

How Debate Can Lessen Educational Inequities for Students Across Diverse Socioeconomic Backgrounds

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ABSTRACT

Public schools are failing to provide a sound education for students in low socioeconomic status communities (SES). With the rise of COVID and online schooling, the education quality gap has widened due to disparities in access to resources and funding. With this divide, debate programs can be a viable, inexpensive solution to the education imbalance that is evident across the United States. Debate allows students to use their voice and develop public speaking skills, which support their intellectual ability to become stronger communicators. Public speaking is an invaluable skill that, unfortunately, receives little attention in the public school system. Adding debate to a school's offerings can lead to great improvements for the students who take part. Debate increases the academic ability of students as they learn to research, do document reading, and present their work to a large audience. Through practice, students develop a greater self-esteem and become disciplined in their work. When adapting and crafting their speech techniques, students learn how to be efficient communicators and develop essential tools to be leaders in the workforce. Although education policy makers may doubt the effectiveness of debate programs in reducing the SES achievement gap, research shows that debate programs can give students in underserved communities the opportunity to develop skills that will support their future success.

Introduction

In the American public school system, the futures of millions of students are undervalued. The modern school system is built to benefit students from affluent backgrounds over others who come from more modest means. Among the factors that contribute to the academic achievement of students, school quality and SES stand out as particularly important. Children that are educated in low SES communities develop academic skills at a slower rate than children from average SES communities because their learning system is less prioritized and under-resourced (American Psychological Association, 2022). COVID, in particular, had a direct impact on education quality. As a result of COVID, the communication and academic skills of students have been restricted. As the COVID outbreak is coming to an end, it is time to restructure the normal public school education system.

With the transactional structure of courses and teaching being a prominent component of childhood education, the system gives insufficient attention to a pivotal skill: public speaking. Adding debate programs to low SES schools can help support students in developing practical skills to which they may not have frequent exposure.

Funding for schools has increased over the past decade due to educational budget propositions, like Proposition 98, which were created to specifically benefit low-income schools (Fensterwald, 2022). In 2020 and 2021, Congress passed three COVID relief packages that added up to over \$190 billion for public and private schools (Barnum,

2022). With greater funding, schools, specifically in lower SES districts, have the opportunity to invest in extracurricular programs that positively influence the future of their students. In combination with core classes, debate programs can enhance students' academic, intrapersonal, and leadership skills, which all benefit students' continuing academic and professional careers. As a low-cost enrichment activity, the implementation of more debate programs within the school system is both feasible and practical. Debate provides a different type of education that is not traditionally prioritized in schools. While schools emphasize training in hard skills, debate is a soft skill that directly translates into real world work. Students in debate develop necessary skills that serve as a boost in their school careers, which is particularly important for students from low SES backgrounds. Thus, adding debate into more schools has the potential to reduce the education inequality gap between high and low SES students.

In lower socioeconomic communities, the most subtle improvements in education access and quality can have a drastic effect on academic results. Although a debate program at a well-funded school is likely of higher quality than a debate program at an underfunded school, debate programs at underfunded schools can still produce large academic benefits for students. Through debate, students are introduced to a new, pivotal skill that allows them to succeed in the future: particularly important for students from low SES communities who have more obstacles to overcome to have success. In classroom settings, activities like debate increase “engag[ment]” and “passion” from students, building a stronger educational environment for learning and personal growth (Palmer, 2021). Critics may argue that debate cannot impact the educational achievement gap due to uncontrollable socioeconomic factors; however, this research review looks to explain how debate can decrease educational inequities that have become systemic throughout the United States.

Benefits of Debate

In the following section, I describe the academic, intrapersonal, and leadership benefits of debate. Academic benefits focus on measurable grade level improvements such as reading ability, GPA, grades, and national test scores. Intrapersonal improvements focus on changes in students' self-confidence, mental health, maturity, and engagement with high-risk behaviors. Leadership traits from debate develop public speaking ability, communicative adroitness, and the ability to work with a diverse set of people.

Academic Benefits

The first substantial benefit of debate programs is that it increases the academic performance of students. The core liberal arts programs, common in public education in the US, provide students with a sound education; however, these classes “give [students] extremely low chances to learn critical life skills” because they are “preparing [students] for universities, not jobs or real life” (“School Does Not Prepare Us”, 2020). Communication is an essential tool that is not frequently used in the public school system. The American Association of Colleges and Universities finds “‘good speaking skills’ as the top quality employers are seeking,” but “most schools don’t teach oral communication” (Harper, 2018). When students learn to communicate and function at a higher level, they become more successful and productive in their work.

