Youth Community Engagement:
A Sociocultural Study of Participatory Action Research

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Prepared for the Annual Conference of the
American Educational Research Association,
April 2002, New Orleans, LA.

This study examines the activities of a group of young adolescents in an after school program whose goal was to make their city better for youth. Unlike typical community service programs that place students in service-delivery roles such as tutoring or litter abatement, this program (called here "Community Youth Research") sought to help young people to solve problems facing their own communities. Youth participants researched the needs for youth in their neighborhoods and used their findings to try to influence citywide policies. We draw on sociocultural theory (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Rogoff, 1995a) to make sense of the processes through which youth participants became empowered members of their community. In particular we focus on how youth's mastery and appropriation of research tools helped them gain access and credibility with city leaders, and how youth used this opportunity to challenge mainstream perceptions of themselves and their city. In this sense, our account of youth empowerment extends sociocultural metaphors by addressing not just the enculturation of novices to a community of practice, but also the critical voices that these youth asserted as part of their participation.

Theoretical Background

In recent years, educators have become interested in understanding how young people become "empowered" members of their neighborhoods and communities. Youth empowerment programs in both school and out-of-school contexts represent a promising alternative to perceptions of youth (especially urban youth [1]) as needy clients or potential criminals. Nevertheless, amidst this interest lies a host of interpretations of what "empowerment" actually means. When used by educational psychologists, it has typically been associated with discussions of how autonomy, self-determination, locus of control, and self-efficacy facilitate

[1] In this case, by "urban youth" we are referring primarily to working class and low-income youth of color who live in metropolitan areas.

learning. For example, if students have choice and feel competent in their abilities, then they are more likely to pursue a learning task (see Eccles, Wigfield and Schiefele, 1998 for review). While some educational psychologists have considered ways in which the social context may create opportunities for empowerment, they still tend to focus on the individual as a unit of analysis and ignore the set of social relations that define a person's position in a community (Wenger, 1998). With some exceptions (i.e. Zimmerman, 1995), the traditional psychological approach tends to be focused on improving students' control over their learning as opposed to their impact on a wider social context.

The field of critical pedagogy provides a different model of empowerment in which neighborhood, community, or societal change is the goal. In this account, to become empowered means to recognize, engage, and critique existing social practices and institutional structures that sustain inequalities and oppressive relations (Freire, 1993). One strategy for doing this is participatory research:

> Participatory research starts from the assumption that all people have a special understanding of the problems that affect their own communities and have the ability to take action to address them. …It assumes that the purpose of research is not only to gain knowledge, but to use that knowledge to produce change that is consistent with a vision of a more equitable society (Center for Popular Education and Participatory Research, 2001).

This model is useful for us because it matches some of our own strategies and assumptions going in to our work: the Community Youth Researchers in our study were actively working to impact their neighborhoods using research methods as tools of empowerment. Building on the work of critical theorists, we examine the processes of empowerment by focusing on the ways in which youth were able to participate, critique and work toward social change. More specifically, we draw on sociocultural theory to study empowerment in terms of changes in social

participation, from peripheral to more central. Before proceeding to our study, we will briefly explain the specific concepts that we employ from sociocultural theory.

Sociocultural theorists who have studied the learning process argue that learning is marked by participation in activity rather than by the accumulation of disembodied knowledge (Lave and Wenger, 1991). Rather than focus exclusively on what happens inside youth's minds, sociocultural theorists examine how students' positions in a social group change, and how they reflect and make sense of those changes. Rogoff (1995) summarizes this position:

> The central question becomes how people participate in sociocultural activity and how their participation changes from being relatively peripheral, observing and carrying out secondary roles, to sometimes being responsible for managing such activities (p.157).

Although few sociocultural theorists have written about youth empowerment, we believe that sociocultural theory provides useful metaphors for studying empowerment in terms of changes in social participation. Two key concepts help frame our interest in the processes by which youth researchers become empowered: community of practice and participatory appropriation.

Lave & Wenger (1991) introduced the term "community of practice" to describe how learning is situated in a group that shares a common activity or purpose. Learning is treated in terms of mastering a set of practices in a community. Newcomers begin as "legitimate peripheral participants" and steadily become more central participants as they learn the practices of the group. Educational researchers have used the "community of practice" model to explore how classrooms are structured to foster certain kinds of social interaction, and have looked at the various roles students adopt in different classroom structures (Brown & Campione, 1994; Greeno, 1998; Lampert, 1990).

