

# Educating for a Critical Democracy

## Civic Participation Reimagined in the Council of Youth Research

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### ABSTRACT

This article explores civic learning, civic participation, and the development of civic agency within the Council of Youth Research (the Council), a program that engages high school students in youth participatory action research projects that challenge school inequalities and mobilize others in pursuit of educational justice. We critique the neoliberal view of democracy that dominates existing research, policy, and practice around urban school reform and civic education and instead turn to evidence from social movements and critical social theory as a foundation for a reimagined, robust vision of critical democracy. Through our analysis of the activities that the Council students engaged in during and after a five-week summer seminar, we offer findings about the kinds of learning and pedagogy that characterize a critical democratic space. We discuss how students and teachers learn through dialogue that characterizes them as public intellectuals; we explore how students develop new forms of civic participation through their engagement with digital, participatory media and interactive presentations to community stakeholders; and we document the developing sense of agency that students experience as a result of these authentic learning opportunities. We conclude by highlighting the impacts of this program and its potential to create a new paradigm for civic life and civic education.

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**T**HIRTY YOUTH FROM Los Angeles public high schools sit in the empty chamber of the California State Senate. The California State Capitol is a marvelous building and, during a tour of the facilities, students comment on the spaciousness of the chambers, the ornate design, and the exquisite attention to detail. The students are struck by the expense that has been put into this building, a public edifice, as their schools are laying off teachers due to budget difficulties. What strikes the students most, however, is the lack of activity in the chambers, given that it is 10:00 a.m. on a weekday and the state is 30 days and counting without a budget. The Council of Youth Research (the Council) has traveled to Sacramento during a week that the California State legislature has given itself a vacation, even though no budget has passed and each day without a budget costs the students and the taxpayers of California an additional \$50 million. The budget clock outside of the governor's office reminds us that this figure exceeded a billion dollars upon our arrival.

The students are visiting the Capitol for two days as part of their participatory action research projects, during which time they plan to interview, among others, the state superintendent of

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instruction, the mayor of Sacramento, and several staffers of assembly representatives and state senators. On the eight-hour bus ride from Los Angeles, students worked with their research teams to familiarize themselves with the conditions of California schools in the ten years following the *Williams v. California* (2004) class action lawsuit, better understand the issues surrounding the current budget crisis, and prepare questions for the power brokers they would encounter. The night prior, these same students stayed up until midnight preparing for the day's events. They have a sophisticated understanding of the workings of California's state government. They know who their representatives are in the state assembly and state senate. They know who runs the schools. They are aware of the major issues between the governor and the state legislature that are preventing the budget from being passed. And, more than having this knowledge, they are poised to take action based upon that knowledge, including sharing research with youth in their schools and neighborhoods.

It strikes us, as researchers and educators involved with the Council, that our students have learned a great deal more about politics and government through their research than through any traditional lessons in civic education that they have experienced in school. Even more important, they have taken a greater interest in engaging with local, state, and federal politics through their authentic participation in an initiative dedicated to understanding and intervening in key educational issues that affect youth today. In this article, we discuss the council in the context of a theory of critical democracy that has implications for civic engagement, civic education, and educational reform. According to our assessment of today's educational climate, much education policy and practice in urban schools today is fostering pervasive civic disengagement, and we explore in these pages a program that seeks to engage youth differently in preparation for a more robust civic life.

## The Problem

Exhaustively documented inequalities in civic knowledge based on race and class in the public education system have prompted some scholars to declare that our country is facing not only an academic achievement gap but a "civic achievement gap" (Levinson, 2007). Data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) civic test shows that at all tested grade levels (fourth, eighth, and twelfth), low-income, African American, and Latino/a students receive lower scores than middle-class, White, and Asian students (Lutkus, Weiss, Campbell, Mazzeo, & Lazer, 1999). The 2001 International Education Association (IEA) Civic Education Study showed similar gaps among American ninth graders (Baldi, Perie, Skidmore, Greenberg, & Hahn, 2001). Even more troubling, research has revealed persistent disparities between the civic and political engagement, in areas such as volunteering and community activities, of low-income youth and youth of color and their more affluent White peers (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996; Foster-Bey, 2008).

It is critically important that we acknowledge the social and educational context in which inequalities of civic knowledge and engagement occur so that we can shift from criticizing the presumed deficits of individual schools and students from specific

racial groups to analyzing the problematic assumptions in curriculum, pedagogy, and policy that structure success and failure.

