

CHAPTER 7

Youth-Initiated Research as a Tool for Advocacy and Change in Urban Schools

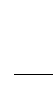
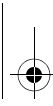
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Overview

Though some important gains have been made, most scholars and policy makers revisit the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling with an acute sense of the distance yet to be traveled toward equitable schools that grant meaningful access to all students. Research conducted in the 50 years following *Brown* reveal that problematic trends persist in spite of the rhetoric of reconciliation and progress. America's classrooms and schools remain, for the large part, racially and socioeconomically segregated spaces (Orfield and Eaton, 1997). There are also huge spending discrepancies between the wealthiest and poorest districts (Kozol, 1991) and large gaps in academic achievement (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Noguera, 2002).

We know from this research that students in poor urban areas continue to have differential access to learning resources such as rigorous coursework, credentialed teachers, textbooks, lab equipment, and digital technology (Fine, 1991; Oakes and Lipton, 2004; Valenzuela, 1999). These students also frequently attend schools that fail to offer the basic necessities such as heat, water, healthy food, or toilet facilities. Most important, however, these schools fail to offer students the access they need to a quality education; an education that will largely determine their access to a well-paying stable job and the skills needed for critical citizenship in a multicultural democracy.

Sociologists of education are working diligently to confront these problems. Research on the inequitable conditions and achievement gaps have been important in promoting honest and candid dialogue about the state of America's urban schools. There have been many of us, however, who have not



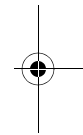
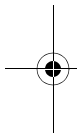
been satisfied only with promoting these sorts of conversations. We have become more interested in impacting the conditions of urban schools than we are in studying them at present. In this project of critical sociology, we have attempted to work with parents, students, teachers, and community members to transform the inequitable conditions of urban schools. One important aspect of this work has been the engagement of urban teens as collaborators in the critical research project. For the past six summers I, along with a team of colleagues at the University of California–Los Angeles Institute for Democracy, Education, and Access (IDEA) have convened a seminar in which local teens are apprenticed as critical researchers as they develop and carry out research projects in urban schools and communities. This chapter will examine the production associated with two consecutive summer research seminars that apprenticed Los Angeles area youth as critical researchers of the conditions of Los Angeles area schools. Particularly, this chapter will explore youth research related to an Educational Bill of Rights and a School Accountability Report Card to understand more about how youth research can be used as a tool for advocacy and social change.

I begin by explaining the conceptual framework of the seminar; that is, I describe our notions of critical research and critical learning through apprenticeship in communities of practice. I then briefly describe the structure of the summer seminars and the research foci during the summers of 2001 and 2002. I then devote a section each to describing and presenting the research activities and products associated with each of these seminars. The penultimate section describes the dissemination and advocacy associated with the student research. I talk about how the work was disseminated and some important structural changes that occurred largely as a result of the student research. I conclude with some commentary on the impact of the seminar on the students and the university researchers who participated, along with recommendations for policy makers at the school, city, state, and national levels.

Conceptual Framework: Critical Research in Communities of Practice

Critical research can be defined by the *who*, the *what*, and the *why* that have come to be associated with the term. By *who*, I mean to challenge the assumption of what persons have the right to participate in socially sanctioned research. Foucault (1972) suggests that discourses internally regulate themselves by limiting the numbers of people who have the will to truth or the right to make truth statements. Critical research challenges the exclusions within the discourse of social science research that normally exclude nonacademics from participating in conversations about educational reform. Instead, it draws upon Gramsci's (1971) notion of the organic intellectual to argue that students and parents should legitimately work as collaborators in community-based critical research.

The *how* of critical research also differs markedly from its traditional counterpart; where traditional research is individualistic, critical research is



collaborative; where traditional research is often defined by objectivity or distance from research subjects, critical research is defined by proximity, even intimacy between researchers and populations researched. Kincheloe and McLaren (1998) argue that trustworthiness is a better criterion than objectivity in evaluating the merit of critical research projects. Critical research is messy and near, but no less “worthy” than more traditional forms of research. Philosophers dating back to Frankfurt school theorists like Max Horkheimer (2002) have reminded us that all scholarship is ideological or susceptible to ideology—even work that imagines itself as objective or neutral. Indeed, the most current iteration of critical thought has been as a reflexive discourse used to unpack the relationship between the unwitting work of dominant discourses and the maintenance of existing, often inequitable power relations. Critical research, then, is not a derivative or inferior form of traditional scholarship; rather it offers a compelling counterargument for an entirely different approach to knowledge production (Merriam, 1998).

