

## **EDUCATION FOR DEMOCRACY BY YOUNG PEOPLE IN COMMUNITY-BASED ORGANIZATIONS**

*Schools ain't teaching us nothin related to  
Solv'n our own problems, knowwhatimsayin?  
Ain't teachin us how to get crack out of the ghetto  
They ain't teachin us how to stop the police  
from murdering us and brutalizing us,  
They ain't teachin us how to get our rent paid  
They ain't teachin our families how to interact  
better with each other....  
...so school don't even relate to us.*

Dead Prez, "they schools"

At a time when many young Americans have reduced their civic engagement, and public schools have de-emphasized their civic mission, some youth are joining together and taking initiative at the community level, and some community-based organizations are establishing education and training programs to promote their participation. Because these efforts often originate in communities of color in economically disinvested areas whose young people are arising, they have significance for the future of "education for democracy" in a society whose population is changing in its social and cultural composition.

There is justifiable concern about lower levels of voting by young people, but this does not necessarily mean that youth are disengaged from democracy. On the contrary, young people in low-income communities of color are finding new ways of democratic participation. Young people in these communities have a more critical view of democracy and, accordingly, require education and training which are appropriate for their situation. As part of a long tradition within education, they are working to bridge the gap between the theory and practice of democracy in American society.

This paper provides perspectives on education for democracy by young people in community-based organizations. It draws upon analysis of educational efforts by organizations affiliated with Lifting New Voices, a national project to increase youth participation in organizational development and community change in the South Bronx, Mississippi Delta, Albuquerque, East Oakland, and other areas. Each effort is distinct, but together they share commitment to civic engagement and suggest a set of principles for preparing young people for active participation in a democratic society.

## **ENGAGEMENT AND EDUCATION**

Civic engagement is essential to a democratic society, but many young Americans have reduced their engagement in public affairs. Social scientists document that Americans are becoming more socially isolated, removed from closely-knit communities, and detached from civic life. Data show that young people in particular are less interested in politics; less informed about current events; and less likely to attend public meetings, contribute to political causes, contact public officials, or vote in elections, than earlier generations (National Commission on Civic Renewal, 1998; Putnam, 2000).

At the same time as social scientists document youth civic disengagement, other young people are joining together and taking initiative in communities nationwide. As expressions of participation, they are mobilizing for civil rights, cleaning up the environment, rehabilitating houses for homeless families, and organizing against violence in the schools. They are serving on agency boards, lobbying city council members, and planning programs of their own choosing. These initiatives are youth-led, adult-led, or intergenerational, and many of them originate communities of color in socially disadvantaged and economically disinvested areas (Alexander, 2001; Checkoway, et al., forthcoming; Finn & Checkoway, 1998; Harvey, 1998; Irby, et al., 1999; Johnson, et al, 1998; McGillicuddy, n.d.; Mullahey, et al., 1999).

These initiatives represent a “new politics” which is stirring nationwide, especially in communities of color in socially disadvantaged and economically disinvested areas which are traditionally underrepresented in voting and other mainstream forms of political participation. As the United States population changes and people of African, Asian, and Hispanic descent become the majority, these initiatives will have special significance and call for a “new civics” for a more diverse democracy.

Education can contribute to civic engagement, but many public schools have de-emphasized their civic mission. Whereas schools once were concerned with “education for democracy,” today it is hard to find institutions with consistent commitment to this purpose. Few faculty members consider civic engagement central to their work, and few curricula emphasize the competencies needed for community empowerment, especially empowerment of traditionally underrepresented groups. School curricula do teach about the branches of government, how bills become laws, and voting in elections, but content of this type is not equally relevant for all groups in society. It is not surprising that

some of these groups are organizing for educational reform (Cervone, 2002).

In contrast, some community-based organizations have established their own education and training programs to prepare young people for civic engagement. These grassroots groups have assessed training needs, formulated curricular objectives, developed course content, and identified individuals to facilitate the learning process. They tend to offer some combination of political education and community organizing; conduct classes, workshops, retreats, and summer programs; and employ experiential education, group process activities, and problem-solving exercises in real communities. They represent a “new civics” which is consistent with the tradition of education for social justice (Ayers, 1998; Coates, 1994), the praxis ideas of reflection and action in the work of Paulo Friere (1970) and Myles Horton (1998), and the earlier educational principles of John Dewey (1916) and Jane Addams (1902).

These education and training programs build on an infrastructure of intermediary organizations and support networks, such as the Center for Third World Organizing (1999) which places minority activists in field-based internships; School of Unity and Liberation (n.d.) which trains young women of color and low-income youth to become organizers; and the Institute for Community Research (Berg, 2006; Schensul, 1997) and Youth in Focus (2003) which promote youth participation in research, evaluation, and planning.

