

Urban Youth's Civic Development in Community-Based Youth Organizations¹

Jennifer L. O'Donoghue & Benjamin R. Kirshner
Stanford University

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Problem Statement

Recent years have witnessed the increased marginalization of youth from participation in the public realm. In urban communities, in particular, rising poverty and inequality, increased isolation, and decreasing support from communities, families, and schools limit urban youth's opportunities to influence the policies and contexts that affect their lives (Blanc, 1994; Hart & Atkins, 2002; Hart, Daiute & Iltus, 1997; Torney-Purta, 1999). In addition, broader societal trends of citizen disengagement and disempowerment (National Commission on Civic Renewal, 1998; Putnam, 2000) are complicated for urban youth along racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic lines. Young people of color, especially, are frequently marginalized by "powerful signals...about their value, social legitimacy, and future and many respond to these signals by...distrusting the possibility or desirability of ever becoming part of the broader society" (McLaughlin, 1993, p. 43).

This mistrust often extends to the government and its institutions. Political efficacy and trust levels have declined for African-American as well as Latino youth since 1967, when levels among white and African-American youth were similar (Flanagan & Faison, 2001). Similarly, a recent study of youth in several urban areas found that Korean-American youth exhibited a greater sense of political powerlessness and alienation than their white counterparts (Mo, 2000). These low levels of trust and efficacy among youth of color do not bode well for their civic participation or empowerment. Indeed, in a recent survey of youth participation nationally, "minority groups" were found to have the lowest levels of community involvement, which represented a 10% *decrease* in involvement from a previous study conducted only a few years earlier (Pittman, Ferber, & Irby, 2000). These general patterns held in studies of "disadvantaged" youth (a group that cuts across racial and ethnic categories) as well (Flanagan & Faison, 2001).

Despite, or perhaps reflective of, these declining levels of participation, urban settings offer few spaces where youth can learn needed democratic skills. As McLaughlin (2000) writes, youth in distressed urban neighborhoods face an "institutional discontinuity" – a lack of access to spaces to engage in sustained, active learning opportunities, especially opportunities for democratic participation. Educators and researchers looking to solve the problem of declining youth civic engagement typically turn to schools, the major "socializing institution" for young

people. Yet researchers have found that, for the most part, urban schools present limited opportunities for youth to experience participatory democracy or engage in public change efforts.

Schools that emphasize hierarchical authority and control undermine youth's ability to practice active democratic citizenship or develop needed civic skills and knowledge (Berman, 1997; Carter, 1988; Hart, 1992). In their survey of institutions that serve youth, Costello and her colleagues (2000) find that as the "first requisite" of schools is order, they are most often governed by clear hierarchies of control that allow little or no room for youth to be actively involved in decision-making. Indeed, they find that healthy signs of youth growth (and democratic citizenship) such as questioning and initiative are often seen as threats to institutional authority, symptoms of youth insubordination that need to be quelled rather than supported.

Researchers also implicate school curricula in transmitting narrow and passive definitions of democracy and citizenship. Civic education programs typically focus on history and the machinery of representative government, providing limited definitions of politics as the behavior of elected officials, interest groups, and bureaucracy (Leppard, 1993; Seigel & Rockwood, 1993), giving comparatively little attention to civic responsibilities and conveying a privately-oriented conception of citizenship (Conover & Searing, 2000; Flanagan & Faison, 2001). Pedagogy in many schools (and particularly in urban schools) also falls short in engaging students in participatory or democratic practices. Descriptive presentations of democracy and citizenship most often taught using textbooks that present an encyclopedic account of history and politics encourage young people to be "bystanders in democracy rather than active citizens" (Berman, 1997, p. 174). Moreover, general patterns of classroom pedagogy in high schools, which rely on lecturing as the dominant form of instruction, allow few opportunities for youth to practice the skills necessary for democratic citizenship.

Factors in the broader sociopolitical context of schools further affect their ability to provide rich and empowering participatory experiences for youth. In contrast to suburban and rural schools, urban schools have been found to provide students the fewest opportunities to hone the skills needed for active citizenship (Conover & Searing, 2000). In addition, civic education generally has a low, sometimes "precarious," status in schools (Youniss, et al., 2002), and teachers' flexibility is often limited by district-wide curriculum objectives and standardized tests imposed by state policy. Current high-stakes accountability systems eclipse the traditional role of public schools as sites of civic education (Giroux, 2002), leaving schools "preoccupied with

preparing students to assume their place in a rapidly changing economy” (Conover & Searing, 2000, p. 91).

