

Introduction

Youth Activism as a Context for Learning and Development

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Recent studies have documented the potential of youth activism for influencing political change toward socially just ends. This special issue builds on such research by focusing on youth activism as a context for learning and development. What kinds of learning opportunities are generated through working on social action campaigns? How do adults support youth's participation in ways that foster youth engagement and leadership? In addition to previewing the articles in this issue, this introduction proposes and describes four distinctive qualities of learning environments in youth activism groups: collective problem solving, youth–adult interaction, exploration of alternative frames for identity, and bridges to academic and civic institutions. It concludes by highlighting directions for future research.

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But in youth the tables of childhood dependence begin slowly to turn: no longer is it merely for the old to teach the young the meaning of life. It is the young who, by their responses and actions, tell the old whether life as represented to them has some vital promise, and it is the young who carry in them the power to confirm those who confirm them, to renew and regenerate, to disavow what is rotten, to reform and rebel.

—Erikson (1968/1994, p. 258)

Erik Erikson's statement, although published at the peak of 1960s social change in the United States, dramatizes the complex, if not contradictory, qualities of what it means to be an adolescent in contemporary American society. As Erikson suggested, adolescence involves a transition toward greater social responsibility. It is a time of heightened idealism and concern for meaning—adolescents reflect on their surroundings and engage in complex moral reasoning (Damon, 1983; Fischer & Bidell, 1997; Kohlberg, 1976). But many youth in the United States lack opportunities to participate in adult institutions and give input into political decision making

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(Zeldin, Camino, & Calvert, 2003). Their routine activities—whether going to school, playing sports, or hanging out with peers—tend to be segregated from those of adults (Hart, 2006; Heath, 1999).

Youth activism, the subject of this issue of *American Behavioral Scientist*, represents one response to the contradictory status of teenagers. Youth may not have opportunities to vote or hold formal seats on decision-making bodies, but many contribute to social action campaigns that give voice to their hopes and concerns (Checkoway et al., 2003). For example, activism groups, often populated by youth of color living in poor and working-class neighborhoods, have worked to improve failing schools; they have performed action research to expose environmental polluters; and they have persuaded policy makers to stop the building of *super jails* for juvenile offenders (see Kwon, 2006; Larson & Hansen, 2005; Sherman, 2002). Typically, these groups are based in community organizations and after-school youth programs, but in some cases, they may be school classes and clubs. In contrast to community service programs where youth clean parks, tutor children, and serve food to the homeless, youth activism groups seek to influence public policy and change institutional practices, often with a social justice focus (Kahne & Westheimer, 1996). In this sense, such groups exemplify a critical form of civic engagement in which youth are encouraged to question the status quo and envision better alternatives for themselves and their peers (Watts & Guessous, 2006).

Recent studies have documented the promise and challenge of youth activism for influencing political change (Ginwright, Noguera, & Cammarota, 2006). This purpose of this issue, however, is to focus on youth activism as a context for participants' learning and development. What kinds of learning opportunities are generated through working on social action campaigns? What features of youth activism projects contribute to academic skill development and sociopolitical identity development? How do adults scaffold youth's participation in ways that foster youth engagement and leadership? As these questions suggest, research about youth activism can generate insights that are relevant to fundamental topics in education, psychology, and sociology—such as cognition and learning, civic development, and social movements. This special issue brings together researchers from these diverse disciplines to examine youth activism as a context for learning and development.

In addition to previewing the articles in this issue, in this introduction, I propose and describe some of the distinctive qualities of youth activism groups as learning environments. Without claiming to offer a comprehensive list, I draw on recent publications and on articles in this issue to focus on four features of such groups: collective problem solving, youth–adult interaction, exploration of alternative frames for identity, and bridges to academic and civic institutions. I conclude the introduction by highlighting some directions for future research.

