# Critical Civic Engagement Among Urban Youth

**Ben Kirshner, Karen Strobel, and Maria Fernández**

In recent years, researchers have identified civic engagement as an important element of youth development (Flanagan & Faison, 2001; Youniss, 1999). Particular attention has been directed towards adolescence as a critical period in the emergence of a civic identity. During adolescence, youth begin to transition out of the role of beneficiaries within a community into the roles and responsibilities of active citizens (Hart & Atkins, 2002). Some researchers have identified predictors of youth involvement in volunteer service and community organizing, such as socioeconomic status and family values (Flanagan et al., 1998; Hart, Atkins, & Ford, 1998). Other researchers have focused on developmental outcomes associated with community service, such as improved self-esteem and sense of social responsibility (Conrad & Hedin, 1992; Pancer, Rose-Krasnor, & Loiselle, in press). While this work has provided important and useful insights, little is known about how youth interpret their social context and how this sense-making is related to their emerging civic awareness and involvement. Rather than focus on predictors or correlates of youth civic involvement, in this study we use interpretive methods to find out how young people involved in an after school program reasoned about their social and political environment.

Our paper begins by reviewing literature about the civic engagement of urban youth[1]. We then describe the specific research questions and methodology that organize the study, as well as provide an overview of the after school program where the research took place. The remainder of the paper discusses youth's perspectives on their local social context and their efforts to respond through research and advocacy to problems they identified.

## Literature Review

In a recent review of articles about youth citizenship in the United States, Flanagan and Faison (2001) concluded that there were few systematic accounts of the processes by which ethnic minority groups "develop an affection for the polity and become engaged citizens…And what we do know does not engender optimism" (p. 5). In such research, citizenship is defined more expansively than voting preferences or party loyalties. Instead, citizenship includes the multiple ways that youth "come to identify with the common good and become engaged members of their communities" (p. 1, Flanagan & Faison, 2001). Developmental psychologists have reported that, in comparison to middle-class white youth, youth from low-income families and youth of color tend to feel more "alienated" from their communities and generally have a lower sense of "political efficacy" (Bandura, 1997; Torney-Purta, 1990). In addition, political scientists have documented a "participation gap" between those of high and low socioeconomic status (Schlozman et al., 1999).

Although it is likely that these findings capture a real trend in the perceptions and behaviors of American youth, they should be interpreted in light of the social ecological contexts in which young people are growing up (Ginwright & James, 2002). In urban areas that have experienced job losses and increasing stratification between rich and poor, there are often few institutions,

aside from schools (and sometimes religious organizations), that connect youth to a community outside of the peer group or family (Lincoln & Mamiya, 1990). In work discussing the moral and civic commitments of inner-city youth, Hart, Atkins, & Ford (1998) underline the disparities that separate urban and suburban youth in terms of opportunities for extracurricular involvement and relationships with adults. Youth living in urban contexts are more likely to encounter obstacles depriving them of knowledge about their communities or access to opportunities to participate (Hart & Atkins, 2002).

While these analyses of the structural and institutional challenges to urban youth's civic participation provide a necessary starting point, it is also important to pay attention to young people's own interpretations of social context. How do young people make sense of their social and political environment and its implications for their future? Flanagan and Gallay (1995) write:

> Rarely are [young people] asked to look outward, toward the community where they live, and reflect on the justice of economic arrangements or of the political influence they observe…we know little about the processes through which children come to understand, challenge, or justify the political arrangements or economic practices of their society (p. 35).

Often, ethnicity, socioeconomic status (SES) and geographically defined neighborhoods are variables included in studies as indicators of the social context in which adolescents are developing their civic identities. In this paper, we argue that knowledge of adolescents' "social address"—while necessary—does not provide sufficient understanding of youth experiences in that context; this is not because we think that the structural analyses are wrong, but because we believe youth's sense-making about social and political realities is a core aspect of their development. Understanding how young people think about their neighborhoods, schools, and communities is critical to supporting their capacity to help build, shape or challenge the institutions in those settings.

Secondly, knowledge of youth's social awareness is important because it can give us a more complex picture of what it means to be an "engaged citizen." Terms such as "cynical," or "alienated" that are used to categorize broad demographic groups misrepresent the complexity of youth's attitudes towards their communities. Young people are often cynical *and* hopeful, or both critical *and* engaged. Rosaldo (1997), for example, points out in his discussion of "Latino cultural citizenship" that citizenship involves a discussion and struggle over the meaning and scope of membership in the community in which one lives, which involves feelings of both alienation and belonging. Sanchez-Jankowski (2002) makes a related point: because of historical experiences of oppression and exclusion, some ethnic groups are more attuned to systemic injustices, leading to distinct forms of civic involvement. For youth growing up in neighborhoods and schools with insufficient resources, meaningful democratic participation often involves a critical analysis of structural forces and power (Ginwright & James, 2002). This complex process can be described as a *critical* form of civic engagement, in which youth's civic participation is motivated by their own experience of pressing social problems. A research approach that puts urban youth's meaning-making about social context at the center can help to shed light on this complexity.

