YOUTH PARTICIPATION FOR EDUCATIONAL REFORM IN LOW-INCOME COMMUNITIES OF COLOR

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Young people should participate in educational reform at the community level, because their participation provides a legitimate source of information for making policy, planning, and program decisions. It prepares youth to exercise their political rights and to participate actively in a democratic society. It also strengthens their social development, by increasing their individual involvement, organizational capacity, and ability to create community change (Hart, 1997; Johnson et al., 1998; Quinn, 1995; Youniss & Yates, 1997).

Young people in low-income communities of color have special stake in educational reform, because they experience disproportionate undereducation and because their involvement has potential to create a new constituency for change, if their voices were heard. Yet although participation is increasing, most studies of youth in these areas focus on them as “troubled and troubling” rather than as competent citizens and community builders with a right to participate (Finn, 2000; Kurth-Shai, 1988).

Youth participation of this type challenges the usual role of young people as targets rather than as the agents of public policy, especially in low-income communities of color. Although young people are directly affected by educational policies, they are too often displaced and thus disengaged from the process. In contrast, our argument is that young people are willing and able to participate, and that if only a fraction of them were to increase their involvement, and if society were to view them in this way, they might create a powerful new constituency for educational reform.

This paper focuses on youth participation in educational reform in low-income communities of color. It draws on information from review of the limited literature and from Lifting New Voices (LNV), a national demonstration project designed to increase participation in organizational development and community change. This project provides perspectives on the ways in which young people frame the issues, the strategies and tactics they employ, and the lessons learned from empirically-based practice. As such, it advances our argument and strengthens our belief that more knowledge of youth participation as a subject of study will contribute to its quality as a field of practice.
PERSPECTIVES ON PARTICIPATION

Youth participation in educational reform is a process of involving young people in the educational policy, planning, and program institutions and decisions that affect their lives. It includes youth-led, adult-led, or intergenerational initiatives by formal agencies to involve youth in their activities, or by young people to join together and take action of their own. It includes efforts which address both broad systemic issues related to discrimination and poverty, and also everyday experiences with unsanitary toilets and inedible food (Cervone, 2002; Fletcher, 2003).

Youth participation in educational reform is increasing in communities nationwide. There are initiatives by people who mobilize around issues, organize action groups, and advocate their interests in school boards, city councils, and state legislatures (Colgan, 2002; Fletcher, 2003; Joiner, 2003). In California, they document inequities in school suspension policies and prevent cuts in youth services (Cervone, 2002). In Michigan, they conduct campaigns for new school curricula responsive to racial and ethnic diversity (Checkoway & Richards-Schuster, 2003). In Pennsylvania, they work to reduce class sizes and increase after-school programs, under the banner that “education is a right, not a privilege” (What Kids Can Do, 2001).

Youth participation of this type requires a shift in the view of the role of young people in society, which often ascribe authority to adult leaders who advocate for them rather than enable them to organize on their behalf. However, these emergent initiatives represent both a view of “youth as citizens” (Dryfoos, 1990, 1998; Jarvis, Shear, & Hughes, 1997; Nixon, 1997) and also a “new politics” which is stirring, especially in communities that are traditionally underrepresented in voting and other mainstream forms of political participation (Hart, 1997; Johnson et al., 1998; Quinn, 1995). As the United States population changes and people of African, Asian, and Hispanic descent become the majority, these initiatives will have special significance for diverse democracy, and will benefit from more systematic study.

The present literature on community participation in educational reform is largely about adult initiatives. For example, there are studies of school officials to involve community members in order to build support for program implementation, or by interest groups to exercise influence in board elections, bond millages, and other school politics (Salisbury, 1980; Stone et al., 2001). Other studies enable educators to formulate strategies for involving parents and families in community advisory councils and school-community partnerships that strengthen
learning and improve schools (Epstein, 1995). Whatever their specific focus, such studies are largely about the participation of adults, rather than of young people (Golod et al., 2002; Zachary & Olatoye, 2002).

Recent youth participation in educational reform has resulted in new studies of these phenomena. For example, Cervonne (2002) documents youth efforts to “take democracy in hand” and influence educational change in the San Francisco Bay Area; Chow (2001) documents efforts in other California communities; and Mediratta & Fruchter (2001, 2002) map efforts in Baltimore, Chicago, Los Angeles, Mississippi Delta, New York City, Philadelphia, San Francisco, and Washington.