In most examples in the research literature communities of practice are small and closely connected groups, sharing face-to-face contact in classrooms or workplaces. However, according to Lave & Wenger,

> [The term community does not] imply necessarily co-presence, a well-defined, identifiable group, or socially visible boundaries. It does imply participation in an activity system about which participants share understandings concerning what they are doing and what that means…for their communities (p. 98, 1991).

In this study, the relevant community of practice is not just the group of Community Youth Researchers, but instead a larger non-profit collaborative organization in West City, called here the West City Youth Network, which was comprised of civic leaders and public officials to whom the young people addressed their findings and recommendations. Although this diverse group was only intermittently in the same room together, its members shared a common purpose—to collectively improve West City's services and resources for youth development—and common practices, such as using research and evaluation in their city planning decisions.

Having defined the metaphor of community, and what it means in this study, it is important to explain the term "participatory appropriation". According to Rogoff (1995a), the term "participatory appropriation" refers to the process through which individuals appropriate valued social practices and cultural tools of a group, and in so doing alter the nature of their participation. Through participation "people change and in the process become prepared to engage in subsequent similar activities (Rogoff, 1995a, p. 150)."

Herrenkohl and Wertsch (1999) have analyzed this process in terms of two steps: "mastery" refers to knowing how to do something; "appropriation" refers to a person's tendency or disposition to use a cultural tool for her goals. A key element of learning and empowerment, then, includes the mastery and appropriation of valued cultural tools, which then opens new avenues for individual participation in a social group. In this study, we suggest that when a

young person appropriates a valued practice or tool (i.e., gathering and presenting research evidence), this can gain her credibility among civic decision-makers and become a vehicle for more meaningful subsequent participation.

Certain sociocultural approaches to learning have been criticized for implying that a novice simply becomes a part of the community, as if members are inherently motivated to move from novice to master. There is little explicit attention in this body of research to ambivalence in participation—that is, criticism, questioning, or challenging of the norms of the community in question. Linehan & McCarthy (2001) critically describe one of Rogoff's analyses as reducing participation to a "process of coming to see things the way the community does (p. 133)." Others have pointed out an overemphasis on processes of internalization, at the expense of understanding how newcomers transform, criticize, or resist the communities of which they are a part (Engestrom, 1999; Hodges, 1998; Parker, 2000).

In this study, we seek to address these criticisms by describing two sides to the youth's participatory appropriation: both their adoption of cultural practices and the critical perspectives they raised. In this sense they youth were both novices *and* experts: they were "novices" when they were learning how to use cultural tools such as social science research methods, but they behaved more like "experts" when they asserted their own perspectives and capacities. Our data analysis is guided by these two themes: How did the youth researchers participate in this community of practice? And, in what ways did they also question, criticize, or challenge it?

Method

Background: Community Youth Research

Community Youth Research (CYR) is an activity in which youth examine the resources in their community in order to assess how the needs of children and youth are being met. The

purpose of Community Youth Research is to gather information from various youth perspectives about the needs and resources for youth in a particular neighborhood or city. It bears some similarity to participatory action research (Park, 1993; Penuel & Freeman, 1997), as well as recent "youth mapping" programs that are aimed at training youth to identify resources in their communities (Academy for Educational Development, 2001).

The Community Youth Research project discussed here came about because of a community-university partnership, in which a university provided resources to support youth development efforts in a neighboring city. A collaborative organization, called here West City Youth Network, which included representatives from the City of West City, two school districts, the county, and other social service professionals served as the community partner.

This study focuses on the CYR program's pilot year.[2] The program met twice a week after school for approximately seven months. During the first months of the project, the youth developed the question they wanted to address ("How can West 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 footage. The final months of the project involved analysis and reporting of the data.

Background: West City

West City is a growing city of approximately 76,000 residents that has been part of the technology boom familiar to many California communities in the 1990's (Rosaldo, 1997). The city as a whole ranks among the top 250 towns and cities in the United States in terms of median cost of a house (Gossage, 2001). However, unlike its affluent neighbors, West City is a diverse city made up of a people from a variety of socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds, and is often

[2] The collaboration between the university and West City is ongoing. There is another group of CYRs participating in the project for the academic year 2001-2002.

referred to as the "poor cousin". A quick glance at Table 2 provides evidence of the ethnic stratification within the school system. Whereas whites 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 West City in general. Whereas working class and Latino neighborhoods tend to be clustered on the east side, more affluent neighborhoods are located in the hills on the west side. This stratification is magnified when one considers representation among elected political bodies, such as the School Board and City Council, in which only 5% of all elected officials are Latino. Voting statistics reflect this trend: in the predominately working class and Latino east side, 33% of registered voters voted, compared to 60% in other precincts.