One promising arena for a better understanding of critical civic engagement lies in the emerging phenomena of youth participation in social change. Amidst concerns about the political disengagement of young people, researchers have begun to document the growing prevalence of "youth action" (Forum for Youth Investment, 2001). For example, youth groups have organized politically to achieve school reform goals, performed action research to expose environmental polluters, and conducted program evaluation to improve city services for youth (for a discussion see Forum for Youth Investment, 2001; Sherman, 2002). Programs like these seek to empower youth who have been traditionally marginalized from political participation. The way that youth are socially positioned in the groups contrasts sharply with the typical public school, which rarely engages youth in decision-making or privileges their voices in policy discourse (Gee, 2001; Mitra, 2002). Youth are expected to think critically, develop a sense of themselves as agents of change, and learn how to act competently in the public arena. Although practitioners have begun to promote this emerging field, there is little research describing developmental processes in these settings or their significance for youth's development as citizens (Rajani, 2001).

In this study we wanted to understand young people's perspectives on their local social context, and how these perspectives took shape as part of an action research project designed to improve city services for youth. We relied on interviews and participant observation to learn about a group of 8th graders involved in the Community Youth Research after school project. By listening to what these young people had to say, we sought to learn how they made sense of social arrangements in their city and how they acted on their concerns through advocacy. We hoped to gain insight into the dynamic relation between youth's experience in their communities and their civic participation.

Two research questions guide our analysis. The first question explores youth's sense-making about social issues; the second addresses the actions they took after doing their research:

- How did participants in the Community Youth Research after school program describe and interpret their surroundings?
- In what manner did these young people direct their concerns towards social action as part of their work in the Community Youth Research program?

## Methods

**Background on the after school program**. The Community Youth Research after school program (CYR) was developed through a partnership between the John W. Gardner Center for Youth and Their Communities[2] and city officials in Redwood City, California. Redwood City planners and community members were interested in learning what young people viewed as resources and needs for youth. The Gardner Center sought to develop a new kind of university-community partnership, by offering tangible resources to strengthen Redwood City community and youth development efforts and study the process of youth development and systems change. Community Youth Research, therefore, would teach young people how to gather information about the needs and resources for youth and how to use that information to influence policy at a local level. In its emphasis on problem-driven research conducted by young people, it bears some similarity to participatory action research (Park, 1993; Penuel & Freeman, 1997), as well as recent "youth mapping" programs (Center for Youth Development and Policy Research,

2001). These kinds of projects train youth in ways to identify and study issues in their communities and act on their findings.

This study focuses on the CYR program's pilot year in 2000-2001.[3] The program met twice a week after school for approximately seven months. An important practice of CYR was to have youth members make key decisions about program direction and content. Along the way, adult facilitators supported youth's ideas and provided training to help youth achieve their goals.[4] During the first months of the project, participants developed the question they wanted to address ("How can Redwood City be better for youth?") and conducted interviews with their peers to collect some initial data. They then broke into smaller groups using methods of their choosing, which included surveys, interviews, and video documentary. In the spring, the youth identified the audiences with whom they wanted to share their findings and recommendations, and the adult facilitators helped the youth gain access to those members of the community. CYR members made presentations to teachers at their middle school, the school board, and the City Council.

**Background on the city context.** Redwood City is a growing city of approximately 76,000 residents that was part of the technology boom familiar to many California communities in the 1990s (Rosaldo, 1997). The city as a whole ranks among the top 250 towns and cities in the United States in terms of median housing cost (Gossage, 2001). Unlike its affluent neighbors, however, Redwood City is comprised of people from a variety of socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds, and is often referred to as the "poor cousin" of its neighbors. A quick glance at Table 1 provides evidence of the ethnic stratification within the school district. Whereas European-Americans occupy 66% of the total population of the town, they only account for 29% of the students who attend kindergarten through 8th grade in the public school system. This trend is reversed among Latino residents, whose children go to the public schools in much greater percentages. This contrast reflects the class and ethnic stratification in the community as a whole. Whereas working class and Latino neighborhoods tend to be clustered on the east side, more affluent neighborhoods are located in the hills on the Redwood side. The stratification is magnified when one considers representation among elected political bodies as of 2001, such as the school board, county board of supervisors, and city council, in which 5% of all elected officials were Latino.

Table 1 Percentages of ethnic groups in Redwood City and its public schools (2001).

| | African-American | Latino | Asian-American | European-American | Native American |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Redwood City as a whole | 3.4 | 24.1 | 3.4 | 65.8 | .4 |
| Redwood City K8 Schools | 2.4 | 60.9 | 3.9 | 29.3 | .6 |

(Source: Redwood City School District website)

**Study Participants.** Participants in the study were 8th grade students from a middle school in Redwood City who were interested in joining the Community Youth Research program. Presentations were made to all eighth-grade classes, describing the project as an opportunity to make the community a better place while learning new skills and having an employment opportunity at the same time[5]. Students were also told that they would receive a letter of reference for future jobs and education. In accordance with the wishes of the school, the program was available only to students with a C average or better at the beginning of the project (though an exception was made in one case). Eighty-five students turned in an initial interest form. A smaller number of candidates (approximately 40) were interviewed by phone or in person. Using criteria that included enthusiasm for the goals of the project, ability to get along with others, and diversity in terms of SES, neighborhood, ethnicity, academic performance, and gender, fourteen youth were selected. Thirteen youth stayed in the program for its duration.

The group of "Community Youth Researchers" (CYRs) was nearly evenly split between boys (7) and girls (6). The majority of the students were Latino (10); the other youth were White (3). Eight of the youth lived in low-income or working class neighborhoods; using block data from Census 1990, the median household income for neighborhoods where these youth lived ranged from $19,000 to $33,000. The remaining five youth lived in more middle-class residential neighborhoods, in which the median household income for these neighborhoods ranged from $42,000 to $60,000 (Census, 1990).

