality that many local people are illiterate. Most of the students who were at the event who didn’t receive personal interviews were still filmed for the broadcast (while reading). This was a milestone for the students—it really put them out into the public eye and made them even more eager for the read-a-thon the next day at the local mall.

The read-a-thon event at the local mall lasted from 2-5 pm on Saturday, March 23, 2013. While fewer students participated in this event than the one at the school library, there were still over half of the students in attendance. Some students brought siblings and parents along; the school principal, Principal Ishler, who had been supportive of the project from the start, came out for an hour with his daughter to read. Carpets were laid out behind a long table that was covered with picture books; chairs were lined up, and students brought pillows to get comfortable and read. A large sign was placed out front of the table to explain what the students were doing; it include the visual of the Penn State University football stadium with facts about local illiteracy and the Mid-State Literacy Council.

For the three-hour period, students sat and read quietly as mall patrons walked by. Some noticed the students reading and came up to peruse the sign, or place a dollar in the donation jar. The students were excited to be out in public demonstrating for the community

what they had been working towards over the past several months. As the event winded down, Mrs. Kissler, mother of the school librarian, Dotty Delafield, came to express her gratitude to the students. Mrs. Kissler is the founder of the Mid-State Literacy Council. Even though she is now relatively old and in a wheelchair, she still made the effort to make it to the event to thank the students. She shared a few kind words about how much their efforts meant to her, personally.

About two weeks after the read-a-thons, the class held a culminating ceremony in the school library (the same venue as the first read-a-thon). They invited the president of the Mid-State Literacy Council, and presented her with a “big check” listing the amount they had raised on the Council’s behalf: \$1,879.51. The students took a class photograph (along with the check and the Council’s president) to document their project’s success.

#### Levels of Student Involvement

Throughout the service-learning project most of the students helped work towards the read-a-thon events. Because the majority of the work was done during class time, the students were required to do something during these periods to help towards the project. Throughout the class, there were some students who put more effort into the project than others.

One student, Kelly, was responsible for setting up the read-a-thon event at the mall. This required a lot of work. She had to be in constant communication with people from the mall, on the phone and via email. At times, she had to be persistent when an email was sent with no response, or a voicemail was left without a call back. Furthermore, when she was able to reach someone who could help out, Kelly had to make sure the date and time were set, and that there would be a table, chairs, and a carpet available for her and her classmates. Because

she was responsible for coordinating the read-a-thon event at the mall, Kelly had a lot of ownership over the project. She was instrumental in its success, and emerged with a great sense of pride over what she had done.

Another student, Erica, was primarily responsible for putting together a bake sale to benefit the literacy council. This required less work than contacting the mall to set up the read-a-thon. Erica was responsible for figuring out what each student would contribute to the sale, determining the prices of each item, and making signs which had the items and prices listed (other students helped her with these tasks, but Erica was the primary “bake sale person”). Even though Erica had fewer responsibilities and thus was perhaps less involved in the project than Kelly, she did her part well and enjoyed it; she still felt ownership over the project.

James’ main task was putting labels on jars for the penny wars competition. This was far less arduous than being in communication with the mall or even organizing a bake sale, but it was something James wanted to do, and he did it well. As Virginia later explained, James is dyslexic, and of different intellectual capacity than students like Kelly (who is in Learning Enrichment). Virginia said that she could not ask James to set up the event at the mall, or even to organize a bake sale; James wanted to put labels on jars, and this was his contribution. It is something that needed to be done, and James did it willingly.

Because students had different roles in the project that ranged in difficulty and importance, there were clearly different levels of involvement across the class. Virginia, who, as the teacher, is well aware of the academic strengths and weakness of her students, explained that there were some students who could be entrusted with more responsibility than others. The level of student involvement depended on the student’s eagerness to perform a

certain task, and Virginia making sure students took on roles that were appropriate based on the student's intellectual capacity.

### **Leadership in the School**

In mid-March, 2014, following a spring break truncated by a snowy winter, I had the opportunity to sit down with MNMS Principal Ishler for a short interview. The focus of the interview was his relationship with and opinion of Virginia as a teacher, and to get his views on the concept of loose coupling and teacher autonomy in the building. Principal Ishler said the following about Virginia as a teacher:

I like to think Virginia is an out-of-box thinker. You know, she's not a person who just thinks inside the classroom. She wants them [students] to have experiences outside [the classroom]. Think of it as text to community, where she's teaching in the classroom, that's the text part, but she wants to make sure that whatever she's doing in the classroom can be related out into the community (B. Ishler, Personal Communication, March 13, 2014).

