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Supporting Youth Participation in School Reform: Preliminary Notes from a University-Community Partnership

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Abstract

Youth voice and participation have become popular slogans in the United States. However, too often presentations by youth groups result in pleasant, but ultimately toothless, responses from policymakers. This paper describes the early stages of a partnership between a university researcher and a community organization that helps high school students learn tools that will enable them to participate, as legitimate political actors, in decisions about school reform. The report identifies the goals of the partnership, discusses steps taken so far, and shares some of the assumptions and strategies guiding the work.

Keywords: [action research](#), [youth participation](#), [youth organizing](#)

Introduction

Picture a city council meeting where members of a local youth organization present policy suggestions based on a series of needs assessment and resource mapping activities. Youth participants describe the research they conducted and share their principal finding that young people need more safe and engaging recreational opportunities. Council members, impressed by the effort put forth by the students, praise them as role models for their peers and thank them for their efforts to improve the community. But what happens next?

The first possibility, which I fear frequently occurs, is that the two parties go their own way with minimal follow-up. Adults may agree with the spirit of the proposal but feel little incentive to craft a specific policy response. The program sponsoring the youth group may end and the participants may move on to other groups.

The second possibility, in which council members and youth hold each other accountable for implementing the proposal, is far more challenging to achieve (see Chawla et al. 2005 for a helpful discussion). It may require that prior meetings have taken place to prepare policymakers for the official proposal, that community members are present in support of youth, or that the youth craft a proposal that can be easily translated into a resolution or bill.

This field report describes the early stages of a partnership between a university educator and a community organization that seeks to achieve the second outcome by teaching high school students tools that enable them to participate, as legitimate political actors, in shaping school reform policy. After describing the context of youth participation in the U.S., the article identifies the goals of the partnership, discusses steps taken so far, and shares some of the assumptions and strategies that inform the project.

The Paradoxical Status of Youth

Youth voice and participation have gained support from policymakers, researchers, and educators in the United States. School reform leaders endorse the idea that students should have input into how their schools are designed (Estrada et al. 2001; School Redesign Network n.d.). Youth development researchers identify civic participation as a central task of adolescence (Zeldin, Camino and Calvert 2003; Flanagan and Faison 2002), and those who work with young people—program directors and frontline youth workers—have known for quite some time that youth become engaged when they are included in decision-making and given the chance to solve problems they care about (Cervone 2002; Sherman 2002).

On the surface it might appear that the youth development field has matured to a point where the argument has been won: what politician would object to the idea that teenagers should be given “voice?” Indeed, I have witnessed numerous occasions where young people present their views to adult policymakers and I can only think of one occasion where the presenters received an openly hostile, or even cool, reception.

However, this superficial acceptance speaks to the paradoxical status of youth under 18: they are not taken seriously as political actors (e.g., they do not have the right to vote), and yet they hold symbolic power derived from their status as innocent minors. While few public officials would openly argue with youth or dispute their experiences, they are likely to merely listen politely, voice affirmations about the speakers, and then move on to pressing agenda items that address the needs of constituents who vote.

This paradoxical status haunts youth participation initiatives. How does the field move beyond well-rehearsed presentations that result in praise for youth participants but little else? This is an ambitious task, and I do not claim to offer a recipe of solutions in this paper. I will discuss one effort, at its beginning stages, that seeks not only to provide a learning opportunity for young people, but also to help them have a meaningful voice.

The project was developed in collaboration with One Nation Enlightened (O-N-E), a Denver-based youth organizing group. Our goal is for young people to gain the tools necessary to articulate a policy voice that is taken seriously by adult policymakers.

Partnership with O-N-E

O-N-E History

O-N-E is a non-profit youth organizing group whose leadership and membership is comprised of low-income youth of color from Denver public schools. O-N-E seeks to develop young people's capacity to impact policies in education, school finance, school discipline, police accountability, and juvenile justice systems. One of its two youth organizing projects, called Students 4 Justice (S4J), has had several successes in its eight-year history that focus around equity and civil rights for students of color in Denver schools. Student authors published two reports based on original research conducted with the support of young adult advisors: *On the Outside Looking In: Racial Tracking at Denver's East High School* (Students 4 Justice 2001) and *Struggling to Succeed: Post-Busing Reforms and Broken Promises at Denver's Manual High School* (Students 4 Justice 2002).