**Data sources.** This study relies on two different sources of data. To answer the first question about interpretations of social context, we asked the youth participants to give us a "guided tour" through photo collages they made about their communities during the first month of the project. Interviews, which took roughly 30 minutes were completed with 12 of the 13 youth. Interviews were later transcribed, coded, and analyzed. Categories were developed to describe different types of social and political assessments. Because our research questions focused on youth's meaning-making, we chose to adopt an open-ended, inductive approach to data analysis (Way, 1998).

To answer our second question about how youth directed their concerns toward community change efforts, we discuss the youth researchers' presentation to city officials. We rely on field notes describing this event as well as youth's reflections afterwards. Throughout the year, program activities were documented through written field notes and reflections.

It is important to note that this paper is not intended as an evaluation of the after school program nor is it seeking to measure changes in youth participants' political understanding. Instead, it is an exploration of youth's perspectives as they entered the program as well as a reflection on the opportunities afforded to them due to their participation in it. All three authors on this paper were participant researchers, which means that at different times we helped facilitate project activities while at the same time maintaining a record of what had happened.

## Data Analysis

### How did youth participants describe and interpret their surroundings?

Early in the year, the participants were given cameras and asked to take pictures of their communities. They used these pictures to create photo collages, which answered the questions,

"What is your neighborhood like?" and "What do youth need?" The purpose of the activity was for the youth to begin identifying assets and problems in their communities before embarking on more systematic research. For us, as researchers, this task presented an opportunity to explore these young people's emerging ideas about their sociopolitical context. In interviews with twelve of the youth we asked them to give us a "guided tour" through their collages—to describe what the photos of their neighborhoods meant and why they took them.

Several themes emerged from these conversations. First, these young people's collages focused primarily on negative experiences or problems in their neighborhoods. Second, this theme was more powerful for youth living in low-income neighborhoods, although there were some exceptions. Third, there was diversity in the ways young people critically assessed the problems that they identified. While some youth focused on the prevalence of the problems, others made comparisons across neighborhoods within the city and emphasized inequities.

**Overall perceptions of neighborhoods.** As is shown in Table 2, all twelve CYRs used their photographs to illustrate some kind of problem or concern about their neighborhoods. The two most common categories were: "Lack of Things to Do" and "Threats to Safety." "Lack of Things to Do" refers to the sentiment that there are not enough community centers, safe parks, or free activities for youth. Several youth remarked on the problem that the sole youth-oriented recreation center in town charged admission. "Threats to Safety" varied from cars that did not stop at stop signs to older teenagers who menaced young people. In describing her photo of a park, one student said, "They just need more safe places for kids where they feel safe and they can play."

TABLE 2 Concerns & problems in neighborhoods.

| Category | Number of youth who mentioned it |
|---|---|
| General | |
| Some kind of problem or concern | 12 |
| Specific | |
| Lack of things to do/places to go | 7 |
| Threats to safety (e.g., bullies, reckless cars) | 7 |
| Gang presence (e.g., gang graffiti) | 5 |
| Inequities between neighborhoods in terms of resources or opportunities | 5 |
| Litter | 4 |
| Drug use | 4 |
| Racism | 2 |
| School not taken care of | 2 |

Gang presence and Inequities were the next most common issues that came up. Concerns about gang activities was usually depicted through photos of gang graffiti used to mark off territory. Four of the students made gang graffiti a central feature of their collages, in part because, in one student's words, "that's all that's in my neighborhood. You go down there, the first thing you see when you cross the street is tagging. Literally. Cause it's like right on the corner."

"Inequities" is a more abstract category: it refers to observations of discrepancies between neighborhoods in terms of resources or opportunities. We will explore this issue further when we discuss the critical lens through which the young people made sense of their contexts. The remaining four categories in the table were less frequent. They represent more self-evident observations made by youth about litter, drug use, racism, and poorly maintained schools.

Table 3 depicts the number of youth who reported "positive features of neighborhoods" in their collages, such as safety, cleanliness, or things to do. In contrast to Table 2, of the twelve youth interviewed, just seven mentioned at least one positive description of their neighborhoods. Most common among these (mentioned by four youth) was that it was safe.

TABLE 3 Positive features of neighborhoods.

| Category | Number of youth who mentioned it |
|---|---|
| General | |
| Some kind of positive feature | 7 |
| Specific | |
| Safe | 4 |
| Clean | 3 |
| Places to go | 3 |
| People get along | 2 |
| Streets maintained | 2 |

A comparison of the two tables shows the predominance of concerns and problems among the observations made by youth. Another way of summarizing this difference is that just two of the twelve young people made more positive than negative observations. These two youth both praised certain features of their own neighborhoods—safe, clean, things to do, well-maintained services such as street cleaning—and perceived that other neighborhoods did not seem to have these features. In contrast, nine of the youth had more negative statements than positive statements when describing their neighborhoods; for one youth the number was equal.

These differences should be interpreted cautiously—the general focus of the project was to identify ways to make Redwood City better for youth, so it is possible that some of the CYRs assumed that they should focus on problems for this assignment. Also, we noticed that when prompted with a follow up such as, "you've talked a lot about problems—are there any good things about your neighborhood?" some students moderated their original comments.