For the most part, urban schools are not providing sufficient opportunities for young people to develop the civic outcomes necessary to be active citizens.² To find examples of civic experiences where urban youth engage in more experiential, youth-driven projects that seek to address deep-seated public problems, it may be necessary to look outside of schools to “alternative spaces” for civic development (Espinosa & Schwab, 1997). Community-based youth organizations (CBYOs) represent one such space worthy of investigation. While CBYOs often sit in the same sociopolitical context as urban schools, they rarely face the same sets of constraints or accountability demands. In contrast to schools, for example, such organizations often have less hierarchical structures that allow for greater youth autonomy and participation (Costello et al., 2000). The flexibility of many CBYOs could allow them to present broader and more youth-centered conceptions of citizenship, such as building on the diverse talents, skills, and interests of young people or featuring youth leadership and voice in the organization (McLaughlin, 2000).

While certainly not all CBYOs share these features, some do seek to facilitate civic engagement for urban youth through direct forms of civic action, where youth participate as leaders and decision-makers in projects designed to address pressing social problems through research, advocacy, education, and action. Although practitioners have begun to promote this emerging field, there is little empirical research describing learning processes in these settings or their significance for youth’s development as citizens (Rajani, 2001). The purpose of this paper is to shed light on urban youth’s civic development in these settings by reporting key “civic outcomes” that are practiced and learned by youth participants. In doing so we seek to answer three questions:

² A possible exception to this may be Community Service Learning (CSL), often pointed to as a “bright spot” in schools’ citizenship education efforts. CSL may hold the potential to develop youth’s citizenship skills by teaching social responsibility, broader meanings of democracy, and critical thinking (Barber, 1997; Seigel & Rockwood, 1993). However, as conventionally organized, CSL often falls short of reaching these goals. Boyte (1991, 1997) offers a particularly compelling critique of CSL, noting that the individual focus of most CSL programs limits youth’s ability to understand the larger structural and policy dimensions of their work. CSL often involves privileged youth working in less privileged communities without reflecting on the “complex dynamics of power, race, and class that are created when middle-class youth go out to ‘serve’ in low-income areas” (Boyte, 1991, p. 766). In this sense, CSL may even serve further to marginalize urban youth who are often the recipients of such “service” rather than active participants.

- *How should we conceptualize civic outcomes in light of the distinctive features of CBYOs?*
- *What are the civic outcomes that youth participants practiced and learned in these CBYOs?*
- *What do these outcomes look like and mean to young people as they go about their work together?*

Methodology

As this area of research is relatively new, exploratory, interpretive methods focusing on youth's meaning-making serve as an important starting point. Towards this end, we conducted qualitative research in five youth organizations located in low-income urban areas between October 2001 and August 2003. These organizations were:

- Environmental Guardians
- Student Power
- Youth as Effective Citizens (YEC)
- Youth Supporting Youth Change (YSYC)
- Youth Voices

Two of these organizations (YEC, Youth Voices) served as “primary sites,” and were studied for more than two years each. The additional three organizations were “satellite sites,” with the researchers spending a minimum of 6 months in each. While these organizations varied in specific mission and goals, all five organizations selected had as a stated goal or mission involving youth in civic action or community change. This ranged from efforts to redress negative media portrayals of youth by producing news stories based on their own research to governing and sustaining a youth-initiated charter high school.

In total, these five organizations worked with over 150 youth (with program size varying from 7 to 75). Data collection at each site involved weekly or bi-weekly observation of program activities, meetings, events, and performances and formal and informal interviews. Formal interview data was collected from a sample of 55 youth participants: 24 African-American, 18 Asian/Pacific Islander, 4 Latino, 4 Caucasian, and 5 multi-racial youth. This sample was divided roughly evenly between female (28) and male (27) youth. Youth ranged in age from 14 through 19. Each sample participant was interviewed at least once, with more than half interviewed at least twice, for a total of 115 interviews. Formal interviews with adult staff members were also conducted at most of the sites (n=18).

Conceptual Framework

Typically when we think of “outcomes” we think of skills, knowledge, or beliefs that an individual learns as a consequence of taking part in an educational experience. Although we began working on this paper by conceptualizing civic outcomes in terms of these distinct categories, we soon realized that in the settings we studied such distinctions were arbitrary. For example, knowledge of city government, skills to speak to city officials, and the belief that one’s opinion matters were all part of the same experience for young people. The process of learning new information about an issue was bound up with learning relevant skills for making an impact on that issue, which both touched on youth’s beliefs about their own personal agency.

Soon after beginning our analysis, a second insight became clear: the way that outcomes were learned and made meaningful in CBYOs was quite different from the standard discussion of outcomes in schools. Often researchers measure academic outcomes by looking at individual students’ performance on a test, a writing exercise, or perhaps a survey of beliefs. Rarely do we examine outcomes that are performed in the service of an ongoing, non-assessment related activity or project. This may be in part because of the challenge of finding systematic, large-scale ways to measure them. It is also because such assessments correspond to the way learning is typically organized in schools, which tends to emphasize demonstrations of learning by individuals on graded tests or written work. In these CBYOs, however, there were few assessments of this kind; instead youth demonstrated their learning in ongoing activity with each other, adult coaches, and members of the public.

