

# Youth activism in the urban community: learning critical civic praxis within community organizations

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Research on African-American and Latina/o youth has been dominated by studies that focus on 'problem' adolescent behavior. Typically, they explain youth crime, delinquency, and violence as individual pathological behavior or cultural adaptations stemming from social disorganization in their communities. This article argues for a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between youth-serving organizations and youth agency in urban communities, which can avoid the pitfall of focusing on the most egregious activities among youth. Rather, it is argued that African-American and Latina/o youth respond to community and school conditions through civic engagement facilitated by community-based organizations. Urban youth collectively respond to community and school problems through youth organizing, spoken word, volunteering, and participation in civic affairs. Organizations in urban communities can provide youth with opportunities to develop *critical civic praxis* through engagement with ideas, social networks, and experiences that build individual and collective capacity to struggle for social justice. This view of youth acknowledges structural constraints in their communities, but also views young people as active participants in changing debilitating neighborhood conditions.

Social science research on African-American and Latina/o youth has been dominated by studies that focus on 'problem' adolescent behavior. These studies are largely related to public policy concerns about crime and safety in poor urban communities. Typically, they explain youth crime, delinquency, and violence as individual pathological behavior (Sullivan, 1989), or from cultural adaptations that stem from social disorganization in poor urban communities (Wilson, 1996; Anderson, 1999). The social disintegration thesis explains how gross disinvestments in urban communities ultimately lead to the erosion of community and family values and to behaviors that create and sustain poverty (Wilson, 1996, 1987). Scholars argue that urban youth

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learn 'ghetto related' behaviors, including disrespect for authority, indifference toward educational achievement, and lack of work ethic from other urban residents who have given up on legitimate means for economic security (Anderson, 1990; Newman, 1999; Ogbu, 1987, 1990; Wilson, 1987, 1996).

The social disorganization thesis has also shaped conceptualizations of social capital in urban communities in particular (Coleman, 1988a; Putnam, 1993; Portes, 1995; Stanton-Salazar, 1997, 2001). When theorizing about the persistence of poverty in urban communities, researchers often argue that the lack of vibrant social capital in urban communities contributes to the sustained poverty (Sullivan, 1989; Wilson, 1996; Anderson, 1999). Similar to the social disintegration thesis, the lack of social capital putatively results in maladaptive behaviors among youth. These formulations of social capital suffer from two key problems. First, the social capital perspective employs a static view of urban youth behavior and conceptualizes young people's choices as maladaptive responses to social, economic, or cultural decay in poor communities (Sullivan, 1989; Wilson, 1996; Anderson, 1999). As a result, ethnographic research has largely been confined to studying problems, prevention, and pathology (i.e. negative or oppositional attitudes) among urban youth (Anderson, 1990; Ogbu 1990; Bourgois, 1995; Newman, 1999). This is most striking with research on African-American and Latina/o youth, where scores of studies focus on explaining the causes of illegal drug use, dropout rates, violence, early sexual activity, and other behaviors that jeopardize healthy development. Second, this social capital perspective is overly deterministic and disregards the relevance of agency—young people's ability to analyze and respond to problems impeding their social and economic advancement. A rigid cause (lack of social capital) and effect (problem behaviors) framework obscures the fact that youth in poor communities utilize social networks through family members, social organizations, peers, and after-school programs to make healthy choices and participate in pro-social, civic activities (Ginwright *et al.*, 2006; Cammarota, forthcoming).

This article provides a more nuanced understanding of youth agency in urban communities by focusing on how African-American and Latina/o youth respond to community and school conditions through forms of civic engagement often overlooked by social scientists. We argue that community-based organizations in urban communities can provide youth with access to networks, ideas, and experiences that build individual and collective capacity to struggle for social justice—the chance to engage in critical civic praxis. As a result of collective engagement in community alliances and intergenerational networks, and exposure to political information and ideas about social change, urban youth collectively respond to community and school problems. These actions may take the form of youth organizing, spoken word, volunteering, or participation in conventional civic affairs. All of these are examples of young people's intentional efforts to address injustice in their communities. This view of youth acknowledges structural constraints in their communities, such as violence and poverty, but also views them as active participants in changing debilitating neighborhood conditions.

## **Methodology**

Our reflections and insights regarding the data we collected from 1999 to 2000 remind us of the art form of jazz. In 1942, jazz greats such as Charlie Parker, Bud Powell, and Dizzy Gillespie met in small clubs and single-room apartments in New York City to experiment with a new sound in jazz that we now call be-bop. Their encounters led to new ideas and innovations in jazz that would never have come from any one of them working in isolation. Good scientific work, just as in art, is often the result of collective efforts coming together to pose new questions, challenge assumptions, and ultimately move together in an entirely different direction. In the same spirit of jazz, our methods were informed by ‘rigorous improvisation’. That is, after hours of observations of young people and conversations with youth and their families we bounced ideas back and forth, argued with each other about meaning, entrenched ourselves back into our sites until we developed a melody that we could explain—a theory so to speak.