Nevertheless, the descriptions of problems provide a helpful view of youth's experiences in their neighborhood, and the variation among the photo collages suggests that students did not respond to the assignment in a uniform or pro forma manner.

**The relation between neighborhood SES and types of issues identified.** Based on background data on Redwood City, one might expect the neighborhood collages to reflect the patterns of socioeconomic stratification there. In important ways they did; the themes in the collages matched up loosely with the level of affluence in students' neighborhoods. For example, in terms of identifying problems, the students in the lower income neighborhoods talked most about problems such as gang graffiti and threats to safety. Also, the two students with more positive than negative depictions who contrasted their own neighborhoods with other parts of the city were in the middle family income group ($42,000 to $60,000). One student, who lived in a gated community, had trouble relating her own neighborhood experiences to the purposes of the project:

> *Interviewer:* Is any of the information that you documented in this collage related to your suggestions for making changes in Redwood City.
>
> *Youth*: Oh. Nnnn-not that I know of. Not really.
>
> *Interviewer:* Okay. And why is that?
>
> *Youth*: I don't know. 'Cause the community I live in, I'm fine with it. But as soon as I step out of it, it's like, "eeeagh!"

At the same time, it would be incorrect to conclude that perceptions were entirely predicted by neighborhood socioeconomic level. Even the youth who lived in lower income neighborhoods identified positive resources and opportunities. For example, one young person who lived in a mobile home park isolated from the rest of Redwood City by a major freeway, compared his community favorably to those of other youth researchers:

> *Interviewer:* Are there things that you learned that you didn't know before?
>
> *Youth:* Yeah, that people's communities could be pretty messed up sometimes.
>
> *Interviewer:* So you didn't think that so much before you started mapping?
>
> *Youth:* I mean, I knew there were messed-up communities, but I didn't know that they were like that messed up or something…Like in one interview this guy said that his community was, like, really bad.
>
> *Interviewer:* What did he mean by "bad"?
>
> *Youth*: Like, um gangs and, like, nobody to hang out with or… Just stuff like that

Other youth, some of whom lived in neighborhoods where gangs were a problem, mentioned the value of good places to get a meal, or having trustworthy neighbors. Conversely, some of the youth in more affluent neighborhoods identified problems that they faced, such as lack of transportation, lack of things to do, and drug-use among peers. These examples support the

notion that researchers interested in youth citizenship should look beyond the "main effects" of SES.

**Critical observations.** In addition to examining the content of the photo essays, we were also interested in the ways that young people reasoned about what they had observed. There was a range in the complexity of their reports: While some offered descriptive accounts of objects in their photographs, others used their photographs to draw comparisons with other parts of West City. Two other students offered political analyses to explain the comparisons. One example of a descriptive approach is in one student's explanation for his pictures of gang graffiti:

> *Interviewer:* Why did you want that picture in your essay?
>
> *Youth*: Oh because I wanted to show what the gangs are writing. And they tag and things.
>
> *Interviewer:* Okay. And why did you want to show that?
>
> *Youth*: I just wanted to show what they write.

A second way that youth interpreted their neighborhoods was make comparisons with other parts of Redwood City. For five of the CYRs, this meant pointing out a disparity between their own streets or neighborhoods and what they knew of other parts of the city. In one example, a student who lived in a low-income neighborhood contrasted the area near her house where there was a heavy gang presence with an area close by that she viewed as more safe:

> *Interviewer:* Are there any positive aspects of your neighborhood? That you think maybe you would have highlighted?
>
> *Youth*: I learned like . . . I don't know. Like where I live, there's usually a lot of gangsters around there, but at night. Like on the back streets, there's some good houses, they're clean, clean places, but not on ours. I don't know why. I mean, you skip one street and the other is really bad and . . . One's good and one's bad. I mean, why can't it all be good?

Another student, who lived in a wealthier neighborhood, discussed his observations of his own neighborhood and how it differed from other parts of the city.

> *Youth*: And then I took these to show that there's, like, no violence around my community[6], no gangs or anything like that…And then some more houses to show, like, peace around the community.
>
> *Interviewer:* What do you mean when you say 'peace'?
>
> *Youth*: Well, like, to show that people kind of get along. And they respect everybody else's properties and there's no violence anywhere. And then, like, the streets…are nice and things. And the reason I took that is because I noticed that in some other communities the city doesn't do anything to fix up areas. Like, in my community they're always fixing up the streets, the sidewalks and everything. But other communities, they don't do anything to fix it up or anything like that. And that's something that I was

hoping maybe could change and they could maybe fix up other places. And then I took a picture of a house being remodeled, that the city is paying for part of it to help the people remodel it because it was pretty old.

Both of these examples show youth making a comparison between two parts of the city. They described what they saw in their own neighborhoods and coordinated that description with what they know of other parts of the city. Implicit in both of these comparisons was an awareness of some sort of unfairness in the distribution of resources. For the first student, this was evident in her question, "why can't they all be good?" For the second student it was evident in his observation that city services seem to only be working for certain parts of the city. When pushed to offer an analysis, however, neither student offered an explanation for why these inequities existed. For example:

*Interviewer:* You mentioned that the city helps repair certain places but not others. Why do you think that is?

*Youth*: I don't know why they do that. But that's just something I've noticed before…

*Interviewer:* Do you want to make any guesses?

*Youth*: I don't even know why.