These observations led us to develop a conceptual framework that would bring to light the unique organization of learning in these CBYOs. By clarifying these different approaches to learning, we can better understand the kinds of outcomes that youth did and did not develop in these organizations. Our framework offers four dimensions upon which CBYOs³ differed from traditional schools. We recognize, from the start, that both schools and CBYOs vary along these dimensions. For example, some schools practice forms of experiential education and collaborative learning, and some CBYOs in our sample relied on traditional pedagogical techniques and individual assessments. The clarity of these dimensions, therefore, is

³ From this point in our discussion, when we talk of “CBYOs,” we refer to those that we studied in this research. We recognize that CBYOs vary widely in their missions, goals, and strategies for learning. The framework we develop here is based on the five organizations with which we worked. This being said, we believe that the distinctions discussed here would hold true for other organizations with similar missions.

exaggerated to expose the basic differences and challenge our assumptions about how learning should be organized. See Figure 1 for a synopsis of these categories.

Figure 1: The Social Organization of Learning in Schools and CBYOs

<u>Schools</u>	<u>CBYOs</u>
Curriculum (<i>i.e., which outcomes matter</i>)	
<p style="text-align: center;">Content-based</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mastery of skills/knowledge is a primary <i>end goal</i> of classroom activity. Content knowledge and skills are planned as part of a curriculum to meet certain standards. 	<p style="text-align: center;">Project-based</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Individual's mastery of knowledge is most relevant as a <i>means</i> towards a larger end Content knowledge and skills are acquired in an <i>opportunistic</i> manner, depending on the problem being worked on.
Pedagogical strategies (<i>i.e., how outcomes are learned</i>)	
<p style="text-align: center;">Hierarchical</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Adults/teachers are expected to decide on direction of curriculum and be in position of authority Adult leads the process; responsible for imparting knowledge and enforcing groundrules. 	<p style="text-align: center;">Egalitarian/democratic</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Adults and youth are expected to decide together on project direction and share authority; mutual accountability Group, collaborative process; youth and adults facilitate, share knowledge/skills/ideas with each other
Social organization of outcomes (<i>i.e., for whom outcomes matter</i>)	
<p style="text-align: center;">Emphasis on individual</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> All students are expected to master same body of knowledge. 	<p style="text-align: center;">Emphasis on the group</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Expertise in knowledge areas is <i>distributed</i> across the group; people are expected to use each other as resources
How knowledge/skills are made consequential (<i>i.e., when outcomes matter</i>)	
<p style="text-align: center;">Private, self-oriented</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students' mastery of knowledge is assessed by teacher through privately viewed artifacts (<i>i.e.</i>, paper or test). The most rigorous assessment of knowledge is done without the help of peers, teacher, or written materials. 	<p style="text-align: center;">Public, community-oriented</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students mastery of knowledge is not assessed, but is demonstrated through public interactions with each other and community Knowledge is typically put to use with the help of peers, adults, and written materials

Curriculum

The CBYOs we studied tended to adopt a project-based, experiential curriculum whose direction and content could not be planned in advance because it was selected by youth members. This meant that while adults were able to plan for certain key general skills that would be necessary regardless of the project topic (e.g., public speaking, collaborative work), most project-specific content knowledge was acquired in a “need to know,” opportunistic manner

(e.g., how to write a resolution for the School Board). This approach is similar to the “embedded curriculum” in youth organizations observed by McLaughlin (2000). Importantly, in such an approach specific kinds of learning are built into the organization of tasks and projects. For example, in group projects where youth had to work collaboratively with a small number of peers, they would need to figure out how to listen to other people’s opinions, how to hold each other accountable, how to make decisions, etc. Therefore, while some content learning was contingent on the problem or topic being studied, other kinds of skill-development were necessitated by the process that groups relied on to get the work done.

Pedagogical strategies

A second distinctive feature of CBYOs was their egalitarian and democratic approach to teaching young people. Whereas in schools students are generally not included in curriculum planning or course design, participants at our sites went to great lengths to set up an inclusive process where youth and adults made decisions together and authority was distributed equitably across the group.

This practice of sharing authority is relevant to understanding the kinds of democratic outcomes among youth in our sample. Principles of democratic participation and attention to group process were valued as much *inside* the organizations as they were in relation to the local community or school. In other words, these were settings where youth were expected to experience the satisfactions and frustrations of democratic processes – the group decisions, the conflicts over fairness, the construction of groundrules, etc. It was through these experiences that youth were expected to gain personal knowledge of what democratic participation looks like, rather than a more abstract knowledge of a set of procedures or principles.