Our entry into studying youth in their communities was more a calling than a research project. We have spent years working with urban youth who participated in community-based organizations located in Oakland, California. After years of rich insights, we wanted to better understand how young people collectively respond to neighborhood problems to improve conditions for their families, schools, and communities. We observed and documented through extensive field notes the educational and organizational processes and practices that promote youth agency. Our goal was to understand the shifts in consciousness that are necessary for young people to initiate social change. Through our observations and interviews, we documented how critical civic praxis was developed, sustained, and translated into struggles for justice for urban youth in low-income communities.

Cammarota spent the entire summer of 1999 researching a summer youth employment program at the El Pueblo Community Center (name changed to maintain confidentiality) located in Oakland, California. At this site, he observed weekly how this organization implemented different opportunities for youth civic engagement. He accompanied youth and their youth leaders on several activities within the local community and then documented these observations in extensive field notes. Cammarota also interviewed 20 youths between the ages of 16 and 21 about their experiences at the El Pueblo Community Center (EPCC).

Cammarota focuses on three Latina youths, Elena, Rogelia, and Rosie, who were recent high school graduates at the time of the research and youth leaders employed by the EPCC. They had been participants in the EPCC programs since they were 15-year-olds, and in their late adolescence the EPCC placed them in leadership roles to work with younger teens (15–17 years of age). Their experiences as youth leaders for the EPCC demonstrate how young people learn and then partake in civic engagement.

Rosie’s first experiences with the EPCC—documented through several tape-recorded interviews—are discussed to highlight the role of organizations in establishing the relationships necessary for critical civic praxis. Rosie is a second-generation Latina

youth born in Oakland; therefore, she has considerable experience with the local Latina/o community. However, when Rosie was in middle school, her mother remarried and moved the family down state, where her new husband had a good job working in an auto repair shop. Two years into the marriage, abusiveness reared its ugly head, but this time Rosie and her sisters were victims as well. Rosie's mother quickly grabbed her children and left to raise them back in Oakland. She received Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) and relied on relatives for any extra care for her children. Therefore, Rosie's childhood and recent adolescent memories of Oakland focus on the struggles of survival. Rosie states painfully, 'That's how I learned to count as a kid, learning how to count to see if we had enough money to buy milk.' She has seen many Latina/o community members not overcome the barriers of poverty. In fact, she has witnessed many of her peers fail to graduate high school. However, with the assistance of the EPCC, Rosie's life took a different, more positive turn—a turn facilitated by her critical civic praxis.

Ginwright's data were collected over a two-year period (1999 to 2000) and largely consisted of participant observation and interviews with 15 African-American youth from Young Black Leaders (YBL), an Oakland community-based organization that provides intensive self-awareness, political education, and leadership training to African-American youth throughout the city. Ginwright's observations occurred largely during the organization's summer activities such as summer camps and during their weekly Saturday morning political education meetings. These observations also extended into their schools, local shopping centers, and occasionally their homes. Ginwright's process involved collecting extensive field notes of observations of young people's comments in group meetings during the summer program, conversations on buses as they traveled to other parts of the city and one-on-one informal conversations. These notes comprised several notebooks that were reviewed and analyzed for themes and interesting patterns and unanticipated surprises. There were generally two types of observations: (1) description of what he had witnessed and (2) details of what he found interesting and/or surprising. These notes were coded for themes and analysis using techniques by Emerson *et al.* (1995).

During Ginwright's participation and observations in many of the meetings, discussions, and summer programs, he was not a distant, objective observer. In fact, he was instrumental in founding the organization and designing many of its programs. For over 10 years, he served as the Executive Director of YBL and was consequently familiar with many of the youth and their families. Additionally, he developed relationships with a number of community residents, Oakland Unified School District officials, and youth service providers in the San Francisco Bay Area. He was able to easily develop relationships with these youth because he knew some of them from his prior role as Executive Director.

The methodology for this study is also shaped by numerous informal conversations we both encountered with youth and community residents concerning life in Oakland. During the period of time we collected data, Oakland's homicide rate gained news coverage (as it does every year). Nearly every young person with whom we spoke had in some way lost a friend or classmate to violence. Despite this tragedy,

these young people expressed an intense need to 'heal' from the pain they experienced from their loss. Both of the community-based organizations in this study provided a space for youth to reflect and develop skills to respond to neighborhood issues.

