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

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ABSTRACT

This study examines a two-year effort to engage groups of inner-city students in community engagement projects at Social Action Charter High School, SACHS, in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. In this project, graduate student volunteers coached small groups of students working on community change projects, collecting data on what happened over time. Kahne and Westheimer (2006) identified a key challenge to projects of this kind. On the one hand, social action projects seem able to enhance students' belief in their own capacity to solve community problems only if adult allies make sure the students do not encounter any significant barriers to success, although this misleads them, albeit unintentionally, about the realities of unequal power in society. On the other hand, authentic engagements with real-world institutional power tend to reduce students' confidence and their desire to participate in social action in the future. Thus the "catch-22" in our article's title. This article shows how one of the groups we worked with at SACH discovered a middle way between Kahne's and Westheimer's two extremes. Even though the students were not able to overcome the power they encountered, they nonetheless found creative and pragmatic ways to accomplish significant tasks. We argue that the students' experience shows a possible avenue for educators to move beyond the catch-22.

THIS ARTICLE DISCUSSES findings from efforts to engage small groups of inner-city high school students in community engagement projects at Social Action Charter High School, SACHS (a pseudonym), in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Over two years, a professor and a team of graduate students examined what could happen when students are pushed beyond more traditional efforts to serve individuals perceived as needy (through tutoring, in soup-kitchens, and the like) toward projects that seek in some small way to address the systems, institutions, and individuals that cause social problems (what we term, below, a more youth organizing approach).

This article focuses on the experiences of one of these groups during the second year of this effort, which at least partly overcoming what we term the catch-22 of youth civic engagement, as identified by Kahne and Westheimer (2006). In their study of ten different community engagement efforts, Kahne and Westheimer found that these civic engagement projects either increased student efficacy by eliminating significant barriers to success and misleading students about the realities of power; or they brought students face-to-face with the realities of power, generating cynicism and reducing the chance that students would seek to engage in such efforts in the future. At the 2010 Future of Community Engagement in Higher Education Summer Institute, Peter Levine, one of the leading scholars in civic education in the United States, noted that this catch-22 is one of the most significant challenges facing the field, today.

In our analysis we show how one of our groups found a middle way between these two extremes, engaging with power but also

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finding creative ways to accomplish significant tasks without needing to directly overcome power.

The social action projects at SACHS were grounded in a model called public achievement (PA), a school-based program developed by the Center for Democracy and Citizenship (www.publicachievement.org) in Minnesota (Boyte, 1991; Boyte, 1996). PA is one of the few programs operating in schools today that goes beyond apolitical forms of service-learning. PA tries to nurture a more active democratic citizenship by teaching youths concepts and skills for engaging in what they refer to as more authentic *public work*. In traditional forms of PA, coaches (usually college student volunteers) meet for around an hour once a week after school with small groups of high school students who volunteer to participate in PA. The situation at SACHS was unusual in that it integrated PA into its regular, project-based school curriculum, so all students were required to participate. While the traditional PA model generally focuses on consensual efforts, in the groups coached by members of our team we tried to push students to engage more directly with power, with forces that prevent significant social change in the areas students were focused on. Thus, as we discuss below, we attempted to shift PA in the direction of a more youth organizing model of civic engagement.

During both years, we spent fall semester at SACHS, coaching teams of five-to-eight students each and then analyzed the data we had collected in the spring. During the first year of our effort (Year One: 2005–06), we felt like we mostly failed to really engage students in practical social action efforts. The magnitude of the topics students decided to address—for example, police harassment, foster care, and homelessness—simply overwhelmed both students and coaches. Groups met weekly but could not figure out how to actually *do* anything that felt significant. Further, coaches were unsure about what role they should play—uncertain about when to intervene to get students moving or when to stay in a more facilitative role, letting students struggle with the challenges they encountered.

In response to these problems, we made a number of changes for Year Two (2006–07). Most important (and counterintuitive in a democratic effort), we developed a series of potential projects *for* students, which they could choose among, based on what we had learned about their interests. We decided after Year One that we needed to provide options for action instead of hoping that students, who already felt disempowered before they even started PA projects, could find some entry point into the world of power themselves. Our hope was that students would take these projects as starting points, appropriating and adapting them even more specifically to their own interests. As best we could, we designed projects that would be doable but that would also bring students in contact or relationship with power in some way, however small. As we note, below, this was an attempt to negotiate the tension between making projects easy to accomplish and revealing the realities of power. We did give them a chance to request other topic areas, and created an additional area (around truancy) after listening to their interests.