Perhaps the most significant difference in critical research concerns its “*why*,” that is itself part of a process of transforming the world. Kincheloe and McLaren (1998), for example, define a *criticalist* as a researcher or theorist who attempts to use her work as a form of social or cultural criticism and who accepts certain basic assumptions that all thought is fundamentally mediated by power relations that are social and historically constituted; that facts can never be isolated from the domain of values or removed from some form of ideological inscription; that the relationship between concept and object and between signifier and signified is never stable or fixed and is often mediated by the social relations of capitalist production and consumption; and that the oppression that characterizes contemporary societies is most forcefully reproduced when subordinates accept their social status as natural, necessary, or inevitable (p. 263). In the process of articulating the politics, purposes, and practices of critical research, they offer the following:

To engage in critical postmodern research is to take part in a process of critical world making guided by the shadowed outline of a dream of a world less conditioned by misery, suffering, and the politics of deceit. It is, in short, a pragmatics of hope in an age of cynical reason. (p. 294)

Within this criticalist tradition, Denzin (1997) advocates a public, civic, or everyday life ethnography that draws on the legacies of the new journalists, that evidences a desire to connect with people and their concerns, and writes ethnographies that move people to action and “answers to a new readership—the biographically situated reader who is a co participant in a public project that advocates democratic solutions to personal and public problems” (Denzin, 1997).

Cultural psychologists believe that people learn as they participate in everyday sociocultural activity (Bruner, 1996; Cole, 1996; Lave and Wenger, 1991,



Rogoff, 1990; Vygotsky, 1978). They critique transmission models of learning often promoted in schools that assume that teachers are sole disseminators of knowledge and that students are empty vessels.

Within this school of thought, Lave and Wenger (1991) offer a social practice theory in which they contend that learning occurs when new participants are afforded legitimate peripheral participation in communities of practice. As the beginner or newcomer moves from the periphery of this community to its core, he becomes more active and engaged within the culture and hence assumes the role of expert or “old-timer.” These ideas are what Lave and Wenger (1991) call “the process of legitimate peripheral participation.” A community of practice is a site of learning and action where participants coalesce around a joint enterprise as they develop a whole repertoire of activities, common stories, and ways of speaking and acting. Communities of practice constitute reality in a particular manner and encourage specialized ways of acting and thinking (Wenger, 1998).

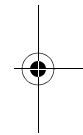
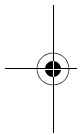
Communities of practice are social sites where people participate in activities as they become certain “kinds of persons.” These activities embody distinctive ways that participants relate to each other and the broader world. Learning occurs constantly in these communities as people participate in activities that are increasingly central to the core practice. This changing participation leads participants to take on new identities that are necessarily bound up with new knowledge and skills (Lave, 1996).

Building upon these concepts of critical research and communities of practices I, along with several colleagues at UCLA, designed a seminar in which city teens would have the opportunity to learn about critical research as they collaborated with local teachers and university professors on research projects conducted in local schools and communities. In the following section I describe the structure of summer seminar in more detail and outline the themes of the two seminars around which this analysis is framed.

The Summer Seminar

Beginning in 1999, several colleagues at IDEA began convening a summer seminar at UCLA. The seminar brought together students, teachers, and parents from urban schools and communities to design and carry out critical research projects on issues of immediate concern to these schools and communities. Students were chosen from the most underperforming schools and communities in the city. They were selected only for their interest in the program, giving us students with a wide range of life and educational experiences.

The students worked in groups of four or five on research teams led by teachers from the local elementary and secondary schools. Throughout the five weeks of the seminar the students read seminal works in the sociology of education and critical methods of educational research; they developed research questions, read relevant literature, collected and analyzed data, and



created research reports; and they presented these reports to university faculty, policy makers, and, on occasion, to regional and national conferences of educational researchers and practitioners. Students also wrote individual papers where they contemplated the practical applications of their research to the issues in their own schools and communities.