Table 2: Percentages of ethnic groups in West City and in West City public schools

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

(Source: West City School District website)

Study Participants

Participants in the study were 8th grade students from a middle school in West City who were interested in joining the Community Youth Research project after school. 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[3]). 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

[3] 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.

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.

This study focuses on the 13 youth who stayed in the program for its duration. The group was nearly evenly split between boys (7) and girls (6). The majority of the students were Latino (10) and the other youth were white (3). Eight of the youth lived in low-income or working class neighborhoods (including two who lived in mobile home parks). 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).

Analytic Plan

This study relies on three principal data sources: interviews with community youth researchers, observation of program activities, and analysis of youth artifacts such as youth's written work and research documents. Interviews took place at two time points. Round one took place during the 3rd and 4th months of the project. Round two took place during the 6th and 7th months of the project. In both cases interviews were roughly 30 minutes long. Some interview questions asked youth to reflect on specific activities, such as to give a "guided tour" of a photo essay they had created. Other questions asked youth to reflect generally about their experience, such as by asking, "Are there ways in which you have changed during this program?"

Interviews at both times were transcribed. Program observations were documented through written field notes and reflections. All three authors on this paper were participant researchers, which means that we engaged in or facilitated project activities, while at the same time maintaining a record of what had happened. Transcripts and field notes were read several times. Codes were developed that captured central topics of interest, such as "Perceptions of Neighborhood," "Participant Goals," and "Appropriating Research Methods."

Data Analysis

This study examines the ways in which these young people moved from a marginal to more central position in the West City Youth Network. In part this movement can be understood in terms of the young people mastering and appropriating certain valued cultural practices, such as research and public speaking. At the same time, the study also discusses ways in which they questioned and criticized their social and economic circumstances in West City.

The evidence in support of these points is organized in five sections. Section One defines in greater specificity our unit of analysis: what is the network of relations in which young people were moving from marginal to more central positions? Section Two discusses the youth's mastery and appropriation of social science research methods. We show the different ways that youth began to take on habits and skills valued in the West City Youth Network. Section Three examines the ways in which they raised their own concerns and questions about community development in West City. Evidence for this section is drawn from a video ("Youth Tell the Truth") made by the youth participants. Section Four discusses the City Council presentation, as an illustration of an event where the youth researchers' role was shifting from novices to experts. Section Five addresses the significance of the young people's participation in the Network, both in terms of their empowerment, and the impact of their participation on it.

I. Defining the Community of Practice

The West City Youth Network (henceforth "the Network") was a collaborative network that included city departments and committees (including the City Council), two school boards, county departments, and various support services agencies. The purpose of the Network was to improve West City's effort to promote youth development through such initiatives as improved services for youth, better coordination among agencies, and shared sense of purpose around key developmental outcomes.

At the beginning of the year, the Network was working on a funding proposal for extended support services to children and families at a local middle school and asked our university to help implement a youth-run needs assessment in hopes that the information gained would be a useful component of the grant proposal. The Community Youth Research project met this need and a partnership (which extended into a variety of other areas as well) was born.

Because the Network linked the youth researchers to a group of civic decision-makers, it provides a bounded setting in which to examine the youth's civic participation. It is a venue in which youth came together with adults to work on issues of community improvement. The community of practice, then, is this group of organizations that youth were invited to work with.

II. The Mastery and Appropriation of Research Methods

There are a number of social practices common to the city government and non-profit world—attending meetings, engaging in long-term planning, collaborating with people, to name a few. The social practice most relevant here, however, is the legitimation and use of empirical data in city planning. Youth participated in this social practice by virtue of their mastery and

appropriation of social science research methods. In this section, we share evidence of the multiple ways in which youth took on this role.

From the beginning, research was central to the activities in the project, and the young people recognized this. They saw their role as "information gathering" or "finding out youth's opinions" about community needs (round one interviews). For example, one student, Luis, said: "It's a program that tries to investigate what other people says about their neighborhood, what do they want about their neighborhood (interview, 3/20/01)." When asked how the youth researchers would convince the city to build new youth centers, another youth, Juan, said, "We'll get the information. All kinds of stuff to prove it (interview, 3/1/01)." Several youth also commented that there was a unique value to gathering information from youth, as opposed to just relying on adults' assumptions about what youth want. For example, Cristina said:

> Like, like, let's say all these adults are like, 'Yeah, we think youth need a place where they can learn how to play golf'. And we're like, 'wait, all the kids don't want to play golf.' Like, we can be like, 'maybe kids want basketball more' (2/27/01).