This is in direct accord with how Virginia describes her "mission" as a teacher—for students to have experiences outside of the classroom in the community. Principal Ishler explained that not all teachers in the building make attempts to connect with the community—Virginia is one of a handful—and also that Virginia is the school's teacher "most active in trying to make the connections to the community".

On top of trying to make connections to the community, Virginia likes to make the projects that begin in her classroom and involve the entire school. An example of this is a project Virginia's class started several years ago. A student in her classroom was mentally

retarded and was participating in the Special Olympics. Other students in the class approached Virginia with the idea to have a pep rally for the students in the building who were attending the Special Olympics, and it became a school-wide tradition that exists today (which Principal Ishler brought up during our interview). Not only can Virginia's class take pride in the pep rally, but students from the entire building can participate and contribute.

Principal Ishler brought up another activity the sixth-grade classes used to do (but that no longer exists) called "Bill Projects". According to Principal Ishler, the students would, as a class, propose changes they wanted to make to the school; classes would vote on the bills, and then the vote would go to the team. As Mr. Ishler recounted, the bills that passed would come to him, and then he decided: "let's sit down and see if this something we can truly work in the building. And we really tried to do that. We did some stuff with lunch—some lunch changes—and that was awesome" (B. Ishler, Personal Communication, March 3, 2014).

Aside from specific examples of student engagement in Virginia's class and in the building, Principal Ishler and I discussed teacher autonomy. Following the theme of loose coupling, when a teacher closes his or her door and commences to teach, he or she will inevitably be able to make decisions as to what will go on in the classroom. As Principal Ishler explains:

I don't think we as administrators can come up to a teacher and say 'you have to teach it this way'. I think the Common Core's been approved, and that's the framework, but I think the teachers need the autonomy to teach to their strengths. So I think it is very important that they're given that autonomy to expand upon their strengths and do what's best for them and the students. I think a lot of teachers try—you know it takes

some time to get to know their students—and then try to accommodate what they’re doing for the students, too. And I think our teachers do a very nice job of trying to find that balance (B. Ishler, Personal Communication, March 3, 2014).

Brian Ishler has been principal at Mount Nittany Middle School for six years (Virginia has been teaching there for much longer). Thus, Virginia was already comfortable with her position before Principal Ishler came into the picture. Since he’s been principal, they have had a very convivial teacher-administrator relationship. “She’s very inviting—I mean it’s a class that I feel that I can just stop in and sit down and listen, and she’s very receptive to that. And I think that eases the administrator-teacher relationship. Because some classrooms I walk into and you know what they’re doing changes because I’m there. And I don’t see that with Virginia—whatever she’s doing she continues to do” (B. Ishler, Personal Communication, March 3, 2014). It takes a certain amount of confidence and comfort in ability for a teacher to not feel at all threatened by the presence of a building principal in her room.

This school year, Principal has received several complaints about Virginia as a teacher, mostly dealing with her methods and the projects she has the students do. His explanation is that some parents are used to a teacher who does things traditionally, and that’s not Virginia’s style. It takes time for parents to understand that there is a bigger picture to what she does as a teacher—that she is not a traditional instructor, but beats to her own drum. Principal Ishler explained his reaction to complaints: “...do I think those complaints are justifiable—absolutely not, because whatever Virginia does is always in the best interest of the students” (B. Ishler, Personal Communication, March 3, 2014). This response is consistent to Virginia’s ideology, which is shown from direct quotes in previous sections of this paper. It is significant that

Principal Ishler not only understands the teaching styles and philosophies of teachers in the building, but that he supports them in their way of attending to student needs.

### **Chapter III. DISCUSSION**

It is important for teachers to have autonomy in their classroom—the more administrative support, the better. Virginia almost did not get two teaching jobs because of her opinion/philosophy as an educator. But she stuck to her guns. She wasn't going to pretend to be something she wasn't just to get a job. And there's a lot of courage in that—and a lot to respect. How can she expect to teach her students to stand up for what they believe in if she doesn't demonstrate these qualities herself?