The following questions guide our discussion on the relationship between youth agency and community organizations: How is critical civic praxis developed and sustained among urban youth? How do community-based organizations function as sites for the development of critical consciousness in the context of social justice activities?

### **Limits to studies of social capital**

Social science research on urban youth has largely focused on how social networks and economic transformations shape urban communities and the lives of youth within them (MacLeod, 1987; Sullivan, 1989; Anderson, 1990, 1999; Bourgois, 1995; Portes, 1995; Newman, 1999). Informed by the erstwhile work of Robert Park (1925) and other Chicago School theorists, social scientists have explored the impact of urban life on families from low-income and largely ethnic neighborhoods. Chicago School theorists concluded that urban life—marked by rapid economic changes, concentration of poverty, and dense living conditions—threatened traditional family structure and cultural practices, and disintegrated ties to neighbors, civic organizations, and activities that regulate daily life.

More contemporary research still relies on this understanding of the role of social capital in urban communities. Sullivan (1989) concludes that the 'distinctive crime patterns of the Projectville group derived not only from the ecological and demographic characteristics but also from the social organization of their environment' (p. 150). Sullivan argues that, unlike White youth who benefit from strong social networks that turn into jobs, African-American youth, who lack this type of social capital, turn to crime and illegal activities to earn money. Thus criminal behavior among African-American youth appears to be the only way that African-American youth respond to economic oppression.

Anderson's (1999) ethnography of African-American families in Philadelphia details how rules, norms, and values unique to urban poverty foster violence and other problematic behaviors among 'street families' while 'decent' families struggle to maintain mainstream values, beliefs, and behaviors. The classification of 'street' and 'decent' families conveys the notion that middle-class values among the 'decent' families can mitigate the mire of urban poverty and violence. Anderson's view of violent and high-risk behavior, particularly related to youth, is viewed as a function of local beliefs and values, which are adaptations to economic deprivation. For African-American youth in this neighborhood, violence became an accepted code of conduct. For some, participating in violence gained them respect among their peers, while for others, participating in violence was a way to navigate risky confrontations on the streets.

These treatments of social capital among urban youth tell us very little about how positive social capital is developed and sustained in urban communities. Without a

more holistic understanding of how urban youth engage in pro-social and positive civic activities to improve their communities, research will continue to conceptualize urban youth in the confines of a problem behavior framework, and continue to overlook the strategies young people employ to make change in their schools and communities. We strive to outline a more nuanced understanding of how urban youth acquire what Salazar has called ‘network orientation’ or ‘perceptions, attitudes, beliefs, and *dispositions that inform or motivate the choices an individual makes ... in recruiting, manipulating, and maintaining various social relationships ... in light of social structural circumstances that either expand or constrain his or her options*’ (Stanton-Salazar, 1997, p. 26, emphasis in the original). Salazar’s conceptualization of the network orientation represents advancement over common notions of social capital, because it allows for understanding how youth may overcome social and civic barriers (such as poverty or isolation from job information) while also demonstrating how culture serves as the key to successfully negotiating mainstream institutions. Cultural resources and affiliation from community organizations and families can help youth break through the institutional barriers that prevent them from gaining access to resource-rich institutions and networks.

### **Learning critical civic praxis**

An alternative way to conceptualize social capital among urban youth is through collective community action, exemplified by participation in neighborhood-based organizations (Ginwright *et al.*, 2006). Often, these organizations provide opportunities for urban youth to connect with peers, adults, ideas, experiences, and activities that address pressing social and community problems. Sampson (2001, p. 95) argues that social capital for poor communities must be understood as closely linked to collective efficacy, and calls for ‘the linkage of mutual trust and the shared willingness to intervene for the common good.’ Sampson *et al.* (1999, p. 635) argue that ‘collective efficacy for children is produced by the shared beliefs and a collectivity in its conjoint capability for action. The notion of collective efficacy emphasizes residents’ sense of active engagement.’ This view of social capital acknowledges structural constraints in communities, but also attends to strategies for young people to develop a sense of and value for the collective in the face of them. In addition, this perspective allows for defining the purpose of social relationships through actions promoting justice within neighborhoods, churches, and youth programs in low-income urban communities, all of which serve as vital sources for the production of social capital for African-American and Latina/o youth and their communities. This understanding of the role of social capital in urban communities highlights the importance of critical consciousness and social justice activism with the development of effective social networks.