For some, this shift to providing projects instead of having students develop them themselves may seem like a repudiation of student-led democracy. In an effort to empower, it may seem like we have disempowered. And it seems helpful to respond to this concern from the beginning. In general, we resist this narrow vision of democracy. In fact, we believe that our approach fits well with that of the field's premier democratic educator, John Dewey (Dewey, 1916, 1938; Mayhew & Edwards, 1936; Schutz, 2010). First, Dewey emphasized that effective democracy is always about working within constraints. It represents not freedom to do anything but the capacity to collaborate on action within the world as it is. The topic area was only one of many constraints students faced. And it was a flexible constraint. Students had the capacity—in fact, were encouraged—to adapt their project to the realities they encountered and the interests they brought with them. (They could even have decided to completely change their area.) Second, democracy within an educational setting, as in Dewey's Laboratory School, almost invariably involves some level of scaffolding. Effective educators start with students where they are and seek to stretch them to move to another level. The sink-or-swim model is not useful if we know from the beginning that most will sink. And in our effort, scaffolding took place in many different areas beyond simply project selection—in the way coaches modeled democratic dialogue themselves, for example. Third, for teachers to scaffold students into particular practices, they must understand these practices themselves. As experienced community organizers know, developing doable projects is one of the most challenging aspects of social action efforts (Schutz & Sandy, 2011)—and our coaches were not experienced organizers. In some sense, the topics we developed ahead of time represented scaffolding for the coaches as well. Finally, the fact is that one cannot teach everything at the same time—this is as true in social action as it is in science. Of course, we could have chosen to focus on the process of developing good topics. As we argue in other unpublished writings about this project, however, we found during Year One that asking marginalized students to conduct research when they didn't really believe that they would be able to find effective avenues for action ended up discouraging them. It is possible to engage students in action research, but action research is generally done for its own sake (hopefully influencing other people through education), and does not promise to provide a base for concrete action.

We also clarified the coach role, providing guidelines on when to intervene and be more directive and when to be more of a facilitator. We hoped these changes would overcome group paralysis, giving students opportunities to engage more concretely with community issues. This article examines the experiences of one Year Two group that pursued a graffiti art project, intending to create a public mural that expressed students' feelings about local community problems.

Why Engage Students in Social Action in Inner-City Schools?

An abundance of research suggests that participation in civic activism enhances low-income young people's development and well-being. For example, research suggests that low-income students' participation in civic activism improves their connectedness to their communities (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002; Hilley,

2004; Strobel, Osberg, & McLaughlin, 2006); enhances their self-esteem, political efficacy, and academic engagement; and, as a result, increases their academic performance (Forum for Youth Investment, 2004; Ginwright & James, 2002; Larson & Hanson, 2005; Lewis-Charp, 2003; Morgan & Streb, 2001; Strobel, Osberg, & McLaughlin, 2006). The overall objective for promoting social action in urban youths is to empower them to be agents of social change, increase their connectedness with their communities, and improve the communities they live in. From a youth development standpoint, it also seems to make sense to engage youths in social action activities in the school curriculum.

Data Collection and Analysis

Each coach audiotaped about 13 weekly group meetings over the course of one semester, and then wrote up field notes from the tapes. We collected the same kind of data in similar groups during Year One. These earlier data informed the discussion in this article, and are being used in other works in process. We focused on each group as a unit, not on the development of individual students. No data were collected beyond that which emerged in the process of the coaching activities—for example, no individual interviews were done with students. Some of the data collected for this study were collected at sites outside the school walls and were not audiotaped. We returned to the tapes after transcription, ensuring comparable detail across the different groups. Early on during each year, the professor leading the university team of researchers responded to the graduate student coaches' field notes, asking questions and seeking to standardize the kinds of data collected. The coaches also discussed each others' data during the seminar meetings of the second semester of each year, helping to minimize observer bias and misinterpretation of the data and providing opportunities to ask questions.