Of the academic improvements debate fosters in students, reading comprehension ability directly correlates with time allocated for debate research. According to the Stanford National Forensic Institute, the research skills required to be a participant in debate grows students' reading and analysis capabilities (SNFI, 2022). Through the type of reading required for debate preparation, students learn to turn facts into nuanced arguments, a critical skill not practiced in the modern school system. The reality is that “students who cannot read proficiently are especially unlikely to obtain a post-secondary degree” (Casey, 2010). In the rising competitive market to both attend college and find entry level jobs in the workforce, it is paramount that students are provided essential opportunities to read and

engage with complex materials, as they do in programs like debate. As students increase their commitment and preparation for debate tournaments, they, in turn, become stronger readers.

A 2005 study of Providence, Rhode Island public schools examined the correlation between debate participation and reading ability. After only a year, students who consistently participated in debate activities finished a basic reading comprehension test 33% faster than the group that participated in no debate activities (Snider, n.d.). After two years, debate participants had gained an additional advantage: improving their reading abilities by an additional 16.6%, while the other group's reading comprehension score declined (Snider, n.d.). These statistics support the idea that debate creates a substantial improvement in reading ability. Through debate, students' reading skills can advance faster than those of their peers. Because debate programs often have year round activities, debate students benefit from the consistency of practicing these academic skills. Debate students learn to synthesize large bodies of complex information and make it meaningful. Doing so requires highly developed analytical skills.

The academic benefits of debate extend beyond reading comprehension. Rowland Hall finds that students can improve up to 25% on their reading capabilities, and with consistent reading, debate participants become comfortable with new concepts such as culture, economics, philosophy, and politics (The Benefits of Debate, n.d.). Students in debate build a well-rounded education of how the different central structures of human society all connect. These improvements are not as efficient in other academic courses.

With their advanced literacy, students who take part in debate have been shown to be more successful on academic examinations. The SNFI finds that the critical reading skills developed by debaters help improve their reading scores on national standardized tests such as the ACT and SAT. On average, debaters score higher on national test exams than non-debate students. In a study conducted in Minnesota in 2005, researchers tested the statistical significance of debate participation on GPA scores; research found that the gross average of debaters' 2006 GPA was 2.97, compared to 2.59 among the non-participant group (Snider, n.d.). The large difference between the GPA scoring demonstrates how debate can significantly increase academic performance. A GPA boost of 0.4 points can make a substantive difference in a student's trajectory. A higher GPA increases a student's competitiveness when applying for college. If debate can increase college acceptance for students from low SES backgrounds, then all schools would benefit from establishing a debate program. This change can help decrease the education inequality gap by providing students of lower SES the ability to strengthen their academic scores, despite their circumstances. Snider's research further found that after the summer, returning debaters averaged a 0.13 increase in their GPA from the previous year, while returning non-debaters members lost an average of 0.10 points (Snider, n.d.). Debate students are at less risk of falling behind in school in comparison to their peers because the year-around activity instills consistent educational improvement within students.

Along with increased academic scores, debate can lead to increased matriculation of participants. In a study comparing the graduation rates of debaters to those of non-debaters in the Chicago Public School System from 1997 to 2006, specifically African American males, it was found that there was a rise in graduation rates for debate students. While only 50% of non-debaters graduated, over 75% of debaters did (Mezuk, 2009). Mezuk also found that debate participants are 70% more likely to graduate and three times less likely to drop out of school. Similarly, the American Debate League finds that while only 50% of high school students in urban schools graduate, 90% of urban high school debaters graduate (ADL, 2022). With the increased academic engagement that accompanies participation in debate, students are more likely to experience the motivation necessary to perform at high levels in the classroom. In lower SES communities like the one in which the Mezuk study was situated, graduation rates play a large role in the long-term success a student may have. By significantly increasing graduation rates, debate can enhance students' opportunity to attend college.

Increased engagement in school can also nurture students' passion for learning. In a study of Minnesota public schools, over 80% of debaters consistently attended class as opposed to only 49% of non-debate students (Snider, n.d.). Although many external factors affect a student's ability to attend class, it is possible that the higher rates of school attendance among debate students may correlate with their increased engagement in their academics.

By the end of the first year of debate, 100% of debaters in the study reported an increased interest in their classes, underscoring the academic curiosity that debate nurtures in students.