Community organizations can provide critical knowledge to community members and offer them ways to respond to neighborhood and community problems. In many ways, civic organizations bear opportunities for their constituents to engage in what Freire (1993) calls ‘praxis’—critical reflection and action. Through engagement in



real-world issues that shape their daily lives such as school safety, school closure, and police harassment, youth learn to move past victimization and confront unjust social and economic conditions. Often, community-based organizations facilitate what we call *critical civic praxis*, a process that develops critical consciousness and builds the capacity for young people to respond and change oppressive conditions in their environment. In other words, critical civic praxis is the organizational processes that promote civic engagement among youth and elevate their critical consciousness and capacities for social justice activism. We refer to ‘critical consciousness’ through Freire’s conceptualization of the term as an awareness of the systematic forms of oppression that limit one’s capacity for self-determination and thus ability to take action to address the conditions of oppression. Once critical consciousness is attained, the individual’s subjectivity transforms to foster new possibilities and capacities to see and act differently, proactively in the world—perceptions and actions geared toward promoting justice. Through organizational processes, young people experience critical civic praxis and thus comprehend the full, humanistic potential *to create social change*. This notion marks a significant departure from the standard social capital literature that more often fails to recognize both individual and collective agency, or how social networks ultimately foster critical consciousness.

### **Reconstituting urban youth identity: from civic problems to important civic problem-solvers**

The following examples of critical civic praxis derive from our numerous years both conducting research and organizing in Oakland California. We collected data from 1999 to 2003 through participant observation and interviews with urban youth who were members of Young Black Leaders (YBL) and the El Pueblo Community Center (EPCC), small community-based organizations in Oakland California. YBL’s mission is to educate African-American youth for personal and social change. The organization’s philosophy rests on the premise that community changes occur through personal transformation. By supporting young people’s navigation of personal issues such as police abuse, shame for substance-abusing parents, or anger for not having a father in their lives, YBL helps African-American youth build their capacity to challenge community and social inequality. The organization was created by a group of African-American college students in 1989 and has earned respect among the African-American residents of Oakland for working with African-American children and youth (ages 6–18) from juvenile halls, probation, schools, churches, and other community organizations. Located in the downtown corridor that is home to over 20 youth organizations in the city, YBL staff, board of directors, and youth are all African-American.

The El Pueblo Community Center (EPCC) provides crucial legal and economic services for the Latina/o barrio in Oakland. In response to large proportions of immigrants in Oakland, the EPCC delivers critical help to families dealing with the bureaucratic nightmares of legal documentation. EPCC counselors work with poor

immigrant families in Oakland, providing them with information and counseling to contend with economic hardship, including invaluable employment referrals. Offering summer jobs to youth is an especially important community economic service. The EPCC employs youth to work on projects that help with the enrichment and development of the Oakland Latina/o community, such as youth leadership workshops and anti-violence campaigns. While these organizations differ in their mission and focus, both provide contexts for community members to engage in broader social networks that ultimately facilitate increased critical consciousness.

### **The development of critical civic praxis**

Ongoing tensions between the police and African-American youth in Oakland have fostered a culture of distrust and suspicion between the two parties. For years, African-American youth have voiced concern about the mistreatment they received from the police (MacDonald, 2004). These allegations of misconduct on the part of the Oakland Police Department (OPD) are not unfounded. In fact, in 2002 several members of the OPD were formally charged with willful misconduct and were removed from their posts (Lee, 2004). Instances of police harassment are all too familiar among African-American youth in Oakland. These patterns contribute to wide mistrust of police and the justice system on the part of African-American youth.

YBL often finds itself at the epicenter of virulent battles between the police and Oakland's African-American youth. The organization actively contests the 'predatory black youth' image and recasts the image of African-American youth as important community actors. YBL exemplifies the potential for community organizations 'to cultivate and sustain what Melucci called "submerged networks" of everyday political life where actors produce and practice alternative frameworks of meaning, social relations, and collective identity below the horizon of established or officially recognized institutions' (Gregory, 1998, p. 135, quoting Melucci, 1989).

One important aspect of the YBL community is how critical consciousness is created and sustained among African-American youth. YBL fosters and sustains critical civic praxis through intergenerational networks of caring adults and exposure to relevant political ideas. At 'The Spot'—a colorfully painted multipurpose meeting room and lounge with couches and beanbags—YBL holds political education sessions for a group of about 20 young people in the program. The program is designed to train youth to frame how power is used and misused in their lives and in their communities. Guided by the slogan from the feminist movement, the 'personal is political,' Ginwright facilitated several meetings, encouraged youth to examine issues in their lives and supported them with analysis of the problem and action to solve it. On some Saturdays YBL examined the dilapidated conditions of the local park and lobbied the city council for renovation funds. At other times, however, the program focused on personal issues that required political solutions. Through role-plays, workshops, videos, and other activities, discussions about the connection between personal and political power mitigated the sense of hopelessness and fatalism



commonly described in the lives of African-American youth (Poussaint & Alexander, 2000).