Social organization of outcomes

A fundamental difference between CBYOs and schools pertains to the level of social unit we are talking about when we think of outcomes. Generally speaking, in school classrooms *individual outcomes* are what matter, whereas in CBYOs *group outcomes* were of equivalent importance. This is not to understate the attention placed on individual learning; great care was taken, for example, to rotate youth facilitators or speakers so that everyone would develop competence in that area. At the same time, however, much of the activity in CBYOs was

performed in groups where skills and expertise was distributed across members of the group. In a typical situation there might be a computer-savvy technician, a talented artist, and perhaps a third person who was good at keeping people on task. In this scenario each person would not master all of the same skills, but together they would make an effective team. In a school classroom this variation in skills/knowledge would be problematic, especially in a testing situation, but in our sample this kind of collective work was often seen as an effective way of engaging all youth in successfully completing a task. This phenomenon poses challenges for assessment of individual learning because, while there were some learning areas that were consistent across the group, there were competencies that were unique to individuals because of the tasks for which they were responsible.

How knowledge/skills become consequential

Graded tests and papers are the primary means by which youth's knowledge and skills are made consequential in school. More often than not, these are performed privately (i.e., they are not shared with other students or a wider public). Furthermore, one is penalized for getting help from other students or more skilled others.

CBYOs offered a stark contrast to this. No tests. No graded papers (although lots of opportunities to write). Instead, knowledge and skills became consequential in planned interactions with the public. Such interactions ranged from presentations before a City Council or School Board about a proposed resolution to scripted meetings with journalists about their coverage of youth issues. During these occasions where youth demonstrated their skills or knowledge, it was quite acceptable to make use of material resources (index cards) or help from peers to ensure a successful meeting or presentation. Lastly, and perhaps most distinctly, youth used their skills/knowledge to make a public impact; their skills/knowledge took on importance as they were used to advance an agenda of public significance.

Discussion of Findings

In this section, we discuss five civic "outcomes" that were found to be particularly salient within the CBYOs we studied: working with others; decision-making; knowledge/awareness of local issues; taking action; and public efficacy. These outcomes were chosen because they were identified by youth as particularly important to them, they were discussed often within the organizations, they were points of conflict or tension, and/or they were areas where meaning was

negotiated among youth and between youth and adults. In our discussion, we focus on the ways in which the unique character of learning in CBYOs influenced the experience and development of these outcomes for the young people involved.

Working with Others

Perhaps the skill pointed to most often by youth when asked about their learning within these CBYOs was that of working with others. While sometimes expressing frustration over the challenges of collaborative work, nearly all youth interviewed felt they had learned valuable and needed skills related to teamwork. Youth stated having learned that, “we have to work together in order for things to work out.” Collaboration led to a number of sub-skills, including learning to trust others, make and stick to commitments, hold others accountable, ask for help, have an open mind, and work with and through diversity. While these lessons came both from positive and less positive experiences, they were grounded in the real-world public work of the CBYOs. At YEC, for example, youth described becoming more responsible because they knew others were depending on them to get things done; if they did not write their speech for the city council hearing, the whole project could fail. At YSYC, on the other hand, this sense of accountability broke down because youth relationships and group work were not as strongly emphasized.

Through working together on public projects, youth came to see the importance of taking others’ opinions into account and of trying to understand others’ points of view, even when they are different from one’s own. Indeed, diversity within groups – of background or opinion – was something youth valued and learned from.

When there’s not a big diversity within the group, it’s hard to see different perspectives; like for [youth in our group], she’s a lesbian, and we had some groups [applying for grants] that were about being gay or lesbian or transsexual, and hearing what she had to say about those groups is something that I didn’t even think about because I don’t know that perspective.

I used to not listen to as much people. Like before, I would listen to only one person, and everyone else’s point of view, I didn’t really care for it. But then now, it’s like it does matter now, and they have, even if their point of view is different from mine, I can still respect that.

The result of collaboration among diverse youth, they felt, was improved quality in the work.

Learning to work with others also extended to the relationship between youth and adults. Youth-adult relationships are complicated, particularly in settings that strive for non-hierarchical

“partnerships” between young people and adults (see Kirshner, 2003; Mitra, 2003; O’Donoghue & Strobel, 2003; and Powell, 2003 for more on this). In the CBYOs we studied, youth had extensive opportunities to collaborate with adults on their civic projects. This partnership took different forms within different organizations from one-on-one pairings to one adult working with a team of youth. These types of relationships allowed youth to experience new ways of interacting with adults that led them to have a changed understanding of youth-adult relationships and a new sense of responsibility.

My relationship with [adult staff member] has changed me, like made me kind of understand more the theory of, like, adults and youth being equal...Just by having relationships with [adult staff], you develop better relationships with...all other adults.