Many of the accounts of Virginia's interaction with her students described in the findings section (especially the quote from David Rockower) show a very open relationship between teacher and student. Virginia interacts with her students in a way that is not demeaning, and that does not make the student nervous or feel like they are talking to a superior. Her interactions with students demonstrate what Fielding (2001) calls "radical collegiality". Radical collegiality involves an "overt openness" between teacher and students, particularly in the dialogue between them (Fielding, 2001).

Another important aspect of Virginia's methods is that the projects in her classroom (that are most memorable) come from the students. As Principal Ishler said of the Special Olympics pep-rally and the service-learning project Virginia's class did last spring:

...both of those projects came from the students, so it's things like that I like to see them come up with and create and then support them and allow it. And whatever we can do even as a building—how can we expand it so it's not just within their room—can we increase it so maybe it's a sixth-grade project? Or a building project? Not just a classroom project—try to get as many students involved who want to be involved—



again, not forcing them, but who want to be involved in things” (B. Ishler, Personal Communication, March 13, 2014).

Between this quote and others mentioned throughout this piece, the leadership, particularly from the principal, is very strong throughout the building. He supports his teachers, allows them to teach to their strengths, and makes sure that they are working in the best interest of their students. Without a strong network of support, it is unlikely Virginia would have succeeded. (Take, for example, how she got two of her teaching jobs after “bad” interviews—she had other principals pulling for her.)

The fact that teachers choose to do one thing means that, inevitably, they are choosing not to do something else. Time is finite—the school year does not last forever. At some point, time constraints come into play, and teachers must decide what they are going to do. One of Virginia’s weaknesses brought up by Principal Ishler is that she sometimes tries to do too much. Instead of saying “no”, she’ll take on any task, which causes him concern that she might reach the point of burnout as a teacher. Perhaps this is Virginia trying to do everything, but the take-away is that a teacher must make decisions and stick with them.

David Rockower, her colleague of several years, said a weakness of Virginia’s as a teacher is that she will try many projects but give up sometimes too quickly if she’s not seeing results. As a result, this time is not only spent away from other tasks, but might ultimately be wasted if the project does not play out enough for the students to benefit from it. Teachers take risks in the projects they do that are not directly in line with the curriculum. Thus, a teacher must not rush into a project, but spend time planning it out thoroughly.

The service-learning project Virginia's class completed in the spring of 2013 was successful. Reading through the student reflections on the project, it is evident that all students gained something from the project. After the service-learning project, the students completed a written assignment reflecting on their experience. The following are quotes that highlight the success felt by the students following the project, and what they took away from the experience:

I learned that it is a great thing to help out people who cannot read, or anyone that needs help. I would like to do something like this again, because it feels good to help people. If someone said young people cannot effect the world I would say, young people are the future and we effect the world everyday. – Zak.

What stands out from Zak's quote is his understanding that young people are the future. By helping others, he has learned that he can make a difference. This understanding is one he will carry forward.

By participating in the Mid-State Literacy project, I learned that if you put your mind to something and you work hard you can accomplish it. I would love do something like it again, and I would say to someone who said kids are too young to affect change, No matter how young you are, if you work hard, focus, and are working for a good cause, you can do anything. – Raylene.

Raylene shows an understanding that young people have the ability to make a difference—they are not constrained by their age.

I learned that we can make a difference if we simply set our mind to it. No one is too young to make a change. Even if it's something small, like putting up posters to raise

awareness for a cause. This activity was very fun and I especially liked how we were helping people while having fun reading! I would love to do something like this again! –  
Tori.

Tori recognized that even little things like putting up posters are a start to change.

Furthermore, she genuinely enjoyed the experience of helping those in need, and expressed interest in doing another community-based project in the future.

Based on the student reflections, all students who participated felt “good” by serving their community, which is important to service-learning (Davis, 2006). Furthermore, many students demonstrated a sense of civic efficacy, or the belief that they can make a difference in their community; many students also noted they wished to “do something like this again” (Mitra & Serriere, 2012). This suggests that even though the project was teacher-led at the onset, the students did have a sense of ownership, and did make personal gains. Even Aja, a new student in the class who was not present for the project, reflected positively on what the class had accomplished; she felt pride knowing that a group of sixth-graders, her age-mates and classmates, could achieve something so great.

The service-learning project, while occasionally messy, began in an organized fashion. After the teachers “planted seeds”—dropped hints about illiteracy in the area—the students eventually caught on and decided they could do something about it (so the project came from them). Without Virginia and Madeline, the project could not have happened. But the students, because they had a sense of ownership over the project, irrespective to their level or degree of involvement, all reflected positively on the experience. Moreover, there is evidence that all students gained something from the project. This was an instance where Virginia did not rush

or take on too much—the project was well-planned from beginning to end, and this organization allowed it to succeed.