These activities and discussions served as the foundation for building critical civic praxis. Through the discussion of relevant neighborhood issues and connecting these issues to both structural realities (such as the economy) and personal choices (such as selling drugs), the youth succeeded in developing a rich political understanding of their environment. These activities also spurred several young people to make personal choices that they believed would contribute to a healthier community.

On Saturday mornings and Wednesday afternoons, YBL held workshops and activities concerning pressing issues for African-American youth. Through group discussions, political education, and activities, youth developed a political understanding of juvenile justice, racism, poverty, and how these social issues shape their lives and communities. These sessions not only facilitate greater knowledge regarding social issues, but also contributed to a consciousness that encouraged new types of behavior. One young male commented:

At first I did sell weed, but then it was like, it was like, it's like I don't necessarily see anything wrong with it. Then I came around all these folks talking about political stuff. When I started, it was almost like a training ground, like boot camp in the sense that you come from the community that has all these problems and you are impacted by these conditions that we did not create. Then we look at what we can do to change this stuff—we don't have the resources. Just because we live here doesn't mean that we don't have the same rights as the people in the hills.

Through participating in political activities, youth also broaden their social networks, which help them develop a political understanding of issues in their communities. For example, consistent with the claim of Sampson *et al.* (1999) that social capital is reinforced by social interactions, exchanges of information, and mutual interests, YBL youth joined the 'Books Not Bars' campaign with several other youth agencies in Oakland.

It was cool working [against] Prop 21. Even though it passed, we started like a movement in the Bay Area. We connected with other programs, we put our ideas on paper and went to City Hall and talked to lots of people and got them involved. Doing things like that made me see how we can come together. If something bothers you in your community, as being part of, we gotta take action and do something about it. Because just one person can make a difference, and I know I make a difference and that makes me feel good.

As a result of participation in YBL activities, these youth exemplify how critical civic praxis involves both reflection on relevant civic issues and action to change these issues.

Critical civic praxis also leads to a unique political response from youth. During one meeting young people were asked how they could encourage more African-American youth in Oakland to participate in organizing activities to discourage the public from supporting proposition 21, which would levy more severe sentences on minors. Most of the youth organizing activities had been dominated by white and Asian youth groups, while large groups of African-American youth were clearly missing from Oakland's youth organizing landscape. When faced with the challenge of reaching out to more African-American youth, many of the young people acknowledge that

organizing groups do not typically come to the ‘block’—the neighborhoods and parks where large numbers of African-American youth congregate. Furthermore, they discussed how many young people do not read newspapers or, even if you pass them a flyer, they might not read it because it is not as real to them because it is an ‘old’ way of organizing.

After discussing several strategies to reach out to more African-American youth, the youth planned mobile hip-hop concerts that would attract large numbers of African-American youth in the neighborhoods that had been overlooked by other youth groups and encourage their participation to defeat proposition 21. The following Saturday morning, we joined forces with Boots Riley, the leader of the political rap group The Coup, and rented a large flatbed truck that was loaded with a very large PA system, turntables, microphones, and speakers. We planned our drive to parts of Oakland that often are neglected by even the most progressive community organizers. We held what we called ‘Guerrilla hip-hop’—impromptu mobile political concerts with music, rapping, and political education in local parks, strip malls, and street corners where young people hang out. With loudspeakers, a DJ, music, and Boots as a main attraction, we distributed thousands of flyers and spoke to hundreds of youth who would be most impacted by this legislation. Through hip-hop, we were able to communicate the urgency of their political participation and begin building a base of support from African-American youth themselves.

YBL developed critical civic praxis through dialogue regarding relevant issues and political explanations about personal challenges. In addition, YBL enlisted youth themselves to formulate strategies for engaging their peers in community and political involvement. This type of community organization provides space for youth to come up with their own solutions to problems that impede their educational, economic, and social development, building on the power of collective agency in urban neighborhoods.

### *A pedagogy of critical civic praxis*

Similar to YBL, the El Pueblo Community Center (EPCC) provides workshops and activities where youth can learn to recognize relationships between political consciousness and personal and family issues. Critical civic praxis is developed through engagement with political ideas and supported by discussion on the role of violence in their communities. In particular, EPCC workers conduct workshops on violence prevention for Oakland’s Latina/o youth. Carmen Baptista, co-director of the EPCC and community activist, developed a workshop entitled the ‘Cycle of Violence’ in response to the increasing violence among Oakland students. In the workshop, Oakland high school freshmen and sophomores learn how to educate other students on violence prevention. Carmen describes how violence perpetuates itself in urban communities:

I think that human beings rage against inequalities. That produces the violence, and then there’s that hole in the emotional self. That produces the willingness to destroy. I mean, what you have is, I mean, I’ve always wanted to have all the answers and say this is the

exact description of what you're acting out on right now, is that hole in and the continuity of the self and that you've got all this energy. And it's all proactive, but it's destructive. And there's no propensity to create positive change.

