

**Civic Involvement Among Urban Youth:
A Qualitative Study of “Critical Engagement”**

Ben Kirshner (kirshner@stanford.edu)
Karen Strobel (strobe@stanford.edu)
María Fernández (mafernandez@stanford.edu)

John W. Gardner Center for Youth and Their Communities
Stanford University

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In recent years, researchers have identified civic engagement as an important element of positive youth development. (Flanagan & Faison, 2001; Youniss, 1999). Particular attention has been directed towards adolescence as a critical period in the emergence of a civic identity. During adolescence, youth begin to transition out of the role of beneficiaries within a community into the roles and responsibilities of active citizens (Atkins and Hart, 2002). Some researchers have identified factors such as SES and family values that may predict youth involvement in volunteer service and community organizing (Flanagan, Bowes, Johnsson, Csapo and Sheblanova, 1998; Hart, Atkins and Ford, 1998). Other researchers have focused on developmental outcomes such as identity or personal agency associated with civic involvement (Yates and Youniss, 1996). While this work has provided important and useful insights, little is known about how youth interpret their social contexts and how their sense-making about their neighborhood and community contexts may be related to their emerging civic awareness and involvement. Moreover, even less is known about the social and political perceptions of youth from low-income families who live in urban contexts (Flanagan & Faison, 2001).

Rather than focus on predictors or correlates of youth civic involvement, in this study we use qualitative methods to find out how young people involved in a community mapping project reasoned about their social and political environment, and the extent to which their civic efforts could be described as “critical engagement.” Critical engagement refers to a process in which youth critically assess their surroundings and at the same time are constructively engaged in finding solutions to the problems they

identify. This concept helps us to explore the dynamic interplay between youth's civic involvement and the neighborhood contexts that give shape to their experiences.

Our paper will begin by reviewing literature about the civic engagement of urban youth¹. We will then describe the specific research questions and methodology that organize the study, as well as provide an overview of the after school program where the research took place. The remainder of the paper will discuss the teenagers' perspectives on their community and their actions towards making it better.

Literature Review

In a recent review of literature relating to youth citizenship, Flanagan and Faison (2001) concluded that there were few systematic accounts of the processes by which ethnic minority groups “develop an affection for the polity and become engaged citizens...And what we do know does not engender optimism (p. 5).” In such research, citizenship is defined more expansively than voting preferences or party loyalties. Instead, citizenship² includes the multiple ways that youth “come to identify with the common good and become engaged members of their communities” (Flanagan & Faison, 2001). Developmental psychologists have documented that, in comparison to middle-class white youth, youth from low-income families and youth of color tend to feel more “alienated” from their communities and generally have a lower sense of “political efficacy” (Bandura, 1997; Torney-Purta, 1999). In addition, political scientists have

¹ In this case, by “urban youth” we are referring primarily to working class and youth from low-income families, typically youth of color, who live in metropolitan areas. There are of course numerous “urban youth” who live in prosperous neighborhoods and attend private schools; this population is not included in our use of the term.

² The terms citizenship and civic engagement are used synonymously in this paper

documented a “participation gap” between those of high and low socioeconomic status (Schlozman et al., 1999).

Atkins and Hart (2002) have carefully examined factors that help explain the relative disengagement of urban youth. They suggest that civic involvement is possible only when young people have acquired knowledge about their communities as well as opportunities to participate in them. With knowledge and the experience of participation, youth are more likely to feel a sense of connection and responsibility to their community. Unfortunately, research suggests that youth living in urban contexts are more likely to encounter obstacles depriving them of knowledge about their communities or access to opportunities to participate (Atkins and Hart 2002; Hart et al., 1998). This line of argument is supported by other researchers who have documented how the decline of institutions and community supports in inner-cities has limited young people’s opportunities for civic participation (McLaughlin, 2000; O’Donoghue, 2002).

While these analyses of the structural and institutional challenges to urban youth’s civic identity provide a necessary starting point, it is also important to pay attention to the interpretations of youth themselves. In other words, how do young people themselves make sense of their social and political environment and its implications for their own development? Flanagan and Gallay (1995) write:

Rarely are [young people] asked to look outward, toward the community where they live, and reflect on the justice of economic arrangements or of the political influence they observe...we know little about the processes through which children come to understand, challenge, or justify the political arrangements or economic practices of their society (p. 35).

Often ethnicity, SES and geographically defined neighborhoods are variables included in studies as indicators of the social context in which adolescents are developing their civic

identities. In this paper we argue that knowledge of adolescents' "social address"—while necessary—does not provide sufficient understanding of youth experiences in that context, not because we think that the structural analyses are wrong, but because we believe youth's sense-making about social and political realities is a core aspect of their development as citizens. Also, youth lend a perspective that does not always conform to what adults know or can predict (Kirshner & O'Donoghue, 2001). Understanding how young people think about their neighborhood and community contexts is critical to supporting their civic involvement.

