

# Students Have Their Own Minds

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

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### ABSTRACT

In response to the authors' work on finding a more pragmatic approach to dealing with power, this commentary calls into question the possibility of a preestablished agenda by the researchers, who struggled to engage high school students. There might have been a case of overly ambitious expectations at work; also, the authors confess to being in the school only once a week and that their students were themselves struggling to find their place in a new charter school with an emphasis on social action. This response challenges the authors to reexamine their wish to engage students with institutional power by suggesting that they consider their own positions of power inside the school and classroom. Lastly, the response posits that rather than focusing on the limitations of service-learning and/or public achievement, which may make them appear as less desirable models for social action, we should consider such approaches as providing the very thing—small wins—the authors sought in and that educators should prepare their students for more substantial engagements with power.

**I**N THEIR PAPER, the authors describe their struggles to coach high school students at Social Action Charter High School in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, to design projects that would help them authentically engage with power and people in power (Fehrman & Shutz, 2011). The authors' stated reason for creating this project is to expand on previous research that found that civic activism improves students' connections to their communities and to the larger world. It also builds qualities such as self-esteem, political efficacy, and academic engagement and performance. The authors are mindful that social action projects might enhance students' belief in their own capacity to solve community problems, but the work of teachers and other adults who clear the way of any “significant barriers to success” also might wind up “misleading students about the realities of unequal power in society and create a catch-22” (p. 1). In this paper, students don't have confidence and the desire to participate in social action to better the future because they have a lack of authentic, real-world engagement with institutional power.

Borrowing the concept first advanced by Joseph Kahne and Joel Westheimer (2006), the authors use the term *catch-22* as a conceptual framework for their work with one high school group. The paper identifies a number of other groups also working in the school at the same time. It seems like a missed opportunity to ignore an analysis of contrasting data from all of the groups and instead focus only on the progress of this one group. In the second

year of this project, students and researchers found a middle ground, as well as a strong creative manner, to accomplish tasks. The students learn to negotiate around, rather than directly overcome, some power barriers to achieve a modicum of success. To build their case, the authors assess different strategies for youth community engagement. The first example they select is service-learning (S-L). Their appraisal seems overly general, basically decrying S-L as being apolitical, having no real connection to macro issues, and being an example of a way for those with advantages to provide charity to those less advantaged. It is not difficult to find examples of poorly done or not especially reflective service-learning projects, and there are a plethora of projects that are apolitical in design and intent. Certainly in public (noncharter) schools, the standards-driven curriculum often limits and fixes the scope of how S-L can function in a given class.

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Educators and practitioners such as the ones who recently debated this theme on the Education Liberation blog would be quick to say that quality reflection is an essential component of any S-L program, and in particular that it connects service to the larger social, economic, and political problems. This is not to say that reflection is a panacea. It can be facile and self-aggrandizing. Still, a wider search by the authors of this paper would have found any number of countervailing examples where S-L took on successfully and purposefully strong political and social issues and connected service to the wider society and change efforts (Sylvester, 2010; Williams, 2002).

The researchers are more enthusiastic toward the second strategy, public achievement (PA), because its emphasis on public work brings the students closer to the kinds of project-based experiences that will help them succeed in real-world activities. It is also the type of social action that the school in this study earlier had selected to integrate into its regular project-based curriculum. Still, the authors are critical of what they term “traditional PA” because, they argue, such programs tend to be too cooperative (as if this is a bad thing) and assume that all actors, including institutional and other power elites, will work together and get along. Ultimately, they find PA not to be real-world enough.

Lastly, they arrive at a youth organizing model derived from the Saul Alinsky school of grassroots organizing. This strategy appeals to them because not only does it include an analysis of power but, at least when translated to a youth organizing concept, it can contain small wins that build the confidence in youths and a belief that their efforts can produce social change. This is the strategy these researchers believe holds the best likelihood of keeping students connected to and ultimately engaged with institutional power. In the process of actually facilitating these projects, the researchers learn that there is some distance that needs to be bridged between their own ambitions for this project and the lived experiences of their students.