The EPCC hired Elena Padilla, Rogelia Silva, and Rosie Juarez to run the workshop, which trains teenagers to become school leaders and conduct workshops in class or after school. During their teenage years, these Latinas had participated in similar workshops and gained early organizing experience through the EPCC. Cammarota attended three workshops at the EPCC and here describes the pedagogy used. At the time of the sessions, Elena, Rogelia, and Rosie were older youth (19–21) and were regarded by the EPCC as youth leaders. All three were extremely competent workshop leaders; their presentations were clear, well organized, and filled with knowledge. They had the students sitting in chairs arranged in a large circle tracing the perimeter of the summer program room. There were usually 10–15 students at each session, always attentive and ready to benefit from the training.

The youth leaders started with an 'icebreaker' to make the young people feel comfortable, grab their attention, and, most important, establish a collective process immediately requiring everybody's participation. One icebreaker was to ask students to introduce themselves and describe something they would like to see happen in their lives over the next few months. Rosie, Rogelia, and Elena proceeded around the room eliciting responses from each student until everyone had answered. Most students joked around, blurting out some whimsical response, such as 'Finding a million dollars,' 'Go to Hawaii,' 'Be on the "Real World",' 'Meeting Mark Anthony.' However, Xochitla, a Latina student with unusually short thick black hair and black penetrating eyes, offered a sobering response that was a poignant, as well as suitable, segue into the training topic. She stated, 'For once, I would like to walk around and feel safe, like somebody wasn't going to kill me, put a cap in my head all the time, like my life wasn't in danger all the time.'

Although Xochitla's comments captured the theme of the workshop, the community center workers did not intend for the icebreaker to be a content-based exercise. Elena, Rogelia, and Rosie used the icebreaker to demonstrate and put into practice the teaching methodology for the training. They were concerned that the students learn the importance of 'process-oriented pedagogy.' That is, the leaders wanted the students to learn to organize and conduct their own workshops so that learning becomes a collective undertaking in which everyone in the workshop participates and has a turn to speak. This focus on each person having the chance to state his/her opinion is not a nicety, but is fundamental to the workshop's purpose and strategy. Carmen Baptista, Rogelia, Elena, and Rosie believe that the lack of opportunities for young people to voice their concerns, feelings, and thoughts is partly responsible for built-up frustrations and anxieties that push young people to violence. Rogelia Silva explains how the EPCC's pedagogical approach differs from the silencing that students normally endure in El Pueblo schools:

When a student asks a question, I've seen them not talk to them like human beings. It's like. 'Oh, get to class.' Their position is always that the students are doing something wrong, or they're about to do something wrong. I think a lot of teachers just got burned

out. I think they've been stuck in such a violent, non-supportive environment for so long I think they just forgot what it means to teach and teach students so that they can go on to something when they leave their class, or everyday. Let me compare: like in our training, we try to get the students to find their voice; that's one of our priorities. That's something that's not ... if anything, students are taught to shut up and sit there and be told what to do, especially at El Pueblo High. The last year our approach has been very interactive, very creative, less talk from us because they'll just shut down. When students come in, they're coming in with that unconscious knowledge that a teacher is an authority that you can't.... They come in with all this shit from junior high of having been probably humiliated in the classroom, not encouraged to talk or put out their opinions. Some examples: the first day we'll go in and say we're the trainers, we're doing this, we introduce ourselves, and then everyone has to introduce themselves. I don't think they've ever been asked to do that! I understand this because it's taken me a long time to learn to talk in front of people, to find my voice. It's so hard for them to say their name and what junior high school they came from. It's just hard for them.

The underlying philosophical stance of the EPCC requires project coordinators to institute a collective structure to activities, meetings, and educational sessions so that young people can participate, speak out, and develop their 'voices.'

Next in their process-oriented pedagogy, Elena, Rogelia, and Rosie asked the students in the workshop to state the reasons for fights at school. Elena walked over to a large piece of paper taped to the wall and anxiously waited with marker pen in hand. After several minutes of silence had elapsed, the youth started to shout out some reasons: 'Stupid stuff! Like somebody sayin' smack at you'; 'Walkin' down the hall and some fool accidentally bumps into you.' A Latino male wearing an Oakland Raiders' jersey murmured in a barely audible yet deep voice, 'Somebody say somethin' bad 'bout yo' friend.'

Then the young Latina trainers disclosed that the goal of the workshop was for students to recognize the 'deeper reasons for fights or conflicts.' They told the students that social and economic pressures stemming from poverty, discrimination, and oppression were responsible for conditions that promote people's violent responses. Rosie Juarez describes how these larger pressures instigate domestic violence:

I think that the men in our community are not finding the jobs because they're not available. I think that this is kind of part of it, and then that feeds into the cycle of violence, where the man is unemployed, and he still tries to act out his role as head of the household. And the way he acts it out is by being violent or drinking or other types of negative behavior.