Exploring young people's sense-making in this regard is also important because it can give us a more complex picture of what it means to be an "engaged citizen." In other words, terms such as "cynical," or "alienated," while accurate in one sense, may not effectively describe the complexity of youth's attitudes towards their communities. Perhaps young people can be both cynical *and* hopeful, or both critical *and* engaged. Rosaldo (1997), for example, puts forth a notion of citizenship among Latinos that includes a complex mixture of alienation and belonging in the United States. In his view, citizenship involves a discussion and struggle over the meaning and scope of membership in the community in which one lives. This complex process could be described in terms of *critical* civic engagement, in which youth identify problems while engaging in constructive efforts to address those problems.³ Critical engagement may be particularly adaptive for youth in distressed neighborhoods, who care about making their communities safer and better places. They may have reasons to be cynical, but they also are able to be hopeful and engaged. For example, it is no great insight to point out that American history is crowded with people—Dr. Martin Luther King, César Chávez, Ella

Baker—whose prosocial commitments were accompanied by a powerful sense of social criticism.

One advantage of a qualitative approach is that it lends itself more readily to encountering this mixture of sentiments. In recent years, research on urban youth and their developmental experiences has profited from methods that are sensitive to contexts and the meanings that youth apply to them (Burton, Obeidallah, Allison, 1996; Heath, 1996). Ethnographic and other qualitative methods have enabled researchers to question mainstream assumptions about normative development and to develop rich new understandings of the multiple contexts in which urban youth develop (Brown & Theobald, 1998; Heath & McLaughlin, 1993; McLaughlin, 1999).

In this study, we used qualitative research methods in order to capture the perspectives of a group of 8th graders involved in the “Community Youth Research” project. By listening to the youth’s voices, we were able to learn about their current and developing knowledge about their communities, their analysis of the reasons for certain disparities within their community, and the extent to which they felt a sense of responsibility to work to address the issues they identified. This allows us to begin to carefully examine the concept of “critical engagement” and gain insight into the dynamic relation between youth’s experience in their communities and their forms of civic involvement. Two research questions guided our analysis:

- How did the participants in the Community Youth Research project describe and interpret their neighborhoods?
- In what ways did their civic engagement embody of mixture of social criticism *and* constructive problem solving?

³ This notion has been discussed in Freire’s work on empowerment and “conscientização” (Freire, 1993).

Method

Background: Community Youth Research

The purpose of Community Youth Research is for young people to gather information about the needs and resources for youth in a particular neighborhood or city and use that information to influence policy at a local level. It bears some similarity to participatory action research (Park, 1993; Penuel & Freeman, 1997), as well as recent “youth mapping” programs (Academy for Educational Development, 2001). These kinds of projects train youth how to study issues in their communities and act on their findings.

The Community Youth Research project discussed here came about because of a community-university partnership aimed at improving youth development outcomes in a neighboring city (called here West City). City planners and community members in West City were interested in getting a youth’s eye perspective on the resources and needs for youth, and asked our university to help run an afterschool program that would train youth in the skills necessary to do the research.

This study focuses on the CYR program’s pilot year.⁴ The program met twice a week after school for approximately seven months. During the first months of the project, the youth developed the question they wanted to address (“How can West City be better for youth?”) and conducted interviews with their peers to collect some initial data. They then broke into smaller groups using methods of their choosing, which included surveys, interviews, and video footage. The final months of the project involved analysis and reporting of the data.

Background: West City

⁴ The collaboration between the university and West City is ongoing. There is another group of CYRs participating in the project for the academic year 2001-2002.

West City is a growing city of approximately 76,000 residents that has been part of the technology boom familiar to many California communities in the 1990’s (Rosaldo, 1997). The city as a whole ranks among the top 250 towns and cities in the United States in terms of median cost of a house (Gossage, 2001). However, unlike its affluent neighbors, West City is a diverse city made up of a people from a variety of socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds, and is often referred to as the “poor cousin”. A quick glance at Table 1 provides evidence of the ethnic stratification within the school district. Whereas whites occupy 66% of the total population of the town, they only account for 29% of the students who attend kindergarten through 8th grade in the public school system. This trend is reversed among Latino residents, whose children go to the public schools in much greater percentages. This contrast reflects the class and ethnic stratification in West City in general. Whereas working class and Latino neighborhoods tend to be clustered on the east side, more affluent neighborhoods are located in the hills on the west side. This stratification is magnified when one considers representation among elected political bodies, such as the School Board and City Council, in which only 5% of all elected officials are Latino. Voting statistics reflect this trend: in the predominately working class and Latino east side, 33% of registered voters voted, compared to 60% in other precincts.