After the students initiated the project, they put together a presentation for Principal Ishler. They created a PowerPoint, dressed in formal attire, and delivered their presentation seeking the principal's approval for their project. While Principal Ishler later told me that all that was really required for the project to take place was for the students to write an email or letter to him, the presentation formalized the undertaking. All students spoke during the presentation—and thus all had a voice—which helped the project not only feel “real”, and organized, but truly a collective effort. This affirms Camino & Zeldin's (2002) assertion that students must have ownership over a service-learning project in order for results to be realized.

Student voice, as seen in the findings section, is most relevant in Virginia letting students define what they want to do and scaffolding students to help them run with their ideas. Most of the student voice evidenced by Virginia—examples of students doing special projects or expanding projects that the class was already doing to extend beyond the classroom—came about because the students decided they wanted to do these things. As Virginia and Principal Ishler both noted, the projects have to come from the students. This is in accord with the literature on service-learning, which notes that one of the most important aspect of civic engagement is student ownership over a project (again, discussed by Camino & Zeldin, 2002). The way students take ownership is by first defining what it is they are doing. This places the student projects at the top of Hart's (1992) ladder, with “student-initiation, shared decisions with adults”.

There is a tremendous importance of listening and community building in the classroom. Teachers need to listen to what their students have to say—really truly listen to them. It goes back to what Virginia said in the interview for her first teaching job—it was not so important that the students like her, but that they trust her and respect her. Listening is an avenue to gaining trust; it is an avenue to community building in the classroom. A learning environment in which the students feel safe to speak up and voice their opinions is a learning environment that will foster student voice and participation. Virginia is able to see results from her students because they feel safe talking to her, and trust that she will listen.

The leadership at MNMS—specifically Principal Ishler—is invaluable to Virginia’s ability to be creative with the curriculum and have a focus on fostering youth civic engagement. Principal Ishler understands that it’s important for teachers to have autonomy in their classrooms. As Principal Ishler purported, teachers need to be able to teach to their strengths. The relationship between Principal Ishler and Virginia was able to grow because, as Principal Ishler noted, Virginia is always herself—if he walks in to observe her class, she will not change her lesson, while some other teachers might. The teacher must be who she is.

In the words of Cohen (1990): “They [teachers] cannot simply shed their old ideas and practices like a shabby coat, and slip on something new. Their inherited ideas and practices are what teachers and students know, even as they begin to know something else” (pg. 323). This quote was used earlier in the present study when discussing Mrs. Oublier, and how she exemplifies loose coupling. But it has implications for Virginia; she is undoubtedly a wonderful teacher, who has seen great results from her students over the years. But Virginia has doubts about next year with the implementation of the Common Core. She has not ruled out the

possibility that the increased stress on her student's test performance will shift how she is evaluated as a teacher.

Chrispeels (1997), in a piece on the rise and fall of an assessment system in California during the 1980s-90s, discusses "horizontal networks"—teachers talking with other teachers and administrators to figure out how to improve their practices; there is some evidence that Virginia did this, but only really with like-minded teachers, especially David Rockower. Virginia was open to say there were other teachers she would not collaborate with, because they had different ideologies. In discussing her relationship with David Rockower she became a bit nostalgic, and admitted that she missed having him around to bounce ideas off. The take-away message here is that it is extremely important for teachers to have horizontal networks available to them—other teachers they can talk to, and plan with.

## Chapter IV. IMPLICATIONS

The data that have been presented paint a picture of a wonderful teacher, and, hopefully, a unique and inspiring story. It is now essential to flesh out the most important question: **so what?** What can other teachers learn from Virginia's experience? Virginia would argue the following:

I have had interns and student teachers for the past fourteen years. During this time I would like to think that I have shown them there are ways to teach that go beyond delivering the curriculum. I am who I am with my students. I do not profess to know everything, or to be always in control. (That's an understatement!) But I believe students in sixth grade will not remember the curriculum as much as they will remember their teacher. And if anyone remembers me at all, I want them to remember that I really, really cared about all of my students and that I was willing to put aside whatever we were 'supposed to be learning' and listen if they needed it. (V. Squier, Personal Communication, 4/3/14).