The leaders continued that once students identify these pressures, they can redirect their energy away from aggressive behavior and adopt more positive solutions to the problems that perpetuate violence in their communities. With the help of Elena, Rogelia, and Rosie, the students in the workshop listed the larger social and economic pressures that might make them feel frustrated and distressed, pushing them to act aggressively. The following represents a partial list of the problems they mentioned: abuse at home, lack of healthcare, lack of one or more parents, parents having no time because of work, and poverty. They also listed conditions at school that contribute to their frustrations: no books, racist curriculum, overzealous security, no heating, dirty

bathrooms, apathetic teachers, no sports, no food or bad food, police occupation, and schools looking like prisons. The lists constitute a general recognition of the larger forces that negatively impact on students and lay behind the tensions and conflicts between them.

Once the trainers completed the lists, they asked the workshop participants to think of the typical responses to these everyday problems. Some young people stated, 'Drugs, drinking, gangs, tagging, vandalizing, dropping out, fights, putting people down, and not caring about anything.' Elena, Rogelia, and Rosie at that point led the youth through the most critical stage of the workshop, noting that these 'typical responses' tend to make life worse for young people. They asserted that the public, state officials, and school administrations use the miscreant behavior of youth to justify negative treatment and punitive measures. In concert with the students, the Latina trainers generated another list detailing the consequences of typical responses: bad media representation, criminalization, police harassment, stereotypes, anti-immigration politics, anti-affirmative action, welfare reform, schools with 12-foot-high wrought iron fences, lockdowns at schools, tardy sweeps, and truancy centers. The list of consequences explicated how a cycle of violence traps young people, particularly urban youth. Social and economic problems pressure them to act out aggressively and destructively, fomenting public reactions that add more fuel to the fire. The youth concluded that the public tendency to view young people's destructive behavior as evidence of their malfeasance instead of a reasonable reaction to impossible living conditions wrong-headedly bolsters punitive and restrictive measures that bring more oppression and pressure into their lives. The social and economic problems that provoke youth violence remain unaddressed, while the authoritarian approach of police, security, bigger fences, and restrictive policies do not solve problems; they compound them.

In the final part of the workshop, the youth leaders encouraged the participants to break the cycle of violence by adopting more constructive responses. Rosie, Rogelia, and Elena told the youth that organizing in the community and schools is a more constructive way to prevent violence. Organizing can focus on ameliorating the conditions of urban life, acquiring resources from the state to expand the quality of education, healthcare, housing, employment opportunities, and other social resources. Specifically, the community center workers encouraged the youth to become leaders at their schools and struggle for greater material resources and for courses that teach about their history and culture. The EPCC and community center workers believe that better books, teachers, and technology, along with a culturally relevant curriculum and learning context, would alleviate some of the students' frustrations and better facilitate their academic success. Rosie, one of the youth leaders, not only teaches critical civic praxis through the cycle of violence workshops, but exemplifies the increased social agency that can be attained as a result. Perhaps what makes her an effective youth leader is that she is a living example of critical civic praxis. Her capacity for community action emerged from her involvement with the EPCC. Her first exposure to the EPCC was a few years earlier when she was a senior at El Pueblo High School. At that time, the EPCC organized a tour for several Latina/

o seniors who hoped to attend four-year universities. Because Rosie had her heart set on attending UC Berkeley, she was selected for the tour group. The group visited many major college campuses across the San Francisco Bay Area as well as several high schools to see the different ways students are prepared for college.

Rosie describes the educational disparities she noticed throughout the larger Bay Area region:

I started to talk to students from different schools and that's when I realized I wasn't getting the same education. Especially when people were talking about their future plans and 'All I need to do is take this class.' I didn't have the classes [at El Pueblo], I didn't have a plan. And I asked them, 'How did you come up with that plan?' And they're like 'Oh, ever since junior high....' They just had better guidance, from teachers, from counselors. And I didn't have any of that. So I think that's what got me upset.

In addition to providing the context for her to learn about these disparities, the EPCC provided Rosie with the opportunity to process her anger over them. The EPCC organized a camping trip for the Latina/o seniors in which, according to Rosie, they 'got to talk about the problems at our schools and what kind of activities we could do to change them.' Rosie also remembers having met 'Carmen from the EPCC; she's the one that runs the cycle of violence program.' Carmen helped Rosie to process her anger through the cycle of violence workshop, and it was through this experience that Rosie understood what action was needed at her school.