In adopting the role of researchers, the CYRs began to take on the intellectual habits associated with conscientious research, such as a concern for ethics and validity. We noticed this early on when we observed a discussion about interview questions (Field notes, 1.30.01). The issues raised in this discussion reflected the youth's appropriation of research methods.

Several weeks prior to the discussion, the group had brainstormed a list of interview questions to ask their peers. After conducting interviews based on these questions, the CYRs reviewed the protocol to see if it should be revised. In Figure 2 the sentences that are crossed out are the original questions. The unmarked sentences are the updated versions. Placed below the questions is an analysis of our field notes excerpt from that discussion. The left column of the figure is drawn from our field notes. The right column highlights the research principles that

youth implicitly employed in their discussion about the interview questions (superscript numbers indicate the place in the conversation where the principle was employed).

Figure 1: Revising the interview protocol

Interview questions
5. → Where do you want to be in 10 years?
6. (*deleted)*
7. → → How would your friends describe you?
8. → If there was something you could change what would it be?

Field notes excerpt, 1.30.01.	Research principles
This was a very rich discussion! CYRs made several revisions to the protocol sheet after back and forth discussion. They said that the question, "What do you want in your future?" is not good because everyone gives the same answer.[1] *They want to ask questions that won't be predictable!* They also didn't like the last question, ("Do you need help with anything in your life?"), because it was too "personal"[2], so they deleted it. They also revised a self-description question: They said, how can you get a person to describe who they are? The current question, "what are your friends like?, was too vague.[3] No one seemed to be able to answer it in the first round. They discussed how the goal of this question was to learn about what the person was like by learning about their friends. One person (Elsa) pointed out that this could lead to stereotypes, because she has some friends who are gang members but this doesn't mean that she is in gangs.[4] So another person suggested the question, what are you like? Another offered, "describe yourself (using 3 adjectives)". People seemed to feel this was too direct, or perhaps also too difficult to answer. Elsa asked, would you be able to answer that?[5] J, who suggested it, agreed, that would be hard to answer. Then someone, either P or M, suggested the question, "how would your friends describe you if we asked them?" Everyone liked this one a lot. Because it brought in the friends issue but also got at a self-description. Still some quarrels, having to do with, "what if they didn't know what friends thought about them?" But this one remained.	[1]Questions that provide useful information [2]Ethical questions [3]Questions that aren't vague [4]Ethical interpretations [5]Questions that make sense to the respondent

The discussion was interesting because it showed the members of the group in the act of appropriation; they were transforming the interview protocol from an "object" to an "instrument" for their own ends (Cole, 1995; Wertsch, 1998). They justified their revisions using a variety of criteria, including practicality (will answers be interesting to us?), efficiency (will the question address construct we are interested in?), ethics (will the question respect person's privacy?), and clarity (does the question make sense?). This discussion shows that the CYRs did not behave as passive, neutral, conduits of information, but instead they critically examined their methods.

It is also important to point out that, after an initial period of training, the CYRs selected the research methods that they felt would most effectively advance their goals. They split into three groups—survey, interview, and video. Youth's 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 youth's experiences in West City. Those who chose video talked about wanting to tell a story about their own neighborhoods, wanting to provide "proof" of the way things are where they live. It was less important to them to make generalizations about all youth in West City, but instead to provide evidence of their own experiences and living conditions in their neighborhoods.

III: Asserting an alternative viewpoint: "Youth Tell the Truth"

In the prior section we provided evidence of ways in which the CYRs adopted the practices of social science researchers. While that process is part of the story, it leaves unexamined the ways in which young people asserted their own perspective and expertise during the project. In this sense, their participation was not merely about becoming part of a community, or coming to see things the way "old-timers" did, but instead about bringing to the table an alternative, "youth's-eye" viewpoint.

The following section provides an analysis of a 10-minute video documentary that the youth researchers created. Embedded in the video documentary are challenges to mainstream narratives about West City and to common perceptions of youth. We discuss how the young people's appropriation of the video medium was a critical aspect of their social participation as they moved from a position outside of the Network to a more central one in which they engaged in dialogue with adult members.

The video project, called "Youth Tell the Truth," was developed by six of the youth in the project to show the West City Youth Network a representation of their neighborhoods from the perspectives of youth. In the video, they identify resources as well as problems across five neighborhoods. Their main purpose was to share with the Network and other interested community members how they viewed their communities and what they thought should be changed. As Cristina notes in the introduction, "It's gonna show you what youth think can be done to improve these neighborhoods."

