

# Confronting Power: Success Isn't Everything—But It's Not Nothing Either

A Response to: “Beyond the Catch-22 of School-Based Social Action Programs: Toward a More Pragmatic Approach for Dealing with Power”

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## ABSTRACT

Fehrman and Schutz contend that the fine balance between having students experience real-world obstacles to social change and having them learn how to navigate around those obstacles can be achieved by having adults both pre-select community action projects that are both possible and meaningful to ensure a modicum of success, and jump in and redirect wayward efforts when necessary to get them back on a trajectory aimed at a positive outcome. I agree. I also suggest that other factors are significant as well, namely the purposeful nurturing of a sense of community and hopefulness. Finally, I point out that adult intervention and democratic teaching are in no way mutually exclusive, especially by any standard John Dewey might have suggested.

*You can try and change things, but basically it will just make you feel bad for trying. They didn't even want to hear what I was saying. They don't care.*

*They ain't gonna let us paint in the city anywhere, no way! Those people act like we're all thugs.*

**T**HE FIRST QUOTATION comes from a participant in a California program we studied more than a decade ago (Kahne & Westheimer, 2006). The second is from a student in the study Darwyn Fehrman and Aaron Schutz write about in “Beyond the Catch-22 of School-Based Social Action Programs” (2011). Hopeless? No. A sign of the futility of engaging students in community-based projects that confront real-world obstacles and rub up against entrenched political interests or opponents in powerful positions? Hardly. Fehrman and Schutz's student in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, at the school they call Social Action Charter High School (SACHS), continues this way: “We would be better off doing this a different way than trying to work with these folks,” at which point one of his peers chimes in with an idea: “Maybe we can find someone cool to let us do [the mural] on their building” (p. 7). The anger and frustration that the SACHS students experience is quickly displaced by resilience and the desire to overcome, or at least work around, the obstacle in order to

achieve success. And succeed they do. Another student recalls that while the previous year during a similar project they just “sat around and talked about [community] problems,” this year they “took a stand” by putting those problems on public display in their artistic mural for everyone in the community to see (p. 8).

Beyond the 10 years or so that divide Fehrman and Schutz's research from ours, what separates the two groups of students of community action—one from California, the other from Wisconsin? Why does the former end up with low self-efficacy scores and shy away from future community work while the latter seems eager to fight on? Fehrman and Schutz contend that they've developed a strategy for “small wins” and structured successes that result in a fine balance between having students experience real-world obstacles to social change and having them learn how to navigate around those obstacles. The students, they explain, “had a relatively authentic experience of encountering power, and they were able to accomplish something that felt important to

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them without needing to overcome this power” (p. 8). In other words, Fehrman and Schutz conclude, they got to have their cake and eat it too—they confronted and learned about power interests in the community and they experienced success and a sense of efficacy.

The salient feature of the program that allowed feelings of pride and commitment to flourish, the authors argue, is the strategic intervention of experienced adults to (a) preselect community action projects that are both possible and meaningful, to ensure a modicum of success for the students, and (b) jump in and redirect wayward efforts when necessary to get students back on a trajectory aimed at a positive outcome. These two strategies represent program features that are rightfully showcased in their research and are worthy of serious consideration by any group hoping to accomplish similar ends.

### **Fehrman and Schutz’s Critical Elements for Youth Engagement in Social Justice**

The program approach that Fehrman and Schutz describe makes perfect sense. Not enough has changed since we conducted our earlier research (Kahne & Westheimer, 2006). At that point, we cited a survey of youths ages 15 to 24, conducted by the National Association of Secretaries of State (1999), which showed that two thirds of young people agreed that, “our generation has an important voice, but no one seems to hear it” (p. 22). And those youths who were least confident in their voice being heard and who least trusted politicians and other government officials were also the least likely to vote, to believe that government can affect their lives, or to pay attention to politics. After years of interventions designed to give students confidence in their ability to make a difference through service-learning and other school-based programs, our work revealed a surprising outcome: although programs that ensured students successfully accomplished tasks such as cleaning up a local park did increase students’ sense of efficacy, those that did not ensure success also had value.