Rosie realized that if El Pueblo did not have the classes necessary to help her enter UC Berkeley, she would take the initiative and make sure these vital classes were offered. While applying for college, Rosie learned that:

One of the requirements was two years or more of higher math. I already had the math I needed but I found out that you got more points for honors classes and for taking the AP [Advanced Placement] classes and the AP test. El Pueblo didn't offer that kind of preparation so we approached our counselor about why is this not offered to us, and basically he told us to find a teacher and get 20 students that will take the class. So that's what we did. The last time El Pueblo had an AP was probably since the early '80s.

Rosie organized with other students the first AP physics class in the history of the school. With AP physics on her transcripts, Rosie was accepted to UC Berkley the following year. Through the EPCC, Rosie learned that a course of action can be taken to improve one's opportunities and experiences in life. As a result of a pedagogy that fosters critical consciousness, participants learn that they have the capacity to take constructive social action in their communities.

### **Knowledge of self and community: critical consciousness and social capital**

The examples of YBL and the EPCC show how development or educational processes can influence young people's consciousness of their own existence and environments. For urban youth, critical civic praxis is: (1) cultivated through ties with adult community members; (2) facilitated by challenging negative concepts about urban youth in public policy; and (3) sustained by building collective interests



through critical consciousness among urban youth. Once they gain a new perspective regarding the conditions shaping their experiences, young people can formulate concrete strategies to improve their own life chances. This new perspective centers on the understanding that their personal life situation is linked to the conditions in their communities, and any significant personal changes derive from actions taken to improve community conditions.

Moreover, a critical consciousness that recognizes the oppressive forces impeding healthy development will answer key questions around the importance of social relationships among peers, older youth, and adults, thereby placing young people on the path toward acquiring social capital. As demonstrated by participants in YBL and EPCC, their critical consciousness will help them to understand that they need help to make the kinds of changes necessary for improving community conditions. A critical consciousness will also provide them with the knowledge of the people with power and influence who might help them initiate community changes. The young people in our studies have also learned that actions of change require their own personal development; effective community activism involves continuous education and the engendering of knowledge that enhances critical consciousness. This is exemplified by the return of EPCC graduates to the program, and their assumption of youth leadership roles in helping younger participants analyze underlying sources of violence in their communities. Finally, the act of attaining a critical consciousness is facilitated by a praxis-based education, which in and of itself is a social relationship. Young people therefore attain their critical consciousness through learning processes initiated by individuals, either youth or adults, working within organizational contexts. This interaction between youth and organizations promotes effective social relationship (i.e. social capital), because they are exposed to other youth or adults who engage in improving the quality of life within their communities and demonstrate to young people how they can make positive community and personal changes.

## **Conclusion**

In recent years, social science research concerning urban youth has focused almost entirely on understanding causes of problem behavior such as violence, school failure, substance abuse, and crime. Bound to the legacy of social disintegration thesis, social capital theorists have under-theorized the role of agency and the capacity of urban youth to respond to community issues. Research has also systematically disregarded ongoing work of community organizations to improve conditions for future generations. This study challenges the standard conceptualization of social capital by, first, attending to the ways that community organizations invest in and foster constructive collective action; and, second, presenting a more nuanced understanding of how social relationships facilitate critical consciousness development and thus civic engagement among urban youth. Rather than focusing on how urban decay and poverty foster delinquent and pathological behaviors among urban youth, this paper illustrates how critical civic praxis, brought about by interactions among youth and

small community-based organizations in urban communities, prepare young people to address ongoing political and economic disinvestment in their communities. Borrowing from the 'community social capital' notion of Sampson *et al.* (1999), we demonstrate how critical civic praxis is embedded in neighborhood-based networks of collective interests, collective identities, mutual trust, and the capacity to act on behalf of the common good.

By examining how community organizations challenge public policy that is shaped by 'control and contain' attitudes toward urban youth while simultaneously cultivating a collective racial and political identity, we develop a deeper understanding of the intersection of social capital and collective action among urban youth. More importantly, such an analysis reveals important pro-social dimensions of youth behavior. This study also explicates the unique properties of social capital in urban community organization. By framing urban decay in the context of Wacquant's (1998) notion of negative social capital, we have a more robust analytical framework to recognize how urban communities resist and challenge state-sponsored repression. Rather than the destruction of social capital, as some have articulated (Putnam, 1993) we consider the matrix of experiences, actions, and learning processes required to cultivate new forms of social capital among urban youth. A key component of this social capital is the critical civic praxis the YBL and EPCC cultivate through social relationships and youth activism. By framing personal issues as political, mutual trust and collective interests are deployed on behalf of the common good. Through critical civic praxis, youth demonstrate how social ties, intergenerational relationships, and connections to organizations support youth in their quest for social justice.

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