There were multiple goals of the seminar, but two emerged as primary. We desired to use the seminar space to help students acquire the language and tools they need to function within the academy, what we have called *academic literacy* (Morrell, 2004). Customarily, the student populations that we worked with had not been well represented within colleges and universities throughout the state. We wanted to demonstrate to the schools and universities who had dismissed these students that the students were indeed capable of college-level work. At the same time, we wanted to use the context of critical, community-based research to help the students gain the literacy tools they would need in order to be successful at these universities.

A second goal of the seminar relates to the research itself. We held the sincere belief that teachers, students, and parents were the most legitimate collaborators for the kind of community-based praxis-oriented research that we ourselves were interested in. In other words, the research studies were not merely a context for literacy learning; the products themselves were important to the struggle for educational justice within the teacher education program, with the local districts, the greater metropolitan area and even statewide. The student-participants and their work would influence policy and practice across all of these settings.

During the summer of 2001, students convened to articulate an Educational Bill of Rights that outlined the basic entitlements of all students in California. Student-initiated research projects sought to investigate the existence of these rights in the context of urban schools across Los Angeles. This research sought to answer the following questions:

- What does every student in California deserve?
- What inequalities arise in the experiences of California's students?
- Why do these inequalities arise? What is our explanation for the inequalities?
- What can youth do? How can they use research to play a part in legal advocacy?

Toward these ends, student groups collected data in and around Los Angeles's urban schools. Students visited classrooms, interviewed and surveyed their peers, evaluated curricula, textbooks, and technological capabilities in order to understand the state of schools in their communities. Research from the seminar featured prominently in the ongoing work of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) in their litigation against the State of California. Language from the Educational Bill of Rights was incorporated in legislation that was argued in the state assembly. Teachers, students, and administrators from the target schools were also impacted by the work of these student researchers.



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In July 2002, a different group of students convened for the summer seminar. Course readings introduced students to the field of sociology of education and to critical research methods. These academic tools were used to develop research projects that would test out the possibilities of a bottom-up accountability system that enabled students and parents to monitor student opportunity to learn. The central purpose of the seminar was to understand how students could contribute information about school conditions to the state-mandated School Accountability Report Cards (SARCs).¹ This question embodied three subquestions:

- What are the conditions of learning in urban schools across Los Angeles?
- How can students access and contribute information about these conditions?
- How can students, working in conjunction with parents and community advocates, pressure their schools and districts to include student-generated data in the official SARCs?

The seminar was divided into four student research teams, each focused on one core condition of schooling—quality teachers, a rigorous curriculum, adequate learning materials, and a positive physical and social school environment. Under the guidance of teachers, the research teams conducted field research in several Los Angeles area schools. The students explored various research and pedagogic tools (Geographic Information Systems mapping, audiotape recording, video and still digital photography, and the theater of the oppressed) for gathering and representing this data. Throughout the five-week seminar, the students also interviewed and met with educational researchers, community organizers, parent advocates, school administrators, civil rights attorneys, and elected officials to investigate how student research might become a standard part of the SARC process. On the final day of the seminar, the research teams presented their findings, methods, and analysis of the politics of implementation to a public audience of UCLA faculty, civil rights attorneys, educators, community advocates, and parents. Instruments developed during the seminar were refined and used by other students and parents to make sense of the conditions in schools across the city. The research products and tools were also featured on a website developed for teachers in the Greater Los Angeles area. Finally, a team of students presented their research to the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association.

This chapter draws upon field notes; student interviews; digital video footage of seminar sessions and student research; student-generated products; and conversations with lawyers, community advocates, administrators, and policy makers to consider the relationship between the summer project, students' identities as agents of change, and local and state conversations about transforming urban schools. The work upon which this chapter reports has major implications for who has the right to conduct research of import to urban educational reform. It also has implications for curriculum development in urban schools. I argue that it is important to consider students as partners in

urban educational research. I further argue that the process of engaging in student-centered, community-based research taps into students' funds of knowledge, increases students' sense of efficacy, and helps students to develop literacies of power (i.e. academic literacies, critical literacies, civic literacies, and new media literacies). The next sections discuss in more detail the work of the seminar during the summers of 2001 and 2002.