Youth Activism Groups as Learning Environments

Collective Problem Solving

Researchers have noted that one of the defining features of youth activism is its collective focus (Flores-Gonzales, Rodríguez, & Rodríguez-Muñiz, 2006; Youniss & Hart, 2005). Participation involves a shift in focus from individual to group—from “what I can do alone” to “what we can do together.” Members learn how to work effectively with one another because their projects would otherwise not succeed. An evaluation of Public Achievement, an organization that fosters democratic action by children and youth, found that the principal lesson that youth drew from their experience was figuring out how to work together (Hildreth, 2003). Watkins, Larson, and Sullivan (2007 [this issue]) show that through working together on a social action campaign, youth participants learned how to “bridge differences” related to race, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation. Such experiences may contribute to feelings of collective efficacy (Bandura, 1999). In a case study of a youth organizing group, young people commonly invoked the slogans “power in numbers” and “strength in numbers” to recruit others to their cause, suggesting the formation of a sense of collective efficacy (Kirshner, 2006).

From the perspective of cognitive science, the emphasis on collective problem solving in youth activism embodies a distinct form of *distributed cognition* (Hutchins, 2000; Pea, 2003), which refers to the ways in which problem solving is distributed across people and tools. For example, in an influential study, Hutchins (1995) showed how the process of landing an airplane relies not just on the mental abilities of the pilot but also the guidance of air-traffic controllers and the multiple forms of technology in the cockpit. According to this view, cognition is not just inside a person’s head but instead distributed across a range of people and technological tools. Similarly, tasks in youth activism groups are distributed among participants and their tools. For example, in a study of three youth activism campaigns, I found that each group divided itself into smaller teams that were responsible for specific aspects of a campaign, such as creating a video, organizing student clubs, and designing a press release (Kirshner, in press). Moreover, within each team, tasks were distributed among the youth based on their interests and talents—a group designing a press release might include a computer-savvy writer, a talented artist, and someone who is good at keeping people on task. In such a scenario, each person did not master every skill, but together the group made an effective team.

The collaborative, distributive nature of work in activism groups enables participants to accomplish goals they would be hard-pressed to accomplish on their own. Consider some of the complex tasks undertaken by youth in collaboration with each other and an adult program director, who sought to reform schools in Chicago: Participants “organized a city-wide Youth Summit, lobbied the school board . . . worked to get a career preparation program into the schools, and organized a rally

against a new high-stakes exam” (Watkins et al., 2007, p. 386). Young people’s accomplishments in groups such as this defy predictions about what adolescents are capable of doing according to standard developmental theory (Youniss & Hart, 2005).

One reason for such groups’ success is that, when effective, they compose highly interdependent systems that provide the necessary scaffolding and resources for youth to accomplish challenging goals. In this sense, activism groups engage young people’s *zone of proximal development*, which refers to the distance between what a person can do alone and what she or he can do in collaboration with peers or an experienced adult (Vygotsky, 1978). Activities targeted toward the upper end of the zone of proximal development are said to stimulate development—they form leading activities for development, helping to support and stimulate young people’s maturing psychological functions (Griffin & Cole, 1999). When organized optimally, social action campaigns can serve as leading activities for the development of strategic thinking (Larson & Hansen, 2005) and sociopolitical awareness (Watts & Flanagan, in press).

Youth–Adult Interaction

Much of the literature about youth activism foregrounds the actions and accomplishments of youth themselves. But this emphasis on youth obscures the fact that activism groups typically embody cross-age collaborations in which young adults (usually in their twenties) play critical roles as organizers and advisers.

The quality of relationships between youth and young adults has become a topic of interest for researchers (Camino, 2005; Larson, Walker, & Pearce, 2005; O’Donoghue & Strobel, 2007 [this issue]). Adults who work with high school and middle school youth experience dilemmas about their roles. For example, some adults may seek to empower youth by letting them formulate campaign strategy; they step aside so that youth can assume leadership. But these same adults may have greater expertise in campaign strategy and how to facilitate group decision making. Tensions between youth empowerment goals and adult expertise can therefore pose challenges for adult leaders (Kirshner, in press).

