
Democracy & Education

The Missing Elements of Change

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Abstract

By establishing a set of theoretical frameworks to view and compare the work of youth organizers and youth commissioners, and through personal interviews, the authors of the paper “Youth Change Agents: Comparing the Sociopolitical Identities of Youth Organizers and Youth Commissioners” presented their explanation of the development of the sociopolitical identities and civic commitments of each group. This response paper asks questions about the authors’ limited use of context and complexity to explain how their youth arrived at their opinions, perspectives, and ultimately their sociopolitical identities. Their work also raises questions of how and why civic engagement and social activism took place based upon the provided evidence of actual changes that occurred. Finally, it poses methodological concerns associated specifically with relying on youth memories, years after the fact, of their tenure in these two groups and uncoupled from any interactive variables, as well as the absence of triangulated data that would further substantiate their findings.

This article is in response to

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WE LIVE IN a society where bad news always drives out good news. On any given day, the headlines are a stark report of violence, failure, and alienation, often directed at the actions of young people. Contrary to opinions of youth as self-absorbed and aimless, across the United States and the world, youth activists, either as individuals or in groups, are creating examples of social change. They are bringing their ideas and energy into solving the pressing problems of today and doing so with or without adults sanctioning their efforts. Their stories rarely make news. However, a place like the international website What Kids Can Do provides extensive documentation of how youth throughout the world have found answers and taken action to address many problems that seem to stymie adult policymakers (www.whatkidscando.com).

The authors of “Youth Change Agents: Comparing the Sociopolitical Identities of Youth Organizers and Youth Commissioners” (2016) have added to the history and understanding of

youth agency and civic engagement. With their focus on two different approaches to involvement in social and political change by similar urban youth, one from inside the system and the other from outside the system, they illustrated how a sample of young people came to develop their own sociopolitical views and theories of change. Their effort to link their interview data to two theoretical constructs, Flanagan’s (Watts and Flanagan 2007) model of

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sociopolitical development and Westheimer and Kahne's (2004) three "kinds of citizen," grounded their findings and situated the youth in their study within larger conceptual frameworks to understand the different types of social activism and political development among young people.

The literature on youth activism is still a relatively small but growing field of study (Sherrod, Torney-Purta, & Flanagan, 2010; Taft, 2011; Dibov, 2013). With their analysis of how civic engagement and political participation occurred within these two groups, the authors of "Youth Change Agents" (2016) have added to the field. Still, there were some limitations in their work, some of which they freely acknowledged and others that this paper will address. The response to their work will center on the following issues: the authors' limited use of context and complexity, both theoretically and empirically, to explain how their youth arrived at their opinions, perspectives, and ultimately their sociopolitical identities; the how and why civic engagement and social activism took place based upon limited evidence of actual changes that occurred; and the methodological concerns associated specifically with relying on youth memories, in most cases years after the fact, of their tenure in these two groups and uncoupled from potential interactive variables, as well as the absence of triangulated data that would further substantiate their findings.

Issue of Context and Complexity

The authors used their comparison of how the experiences of these two groups contributed to the construction of sociopolitical identities, a sense of agency, and beliefs in how change occurs. In the broadest sense, the authors collected data from Big City Youth Commission (BCYC), youth appointed by elected officials. Perhaps by their proximity to politicians and policymakers, these youth had a seat at or close to the proverbial table where policies are made. The BCYC was contrasted with data from Students For Change (SFC), similar youth from the same city. Because they inhabited an outsider's position, SFC youth had to use the tools and strategies of public action and grassroots organizing in order to have their views and concerns represented. It seems plausible that without any additional data, the experiences in those two settings would produce some divergent understandings in how youth thought about social change, how their sociopolitical identities took shape at an early age, and the ways in which power was seen as acquired and exercised to change things. Reading their work, I observed an absence of context and complexity in both their overall data and in connecting their data to their theoretical framework.

Theoretical Considerations

The authors selected two frameworks as useful lenses. First, they employed the work of Watts and Flanagan (2007) to illustrate how their youth groups thought about their sociopolitical identity and how social change happens. Interestingly, Watts and Flanagan advocated for a form of liberation psychology as the most effective approach to building youth identity and its connection to social change. In a later work, Flanagan (2013) characterized membership in groups like BCYC and SFC as "mini-polities" and as a way youth situate their place and significance within the larger social and

political universe, be it within a city or the nation at large. In their paper, the authors were particularly interested in Watts and Flanagan's notions of conventional political work and sociopolitical activism and left aside examining the concept of liberation psychology.

The authors combined this framework with Westheimer and Kahne's (2004) typology, or "kinds of citizens," to describe and categorize the behaviors of each of the youth groups that identified civic engagement as inhabiting the spheres of action and change making as either personal responsibility, participatory, or justice-oriented behaviors. The authors restricted their use of Watts & Flanagan's (2007) theory to discussions of opportunity structures that exist in conventional political work and the "extra-institutional" work at the local level to contrast BCYC, their "insider" group, with SFC, their "outsider" group. In my view, these choices allowed for somewhat seamless analytic distinctions between the perspectives of each group and accounted for no internal variance nor presented the possibilities of competing or conflicting influences or experiences (e.g., families, friends, neighborhood events, and/or academic ambitions) that might have colored the perspectives of youth while in these groups and over time contributed to the formation their sociopolitical identities and ideas about how social change takes place.