In addition, Cross City School Campaign for Urban School Reform reports efforts to involve youth on state boards in Maryland, California, and Vermont, and identifies community groups working on education organizing (Golod et al., 2002); Endo (2002) tallies hundreds of youth organizing efforts with approximately 75 percent focusing on education-related issues; and Wilson-Ahlstrom (2004) and Cao Yu (2004) compile bibliographies with secondary literature and case studies of youth and community.

Youth participation in educational reform can be expected to increase in the future. Private foundations provide program funding, and national organizations strengthen local capacity (Funders’ Collaborative, 2003; McGillicuddy, 1997). What Kids Can Do provides a forum for youth-led research and youth organizing (Cervone, 2002); Applied Research Center prepares youth to track institutional racism and issue racial justice report cards (Gordon et al., 2000). Cross-City Campaign for Urban School Reform is a national network of urban school reform leaders who help youth and adults to document local efforts and brings activists together to share best practices and lessons learned (Golod et al., 2002).

We expect that future studies of youth participation in educational reform will assess activities and outcomes similar to other participation studies. For example, we expect studies that show that such participation provides a legitimate source of information and ideas for making policy, planning, and program decisions, for young people have everyday experiences which position them to “provide a different lens” (Noguera, 2003, p. 135), “raise issues in school governance that might not have otherwise been on the radar of adults” (Endo, 2002, p. 3), “pave the way for more effective school change” (Ginwright, 2004, p. 131), and “play a fundamental role in addressing social issues that are destined to impact their lives and those of future generations.” (Hancock, 1994, p. 142).
We also expect studies that show that youth participation in educational reform prepares them for active participation in a democratic society, and strengthens their social development, by increasing their individual involvement, organizational capacity, and ability to create community change. There has been no systematic study of youth participation at these multiple levels, but there is reason to expect that subsequent studies will substantiate its effects on such measures as personal confidence, social connectedness, civic competencies, and leadership development. At present, however, the benefits are not established by systematic research (Checkoway & Richards-Schuster, 2003).

We argue that more knowledge of youth participation as a subject of study will contribute to its quality as a field of practice, and draw upon Lifting New Voices as a national project addressing these phenomena.

**LIFTING NEW VOICES**

Lifting New Voices (LNV) was a national demonstration project designed to increase the participation of young people 15 to 21 years old in organizational development and community change. Coordinated by the Center for Community Change with funding from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation and Ford Foundation, the project aimed to demonstrate what happens when community-based organizations try to enable young people to organize themselves, plan programs, and become more central to planning and decision-making (Checkoway & Richards-Schuster, 2003; Checkoway et al., 2003).

Six community-based organizations were selected for participation in the project: Citizens for Community Improvement (CCI) of Des Moines; Direct Action for Rights & Equality (DARE) of Providence; People United for a Better Oakland (PUEBLO) of Oakland; Southern Echo in the Mississippi Delta; Southwest Organizing Project (SWOP) of Albuquerque; and Youth Force in the South Bronx. Each organization formulated a plan, hired a youth organizer, and established a structure for implementation.

As expressions of participation, young people took initiative on numerous issues including their right to freely assemble in public places, resident control over public housing, gentrification in low-income neighborhoods, and portrayal of youth in the media. They employed several strategies to mobilize protest demonstrations, organize action groups, participate in public agency proceedings, and develop community-based services responsive to youth (Checkoway & Richards-Schuster, 2003).
LNV was evaluated by a participatory process which involved youth and adults in documenting their activities, assessing their outcomes, and using the information for improving their effectiveness. Each organization had a community-based evaluator who worked with an evaluation committee of youth and adults to facilitate the process. National evaluators analyzed activities across sites and assessed outcomes in terms of overall activities (Checkoway & Richards-Schuster, 2003).

Evaluators employed various methods for gathering information. They used methods that are standard among adults, such as observations, interviews, focus groups, and surveys. They also used methods deemed more age-appropriate, such as involving youth in skits and sociodrama about neighborhood problems, compiling writings and photographs in a project scrapbook, and interviewing parents about the effects of the project on their children. These methods were chosen by and for young people.

ORGANIZING AROUND EDUCATIONAL REFORM

School and school conditions were the most common issues around which Lifting New Voices groups organized. This was not surprising, because schools are places where young people spend disproportionate time and too often experience inadequate services and unjust conditions. Young people used their experience and status as students to mobilize other youth and identify other issues for their organizing.