Some organizations have prepared publications and training manuals which provide political content and practical skills. For example, Alliance for Justice has prepared a guide to youth-led social change with information on planning campaigns, conducting meetings, and working with media (Dingerson and Hay 1998); Constitutional Rights Foundation and Close Up Foundation have created a civic action guide with information on youth participation in planning their own community projects; Youth on Board (1999) has produced a publication on how to develop youth-adult partnerships and involve young people in organizational decision-making; and YouthBuild USA has published a workbook with a definitive statement on adultism and key elements of leadership development for young people. These types of publications are numerous enough that a recent bibliography of resources for youth organizers has more than 25 single-space pages (Richards-Schuster et al. 2002).

These initiatives are increasing, and can be expected to increase in the years ahead, but have received relatively little attention as a subject of study. They represent curricular content which has special significance for a society in which many young people appear disengaged from

democracy, and especially for a more multicultural society whose young people are arising. More knowledge of these initiatives as a subject of study will strengthen their quality as a field of practice.

### **LIFTING NEW VOICES**

Lifting New Voices is a national demonstration project designed to increase the participation of young people 15-21 years old in organizational development and community change. Coordinated by the Center for Community Change with funding from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, LNV aims to demonstrate what happens when young people and adults work together to organize themselves, plan programs, and become more central to planning and decision-making (Checkoway, et al., forthcoming; Checkoway & Richards-Schuster, 2001).

Six community-based organizations were selected for participation in the project, and a participatory research evaluation research process enabled youth and adults to document their activities and assess their experiences. Each organization had a community-based evaluator who works with an evaluation committee of youth and adults to facilitate the process.

As expressions of participation, these organizations have undertaken a wide range of youth-led, adult-led, or intergenerational initiatives. For example, we have documented efforts by Mississippi youth to organize around segregation in schools and communities; Albuquerque youth to address economic injustice and environmental racism in communities of color; Oakland youth to mobilize against the Mayor's proposal to establish a military charter school; and South Bronx youth to establish a Democracy Multiplied Zone to recruit 2000 young people for a youth-led movement for community change.

Each of these organizations is distinct in its objectives, but together they share a commitment to education and training to prepare young people to participate effectively in a democratic society. Because the public schools have de-emphasized this purpose and often neglect theories of democracy that are relevant for low-income youth of color, these community-based organizations have established education and training programs of their own. Following are brief summaries of these programs and selected examples of their educational efforts:

#### **Citizens for Community Improvement of Des Moines (CCI) Des Moines, Iowa**

CCI, which organizes low-income people for social and economic changes at the neighborhood level, has established Youth Working for Positive

Change (YWPC) to build its youth constituency. CCI staff and YWPC leaders have conducted a youth organizing retreat to develop leadership and provide practical skills in community organizing. Young people learned how to formulate strategy, identify issues, develop constituencies, select tactics, and take direct action. One outcome was an immediate confrontation with a business establishment that had shown disrespect to young people, and the business responded with an apology and accommodation to the demands (Welsh, 2001).

**Direct Action for Rights & Equality (DARE)  
Providence, Rhode Island**

DARE, which organizes low-income families in communities of color, has established Seeds of Change for youth leadership development, political education, and organizer training as part of an overall campaign effort to improve the quality of education in the schools. With guidance from a youth organizer, youth leaders receive a stipend and offer bi-weekly workshops with content on oppression, sexism, and discrimination, in addition to education and welfare systems and the prison complex. Sessions include practical skills in community organizing, meeting facilitation, public speaking, reading and writing, preparing press releases, and recruiting people for action. Experiential exercises include role-plays, interactive games, analysis of rap lyrics, and hands-on door-knocking and petition drives in the community.

**People United for a Better Oakland (PUEBLO)  
Oakland, California**

PUEBLO, a multi-ethnic, multi-issue organization “working to take back power over our lives and our communities” in one of the nation’s most diverse cities, has formed Youth of Oakland United (YOU) to involve youth of color in the issues that affect them. Training promotes political education and community organizing, enabling youth to explore race, class, oppression, power, and other issues; as well as public speaking, creative writing, action research, and other organizing skills. Learning activities are highly experiential and culturally-competent, including games, role playing, team building, and problem solving exercises in the community. For example, Up the Hill Down the Hill enables young people many of whom have never left their neighborhoods or thought about the workings of poverty – to tour schools, parks, and recreation centers in the high income hills and low income flatlands of the city and, in so doing, introduces concepts of class consciousness and political inequality. As a form of popular education, they have organized a film festival for area youth to make presentations, including their own gentrification video which documents displacement of poor people and raises questions about social justice and the city (Aragon, 2001).