Here, a grand implication can be drawn that a teacher needs to be real with and truly care about her students. Furthermore, she must be willing to, as Virginia states, "go beyond delivering the curriculum". This will become increasingly difficult the more curricula are designed to correspond to standardized tests. But it is a necessity that teachers be willing to ignore the standards, from time to time, when they see that something bigger is happening in the classroom.

Teachers need to be inspired to go beyond the curriculum. They need to be willing and motivated to prepare students for a life of living among other people, and contributing not only

to the economy, but also to the democratic society among which they exist. This is particularly important in the middle school years, when students spend a great amount of time with their homeroom teacher and the classmates within their homeroom. Virginia discusses this further:

I try and teach the student teachers and interns I have had about their responsibility to their students, their community and their country. I strongly believe in the concepts of democracy and equality, and to me both of those concepts are dependent upon every person participating in their community (school/town/country). We are all in this together, right? We have a social obligation to each other to be the best we can be. (V. Squier, Personal Communication, 4/3/14).

In order to teach democracy—or to teach students to be members of a democracy—must one truly believe in it as Virginia does? I would argue yes. A teacher's system of beliefs must be in accord with what she sets out to accomplish in her classroom. Before a teacher can teach her students to be civically engaged, she must, herself, be engaged. Thus, as tokenism exists towards the bottom of Hart's (1992) ladder of student engagement, it can be applied to teachers, particularly in civics, as well.

Virginia also brings up an important point, which was touched on during the findings sections, of what a student should take from a year in a classroom. A teacher must consider not only what students learn on a day-to-day basis over the course of the year, but what they take away from the experience of a year of school. Curriculum aside, the teacher has a certain degree of control over what her students will take away. She has the power, and the responsibility to ensure that students not only learn what's in the text, but grow socially, too.



Secondly, the nature of Virginia's relationship with her students allows her to get them engaged in the classroom and greater community. Her openness reflects Fielding's (2001) concept of "radical collegiality", but it takes the concept to a further level. Virginia explains her relationship with students:

I am honest with my students and when I am excited about something, I share it. My passions can inspire my students. I am also honest with them when I am having a bad day. I consider all of these things "teachable moments." I am not saying that I have 'the answers' but I am hoping that I can show students the benefits of a life that is engaged. (V. Squier, Personal Communication, 4/3/14).

Virginia is not just "open" in terms of a dialogue between her and her students, but she allows herself to be vulnerable in their presence. She humanizes herself—she is not just a teacher delivering a curriculum, but an actual real live human being in the classroom. She is able to connect with students because she not only listens, but she does so on an extremely personal level. While this is incredibly challenging (and probably uncomfortable) for many teachers, rethinking the teacher-student power structure is crucial for a teacher to connect with her students. By creating a more "real" relationship, a teacher is able to get more from her students.

### **Virginia's Community Ladder**

Virginia, in many of her methods, exemplifies what Biesta (2007) calls "democracy *through* education"—that is, she wants students to learn to be members of a democracy through their learning experiences in the classroom. The first lesson Virginia did with her class was to make a

class constitution, together, and have all the students sign the document. While Virginia ultimately has the goal of getting her students to care about their community on more than one level, it is a process that requires starting from the bottom.

From Virginia's perspective on civic engagement we can discern three separate levels of community: the classroom community, the school community, and the greater community (which can be the town and/or the country as a whole). This framework can correspond to Westheimer and Kahne's (2004) three kinds of citizens—personally responsible, participatory, and justice oriented. Virginia's framework reflects how the three types of citizens can be developed within an individual classroom. We can take the idea of Hart's (1992) ladder and combine it with Westheimer and Kahne's (2004) three types of citizens to build "Virginia's community ladder".

At the bottom of Virginia's community ladder is the classroom community. This is the first place to start engaging students—with others in their classroom who they spend the most time with. Virginia does this by creating, as a class, norms for their community. She also does it by teaching them socially acceptable ways to communicate and coexist with other (e.g., through projects like the class tea party). By focusing first on the classroom community, Virginia is able to get her students to be personally responsible citizens. This is the most basic level of engagement—learning to engage with classmates or peers.