Working either as an insider or as an outsider can be a legitimate and powerful way to understand and affect social change. However, I think the authors simplified the ways youth made sense of their own political identities, civic commitments, and sense of agency. Watts and Flanagan (2007) mentioned that there are many factors that contribute to a young person's worldview and sense of agency. In fairness, the authors allude to the possibility of more factors at work than simply their membership in one group or another but that concession was never unpacked. We know from research (Adolina, Jenkins, Zukin, & Keeler, 2003; Fernández-Ballesteros, Díez-Nicolás, Caprara, Barbaranelli, & Bandura, 2002; Kohlberg, 1969) that youth development includes theoretical assumptions that adolescents are active participants in their own development; that development is bidirectional (i.e., adolescents influence and are influenced by their environments); and that development in continuous and discontinuous. It is also influenced by maturation and learning across a diversity of settings, so, for example, middle school members of SFC would differ in their worldview than high school members. Further, opportunities for development differ for individuals over a lifespan and within different contexts (Wilkenfeld, 2009). Those with multiple years serving in BCYC would vary in significant ways from those in their first year. None of these issues were explored. This raises another concern about the authors' sample informants. Those interviewed about their membership in BCYC and SFC, in most cases, were done years after the fact. Youth undergo a lot of changes in a short amount of time. Decades of research have shown that youth (i.e., ages 12–26) is a fluid time period where personal, social, and political values and identities change, adapt, and evolve based upon new information and new experiences (Bandura, 1977; Brofenbrenner, 2005; Kohlberg, 1969).

Some like Wilkenfeld, Lauckhardt, and Torney-Purta (2010) have argued that building a theoretical case for understanding the development of sociopolitical identity and the roots of youth's emergent civic engagement would benefit from multidisciplinary approach that incorporates concepts and theories from psychology, sociology, political science, anthropology, and economics as well as social work and education. This is not to say that the authors' review of literature and theoretical framework needed to be vastly expanded to reflect the complexity research across these disciplines. Rather, a recognition of these interacting contextual and developmental forces would have been useful in grounding change and youth development in a broader perspective rather than focusing exclusively on Watts and Flanagan's (2007) types of sociopolitical activism and Westheimer and Kahne's (2004) "kinds of citizens."

Empirical Considerations

The authors stated that "it is important to examine youth's sociopolitical views and theories of change and to understand why and how they act, not simply because of what their beliefs and behaviors might portend for the future of American democracy but because the significance of their attitudes and actions now in shaping the present" (Connor & Cosner, 2016, p. 2). However, on the next page, they stepped away from the question of why and focused almost exclusively on "how the different orientation and positioning of these organizations corresponded to differences in participants' beliefs about the process of social change, civic commitments and sense of agency" (Connor & Cosner, 2016, p. 2). At my request, the authors shared their interview protocol. It was surprising to see that many of their questions never made it into their description and analysis. Of the 38 questions posed to SFE alumni, 5 asked the question of why, and of the 29 posed to BCYC alumni, 2 questions asked why. Answering the questions of why these youth acted and felt and believed as they did could have deepened their analysis of how their identities and beliefs emerged and were shaped by their experiences.

From their description and brief history of these two types of youth groups there was little insight into the culture and social structures of either group. Near the end of the paper, we were told that they could not examine how the organizations influenced participants' worldviews (Connor & Cosner, 2016, p. 10). That seems to be an important omission, but why that was the case was unanswered. They stated that adult leadership in SFC was quite stable and leadership in BCYC was not. We learned that elected officials could appoint youth to the BCYC and that youth from across the city were eligible to join the SFC. We don't learn why these youth were nominated or why they wanted to be a part of either group or why they stayed on even though the interview protocols asked them why. Once again, these missing elements, their reasons for joining and staying involved, could have provided some additional context and depth into how these youth developed their sociopolitical identities and beliefs in how and why they wanted to be committed change agents.