**Southern Echo**  
**Jackson, Mississippi**

Southern Echo develops grassroots leadership in African-American communities through education and training which emphasize intergenerational organizing and recognize that young people are future leaders. They have conducted a series of residential training schools addressing the specific needs of young people as they transition to young adulthood, including training on “organizing the community to stop the use of public education in suppressing the African-American community,” on organizing youth and adults around school issues and “educational battlegrounds” at the local and state levels, and on stopping the pattern through which young people pass “from school house to jail house.” One residential training enabled young people to share their school experiences with older participants, and provided them with special training in critical thinking, public speaking, meeting facilitation, program planning, and community organizing.

**Southwest Organizing Project (SWOP)**  
**Albuquerque, New Mexico**

SWOP, an activist organization whose members address economic injustice and environmental racism against communities of color, have formed Jovenes Unidos to organize young people and involve them in the organization. First, they involve a “core group” of youth members in informal meetings which include discussion of political issues, preparation for campaigns, field trips to communities, or other activities which develop leadership. Second, they conduct an intensive formal eight-week training which provides information on the history and culture of the Chicano movement and struggle against oppression, and practical skills in confronting the powerholders, using high-visibility conflict tactics, and other steps in community organizing. Youth participants who successfully complete the training become a youth organizer at SWOP, and then serve a summer internship in which they work with experienced practitioners and gain hands-on skills in youth-led campaigns. In a campaign against racist dress codes in a school district, for example, youth interns contacted students and parents, conducted community meetings, and organized rallies at the school board.

**Youth Force**  
**South Bronx, New York**

Youth Force, aiming to build “a youth-led movement for social change” in one of the nation’s lowest-income areas, employs education and training

of various types. For example, in-house trainings enable youth leaders and staff members to develop political theories and practical skills for their organizational work. Boot Camp is an intensive summer program to develop new community organizers who attend in-depth sessions and participate in projects in the streets, schools, and public housing projects. Street University offers a broad range of public workshops that feature political theory and practical skills in organizational development and community change, including sessions on political systems and empowerment strategies for young people. As forms of popular education, they produce graffiti art and public murals, videos on policy issues, and reports of research on youth conditions in juvenile justice and youth criminalization in the media (Figueroa, 2001).

### **CURRICULAR CONTENT FOR CIVIC DIVERSITY**

Each organization has its own approach to education and training, but together they share some similarities in curricular content.

These organizations all seek to prepare young people for active participation in a democratic society. They all convey that people – regardless of age, class, race, or other characteristics – can join together, take initiative, and create change in their communities.

Similar substantive knowledge and core concepts recur across curricula. All of them include information about “democracy” as a process in which people are able to participate; “politics” as the practice of power in institutions and decisions; “community” as a means of building capacity and solving problems; “organizing” as a vehicle for generating power and creating change over the long haul; and “planning” as a systematic way of setting goals and achieving them. Their emphasis on politics is not on formal governance through branches of government, voting in elections, political parties, or how a bill becomes a law; instead, they emphasize everyday elements of bringing people together, setting priorities, preparing action plans, and building support for implementation.

However, because these young people come from communities of color in economically disinvested areas, these political concepts are presented in ways which reflect their social location. Thus democracy is discussed as a process which is imperfect, politics as a system that benefits some people more than others, and community as a unit which differs in its resources from one area to another. There is discussion of power and powerlessness, privilege and oppression, dominance and subservience, equality and inequality, and wealth and poverty. This approach to political education is deeply rooted in democratic thought but contrasts sharply with the version which is taught in the schools.

Consistent with this approach, these programs place emphasis on the history and culture of their respective communities. Youth participation is viewed in terms of the particular history, traditions, values, struggles, and other experiences of their respective communities. Young people learn about past patterns of successful and unsuccessful participation, formal and nonformal power structures, and resources that are available and needed to take action for needed change. In so doing, these people become conscious of their own social and cultural identities, talk openly about race and class factors, and form the basis for a new cadre of community builders and change agents who are more cultural and intercultural in their sensibilities than earlier generations. Each program places special emphasis on the history of social justice movements, earlier civil rights movements in the nation's history.

These education and training programs provide young people with information and ideas about policy issues that affect their lives. Some issues affect people of all ages, such as abandoned buildings, lead poisoning, environmental racism, police brutality, and discrimination in public services.

Schools and school conditions are the most common issues across all communities. This is not surprising, because schools are places in which young people spend disproportionate time, and in which youth of color often find disparities and injustices.