Table 1: Percentages of ethnic groups in West City and in West City public schools

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

(Source: West City School District website)

Study Participants

Participants in the study were 8th grade students from a middle school in West City who were interested in joining the Community Youth Research project after school. Presentations were made to all eighth-grade classes, describing the project as an opportunity to make the community a better place while learning new skills and having an employment opportunity at the same time⁵. Students were also told that they would receive a letter of reference for future jobs and education. In accordance with the wishes of the school, the program was available only to students with a C average or better at the beginning of the project (though an exception was made in one case). Eighty-five students turned in an initial interest form. A smaller number of candidates (approximately 40) were interviewed by phone or in person. Using criteria that included enthusiasm for the goals of the project, ability to get along with others, and diversity in terms of SES, neighborhood, ethnicity, academic performance and gender, fourteen youth were selected.

This study focuses on the 13 youth who stayed in the program for its duration. The group was nearly evenly split between boys (7) and girls (6). The majority of the students were Latino (10); the other youth were White (3). Eight of the youth lived in low-income or working class neighborhoods (including two who lived in mobile home parks). Using block data from Census 1990, the median household income for neighborhoods where these youth lived ranged from \$19,000 to \$33,000. The remaining five youth lived in more middle-class residential neighborhoods, in which the median household income for these neighborhoods ranged from \$42,000 to \$60,000 (Census, 1990).

⁵ Community youth researchers received a monthly stipend of \$100 contingent on their completion of 5 hours per week of project tasks and participation in related activities.

Data sources

This study relies on two different sources of data. To answer the first question about how the young people interpreted their context, we asked the thirteen youth participants to give us a “guided tour” through photo collages they made about their “communities” during the first month of the project. These interviews lasted roughly 30 minutes long. They were later transcribed and read several times. Interviews were analyzed and coded. Categories were developed to describe different types of social and political assessments. To answer the second question, we focused on the youth researchers’ presentation to city officials. We rely on field notes describing this event, as well as reflections by youth afterwards. Program observations were documented through written field notes and reflections. All three authors on this paper were participant researchers, which means that we helped facilitate project activities while at the same time maintaining a record of what had happened.

It is worth noting our reasons for not including conventional psychological methods, such as a pre/post measure or a control group. First, we did not use a quantifiable outcome measure because it presupposes knowledge of the variable in question and a reliable way of measuring it. Because of the infancy of studies of youth citizenship, in particular with this population of youth, we chose to adopt open-ended, ground-up approach to data analysis (see Saxe, 1996 and Way, 1998 for more extended methodological discussions). Also, although a control group would provide useful insights into the differences between the CYRs and typical youth, finding such differences between groups of youth was not the purpose of the study.

Data analysis

Section 1: How did the youth participants in the Community Youth Research project describe and interpret their own surroundings?

Early in the Community Youth Research project, the participants were given cameras and asked to take pictures of their communities. They used these pictures to create photo collages, which answered the questions, “What is your neighborhood like?” and “What do youth need?” The purpose of the activity was for the youth to begin identifying assets and problems in their communities before embarking on more systematic research. For us, as researchers, this presented an opportunity to explore these young people’s nascent ideas about their sociopolitical context. In interviews with twelve of the youth we asked them to give us a “guided tour” through their collages—to describe their photos of their neighborhoods and why they took each one.

Several themes emerged from these conversations: First, among these young people there was a predominance of negative experiences and feelings about their neighborhoods. Second, the relation between socioeconomic status and neighborhood perceptions for the most part confirmed predictions from past research suggesting that youth in low-income neighborhoods would perceive a greater number of problems compared to their higher income peers. However, there were important exceptions to this trend. Third, we discerned different levels at which young people reflected on their neighborhoods. While some just described their own neighborhoods, others began to comment on inequalities between their own and other neighborhoods in West City. Still others commented on these inequalities *and* had explanations for the causes of them.

Overall perceptions of neighborhoods

As is shown in Table 2, all twelve CYRs used their photographs to illustrate some kind of problem or concern about their neighborhoods. The two most common categories were: “Lack of Things to Do” and “Threats to Safety.” “Lack of Things to Do” refers to the sentiment that there are not enough community centers, safe parks, or free activities for youth. Several youth remarked on the problem that the sole youth-oriented recreation center in town charged admission. “Threats to Safety” varied from cars that did not stop at stop signs to older teenagers who menaced young people. In describing her photo of a park, one student, Cristina⁶, said, “They just need more safe places for kids where they feel safe and they can play.”