In addition to empirical research that supports the academic benefits of debate, anecdotal evidence from academic professionals supports it as well. Former US Secretary of Education Arne Duncan believes debate is a “great equalizer” for minority achievement from low-income regions. He claimed that “the experience of competing on a debate team boosts your college readiness—and your chance to succeed in life” (The Power of Debate, 2012). Duncan’s comments support the idea that debate produces dynamic students who are proficient in critical thinking, communication, collaboration, creativity, and civic awareness. In debate programs, students use critical thinking to create strong, compelling arguments and build a case. They use communication and collaborative skills during debate rounds to convince the judge of their arguments. Debaters use their creativity to win rounds, learning to be composed and efficient to build strong refutations under the pressurized conditions of a round. Debaters “challenge themselves” through research and become culturally competent, learning about international relations and how culture, politics, and the economy all work together (“Why do Research,” n.d.). In total, students emerge with a diverse group of practical skills when participating in debate. The combination of skills that debate fosters creates students with great potential to succeed.

Beyond school, debate translates to real world use in several domains. Former South African President Nelson Mandela believes that “a good leader can engage in a debate ... knowing that at the end he and the other side must be closer, and thus emerge stronger.” On his debate team, Mandela was able to use his development of debate principles to advocate for racial equity. Because debate often requires participants to discuss polarized topics, the ability to cooperate while in argumentation is a skill that Mandela progressed in debate and applied to changing the social structure of South Africa. Debaters have come from other prestigious industries as well. In an interview with the National Speech and Debate Association, actor Josh Gad insists that debate “changed his life” and gave him the skills to be a great professional actor (NSDA, 2018). Testimonials from former debate participants who have found mass success in various industries demonstrates the wide impact debate can have on youth development. These testimonials also show how debate can promote success in various industries. Regardless of the industry, debate sets students up for success in the workforce, making the case for more debate programs within the United States.

Intrapersonal Benefits

Although the substantial academic benefits of debate are an important benefit for students, the intrapersonal advantages that debate builds are arguably even more vital in the youth today. In the current social climate, students across the country are experiencing higher levels of depression and anxiety than seen before, mainly due to the rise of social media. Indeed, “young adults with high social media use seem to feel more socially isolated” and often are found comparing themselves to the lives of others on the internet (Primack, 2017). Considering over 81% of teens in the US use social media, there is a national problem with youth anxiety and depression that is built from negative online experiences (Smith, 2017). In addition to the mental health consequences of social media use, COVID-19 created a multiyear period where students became further isolated from their peers and lost physical contact with the world. Younger students are missing the opportunity to learn necessary social skills such as how to make friends and interact with people who they may not know. Students need activities like debate that boost confidence and self-esteem.

Involvement in debate can help students increase their confidence. The daunting prospect of speaking in front of a crowd for a long period of time is something that becomes increasingly easier through practice. Over time, debate students master public speaking and begin to trust themselves and their intellect. The SNFL finds that debate directly builds confidence in youth through confronting the common fears of public speaking. As a result, “debate increases overall confidence and public speaking abilities” while improving “students’ ability to solve problems” (Mbonyinshuti, 2021). Attributes like confidence and problem solving ability are skills that can help debate students

stand out as they enter the workforce. Both professionals and former participants agree that the confidence boost from debate is necessary in the modern school era. With the increased confidence, students of debate can also become happier and have greater mental health. A study of students in Minneapolis public schools found that debaters averaged a 15% higher self-esteem score than the comparison group in a test.

Many of the high-risk behaviors students often find themselves taking part in can result from having a limited perspective. Of the Minneapolis urban debate league debaters, none were likely to engage in negative risk behaviors such drug use, early pregnancy, and alcohol. Taken together, this research indicates that debate is a protective factor against high risk behavior in students. Many “[high-risk] students” are “more likely to earn good grades, feel connected with their communities, and engage in healthy physical activities as they participate in more activities outside the school day” (Vermont Youth Risk Behavior Survey, 2019). Debate students are “less likely to engage in aggressive behavior such as carrying weapons and bullying, use and abuse drugs and alcohol, and attempt suicide” because they tend to develop discipline and focus on their academics (Vermont Youth Risk Behavior Survey, 2019).

Additionally, researchers found that “adolescents from families with lower SES have a greater propensity for substance abuse, overeating, unsafe sex, violating social rules, and other risk-taking behaviors” (Zhu, 2021). In lower SES communities, debate can assist in the battle to protect students from taking part in criminal and other suboptimal activities. Thus, implementing a program like debate can protect students while providing an educational benefit.