Fine, Burns, Payne, and Torre (2004), through interviews with urban youth of color, argued that the longer students attend urban schools that suffer from structural deficits, including overcrowding, lack of quality teachers, and crumbling facilities, the more civically alienated they become. As they expressed poignantly:

*Schools of poverty and alienation transform engaged and enthused youth into young women and men who believe that the nation, adults and the public sphere have abandoned and betrayed them in the denial of quality education, democracy and the promise of equality.*  
(p. 2194)

In addition to failing students through structural inequalities, schools serving low-income minority youth also fail to provide them with the curricular learning experiences necessary to promote civic engagement (Kahne & Middaugh (2008). Due to the lack of school and societal resources, Fine et al. (2004) and Kahne and Middaugh argue that, rather than a civic achievement gap, students experience a civic "opportunity gap."

We argue that this opportunity gap is widening through the influence of neoliberal ideology upon schooling—a set of ideas that suppresses dialogue about democracy through a focus on standardization and economic competitiveness. Through an analysis of our data, as well as theories of democracy, schooling, and education, this work aims to present an alternative vision of civic education, one that we call *education for critical civic agency*. This term marks an important theoretical shift from viewing quality teaching and learning as practices that prepare students to succeed economically to viewing them as practices that prepare students to become self-actualized and critically empowered civic agents.

## Research Questions

We explore education for critical civic agency through the analysis of a specific learning community called the Council of Youth Research that seeks to reposition high school students and teachers in city schools as public intellectuals and civic leaders. For the past 12 years, the Council has operated upon a theoretical foundation that views education as a tool for democracy and transformation (Dewey, 1903; Freire, 1970), learning through cultural modeling (Lee, 2007) and firsthand participation (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Lawy & Biesta, 2007), and collaborative youth participatory action research (Camarrota & Fine, 2008; McIntyre, 2000; Morrell, 2004).

Through a close analysis of the way that students are positioned within the Council and the forms of learning that they encounter, this study seeks to provide a new rationale for critical civic agency. The questions that we address in this article include: What sorts of learning opportunities empower students to become critical civic agents? What theories of democracy inform these learning opportunities? How does the Council of Youth Research strive to embody a critical democratic practice?

In order to more fully enact our understanding of the democratic purposes of schooling, it is first necessary to analyze democracy as it is being conceptualized in today's neoliberal educational climate. We must further articulate ways in which existing conceptions of democracy insufficiently address the needs of marginalized and oppressed communities. With this in mind, we offer an alternative vision of democracy that is based in critical understandings of civic learning and identity. This study, through focusing on the work of the council, serves as an example of the sorts of learning opportunities that can be created when educators truly work to act out democratic principles in both theory and practice while defining what we have come to term *critical civic agency*.

### **Neoliberal Civic Learning and Identity**

More and more, democracy is being conceptualized in our public institutions through the lens of neoliberal ideology. Neoliberalism has become the dominant political discourse in America over the past several decades, bringing with it a focus on deregulation, economic competitiveness, and globalization; as a result, the free market has supplanted social democratic policies as a driving force in many areas of public life (Harvey, 2005). Neoliberalism operates on the principle that citizens are best served economically and socially through limited government intervention in their lives and defines freedom and democracy in economic terms as the right of individuals to make entrepreneurial decisions within markets, including the market of education (Foucault, 1979).

Hursh (2007) argued that neoliberal ideas have manifested themselves in education policy from the publication of *A Nation at Risk* (1983) through *No Child Left Behind* (2001) as a result of discourse connecting schooling to economic success (or failure) and using globalization as a rationale for implementing reforms focusing on job skills and the basics. This ideological context has huge ramifications for how civic education is conceptualized in school and classroom practices. In terms of civic, the focus on basic skills in a test-driven atmosphere eliminates opportunities for any explicit instruction about democracy. And indeed, an analysis of the current landscape of civic education across most states reveals that citizenship is not being treated as a priority in our schools. A 2003 report from the Albert Shanker Institute indicated that the architects of state civic standards failed to distinguish between “the important and the unimportant,” resulting in “long, unprioritized lists of topics, subtopics, and skills” (Gagnon, 2003, p. 18). The report also indicated that within a climate of intense standardized testing, the long lists of standards do not give social studies teachers (those most often solely responsible for civic education instruction) the time to employ best practices such as “group projects, simulations, debates, seminars, and exhibits” (p. 18). The report concluded that only 13 states possess standards that provide students with a “strong civic core” (p. 23). Another report, released in 2004 by the Education Commission of the States, analyzed data from the IEA Civic Education Study, which synthesized the civic standards from 45 states, to conclude that current standards too often offer “encyclopedic” (Torney-Purta & Vermeer, 2004, p. 14) coverage of details about government structures and focus on patriotic, triumphalist rhetoric that ignore the experiences of low-income

communities and communities of color. As such, the report argued that the many lists produced by states of “requirements, competencies, and standards relating to citizenship education” have “little meaning to students” and “do not connect to their own identities as citizens” (p. 14).