TABLE 2
Concerns & problems in neighborhoods (from a total of 12 interviews)

Category	Number of youth who mentioned it
General	
Some kind of problem or concern	12
Specific	
Lack of things to do/places to go	7
Threats to safety (i.e., bullies, reckless cars)	7
Gang presence (i.e., gang graffiti)	5
Inequities between neighborhoods in terms of resources or opportunities	5
Litter	4
Drug use	4
Racism	2
School not taken care of	2

Gang Presence and Inequities were the next most common issues that came up. Gang presence was usually depicted through photos of gang graffiti used to mark off territory. Four of the students made gang graffiti a central feature of their collages, in part because, in Elsa’s words, “that’s all that’s all that’s in my neighborhood. You go down there, the first thing you see when you cross the street is tagging. Literally. Cause

⁶ All of the student names used in this paper are pseudonyms

it’s like right on the corner.” We found that these youth who included gang graffiti were expert “translators” of the codes and symbols (“LST,” “XIV”, etc.) that they photographed.

“Inequities” is a more abstract category: it refers to observations of discrepancies between neighborhoods in terms of resources or opportunities. We will explore this issue further when we discuss the levels of complexity at which the young people made sense of their contexts. The remaining four categories in the table were less frequent. They represent more self-evident observations made by youth about litter, drug use, racism, and poorly maintained schools.

Table 3 depicts the number of youth who raised “positive features of neighborhoods” in their collages, such as safety, cleanliness, or things to do. In contrast to Table 2, of the twelve youth interviewed, just seven mentioned at least one positive description of their neighborhoods. Most common among these (mentioned by four youth) was that it was safe.

TABLE 3
Positive features of neighborhoods (from a total of 12 interviews)

Category	Number of youth who mentioned it
General	
Some kind of positive feature	7
Specific	
Safe	4
Clean	3
Places to go	3
People get along	2
Streets maintained	2

A comparison of the two tables shows the predominance of concerns and problems among the observations made by youth. Another way of describing this difference is that just two of the twelve young people—Heather and Pablo—made more

positive than negative observations. These two both praised certain features of their own neighborhoods—safe, clean, things to do, well-maintained services such as street cleaning—and perceived that other neighborhoods did not seem to have these features. In contrast, nine of the youth had more critical statements than positive statements when describing their neighborhoods (for one youth the number was equal).

These differences should be interpreted cautiously—the general focus of the project was to identify ways to make West City better for youth, so it is possible that some of the CYRs assumed that they should focus on problems for this assignment. Also, we noticed that when prompted with a follow up such as, “you’ve talked a lot about problems—are there any good things about your neighborhood?” some students moderated their original comments. Nevertheless, the descriptions of problems provide a helpful youth’s eye view of CYR’s experiences in their neighborhoods. And the variation among the collages suggests that they were representing students’ authentic experiences of their neighborhoods.

The relation between neighborhood SES and types of issues identified

Based on background data on West City, one might expect the neighborhood collages to reflect the patterns of socioeconomic stratification there. And in important ways they did; the themes in the collages matched up loosely with students’ neighborhoods. For example, the two students with more positive depictions were in the middle family income group (\$42,000 to \$60,000). These were the youth (Pablo and Heather) who contrasted their own neighborhoods with other parts of the city. For example, Heather, who lived in a gated community, had trouble relating her own

neighborhood experiences to the purposes of the project (hyphens indicate that a section of the transcript was left out):

IS ANY OF THE INFORMATION THAT YOU DOCUMENTED IN THIS COLLAGE RELATED TO YOUR SUGGESTIONS FOR MAKING CHANGES IN REDWOOD CITY.

Heather: Oh. Nnnn-not that I know of. Not really.

OKAY. AND WHY IS THAT?

Heather: I don't know. 'Cuz the community I live in, I'm fine with it. But as soon as I step out of it, it's like, "eeeagh!"

Furthermore, in terms of identifying problems, it was the young people in the lower income neighborhoods who talked most about problems such as gang graffiti and threats to safety.

At the same time, it would be wrong to conclude that neighborhood perceptions were entirely predicted by neighborhood socioeconomic level. We noticed that even in lower income neighborhoods, youth identified positive resources and opportunities. For example, one young person, who lived in a mobile home park isolated from the rest of West City by a major freeway, compared his community favorably to those of other youth researchers, in part because, "I don't think most people have a club house." Later in the interview he said:

Mike: I mean, I knew there were messed-up communities, but I didn't know that they were like that messed up or something. Like, like uh, people say . . . Like in one interview this guy said that his community was, like, really bad.

HOW DID HE . . . WHAT DID HE MEAN BY "BAD"?