There were two students who not only drew comparisons between parts of Redwood City but also offered explanations for these comparisons. In the following section, taken from an interview conducted with two students at the same time, one student discusses why she took a photo of a cigarette advertisement (dashes indicate that a portion of the transcript was left out):

*Youth1*: Everyone advertises like cigarettes. I noticed that cigarette ads and alcohol ads are always in the poorer neighborhoods. Like if I go up to Lincoln (*wealthy neighboring town*), I'm not going to see like, "Cigarettes: Newport and Pall Mall on sale." . . . Alcohol and all these cigarettes are advertised in bad neighborhoods. So like people are wanting kids to ruin their lives early.

---

*Interviewer:* Why do you think it is…

*Youth1*: Because they need kids to smoke cigarettes because they need the money every year or they won't be in business.

*Interviewer:* But why not… why don't you think it is in Lincoln?

*Youth2*: Because it's a rich neighborhood.

*Youth1*: Because they're predominantly, rich, white neighborhoods. And they have louder voices, you know? Their voices are heard. When they see, like, a group of minorities, they're not gonna say anything.

In this example, one of the youth drew a comparison between her neighborhood and a wealthier one adjacent to hers. When asked what might account for the difference, these youth offered an explanation focused on racial and class inequities. Interestingly, among several of these comments, we observed an appeal (sometimes implicit) to moral conceptions of justice and fairness. For example, three of the youth raised the same kinds of questions: Why are there some good and some bad neighborhoods? Why do some get resources and others not? In the last example, the youth asserted the injustice of a situation in which, by virtue of one's income or ethnicity, one does not have a voice.

We included these quotes to illustrate the range of analyses that the youth researchers employed in putting together their photo essays. It is important to point out that the purpose of these interviews was not to definitively assess these youth's levels of reasoning—not everyone was given the same probes or follow-ups, making it inappropriate to draw firm conclusions about differences within the small group. Nevertheless, these exploratory interviews provide insight into the diverse ways that these youth think critically about their community context.

**How did these young people act on their concerns?**

As discussed in the introduction, studies of youth citizenship suffer from a paucity of terms to describe the complex political views of urban youth. Young people's cynical statements about political arrangements or negative perceptions of their neighborhoods are liable to be interpreted as signs of alienation of disengagement. The perspectives voiced above, however, were connected to participation in an activity designed to address pressing local problems. In the following section, we briefly summarize the activities of Community Youth Research, and then focus on the City Council presentation as one instance of civic participation.

The Community Research Project moved in two broad steps, beginning with step one, which involved data collection. After preliminary exposure to different research methods, the youth researchers split into three groups (survey, interview, and video documentary), which they selected based on the methods they felt would most effectively advance their goals. Their choices reflected their different views towards research. Those who chose surveys and interviews adopted a more traditional social science purpose—to gather data from a larger sample of youth about their experiences in Redwood City. Those who chose video talked about wanting to tell a story about their own neighborhoods, in order to provide "proof" of the way things were where they lived. It was less important to them to make generalizations about all youth in Redwood City, but instead to provide evidence of their own experiences and living conditions in their neighborhoods. Adult facilitators helped each group design its research instruments and gather data.

After four to six weeks of data collection, the second step was to analyze the data, determine principle findings and recommendations, and make presentations to city leaders. With the assistance of facilitators, participants worked in small groups to decide on their message for different audiences. Although the youth researchers did not have detailed knowledge of how these government bodies functioned, they catered their presentations to what they perceived as the general purview of each decision-making body. For example, the presentation to the school

board focused primarily on education-related issues, whereas the presentation to the City Council addressed broader issues in Redwood City.

In this paper, we focus specifically on the City Council presentation, because in it the youth presented their findings about neighborhood and city-level issues that they had discussed previously in their collages. During two weeks leading up to the presentation, the youth researchers organized their findings into slides for a PowerPoint presentation. Each researcher was responsible for 1-2 slides. They practiced speaking and received feedback from both their peers and the adult facilitators.

The presentation offered youth their first opportunity to interact in a public forum with Redwood City decision-makers in their roles as researchers and youth advocates. Drawing from the survey and interview data they had gathered from their peers[7], youth suggested that there was a need for a "Friendlier Climate," "Activities and Places for Youth," and changes in the "City Infrastructure and Climate." (These were titles given by youth to organize their presentation in PowerPoint slides). "Friendlier Climate" meant that the city should have more opportunities for youth to reduce violence and gangs, and more support for kids who want to be involved in the community to make positive changes for youth. In support of this recommendation, one of the youth presenters cited the finding that while youth in general (67%) reported liking their neighborhoods, youth on the east side of the city reported having more gangs than youth from other parts of the city. The group's second recommendation—that there be more youth centers "in our own neighborhoods"—was supported by evidence that the one recreation center, which was popular among some of the youth, was inaccessible because of its location in the west side of town and its prohibitive entry fee ($3). The youth presenter explained,

> The ones that live near like the recreation center (*on the west side*)…do have areas to hang out and go have fun, but the ones that live more towards (*the east side)*…don't really have anything fun to do in their areas.