Not surprisingly, forms of youth–adult interaction vary considerably across groups. Some groups aspire to be youth led, in which case adults simply act as facilitators who help youth formulate their goals and plans (Larson et al., 2005). Other groups seek to develop partnerships characterized by shared roles and egalitarian decision making (Camino, 2005). Still, others embrace an apprenticeship approach, in which veteran activists model what it means to engage in social action and community organizing (Kirshner, in press). As in craft apprenticeships, experienced adults gradually fade so that youth can take over the activities of the group (Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989). Of course, there are additional ways of parsing gradations of youth–adult interaction, as suggested by Hart’s *ladder of participation* (1992), which is widely used by youth organizations (see Hart, 2006, for an updated commentary on this framework).

Regardless of the type of collaboration, the fact that youth interact with adults as they carry out activism campaigns is significant, especially when given the broader societal context in which age segregation is common (Hart, 2006; Heath, 1999; Zeldin et al., 2003). As Rogoff, Paradise, Arauz, Correa-Chavez, and Angelillo (2003) write, “instead of routinely helping adults, children are often involved in specialized child-focused exercises to assemble skills for later entry in mature activities” (p. 181). Urban high schools in particular are often too large, anonymous, and lacking in opportunities for meaningful connections between teachers and students (Darling-Hammond, Aness, & Ort, 2002; Fine, 1986). Youth activism groups therefore provide an important venue for young people to develop relationships with adults in the context of task-oriented activities (Halpern, 2005).

Alternative Frames for Civic Identity

Youth activism groups enable participants to forge identities as powerful civic actors. One way that they do so is through the actions that they take in the public realm. By participating in civic venues, such as school board and city council meetings, youth position themselves—and are positioned by social others—as competent political actors (Nasir & Kirshner, 2003). For instance, Ginwright (2007 [this issue]) describes an occasion where youth participants in Leadership Excellence—an organizing group for Black youth in Oakland—spoke at a city hall hearing about their experiences with the Oakland police. In a demonstrably visible way, these youth defied stereotypes held by some of the adults in attendance and showed that youth should be treated as partners in finding solutions to police–community relations. Another such example can be observed in groups that focus on issues of media representation. For instance, a group called Youth Engaged in Leadership and Learning created a campaign called “Don’t Believe the Hype,” which sought to counter stereotypes about youth in the local media. Participants published articles about the impact of media representations on the identities of themselves and their peers (see <http://gardnercenter.stanford.edu/what-we-do/yell.html>).

Youth activism groups provide alternative frames for identity through the kinds of sociopolitical ideologies that they espouse. As Youniss and Yates (1997) have written, to develop civic identity, adolescents must come to identify with transcendent values and ideologies that link the self to a past and a present. Here, the term *ideology* is not limited to political systems but to the need to find meaning—to identify with beliefs that link one to a broader social and cultural context (Furrow & Wagener, 2003). Experiences that expose teenagers to political viewpoints support civic identity development because they enable young people to reflect on sociopolitical issues and thereby see themselves as active producers of society (Youniss & Yates, 1997).

Social justice-oriented youth activism groups in particular seek to foster awareness of the influence of social forces on individual behavior, as well as a belief in the

power of ordinary people to accomplish social change (Freire, 1970/2002; see also, Watts & Flanagan, in press). As Hamilton and Flanagan (2007 [this issue]) discuss, activism projects enable youth to see how issues that are typically treated as a private responsibility can be reframed as a collective responsibility. Framing social problems as such can be significant in identity development because it contributes to feelings of empowerment and collective self-determination (Flores-Gonzales et al., 2006). For example, Ginwright (2007) describes the case of a young mother who, in seeking to finish high school and obtain her diploma, encountered barriers to finding child care during school hours. Rather than interpret the situation as her own isolated problem, she organized other teenage mothers to make their case to the district superintendent, who decided to keep the high school's child care center open. Although longitudinal research is called for to understand precisely how social action experiences like this influence identity development, Ginwright's study suggests that taking action contributes to a sense of collective identity that is related to positive youth development outcomes.

Bridges to Academic and Civic Institutions

To some observers, activism groups may appear to adopt an adversarial posture toward institutions they seek to influence, such as school boards or city councils. But a nuanced treatment of activism suggests that by helping youth direct their anger and sense of injustice toward constructive ends, activism groups perform a bridging function between young people and mainstream institutions.