Mike: Like, um gangs and, like, nobody to hang out with or . . . Just stuff like that

Other youth, some of whom lived in neighborhoods where gangs were a problem, mentioned the value of good places to get a meal, or having trustworthy neighbors.

Conversely, some of the youth in more affluent neighborhoods identified problems that they faced, such as lack of transportation or things to do, and drug-use among peers.

These examples suggest that binary statements, such as that low SES youth would more likely have negative neighborhood perceptions and high SES youth would more likely have positive neighborhood perceptions, do not adequately describe young people's experiences. Instead, a nuanced account, which accounts for the richness of people's experiences while still acknowledging general trends, provides a more comprehensive picture.

Levels of complexity in youth's analyses

In addition to examining the subject matter in the photo essays, we were also interested in the ways that young people made sense of what they had observed. In other words, did they just describe their neighborhoods or did they begin to think in more complex ways about them, through comparison with other neighborhoods or by thinking about the causes of problems?

The different levels at which these youth reasoned about these issues fall into three categories: "descriptive", "comparative", and "analytical". "Descriptive" refers to statements that describe the objects in the photographs. "Comparative" refers to statements that use objects in the photographs to make comparisons with other parts of West City. "Analytical" refers to statements that make comparisons with other parts of the city, and also offer political analyses to explain the comparisons. The majority of observations were descriptive or comparative.

One example of a "descriptive" approach is in Luis' explanation for his pictures of gang graffiti:

WHY DID YOU WANT THAT PICTURE IN YOUR ESSAY?

Luis: Oh because I wanted to show what the gangs are writing. And they tag and things.

OKAY. AND WHY DID YOU WANT TO SHOW THAT?

Luis: I just wanted to show what they write.

In his collage Luis documented the prevalence of graffiti in his neighborhood. When pressed to explain what he was trying to show, he did not draw a more general inference or compare it to other neighborhoods.

“Comparative” refers to a level of reasoning in which, in addition to describing a specific issue of importance, a connection is made to a more general point. For five of the CYRs, this meant drawing a comparison between their own neighborhoods and what they knew of other parts of the city. In one example, Pablo discussed his observations of his own neighborhood and how it differed from other parts of the city.

Pablo: And then I took these to show that there’s, like, no violence around my community, no gangs or anything like that...And then some more houses to show, like, peace around the community.

WHAT DO YOU MEAN WHEN YOU SAY ‘PEACE’?

Pablo: Well, like, to show that people kind of get along. And they respect everybody else’s properties and there’s no violence anywhere. And then, like, the streets...are nice and things. And the reason I took that is because I noticed that in some other communities the city doesn’t do anything to fix up areas. Like, in my community they’re always fixing up the streets, the sidewalks and everything. But other communities, they don’t do anything to fix it up or anything like that. And that’s something that I was hoping maybe could change and they could, like, maybe fix up other places. And then, like, I took a picture of a house being remodeled, that the city is paying for part of it to help the people remodel it because it was pretty old.

Another student, Blanca, who lived in a low-income neighborhood in which the presence of gangs was an issue, made a similar kind of comparison, although from a different vantage point:

ARE THERE ANY POSITIVE ASPECTS OF YOUR NEIGHBORHOOD? THAT YOU THINK MAYBE YOU WOULD HAVE HIGHLIGHTED?

Blanca: I learned like . . . I don’t know. Like where I live, there’s usually a lot of gangsters around there, but at night. Like on the back streets, there’s some good houses, they’re clean, clean places, but not on ours. I don’t know why. I mean, you skip one street and the other is really bad and . . . One’s good and one’s bad. I mean, why can’t it all be good?

Both of these examples show youth making a comparison between two representations. They described what they saw in their own neighborhoods and coordinating that description with what they know of other parts of the city. Implicit in both of these comparisons was an awareness of some sort of unfairness in the distribution of resources. However, when asked why these inequities may have existed neither of these youth offered a judgment or explanation. The following interchange between Pablo and the interviewer reflects this:

YOU MENTIONED THAT THE CITY HELPS REPAIR CERTAIN PLACES BUT NOT OTHERS. WHY DO YOU THINK THAT IS?

Pablo: I don't know why they do that. But that's just something I've noticed before...

DO YOU WANT TO MAKE ANY GUESSES?

Pablo: Uhh, I don't even know why.

Lastly, there were two students who not only drew comparisons between parts of West City but also make analytical judgments about these comparisons. In the following section, taken from an interview conducted with two students at the same time, one student discusses why she took a photo of a cigarette advertisement:

Cristina: Everyone advertises like cigarettes. I noticed that cigarette ads and alcohol ads are always in the poorer neighborhoods. Like if I go up to Lincoln (*wealthy neighboring town*), I'm not going to see like, "Cigarettes: Newport and Pall Mall on sale." . . . Alcohol and all these cigarettes are advertised in bad neighborhoods. So like people are wanting kids to ruin their lives early.