The second rung of Virginia's community ladder is the greater school community. Through the example of the service-learning project her class performed last spring, it is important to see that, after defining the problem as a class (the astounding rate of local illiteracy) the students brought it to the attention of the school by writing and delivering a

commercial during the morning announcements. In doing so, the students used school-wide fundraising events (such as the “penny wars”) to involve the entire building in their initiative. This brought students to the level of “participatory citizens”—they sought a way to solve a social issue (illiteracy) by including their entire school community.

The third and final rung of Virginia’s community ladder expands to the town, or even the country. The literacy service-learning project reached the State College community—the class held a “read-a-thon” event at the local mall, and a local news reporter came to the same event held at the MNMS library. This brought to greater attention the social ill—illiteracy—and informed the greater community how to address the issue (by helping the Mid State Literacy Council).

Other data from the findings section—such as the girl who wanted to help Fukushima tsunami victims, or the boy who wanted to change local chicken ordinance policies—exemplify students who reach the third community level individually. In these examples, the students identified the problem and, with scaffolding from Virginia, were able to address it. At this level, students fall into the category of “justice oriented citizens”.

While Virginia’s class during the 2012-2013 school-year saw incredible results through their service-learning project, the following year’s class has not been able to engage in a project of the same magnitude. This is an important characteristic of Virginia’s community ladder—the class must start at the bottom and move up. Because her students as a whole are a bit more “challenging” this year, and she has missed a fair number of school days, Virginia’s class has been stuck on the first rung of the ladder. Before they can address their greater school

community, they must first develop a cohesive classroom community. They must learn to care about those in their immediate surroundings before moving to the next rung on the ladder.

Important to Virginia’s ladder—and essential to civic engagement—is that the kids must climb on their own. That is, Virginia cannot force her students to care about their classroom community, or broader levels of community. It is up to the students to identify and solve problems in their classroom, in their school, and in their town/country. Along the way, Virginia scaffolds and provides support (and this involves seeking support from Principal Ishler, which occurred during the literacy service-learning project).

The framework of “Virginia’s community ladder” can be useful to other teachers in many ways. It can help them to understand not to be frustrated by a lack of student growth, but to focus on building civic-mindedness from the ground up. Start with a foundation, plant seeds, and allow students to grow as a unit. When they are ready, students will climb the ladder with teacher support. Finally, it might not be all students who reach the top, but a teacher must allow the space for it to occur, even if it is only one individual student. All of the scaffolding that helps students climb the community ladder comes from the depth of the teacher’s relationship with and knowledge of her students.

## Chapter V. CONCLUSION

In the words of educational historian Diane Ravitch (2011): “Not everything that matters can be quantified”. The importance of youth civic engagement and student voice certainly fall into that category. While standardized test scores are used to measure teacher success and efficacy, a teacher’s ability to create citizens is not. Perhaps this is because a teacher’s ability to create citizens is difficult to measure.

Having a great teacher, like Virginia, is an invaluable experience for any student. So many factors affect a child’s education. However, as Shulman (1983) professes: “...the teacher must remain the key. The literature on effective schools is meaningless, debates over educational policy are moot, if the primary agents of instruction are incapable of performing their functions well” (p. 504). This insight from Shulman touches the heart of the present study.

Tyack and Cuban (1995), in their book *Tinkering Toward Utopia*, introduce the concept of the “grammar of schooling”. The concept, at its most basic level, argues that education is a field that is incredibly hard to change. Virginia Squier is a prime example of that. While she has many practices that elicit incredible results, she is firm in her beliefs. She describes herself as “stubborn”, much like the grammar of schooling, and Cohen’s (1990) example of Mrs. Oublier. It is incredibly hard for people, in general—and this includes teachers and policymakers and those who have an opinion about education (because everyone who has attended school at some point in their life inevitably has an opinion about how they should be operated)—to change.

This present study leaves some loose ends for future research. The biggest questions that remains are: can a teacher like Virginia operate in a school that lacks an open-minded and supportive principal, or where the students are from low-income families where they don't have the resources to help themselves let alone their communities? Context shifts, and policies are implemented into a social context that is unpredictable; there are some things you can control and there are others you cannot. Virginia's hope is that certain aspects of her teaching are transferrable to those who teach a different demographic of students. Her passion for the profession is a quality that all teachers should strive to replicate.

Most important, again considering the different language used by President Roosevelt and President Obama, is the purpose of education. We need to find a way rediscover the responsibility education has in creating citizens, not just members of the work force. To do so will take effort from those on the street level, who put effort into weaving civic engagement projects into the curriculum. It will take great teachers, like Virginia, to influence education policy from the bottom-up and make change.

