From Hunger Strike to High School: Youth Development, Social Justice and School Formation

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The following project seeks to identify the attempt of two communities (one Mexican-American, one African-American) to authentically involve young people in the development and planning process of a community high school. As an active participant in the process, I have utilized the tenets of participatory action research to identify challenges faced by young people and adults in neighborhood school development. Where issues of race, class and gender are usually given nominal attention in school improvement, the subsequent study seeks to highlight an instance where community members realized that engaging young people was the most viable means by which to address potential racial/ethnic conflict in a new school. Through youth development, young people are leading the process to engage dialogue and coalition building to address commonalities between cultures with distinct histories and realities.

A Brief Note on Participatory Action Research and Method

Throughout the process of developing this paper, I operate on two specific fronts: as participant researcher and concerned community member. In these spaces I have consciously chosen political spaces that may make the following document appear "unsettling." However, for the purpose of this document, such disquiet is important in completing the required inquiry. Throughout the process I continually challenge myself to study my praxis (theory plus practice) in the hope of working in concert with community members, community organizations, teachers, students, and administrators to develop a community high school. Echoing the sentiment of Michael Apple (1994), I understand my work as raising

> **Intensely personal questions about ourselves (myself)—as raced, gendered, and classed actors---and where we fit into the relations of power, of domination and subordination, in our societies (Apple in Gitlin 1994, p.x).**

As an African-American teacher/organizer with a background in community organizing, I am closely acquainted with the relations of power between municipal bodies (in this case an urban public school system), community organizations, and community residents. Such research is "grounded" in my experience as a community organizer and the transition to high school social studies teacher and college professor. In so doing, the attempt is to document my experiences as a member of a design team for one of the high schools as our proposal for the school awaits approval from central office.

Situating myself in the position of researcher and concerned community member can complicate matters in terms of research. Participatory action research in the following pages locates me as insider and outsider, depending on the situation. Wearing my "prejudice on my sleeve" in this case would seem a dangerous exercise as qualitative researchers are often chided for incorporating data often deemed "too interpretive" to quantify. Nevertheles, in the attempt to present a factual account of my participation and observations, the attempt is to "test out the

principles of reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it" (Crotty in Tickle 2001, p.346). As a concerned community member, I made numerous visits to the hunger strike site and also was one of the first persons outside of the hunger strikers to be consulted on issues of curriculum. Consequently, it is my belief that research can be "reconceptualized so that it can more powerfully act of some of the most persistent and important problems of our schools, namely those surrounding issues of race, class and gender (Gitlin in Gitlin 1994, p.ix)." The following account, in documenting the inclusion of young people in the planning of a school, is an explicit attempt to discuss the intersection of race, class and power.

Documenting such events as a participant required significant dependence on field notes and tape recordings. Along with the requirements of attending meetings, interviews with community members have been transcribed to provide context to the events leading to the inclusion of young people in the initiative. Coupled with the gathering of primary and secondary documents (community flyers, requests for proposals, historical accounts, newspaper clippings, related websites, memoranda between community organizations, etc.), the following sections are the attempt to provide synthesis between oral and printed qualitative data. From the organizing that led to the hunger strike, to the approval of the high school, the process is multifaceted and requires analysis of the factors that impact youth inclusion.

Beginnings: The need for drastic action

The Mexican-American neighborhood on Chicago's Southwest Side has been steeped in community action and resistance. From the struggle to develop bilingual education programs in public school to assisting in the election of Chicago's first African-American mayor, the community of South Lawndale (referenced as Little Village hereafter) has a history of community activism. The events leading to May 19, 2001 should be understood as part of the

continuum of community efforts. In it we locate the struggles of a community to gain access to equitable education for their students.

Beginning as early as 1995, members of the Little Village community through political and grassroots organizing began to place pressure on central office to create a high school for their neighborhood. Currently the community is one of the youngest in the city, with 4,000 children of high school age and one public high school with a capacity for 1,800 students (Little Village Request for Proposal 2004, p.5). Twenty-five percent of the residents have incomes below $15,000. Only 17% of all high school residents have a high school diploma and 5.5% have college degrees. Adding to the concerns is the fact that the overcrowded high school has a 55% graduation rate and a dropout rate of 17% (p.5).