We reported that certain kinds of constraints, although frustrating, sometimes allowed students to learn about interest-group influences, power dynamics, and technical challenges that inform political action and change. For example, one student from our study, Tony, observed that “We really had no clue that so many people would be *against* a [publicly funded] health center, but when we started to see where people stood on this, it seemed like, well those who [had] nothing [to gain], they were the ones who didn’t want it.” When asked what it would take to get a women’s health center built, Kira responded, “You’d have to change a lot of people’s minds about stuff and organize. . . . You’d have to fight for it.” (Kahne & Westheimer, 2006, p. 5). In other words, even when students did not succeed at ambitious, social justice-oriented tasks, they sometimes gained an understanding of power relations, obstacles to change, and resistance that students working on simpler and less contentious projects did not.

Even more salient, we found that eliminating all the frustrating obstacles that community work can entail tends to reinforce conservative political assumptions—that if individual citizens would just help out where help is needed, these acts of kindness

and charity (multiplied across a citizenry) will transform society and offer redress for complex social problems.

But as Fehrman and Schutz point out, we also found that many students engaged in the challenging justice-oriented work became dispirited and reported being less likely to engage in future community work. The program at SACHS 10 years later succeeded at allowing incremental (and therefore doable) successes along the path to larger efforts at addressing social injustices. The mural project, for example, allowed the students to explore community needs (including their structural or institutional origins), encounter powerful resistance to even a mostly innocuous effort to educate the community about those needs, and finally, to succeed in mounting a public exhibition of their social-action mural. This is a significant and important contribution to the field and program developers could gain a great deal by considering the lessons Fehrman and Schutz derive from their experiences as educators, organizers, and community activists.

Before I turn to the other aspects of their program that I believe contributed to its success, I want to comment on what the authors deem as *counterintuitive* adult intervention. They—like many program developers—worry that adult interference somehow makes the program experience less “democratic.” I do not think so. I recognize the common assumption: to teach democratic engagement, you must model a democracy by allowing the children to make all decisions for themselves. It is true, of course, that context matters, that it is not just the content of what we teach that is important but also how we teach and the condition of the surrounding environment in which we teach. But the insistence that only by modeling democracy in the classroom and school can we teach any valuable lessons about what it means to be a good democratic citizen is false. The kind of teaching for democracy and civic engagement pursued in schools varies at least as much as the many visions of what constitutes “good” actions. There is no one pedagogy matched inextricably to certain kinds of educational outcomes.

Indeed, John Dewey himself broke ranks with the Progressive Education Association that he had founded because of the dogmatic homage to “child-centered” pedagogy that began to grip the organization. In *Experience and Education*, he wrote passionately that the teacher “is responsible for [selecting activities] which lend themselves to social organization, an organization in which all individuals have an opportunity to contribute something” (1916/1997, p. 56). Engaging students in well-crafted choices is a helpful pedagogy for teaching democratic participation, but eliminating the role of adults in ensuring the lessons proceed in a productive manner is unwarranted. The authors need not worry about a contradiction.

I should point out that the reverse is true as well. There have been many successful efforts throughout history in teaching profoundly nondemocratic lessons through what appeared to be democratic means. Most of us associate fascism with goose-stepping soldiers marching on order from above. But one need only examine the methods of the Hitler Youth brigades to note the “progressive” aspects of their pedagogy—inclusive (within their group, at least), community oriented, highly social, collective, and

cooperative (Sunker & Otto, 1997). The medium does not always make the message.

## Beyond Small Wins

Although Fehrman and Schutz highlight important program strategies that balance justice-oriented projects with winnable intermediate goals, I suspect these strategies compose only part of the picture. A combination of other factors are at play in the mural program they describe, and, by extension, in many other similarly directed social action programs in schools and community-based youth organizations. At least two program features are as likely to contribute to the fine balance between efficacy and the pursuit of complex social justice issues as are the strategic adult interventions that Fehrman and Schutz describe. Beyond the small wins the authors discuss, programs often aim to foster (a) a community of like-minded peers and (b) an enduring sense of hopefulness. These goals—community and hopefulness—are both contributors to and beneficiaries of the twin curricular goals of small wins and engagement with root causes and structural injustices.