Banks (2008) proposed that any attempts at imposing a thin, universal conception of citizenship upon all citizens will always end up marginalizing minority group members because we live in a stratified society in which those in power define and normalize views of citizenship to support their own interests. Young (1989) also argued that citizenship is impeded by a universal view that asks people to “leave behind the perceptions they derive from their particular experience and social position” (p. 274). Banks and Young called instead for a differentiated idea of citizenship that allows for identity or interest groups to conceptualize a relationship with America in unique and critical ways.

### **Critical Civic Learning and Identity**

A growing number of scholars are seeking to recast civic learning and identity in ways that can help to shift focus from global economic competitiveness to collective democratic life. Lawy and Biesta (2007) argued that “citizenry is not a status or possession, nor is it the outcome of a developmental or educational trajectory that can be socially engineered” (p. 47). Instead, they see citizenship as a practice in which young people enact identities as citizens through participation in “the actual practices that make up their daily lives” (p. 45). As such, Lawy and Biesta extracted civic identity from the normative ideology to which it has been attached and opened it up to individual meaning making on the part of young people in order to empower all students to civic action.

Nasir and Kirshner (2003) echoed this conceptualization of citizenship as something that is constantly negotiated through everyday practice, as opposed to a static predetermined entity, by introducing a sociocultural perspective on moral and civic identity development (p.139). Drawing on theories of development as an inherently social and cultural process that takes place in communities of practice, they argued that civic identity development must be analyzed through three overlapping lenses: the social interactions that occur between individuals, the cultural practices that structure these interactions, and the institutions in which these interactions occur (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Vygotsky, 1978).

Watts and Flanagan (2007) specifically focused on the psychological effects that universal conceptions of civic identity have on youth of color and offered a new model of sociopolitical identity development that emphasizes their liberation and empowerment. Like Banks, they argued that traditional notions of political socialization “implicitly encourage investment in or identification with the prevailing social order and replication of it” (p. 781) and asked, “Are young members of marginalized groups as likely as more socially integrated youth to replicate or buy into a system where they feel excluded?” (p. 781). Their model of civic (what they call sociopolitical) identity development centers on a critical rather than a normative understanding of the systemic forces shaping society that validates the experiences of young people of color and offers them avenues for developing liberating political efficacy. Like

Nasir and Kirshner, Watts and Flanagan included analysis of worldview, opportunity structures, and social interactions in their developmental model.

The work of translating these practice-based theories of civic learning and identity into tools for engaging young people of color in powerful civic learning is just beginning to be explored, and includes practices such as youth organizing (Kirshner, 2009), critical youth action research (Morrell, 2004), and spoken-word poetry (Jocson, 2006). What many of these practices have in common is a commitment to critical pedagogy as the form of teaching and learning best suited to empowering students. Freire (1970) stressed the importance of praxis—the dialectical cycle of action and reflection—as the source of critical consciousness for marginalized students. He argued that when teachers and students engage in critical dialogue together, the traditional power structures of authority that divide them fall away, and “teacher-students” and “student-teachers” (p. 80) are created and are co-intent on unveiling oppression, re-creating knowledge, and struggling toward a more authentically democratic society.

This critical orientation is key to the way that we facilitate the Council and the way that we analyze its impacts and leads to a discussion of the methods and data analysis for this study.

## **Democratic Research Methodology and Data Analysis: YPAR and Beyond**

### **A NOTE ON POSITIONALITY: INSIDER/OUTSIDER STATUS**

The authors of this article are in the unique position of both facilitating the work of a youth participatory action research (YPAR) program that serves as a civic education intervention for Los Angeles youth and researching the effects of the program. We are positioned both as insiders and outsiders, which complicates our methodology and data analysis. We first explain the YPAR methodology that structures the Council of Youth Research itself and then turn to the critical qualitative research methodology that guides our approach to analyzing it. We also detail our procedures for data analysis.

### **YPAR IN THE COUNCIL**

YPAR is a critical research methodology that foregrounds the voices of youth as the experts of their lived experiences in schools and communities (Camarota & Fine, 2008; Morrell, 2004). This methodology directly challenges traditional research paradigms by suggesting that students should be considered legitimate actors in education policy, practice, and research (McIntyre, 2000). YPAR provides students with the space to create and enact their own research agendas and understand the power of their voice in moving toward social change in education (Morrell, 2008).