Students' Bill of Rights: Summer Seminar 2001

In the spring of 2001, researchers in IDEA met with leaders and activists in the community over a series of lawsuits being filed by the ACLU over grievances about inequitable educational conditions in California's urban schools. Out of these conversations emerged an Educational Bill of Rights, listing what these legal activists, community leaders, educators, and educational researchers believed that every student in California deserved. The rights included:

- Clear standards
- Appropriate materials
- Adequate facilities
- Quality teachers
- College preparation
- Safe schools
- Fair tests
- Home language
- Rights information
- Public forums

It was against this backdrop that we began planning for the 2001 summer seminar. Our aim was to use our work with the students to learn more about what we meant by each of these rights. Particularly, we wanted to gain an understanding of what these rights might look like in practice and we also wanted to develop tools that students, parents, and community members might be able to use to determine whether these rights were being met. It is one thing to say that students have a right to a quality teacher, for instance. It is quite entirely another enterprise to agree upon a definition of a quality teacher and to assess whether the 10th-grade English teacher fits that definition.

The five research groups each took one of the 10 rights as a starting point. Groups examined access to quality teachers, a safe school environment, learning and technology resources, fair and authentic assessments, and rights to primary language. As part of their research process, these students consulted educational scholarship, used Internet research to obtain demographic data, visited schools, and interviewed and surveyed students, teachers, and administrators. Students were able to amass impressive data sets combining the most recent educational scholarship, achievement data, and their own data



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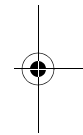
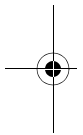
sets to contribute to their analysis of educational equity and access in urban schools. Consider this excerpt from the final report of the Fair and Authentic Assessment Group report:

Standardized testing is defined by “Any set of predetermined questions given to large numbers of students under the same conditions (such as time limit) and scored in the same way” (Failing Our Kids: Why the Testing Craze Won’t Fix Our Schools, 2000). This means schools around the nation, rich and poor are taking the exact same test even though some schools lack resources, funds, and even credential teachers. Many of these schools are schools in low-income urban cities and many of these students are students of color.

Our research shows that many students are drastically being affected by these standardized tests and some are not even aware of the consequences. We found a great number of English Language Learner (a.k.a. ELL, ELD, ESL) students that take standardized tests such as the Stanford Nine (STAN-9, SAT-9, STAR) and the High School Exit Exam (HSEE) achieve low scores because of their inability to understand English fluently. It is stated that “Beginning in 1999, Spanish-speaking English Language Learners who have been in California public schools fewer than 12 months must be administered the SABE/2” (Spanish Assessment of Basic Education Second Edition).

The Fair and Authentic Assessment Group produced a well-written, well-researched report that explained many of the dangers of the current climate of high-stakes, standardized tests. For example, the group used existing research, policy documents, demographic data, and their own interviews with high school students to demonstrate that many students were poorly prepared to take the tests and others were unfairly assessed in negative ways due to language differences. The issue of language was an important one for Los Angeles students considering that the majority of students in the city come from homes where English is not the primary language. Additionally, a large number of students in Los Angeles schools are recent immigrants to the United States. The student research group was rightly concerned that students attending underperforming schools and students speaking a first language other than English were disproportionately negatively affected by the state standardized tests and the High School Exit Exam (HSEE), which has subsequently been suspended, largely due to efforts similar to the work of the students in the seminar.

It is also important to note that the research process itself was a form of advocacy. As students engaged in research on students’ rights, they were also teaching other students about their rights and educating themselves. Engaging youth as critical researchers built efficacy on the part of the research practitioners, who gained confidence and tools needed to advocate for educational justice.