As with youth working together, collaboration between adults and youth was not problem-free. In the resulting tension, youth learned how to assert themselves and developed a greater sense of youth voice vis a vis adults. For example, the partnership broke down when adults began to overstep the boundaries of what youth considered the “adult role.” Across sites, youth expressed frustration when adults made decisions about civic project ideas or took on responsibilities previously given to youth. Rather than simply accept this, however, many youth put their new collaboration skills to work, speaking up to hold adults accountable for the commitments they had made to support youth voice and initiative.⁴ At YSYC, for example, youth were extremely upset when adults made phone calls to notify youth groups that they had been funded. Young people had always been the point of contact with the youth groups, from outreach through grantseeker workshops, grantee orientation, and evaluation, and they were appalled that adults would step into this sphere of responsibility. Youth asked to have a meeting with the adults in which they voiced their concerns and reminded adults of the importance of keeping youth at the center of the work.

Decision-Making

The CBYOs we studied all engaged young people in decision-making processes that varied both across and within organizations. As one youth described it, decision-making is “different at every time,” ranging from more “majority rules” style voting to consensus-building

⁴ Not all youth were ready to step into this kind of confrontation with adults. See below for more discussion on the developmental nature of youth’s assertion of their own power in relationships and decision-making.

to less inclusive forms. Sometimes, these processes would be combined together. At YEC, for example, youth engaged in a “Decision Day” to determine the structure of the charter school for the second semester. Young people first worked in small groups, using consensus-building techniques, to develop proposals, and then later used “majority rules” voting in the large group to select one of the presented proposals. What characterized all organizations was that youth were learning decision-making skills while engaged in the process. They were making real-world decisions that would have public impact.

[I learned] decision-making skills. I never really had to make any decisions like this before this kind of experience...whereas, in school you work with a group to finish a project and do it the best you can, [here] you work in a group to make a good decision that will benefit other people and go farther and constantly expand.

This opportunity to shape something meaningful increased motivation for young people to engage in processes that were sometimes lengthy and frustrating.

Although not used at all sites, consensus-building processes, stood out in youth’s minds when discussing their civic learning. Youth often came to the CBYOs with an understanding of voting, but less often came with the skills to arrive at consensus. Indeed, almost all youth who were asked reported that they had no prior experience of consensus decision-making, either in school or in other community organizations. Several youth, however, pointed to the importance of consensus in allowing youth voices to be heard.

Majority sort of makes people feel like they don’t have a voice. Because, like, when you’re saying, “oh, because we like it and there’s more of us than you, our voices are more important because there’s more; so your ideas are not good. Don’t share them.”

The specific processes used to reach consensus varied across organizations. No matter what the method used, youth reported that respect, for people and for their ideas, and learning to take others’ opinions into account were the keys to good decision-making.

Decision-making in these CBYOs was not without its challenges. While youth talked about the value of consensus-style decision-making and the techniques they had learned, they also expressed frustration with the lengthy process it often entailed. In one example, youth at Youth Voices spent several weeks revisiting a decision they had made to work on the problem of “stereotypes” because of the complaints of some members. However, several youth felt that this was “wasted” time that ultimately took away from working on their campaign. Similarly, some

youth questioned whether every decision, down to “what color to paint the walls” required an extended, drawn-out process, and other youth pointed out that sometimes there just is not enough time to “be democratic.”

Adults also struggled over when to use different decision-making techniques. However, some occasions when adults bypassed the longer, more inclusive decision-making processes resulted in anger and rebellion from the youth. At YSYC, for example, a decision was made to cancel an event because adults felt that youth were “burnt out” from all the other work they were doing. Youth were extremely upset about this.

When you have a decision like that made, it's really hard on people in the group when you don't include them or at least let them know that this might happen.

They made a decision without discussing it with us to cancel it. So, both [things made me upset] - the not making it a priority of letting the youth say something is important to them, and also not really asking and just making decisions for the group.

The important point to take from this, in terms of civic outcomes, seems not to be that youth became expert in or wholeheartedly embraced one style of decision-making, but rather were engaged in and learning about the tradeoffs of democratic processes through real-work around things that mattered to them.

Finally, sophistication in decision-making, both in terms of participation and of discernment of the subtleties of different processes, was seen to be developmental in nature. Veteran youth were often most involved in and most critical of decision-making processes (and youth-adult interactions), whereas novice youth were often pleased just to be part of the group and get to vote on decisions. Moreover, decision-making in these CBYOs was primarily an oral process that often assumed that youth would speak up if they did not agree. In interviews several youth described being too shy to speak up, demonstrating a limit to truly inclusive decision-making. In our observations, however, we noted that as youth spent more time in the CBYOs, they grew more comfortable participating in decision-making and became more discerning about the level and quality of the process.