Recognizing these issues to be of immediate concern, Little Village community members organized themselves to lobby for a new high school in their neighborhood. After consistent pressure by the community to the school board, $30 million was allocated to build a high school. While the request form residents of Little Village were to build a neighborhood school with open enrollment, the city of Chicago set plans to create four selective-enrollment high schools across the city. Selective-enrollment schools, unlike neighborhood schools, require applicants to have a particular composite test score upon entry. In addition, applicants to a selective-enrollment school are not allowed to take the entrance exam if they do not have the required composite score. As the selective enrollment high schools were given first priority, plans for new neighborhood schools were overlooked by central office. In Little Village, despite the $30 million dollar allocation, no construction took place. Community members, under the request of elected officials for the neighborhood, sought to address the problem through the protocols of Chicago Public Schools (CPS hereafter). Since the winter of 2000, Little Village received no notice for construction of the high school while four selective-enrollment schools were built

across the city. Outraged at the decision to build the selective enrollment schools, Little Village residents approached CPS. They were given the response that the funds originally allocated to build their high school had been spent. Because the funds were non-renewable, high school construction was postponed indefinitely. From the indefinite postponement, Little Village community members were subsequently told that CPS had come to a final decision not to build a high school.

In response to the CPS decision, members of the Little Village community decided to stage a hunger strike, beginning on May 19 and ending on June 7. The hunger strike was chosen due to its ability to demonstrate the seriousness of the community. It was not a decision couched in desperation. Instead, it was an intensely planned strategy to alert CPS of the community's staying power. The hunger strike took place on the site originally planned for the school. Renamed "Camp Cesear Chavez" after the leader of the United Farm Workers, medical staff remained on site in case of emergency. Because some of the hunger strikers were senior citizens, careful attention was given to the hunger strikers as the days progressed. Although there were only thirteen hunger-strikers, community support surpassed the participants' expectation. During the nineteen days the community staged community theater events, community rallies, and prayer vigils. All were key in keeping the hunger-strikers in good spirits.

Of the thirteen hunger-strikers, two were under the age of twenty. One was still in high school at the time, while the other was a college student at a downstate university. Within this time period the hunger strikers forced CPS to the negotiating table, resulting in the approval of the high school originally set for construction in 1998. Within the structure, four schools ((1)visual and performing arts, (2)math, science and technology, (3)world languages and (4)social justice) will be housed in the complex, all of which are scheduled to open in the summer of 2005.. Remembering the spirit of the hunger strikers and the participation of young

people in it the initiative, the original planning committee vowed the new high school complex to be a space that reflected the four principles of community ownership, cross cultural/multiracial cooperation, global community and learning. This document will focus on community ownership, in that the advisory council (of the original planning committee) sought to ensure authentic community inclusion in school governance and decision-making (p.4). Within this space, the advisory board that grew out of the planning committee decided that young people were critical to the process. In order to incorporate the values of the initiative (self-discipline, transparency, life-long learning, innovation, leadership development, democracy, teamwork, community ownership, cross-cultural respect, efficacy, accountability, empowerment, flexibility, and collaboration), the participation of young people became imperative.

Organizational Structure: Inclusion and Community Context

Indicative to many community planning/organizing initiatives, groups are often required to organize themselves as committees under an umbrella organization. In this case, the block club organizations involved in the hunger strike came together to organize themselves as the school planning committee. With the help of a local community development organization, the planning committee organized itself into three main committees: curriculum, community services, and school design. Originally part of the curriculum committee, the youth council came into existence as a separate entity as the planning committee transitioned to an advisory board (later known as the Transition Advisory Committee, or TAC). The multifaceted nature of the process is important in that members of the various committees remained committed to ensuring youth representation in the development of the school. By remaining accountable to the needs of young people, the shifts and transitions in community organizing are critical in the documentation of the project's development. As committees phased out, dissolved into existing

committees or became new committee altogether, the chronology becomes important in order to provide a sense of the work that took place as young people and community maintained continuity throughout.

For the remainder of the document, the young people who are involved in the high school planning process are advised from two specific spaces. The first is from the youth advocate position on the advisory board (TAC). The youth advocate position (currently shared by three members of the advisory board) is responsible for holding youth council meetings and representing youth positions on the advisory board. Upon first glance, the process may appear contradictory to "authentic" youth participation. Often youth initiatives claiming to include the opinions of young people use youth participants symbolically. Rarely are youth trained to make leadership decisions that determine the direction of the organization. In the attempt to break from such practices, the youth advocates are active in providing youth the necessary leadership development to make informed decisions on policies that will govern the four high schools. The representative position of youth advocate came about for logistical reasons. In the transition from the planning committee to advisory board, many of the meetings were held at night (due to work schedules of advisory board members). Because many of the members of the youth council were aged 11 to 14, many parents were worried about their safety in traveling the neighborhood at night. To accommodate parental concerns, youth council meetings would be held on another day in the afternoon. The youth advocates, in organizing the youth council meetings, became responsible for report-backs to the advisory board.