The following excerpt from the Language Rights Group report provides a great example of how the students began to see themselves not only as advocates, but as educators as well:

We had many opportunities at “Shadow Side High” to get in group discussions about fair and authentic assessments. Our group felt that not only the interviews were great and powerful, but also [that] the focus groups were a way to educate the students about the injustices in the school system. The first time that we went to “Shadow Side High” we were able to have a discussion with four ELL students and an ELL teacher’s aid. These students were honest and their input was incredible. We got to observe their facial expressions and there was a lot of anger, disappointment, sadness, and confusion. Many of the students that we interviewed couldn’t believe that they were attending a school with such a bad reputation. These students said many times that they felt that they were cheated in many different ways. But there were some of them who also were very critical. They were conscience about the corruption in the school system. Not only did we learn from these students but we also educated them in many different ways. Our research group was a group who encouraged these students to feel proud of themselves because, believe it or not, many of these students were “ashamed” of themselves because of their low-test scores. The ELL students and our research group empowered each other with knowledge.

School Accountability Report Cards: Summer 2002

The theme for the summer of 2002 emerged in work initiated during the previous summer relating to the Educational Bill of Rights. Students, parents, and teachers throughout the state felt it unfair that all students were assessed under conditions that assumed equality of educational experience when the lived experiences of students bore out an entirely different reality. Without paying attention to context, state officials were insensitive to the plight of underperforming urban districts, essentially blaming them for their own failure. What would happen, in essence, is that the states would blame districts, who would then blame principals, who would then blame teachers, who would in turn blame students and their families. We called this process a top-down accountability system; that is, starting from the top, each unit beneath was considered responsible for failure until it came to students and their parents, the real losers in the equation, who were unable to hold anyone else accountable.

This situation created two serious problems that needed attention. First, the standardized tests existed as the only real assessment of school performance. The State of California had created an achievement index to rank schools on a scale of 1 to 10, but the only criterion for assessment remained the scores on state standardized tests. Second, parents and students had

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no collective mechanisms for holding schools accountable. From our conversations with local participants, we decided to create a seminar that would focus on creating a bottom-up accountability system in which local actors would have the tools to assess the degree to which their schools were adequately preparing their children. We wanted to continue with the themes

We are high school seniors researching inequality in public schools in order to make positive changes. With your help we can make a difference. Your opinion counts!!!

Demographic Info

School:
 City:
 Grade Level:
 Gender:
 Ethnicity (optional):
 Age:

Rigorous, Quality, and Relevant Curriculum

My classes are preparing me for a successful future				
Hell No				Hell Yeah
1	2	3	4	5
I feel like I'm being challenged in my classes				
Hell No				Hell Yeah
1	2	3	4	5
I know what courses I need to graduate and go to a four-year college				
Hell No				Hell Yeah
1	2	3	4	5
I often choose my own class schedule				
Hell No				Hell Yeah
1	2	3	4	5

Social and Physical Environment

The bathrooms at my school are in good shape and I am able to use them				
Hell no	Barely	Somewhat	Mostly	Hell Yeah
1	2	3	4	5
I am proud of the way my school looks				
Hell no	Barely	Somewhat	Mostly	Hell Yeah
1	2	3	4	5
I notice segregation at my school during lunch				
Hell no	Barely	Somewhat	Mostly	Hell Yeah
1	2	3	4	5
I notice segregation at my school during classes				
Hell no	Barely	Somewhat	Mostly	Hell Yeah
1	2	3	4	5
When I express my opinions to the administrators they take action upon my concern				
Hell no	Barely	Somewhat	Mostly	Hell Yeah
1	2	3	4	5
My school does a good job of informing parents about what goes on in my school				
Hell no	Barely	Somewhat	Mostly	Hell Yeah
1	2	3	4	5

Fig. 7.1 Los Angeles Area High School Student Survey.