In addition to time spent, there was variation in the opportunities youth had to participate in decision-making within the organization, particularly in larger CBYOs that struggled to have inclusive and democratic processes with greater numbers of youth. As YEC grew from 35 to 75 youth, for example, they tried to ensure that young people continued to have a say by developing

a “Youth-Adult Council” which took on much of the decision-making responsibility for the policies of the organization. While this provided meaningful civic learning opportunities for those youth involved (8), it did not develop decision-making skills among youth in the organization more broadly. Thus it seems that both time and opportunity influence decision-making outcomes among youth.

Knowledge/Awareness of Local Public Problems

A crucial part of the work done in these CBYOs was to achieve some kind of public impact. Consequently, youth participants spent a significant proportion of their time learning about problems facing the local community. Definitions of community varied across sites – for some it was the whole city where they were located, at others it was a smaller neighborhood within that city, and for others it was the school system in that city. The kinds of public impact that were sought varied as well.

Figure 2: Problem definitions and public actions at each site

CBYO	“Community” of focus	Problem(s)	Public/Community Actions
Environ. Guardians	Neighborhood	Negative consequences of war on local environment	Educate other youth about war and the environment
Student Power	All high schools in district	Drop-out rate/Lack of student voice	Change student leadership classes to include governance (not just planning dances)
YEC	City; neighborhood; charter school	Lack of quality educational options and meaningful public opportunities for youth	Create charter school to serve as basis for collaborative social change work
Youth Voices	Neighborhood	Negative media images of neighborhood youth	Pressure media outlets to produce more positive stories
YSYC	All youth in city	Multiple: violence/racism/poverty/homophobia/food security/digital divide	Build capacity of city youth to instigate change by giving grants and technical-assistance to grassroots youth-led initiatives

Adults in all of the CBYOs sought to educate young people about the problems they were working on. Generally speaking (although varying in degrees of intention and success), these programs tried to get youth to think in terms of deeper systemic causes for social problems. For example, when talking about the drop out rate, adult staff members at Student Power designed multiple activities – from discussions to an original board game – that would ask youth to see larger social or structural factors that would have an impact on students’ behavior. Rather than merely “blame the victim” (i.e., fault students as lazy, unmotivated, or irresponsible), youth were

asked to reflect on other factors that might influence the drop-out rate. After a process taking several months, which included reflection, discussion, and surveys of other students, youth identified other factors, such as poor retention of quality teachers, limited student voice, and lack of counseling services. Discussions among adults and youth often linked local budget problems to even more distal factors, such as state and federal budget priorities (prison-building and war-waging respectively). Although not all of the sites conducted this sort of local issues education in the same manner (some adults strived more for neutrality while others believed in taking a clear position), they all sought to help youth participants turn seemingly entrenched social problems into policy questions or public action. For example, “Given that we think the prevalence of negative, misleading stereotypes is a problem, how can we understand it in order to offer effective policy solutions?” or “Now that you have learned about some of the issues involved with the war, what public action are you going to take?” Often, this process of taking a problem and framing it in a way that it could be changed led to modes of analysis that emphasized structural or contextual factors.

One outcome of these discussions for many youth was greater knowledge about their local sociopolitical environment. In interviews youth articulated opinions about school board policies, youth violence, negative media images, and environmental racism, in terms of their origins and their consequences for youth. In presentations to members of the public, youth demonstrated their knowledge and awareness of the problem being discussed.

A second, related outcome pertains less to changes in sociopolitical knowledge and more to changes in self and identity that came with being exposed to habits of thinking that they did not get at school. As one student summarized, “I’m looking at the world at a completely different angle now.” Another student, when asked what he felt he had learned, talked about changing from passive to “eyes open.”

Say you let something just pass you by at first, right? And you just keep letting it pass by. You ain’t trippin’ off it. But then you learn something about it and then you be like, well, I can’t just let it pass by anymore and so...after you think about it...you get kind of mad about it, so you kind of angry and then you want to do something about it.

We heard this sentiment voiced by several youth. We describe it as a form of critical awareness that comes with looking at things in a new way. It suggests a transition from accepting the way things are to recognizing that things do not have to be that way.

Taking Action

Youth across sites learned strategies for making their voices heard by a broader public or having an impact on policymakers. Interestingly, these strategies rarely pertained to lessons about the state or federal legislative process or the relations between the branches of government. Instead, these strategies were locally-based and linked to the specific campaign goals being sought. Some groups focused on building grassroots coalitions and identifying “allies” from other youth organizations. They learned how to mobilize press for public events. Student Power and YEC emphasized “having numbers” (i.e., allies) who would show up at important meetings to convey support. At YEC, Environmental Guardians, and Student Power youth learned how to directly influence political officials by writing formal resolutions that were submitted to government agencies or deliberative bodies. Because of their status as grant makers for multiple youth initiatives, members of YSYC spent much of their time discussing whether projects would actually have an impact on the problems they were trying to solve. In debating whether the youth and the community would gain skills or knowledge from the proposed projects, these young people came to believe that strategies that lacked follow-up or educational components were less effective at producing lasting change.