The coding process sought to uncover common themes and differences across the groups. Coaches were interviewed when we needed clarification during this process. For the purposes of this paper, in particular, issues raised by Kahne and Westheimer's (2006) article and the wider literature related to youth civic engagement and political efficacy provided initial areas of interest to examine and code for. We specifically sought to understand if there were ways that individual groups managed to overcome aspects of the catch-22 identified by Kahne and Westheimer.

Fehrman was a coach during both Year One and Year Two, and the case described below comes from his Year Two group. Schutz coached a group only during Year One.

The Setting

This study mainly took place at an urban Milwaukee public charter school located in an office building it shares with a law firm and other small businesses near Milwaukee's downtown. SACHS opened in the fall semester of 2004 with a project-based curriculum in which students design, in collaboration with faculty, individual projects of interest to them. Student projects usually cover the subjects of science, social studies, and history but also incorporate elements of language arts and reading. SACHS uses a separate math curriculum. All students are required to meet particular "learning targets," based on state academic standards, in order to advance through grade levels. Panels made up of faculty, community members, and SACHS students evaluate student project presentations and determine whether learning targets were met.

Our PA coaches had three small meeting rooms and one large room at their disposal for conducting PA meetings. In addition, each student at SACHS had a personal work area and computer located in one large room surrounded by a few small rooms used for a range of small group activities. The school had nine regular education teachers, or educational advisors (EAs), as they were referred to, and one special education teacher. A typical school day involved EAs moving from student to student, helping each develop and complete projects while dealing firmly with disciplinary matters if they arose. The faculty at SACHS was predominantly White (two EAs were African American males) and about evenly split between male and female.

While this research did not study the school itself, it was obvious to all of the coaches that SACHS often struggled with discipline issues during its first couple of years (though these improved markedly during our Year Two at the school). Incoming students seemed ill-equipped to deal with SACHS's nontraditional project-based curriculum and largely nonpunitive discipline policy. Consequently, the school was sometimes very loud with student disruptions resulting in numerous suspensions. The suspension rate for the school during 2005–06 was 56% but fell to 26% during 2006–07 (Year Two), showing a much improved atmosphere. During Year Two students were visibly more engaged in their academic work and the environment was overall more respectful and quiet.

STUDENT CHARACTERISTICS AT SACHS

Eighty to ninety students ranging in age from 14 to 18 attended SAHS during our two years there. Demographically, about 80% were African American, 10% Hispanic, and 10% White (similar to most inner-city schools in Milwaukee). Approximately 70% received free or reduced lunch. Also, during Year Two, about 12% of the students rated *proficient* on the state reading test, compared to about 40% for the whole district. Scores on other subjects were similar when compared to the district. The school also had the second highest percentage of *special needs* students in the district (31%) during Year Two. The year-to-year student mobility rate for SACHS was 26–30%. Discussions with staff indicated that many of the students at SACHS had come from the Milwaukee Public Schools system after being expelled for behavioral problems or chronic truancy, or after being pulled out by a parent or guardian who hoped SACHS would offer a better education or their teenager would fit in better there. Few students understood SACHS's focus on civic engagement prior to their enrollment, despite the administration's efforts to inform students and parents during the application process.

Youth Community Engagement Strategies: A Review

For the purposes of this article, we examine three overlapping but comparatively distinct strategies for engaging students in their communities: service-learning, public achievement, and youth organizing.

SERVICE-LEARNING

Service-learning programs generally seem to involve an altruistic approach to community engagement. According to research on service-learning by Kahne and Westheimer (1999), most projects focus on charity. Similarly, Schutz, and Gere (1998) point out that the targets of service-learning projects are often viewed as clients in need of services, not as partners or fellow collaborators, reinforcing a deficit view of the community.

The majority of service-learning projects avoid engaging with politics and issues related to power (Schutz, 2006). Knight Abowitz (1999), for example, contended that the service-learning approach implies that social problems can be solved through *consensual dialogue*. Service-learning generally remains resolutely apolitical, rarely if ever addressing the social and bureaucratic barriers that arise in real-world situations. Indeed, most service-learning projects are geared toward student success, and any potential obstacles to success are eliminated as much as possible (Kahne & Westheimer, 2006; Sullivan, 2002).

PUBLIC ACHIEVEMENT

For the purposes of this research, we make a distinction between what we call traditional PA and what we refer to as the youth organizing–like PA that our coaches were trying to encourage at SACHS.