After the first year, the authors acknowledge that their initial attempts as coaches failed to engage their students in taking social action. As a result, they alter their approach in the second year. I applaud them for hanging in a second year. Not all research teams would. However, even two years is quite small in efforts of school or other educational institution reform. During that first year, the school itself was new and experiencing growing pains outside of this research project. Many students did not grasp how this school was different from previous ones and were suspended. The authors also felt that during the first year the students’ ideas for projects were too out of reach and as a result left them frustrated and alienated. So rather than stay with a more democratic classroom where students were the co-constructors of their own projects, the coaches opt to offer what they term “doable” projects in the second year, so as to allow students to experience small wins and gain a greater overall confidence, which in turn might move them closer to their goal of helping students “respond to the actual limitations in power and resources that small groups have during school-based community engagement efforts” (p. 5). The authors state that “thinking small and choosing winnable issues” (p.5) are key characteristics in youth organizing and serve to help build young

people’s confidence in their own political efficacy. Incremental steps and little wins are akin to the curricular and instructional scaffolding that educators construct in most classrooms when attempting to introduce new ideas and concepts, and are part of thoughtful pedagogy.

I certainly identify with these researchers’ struggles, having labored myself in the early years of building an idealistic charter school where students could really become the architects of their own education. I recall my own experiences in the scenarios these authors share from their first year, the suspensions and the lack of student engagement. Teenagers are strong-willed individuals who don’t necessarily make life easy for adults, especially those adults who are directly in charge of them. I appreciate the coaches’ tinkering with their course to make it more accessible and perhaps more fun for their students. I really relate to the challenges they saw and experienced, and I respect their naming them in their write-up. Too often in academic papers the messiness of the field experience is bleached away, and it is refreshing to read how these educators come to terms with some of their own struggles.

Quite frequently a “re-culturing” of a school has to occur if restructuring is to happen (Fullan, 2001; Corbett, 1991). Just because this was a new charter school did not mean that youths (and adults) left behind their old models, paradigms, and expectations of what school, teaching, and learning look like. I am fairly certain the authors understood this. In charter schools where social action is built into the overall focus of the school, such as the one described in this paper, it may be unrealistic to expect students who have had little or no experience with social action and voice in their own education to know how to operate within those parameters. Some unlearning of old habits and beliefs has to take place—educators and students need to clear the conceptual and institutional brush in order to see new learning possibilities. Meeting once a week, even over two years, is perhaps an insufficient time frame in which to see substantive change occur. The authors never mention their relationships with the rest of the school. It seems plausible, given that PA projects and classrooms existed across the school, that other members of the school community—adults and youths alike—might have had some insights into and experiences with how to best engage students, but there is no mention of the school serving as a resource for the coaches’ enterprise. It is always challenging as an infrequent outsider to a school community to establish rapport and build trust, and help with gaining entry from those already on the inside is a good strategy.

Despite their criticism of PA, these authors saw that the progressive environment of the school provided opportunities and a platform for introducing youth organizing into the curriculum. Discussing their work in year two, they report that their coaches received guidance (from their own staff) on when to be directive and when to facilitate, though they always had the overall mission to “engage their groups with power in one way or another” (p. 6) While reading their account, I question the pedagogical reasoning behind this decision. The authors do not link their goals back with the expected benefits from engaging in civic activism. The absence of rationale for why students should care about engaging with power might

help explain some of the resistance the researchers encountered, and perhaps when students did imagine engaging with powerful forces, as in year one, why their reach might have exceeded their grasp. Some might argue that the behavioral problems reported in the first year are examples of these students engaging with power, if not in socially acceptable ways, and that might have pleased someone like Saul Alinsky. The lack of explanation for why students should adopt this type of schooling also hints at the possibility that this group of researchers entered with its own preestablished agenda.

In a way, the role and the position of the researchers can be seen as an institutional force exerting its own power over these students. Teachers, and in this case the study's researchers as well, form one arena of power and authority always right in front of the students. Savvy student might have called this into question and engaged directly with the power dynamics inside these classrooms and projects. Perhaps they did, but if so the authors do not acknowledge or identify that in their paper, and certainly such student engagement does not seem as fitting with the researchers' conceptual framework.