The Council of Youth Research is a YPAR community of high school students, teachers, university professors, and graduate-student researchers committed to conducting research aimed at improving the conditions in urban schools and injecting the voices of young people into conversations around education policy and reform. The students in the program, who all identify as Latino/a and African American, hail from high schools in East Los Angeles, South Central Los Angeles, and Watts—all communities within

Los Angeles that suffer disproportionately from concentrated poverty, systemic racism, and struggling schools but also draw strength from deep historical traditions of protest and resistance. Teachers, who serve as group leaders, facilitators, and mentors, recommend students interested in social justice to the program.

Offering intensive, graduate-level, five-week seminars over the summer and weekly meetings during the school year, the Council creates a supportive environment in which students can become critical researchers of their own schools and communities. The seminar guides students through the analysis of critical social theory and provides them with the tools necessary to conduct fieldwork and create multimedia presentations about research topics that matter to them. The Council presents their work several times a year to audiences of elected officials and community leaders throughout the state of California and across the country.

Central to the Council of Youth Research’s work in moving toward an education for critical civic agency is the idea that knowledge production can act as a form of counterhegemony. The proliferation of a neoliberal agenda in schools often means that low-income and students of color are conditioned into a culture of silence that precludes genuine democratic dialogue. The production and presentation of the stories of the disenfranchised are critical to breaking this silence. The authentic creation of knowledge requires an understanding of the need for consciousness raising about the salience of race (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Smith-Maddox & Solorzano, 2002), the relevance of social locations, shared experiences and histories (Harding, 1997), and the authority of disenfranchised communities to speak about their own conditions (Spivak, 1988). These understandings are vital parts of the development of civic agents. As a result, our work with the Council of Youth Research is intent on including the voices of students of color and their communities both in the process of their education and in education reform. As these students become researchers in their own schools and communities, they bring new information and perspectives to interrogate existing deficit language and common sense about them, their schools, and their communities.

### **RESEARCHING THE COUNCIL:**

#### **CRITICAL QUALITATIVE INQUIRY**

As we study the Council as a setting for civic learning and engagement, our work is informed by critical qualitative research (Kincheloe & McLaren, 1994), which claims that research is never neutral but, instead, is informed by ideologies about the nature of knowledge production and, in education, the structure, function, and purpose of schooling. Without an explicit acknowledgment concerning the interested and political nature of research, claims to objectivity can disguise dominant perspectives that ultimately reproduce inequitable conditions. Instead, critical qualitative researchers admit that these biases exist and attempt to represent the interests of those who have been most disaffected by the existing power relations and their impact on the production of knowledge within a particular discipline. This means honoring the voices of youth who have been marginalized in the educational discourse. It also means situating the acts of research and pedagogy

in the context of collaborative action for social change. Critical research is conducted in solidarity with and on behalf of historically underserved populations with the explicit agendas of empowerment, achievement, and justice.

#### DATA ANALYSIS

The data for this article were drawn from the Council's 2010 summer seminar, during which time youth in the Council began to research the state of education in California on the ten-year anniversary of the filing of the *Williams v. California* (2004) class action lawsuit. The ruling in this case declared that the State of California failed to adequately and equitably distribute resources to various schools throughout the state, namely, those schools in low-income areas. Our students sought to determine what, if anything, had changed in schools a decade later and to define an "adequate" education for every California student in the 21st century. We drew from data that included field notes and vignettes from hundreds of hours of participant observation, interviews with students and teachers, a wealth of student-created work products, and media coverage of the students' work.

Throughout our participant observation of the summer seminar activities, our research team regularly wrote analytic memos based on field notes and interview data and debriefed with research participants in order to synthesize our findings. A simultaneously top-down and bottom-up coding approach guided our initial data analysis. While we began our analysis by coding artifacts, interviews, and field notes individually, without any overarching conceptual categories, we continued to return to our analytic categories of civic learning, identity, and agency and used these concepts to reorganize our codes. We formulated these categories based upon our literature review and constantly re-visited them in order to ensure shared understandings within the research team. We chose vignettes that served as exemplars for the forms of learning and development that we discovered during our investigation of the Council's activities.

In the following sections, we describe how civic learning, participation, and agency are reimagined in the context of the Council from a critical, practice-based perspective. We then explore the impacts of this work and make recommendations for policy and practice.