Traditional PA engages more directly with the political process than do standard forms of service-learning. Instead of simply providing service to individuals in need, students work on more concrete projects to improve their communities. PA was developed from the research conducted by the director of the Center for Democracy and Citizenship, Harry Boyte, and his colleagues (Boyte, 2002; Boyte & Kari, 1996; Hildreth, 2000), and emphasizes the importance of engaging citizens in community building through what they call "public work." Generally in PA, college student coaches meet once a week after school with groups of six to eight K–12 students to work on a shared public project. Traditional PA offers students a number of strategies, political skills (collaborative use of power, conflict resolution, negotiation, etc.), and "core concepts" through activities recommended in its manual for coaches (Hildreth, 1998).

PA students have started mentoring programs, created community gardens, built playgrounds, worked on community murals, protested unfair school policies, confronted police harassment, and challenged other community injustices. In general, then, public work in traditional PA ranges from completely collaborative efforts (e.g., creating a community garden) to efforts that engage in conflict with those in power (e.g., protesting unfair school policies). The majority of traditional PA projects, however, tend to be cooperative in nature—in that they seem to assume *everyone* (including institutional elites) will eventually cooperate, work together, and really listen to alternative perspectives. Perhaps because of its location in schools, which generally frown on conflict, traditional PA tends to represent the political as mainly collaborative in nature. In this way traditional approaches to PA tend to deemphasize the existence of divergent interests and inequalities in power (Boyte, 2002; Hildreth, 2000). But PA does not altogether ignore power relationships either. Thus, even traditional PA appears to fall somewhere between charitable and apolitical service-learning and the more politically contentious form of social action embodied by non-school-based youth organizing, discussed below. (See Students at Naropa University [2006] for a range of examples of PA projects.)

YOUTH ORGANIZING

Contemporary approaches to youth organizing are rooted in the community organizing model associated with Saul Alinsky, who began developing his methods for community organizing in the 1930s (Alinsky, 1971; Sherwood & Dressner, 2004). Youth organizers seek to organize large numbers of youths so that they represent a significant force for social change. From a youth organizing perspective, while an advance over service-learning, traditional PA's focus on collaboration risks miseducating students about the extent to which major community problems can actually be solved through cooperation and consensual dialogue. A central theme in organizing efforts is that the powerful rarely voluntarily offer anything of real value to the less privileged. Only through collective action, confrontation, and conflict can the less powerful demonstrate they are a force to be reckoned with and "win" concessions from elites (Alinsky, 1971). In Alinsky's model for social action, oppressed groups first choose specific, "winnable" issues to energize and inspire the group's members. Wins on these issues show that these groups can be effective and help to establish that the community has the ability to influence an oppressive organization's decisions (Alinsky, 1971; Schutz & Sandy, 2011).

Youth organizing basically combines Alinsky's organizing ideology with the field of youth development, so it differs from adult community organizing because it also addresses many of the unique needs of youths (Lewis-Charp, Yu, & Soukamneuth, 2006). Though youth organizing has some similarities to Boyte's (2002) PA model, youth organizing confronts oppression more directly, using often-contentious tactics developed by Alinsky (1971) to empower citizens. Common tactics include public actions that garner media attention and gain further support such as rallies, marches, and sit-ins. And choosing winnable campaigns is critical in youth organizing. Securing "small wins" early in a campaign is often seen as a way to build confidence in youth and instilling the belief that social change is possible and keeping youth engaged (Lewis-Charp, Yu, & Soukamneuth, 2006).

Political education is also a significant part of most youth organizing models. Political education is designed to help youths understand social conditions and their causes while identifying the social problems that are most important to them. This often involves youths not only identifying a winnable social issue but also researching the problem and becoming experts on it (Dingerson & Hay, 2001). Youth organizers teach young people political skills similar to those usually taught in traditional PA groups, like democratic participation, negotiation, and research skills. However, they also add additional skills and tactics, such as strategies for challenging people with power (Sherwood & Dressner, 2004).