In terms of city infrastructure, the CYR presenters recommended cheaper and more frequent public transportation for youth, especially for those living in a section of the east side that was isolated from the rest of Redwood City by a freeway. They specifically recommended a pedestrian ramp for people living in a part of the town where the mobile home communities were located. To support this point presenters shared survey data showing that 34% of the residents of this neighborhood said they had a "hard time with transportation," in contrast to an average of 13% for residents of other neighborhoods. Because two of the youth were from this area, they were able to combine the survey finding with a personal explanation about the difficulties posed by the freeway. The connection between youth's own experience of their neighborhoods and their recommendations was further underlined by a youth presenter, in response to a question from the City Council about the purpose of the video:

> The purpose of our video was to give a visual perspective of how Redwood City really is, because I mean, if you live in one part of Redwood City, you don't know, really, how it is. So we wanted to take you to our homes, and our neighborhoods, to let people see how…how things really are.

The meeting concluded with mutual affirmations to begin working together. Members of the council expressed enthusiasm for continuing to work with the youth, whether by inviting them to

be on specific committees or by requesting their data for further study. The City Manager was especially interested in getting the neighborhood level data.

While the subsequent interactions between adults and youth presenters were in part mere formalities (few politicians would dare to *not* show support for these youth), they still indicate the sense of novelty that the experience appeared to have for the participants. One of the CYRs, who is from Redwood City's east side, initiated this exchange:

> I just want to say thank you on the part of all the youth researchers, and for the ones who weren't here today, I just want to say that finally, it was finally the time that we had to work on something, because usually all the adults make the decisions for the youth and they never hear us, so thanks for (*indecipherable*) us.

At the end of the presentation, during a break, several of the city leaders spoke individually with the presenters. For example, the City Manager spoke with a small cluster of the youth, inviting them to attend a meeting with city department heads to discuss the data. Also, one of the youth presenters later reported that a city council member approached her to say that he grew up in the same neighborhood, that he still had relatives there, including two who had been shot, and he knew what it was like.

The following day, five of the presenters reflected on what the experience had been like. When asked to write down how they felt about the response from City Council members, their reflections were positive. Here are two representative examples:

> *Youth 1:* I thought they were very interested in our ideas, which made me more comfortable.
>
> *Youth 2:* I felt happy because I think they did hear us and I think they're really going to help us because…we are kids.

In our subsequent discussion, youth expressed surprise that the City Council members had been interested in what they had to say. One student was surprised that someone on the City Council would know people from the low-income neighborhood, because he thought "they'd all be rich" and wouldn't know that part of Redwood City. Another student commented that the adults were more interested in youth than she expected, and felt that they wanted them to return to work together. This particular student's comment was interesting because of how it contrasted with the expectations of the City Council presentation that she had stated two months earlier in an interview:

> *(Prior to the presentation)*
> *Youth 1*: It's not going to be like no Disney ending . . .
>
> *Interviewer:* I see.
>
> *Youth 2*: Yeah, our voices are never important, that's what she's trying to say.
>
> *Interviewer:* You just said it's not gonna be like a Disney ending so you're basically saying you don't think that…you alone can…make happen what you want to see happen?

> *Youth 1*: Yeah, don't be thinking about no . . . those little posters, oh, kids have a voice, oh, fight for your rights. That's not even true. Seriously, they ain't going to listen to you. Unless like the people that have a good heart. But most people that work in those kind of places, they're always busy, they don't really care about anything. They probably don't even care . . .

This early skepticism was not representative of everyone in the group, but signals the general surprise that youth experienced at their reception from city leaders.

In this section of our analysis we do not go in depth into the self-reflections of the youth participants at the end of the project. We have not sought to measure or analyze their different kinds of engagement and how these may have changed over the course of the year. Such analyses are beyond the scope of this paper. Instead, in this section we have sought to show, through descriptions of their actions, that these young people were engaged in making their city a better place, and that their efforts to improve Redwood City were intimately connected to the social criticisms that they expressed in their photo collages and the findings from their research. By being able to participate in these ways, youth were able to direct their critical perspectives towards practical ends.

**Discussion**

In this paper we asked the following questions:

- How did the participants in the Community Youth Research project describe and interpret their surroundings?
- How did they direct their concerns toward social action as part of their work in Community Youth Research?

In response to the first question, we found that the youth participants identified a range of problems in their neighborhoods and they made sense of these problems in different ways. While some youth merely took note of things that bothered them in their own neighborhoods, others pointed out disparities between different neighborhoods or parts of Redwood City. Still others noticed these differences and offered explanations for them in terms of the influence of economic and ethnic inequities.

In response to the second question, the data showed that the youth participants' actions embodied a mixture of social criticism and advocacy on behalf of children and youth. Drawing on data analysis skills that they developed while part of CYR, the youth researchers articulated critical positions towards socioeconomic arrangements in their city, such as the lack of resources on the east side of the city. They recommended several changes, including improved public transportation for certain neighborhoods, more safe and fun things to do, and a safer climate free of gangs and violence. They based their recommendations on data that they had collected in their CYR research groups.