In general, high school and middle school students lack global perspective and struggle to look outside of themselves. As this is a time when they are “forming their own unique identity,” it is “normal for teenagers to be self-centered” (Self-Absorbed Teen, 2022). According to the SNFL, debate builds maturity in students by supporting their development of a global perspective and expanding their cultural competency. Hall found that debate students are ahead of their years since they learn crucial world issues at such young ages (The Benefits of Debate, n.d.). Much of the debate research students do requires them to understand the relations of diverse groups of people, topics, and powers. Debate topics center on politics, social status, geography, sports, education, and more. Exposure to a diverse set of topics of study helps students develop a global perspective and understand diplomatic relations. The work-ethic that debate creates can support determined students who desire to succeed. With incentives like awards at tournaments, students are encouraged to dive deep into their research material and truly understand the global problems that are discussed. The National Association of Urban Debate Leagues (NAUDL) stated that debate can directly decrease hazardous activity rates amongst teenagers; moreover, debate establishes a mature student population that disengages from harmful activities and focuses on academics.

The Annenberg Institute of Brown University studied the relations between college preparation and students’ backgrounds. The study found that in low-income areas, only 60% of students nationally graduate on average. Only around 50% of African-American and Hispanic students graduate. Debate may provide a particular benefit for communities with high percentages of ethnic minorities because it can provide racially minoritized students the opportunity to develop skills that will support their future success and ability to potentially improve their communities. Debate has the potential to address low graduation rates and high-risk behaviors in low-income neighborhoods. By implementing debate programs in lower SES neighborhoods, schools may better position the students of the next generation to climb the SES ladder and build generational wealth.

Leadership Benefits

Finally, debate can help create the next generation of leaders, and can alter the demographic for the better. A large part of leadership is composure. Debate students are required to have composure to be efficient in time sensitive situations. The students learn to handle and coexist with pressure: a real world problem that students should learn earlier rather than later. To win a debate, one must find a solution to the problem and convince the judge to agree. In the core liberal arts classes, (language, history, science, and math) students are trained to work in a constant cycle. Schools “teach students to memorize information,” not how to use it (School Does Not Prepare Us, 2020) In a way,

the public school system creates students who are trained to be standard employees: completing their assigned tasks. Debate students build a different skill, learning to be leaders who have to innovate. In debate, there is always a problem, and the student who can adjust the best to solve the problem wins. This translates far better into a real world setting where leaders must find a solution. “Speech and debate participants reap” the benefit of a “growth in ... leadership skills” (Alme and Atchen, 2015). By training students to find creative solutions to their problems, as opposed to a repetitive course load, students develop leadership traits. A study from Michigan State University states that to be a true leader “you have to communicate effectively” (Stewart, 2016). Stewart realized that “participating in public speaking activities helps young people learn” valuable “life skills: organizing ideas, flexibility in adapting information to different audiences, confidence in sharing their ideas, evaluating their work and setting goals for improvement.”

Involvement in debate can lead students to finding their voice and using that ability to help others. Robert Sher, former debater and current entrepreneur, attributes his personal success to debate. He believes the necessary qualities to succeed in the workforce are parallel to those in debate. He identifies debate students as “leaders” and as executives who are built to lead the professional world. Of the many skills necessary to be a leader, Forbes ranks communication as the second most important soft skill to succeed in the workforce (Sher, 2014). The communicative adroitness (the ability to communicate with a variety of people) of debate students allows them to persuade and connect to an audience. This influential capability is a useful tool for debate students to use as leaders to mobilize others and to build support for their ideas.

A large part of the impact leaders can have is through their charisma and courage to use their voice. Debaters learn at an early age how to connect to audience members. Debaters learn to captivate the masses and encourage judges to support their plans. Without a voice, it is difficult for one to lead. Debaters rarely have this issue as they learn to speak forcefully, with a sense of composure. One’s speaking style is critical in their ability to lead. Debaters learn to use diverse speaking styles to appeal to different audiences. In a world where emotional intelligence (EQ) is becoming more vital than IQ to be successful, students who learn to convince different judges also have the ability to lead and cooperate with different types of people (Chancellor, 2022). This is a skill of flexibility that is, once again, not trained in the modern school system. To take charge and lead the future, the school systems should build debate programs and develop students built to persuade, connect, and lead the world into the future.