Academic and Curricular Reform

Young people organized around academic and curricular issues, such as racial tracking and culturally-insensitive curricula. For example, young people in Oakland and Albuquerque organized against racial tracking in their schools. Working with the Applied Research Center’s Racial Justice Report Card project, they analyzed school transcripts to determine the impacts of race on school tracking and graduation rates (Gordon & Piana, 1999). They held meetings with community leaders and school officials, demonstrated the prevalence of racial inequities, and used the findings for community organizing.

As young people became more conscious of these issues, they both challenged teachers and administrators to change curricula and also devised curricula of their own. In the South Bronx, they criticized the lack of cultural content, created their own curriculum on Black and Latino social movements, and taught this curriculum in civics classes.
In Mississippi, they sought to increase Black Studies in the curriculum and, when school officials refused, they established their own class with cultural content about people of African descent.

In Providence, young people were frustrated with the lack of cultural curricula content and campaigned to change the high school curriculum. Twenty young people spent a year to discuss what they wanted to learn, formulated action plans, organized other youth and parents, and testified at school board meetings. They worked with a curriculum specialist to design the program, which they presented to school administrators and board members, who supported their proposal and approved five new multicultural course electives which were implemented in the next school year.

**School Conditions and Facilities**

Young people organized around inadequate school conditions and institutional facilities. In Providence, for example, they held meetings with school officials about outdated books, filthy bathrooms without running water and toilet paper, and cafeteria food which was uncooked, unhealthy, and prepared in unsanitary kitchens. As a result, the superintendent created procedures for filing complaints and appointed students to food testing teams.

In Mississippi, young people confronted local officials about unsafe environmental conditions. They protested the location of schools near illegal hazardous waste dumpsites in one area, and near cotton plantations where spraying of chemical poisons caused dangerous fumes in another. Because of this, officials ordered dumpsite cleanups and a moratorium on aerial spraying near the schools.

In Iowa, young people organized a resident patrol to protect school grounds against crime and drug trafficking in a nearby neighborhood. They recruited parents and other adult volunteers for the patrol, monitored the streets, and assisted the students in safely getting to and from school. As a result, residents joined together in solidarity, police were more attentive, drug dealing decreased, and young people felt safer.

**School Policies and Practices**

Young people protested school policies and practices that they consider unjust, and usually framed these in terms of discrimination against communities of color. In Des Moines, for example, they protested an attendance policy that expelled students with more than six unexcused absences in a year. They argued that the policy was not clearly communicated to those for whom English was not their native
language, and discriminated against low-income families who lacked access to private or public transportation. They made specific recommendations to school officials, who accepted their proposals, made district policy changes, and provided special support to students whose absences were due to economic circumstances.

In Providence, young people protested a transportation policy under which students were ineligible for free transportation if they lived within three miles of school. They researched the issue and concluded that the policy was unfair to those who lacked private transportation and were necessarily forced to walk to school. They communicated with school administrators and then organized a protest demonstration in which students and parents marched 2.7 miles which represented the distance that many low-income students were required to walk daily.

In Albuquerque, young people worked with students and parents in a nearby town to change a dress code policy that was used to suspend and expel youth of color. They facilitated local meetings, conducted community surveys, organized a large rally, and asked school board members to change the policy. After their request was denied, young people held a sit-in at the superintendent’s office to demand a meeting, and this too was denied.

**Criminalization of Young People**

Young people organized around the increasing criminalization of youth through policies which they viewed as school board attempts to stigmatize low-income youth of color and assure white middle class residents that they are “getting tough on violence.”

In Mississippi, for example, youth and adults joined a “Schoolhouse 2 Jailhouse” campaign which demonstrates the relationship between schools and prisons. Young people are aware that school drop-outs, suspensions, and expulsions are increasing while more private prisons are under construction. They argue that school systems lack adequate programs to keep students of color in the schools, and that the construction of new prisons takes youth into the criminal justice system.

In Oakland, young people challenged a proposal by Mayor Jerry Brown to create a Military Charter School which was viewed as a racist policy to remove youth of color from the public schools. Young people organized large rallies, conducted a petition drive against the proposal, and mobilized youth and adults around the issue. The campaign culminated when more than 100 youth and adults spoke out against the charter school at a meeting of the school board, whose members rejected
the proposal. Although the Mayor gained support for the proposal at the state level, youth claimed victory for challenging the mayor and sensitizing the community about the racist nature of the proposal (Aragon, 2001).

Young people in several communities protested policies to place police in the schools, which they interpreted as both dangerous and racist. In Providence, for example, youth learned that school officials had allocated a large sum for police presence without any incidents to warrant them. They confronted the principal and demanded that police be removed, but he refused to take action. They recruited more youth to the issue, collected petitions demanding the removal, and presented these to the principal, who again refused to take action. Young people rallied outside the building during school board budget discussions, and testified on the issue in public meetings. When school board members cut funds for police from the budget, they claimed victory for their campaign.