Quality Teaching

I consider my teachers highly qualified				
Hell No				Hell Yeah
1	2	3	4	5
My teachers are often available during their free time to provide students extra help				
Hell No				Hell Yeah
1	2	3	4	5
My relationship with my teachers is based on respect				
Hell No				Hell Yeah
1	2	3	4	5
My teachers value other students' beliefs and ideas				
Hell No				Hell Yeah
My teachers use creative methods to help me understand the lessons and materials				
Hell No				Hell Yeah
1	2	3	4	5

Learning Resources

Do you have a home and class set of textbooks in all of your classes?				
NO				YES
How important is this to you?				
Not very				Very important
1	2	3	4	5
Are there working computers in all of your classes with available printers?				
NO				YES
How important is this to you?				
Not very				Very important
1	2	3	4	5
Are there a variety of languages and cultures represented in the books at your school library?				
NO				YES
How important is this to you?				
Not very				Very important
1	2	3	4	5
Are there dictionaries and thesauruses in good condition in your English and history classes?				
NO				YES
How important is this to you?				
Not very				Very important
1	2	3	4	5

Fig. 7.1 (Continued)

articulated in the Educational Bill of Rights, yet we wanted the research groups to develop tools that would allow students and parents to assess the schools' performance in respecting the inalienable rights of students to a fair and equitable education.

With these goals in mind, the seminar of 2002 involved four groups; one each to examine learning resources; the quality of teachers; access to a rigorous, college-going curriculum; and the social and physical ecology of schools. The students read literature relevant to the sociology of education, qualitative and quantitative research methods, and the conditions of local schools. They learned how to access Internet databases to learn about school



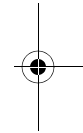
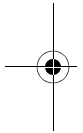
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and community demographics and academic achievement. Student groups also developed tools that they could use in their visits to neighborhood schools where they would conduct their research, and that could be used by their peers and by parents or community advocates interested in conducting research in or on neighborhood schools. For example, the groups each contributed to a Los Angeles Schools survey that was later used by a parent research group in the city (see Figure 7.1).

Unsurprisingly, the groups found that, by and large, students did not have access to these inalienable educational rights. This was significant for the students, considering the fact that they were researching their own neighborhoods and schools. The sense of frustration and resolve in the research groups is well represented in this conclusion to the Learning Resources Group's final report. For this reason, I quote it at length:

Based on our critical research, we are able to see the obvious discrepancies that exist in our educational system. We could see that students do care about their education and that they want the same opportunity that the upper class has. They want equal access to quality resources. They want textbooks that tell their history. They do not want the Eurocentric lectures they are accustomed to hearing. Furthermore, they want the knowledge to keep pace with the Information Age. People nowadays are relying heavily on technology and Internet access. If they are not able to keep up with society, then they will be at a heavy disadvantage. The working-class students also want the simple things. They want staplers and basic materials needed for presentations. They do not have the luxury of being able to afford excess materials to enhance their presentations. They must rely on the little they have but they want the materials provided by the state educational code.

We were able to see that what the students want and what they deserve differ greatly from what they receive. Students in urban schools are not being given the same opportunity as students in the more affluent schools. The textbooks they use are Eurocentric and unrepresentative of other cultures. They progress in the educational system not knowing the history of their own cultural background, which is also in violation of an educational code. Many students do not have access to computers. If computers are in the classroom they are not allowed to touch them. This is not an example of preparing students to engage in the new Information Age. Finally, teachers are grading some projects based on presentation and superficial qualities. The students with the most money are at a higher advantage. The students who are not able to afford the basic necessities that should be provided are looked upon as incapable and incompetent.



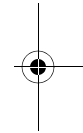
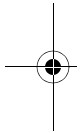


The differences are exposed. The demands are voiced. Like the Chicano, Black, and Women's civil rights movements before us, we are engulfed in social and educational reform. We demand equity and the preservation of our civil rights. We demand that all our schools in urban and suburban communities be taught equally and be provided with the same quality educational resources. Otherwise, how are working-class people supposed to become an active part of society? Cesar Chavez once said, "Once social change begins, it cannot be reversed. You cannot uneducate the person who has learned to read. You cannot humiliate the person who feels pride. And you cannot oppress the people who are not afraid anymore." We are educated, full of pride, and united by a common goal for social change. We cannot be uneducated nor can we be humiliated. We are no longer afraid.

The students in this group, strangers to the topic and the research process only five weeks earlier, had become powerful researchers and advocates for social change. Even though their research revealed gross inequities in access to learning resources, the group left the process with a sense of urgency to work for social change. This attitude speaks directly to the *why* of critical research that I alluded to earlier. It is so important to have youth involved in research for educational justice just because they bring so much urgency to the conversation. I'll discuss further exactly *what* these young people bring in the concluding remarks.