### Critical Civic Learning and Participation in the Council of Youth Research

Through conversations with the teachers and students in the Council in the spring of 2010, we discovered that they were curious about why people would come into their classrooms once per school year to look over their textbooks and conduct surveys of the various learning resources that were available to them. One of our teachers referred to these individuals as the "Williams investigators"—the people meant to ensure that California public schools were adhering to the settlement of the *Williams v. California* (2004) court case that sought to guarantee an "adequate" education to every student in the state. Considering that the year 2010 was the tenth anniversary of the filing of the Williams case, as well as a year in which the state was suffering

from the recession and drastically cutting the budgets at our students' schools, we decided that we would engage students in research about what kind of education to which they believed every student should be entitled.

During a five-week summer seminar at UCLA, students wrote journal entries about the characteristics that they felt were crucial to providing students with not just adequate but excellent educational opportunities. Based on their responses, we developed five research teams that studied the following concepts: teaching, curriculum, leadership, learning resources, and schooling environment. Students developed research questions and set out to interview fellow students, teachers, and community members about the inequalities they saw in their schools and the demands that they had for policymakers. During the course of their research, students realized that much of what they observed in their schools was related to the budgetary priorities of their state representatives. In order to help students deepen their research, we organized a two-day trip to Sacramento and set up appointments for them to interview the state superintendent of education, state senators, and various staffers. Students followed the trip with the production and presentation of multimedia presentations that included their policy and practice recommendations.

The very structure of this summer seminar reflects the practice-based view of civic identity discussed earlier—it was constructed based around the experiences and questions of young people and directly related to civic issues that were immediately meaningful and relevant to them. Students were motivated to acquire civic knowledge about the legislative system in California and the voting records of their state representatives because the knowledge was directly relevant to their research. Students used research, new media, and technology to advance, shape, and reshape their voice while they positioned themselves as powerful actors in the political process. In preparation for their trip to Sacramento, students drew ideas from educational researchers and theorists such as Jean Anyon and Paulo Freire to make arguments about the inequities in their social and physical environments. They brought with them the results from surveys they distributed across five high schools to a total of 625 students in which they gauged their peers' opinions on statements such as "My school looks and feels like a prison" and "My school has enough technology available to students." They also brought with them the voices of their communities.

The civic learning experience in Sacramento impacted students' self-perceptions as researchers and citizens. Luis, a senior at South High School, described what it felt like to interview "important people" and to engage with his elected officials:

*I felt that the trip was a great experience because I never thought that I would have to interview important people like one of the lawyers from the Williams case, the state superintendent, or Roslyn Escobar [education consultant for California state Senator Gloria Romero]. When I interviewed these important people I felt very important and intelligent because the interviewees were impressed that we, as high school students, knew words that they didn't know (personal communication, July 31, 2010).*

Luis articulated how this experience offered him the opportunity to engage in a form of democracy that he “never thought” was possible. The practice of interviewing officials who were associated with the Williams case created the public space necessary to engage in dialogue. For Luis, interviewing allowed him to feel empowered and just as important as the people he interviewed. His use of voice, language, research, and technology allowed him to position himself as an expert in that experience while also demonstrating academic skills.

Students in the Council are able to effectively articulate the ways that their roles as critical researchers inform their understanding of and participation in the democratic process. Their roles as researchers led them to approach their political leaders in nontraditional ways—it is uncommon for politicians to see students setting up cameras and microphones and interviewing them about their activities. The Council serves as a unique example of how critical, practice-based forms of participation like YPAR lead to critical democratic practice as students demonstrate knowledge of institutional power and structures. This form of social inquiry creates the space for Council youth to engage in research, present their concerns, and seek answers.

Through dialogue and research, Council students and adults mutually engage in civic learning. Students interact with civic leaders not only to acquire information but also to share information. As Alma, a junior at East High School explained, “Meeting important people, like the superintendent, the mayor, and [other political representatives] . . . made me feel like this was an opportunity to let my voice be heard” (personal communication, July 31, 2010). While the expression of ideas and opinions is a significant theme in democratic theory, it is often secondary in civic learning to the acquisition of discrete skills and ideas. The pedagogy of the Council sees these two learning goals not as mutually exclusive but instead as mutually beneficial. Students experience authentic learning opportunities through their engagement with representatives from the political system, and the system benefits by gaining insights that are underrepresented. Working with the adults, students learn that they are coproducers of civic knowledge and that this coproduction is fundamental to the democratic process.