Finally, an analysis of power plays a central role in youth organizing. Both in youth organizing and in traditional PA, members often begin by asking questions about who has power/resources in the community, how those with power can be challenged, how power can be taken from the powerful, and what power youths already have (Sherwood & Dressner, 2004). Analyzing power includes mapping an environment to outline all of the various stakeholders in relation to a community issue (Hildreth, 2000). Youth organizing differs from PA in that it often seeks to develop an us-vs.-them contrast, allowing clarity in identifying the opposition (Alinsky, 1971; Dingerson & Hay, 2001; Sherwood & Dressner, 2004). Below, Table 1 lays out the key distinctions of the youth community engagement strategies discussed above.

BETWEEN PA AND YOUTH ORGANIZING

Our hope was to give students at SACHS more authentic experiences with dealing with the actual barriers they will likely encounter during real-world community change efforts rather than relying on the powerful to collaborate with them. The more progressive environment of SACHS gave us the opportunity to explore the potential benefits and limitations of trying to engage students in youth organizing, modified PA projects in an urban high school.

Of course, the PA projects were more inhibited than many nonschool youth organizing projects by the realities of their school placement and our responsibility to protect students' safety and educational outcomes. More radical activities that were likely to lead to retaliation against students were not possible. Furthermore, our PA groups were not encouraged to recruit and mobilize large numbers of new allies against the powerful over time (see Table 1).

What we ended up with, in different ways, were efforts that lay somewhere between PA and youth organizing. Exactly how this played out depended upon the coaches in the individual groups.

Year Two: Key Interventions and a New Approach

To some extent, our pedagogical approach in Year Two can be described in retrospect as an attempt to maintain students' engagement throughout their projects while at the same time respond to the catch-22 described by Kahne and Westheimer in their 2006 article. Our overall goal was to find pragmatic ways for students to respond to the actual limitations in power and resources that small groups of youths have and to do so during school-based community engagement efforts without thereby destroying the students' sense of their own political efficacy.

Providing the PA groups with more or less achievable projects to choose from in Year Two emerged as a solution to the problems we faced in Year One. Thinking small and choosing winnable issues to contest in order to give participants greater confidence is a key characteristic in youth organizing. By providing students with doable projects to choose from, our aim was to help counter-balance the sense of hopelessness that Kahne and Westheimer (2006) identified in students when they are pushed to challenge barriers

Table 1: Key distinctions of youth community engagement strategies

	Service-learning	Public achievement	Youth organizing
Location in schools/ student participation	School-based, often integrated into regular curriculum/ required	School-based, usually held after school/volunteer	Non-school-based/volunteer
Community engagement form	-Creates charitable acts -Does not engage directly with power -Views targets as clients in need of help	-Creates public work -Forms collaborative relationships with authorities and others - Has some conflicting efforts -Rarely uses contentious tactics	-Creates public work -Forms collaborative relationships with authorities and others - Has some conflicting efforts -Challenges oppression more directly -Uses contentious tactics -Has us-against-them mentality
Political education	-Is largely apolitical -Usually does not examine root causes of problems or power relationships	-Teaches political skills (collaborative use of power, conflict resolution, research, negotiation, etc.) -Examines power relationships	-Teaches political skills (collaborative use of power, conflict resolution, research, negotiation, etc.) -Examines power relationships -Challenges the powerful
Project development	-Usually set up for students -Offers prearranged success -Avoids barriers -Is directed by teacher	-Student chooses broad issues to address/research -Student develop own doable projects -Led by youths; adult coaches facilitate	-Student chooses broad issues to address/research -Student develop own doable projects -Led by youth, often with adult allies
Project length	-Limited to school schedule, short-term	Usually short-term	Often sustained, ongoing efforts
Recruits new allies	No	No	Yes
Student risk	No significant risk	Low risk	Retaliation risk

with no clear pathway to success, and that we encountered during Year One. In contrast with Year One, the team developed a series of predefined topics combined with examples of doable projects that students could choose from, based in part on what we learned about students' general interests in Year One. These included efforts to educate middle-school children about how to work with the police (that would bring students in contact with the police), an effort to convince the school administration to allow SACHS to run its own lunch program (we knew the administration opposed this, but we also knew they would at least be willing to engage with students); and, in the case studied here, to create social awareness through the painting of a mural (which would involve finding someone in the community willing to negotiate with the students for a public mural space). While we solicited other ideas, most students chose to participate in one of the preselected projects.