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## **Appendix: Interview Protocol**

### **Interview 12/16/13 with David Rockower (Virginia's former partner teacher of three years):**

Name, a little bit about yourself – e.g., how long have you been teaching for; how would you describe your experience as a teacher, and, more specifically, teaching sixth-graders?

How well do you know Virginia on a personal level?

How would you describe Virginia as a teacher? What areas of education do you think are most important to her—what, from working with her, would you say are the main things that she TRIES to do?

Are there any discrepancies, differences, etc., between what VA tries to do and what she actually does?

What are her strengths as a teacher? – e.g., what are the BEST things, in your opinion, that she does as a teacher?

What are her weaknesses as a teacher? – e.g., is there anything in particular that she does that you don't agree with, or that you would do differently?

Do any aspects of the curriculum, to your knowledge, go to the wayside because of other, peripheral goals?

What have you learned from VA as a teacher—e.g., when you were working with her partner teacher, were there any specific practices that you picked up from her and incorporated into your own teaching methods?

Would you say the climate of the school—MNMS—is one that fosters/encourages collaboration among teachers? Are there factions, e.g., this person is THIS kind of teacher and that person is THAT kind of teacher?

### **Interview 12/27/2013 with Virginia:**

Tell me about yourself as a teacher, and as a person.

What aspects of education, generally speaking, appeal to you the most? (i.e., what is the “purpose” of education—if there is one, definitive purpose?)

How would you define “civic engagement”?

What aspects of learning are most important to you as a teacher?

How would you describe your mission as a teacher—what things do you want students to leave your class knowing/thinking/feeling?

How do you attend to your mission as a teacher?

What classroom activities are most important to you, and why?

Are there certain parts of the curriculum that you ignore in order to accomplish goals that are more personal/important to you?

Do you think you are able to reach all kids in your class?

Where or who do you look to for support—either when you’re having a hard time or have a new idea you’d like to implement/explore?

When an activity that is important to you is either not possible or not allowed, how do you react?

What advice would you give to other teachers who want to implement student engagement/civic engagement (her words) type of activities but lack either the leadership infrastructure in the school or proper support?

What advice would you give to other teachers who are having a tough time getting their students to be civic-minded (e.g., how do you get them to care?)

**Interview 1/10/14 with Virginia and Madeline (Virginia’s student teacher 2012-2013):**

We left off our last conversation talking about the importance of listening, and you spoke about how important it is, citing David Rockower’s answer to the Shreyer Honors College essay—what do you think is the most pressing problem facing the world today—and he said listening.

Question is multifaceted: When it comes to listening to your students, is this something you have always felt to be important (in your near 30 years of teaching), or is it something that has emerged or developed over time?

Is the ability to really listen to a student something innate or a skill that, like any other, takes time and practice?

How would you define student voice? (If it can be defined—is it a “thing”?)

What role do you think listening plays in student voice?

You mentioned in our last conversation that you like to challenge kids to design or detail expectations for assignments—what do you do when they don’t show interest in doing so?

If your students fail to self-advocate, how do you respond?

You mentioned last conversation that you look at literature—can you provide some examples of articles you’ve read recently (or authors who you look to frequently)?

**Interview 3/13/14 with Brian Ishler, MNMS principal:**

(Introduce concepts discussed in thesis)

Last year I observed Virginia’s service-learning project—to raise awareness of illiteracy in Centre County and money for the Mid State Literacy Council—which you OK’d. I had a lengthy conversation (maybe call it an interview) with Virginia after-the-fact, where she reflected on the project, teaching, and education in general. One thing she said was “You have to let teachers teach to their strengths”—her strength would be enabling these big projects to take place in her class. How do you see your role in enabling teachers to “teach to their strengths”?

Do you actively consider how much autonomy you want teachers in your building to have—in your role as a principal?

Do you encourage autonomy (or veering away from curriculum/engaging in special engagement projects), or allow it when the project is well developed?

To what degree is that autonomy affected by your relationship with or knowledge of the teacher (e.g., how long he or she has been teaching, your opinion/alignment with his or her teaching style)?

What do you think VA's strengths are as a teacher?

What are ways he sees that VA could improve?

In another conversation with VA she mentioned that you (the principal) have received complaints about her, VA, as a teacher. What do you think about the complaints—are they justified?

Would you put your kid in her room? (Why, or why not?)