The video is comprised of descriptive as well as critical portraits of West City. The critical elements cohered around two central themes:

1. Youth challenging narratives told of their city and neighborhoods
2. Youth challenging adults' assumptions about youth

Youth Challenge Narratives About Their City and Neighborhoods: The video's first line of narration conveys its central theme: "West City is like two different cities." The message, as the rest of the video shows, is that there are disparities in resources, safety, and opportunities for youth.

After the introduction, the video cuts to a two-part montage of neighborhood scenes. Part 1 flashes pictures of different parks, a shiny clean "dot-com" office building, and then more parks. In the background, Woody Guthrie's "This Land Is Your Land" is playing. Part 2 shifts to images of litter, gang graffiti, and freeway obstruction walls (which are adjacent to some apartment buildings where some of the youth researchers lived). In the background, a song recorded by a local artist describes territorial conflicts between two gangs. Contrasted side by side, the two sets of lyrics convey strikingly different images:

Part 1: Images of a welcome sign, clean parks, homes, corporate businesses	Part 2: Images of graffiti, litter on the streets and in front of apartment buildings, walls separating highways and neighborhoods
Song: "This Land is Your Land" "This land is your land, this land is my land From California, to the New York Islands, From the Redwood Forests, to the Gulf Stream Waters, This land was made for you and me"	Song: "Northside Soldier" "Living up life of a Northside soldier In the Northside, this is how we ride Red Rags do or die, Scraps better run and hide In the Northside, this is how we ride Red Rags do or die, Scraps better run and hide Yo' trip when you first let the pistol smoke…"

In this section of the video, the youth challenge what they perceive to be an idealized notion of West City as a place that is safe and clean with acceptance and opportunities for everyone. The second song demonstrates a marked contrast to the first. It connotes a community with environmental problems – a place where violence is prevalent, a territorial aspect to the community exists, and few opportunities are available for people. This contrast between two cities within West City comes up later in the video as well: As the camera pans to a new technology office building from the road, the voice-over says, "We're driving down Silicon Valley. A couple blocks ago there were really bad houses and litter, but now look at all the clean brand new buildings." The song further challenges a generational myth they believe is prevalent among adults in the community about the histories and homogeneity of its population. While the song in Part 1 harks to the days of Woody Guthrie, Northside Soldier involves a song by a local urban young rap group to which the youth feel more connected.

Another critical view expressed in the video is youth's ambivalence toward local city ordinances and laws reflected in posted signs – whether it be lack of effective enforcement or a deeper ineffectiveness towards problems such as transportation and cleanliness. In one neighborhood, for example, as the camera focuses on a sign, Cristina says, "As you can see, it says 'Warning, no dumping allowed. Violators will be prosecuted.' but directly underneath the

sign you'll find a lot of garbage. So obviously, no one is paying attention." In this example and others, the youth are acting as "investigative reporters" of sorts, to let people know that a mismatch exists between what city leaders believe will solve these community problems and what the reality is.

It is worth noting that when we mention youth's challenging of mainstream narratives, it was not only negative criticisms they made but also an attempt to show positive aspects of their community they believed others weren't aware of. For example, Elsa, who lives in an unincorporated neighborhood near West City with a reputation for gangs and rampant crime notes, "This is a restaurant where they have some good-ass Mexican food" and cites the "Friendship Park" in her neighborhood "where the little kids play" as one of few safe places in her neighborhood, which was mainly supported and built through the efforts of neighborhood residents. Blanca for example, who lives in a neighborhood called Friendly Meadows, but says "there's nothing friendly about it", later reconsiders this statement somewhat by showing a local park where youth do play as well as children gathering around an ice cream truck that passes through what she considers a dangerous street. Thus, Blanca's statements, for example, show some ambivalence in first challenging the "Friendly" aspect of the neighborhood's name, but also recognizing its positive aspects.

Youth Challenge Assumptions About West City Youth: Through the process of making the video, the youth began to contest, implicitly and explicitly, various assumptions they believed adult decision-makers held about them. The youth presented themselves as important resources and potential allies with the adults by depicting themselves as experts in their neighborhoods and as people willing to work towards positive change. In other words, youth in

the video expressed that they had opinions and expertise that mattered and should be included at the decision-making table.