In the South Bronx, young people created the “Cops Outta Schools” campaign to protest police placement in the schools. When school board members transferred school security to the police department and proposed to arm the police and create a mini-police station in the local high school, they protested. They conducted surveys which documented youth experiences with police in the schools, held meetings with the Chancellor, and demanded their removal. As an organizer explained: “This is just the beginning. Placing police in our schools is just a step toward our preparation as inmates to fill the cells. The more our schools look and act like prisons, the more prepared we will be for a life behind bars” (Checkoway et al., 2003).

**STRATEGIES AND TACTICS**

Organizing around schools differed from one area to another, but generally included strategies which are not normally associated with young people. However, these youth articulated goals which emphasized class, race, discrimination and oppression as forces in their lives. They identified issues which reached out to community constituencies who shared their goals, and employed various tactics or planned activities in ongoing campaigns. These included direct-action tactics like the following:

**Protest and Demonstrations**

Some young people used high visibility forms of protest through public demonstrations. In the Oakland military charter school campaign, for example, they protested the mayor’s proposal by marching
outside the school board meeting, waiving signs and cardboard cutouts
of the mayor's head in front of the television cameras, and chanting
"Students, not soldiers!" In the campaign for freedom of assembly in
Albuquerque, they held large-scale rallies, marched through the mall
passing out brown dollars to reflect the revenue generated by youth of
color, and pressured store owners to make changes in the mall policy.

**Civil Disobedience and Authority Challenges**

Young people used forms of civil disobedience and noncooperation
to challenge authority and amplify the issues, such as when Mississippi
students organized a walk-out to protest an unfair corporal disciplinary
policy in one school, and in another questioned school policies on
tardiness and suspension, organized fellow students to be late for school,
and required the whole school to receive suspension. Other young
people used nonviolent intervention through sit-ins and other challenges
to authority, such as when Albuquerque youth organized a sit-in in the
school superintendent's office until he agreed to a meeting to discuss the
dress code.

**Research and Evaluation**

Young people conducted research and evaluation as part of their
organizing for change. In response to the rising rates of school
suspensions and expulsions, for example, PUEBLO youth organized a
multiracial group of researchers, interviewed students who had been
suspended, and conducted surveys in schools and the community. They
concluded that the schools used suspension too often, that this
compromised student learning, and that it criminalized male students of
color and violated their due process rights. They prepared a report,
produced a documentary, educated the community, and recommended
action steps on the issues.

**Accountability Sessions**

Other young people held accountability sessions with public
officials as a tactic for organizing around issues. In New York, for
example, they forced a meeting with the New York City Chancellor of
Public Education and other top administrators to protest the policy to
place police and police mini-precincts in the schools. In Providence, they
held sessions with the superintendent to protest school conditions and
exact a commitment for change; with the deputy superintendent to
demand multicultural curricular reform and a seat on the curriculum
committee; and with food contractors to protest the quality of food served
in the lunch program.
Public Proceedings

Youth also used public hearings and other public proceedings as a vehicle for organizing. In Oakland, for example, they organized around a series of school board hearings on the charter school proposal. At the preliminary hearing, they recruited youth groups to attend the proceeding and speak against the proposal. At the meeting at which board members would vote, they recruited youth and adult allies to demonstrate outside the building, more than 200 people to attend the meeting itself, and a long line of young people to speak against the proposal for more than five hours, after which board members voted against it (Aragon, 2001).

Action Coalitions

Other young people formed action coalitions in which groups joined together for a common cause. In these coalitions, young people built collective agency and developed new forms of social network and civic capital. For example, Oakland youth brought together a number of other youth, adult, parent, and teacher groups in their campaign against the charter school. Mississippi youth and adults built a strong working group which provides education and training around school reform and has led successful campaigns to fight legislative education policy at the local and state levels.

South Bronx young people formed coalitions with organizational allies, contacted elected officials and political leaders, and tried to influence the outcomes of policy decisions. For example, they joined a coalition of 120 community organizations to advocate for public policies that address education and other issues through joint marches, rallies, letter-writing campaigns, and advocacy days at city hall. They also worked with groups to engage young people and press public policy demands on educational reform issues in the state legislature (Checkoway et al. 2003).

EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMS OF THEIR OWN

As part of Lifting New Voices, young people exercised their rights to participate in educational reform, and also developed education and training programs of their own. For example, Southern Echo conducted residential training programs preparing young people with skills for bringing residents together around “educational battlegrounds” and “organizing the community to stop the use of public education in suppressing the African-American community.”
Also, SWOP conducted intensive training with cultural content on social movements against oppression and practical skills in community organizing, including internships in which they gained hands-on experience in youth-led campaigns. In a campaign against racist dress codes in a school district, interns recruited youth and adults, conducted community meetings, and organized rallies at the school board.

Youth Force conducted in-house training for youth leaders to develop political theories and practical skills, and a summer “boot camp” to train new community organizers for work in the schools and community. They established “street university” as an areawide educational program with a broad range of public workshops featuring content on organizational development and community change for young people. They also conducted research to develop knowledge for their organizing (Figueroa et al., 2003; Scott et al., 1996).

Despite differences in their approaches, these efforts shared some similarities. They all provide political education about diverse democracy as a concept, and curricular content about specific population groups and their struggles to overcome oppression. They employ experiential learning and emphasize open talk of their social and cultural identities and class and race as forces in the community. They also provide practical skills in community organizing that are unavailable in the public schools, and information and ideas about policy issues that affect their everyday experiences, such as racial segregation and institutional inequalities, high-stakes testing, police presence, school violence, dress codes and disciplinary policies, and “schoolhouse to jailhouse.”

These efforts enabled young people to develop their political efficacy and civic capacity for challenging educational policies and proposing reforms. In this way, organizing around schools and school reforms enabled them to advance a “new civics” for a “new politics” that will promote education for diverse democracy in the years ahead.

**TOWARD A NEW POLITICS OF EDUCATIONAL REFORM**

Young people are increasing their participation in educational reform in low-income communities of color, and their initiatives can be expected to increase in the years ahead. Because schools are where they spend disproportionate time and are especially problematic in economically disinvested areas, their issues grow from their everyday experiences, such as outdated books, inadequate facilities, and institutional policies that discriminate against their racial or ethnic group.
When young people draw upon their own experience as students, they have potential to provide new information and ideas for educational reform. Endo (2002) describes this as an ability of youth to raise issues in school governance that might have otherwise been on the radar of adults. In so doing, young people provide a legitimate source of information for making better decisions in the institutions that affect their lives.

Youth participation in educational reform enables young people to develop substantive knowledge, practical skills, and social attitudes conducive for democracy. At a time when there is concern about the civic disengagement of young people, these initiatives provide a vehicle for them to increase their public participation and civic engagement.

As such, youth participation provides what Giroux (2003, p. 25) describes as “a critical democratic education that encourages dialogue, critique, dissent, and social justice.” In this way, it may enable young people to advance a “new civics” for a “new politics” that promotes education for diverse democracy.

Young people in these communities are ideally positioned for influencing public policy for future reform. These youth are usually portrayed as “troubled and troubling” rather than as competent citizens and community builders, and their positive participation can change their place in society and the policies that affect their lives. In educational reform, their participation may “pave the way for more effective school change” (Ginwright, 2004, p. 131),

These young people experience disproportionate undereducation, and have potential to create a new collective constituency for policy change. Too many policy makers have been conditioned to believe that these youth do not want to learn, but instead require punitive policies or remedial services responsive to their needs. Yet, if young people started demanding what policy makers believe they do not want, and if this reengaged parents, teachers, and community leaders, it might cause policy makers to address their issues.

Indeed, the failure of present policies to address issues of young people in low-income communities of color can be conceived as both cause and consequence of their nonparticipation in the formulation of the decisions that affect their lives. As these youth increase their participation, however, policies and the structures to support their participation can be expected to change.

More research is needed to address unanswered questions which arise with increasing initiatives. What are the major models and methods
of participation? What are the short- and long-term impacts at the individual, organizational, and community levels? What are the factors which facilitate and limit effective practice? What types of knowledge and skills are needed by youth participants and adult allies? What are some strategies for sustaining the field? What kinds of support will be needed from private institutions and public agencies, and what are some ideas for making this happen? These are not the only questions arising, but among the important ones.

At present, however, youth participation in educational reform remains relatively undeveloped as a field of practice and subject of study. There are increasing initiatives, and increasing accounts of them, but they are few in number, and more work is needed. If the present paper contributes to this, then its purpose will be served.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This paper draws upon information from Lifting New Voices (LNV), a project of the Center for Community Change, with funding from the W. K. Kellogg Foundation and Ford Foundation.
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