Second is the community organization known as the Crib Collective, of which two constituents of the advisory board are members. Where the former is an outgrowth of the original planning committee, the Crib Collective became involved in the initiative as the North Lawndale community became included in the planning process. Developed as a community youth

organization with a focus on the Arts. The idea began with a group of community members who desired a safe space for young people. After interviewing numerous youth throughout the neighborhood, the first project of the crib collective was to create a space where young people could express themselves creatively. Due to the popularity of open mics (performances centered on artists from the audience who sign-in to perform), members of the Crib Collective created their own forum to take place at their site. Where the first were not as well attended, the following open mics were well attended, creating the desired forum for expression. As young people who attended the open mics desired to engage in other substantive work, the work of the collective expanded to the Arts, violence prevention, and employment (all areas of concern for youth in the community).

For the high school, the two adult youth advocates have assembled the youth council, which has been responsible for fielding the concerns of young people as the high school nears opening day. Once the school is up and running, the youth council members (currently in sixth, seventh, and eighth grade) will transition to the youth councils of each of the high schools in the multiplex. Currently organizers from the Crib Collective and LVCDC (Little Village Community Development Corporation--the aforementioned umbrella community organization) have taken the lead in securing the position of young people in the remaining months of the initiative. Both youth advocates from the Crib Collective are college students, responsible for facilitating youth meetings and providing report-backs to the TAC. When the school opens, as the TAC shifts its leadership responsibility to the four schools, the task of the youth advocate and the youth committee will be to insure permanent student input throughout the life of the high school. Currently the four high schools are required by the TAC and the partners of Chicago Public Schools to demonstrate how young people will be included in the daily decision making

process of each school. All are important in recognizing the numerous contexts contributing to the development of the four high schools.

North Lawndale, the Crib Collective, and a Consent Decree

Providing additional context to the involvement of youth in the planning process is the consent decree mandated by Chicago Public Schools (CPS hereafter). Operating under a desegregation mandate since 1982, CPS has been required by the federal government to engage in a concerted effort to desegregate its public schools. Critical to the decree however, is the fact that there aren't enough White students in Chicago public schools to "desegregate" the student populace. In the attempt to operate in compliance with the desegregation mandate, CPS interpreted it as integrating the four high schools with the neighboring African-American community. Under the consent decree, each high school is required to maintain a population that is at least 30% African-American. As a loose interpretation of the desegregation mandate, CPS can argue to the federal government that their attempts at new school development remain in agreement with the legal statute.

It would be incorrect to state that there are fuming tensions between the communities of Little Village and North Lawndale. However, due to the segregation of many of Chicago's neighborhoods, the dynamic deserves some discussion in that there is potential for tensions to escalate as Mexican-Americans and African-Americans are scheduled to convene in the same place. Currently the local high school serving Little Village is predominantly African-American with a sizeable Mexican-American population. Tensions often escalate as rival gangs convene in the same place. Interestingly enough, many of the gang issues do not factor into the interracial tension. Instead, gang concerns are more intra-racial. African-American residents of North Lawndale are concerned about the African-American gangs in the neighborhood that attend the

same school. The same can be said for Mexican-American members of Lawndale. However, because residents in both neighborhoods know little about the others community and culture, a concerted effort by the TAC and community members is needed to secure school support. In fact, when the idea that African-American and Mexican-Americans would be going to the same school, some members of the youth council felt the concept would never work. However, with the involvement of the youth advocate, many members of the community realize the importance of interracial, cross-cultural collaboration to make the project work.

The history of both communities is conflicting in regard to tensions. For a brief moment in the mid eighties, there was great political collaboration between both communities in the election of Harold Washington, Chicago's first African-American mayor. Labor organizers from the 22nd ward under the leadership of Rudy Lozano helped secure a victory for Washington by mobilizing of Mexican-American voters in Little Village. Upon Lozano's assassination in the summer of 1983, the connections were lost as Washington died some four years later. In both organizers was the hope of making the necessary connections in the quest for racial, social and economic justice.