### CULTIVATING COMMUNITY

Cultivating commitments to social justice requires associating with others who recognize and reinforce the importance of these priorities. These connections are especially important in a culture that does little to reinforce the value of civic participation. Fehrman and Schutz allude to the importance of these connections, and I suspect the resulting communal attachments are as important as the incremental successes crafted by attentive adults. Indeed, the motivation that derives from the successes in this and similar programs seems to come as much from the shared “glory” as from the success itself. It’s the joy of engaging with others on a collective project of significance and worth.

These connections are what keep individuals within a community moving forward in the face of failure or disappointment. Like a theater group putting on a play or a sports team working toward a competition, communities of civic actors bring people together around a common sense of purpose. Instead of performing Hamlet or winning a pennant, these communities focus on social, political, or economic goals—securing fair wages for workers, protecting the environment, equalizing provision of social services, and so on. Although I have not seen enough of the qualitative data from the Fehrman and Schutz study, it does become clear from the authors’ retelling that community connections were strong for this group of youths.

Moreover, individual actions within civically engaged communities stem as much from identification with the community as they do from personal decisions repeated for each opportunity for engagement. This principle can be seen most strikingly in interviews by Michael Gross (1997) with 174 rescuers in France and Holland who helped hide Jewish families during World War II at great personal risk. Gross found that supportive social networks and strong identification with other rescuers proved a more significant factor than did personal motivations or higher or lower levels of moral reasoning as determined by Kohlberg’s hierarchical model. For the most part, these people did not rescue Jews because

each weighed the alternatives and made a reasoned moral decision that it was the right thing to do. They rescued Jews because, as many reported, they had no choice. Their identity as responsible civic actors within a community of civically engaged peers compelled them to act despite enormous uncertainty and danger.

### HOPEFULNESS

A second feature of successful programs is deeply intertwined with the collective identity I just described and is acknowledged in Fehrman and Schutz’s article. The reason to instill small wins is to nurture a sense of hope even when the task at hand may seem insurmountable. Many scholars have written about the importance of hope, but in programmatic terms, activities that nurture a sense of hopefulness are critical to the task of engaging young people in seeking solutions to some of society’s more intractable and complex social, political, and economic problems. Hope could easily be considered a dimension of civic identity as described above; that is, a successful civic actor is one who nurtures in himself or herself a sense of the possible.

Hope requires, as the late historian Howard Zinn so eloquently wrote, the ability “to hold out, even in times of pessimism, the possibility of surprise” (2010, p. 634). Small wins, to be sure, help to nurture this sense of the possible. But equally important is the development of the kind of confidence that comes from one’s civic identity, a confidence that you are engaged in the right kind of struggle. Vaclav Havel drew a distinction between hope and optimism when he wrote that “hope is not the same [as] willingness to invest in enterprises that are obviously headed for early success, but rather an ability to work for something because it is good . . . Hope . . . is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out” (2004, p. 82). I suspect that this kind of hope is part of not only the SACHS program described by Fehrman and Schutz but also of many other like-minded programs.

The singer-songwriter-activist Holly Near expressed this artfully in her anthem to the many social change movements that have existed for as long as there has been injustice. She captures poetically the message that Fehrman, Schutz, and other educators and social change advocates work tirelessly to convey to young people: Change does not always happen at broadband speeds, but knowing one is part of a timeless march toward justice makes much of what we do worthwhile. In her song “The Great Peace March,” Near sings:

*Believe it or not,  
as daring as it may seem,  
it is not an empty dream:  
To walk in a powerful path  
Neither the first nor the last*

A clear goal of social action programs everywhere should be this: Develop in our young adults the certainty that—whether in the face of successes or of setbacks—they are walking a powerful and worthwhile path toward justice.

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