WHY DO YOU THINK IT IS . . .

Cristina: Because they need kids to smoke cigarettes because they need like the money every year or they won't be in business.

BUT WHY NOT . . . WHY DON'T YOU THINK IT IS IN LINCOLN?

Elsa: Because it's a rich neighborhood.

Cristina: Because they're predominantly, rich, white neighborhoods. And they have louder voices, you know? Their voices are heard. When they see, like, a group of minorities, they're not gonna say anything.

In this last example, Cristina drew a comparison between her own neighborhood and a wealthier one adjacent to hers. This was a similar kind of comparison as that drawn by Pablo and Blanca. However, unlike Pablo and Blanca, who when pushed did not have their own judgments about why there were these differences, Cristina and Elsa drew an explanation rooted in their impressions of race and class inequities.

Interestingly, in both the comparative comments and the analytical comments we observed an appeal (sometimes implicit) to moral conceptions of justice and fairness. For example, Pablo, Blanca, and Cristina raised the same essential questions: Why are there some good and some bad neighborhoods? Why do some get resources and others not? Cristina asserted the injustice of a situation in which, by virtue of one's income or ethnicity, one does not have a voice.

We included these quotes to illustrate the range of analyses that the youth researchers employed in putting together their photo essays. It is important to point out that the purpose of these interviews was not to definitively assess these youth's levels of reasoning—not everyone was given the same probes or follow-ups, making it inappropriate to draw firm conclusions about differences within the group. Nevertheless, these exploratory interviews provide insight into the diverse ways that these youth reason about their community context, and also convey the passion with which some of them held these opinions.

Section 2: In what ways did young people's civic engagement embody of mixture of social criticism and constructive problem solving?

As discussed in the introduction, studies of youth citizenship suffer from a paucity of terms for describing the behaviors of young people who wish to address problems in their own communities. Young people's cynical statements about political arrangements or negative perceptions of one's neighborhood are liable to be interpreted as signs of alienation or disengagement. In some cases that interpretation would be accurate. However, in this study these critical perspectives were connected to sustained prosocial activities. In the following section we briefly describe the activities of the Community Youth Research project; we then focus on the City Council presentation as an instance of critical engagement.

The Community Youth Research project was connected to a larger youth development effort in West City, which was led by the West City Youth Network. This network was a collaboration of social service agencies, community members, and city officials. On a concrete level, the data and recommendations compiled by the youth researchers were included in grant applications for extended support services in West City. In a broader sense, the work of the CYRs provided a youth perspective for city leaders on what was needed to improve West City for youth.

The Community Research Project moved in three steps. Step one involved data collection. The CYRs split into three groups (survey, interview, and video), which they selected based on the research methods they felt would most effectively advance their goals. Their choices reflected their different views towards research. Those who chose surveys and interviews adopted a more traditional social science purpose—to gather data from a larger sample of youth about youth's experiences in West City. Those who chose video talked about wanting to tell a story about their own neighborhoods, wanting to

provide “proof” of the way things are where they live. It was less important to them to make generalizations about all youth in West City, but instead to provide evidence of their own experiences and living conditions in their neighborhoods.

After four to six weeks of data collection, the second step was to analyze the data and determine principle findings and recommendations. The participants worked in small groups to decide on their message for different audiences. Whereas the presentation to the school board focused primarily on education-related issues, the presentation to the City Council addressed broader issues in West City.

The third phase of the project was the presentations themselves. In this paper we focus specifically on the City Council presentation, because it was the most comprehensive and was most directly related to the youth’s neighborhood experiences and perceptions.

The City Council presentation offered youth their first opportunity to interact in a public forum with West City decision-makers in their new roles as researchers and youth advocates. Drawing from their survey and interview data, youth suggested that there was a need for a "Friendlier Climate," "Activities and Places for Youth," and changes in the "City Infrastructure and Climate". (Evidence for this section is drawn from 5.14.01 field notes and videotaped recording of the City Council meeting). “Friendlier Climate” meant that the city should have more opportunities for youth to reduce violence and gangs, and more support for kids who want to be involved in the community to make more positive changes for youth. In support of this recommendation, Pablo cited the finding that while youth in general reported liking their neighborhoods (67%), youth on the east side of the City reported having more gangs than youth from other parts of the city. The group’s

second recommendation—that there be more youth centers “in our own neighborhoods”—was supported by evidence that the one recreation center, which was popular among some of the youth, was inaccessible because of its location in the west side of town and its prohibitive entry fee (\$3). Pablo, said,

The ones that live near like the [rec center] area [*on the west side*]...do have areas to hang out and go have fun, but the ones that live more towards [*the east side*]...don't really have anything fun to do in their areas.