One example of this can be seen when the youth present themselves as experts about their neighborhoods. As Cristina describes in the video's introduction, "We picked these neighborhoods because we believe nobody knows them better than we do because we live in them." Throughout the video, the youth make observations about their neighborhoods and tell stories about these places that the viewer might not know about. Brian, for example, who lives in the west side of the city perceived to have fewer problems, discusses how a creek behind a local park is a common hangout for high school kids to do drugs. Elsa, who lives in an unincorporated neighborhood, pans the camera through apartment buildings and houses, but makes a reference to the audience about the ethnic make-up of the neighborhood and questions why it is that so many Mexicans are the ones living near the railroad tracks. Youth's assertion of expertise is also evident in their title "Our Neighborhoods: Youth Tell the Truth."

In a more subtle way, the youth also contrasted themselves with conventional views of youth as passive recipients of services. (This conventional view has been dominant historically in West City, which has not had many formal venues for youth involvement). They do this by situating themselves as central figures of the piece and inviting the audience (policy makers, educators, and social service providers in the Network and local residents) to listen to what *they* had to say about their communities. For a change, the adult was placed in the position of listener and learner, while the youth became experts in their own experiences to share with adults. Throughout the video, the youth used active words to demonstrate their commitment to making a community change. Elsa, in her introduction to her neighborhood states, "I think we should all get together and do something about it." At the end, Brian invites the audience to work with

them in saying, "We hope that with this video you know more about West City youth and what our neighborhoods are like and what we can do to make them better."

In sum, in both subtle and more overt ways these youth appropriated the video as a research tool that advanced their message. Though their intention was to profile different neighborhoods and observe then, they began to question and challenge the paradoxes and contradictions between what they first observed, what they thought others believed, and what they believed to be true for themselves and possibly other youth. The youth did not strictly apply the video camera techniques to show pictures and locations, but incorporated their personal narratives throughout while challenging those they believed were not completely accurate. By positioning themselves as central figures in the video youth became both subjects and participants in their research rather than objects of study.

Section IV: Presentation to City Council

We have discussed two features of social participation: 1) the mastery and appropriation of practices, and 2) the unique perspectives that these young people brought to the conversation. The presentation to City Council embodies this combination. It offered youth their first opportunity to interact in a public forum with West City decision-makers in their new roles as researchers and youth advocates. From a situated perspective (Lave and Wenger, 1993), it represented an instance of youth's movement from marginal to more central members of this community. To show that this represented a shift it is important to provide some context for the meeting between youth and adults.

Stratification in West City extends to its democratic leadership, which tends to be almost exclusively white. This point was dramatized visually in the composition of the people at the

meeting. Of the nine CYR presenters at the City Council meeting, eight were Latino[4]. In contrast, the City Council members were all white. In addition to a cultural divide, there was also a generational one: youth in general, and Latino youth in particular, had not typically been treated as informed experts in citywide planning conversations (Field notes, 5.14.01). For example, this was the first time that a forum such as this had been created for youth to communicate findings and recommendations from their own research. This does not, however, mean that the youth were entering a hostile or doubting situation. The city leaders had responded positively to youth's request for time at the meeting, and throughout the presentation appeared to be respectful, engaged listeners. In sum, it was a situation in which the historical norm was for non-participation by youth, but in which the current adults were receptive to their participation.

Having set this context, what did the youth do with this opportunity? What research findings and political concerns did they communicate? As in the example of the video, youth did not merely present the evidence in a neutral manner, but instead advocated and raised critical concerns about their experiences in West City.

For example, drawing from their survey and interview data, youth suggested that there was a need for a "Friendlier Climate," "Activities and Places for Youth," and changes in the "City Infrastructure and Climate". (Evidence for this section is drawn from 5.14.01 field notes and videotaped recording of the City Council meeting). "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 more positive changes for youth. In support of this recommendation, Pablo cited the finding that while youth in general reported

[4] There were only nine because the CYRs were not expected to go to all of the presentations; they were asked to sign up for at least one of their choosing.

liking their neighborhoods (67%), 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). Pablo, said,

> The ones that live near like the [rec center] area [*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.

And in terms of city infrastructure, they recommended cheaper and more frequent public transportation for youth, especially for those living in a section of the east side that is isolated from the rest of West City by a freeway. The CYRs specifically recommended a pedestrian ramp for people living in a part of the town where the mobile home communities are located. To support this point the CYRs shared survey data showing that the residents of this neighborhood reported by far the highest percentage of problems with transportation. 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.