Our Partnership

My initial contact with O-N-E was motivated by my interest in youth activism as a context for positive youth development. In prior work, I looked at activism campaigns as complex learning environments where participants learned skills that were critical to grassroots political participation, such as long-term planning, persuasive speech, and issue-framing (Kirshner 2006). I wanted to extend this work in Colorado by looking more closely at interactions between policymakers and youth, with particular regard for improving the likelihood that young people's work would influence policy. I also sought to develop an ethic of engaged scholarship characterized by research that would build knowledge but also bring the resources of higher education to bear on public issues.

O-N-E approached our partnership with its own goals and motives. The executive director, Soyun Park, as well as the organizing director, Ricardo Valadez, sought access to research findings about school reform that could inform their decision-making about upcoming campaigns. They did not want to pursue a school reform agenda that had already proven, in other cities, to have negative consequences for students. This led them to identify researchers as potential resources for their work.

As we spoke it became clear that there might be other ways we could collaborate. For example, O-N-E had a tradition of training students to do research that informed policy recommendations. Prior efforts had been largely improvised, and the organization wondered whether there were research strategies and techniques that educational researchers could share that would give students more tools for their evidence-gathering efforts. Similar collaborations have succeeded elsewhere, including UCLA's Institute for Democracy, Education, and Access (<http://www.idea.gseis.ucla.edu>), the Graduate Center of the City University of New York (Torre and Fine 2006), and at Stanford's John W. Gardner Center for Youth and Their Communities (<http://gardnercenter.stanford.edu/index.html>).

The Comparative School Study

Students 4 Justice (S4J) is a youth organizing project of O-N-E that is currently focused on the problem of school resources. Current accountability pressures from the federal and state governments expect public schools to meet specific standards of improvement in test scores. While S4J does not object to high educational standards or accountability, they argue that such accountability should be reciprocal. That is to say, the state should also be accountable for ensuring that students have basic resources that enable them to reach high academic standards, such as qualified teachers, up-to-date textbooks, and safe physical surroundings. This position has been defended by leading educational researchers (Oakes n.d.; UCLA/IDEA Fact Sheet 2004).

With this political context—emphasizing accountability and threats of school closings—in mind, S4J decided to design and carry out a research study of student experiences in secondary schools in Colorado. The goal of the study would be to document some of the disparities in resources across schools and inform school reform policy proposals. This study is still in the design stage. My role has been to lend my ideas about research design to program staff as well as conduct periodic workshops for youth organizers in research design and survey construction. In the long run I hope to share with them tools related to data analysis and writing.

Our hope, as we talk about our goals for such a project, is that by using accepted social science methods for collecting evidence, policymakers will be more likely to respond in meaningful ways. However, we recognize that it would be naïve to think that policy decisions are driven solely by research. Influencing policymakers also depends on building relationships with them and finding ways for the research to match ongoing governance agendas (Chawla et al. 2005). As the project develops, O-N-E will draw on its own expertise training young people in community organizing and political advocacy in order to strengthen its proposals.

Research Methods Workshops

To date I have completed two workshops with youth organizers in S4J. The goal of the first was for students to develop a conception of research oriented as much towards the public good as scientific discovery. To stimulate discussion, we screened part of *Erin Brockovich*, a film based on true events, which displays how research was used to right wrongs, in this case testing water samples to help the residents of a poor rural town. The film gave us a common reference for talking about how the S4J research project could combine rigorous data collection methods with larger school equity objectives.

Another goal of the workshop was to help students think about a research design whose results would be most compelling to policymakers. For example, the adults involved in the project thought that school comparisons would be critical to such a study, rather than limit data collection to just one school. Students were encouraged to reflect on this idea by taking part in fictional scenarios in which students played the role of state legislators and Ricardo (the organizing director) and I acted as students presenting demands; our first scenario drew on one case, while our second scenario compared multiple schools. The “legislators” then discussed whose proposal was more convincing and why.

This discussion fed into a second exercise in which students explored data available online that allowed them to compare resources in different schools, such as the rates of teacher credentials. This exercise gave youth the opportunity to check their intuitions against an existing database.