This strategy runs counter to how PA groups typically develop their projects, as well as to the way youth organizing groups work (see Table 1). And we understand that providing preconstructed projects for students has the potential to reduce the learning students are supposed to do in developing their own efforts. But there are limits to what small groups meeting once a week can develop, given the depths of complexity in the world as it is. Further, our students felt disempowered before they even arrived in our PA groups—so it did not take much to trigger a sense of deep hopelessness. Our coaches also had limited knowledge about the communities in our city.

Perhaps more expert coaches with more experience facilitating these types of groups could have made the fully democratic approach work. Whether it is the answer we want or not, however, this compromise may be the most realistic answer to the challenges revealed during Year One and that were also evident within Kahne and Westheimer's (2006) analysis. In fact, Alinsky (1971) argued that apathy was the result of a lack of realistic avenues for action: "If people feel they don't have the power to change a bad situation, then they do not think about it. Why start figuring out how you are going to spend a million dollars—unless you want to engage in fantasy?"

As organizers know, developing a feasible "issue" to work on is one of the most challenging parts of organizing (Schutz & Sandy, 2011). And neither our coaches nor the students were expert organizers. Simply *hoping* that groups would be able to find an accessible entry point for action in the realm of power had proved unworkable during Year One. Our anticipation at the start of Year Two was that students would use these projects as *starting* points, adapting and appropriating them to their own particular goals and the challenges they encountered along the way, while at the same time prevent the paralysis that occurred in Year One. In other words, we hoped that the projects would provide enough of a sense of possibility that they would catalyze action.

We also attempted to connect each project to a local community organization to help compensate for the coaches' lack of resources and expertise. In the case examined here, the graffiti group connected with True Skool, a local youth and urban arts organization that focuses on empowering young people to change their communities by using hip hop and graffiti art to get their voices heard.

Finally, coaches were provided with more guidance about when and how they should shift between "directive teacher" and "facilitator" type roles within the context of "student-led" projects. We added the concept of "jump starting," which was designed to help coaches understand when they needed to intervene to keep the projects moving forward. When a coach observed a group encountering barriers and beginning to stall, it was the coach's responsibility to take charge as needed to get things moving again (e.g., calling an official who fails to get back to students). The directive to jump-start when necessary essentially gave coaches permission to do work *for* the students when they felt it was necessary, helping students get back on track before returning the projects to them. With this strategy we attempted to strike a balance between letting students struggle alone with real-world obstacles and doing everything for them.

The general instruction given to Year Two coaches was to "engage their groups with power" in one way or another. Our hope was that this instruction would help lead some of the groups to face-to-face encounters with the realities of power in society—in at least a small way. What exactly this instruction would eventually mean and how the coaches would interpret it given the constraints of the school context was something we were curious about.

How Did the Groups Respond in Year Two?

In other work, in review elsewhere, we discuss the transition between Year One and Year Two and our broader experiences with this project in much more detail. Here, we focus in on the work of the group that exemplified best how students might find a path between the Scylla of fake empowerment and the Charybdis of cynical despair: this graffiti art project intended to create a public mural that expressed students' feelings about local community problems.

emphasizing power engagement
and doable projects as dual curricular goals
Given the exploratory nature of the work we were doing, each PA coach responded differently to being instructed to "engage with power" and had different interpretations of what a "good" PA project should look like and do. The graffiti group coach made sense of this instruction by envisioning a good project as one that "would allow [his] group to learn how to effectively break down bureaucratic barriers" and "engage with power." In carrying out this vision, the coach intended to allow his students to struggle with institutional obstacles on their own—before he would consider intervening in any way.

Each project was limited to some degree by the policies that come with operating in a public charter high school, however flexible those may be relative to other school settings. The projects were also limited by the amount of school time participants had to work on their projects—about one school semester. And each project was limited by the small number of students working on them. Nevertheless, the graffiti group adapted its goals to the environment it was operating in and discovered pragmatic solutions to the obstacles encountered. This involved the students learning to find alternative ways around obstacles. Providing the students with

an opportunity to choose a more doable project to work on was part of this coach's effort and helped offset the frustration and paralysis other groups had experienced in Year One.