And in terms of city infrastructure, they recommended cheaper and more frequent public transportation for youth, especially for those living in a section of the east side that was isolated from the rest of West City by a freeway. The CYRs specifically recommended a pedestrian ramp for people living in a part of the town where the mobile home communities were located. To support this point the CYRs shared survey data showing that 34% of the residents of this neighborhood said they had a “hard time with transportation”, in contrast to an average of 13% for residents of other neighborhoods. Because two of the youth were from this area, they were able to combine the survey finding with a personal explanation about the difficulties posed by the freeway. The connection between youth’s own experience of their neighborhoods and their recommendations was further underlined by Cristina, in response to a question from the City Council about the purpose of the video:

The purpose of our video was to give a visual perspective of how [West] City really is, because I mean, if you live in one part of [West City], you don't know, really, how it is. So we wanted to take you to our homes, and our neighborhoods, to let people see how...how things really are (Video record, 5/14/01).

The meeting concluded with mutual affirmations to begin working together. Members of the council expressed enthusiasm for continuing to work with the youth, whether by inviting them to be on specific committees or by requesting their data for

further study. The City Manager was especially interested in getting the neighborhood level data.

While the subsequent interactions between adults and youth presenters were in part mere formalities (few politicians would dare to *not* show support for these youth), they still indicate the sense of novelty that the experience appeared to feel like for the participants. One of the CYRs, Blanca, who is from West City's east side, initiated this exchange:

Blanca: Um, I just want to say thank you on the part of all the youth researchers, and for the ones who weren't here today, I just want to say that finally, it was finally the time that we had to work on something, because usually all the adults make the decisions for the youth and they never hear us, so thanks for (*indecipherable*) us.

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

Blanca: Thank you.

At the end of the presentation, during a break, several of the city leaders spoke individually with some of the presenters. For example, the City Manager spoke with a small cluster of the youth, inviting them to attend a meeting with city department heads to discuss the data. Also, Blanca later reported that one of the other city council members approached her to say that he grew up in the same neighborhood, that he still had relatives there, two of whom had been shot, and he knew what it was like.

The following day, five of the presenters reflected on what the experience had been like. When asked to write down how they felt about the response from City Council members, their reflections were positive. Here are two representative examples:

“I thought they were very interested in our ideas, which made me more comfortable”.

“I felt happy because I think they did hear us and I think they’re really going to help us because...we are kids”.

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

Elsa: It’s not going to be like no Disney ending . . .

I SEE.

Cristina: Yeah, our voices are never important, that’s what she’s trying to say.

...YOU JUST SAID IT’S NOT GONNA BE LIKE A DISNEY ENDING SO YOU’RE BASICALLY SAYING YOU DON’T THINK THAT...YOU ALONE CAN...MAKE HAPPEN WHAT YOU WANT TO SEE HAPPEN?

Elsa: Yeah, don’t be thinking about no . . . those little posters, oh, kids have a voice, oh, fight for your rights. That’s not even true. Seriously, they ain’t going to listen to you. Unless like the people that have a good heart. But most people that work in those kind of places, they’re always busy, they don’t really care about anything. They probably don’t even care . . .(2.27.01)

Cristina and Elsa’s early skepticism was not representative of everyone in the group. However, their statements, and the way their views changed later, reflects the impact of the City Council presentation on their own changing sense of civic engagement. Over the course of the project, the youth researchers became more knowledgeable about their community and gained opportunities to participate in

meaningful ways. By being able to participate in these ways, youth were able to direct their critical perspectives towards constructive ends.

In this section of our analysis we do not go in depth into the self-reflections of the youth participants at the end of the project. We have not sought to measure or analyze their different levels of engagement, and how these may have changed over the course of the year. Such analyses are beyond the scope of this paper. Instead, in this section we have sought to show, through describing their behavior, that these young people were engaged in making their city a better place. And, most importantly, their efforts to improve West City were intimately connected to their social criticisms that they expressed in their photo collages and the findings from their research.

Discussion

In this paper we asked the following questions:

- How do the youth participants in the Community Youth Research project interpret and describe their own surroundings?
- In what ways did their engagement embody of mixture of social criticism *and* constructive problem solving?

In response to the first question, the data showed that the youth participants identified a range of problems in their neighborhoods. For the most part these problems were associated with lower-income neighborhoods. However, there were exceptions to this trend. Young people made sense of these problems in different ways: while some merely took note of them, others made comparisons between different neighborhoods or parts of West City. Still others noticed these differences and offered explanations for them in terms of ethnic and socioeconomic inequities.