With the collection of intellect, courage, and leadership qualities, debate can generate a more politically involved next generation. The current political climate is one that is polarized and filled with voters who vote based on party affiliation, not the candidate. Debaters research the political atmosphere for the majority of their topics; thus, they understand candidates for their values and morals rather than their affiliation. With the implementation of debate programs, society can help foster a new voting demographic that upholds the true values of a democratic voting system. The constitution declares that “we the people” control the government, and it is up to the American demographic to vote and build a proper democratic nation that represents and respects the views of every citizen (The Constitution, 1787). This new group can advocate for proper representation under the law and begin a new era where the citizens are, once again, in control of the government.

When looking at the core leadership positions in the workforce, many members come from a debate background. For example, in the United States Government, over 60% of congressional representatives and over 33% of the Supreme Court took part in debate (SNFI, 2022). It is evident that to lead the nation, and or influence it, a debate education background is the first step to making that goal a possibility.

The academic and intrapersonal benefits that debate builds in students gives them the foundation to be successful in the world. When leadership traits are added to those abilities, it builds students who are capable to lead and create positive change in the future.

Critiques

Inevitably, there are concerns surrounding the direct push for additional debate programs. Critiques of adding debate programs into the school system arise from doubts that the economic investment is worth the academic output. Parents fear that adding a strenuous extracurricular like debate into a young student's schedule makes them too busy. Academic research against debate stems from the idea that it promotes confrontation among the youth, leads to negative feelings, and a loss of self-esteem (Gordon, 2020). While these arguments are fair, this research can justify that the educational benefits outweigh any potential harm that a debate program creates.

The main questions that circulate around the activity are its ability to benefit all students, despite their circumstances, and how it, alone, can alter the education that students receive in the status quo. In response to the doubts around debate, Sam Greenland, current president of the World Universities Debating Council, conducted a study in 2010 in Hong Kong. He examined the impacts of debate on students of different SES, genders, and cultures. He found that debate education ameliorated every student: regardless of the pre-existing variables. In regards to SES, Greenland found that debate has positive effects on, specifically, students in disadvantaged communities. For gender, Greenland explained that skill enhancements were equal for both male and female students. It is true that there is little opposition to either of these contentions, but there is also a misunderstood narrative that cultural diversity harms the benefits of debate. While the practicality of implementing debate programs is there, they are actually economically feasible. Even though all of the activities were conducted in English, including speaking, any potential language barrier did not impact the amount of debating expertise developed.

Despite the wave of school funding from COVID, some schools look to allocate that funding to maintain their current system. Nonetheless, when comparing the cost of running a debate program in addition to the core liberal arts programs, the addition makes financial sense. The cost of running a debate program is \$800 to \$1,300 annually (DebateUs, 2021). Considering the substantial benefits, this addition of debate to public school offerings helps students in a variety of ways, from increasing students' GPA to helping them understand international relations. While the quality of the programs in some communities may not be as high as those in higher income regions, the activity, itself, has a clear academic impact on the participating students.

Debate can offer students from more modest socioeconomic backgrounds the ability to develop skills vital to their future success. If debate programs are expanded and practiced throughout the school system, students may see positive changes in their academic ability, mental health, cultural competency, and leadership ability. As a result, they can learn more about the world, and how they operate within it. Ultimately, debate programs have the potential to create the leaders of the next generation; schools must seriously consider implementing these programs.

Conclusion

Overall, the benefits that debate provides students justifies the need for more programs. The studies show that debate has a large impact beyond the classroom and can benefit students well into their adult lives. The literature highlights three main impacts of a debate program on a student: increasing their academic ability, intrapersonal understanding, and leadership skills. With a debate education, Generation Z will be better suited to lead the world and use their knowledge to create positive change. Ultimately, this review underscores the importance that debate can have on one's life. In the future, more academic research should engage with this topic. Future research may focus on exploring how debate directly contributes to economic success in the workforce. If empirical evidence can link debate participation to future earnings, proponents of a debate education can make a more compelling argument to establish a program within their school.

With greater national funding, there are greater opportunities to solve the everlasting problem of poor schooling in low SES communities. This research review demonstrates how the educational benefits of debate go beyond academics. Education policymakers and stakeholders should recognize that debate offers necessary skills to the student generation that other classes do not provide. Debate programs can help minimize the education inequalities and

struggles students face in low SES regions. Nonetheless, nothing will change until the education policy makers take action and fight for the future of America's youth.

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