In trying to understand the shift in relationships between youth researchers and civic decision-makers, it is useful to consider the reactions of adults and the responses from the CYRs. In response to a question from the City Council about the purpose of the video, Cristina, one of the more outspoken members of the group, said:

> 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 RWC, 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 (Video record, /14/01).

One City Council member acknowledged that the issues in the east side "are deep issues and are difficult to overcome." He went on to say that many people in West City don't even know that

this area exists. The mayor and City Manager also commented on the message about neighborhood differences. In the mayor's words, "We're aware that certain neighborhoods differ from other neighborhoods. We would need to specifically understand…which complaints are specific to what neighborhoods." The City Manager also sought more data at a neighborhood level. Not all City Council members responded to this issue of neighborhood inequities—one member instead focused on specific citywide recommendations, such as to improve cleanliness of the streets. She suggested that the presenters volunteer to be part of her litter abatement committee.

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. 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 feel like for the participants. One of the CYRs, Blanca, who is from West City's east side, initiated this exchange:

> Blanca: Um, 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.
>
> Mayor: Well you're welcome and I do want to reiterate what everyone has said, we really enjoyed your presentation and understand how much this means to you and I want to thank you for putting in this time and effort…we know you want to do more than just create statistics, that you're interested in making positive changes in your community, and we want to work with you to make those happen, so thank you for your work--we take it seriously—and thank you for being here this evening.
>
> Blanca: Thank you.

At the end of the presentation, during a break, several of the city leaders spoke individually with some of the presenters. For example, the City Manager spoke with a small cluster of the youth,

explaining that it was hard to digest all of the research in one setting, but that he wanted to have the youth come to a meeting with city department heads to discuss the data. Also, Blanca later reported that one of the other city council members approached her to say that he grew up in the same neighborhood, that he still has relatives there, two of whom had been shot, and he knows what it's 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:

> "I thought they were very interested in our ideas, which made me more comfortable".
>
> "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 surprised that the City Council members had been interested in what they had to say. Luis was surprised that someone on the City Council would know people from Blanca's neighborhood, because he thought "they'd all be rich" and wouldn't know that part of West City. Elsa commented that the adults are more interested in youth than she expected, and felt that they wanted them to return to work together. Elsa's comment was interesting because of how it contrasted with her own expectations of the City Council presentation that she had stated two months earlier in her Round 1 interview (which was also conducted with Cristina):

> Elsa: It's not going to be like no Disney ending . . .
>
> I SEE.
>
> Cristina: Yeah, our voices are never important, that's what she's trying to say.
>
> …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?

> Elsa: 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 . . .(2.27.01)

Cristina and Elsa's early skepticism was not representative of everyone in the group. However, their statements, and the way their views changed later, reflects the impact of the City Council presentation on their own changing sense of belonging and participation.

Part V. Empowerment as Changes in Social Position

Evidence from the presentation and its aftermath shows that shifts in relationships between youth researchers and adults were beginning to happen. First, it is important to consider the self-reflections of the youth researchers at the end of the year. Youth talked about a wide-range of ways in which they had changed over the course of the project, which we coded in three areas: skills, personal and social maturity, and relationship to community. Skills, such as public speaking, indicate changes that can help youth participate as citizens in new and more effective ways. Personal maturity signals new levels of comfort and confidence with adults in professional settings. A change in relationship to community indicates new awareness and knowledge about the diversity of communities in West City. Without discussing these different changes in depth, we include here a brief comment by Elsa about her own thoughts about how she had changed. Whereas at the beginning of the year she could not figure out why she and several of her peers had been chosen (they weren't the "smart kids"), she was beginning to gain insight:

> I'm in the process of understanding why [the director] chose these kinds of people; because they come from different backgrounds. They know different things, not everybody knows the same smart facts and stuff.
>
> CAN YOU HELP EXPLAIN…THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN FACTS AND EXPERIENCES?

> Like facts are like, oh, yeah, 99 percent of youth in West City, like, like to wear red[5]…No, I got it, like 50 percent of Redwood City are in gangs...They assume that we're gang members and stuff. But then…it's not true based on the facts, which is sometimes some people are just with their friends that are gang members and the police comes around and sees them with them and assumes that they're gang members, too….That's not laying down the, like, real, real facts…
>
> HOW DOES HAVING PEOPLE FROM DIFFERENT EXPERIENCES HELP WITH THAT ISSUE?
>
> Cause, like, you know, like . . . I don't know, like, Will, he lives in a nice, up-tight neighborhood. You wouldn't know, he'd be like, "oh, yeah, that's a fact I know for sure". And then you'd have someone like Tania, or Luis, even though Tania doesn't talk, she lives in a bad neighborhood too, like me and Cindy, we could all say "No it's not." And he was like, "Yeah, but it's a fact; they got to". And we were like, "Well, it's not true, we live in those neighborhoods, we know. We know the people that hang around with them and stuff" (5.31.01).