One limitation of this study pertains to the selective sample of young people who were accepted to the project. While their motivations varied—some were attracted to the stipends, others to the community goals, and still others for something to do after school—the very fact of their joining

distinguishes them from their peers, making it hard to generalize to other populations of youth. Furthermore, because of the minimum C grade requirement set by the school, this group was a slightly more academically successful sub-group than the wider population of the applicant pool.[8]

Nevertheless, we draw three lessons from this exploratory study. First, it helps us begin to see the range of ways that young people interpret and make sense of their local social and political surroundings, which past research about the civic attitudes of urban youth has overlooked. Researchers have carefully documented the influence of adverse socioeconomic conditions on urban youth (Hart & Atkins, 2002), as well as the relationship between SES variables and political attitudes (Flanagan & Faison, 2001). But we know less about how urban youth explain or reason about these conditions (Gardner & McLoyd, 2001). By talking to the CYRs about their communities, we learned that even in the most distressed neighborhoods, youth identified positive resources and opportunities. And, even in affluent, resource-rich neighborhoods, youth wanted more opportunities for fun, affordable things to do. As researchers seek to understand the relationship between social context and youth development, it is important to remember that youth construct meaning about their context; these processes of sense-making should complement larger scale studies that rest on more "objective" context variables (Burton, Obedeillah, & Allison, 1996). Also, for those who wish to educate youth about the causes of social problems, it is important to recognize the diverse kinds of reasoning that same-age youth employ about social issues: students may notice differences or inequities between neighborhoods, but still not have a framework for understanding why this might be. Overall, these young people critically assessed their social context with varying levels of complexity, which reflected different ideas about why resources were distributed as they were.

Second, this study provides a case example of young people who have negative perceptions of their surroundings and act on those concerns. With some exceptions, such as Yates and Youniss' (1996) discussion of youth who volunteered at a homeless shelter, there are few empirical studies that discuss youth civic engagement in terms of both prosocial activities and social criticism. As mentioned in the introduction, quantitative attempts to index youth political attitudes typically report alienation, low-self efficacy, or cynicism among working class or minority youth. Therefore it interested us when we began to hear critical voices among the youth researchers, especially among those living in low-income neighborhoods, as they raised concerns about inequities, racism, and lack of safe and productive opportunities for youth. Taken alone, the comments might have confirmed the general assumption about urban youth's negative political attitudes and low level of engagement (Hart & Atkins, 2002). But their comments were part of a larger project "to make Redwood City better for youth." This required a different interpretation: these young people were thinking critically about their surroundings and at the same time were developing solutions to the problems they identified. The word critical here has dual meanings. On one hand it can refer to negative perceptions of one's environment; on the other hand it can refer to an awareness of how one's environment is influenced by larger social structures and institutions. As interviews with the youth participants showed, some youth's criticisms were more like the former, while others were more representative of the latter.

One possible inference from this study is that the latter form of critical thinking is adaptive for youth living in certain circumstances. Especially in a society where an ideology of individual

achievement and "the level playing field" is prevalent (Crocker, Major, & Steele, 1998), critical awareness of discrimination or structural inequalities provides teenagers with a more complex perspective on why some people succeed and other people fail. This perspective would help prepare them for certain challenges they could face in their own lives, and could conceivably help them develop a group consciousness that would counter the negative effects of social stigma (Crocker, Major, & Steele, 1998).

Although this issue is not resolved by the results of this study, which is limited to a small, self-selected population, it provides exploratory evidence in support of the idea that critical perspectives take on special meaning when combined with opportunities to participate in meaningful ways. Presumably, critical awareness, if left alone, could just as easily lead to apathy as it could lead to empowerment. However, when young people have opportunities to influence their world, rather than merely be passive objects of it, this critical awareness can take a powerful direction.

Finally, this study suggests that participatory action research has potential as an educational strategy for promoting skills and dispositions of citizenship. Through its focus on skills of data gathering, teamwork, public speaking, problem-solving, and civic participation, this type of program develops competencies associated with "public work" (Boyte, 1991). Its stress on critical thinking and policy change is an alternative to community service models that promote virtues of charity with little reflection on larger social issues (see Kahne & Westheimer, 1996, for a discussion of this distinction). Participatory youth research asks youth to work together to study about and act on concerns that affect their own communities. It offers youth a chance to deal with problems in a creative, constructive manner, and to get first hand experiences in the workings of a local democracy where they are treated as thoughtful resources rather than as needy clients. Such an approach may have particular resonance for youth who, by virtue of their ethnicity or socioeconomic status (or both), must cope with inequities or discrimination in their everyday lives.

## References


Bandura, A. (1997). *Self Efficacy: The Exercise of Control.* New York: W.H. Freeman & Co.

Boyte, H. C. (1991). Community service and civic education. *Phi Delta Kappan*, *72*(10), 765-767.

Burton, L., Obeidallah, D., & Allison, K. (1996). Ethnographic insights on social context and adolescent development among inner city African-American Teens. In R. Jessor, A. Colby, & R. Shweder (Eds.), *Ethnography and Human Development* (pp. 327-338). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Center for Youth Development and Policy Research. (2001). *Community YouthMapping 10-Step Process: Beyond Anecdote, Charisma, and the Next New Thing*. Academy for Educational Development, Washington D.C.

Conrad, D., & Hedin, D. (1982). The impact of experiential education on adolescent development. *Child and Youth Services, 4*, 57-76.

Crocker, J., Major, B., & Steele, C. (1998). Social stigma. In Gilbert, D.T., Fiske, S.T. (Eds.). *The Handbook of Social Psychology*, Vol. 2 (4th ed.) (pp. 504-553). New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.

Flanagan, C. & Gallay, L. (1995). Reframing the meaning of "political" in research with adolescents. *Perspectives on Political Science 24*(1), 34-41.

Flanagan, C., Bowes, J., Jonsson, B., Csapo, B., & Sheblanova, E. (1998). Ties that bind: Correlates of adolescents' civic commitments in seven countries. *Journal of Social Issues, 54* (3), 457 - 475.