Beyond learning specific strategies for organizing a public action campaign, youth also gained important knowledge about local civic leaders and powerbrokers. In other words, beyond learning general skills about making one’s voice heard, their social interactions with key civic leaders – school board members, city council members, mayors – gave them insight into the personalities and political stances of these figures. Youth at Environmental Guardians organized an “accountability session” with city council, school board, and federal congressional representatives at which they asked policy questions and requested positions on key parts of their campaign, such as the clean-up of a nearby superfund site. Youth at YEC, and to a lesser extent Student Power, Environmental Guardians, and Youth Voices, often referred to the names of local political leaders in conversations with each other and adults, which indicates the level of specificity of their knowledge about local government.

After some interactions youth were surprised by the positive response they received from civic leaders. But there were other occasions where adult power-brokers took actions that angered youth. For example, YEC members learned a great deal about their place in the local power structure after hearing that school board members had sought to reward a contractor for

not working with the CBYO. These face-to-face interactions with local leaders gave youth valuable experiences with the realities of local politics.

When I got involved with the [charter school], I got more into politics...and when I joined the [CBYO] board, we discussed about the situation between us and the school board. And then I got more angry, so I got more involved....So, that's how, I guess it just built up during coming here, because I knew if I didn't come here, I know I wouldn't be interested at all or wouldn't know what was going on.

Both through positive and more frustrating encounters with local government, youth in these CBYOs became more aware of and interested in the processes involved in taking public action.

Public Efficacy

Public efficacy refers to the extent to which young people see themselves as capable of affecting or influencing both their CBYO and the broader community (based on Perkins & Miller, 2000, in Tolman & Pittman, 2001). This concept emerged as a fifth “outcome” for youth in these CBYOs, and is one that is particularly relevant to urban youth who are traditionally disempowered in the public realm. Generally speaking, participants at these sites articulated a strong sense of agency and power, feeling that their opinions mattered and that they could make an impact on their local communities. This sense of efficacy was tightly linked to their experiences within the organizations and to their public work, often tied to the development of skills or knowledge or to their connection with the organization itself. What we found most interesting, however, about this phenomenon was the range of interpretations of public efficacy and the complex factors that influenced it. Here we focus on several of these nuances.

We found that civic or public efficacy was treated in these organizations as a developmental, dynamic belief rather than as a linearly developed trait that youth either had or did not have. Indeed, the adult co-founder of one CBYO described public efficacy as a pendulum, saying that youth would swing back and forth between feeling powerful and not. As they began to see their impact through their civic projects, she described, they would begin to swing to an even higher level of efficacy, but there would also be swings in the other direction as youth “geared up” for their next move forward. Indeed for many youth, having the experience of trying to make an impact on an organization, a policy, or a community often provided a keener sense of the challenge involved in such tasks. Rather than simply increasing their own sense of agency, these experiences provided them with a greater understanding of what it takes to make

change. At Student Power adults offered a framework that identified 8 variations on the theme of efficacy, ranging from “passive” to “eyes open” to “organizing others.” Youth were encouraged to think of this as a process of self-growth that people would move through at their own pace.

Public efficacy for youth in these CBYOs took on multiple meanings, across multiple levels. Youth voiced a variety of ideas about what “making an impact” meant to them, ranging from greater sense of being able to make change in the community to increased awareness of the complexity of the problems they were trying to change (described above), to efficacy in less conventional political activity, such as being able to serve as a positive example to others.

They would always, constantly tell me, “people follow you, whether you do bad stuff or good stuff,” and I didn’t know that. It was like it took me to this year to really look back and see that if I do this, then people will follow; if I do this, then people will follow; what decisions do I need to make for people to follow in the right direction or lead them in the right direction?

Members of Youth Voices, who worked on the problem of stereotypes about youth in their neighborhood, often talked about two different ways of making an impact. While the program’s official campaign was to encourage media outlets to offer more balanced coverage, several youth also talked about their own ability to make an impact by defying stereotypes through personal conduct.

These varied understandings grew from experiences across multiple levels – from interpersonal relationships, to organizational decision-making, to public action. At YEC, for example, the organization maintains that youth’s efficacy develops from seeing their impact first on the organization and others within it and then out into the broader community. In addition, youth’s development of and understanding of public efficacy was influenced by having a space not only to work to create public impact, but also to reflect upon their own experiences and abilities.

I feel like I am able to see what I’m capable of doing, what I can accomplish. And I feel like they taught me how to look, self-reflect, how to look inside myself and see that I, “oh, I have this skill, this skill, this skill, let me use it in different ways.”