When reflecting on the Sacramento trip, Juan, a senior at East High School, demonstrated the ability to analyze politicians’ rhetoric and recognize the way that adult civic leaders often marginalize youth civic participation:

*Sacramento was an exciting trip as a young person but not as a researcher because we didn’t get the answers that we were looking for. As a researcher, I felt that my voice was heard but not taken seriously because most of the politicians went off topic, talking about what their future plans for “change” are. I believe that the state superintendent [of public instruction] tried to use his jokes to get out of our questions . . . I admit we did get some data that will be relevant to our presentation, but I still believe that we could have done better.*

While Juan provided an honest self-critique, he also demonstrated an understanding of what he needed to accomplish in order to successfully conduct research. He clearly articulated the attempt

of his interviewees to use humor to avoid answering uncomfortable questions. While he noted his feelings of empowerment because of his participation, he lamented the results he received and the disempowerment that comes when those in power dismiss the concerns of a group with less power. Juan’s words represent a powerful example of critical democratic practice because they highlight the tension that exists in democracy. In the same way social movements work to address that tension, the Council teaches youth how to be critical and resolute in their efforts.

What does participation in a critical democracy look like? It looks like students using laptops to prepare presentations; it looks like students using technology to interview elected officials; it looks like students reflecting on their experiences and telling their stories in published articles; it looks like students engaging in dialogue with their elected officials; it looks like students organizing for social change. In the Council, critical democracy looks like students using social inquiry to gather, interpret, and disseminate data that represent their voices and views related to the struggles they experience every day.

When viewed in this light, the Council of Youth Research, as a community of university researchers, youth, and teachers, stands as a model for participatory social inquiry leading to critical democratic practice. It is not the top-down approach most frequently used by many research institutions. Instead, the Council serves as a space where youth begin to speak for themselves in the public sphere and where their interests become represented in the political process—where they begin to embody Friere’s notion of critical consciousness (Freire, 1970).

The Council redefines civic learning as the opportunity for knowledge exchange and production as opposed to mere acquisition of information. As discussed in the literature review, this view of civic learning is critical in engaging students of color and low-income students, who tend to have less access to both the political process and learning opportunities that prepare them to participate effectively in it. The Council’s emphasis on knowledge production and exchange produces substantial civic learning outcomes by engaging students in a process of mutual engagement and helping them to assume new roles as teachers, public intellectuals, and cultural producers.

Importantly, because the process of YPAR situates students as experts of their own experiences with the responsibility to educate adult leaders about their findings, it seeks to translate the theory of critical pedagogy into practice and embody what it means to be student-teachers. After the trip to Sacramento, students continued to build upon the research they had done at their individual school sites. In one blog post (2011), the group from Angeles High wrote about the next steps they took with their research:

*In February we did a professional development/teacher workshop with 9th-grade teachers. The purpose of the workshop was so that teachers could witness powerful curriculum. [We learned that] when students facilitate teacher workshops, teachers have a greater understanding of the student’s point of view . . . We don’t feel like students anymore. (Retrieved from <http://youngcriticalminds.com/2011/03/13/students-teaching-teachers-powerful-curriculum-in-action>)*

The Council promotes civic learning opportunities that help students learn through information production and role rehearsal. This process challenges the role of students as passive recipients of knowledge. By seeing themselves as more than students, these learners become public intellectuals, teachers, and cultural producers.

### **Educating Toward Critical Civic Agency in the Council of Youth Research**

According to the logic of traditional civic-education programs, young people gain ability and agency to take on the mantle of citizenship and act in the public sphere as a result of absorbing political and historical knowledge and practicing civic skills in artificial settings such as simulations or mock trials. While knowledge and the opportunity to experiment with civic action in low-stakes environments are undoubtedly important, we argue that the authentic opportunities to learn and participate in civic life offered by the Council allow students to develop a much more powerful and influential sense of themselves as civic agents. As described previously, the process of youth participatory action research positions young people as experts and makes their lives the canvas for transformative social action. In turn, students become better able to name the social forces that act upon them and feel empowered to act upon them.