One such example takes place in regard to school. Social action can be a vehicle for making academic skills relevant to youth's everyday lives (Tate, 1995). Rogers, Morrell, and Enyedy (2007 [this issue]) write about the history, language arts, and statistics skills that youth employed to accomplish projects documenting inequities in the Los Angeles school system. Youth participants described these academic practices as tools to accomplish goals that they cared about; rather than view school subjects as foreign and alienating concepts, they sought to become proficient so that they could find and document evidence for their projects. Similarly, Kirshner and Geil (2006), in a study of seven social action campaigns, found that five of the groups used statistical evidence gained through original research to make arguments before policy makers. For example, one group sought to improve the availability of public transportation in a neighborhood isolated by a freeway: Youth supported their proposal with survey data showing differential levels of satisfaction with transportation across neighborhoods. In all of these examples, social action campaigns provide opportunities for youth to marshal academic skills in the service of meaningful public-oriented goals.

Activism groups also connect youth to mainstream civic institutions. Campaigns typically culminate in presentations to civic decision makers, outreach to community residents, and closed-door meetings with policy makers where youth present policy

proposals and grievances (Rogers et al., 2007; Watkins et al., 2007). Such political encounters represent concrete access points for youth, and these access points offer some of the few public channels through which young people can transgress age segregation and contribute their voice to political decision making.

Summary

Youth activism groups represent distinctive environments for learning and development. Youth contribute their interests and skills to a collective cause that goes beyond their narrow interests, enabling them to accomplish goals that might be unreachable on their own. By interacting with young adults during these campaigns, youth gain opportunities to learn from the strategies, perspectives, and mentoring of caring adults. The public nature of campaigns provides alternative frames for adolescent identity development, especially for youth of color who cope with negative stereotypes. Finally, social action projects connect youth to civic institutions and engage them in authentic learning experiences that demonstrate the relevance of academic skills to everyday life.

The Articles in This Issue

Although concerned with similar themes related to youth activism, the articles in this issue are written from distinct disciplinary perspectives and have distinct analytic foci.

Natasha Watkins, Reed Larson, and Patrick Sullivan, in "Bridging Intergroup Difference in a Community Youth Program," analyze changes in youth's understanding across differences in race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, class, and religion. The authors describe three stages of change identified by youth participants: building relationships across groups, learning and discovery about difference, and coming to act with awareness in relation to difference. In addition to illustrating opportunities to bridge differences stemming from working toward a shared goal, the authors argue that adults in Generation Y have designed purposeful activities to help youth reflect on the causes of injustice and marginalization.

This focus on sociopolitical awareness is also discussed in Shawn Ginwright's article, "Black Youth Activism and the Role of Critical Social Capital in Black Community Organizations." Ginwright analyzes the role played by Leadership Excellence, an Oakland community organization founded and staffed by African American adults, in cultivating critical social capital in young people. Ginwright's conception of social capital departs from conventional ones in its focus on youth's capacity to accomplish social change. Leadership Excellence cultivated critical social capital by working with youth to forge intergenerational relationships, develop a strong racial identity, and interpret personal struggles as political issues.

John Rogers, Ernest Morrell, and Noel Enyedy, in “Studying the Struggle: Contexts for Learning and Identity Development for Urban Youth,” discuss data from a summer seminar in which urban high school students examined historical struggles for educational justice in Los Angeles. The article analyzes the varied academic skills and forms of identity that youth developed through their work. In addition to demonstrating mastery of sophisticated academic skills, students began to see academic practices as critical tools for achieving social justice goals. The authors conclude by sharing five design principles for creating authentic learning environments with youth.

Carmen Hamilton and Constance A. Flanagan analyze the role of digital media in how young people frame social issues. Their article, “Reframing Social Responsibility Within a Technology-Based Youth Activist Program,” addresses the use of alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs (ATOD) among youth. The authors discuss a digital media project in which youth sought to reframe the meaning of ATOD use as one of collective concern rather than one of personal discretion. The article analyzes some of the experiences creating video that contributed to changes in how youth thought about the private versus public dimensions of ATOD use. It also discusses the important role played by the adult facilitators who asked critical questions designed to stimulate reflection and conceptual change.