The whole passage shows Elsa's dawning awareness that she has valuable knowledge and insights, which are rooted in her neighborhood experience. She has begun to see that she has the power to challenge negative social constructions of her community.

From a situated perspective, self-reflections are only one dimension learning and empowerment. After all, has the social position of these young people actually changed? To what extent are they part of decision-making processes that affect young people in West City? Certainly, in comparison to where they were at the beginning of the year, the CYRs have moved from marginal/non-existent participation to some form of legitimate peripheral participation. Whereas at the beginning they were not part of discussions among civic decision-makers, by the spring they had presented their findings and recommendations at two different public events. And in the subsequent year they continued to make presentations to community forums sponsored by the West City Youth Network. These veteran young people are now called "youth ambassadors", which describes their role in reaching out to community organizations, the school board, and city agencies to represent the needs of young people in West City.

[5] Red is the color for Norteño (Northside) gangs.

The crucial question, of course, pertains to the impact of these presentations and involvement. In the long run were the presentations merely tokenistic or did they have some sort of impact on West City? It is difficult to ascertain at this stage the level of impact of the youth on decisions, especially because this is an ongoing process in which we are still involved[6]. We don't want to overestimate the significance of these changes: certainly the Community Youth Researchers have not achieved an *equal* position at the table. However, in comparison to when the project began, the new connections are noteworthy.

We tentatively conclude that there have been two kinds of discernable impacts on the West City Youth Network. The first has to do with bringing a moral voice to conversations about equity and fairness in West City. For example, this year, at a community forum sponsored by the Network, Cristina, Elsa, and Blanca raised points familiar from the first year of research—unequal distribution of resources and opportunities for youth, pervasive negative perceptions of youth, etc. (Field notes, 10/9/01). These comments led to a lengthy discussion among adults about the history of West City, the different ways they have tried to solve problems, and the enduring ways in which the interests of a certain community (on the east side) continued to be unmet. In other words, while the presentation did not lead to concrete changes in resource distribution, it helped stimulate a conversation among civic leaders about these issues.

A second impact has to do with opening up new doors for youth involvement in decision-making. For example, after seeing the accomplishments of the CYRs, the city's parks and recreation department expressed interest in working with them to strengthen its advisory board and is using the youth's data to identify their priorities for activity planning this year. In other areas as well, there are beginning to be signs of stronger interest and tangible opportunities

[6] Also, it is important to point out that we did not include interviews with adult stakeholders as part of our data collection process. Such interviews would have helped us to assess the youth's impact from their vantage point

for youth to be included in decision-making as resources rather than clients.

Conclusion

This paper has described the activities of a group of young people in an after school program whose goal was to make their city better for youth. The program provided structured opportunities for young people to become engaged, active citizens through doing research and advocating based on their findings. In our analysis we have examined strategies of participation by the youth participants. We have not sought to make claims that each individual youth became "empowered" at the end of the project, because we have taken a more socially situated view of empowerment. Also, we have not claimed that the process of collaborative work between youth and West City had reached its final stage. However, we do conclude that as a group, these youth's social position shifted in positive directions over the course of the youth research project. Youth's mastery and appropriation of research tools helped them gain access and credibility with city leaders, and they used this opportunity to challenge mainstream narratives about their communities and the city as a whole. In this sense, their participation was not merely about increased involvement in the community, but also about criticism and change in that community.

This analysis is significant in terms of its implications for metaphors of sociocultural participation. In much of the sociocultural literature there is a strong focus on enculturation, on the processes by which people become part of a community. This tendency has been criticized for not paying attention to the role that newcomers play in fostering change in the community itself (Engestrom, 1999; Linehan & McCartney, 2001). Although cultural tools and practices structure the way people communicate and interact, people remain agents who question, challenge, and shape their social worlds (Holland et al., 1998). In the case of the West City

youth, neither a focus on enculturation nor a focus on criticism provides an adequate account, but instead some integration of the two.

Also, this study suggests that participatory research is a promising educational strategy for empowering youth. Through its focus on skills of data gathering, collaboration, public speaking, problem-solving, and civic participation, this type of program develops competencies associated with "public work" (Boyte, 1991). Unlike typical service programs, 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), brush up against inequities or discrimination in their everyday lives.

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