Report Dissemination and Advocacy for Social Change

The first and immediate form of research dissemination consisted of the final presentations. Students presented orally with their accompanying PowerPoint slides to an audience of academic faculty members, community members, parents, and elected officials. Each of the presentations during the 2001 and 2002 summers were well received. Marco Firebaugh, assembly member for the 50th District in California, sent key staff members to the 2001 presentations. They were so impressed that a series of conversations led to assembly member Firebaugh sponsoring state legislation based on the work of the seminar students. Assembly Bill 226 remained remarkably similar to the Educational Bill of Rights as created by local students and parents. Assembly members fervently argued the bill in committee, and several parents and researchers involved in the seminar testified on its behalf. Ultimately, the bill was defeated. The governor at the time threatened to veto the bill if it passed, anyway. Nonetheless, the bill remained an important rallying call: it significantly mobilized students, teachers, and parents across the state, and it increased momentum for two legal briefs that the ACLU filed against the state, *Williams v. State of California*, which ultimately settled in 2004 giving an additional billion dollars to California schools.





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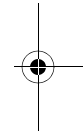
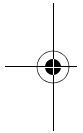
Following the seminar, student projects were uploaded onto an online journal under a series of special issues. The website is accessed by thousands of teachers in the southern California area, as well as by researchers throughout the country. For the academic years 2001–2002 and 2002–2003, each month featured a different issue related to the Educational Bill of Rights and the School Accountability Report Card. The issues featured seminar work and allowed spaces for teachers and students from Los Angeles area schools to submit their own narratives and their own research. As the seminar research instruments were made available, several classrooms across the city disseminated the Los Angeles Schools survey and reported the results.

Additionally, two of the teachers from the summer seminar brought the concept back to their high school, and started an after-school program focusing on critical research. Several of the student participants from the seminar played major roles in helping to establish and promote the club. These students continued with the research of the summer and even attended a march for educational equality. Two students attending this school ran for student office and were elected as president and vice president of the associated student body. Under their tenure they lobbied the district and were successful in creating a diversity liaison to ensure that the needs of the students of color were being met.

Following the summer seminar of 2002, several students traveled to Chicago to present their research to the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association. The symposium, which featured the summer research projects, was well attended by scholars throughout the country, several of whom are now instituting similar projects with urban youth in their cities.

One of the more significant outcomes pertains to the changes in the youth themselves. Students leave the seminar not only having participated in worthwhile projects for educational change; they also leave with a sense of themselves as researchers and agents of change. This is evidenced in the following passage from the conclusion of the Language Rights Group's report from the 2001 summer seminar:

Engaging in a research project for the first time has allowed us to grow in astounding ways. None of us had ever conducted actual critical research before, so this project was very empowering. We have gained knowledge both as students and as researchers. As a group we have built upon the skills for social understanding and looking beyond what a person says. With the experience we have gained in doing research we can look at another author's research, synthesize it critically and sum the findings. We can now confidently use the knowledge that we have constructed to make sense of the inequalities that we see in society. Reading the word has enabled us to read the world.





Conclusion

I would argue that the most powerful tools for advocacy and change are students themselves. This change in outlook and practice is documented in the writings of students in the seminar and the numerous correspondences with students after leaving the seminar. For example, in a recent seminar, we invited past alumni to speak to the current crop of critical researchers. Each of the young women on the panel had created an organization dedicated to the struggle for educational justice. One young woman had organized a club on her college campus for undocumented students, like herself, who were being denied services on campus. Another had created a support group for entering students of color at her campus. Yet another had organized high school students enrolled in a continuation school.

The impact of the panel's presentations led me to do more checking on the social action projects of the seminar alumni. One young woman had traveled to Brazil to work with young people in the *favelas* (Portuguese for "slums"). Another had worked with kids in inner-city Boston. Three had traveled to New York City to work with high school students in their inaugural summer seminar. According to the program's director, they played a major role in making the project a success.