Creating this reflective space for youth seems not about simply increasing youth’s sense of power; rather, it provides young people opportunities to become more *aware* of the power they have already, and the impact that they want to create.

Finally, perhaps not surprisingly given the collective orientation of these CBYOs, we found that for many youth efficacy is seen not as an individual trait, but rather as a group quality. When asked if they felt they could impact their communities, many youth responded no, “not alone.” While at first glance this may seem to reflect a lack of efficacy, further probing showed that youth have developed a more nuanced understanding of what is necessary to effect change in the public realm. Indeed, for some youth, the idea that they *alone* should be the one to decide what was best for their community seemed anathema.

Ideally, [having a say in my community] would mean that I would have a say and everyone has a say; because if I’m just the only one having a say, how is that any better than what we have right now?

In addition, many youth felt that they would only be able to make an impact if there were others willing to support them or an existing group that they could join. For many youth, their first response when asked how they would go about making change on a public problem was: “get a group of people together who would support it.”

Conclusion

In this paper we sought to present key civic outcomes that are related to participation in community based youth organizations. In doing so, we felt that it made sense to understand CBYOs on their own terms by taking into account the social organization of learning in these programs. The distinctions we draw between schools and CBYOs are important because, generally speaking, CBYOs operate in ways unique from traditional civic education classes, making it less useful to hold them to the same standards. Furthermore, it is important to highlight the distinctive features of CBYOs as they seem to offer promising “alternative spaces” for youth civic education. In our conclusion we focus on the benefits, limitations, and implications of our findings about civic outcomes in CBYOs.

Youth in these CBYOs practiced and developed important competencies for democratic participation, ranging from collaborative work and decision-making to practical knowledge about local issues and how to make an impact on them. These competencies shared a common experiential, applied quality; youth participants were engaged in real-world, project-based activities that are not often available to them in traditional public schools. These opportunities

for actual public work geared towards meaningful change meant that youth experienced the ups and downs, the successes and failures, which only come from authentic encounters with complex public problems. While youth at times experienced frustration, this was part of a learning trajectory that will hopefully enable them to continue their democratic work in other venues with new sophistication and wisdom.

In communicating the benefits of CBYOs for youth civic development, it is also important to recognize some of the trade-offs that stem from their approach. By focusing their attention on local issues, students were not systematically encouraged to make connections or become engaged in national or international issues. Similarly, there was little attention paid to traditional civic content knowledge such as the relations between the three branches of government, electoral processes, etc. Even on the occasions when lessons about legislative processes were shared, the point was rarely to achieve individual mastery of content knowledge, but instead a “good enough,” provisional mastery needed to complete a task.

Nevertheless, we believe that CBYOs offer a valuable set of opportunities for urban youth to develop as engaged democratic actors. As new programs develop and researchers seek to build knowledge about civic engagement, we see several important implications of our study. During the recent Congressional Conference on Civic Education (September, 2003), participants discussed the growing divide along racial and class lines of opportunities for civic learning, “with those who most need the power that is derived from political skills and knowledge those who are also least likely to gain such knowledge and skills” (COPE, 2003). Our research has demonstrated that CBYOs can be effective at reaching urban youth, providing them opportunities to learn and practice needed civic skills and outcomes, develop a changed sense of power and agency as democratic actors, and make meaningful public change. Our findings support one of the conclusions of the Congressional Conference calling for the “development of programs that provide students opportunities to do real work on community or public problems and issues...aimed at civic outcomes rather than personal development...using explicit political and public dimensions” (COPE, 2003). What this paper also demonstrates is that doing this in a meaningful way may require changes to the very way that learning is conceptualized and organized not only in civic education classrooms, but in school settings more broadly.

Second, our research demonstrates that this kind of civic education requires skilled adults to work with youth. In order to offer environments that are flexible enough for youth to engage

in this work, adult educators need to design compelling, intentional, but still open-ended, structures to support youth initiative. For example, as the public project comes to drive many of the skills/knowledge that will be learned, the framing process for this becomes all the more important. At YEC, a group of youth was asked to choose their work based on the criteria that it “impact the community.” The adult coach then left to “remove adult influence” from the decision. Observation of the youth’s discussion, however, showed that they struggled with understanding these terms; it was not clear to them who the “community” was (was it their group, their school, something wider) and what “impact” meant, particularly as they had not first developed an idea of the public problems they wished to address. In this case, the youth needed to have a stronger adult presence to help them think through these issues before jumping into a public project.

We also see implications of our findings for the research community. We would like to push the field to consider a more situated, performance-oriented view of outcomes, which takes seriously the occasions when youth perform tasks with each other in non-assessment relevant activities. We suggest that if researchers and evaluators were to take a closer look at these occasions, we would see new patterns of engagement and strengthen our knowledge about how civic outcomes are interpreted and enacted in the lived realities of urban youth.

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