I think it is important to tread carefully within an analysis of unequal power when the people facilitating the inquiry are faculty and graduate students from a research university and their charges are low-income, largely minority high school students. One group has the freedom to come and go inside that environment while the other lives there and calls it home. One group has power and the other does not. It is one thing to be a researcher in an observer role, but when the researcher becomes a participant, even a coach (i.e., leader), new dynamics are introduced and should be examined. Further, for adults who admittedly didn't know the neighborhood and its community assets and who were there for a very finite amount of time, there is something a little off in the directive that they would be getting students to "engage with power in one way or another" for the first time. Who is to say that these students were not already engaging with power in one way or another? It is not clear from this paper the extent to which coaches listened this possibility. Even though they claim that the nature of their work is exploratory, the authors stray close to being missionary-like in their approach of bringing students to engage with power, acting as if these students didn't already have these experiences in their own and their communities' everyday lives.

Maybe the authors and I are making too much out of this, when another explanation may be far simpler. It could be that this university group dramatically overestimated what was possible with a semester-long course that met once a week and was led by less experienced facilitators. But it does seem, especially given the resistance they encountered in year one, that there may not be another catch (a catch-23?) at work—that is, how the researchers could overcome their own agenda, however well meaning and educative in theory, in order to be clear on what the students genuinely valued and wanted to pursue. Power analyses and healthy confrontations with people and organizations in power are all well and good, but if that is not where students are coming from, if those constructs do not animate and correspond with their curiosities and interests, then it might be that the adults are leading from their

own interests and discovering less traction than they want. This is what hints at a preestablished agenda at work.

So much of what these researchers describe is also what challenged me in my work as a practitioner, and their sincere interest in introducing students to ways to engage with power is something that resonates with my own personal politics. However, I think they may have gone about it a bit too ambitiously, something they seem to recognize in their second year. Perhaps they should have offered short-term service-learning projects with solid reflective components or PA projects that built confidence but were collaborative in nature as early foundational steps (i.e., small wins) before launching into a more concentrated engagement with institutional power. At the conclusion of their work, the authors state:

*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. (p. 8)*

The authors have that partially correct. I think the real lessons here are, in the Deweyian sense, that students already come to school with interests of their own and even with their own previous engagement with institutional power. Those educators who wish to work with those variables would do well to provide conditions in which to listen carefully to where students are at. Along with that, when it comes to providing authentic experiences in the real world, all students, and especially those who have little or no access to power, need guidance and help in how to deal with power. Opportunity structure theory (Keeter et al., 2002) provides a helpful frame. Opportunity structure essentially recognizes the value added by access to people, organizations, and experiences that might otherwise be unattainable. This framework looks at how urban youths, who have limited access to opportunities, expand their spheres of influence—personally and civically—through the guidance and political resources that others, such as members of a university, afford them. Adults who serve as coaches and facilitators to youths could and probably should assist students in building strategic partners, cultivating relationships with key allies and otherwise knowing when to lead while getting out of the way (Mittra, 2005).

The authors appear to have learned through experience that there is some middle ground for engaging with institutional power. Advocates of high-quality S-L and PA already know this, and even organizing groups that use Alinsky-style methods recognize the importance of building relationships as a means for achieving their wins. As mentioned earlier, I empathize with the struggle these researchers had, but they also did not give themselves much time and space to take on the scope and depth of the issues and to get to know who their students were. As a result, they saw only one of their student groups arrive at a modest, albeit genuine, success in

the effort to engage with power. At the outset, the authors explain that their reasons for engaging in this project were linked to previous research that said that civic activism improves students' connections to their communities and to the larger world. It also builds qualities such as self-esteem, political efficacy, and academic engagement and performance. Their findings offer some alternative to the catch-22 that Kahne and Westheimer warned against but do not touch on the connection between the students' social action work and their own academic engagement, self-esteem, and performance in school. Progress and success along these lines will go a long way toward better equipping students, especially those with limited access to social and political capital, to engage with institutional power in the future.

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