Flanagan, C. & Faison, N. (2001). Youth civic development: Implications of research for social policy and programs, *Social Policy Report*, *15*(1). Ann Arbor, MI: Society for Research in Child Development.

Forum for Youth Investment (2001). *Youth Action: Youth Contributing to Communities, Communities Supporting Youth*. (Community and Youth Development Series, 6). Takoma Park, MD: Irby, M., Ferber, T., & Pittman, K.

Gardner, N. and McLoyd, V.C. (April, 2001). *Economic ideologies of low-income African-America adolescents and their relation to educational values and perceptions of future economic well-being.* Poster presented at the bi-annual Society for Research in Child Development, Minneapolis, Minnesota.

Gee, J. P. (2001). Identity as an analytic lens for research in education. *Review of Research in Education, 25*, 99-124.

Ginwright, S., & James, T. (2002). From assets to agents. In Kirshner, B., O'Donoghue, J., & McLaughlin, M.W., (Eds.), Youth participation: Improving institutions and communities. *New Directions for Youth Development: Theory, Practice and Research,* no. 96, Winter. San Francisco, Jossey-Bass.

Gossage, B. (2001). The richest towns: Worth's annual feature on where the wealthy are hanging their hats. *Worth. 10***:** 70 - 77.

Hart, D., & Atkins, R. (2002). Civic Competence in Urban Youth. *Applied Developmental Science, 6*(4), 227-236.

Hart, D., Atkins, R., & Ford, D. (1998). Urban America as a context for the development of moral identity in adolescence. *Journal of Social Issues*, *54*(3), 513-530.

Kahne, J. & Westheimer., J. (April 2002). *What kind of citizen? The politics of educating for democracy*. Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the American Educational Research Association, New Orleans, LA.

Lincoln, C.E. & Mamiya, L.H. (1990). *The Black Church in the African American experience*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Mitra, D. (2002). *Makin' it real: Involving youth in school reform*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation. Stanford University.

Pancer, M., Rose-Krasnor, L., & Loiselle, L. (2002). Youth conferences as a context for engagement. In Kirshner, B., O'Donoghue, J., & McLaughlin, M.W., (Eds.), Youth participation: Improving institutions and communities. *New Directions for Youth Development: Theory, Practice and Research*, no. 96, Winter. San Francisco, Jossey-Bass.

Park, P. (1993) "What is participatory research?" In P. Park (Ed.). *Voices of change: Participatory research in the United States and Canada.* Ontario: OISE Press, 1-19

Penuel, W. R. and T. Freeman (1997). Participatory action research in youth programming: A theory in use. *Child and Youth Care Forum 26*(3), 175 - 185.

Rosaldo, R. (1997). Cultural citizenship, inequality, and multiculturalism. In W.V. Flores & R. Benmayor (Eds.), *Latino cultural citizenship: Claiming identity, space, and rights* (pp. 27-38). Boston: Beacon Press.

Sanchez-Jankowski, M. (2002). Minority youth and civic engagement: The impact of group relations. *Applied Developmental Science, 6*(4), 237-245.

Rajani, R. (2001). *The participation rights of adolescents: A strategic approach*. New York, NY: United Nations Children's Fund.

Schlozman, K. L., Verba, S., Brady, H.E. (1999). Civic participation and the equality problem. In T. Skocpol & M. P. Fiorina (Eds.), *Civic engagement in American democracy*. New York: Brookings Institution Press.

Torney-Purta, J. (1990). Youth in relation to social institutions. In S.S. Feldman, & G.R. Elliott (Ed.), *At the threshold: The developing adolescent.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

U.S. Census Bureau (1990). Database: C90STF3A. Retrieved from http://homer.ssd.census.gov/cdrom/lookup/1054509613 on October 5, 2001.

Yates, M. and J. Youniss (1996). Community service and political-moral identity in adolescents. *Journal of Research on Adolescence 6*(3): 271-284.

Youniss, J. (1999). *Civic development and community service*. Paper presented at Creating citizenship: Youth development for free and democratic society, Stanford University, www.stanford.edu/group/adolescent.ctr/Conference/Panel/youniss.html.

Way, N. (1998). *Everyday courage: The lives and stories of urban teenagers*. New York: New York University Press.

## Endnotes

[1] In this case, by "urban youth" we are referring primarily to youth of color from working class and low-income families who live in urban areas.
[2] The John W. Gardner Center is based at Stanford University.
[3] The collaboration between the university and Redwood City is ongoing. Additional cohorts of youth have been participating in the after school program each year since 2000-01.
[4] The nature of youth-adult relationships in projects like this warrants further attention but is not the subject of this paper.
[5] Community youth researchers received a monthly stipend of $100 contingent on their completion of 5 hours per week of project tasks and participation in related activities.
[6] In this case the term "community" refers to this student's description of his neighborhood in comparison to other neighborhoods within the same city.
[7] Youth administered a survey to all of the students attending their middle school. 885 surveys were completed (90% of the school), including 6th, 7th and 8th grade students. A total of 75 students were interviewed.
[8] This is not to say that the participants were all model honor roll students without behavior problems. Over the course of the year several struggled to maintain grades and experienced a range of behavioral difficulties in the school. One student was on probation with the juvenile justice system. In other words, the sample was neither comprised solely of "straight-A" students nor the students with consistent disciplinary problems.