Jennifer O’Donoghue and Karen Strobel employ a mixed-methods design to analyze relationships between youth and adults. Their article, “Directivity and Freedom: Adult Support of Activism Among Urban Youth,” examines how youth–adult relationships influence youth’s activism orientations and their development as leaders. Their survey results show that youth’s perceptions of trusting relationships with adults, as well as their opportunities for input, were related to their senses of public efficacy and their identities as activists. Through observations and interviews, the authors clarify youth’s interpretations of what it means for adults to be supportive, and they identify challenges that participants encountered as they sought to depart from normative patterns of interaction between youth and adults.

Future Directions for Research

The research literature about youth activism is still in an emergent stage, and this special issue does not attempt to provide an exhaustive study of the range of expressions of youth activism. The studies included here address the experiences of working-class and poor youth in the United States, with a particular focus on African American, Asian American, and Latino youth. Most of the groups’ political goals, although engaging in activities based in various institutional contexts, can be loosely labeled *progressive* because of their emphasis on social justice. Also, all of the groups were located in institutions outside of school, as part of youth organizations and university programs.

One direction for future research involves broadening the sample of youth activism groups studied. For instance, it is important to understand the factors that influence politically conservative expressions of youth activism, especially as those become more common. Also, youth political participation has taken on diverse forms outside of the United States, which deserve attention (Chawla et al., 2005; Hart, 2006; Rajani, 2001). Chile, for example, attracted headlines recently when hundreds of thousands of student protesters persuaded Chilean president Michelle Bachelet to provide school meals and waive the college-entry exam fee (Associated Press, 2006; Rohlert, 2006). Also, the motivations and origins of activism among Palestinian youth (Barber, 1999) and Israeli *hilltop youth* (Shapiro, 2003) are likely quite different from activism in a North American context. We will gain a rich and nuanced understanding of the meaning and significance of youth activism by understanding its varied forms.

A second area for research pertains to the impact of activism on youth development and resiliency. Although there have been longitudinal studies of participants in the civil rights movement (discussed in Youniss & Yates, 1997), few studies of contemporary youth activism have examined participants' trajectories of development over several years. We do not know how short-term experiences contribute to youth's long-term sociopolitical identities and other developmental outcomes. This kind of research is particularly challenging because young people tend to self-select into such groups, making causal inferences difficult. Nevertheless, careful longitudinal studies need not be randomized experiments to help us understand how participants change over time and how social action experiences become meaningful in their lives.

A third area for future research is to examine hypotheses about the development of agency in social action groups (Watts & Flanagan, in press). *Agency* is a term often used to refer to people's perceptions of their abilities to make an impact and influence the political system (Bandura, 1999; Larson & Hansen, 2005). In a recent comparative study, the percentage of students who reported high levels of civic agency was significantly higher among members of youth organizing groups than it was among members of conventional youth organizations (Gambone, Cao Yu, Lewis-Charp, Sipe, & Laco, 2004). But we know little about the unique qualities of activism experiences that influence youth's perceptions of agency. For example, how are experiences of collective agency related to perceptions of individual agency? Also, to what extent do youth translate their feelings of efficacy in activism projects to other developmental settings, such as school or work?

Finally, new forms of collaboration between researchers and practitioners can help research be ecologically valid while informing practical decisions faced by youth groups (see Lerner, Fisher, & Weinberg, 2000; Zeldin, Larson, & Camino, 2005). Such collaborations should recognize the expertise of frontline youth workers—these professionals have well-tested ideas about how to engage young people and build their skills. At the same time, without systematic research, practitioners risk fragmentation and isolation. Researchers can do their part by collaboratively designing

studies with practitioners. This kind of research goes by many names and has a legacy that extends back to John Dewey's laboratory school (1902/1990; see also, Lagemann, 1989). For example, learning scientists create *design experiments* (Barab & Squire, 2004), in which researchers collaborate with teachers to design, study, and modify classroom lessons in an iterative cycle. Others call for a renewed *scholarship of engagement* (Ansley & Gaventa, 1997; Zeldin, 2000) that integrates research and practice for socially just ends. Regardless of the disciplinary lens, such efforts represent a promising way to build knowledge about youth activism that has both applied and theoretical significance.

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