Thus these curricula include content about racial tracking in class composition, school attendance policies, dress codes, transportation services, and police in schools, food choices in the cafeteria, sanitary bathroom conditions, and neighborhood safety. They also address the increasing criminalization of youth of color in the schools, expressed by "school to jailhouse," military charter schools, and the placement of armed police in the schools.

In communities like these, these are examples of curricula content which prepare young people for active participation in a democratic society (Cervone, 2002).

### **STRATEGIES AND SKILLS FOR COMMUNITY ORGANIZING**

These education and training programs strengthen strategies and skills for community organizing. Young people are taught how to mobilize protest demonstrations, organize groups for social and political action, and participate in the proceedings of public agencies. They learn how to advocate on the issues that concern them, increase public awareness, and develop their own community-based programs and services.

In addition, they learn how to assess community needs and strengths, bring people together, facilitate meetings, formulate action plans, and build support for what they want to accomplish. With new knowledge of meeting facilitation skills, for example, Oakland youth held sessions which challenged municipal officials decisions about school policies, New York youth held meetings with school administrators to protest the placement of police in the schools, and Providence youth conducted meetings with the superintendent to demand culturally sensitive curricula and with food contractors to improve the food in the cafeteria.

These are everyday skills for democratic participation, they are not normally taught in the schools, and it is not surprising that organizations in communities of color develop them.

### **EXPERIENTIAL EDUCATION AND NONFORMAL LEARNING**

These programs all employ experiential education and nonformal learning methods. In contrast to formal education in which teachers are lecturers and students are passive recipients of information, these programs are led by trainers who employ facilitation methods which engage learners in the learning process. Facilitation methods include openers and icebreakers, small group discussions, learning from field trips, working with pictures, role playing, and games and simulations. They involve participants in problem-solving and program-planning exercises, and place them in internships in which they “learn by doing” from real-world experiences in the community.

These organizations share similarities in their approaches to education and training, but each organization is distinct, and there are differences among them based upon the particular situation. Thus Southern Echo emphasizes education for intergenerational organizing and leadership development in an area whose history of racism has resulted in patterns of domination and control and shaped a culture of fear to be overcome by collective action. Or SWOP emphasizes education for using high-visibility conflict tactics and confronting the powerholders in an area whose youth of color face discrimination in schools, criminalization in malls, and toxic conditions in the environment.

Schools and school conditions are the most common among a wide range of policy issues, but there are differences in the content of these issues in each organization. In East Oakland, for example, young people organized a campaign against the mayor’s proposed military charter school; in Des Moines they organized a resident patrol to protect students in walking through an unsafe neighborhood; and in South Providence they organized around truancy courts and the lack of books

and bathroom facilities. Each campaign was related to schools, but young people required different content in each community.

These organizations all employ experiential education. For example, PUEBLO staff members employ highly experiential learning methods which progress over several sessions with a range of topics that seem especially suitable for a culturally diverse area in which youth have many ways of knowing. SWOP employs an intensive 8-week formal training curriculum and places youth participants in real-world problem-solving situations from which they learn from experience. Southern Echo conducts a series of residential training workshops, each of which is intergenerational in composition and emphasizes one of the issues or campaigns on which they are working. Youth Force' training is almost always youth-led in conception and design, although its Street University involves youth and adult resource persons in a large number of brief workshops which are open to the public.

### **TOWARD A NEW CIVICS**

At a time when many young people have disengaged from democracy, others are joining together and taking initiative in communities nationwide. They are solving problems, organizing groups, planning programs, developing services, and participating in the institutions and decisions that affect their lives. They are not necessarily joining political parties, contacting public officials, or voting in elections, but their actions are highly political forms of democratic participation which reflect their historical experience and social location in American society. They represent a "new politics" which is stirring in communities of color in socially disadvantaged and economically disinvested areas.

At a time when public schools have de-emphasized their civic mission, community-based organizations have established education and training programs to prepare young people for active participation. They provide political education about imperfect democracy and political domination; policy analysis about educational inequality and environmental racism; practical skills in community organizing; and historical and cultural content about specific population groups and their struggles to overcome oppression. They employ experiential educational methods in which people participate actively in the learning process rather than act as passive recipients of information from experts. They represent a "new civics" whose curricular content reflects respect for education and dissatisfaction with its normal process, and a commitment to democracy and a critique of its contradictions

Overall, these education and training programs operate in a society which is changing in its social and cultural characteristics, and combine

democracy and diversity as complementary educational objectives. If democracy is about the participation of the people, and the people themselves are increasingly diverse, then democracy and diversity become complementary objectives, and education for democracy must emphasize education for diversity. As such, these initiatives have special significance and offer insights into the future of education for a diverse democracy.

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