As noted above, we find that as students in the Council begin self-identifying themselves as researchers, they take ownership of their expertise on educational issues and begin to confidently speak back to the deficit portrayals of urban youth that they see propagated in the media and by many educational policies. When students traveled to Sacramento, they proudly wore name tags that identified them as members of a research team as opposed to simply tourists or even students. Instead of asking to meet with state leaders to listen meekly to their talking points, they came armed with pointed interview questions. As Kelly, a senior at West High School wrote:

*Having the opportunity to meet people in power in Sacramento at a young age and as a researcher was an exciting honor and experience . . . I believe that many of the politicians got the point that just because we come from a school that is located in a low-income community does not mean we are unaware of what a low education we're really receiving. I also believe they were able to see that we're not careless students that were raised to be part of the workforce, but students that were raised to become leaders. (personal communication, July 31, 2010).*

Students exhibited sophisticated understanding of the ways that research conducted by adults from outside their communities often creates distorted perceptions of young people, and they sought to reclaim the authority to speak. As Daniel, a junior from Angeles High School reflected:

*You could bring in an adult to do a two-day evaluation of a school and come up with some conclusion, but if you [consult] a student who actually attends the school, that student deals with the school every day, so he or she is an expert at knowing what their peers need. (personal communication, July 31, 2010)*

Nancy, a senior from East High School, added, "It's important to do research [on our own] so it's not only other people who are telling our story. We are the ones living through this current educational crisis" (personal communication, July 31, 2010). This sense of agency was reflected in the PowerPoint presentations and documentary films that the students created after their trip; students felt empowered to recast dominant discourse in ways that met their needs. One student group critiqued the California state definition of "highly qualified teacher" and suggested a new definition based upon their research. Another group showed pictures of the empty senate chamber and demanded that legislators return from recess and "do your jobs." Indeed, one of the most striking aspects of the students' presentations was the students' ability to translate their findings into concrete demands to their audience members; one student group displayed a graphic that turned the traditional hierarchy of decision making in education upside down and put student voice at the top.

Just as students were developing expertise through the activities of the Council, they were simultaneously encountering institutions and adults that threatened to derail their nascent sense of civic agency. They remained students at the very schools that they found were suffering the effects of systemic inequality through failing to offer quality learning resources and resembling prisons rather than college campuses. As was expressed previously in Juan's reflection, they also met adults in Sacramento who attempted to disenfranchise them by avoiding their questions or treating them as unknowledgeable children. Importantly, however, the solidarity offered by the Council community and the repeated opportunities to challenge inequality through their speech and literacy products provided support that enabled the students' continued development of agency.

When reflecting on his experience in Sacramento, Peter, a junior from Angeles High School, commented on the patronizing way that some politicians treated him—as he put it, "I felt like we weren't taken seriously. They kind of saw us as 'cute' kids doing a research project, as if we weren't passionate about this . . . The truth is, they're ignorant to the way we live" (personal communication, July 31, 2010). Samantha, a junior from East High School, shared this perspective but described how she used it as a source of motivation: "That didn't make me feel bad—it just gave me more power to prove to them that they are wrong . . . I have the power to show what I really feel" (personal communication, July 31, 2010). Many students began to refer to themselves as "we" in their reflections, referring both to the community of urban youth and to the collective of the Council itself. As Angel, a senior from West High School, explained, "They might think that we don't have anything to offer to their ideas, but I know that we can prove them wrong" (personal communication, July 31, 2010). They turned to the presentations they prepared for community stakeholders as powerful expressions of their agency that could create change by impacting audience members. As Jennifer, a junior from South High School, reflected, "When your voice is valued, the things you say will have an effect on others" (personal communication, July 31, 2010)

Through their documentary films, students challenged the conditions of their schools and recruited their audiences to join

them in a movement for educational justice. They exhibited sophisticated understanding of messaging by splicing together interview clips that told stories of inequality and of hope. Their developing civic agency was intimately connected to sharing their research with others, and they employed their learning and participation to begin a dialogue that continues through online blog postings and presentations around the country. Peter summarized well this understanding of agency as something developed through authentic practice. As a montage of clips compares our students' schools to those in more affluent areas of the city, his voice-over called us to action:

*Every day that passes, we increase our deficit by \$53 million. That is less money we will receive to better our education. Questioning why the schools in Los Angeles continue to receive only a small portion of billions of dollars is our duty. We need to research how the budget works and how we can direct more of the money coming in to the state toward urban education. Every single person should join this movement and make demands for the resources that we, urban youth, deserve. Because we need the opportunity to show the difference we can make in this world.*

### **Conclusion: Impacts and Implications of the Council of Youth Research**

In the Council, we have found that the provision of critical civic learning opportunities to students creates a community in which learning is shared among young people and adults. These learning opportunities raise consciousness, teach students the importance of their voice, and help them to become committed to participating in the democratic process by, among other things, raising their concerns to people in positions of power. Importantly, these also become learning opportunities for the adults, who engage with these students in their learning, are interviewed by the students, and attend the students' presentations. Those who come in contact with the students' work acknowledge the importance and the benefit of the students' work to the larger community; as a result, we stress the implications of this work for transforming the way we conceptualize teacher professional development, civic education, and educational reform itself.