Relying on the same spirit that Washington and Lozano took to communities, members of the advisory board traveled to North Lawndale in search of community organizations and schools that would support the initiative. In the process, the Crib Collective was identified. Located by a community organizer working at LVCDC on a project separate from the initiative, his experience with a member of the crib collective in a national community support organization provided members of the advisory board a space to meet with residents of North Lawndale. The meeting space was a house the residents converted into a community space. The name Crib Collective came from the popular nickname for a house (crib) and the collective of artists and organizers who occupied the residency. Currently the building houses five residents. Two are

art students employed in a local arts program, one is a community organizer, another is a student while being employed as parks and recreation worker, while the last member of the collective is a direct-service worker (direct-service can refer to social work, drug rehabilitation, ex-offender employment programs, etc.). In addition to their own fundraising, they have secured various grants and fellowships to keep the operation afloat.

The organization started with the purpose of fulfilling a community need as they surveyed young people in the North Lawndale community, inquiring as to what they felt the community lacked. Their informal surveys resulted in the discovery that young people felt there were no outlets for expression and places where they felt safe. Parallel to the experiences in Little Village, 42% of residents in North Lawndale live below the poverty line. Median income for the area hovers around $18,000. Fifty-two percent of the families with children under the age of eighteen live below the poverty line. Reflective of trends in many urban, low-income African-American communities, 58% of families with one or more child under the age of 18 indicated a grandparent as primary caregiver. In terms of school, 18.6% of North Lawndale high school students are performing at or above the state standard. The high school graduation rate is 26.2%, with only three percent of its residents earning a bachelors degree (Little Village Request for Proposal 2004, p.6).

The seriousness of the situation in North Lawndale was reflected in the views and opinion of the young people living in the community. With many members of the collective having experience in community organizing, they began to meet among themselves to develop strategies by which to engage the community. Following the concept of meeting people where they are, they wanted a practical approach that would not turn community members away. The first community project was a Sunday dinner for the residents on the block where the collective is located. Each house member went door-to-door and alerted community members of the

initiative. At first, the community was cool to the concept, a group of artists and organizers who were not from the community appeared suspect. However with consistency and support from connections through other networks, young people began to frequent the community dinners. The dinners provided young people the space to discuss their concerns about the neighborhood. Discussions included concerns with neighborhood safety, drug sales and proliferation, antagonistic relationships with local police, and the lack of a community center for young people.

From these discussions, the next community project became an open-mic for the young people of the community. Open-mics are spaces where participants perform according to order from signing a sign-in sheet. It is "open" because no participant is turned away. Often most associated with performance poetry (also known as "spoken word" poetry) the open mics at the Crib Collective became a fixture in their programming. Highly attended by youth in the North Lawndale community, the open mics became the space that young people desired to express themselves with peers in a safe environment. In addition to poetry, young people showcased their talents in song, dance, and written prose. From the space of the open mic, adults from the community began to inquire about the events of the collective. From these spaces block clubs began to use the Crib Collective's space for meetings, dinners, and community discussions on current developments in the community. With the need to secure a community partner that was centered in the concerns of young people, the Crib Collective became the most logical choice.

Successful Youth Inclusion in High School Development

Because the four high schools are currently at the proposal process, the majority of our work has been on the level of design teams. The school of social justice design team (of which I am member) has taken the responsibility of studying the attempts by schools across the country

to incorporate young people in areas of school governance, discipline and curriculum. Through their struggles we locate the importance of young people in guiding the process of authentic inclusion. The process has taken us to study schools in New York City, Oakland, California and Providence, Rhode Island. Through the various examples, we have discovered a set of common themes. First, the mission and vision of the schools reflect a commitment to young people. Second, all of the institutions have an operating youth council, responsible for providing adults in leadership capacities the issues and concerns of young people in question. Third is the fact that each of the institutions incorporates leadership development in curricular practice. Fourth, community inclusion is central to the process. Many schools have partnered with local community organizations to assist them in the inclusion of community members in the day-to-day functions of the school. Some schools have developed their own community organizations, comprised of parents and students, to address community concerns.

Our process of youth inclusion has been difficult on the social justice design team. Where we have experienced relative success in the participation of parents, young people were slow to participate in the process. Because many of our meetings included dealing with operational budgets and staffing concerns we relied heavily on the youth council to provide curricular ideas and concerns. A summer institute was held by LVCDC to provide young people from Little Village and North Lawndale communities with leadership training centered in the importance of community inclusion in school development. The process is Freirian, in the sense that it is centered in empowering the most disposed with the skills and abilities to act as change agents. Training young people in community mapping, political economy, and community assessment has been beneficial as they provide recommendations to the TAC. During the transition to fully functional high school, the responsibility remains for the adult leadership to remain accountable to the principle of community (youth) inclusion as an original principle of the hunger strike.