I fully expect that many of these students will become teachers, researchers, and organizers for educational change, engaging in a trying but rewarding struggle that will last a lifetime. As I have implied throughout this chapter, many of these young women and men are already involved in these activities. The short-term successes lead me to be much more optimistic about the impact of the seminar on the life chances of students than I am about necessarily transforming urban schools. That journey will be much longer, much tougher, and filled with more disappointments than successes. However, I am continually reminded by these powerful young women and men why it is so necessary to continue this struggle and why it is paramount to involve them in the struggle.

The policy implications of this work for me are quite clear. Local, state, and national policy-making bodies must find ways to set aside resources that grant young people (in school and out of school) opportunities to develop the skills they need to engage in research for advocacy and social change. School district officials, for example, can make space inside of classrooms so that young people can be sanctioned as participants in community-based research. District officials can also create programs for teachers to help in developing their capacity to incorporate the acquisition of these skills into the core courses of language arts, social studies, math, and science. I have observed several powerful examples in the Los Angeles schools of teachers who were able to use the platform of youth advocacy for social justice to teach valuable academic skills across subject matter. School and district officials can also set aside funds and open up spaces for after-school and summer enrichment



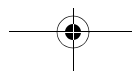
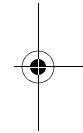
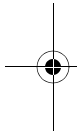
programs that allow students to participate in communities of practice similar to those associated with the summer seminar.

Citywide, officials who control youth development funds can incorporate activities that develop research faculties. Sports and arts programs are essential to the development of our youth, but these programs can and should be complemented by community-centered programs that teach students literacy and leadership skills. Cities can also provide grants to community-based organizations that show initiative and success in creating these types of programs. As an example, I can point to a Los Angeles area community-based organization that received city funds to establish a leadership development program for current and former gang members. The intervention continues to be highly successful.

State-level policy makers can continue to offer incentives to public universities to create programs such as the summer seminar. The seminars, for example, were originally funded through state monies targeted at school districts that were underrepresented at the elite public universities. These universities, in turn, were provided with outreach funds to develop programs to attract high school students attending these underperforming schools. State departments of education can also set aside monies for grants that allow schools and community-based organizations to create innovative projects for developing skilled and highly literate youth advocates for social change. The most beneficial state-level policy, however, would be to radically alter funding structures, giving schools the resources they need to provide a high quality education for all students. It may require a revolution to institute this type of policy change, but I am not above advocating for revolution in academic book chapters!

National-level policy makers can also create grant initiatives that encourage the development of youth-focused programs and research agendas to evaluate the impact of these programs on youth identity development and the acquisition of academic and advocacy skills. Policy makers can also provide money to schools that are showing innovative ways to develop youth as leaders and advocates. National policy makers also play a significant role in setting the national educational goals. I would charge these policy makers to use their influence to promote an educational agenda that values the development of youth leadership abilities. As with the state-level policy makers, however, I would urge our nation's leaders to decide that we were no longer going to have subpar schools with inadequate resources. I might ask them to consider why the wealthiest nation in the history of the planet has schools without heating, air conditioning, sanitation, books, or technology. Some of the problems we face in education are quite complicated, but we would be mistaken were we to make calculus out of what is really a simple equation. Give the schools a lot more money—a whole lot more money!

The bottom line is that policy makers at every level are urged to devote attention and resources to invest in the capital of urban youth as future intellectuals



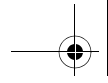
and engaged citizens. The most pressing areas of financial need are still related to improving material conditions in urban education; but those types of structural remedies also need to be complemented by programs that develop the capacity of youth to be researchers, leaders, and agents of change in the struggle for social and educational justice. The motivation, compassion, and energy of these young people toward their schools and communities are unsurpassed. Their brilliance and potential are without bounds. Their vantage point is critical, and their insight invaluable. And it is not insignificant that their presence provides us who are only young at heart with a sense of conviction, a tremendous amount of joy, and, even in our most cynical moments, a large dose of hope.

Note

1. The state mandates that each school develop and provide an SARC that includes required elements (e.g., standardized test scores, teacher certification information, etc.); but that can also be supplemented with locally generated information.

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