COMING UP AGAINST POWER

The graffiti group encountered institutional resistance from the beginning as it attempted to work with city government officials in securing a public site for the mural. The coach stated early on that he wanted his group "to learn how to engage with institutional power" during their project even if their attempts to engage with city officials were ultimately unsuccessful. Initially, with encouragement from the coach, the students showed initiative, persistence, creativity, and political tact in their efforts to persuade city officials to work with them. For example, after several unanswered phone calls to one official who represents a district in the inner city, two of the students composed and sent this e-mail on behalf of their entire group:

> *We are a group of students looking for a public space in your district to display a community mural in. We would like to work with you in finding this space. This mural would show others the community problems we have in our neighborhoods and hopefully get people's attention enough to help try and solve them. Can we meet with you at our school to discuss our plans further and show you what our mural would look like?*

A couple days later, the representative sent back a message that said, "Please be patient, I'll get back to you later this week." He never did get back to the group. Though highly discouraged with being repeatedly ignored, three of the students continued to make attempts to contact him and a different city official.

Predictably, the students became frustrated when officials would not meet with them or return phone calls or e-mails. The frustration students felt is perhaps best illustrated by this angry comment from one student to the rest of the group:

> *Fuck [Mr. City Alderman]! We don't need him anyway. This is a waste of time trying to work with these city government people. They're no fuckin' different than cops and teachers. All they do is play their little games. Let's find another way to do this shit!*

In response, the group moved away from trying to directly engage with the city and began advocating for a change in project strategy:

> *[Student 1] They ain't gonna let us paint in the city anywhere, no way! Those people [city officials] act like we're all thugs. I'm telling you, we would be better off doing this a different way than trying to work with these folks. [Student 2 interjects] Maybe we can find someone cool [a cooperative business or nonprofit organization] to let us do it [the mural] on their building or something.*

In this way, the graffiti group responded to institutional resistance by moving toward a more pragmatic solution for displaying their mural. The students came to the conclusion that trying to gain the city's support seemed futile given their limited resources but that alternative solutions, which bypassed city officials, might be available.

While learning about the difficulties involved in dealing with real-world political obstacles during social action activities is important, we argue that learning how to sometimes *negotiate around obstacles* in the face of strong opposition is also an important skill to learn. The ability to find *alternative and pragmatic solutions* to difficult problems is certainly an important political skill to develop for the real world, too, even if it sometimes results in avoiding dealing directly with institutional power in the end. In this case, the graffiti project adapted to the resistance from city government by eventually collaborating with a youth urban arts organization (True Skool) that helped support the project's efforts.

NEGOTIATING AROUND OBSTACLES

Unable to sway city government officials to help them in securing a permanent public site for their mural, the students found that their project began to stall altogether. However, the group changed its strategy and was able to find a pragmatic solution for their site problem. The coach "temporarily took charge" of the project and connected his group to True Skool (TS), the youth urban arts organization introduced above. TS agreed to collaborate with the students in developing a more doable project to work on. In fact, a TS representative almost immediately helped steer the students toward a more realistic alternative to dealing with city officials. She suggested:

> *Trying to work with [Alderman] is definitely not the way to go. Trust me. We have tried before and never gotten very far, always gonna get back to ya. You know what I'm saying, right? He's got issues and I guess more important things going on. As far as some of the other aldermen, you can try but I wouldn't expect much from them either. You would be better off asking some neighborhood property owners or nonprofit organizations. I can help you with that if you want. Or maybe we can even find a place outside of our building.*

Most of the students were greatly encouraged by her offer to help connect the group's project to local property owners/organizations or to the True Skool building itself. One even said, "how 'bout we just make it outside here [at True Skool], this will be a great spot! Lots of people drive by here." Finding a public space had been a major hurdle for this group to get over. However, the coach worried that (from his field notes):

> *If finding a space for the group's mural was made too easy by True Skool staff, students would not learn how to engage with power . . . They will learn that they need others to break down bureaucratic barriers for them or that they can get what they want by simply asking authorities for it.*

The TS staff used their graffiti art expertise, knowledge about local community issues, activist identities, and social capital to help the students learn how to navigate around the obstacles they encountered. A TS staff artist perhaps illustrates this best when he said:

> *The most important thing you all need to learn from all this is that you're not powerless out there. You have voices and there are different*

ways to use them and this [graffiti art] is just one way. It is one way to make people with power listen to your concerns about your community. What I mean by this is that we can also help you [both materially and with their local community expertise] use graffiti [legally] in your community to give you a voice about the things that both piss you off and that you hope to change about your neighborhoods. We see it as a way [for you] to creatively protest the bad things that are going on where you live, show the positive things, and to make people visually listen to you. You all can make your selves heard like this too.