#### **IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHING AND LEARNING**

As students engage in research in their communities and participate in the coconstruction of knowledge, their mentor-teachers find that not only are their students learning but they themselves are learning, too. As Mr. Green, the teacher from Angeles High School, explained, the process of mutual engagement that he experienced in the Council influenced his classroom practice:

*How I build trust and respect is that I tell my students, whatever I'm asking you to do, I will do. So if I can sit there and say that, how can I not run stride for stride with them on certain things? (personal communication, August 5, 2010)*

We argue that engaging in participatory action research with students represents a powerful form of learning for teachers that

helps them learn more about their students and their schools while providing them with new pedagogical strategies.

Similarly, when Council students presented their research at a major education conference, the audience of educators and education students learned from students' work and were challenged by the level of knowledge and engagement of the students. Commenting on the students' use of theory in their work, their comfort with academic language, and her belief that the early exposure to such theory would be beneficial for sustaining students' interest in the future, an audience member reported, "I learned from them today." Expanding the reach of youth participatory action research programs will provide more opportunities for teachers to hear student voice and respond to student needs in their practice.

The politicians and other public officials who are interviewed by Council students or hear their presentations recognize the Council as a transformative model of civic education and leadership development for students. As Monica Garcia, the president of the Los Angeles School Board said of the students, "I believe that there's a lot of leadership development in their ability to question something and explore answers and solutions and feel like they are community leaders." (personal communication, March 25, 2010). Furthermore, the work of the Council helps political leaders to understand that civic engagement goes beyond voting and extends to critical awareness and critical research. As Luis Sanchez, Garcia's chief of staff at the time acknowledged:

*You're preparing them to be critical thinkers, and most importantly, you're preparing them to be good, fruitful citizens . . . that get involved, and not only get involved on election day and vote, which is important, but get involved throughout the democratic process. (personal communication, March 24, 2010)*

This understanding has the potential to transform the way that civic education is conceptualized in policy and practice.

#### **IMPLICATIONS FOR EDUCATION REFORM**

Additionally, the students' involvement in the Council has provided an important source of information for those involved in education reform. The students produce knowledge from the perspective of those who would be affected by these reforms, a perspective that is often missing from current discussions about reform. As standpoint theorists have pointed out, the social location of the students and their peers provides a perspective that might well be different from those who traditionally "own" conversations about educational reform. Students in the Council bring their own, as well as their fellow students', often missing perspective, to the reform discussion about their schools. Some officials have come to understand the importance of this work and in particular the voices of the students as part of reform efforts; as Marshall Tuck, the CEO of the Partnership for Los Angeles Schools noted:

*I think it's very good data to have students interviewing other students on issues, because I think we get the most unfiltered responses from the youth themselves. I also think the youth have a big perspective on what's*

going on with other schools because they're the ones in it and they're the ones we're trying to serve. (personal communication, March 31, 2010)

A former superintendent of the Los Angeles Unified School District, Ramon Cortines, also became interested in the students' work and took the extraordinary step of distributing it to assistant superintendents to keep them informed about the district's schools and students. As Mr. Cortines described, "I have shared the document [containing students' presentations] with a personal note to the people I work with. Because I do think it's some of the best work I've seen" (personal communication, March 25, 2010). School leaders at individual schools have also taken action as a result of the students' research—in one compelling example, a principal changed the daily schedules of his school's guidance counselors after hearing a student explain that they were often out to lunch at the times when students had free time to talk to them about college applications. We believe that civic engagement initiatives like the Council have the potential to spearhead a movement for education reform that privileges the voices of students and teachers in order to make schools more responsive to their needs and prepares them for transformative civic engagement.

#### FINAL THOUGHTS

We believe that students have the capacity to learn, to teach others around them, and to create new knowledge. We believe providing civic learning opportunities similar to those provided in the Council is critical to students' development to become actively engaged citizens. As a result, we believe that it is critical for the education of students of color that schools provide more spaces for civic learning that engages students in critical research about their schools and their communities. While the Council of Youth Research is an extra-curricular program, we have demonstrated the ways that teachers are using elements of it to change classroom civic education. We believe schools need to provide spaces where students' voices matter, where students have opportunities to have their consciousness raised, and where teachers and students participate in mutual learning, engagement, and production of information and knowledge. It is important that the purpose of schools be geared not just toward economic participation but also toward learning for active engagement and participation in a vibrant, multicultural democracy. We believe that providing the opportunities for civic learning, engagement, and civic literacy development in schools is a cornerstone of a transformative democracy.

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