The second workshop focused on principles of survey design, such as notions of item construction, reliability, and validity. Students identified strengths and weaknesses at their schools and then came up with statements that could elicit responses on a 1-5 scale (from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree).

Students may also use other data collection strategies depending on their interests. For example, students may want to augment the quantitative data with narratives or personal testimonials from themselves or friends. They may also choose to collect certain kinds of “objective data” about physical conditions in classrooms or bathrooms. Other participatory action research projects have made productive use of poetry and creative writing to communicate concerns about school equity and social justice (Torre and Fine 2006), which may provide useful models for S4J. The challenge is to find methods that both engage young people and contribute effectively to policy discussions.

The Role of Adult Advisors

In many youth participation initiatives, adults think they need to limit their own input so as not to corrupt a “youth-led” process. One downside of this tendency is that projects lose the benefit of adult assistance or wisdom. Such initiatives unwittingly reproduce “age segregation” between youth and adults, a phenomenon in the United States in which young people have few opportunities to engage in sustained cycles of planning and executing tasks with adults (Heath 1999; Zeldin, Camino and Calvert 2003).

In prior research I found that although youth participants were quite capable of expressing their feelings about how to improve their schools and neighborhoods, they struggled when it came to offering tangible policy recommendations or speaking persuasively to adult policymakers. I concluded that if youth voice is to be more than mere tokenism it should be accompanied by “apprenticeships” in civic participation (Kirshner 2006). Such apprenticeships are characterized by joint participation by youth and adults, and cycles of modeling, coaching, and fading from veteran participants. Apprenticeships can help youth learn how to adapt modes of argument to state legislatures, newsrooms, or school boards. For example, to be persuasive at school board meetings, young people may need to support their opinions with empirical evidence. Or, when speaking with state legislators, they may need to frame their proposals in terms of bipartisan goals, such as reduced drop-out rates or improved student test scores. Linguistic and cultural minority youth, in particular, may benefit from explicit exposure to discourse practices common to policymaking domains, not just to assimilate to them, but to be effective as agents of change (Delpit 1986).

A related role for adults pertains to building relationships with policymakers. A recent evaluation of the international Growing up in Cities project (<http://www.unesco.org/most/guic/guicmain.htm>) concluded that for youth-centered action research projects to be successful, adult facilitators and advisors should help enlist the interest and buy-in of adult decision-makers prior to specific projects (Chawla et al. 2005). One concrete strategy recommended by Chawla and colleagues is for adult advisors to ask that city decision-makers allocate money in their budget for potential outcomes of an action research project. Strategies such as these are consistent with the apprenticeship model, in which experts assist in the completion of complex tasks. Without efforts such as these, young people may develop well-reasoned, empirically grounded proposals, but receive limited responses from city councils.

The apprenticeship framework is useful because it avoids the common dichotomy between youth-led versus adult-led programs. Apprenticeships, if organized effectively, recognize that adults must ultimately fade back, so that young people can lead projects and advocate for themselves. At the same time, apprenticeships also recognize that youth are novices when it comes to many of the skills required for effective participation in policy domains or carrying out complex campaigns. Adult assistance, in such cases, can make the difference between projects that are relatively ineffectual and projects that accomplish ambitious goals. Such an approach puts essentialist definitions of youth and adult aside in favor of broader concerns about social justice and competent participation by young people in policymaking.

Lessons

Several assumptions guide my thinking about engaging young people in research and policy work. For young people to effectively participate in policymaking contexts, it is important for them to:

- Ground policy proposals in evidence: Evidence is a powerful tool at youths' disposal. For better or worse, research findings, particularly when presented as comparative data, hold symbolic capital in policymaking contexts. Using scientifically accepted research methods can shift the terms of interaction between youth and adults, so that the focus is less on young people's status as "youth" and more on the substantive issues being put forth.
- Make strategic use of policy discourses: Policy settings, such as school board meetings, city council forums, or even legislative offices, have their own valued ways of talking. Research in settings as diverse as science laboratories and after-school clubs has shown that learning to talk like experienced members of a social practice is an essential precondition for being taken seriously in that domain (Gee, 1996). Moreover, mastering a discourse involves not just knowing what words to use, but also knowing how to present oneself strategically. I focus on the word "strategic" because it is not meant to suggest that youth should assimilate to mainstream practices or reject other forms of discourse that may be common with their peers, but instead that they recognize the strategic value of using policy discourses at certain times.
- Have ambitious goals and expectations: Efforts to involve youth in social change may be sabotaged at the very beginning if the adult facilitators have limited goals for what will be accomplished. For example, some adult facilitators may be satisfied if youth are able to successfully put together a report or presentation. Indeed, this is quite an accomplishment that should be recognized. But if the goal is to enhance likelihood of impact, then such presentations should be treated as a means towards a larger end, rather than the end itself.

This distinction can be illustrated in the efforts of an organizing group I studied on the west coast of the United States (Kirshner in press). Youth Rising (pseudonym) spent a year gathering data for a report that called for the local school board to strengthen student councils "to do more than just plan proms" and create alternative leadership opportunities for students, such as peer conflict mediation. The report was well written and the group's presentation to the school board was polished. It went so well, in fact, that the board agreed to endorse the resolution. Unfortunately for the youth group, however, just a few days later the school board lost its decision-making authority to a state administrator who had been installed to rectify the district's ailing finances. Insofar as the report was high quality and the presentation had gone well, this project can be seen as a success. But members of the group—both adults and youth—recognized that they had far more work to do if they were to accomplish their long-term goal, which was to see meaningful changes in their schools. When my fieldwork ended, members were in the process of coming up with new strategies to adapt to the changing situation. I admired that the group stayed focused on its long-term vision for school reform, rather than being satisfied that it had accomplished its short-term campaign goals.

- Build support among community members: “Power in numbers” is a fundamental tenet of community organizing. Rather than solely develop a small group of outspoken leaders, youth organizing groups should seek to build networks of support through student clubs at various high schools. Such groups are more likely to be taken seriously if they do not just represent the speakers but a broader coalition of people and groups. For example, Kwon (2006) describes how a pan-ethnic coalition of youth groups successfully defeated a plan to build a “super jail” for juvenile offenders in California. The coalition’s success stemmed in part from the broad range of groups that were part of the campaign.

Building support among community members also refers to efforts to prepare adult decision-making bodies to respond to young people. Youth Rising, discussed above, was quite effective in its work because leaders met with adult decision-makers prior to their “official” interactions. These earlier meetings allowed the youth to respond to feedback and increase the likelihood of a successful outcome for their proposals.

Epilogue

This collaborative research project with O-N-E has only taken its first steps, but already we have learned an important lesson about the necessity of flexibility and adaptability to changes in the local sociopolitical context. In February 2006 (during the week I drafted this article), many of the youth organizers received notification that their school would be closed down and reconstituted because of declining student enrollment and achievement (Mitchell 2006). This dramatic change will alter the nature of the research project that students undertake, but I have little doubt that they will develop goals related to their struggle for a good education in whatever schools they attend.

Ben Kirshner has been an assistant professor at the School of Education, University of Colorado at Boulder since 2004. His research examines learning and development in organized activities outside-of-school, including youth civic activism, tutoring programs, and various forms of project-based learning. He is especially interested in settings where youth and adults work together to solve problems facing their schools or neighborhoods. From 1993 to 1997 he was program manager in a youth development organization in San Francisco’s Mission District.

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Relevant Websites

University—community partnerships focused on youth participation in school reform

- The Institute for Democracy, Education, and Access, University of California at Los Angeles- <http://www.idea.gseis.ucla.edu/>
- Stanford University's John W. Gardner Center for Youth and Their Communities- <http://gardnercenter.stanford.edu/index.html>

Youth organizing

- Funders Collaborative for Youth Organizing- <http://www.fcyo.org/index.htm>
- The Movement Strategy Center- <http://www.movementstrategy.org/>
- Public Achievement- <http://www.publicachievement.org/>

Youth participation in research

- Youth in Focus- <http://www.youthinfocus.net/>
- What Kids Can Do- <http://www.whatkidscando.org/index.asp>
- Youth and Community- <http://www.ssw.umich.edu/youthandcommunity/>