As mentioned above, by situating the youth in one or the other ideological camps to explain how they came to view social agency

and political change, the authors skipped over additional interactive variables and minimized a level of complexity of the youth identities. For example, a single quote from one former SFC youth was used to illustrate systemic thinking. This individual stated that "it's not about blaming students or parents or community members; one race or one gender. It's about holding everyone accountable and holding the system accountable because the system is what's been doing that to people. The system is what's been doing this for so long. So it's not right to blame people, but it's about blaming the system that runs it" (Connor & Cosner, 2016, p. 7). While this was an open-minded statement, it also struck me as a simplistic critique. No further discussion or analysis delved into who or what made up a system for this or other youth. Such a statement is reminiscent of 1960s youth attributing society's failures to the Man or to Big Brother. Having spent a number of years consulting for and working with groups such as SFC, I have listened while youth interrogated society and in their own words articulated how elected officials, acting in consort with economic interests and actors, created policies that fostered a hegemonic view, perpetuated inequities, and denied social justice. Similarly, the authors highlighted that BCYC youth emphasized their belief in individual agency and, therefore, were not focused on understanding social problems systemically. Is it possible that these distinctions could have been a matter of the absence of asking those types questions in their interview protocols? When discussing how these youth think about effecting change, the authors made a point of firmly rooting former youth commissioners in the belief that change occurs inside the system and through changes in policy, and none of them could envision themselves bringing out change by working from the outside. Of course, with no experience as outsiders, that argument could seem to be based on an a priori worldview.

Drawing on academics such as Giroux (2013); Ginwright, Noguero, Cammarota (2006); and Winn and Behizadeh (2011) could have supplied the authors other complex examples of systemic thinking by similar youth. Had their review of literature looked further, they might have discovered the work on advocacy groups by McLaughlin, Scott, Deschenes, Hopkins, and Newman (2009) and the Mayoral Youth Commissions in Boston and Chicago who act as both insiders and outsiders simultaneously and who see the problems of their cities as both personal and political. It is hard not to reflect that the choice of theoretical frameworks may have driven the analysis of data in a more prescribed direction.

It was also interesting to note that they found that the majority of these youth from both BCYC and SFC came to believe that the most effective course for making change was from working within the political systems. This could possibly be attributed to changes that took place in the intervening years since they were members. What was not revealed was that their interview protocol framed this question of effective change making as an either/or choice. It is possible that the same results might have occurred, but it would have been instructive to learn from these youth in their own words how they thought they would be most effective at creating the kind of change they wished to see concerning their social issues rather than offering them the straight up choice of options.

Evidence of Social Change

The paper reported that most of the BCYC youth were critical of their organization not living up to its mission to include youth voice in policy decisions, but there were no specific examples that illustrate their effort to insert youth voice. The authors presented a list of social issues that varying percentages of youth from both BCYC and SFC said were important to them. Aside from two BCYC individuals talking about their particular issues—quality education and the school-to-prison pipeline—there were no descriptions or discussions of any of their political campaigns, how they got involved, what actions they took, and/or what were the results in terms of changes in policy or practice. As important, there was limited data and discussion about what these youth learned in the process. The authors stated that theirs was a smaller piece of two larger studies. Whether they had no access to the organizations or whether they chose not to include environmental data collected from their protocols, it is unfortunate that so little detail was provided about the actual lived experiences inside the two groups. Once again, such details could have provided a richer context in understanding how their political identities were shaped as well as assessing the “goodness of fit” of their experiences in BCYC and SFC to the theoretical frames the authors employed.

Methodological Concerns

Finally, I was troubled by the methodological approach used to interview these youth, in many instances, years after their experience with BCYC and SFC. No attempt was made to parse out the effects from the kinds of growth that may have occurred during the intervening time or account for memory bias that may have come into play when interviewed. We were told that their sample included some current members of the BCYC, but no disaggregation distinguished them from former members.

The authors reported that all the youth saw themselves as agentive in their roles, and while they added that they could pinpoint specific accomplishments, those details were not included. Instead, quotations such as the SFE “has had an incredible effect on my life as a critical thinker and socially aware person who feels empowered to make change” (Conner & Cosner, 2016, p. 17) are used to summarize an unobserved series of experiential changes. This is where triangulating from data sources such as artifacts, observations, and field notes would have been helpful to ground such a statement in observation and real time events. In fairness, it appears that the study was not designed to include such sources. The authors reported that the reason they chose to rely upon in-depth interviews alone was because they “are considered an effective method for exploring individual’s personal perspectives and sense-making in a safe, low-stakes context” (citing McMillian, 2012, p. 15). It was not clear just what was at stake, but it does seem that such a choice constricted the depth they were able to bring to unpacking their interview data. Is the one quotation we get from a SFE member about linking education to poverty and the criminal justice system meant to represent the shape of systemic thinking? In my opinion, the authors’ choice of theoretical frameworks could have been strengthened with vignettes and

examples of actual experiences, even if in the form of storytelling by these youth.

Conclusion

The authors’ discussion of the insider/outsider dichotomy that these youth activists wrestled with as they tried to figure out how best to situate their agencies and selves brought to mind the words of the Detroit-based social activist Grace Lee Boggs, who died in late 2015 and who once wrote, “To make a revolution people must not only struggle against existing institutions, they must make a philosophical/spiritual leap and become more ‘human’ human beings [sic]. In order to change/transform the world, they must change/transform themselves” (Boggs, 1998). The authors provided the conceptual framework and self-reporting that served to distinguish how these two groups of youth saw changing the world. It is too bad that we didn’t get the accompanying data and analysis of how they went about changing themselves along the way and why.

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