The group, in collaboration with TS, circumvented city officials by deciding to paint the mural on large wooden panels to make the mural portable. The students later, and on their own, negotiated with TS to gain permission to temporarily display their mural outside the youth organization itself. In fact, the students worked with TS and completed their mural well after the PA coach stopped participating in the project. Thus, in important ways the students took ownership of their project and completed the mural largely on their own.

After completing the project, one student explained:

Last year [in PA] we just sat around and talked about [community] problems but this year we found a way [making a portable mural and working with a youth organization on a space] to do something about the problems that we only talked about last year and then we took a stand [publicly displaying local community problems in a mural].

The mural, titled "Liberty for All but Not for Us?" challenged citizens and the powerful to "visually listen" to students' grievances about social inequality and police oppression in their neighborhoods. While the group may have turned away from dealing more directly with power, it learned how to navigate around political obstacles and achieve its goals anyway, by successfully collaborating with a youth organization—arguably important real-world political skills to learn for the future. Simply getting constituents and authorities to listen to people's grievances can be an important political skill to acquire for students engaged in social action activities (Boyte, 2002; Dingerson & Hay, 2001; Hildreth, 2000). In the end, one student expressed the graffiti group's feelings of empowerment this way:

This is a real busy street! When people have to drive by or look at something almost everyday it sticks in their minds and they have to listen to you. But when you just tell them how you feel about something, they just ignore you!

Conclusions: Beyond the Catch-22

While the graffiti group in Year Two eventually turned away from engaging directly with real-world institutional power, it seems problematic to frame this as essentially a "bad thing," as some researchers have suggested (Abowitz, 1999; Kahne & Westheimer, 2006; Sullivan, 2002). Learning how to deal effectively with real-world institutional barriers is arguably an important skill for

students to learn in school. But as Kahne and Westheimer noted, without a clear pathway to success students are likely to develop a sense of hopelessness about actually changing many community problems. On the other hand, "setting everything up" for students working on community engagement activities or having them work only on "charitable acts" may mislead them about the reality of politics and power in our society. It may teach students that most social problems can be solved simply through forming collaborative relationships with institutional elites—which is rarely the case in real-world community change efforts (Alinsky, 1971).

However, the graffiti group discovered pragmatic solutions to the obstacles they encountered during their project. The graffiti group actually did engage with powerful individuals and institutions—city government and city officials. Instead of trying to overcome this power, they found ways to navigate around barriers.

In this way, we believe that they were able to transcend, to some extent, Kahne and Westheimer's (2006) catch-22. They had a relatively authentic experience of encountering power, and they were able to accomplish something that felt important to them without needing to overcome this power. And, in fact, this kind of creative strategic maneuvering would seem an important political skill for students to learn in a world where they are usually on the side of the less powerful. As a result of this maneuvering, rather than developing a sense of hopelessness or drifting toward service-learning, as many projects did in Year One, the students of graffiti group from Year Two worked toward empowering themselves and others, in different ways, to intervene in the social conditions that impact their communities.

These findings suggest that a more flexible approach may be needed for dealing with issues of power during urban, school-based social action programs, particularly if our overall goal is to increase students' future engagement in social action. The reality is that given the limitations to completing most school-based projects and the limited resources and social capital that inner-city students have for dealing with institutions, coaches and other adult allies probably need to continue to take a proactive role in assuring the smooth running of many social action projects. The question is how to do this without miseducating students about the realities of unequal power in the world around them. Providing the students with opportunities to choose doable projects that had realistic goals was part of our effort to enhance students' overall engagement and confidence. As we had hoped, students did, in fact, end up appropriating and adapting these starting points for their own purposes and in response to their own interests. More clarity about when coaches should "take charge" and when they should depend on the students to take ownership also helped. Overall, a pedagogical strategy that helps students learn how to creatively navigate around institutional obstacles to reach a goal may be the most practical strategy for addressing Kahne and Westheimer's catch-22 during school-based social action projects.

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