Based on What We Know, What do we do now?

As stated from the outset of the article, participatory research should not be viewed as a finite field of research that will provide a blanket solution to the issues of urban education. Instead, from instances like the hunger strike to the development of the youth council, we can begin to understand the nuances that impact issues of youth and school development. With this take we are forced to transition from the broad-based educational policy solutions suggested by our current government to ones centered in the site-specific needs of communities. Broad-based (e.g. city, county, state, national) policy should be used to monitor and support the progression of young people instead of developing punitive systems grounded in deficit. As discussed in this paper, one of the most sensible means by which to do so is to consult with the persons who will be effected by said policies the most.

Presently the work at the Little Village Multiplex is incomplete. Because it is a school in formation, we are unable to provide a comprehensive account of the relationships between young people, community organizations, and schools. However, the story of the hunger strike informs us of the severe means communities often have to take to guarantee educational access. From working with both communities, the need for neighborhood cooperation is at a premium in that the high school represents an experiment in race and class, as two distinct ethnic communities are being served. Although they share the realities of class, it is yet to be seen if the work of the community and youth council will prevent expected clashes between young people in both neighborhoods. Still in fact, the attempt must be made. As a participant in the process I have been able to observe and dialogue about the concerns in the high school as it nears opening day. Working on the design team for the school of social justice has enabled me to understand the nuances involved in preserving the integrity of the initial hunger strike. From the drafting of the

initial proposals, we remained critically concerned about the suggestions central office would make concerning our approach. Currently we are in negotiations with the city on the proposed schedule and budget of our school. Coupled with hiring teachers and securing an operating community center for the school, the process has been uneven and sometimes difficult. However, the community has continued to support us throughout the process. Despite our own infighting and inability to come to consensus on things, we continue to move with the idea of making the school a reality.

From working in this community, four specific policy recommendations have come to fruition. They are not new to those who have engaged community organizing, but they are critical in ensuring community representation and input.

- **Community accountability:** Any community initiative must remain accountable to its constituents. Accountability can take the form of community report-backs on new policy, community forums to collect issues and concerns or member-checking with residents on whether or not the information disseminated is accurate.
- **Youth Inclusion Process:** The authentic inclusion of young people in community initiatives should involve a process by which young people's perspective are respected and incorporated into any existing work. The process should also be one that is able to adjust to new issues and concerns held by young people. This can include (but is not limited to) youth councils, policy implementation of youth concerns, etc.
- **Autonomy:** In order for community processes to incorporate the issues and concerns of residents, autonomy must be given to the creators of the policy to engage new and innovative approaches.

- **Evaluation:** Throughout any community process, evaluation will be key in revisiting any initiative to make suggested improvements for any new developments.

Although basic from the outset, these processes were developed independently from the influence of "official" sources (i.e. local government, school boards, etc.). Developed naturally from the initiative of the hunger strike, the aforementioned points remain critical to the school's formation. Still operating as points of contention, members of the youth council, the TAC, and members of the design teams still struggle to keep these points at the center of our work.

Unfortunately, many adults still are overcome with a distrust of young people. On the contrary, it would behoove us to return to a very practical understanding: young people do not have all the answers (no one does), but given the chance, we will discover their expertise on their lives. As youth development has become en vogue and youth organizing is receiving significant funding from major philanthropic organizations, we must remain keenly aware of how the paradigm is defined. It cannot be a situation where youth development becomes equated to "giving those poor people of color what they so desperately need." Again, the rhetoric of deficit inhibits our ability to understand the importance of youth inclusion. Youth development requires a balanced approach. The contributions of young people and adults are critical if our projects, organizations and schools are to succeed. We must look to the examples of work that take from young people and adults like the Summer Program of the Institute for Democracy, Education and Access at the University of California Los Angeles. If we are advocating for youth inclusion to policy decisions, studies and reports can benefit from participatory action research by placing the work of young people in the center. The process can sometimes appear daunting, because you place your theories out to be tested or rejected. Instead of viewing this negatively, participatory

action research allows us to welcome such success and failure, with the hope of moving the project of social justice forward.

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