In response to the second question, the data showed that the young people's engagement embodied a mixture of social criticism and constructive problem solving. The youth researchers articulated critical positions towards socioeconomic arrangements in West City, such as the lack of resources on the east side of the city. They recommended several changes, including improved public transportation for certain neighborhoods, more safe and fun things to do, and a safer climate free of gangs and violence.

Before discussing the different implications of this study, it is important to acknowledge its limitations. One limitation pertains to the selective sample of young people who were accepted to the project. While their motivations varied—some were attracted to the stipends, others to the community goals, and still others for something productive to do—the very fact of their joining distinguishes them from their peers. Furthermore, because of the minimum C grade requirement set by the school, this group was a slightly more academically successful sub-group than the wider population of the applicant pool.⁷ For this reason this paper does not seek generalize to all youth, but instead to a sub-set who already have some inclination towards joining a community-service project.

Nevertheless, the results from this exploratory study are significant for a few reasons: First, they shed light on the complex ways that young people interpret and make sense of their local social and political surroundings, which past research about the civic attitudes of urban youth has sometimes overlooked. Second, they show that young

⁷ This is not to say that the participants were all model honor roll students without behavior problems. Over the course of the year several struggled to maintain grades and exhibited a range of behavioral difficulties in the school. One student was on probation with the juvenile justice system. In other words, the sample was neither comprised of the “straight-A” student nor the student with consistent disciplinary problems.

people can have negative perceptions of their surroundings and still demonstrate civic engagement. Third, from an educational perspective, the findings suggest that participatory youth research is a promising strategy for promoting skills and dispositions of citizenship.

In regards to the first point, this study shows that young people interpret and make sense of socioeconomic realities in diverse and unpredictable ways, which points to an important direction for research on adolescent civic engagement. While several researchers have carefully documented the influence of adverse socioeconomic conditions on urban youth (Atkins & Ford, 2002; O'Donoghue, 2001), we know less about how urban youth explain or reason about these conditions (Gardner & McLoyd, 2001). By talking to the youth researchers about their communities, we learned some unexpected lessons about their perceptions of social context. For example, even in the most distressed neighborhoods, youth identified positive resources and opportunities. And, even in affluent, resource-rich neighborhoods, youth wanted more opportunities for fun, affordable things to do. Overall, the young people critically assessed their social context with varying levels of complexity.

These findings are significant for a second reason: they show that young people can demonstrate civic engagement while also having negative perceptions of their surroundings. With some exceptions, such as Yates and Youniss' (1996) discussion of African-American youth who encountered problems of homelessness through their volunteer work at a shelter, there are few empirical studies that discuss youth civic engagement as a complex blend of social criticism with constructive problem-solving. As mentioned in the introduction, quantitative attempts to index youth political attitudes

typically report alienation, low-self efficacy, or cynicism among working class or minority youth. Therefore it interested us when we began to hear critical voices among the youth researchers, especially among those living in low-income neighborhoods, as they raised concerns about inequities, racism, and lack of safe and productive opportunities for youth. Taken alone, the comments might have confirmed the general assumption about Latino and working class youth's negative political attitudes and low level of engagement. But their comments were part of a larger project "to make West City better for youth". This required a different interpretation: these young people were critically engaged, which means that they demonstrated critical awareness of their surroundings and at the same time were constructively engaged in finding solutions to the problems they identified. The word critical here has dual meanings. On one hand it can refer to negative perceptions of one's environment; on the other hand it can refer to an awareness of how one's environment is influenced by larger social structures and institutions. As interviews with the youth participants showed, some youth's criticisms were more like the former, while others were more representative of the latter.

One possible inference from this study is that the latter form of critical engagement is adaptive for youth living in certain circumstances. In other words, for youth from low-income families, or for youth of color in general, it may be that the capacity to think critically about social and political arrangements is a healthy part of adolescent development. Especially in a society where an ideology of individual achievement and "the level playing field" is prevalent (Crocker, Major, & Steele, 1998), critical awareness of discrimination or structural inequalities would provide teenagers with a more complex perspective on why some people succeed and other people fail.

This perspective would help prepare them for certain challenges they could face in their own lives, and could conceivably help them develop a group consciousness that would counter the negative effects of social stigma (Crocker, Major, & Steele, 1998).

On the other hand, some researchers have found that certain kinds of critical awareness are not associated with positive outcomes for youth. For example, Gardner and McLoyd (2001) report that low-income African-American adolescents who endorse structuralist explanations of the causes of poverty report lower confidence in the value of education and report lower effort in school than those who endorse individualist explanations. In other words, those students in the study who believed there was a level playing field were more likely to see education as useful and try harder in school.

This question about the developmentally adaptive features of critical awareness is not resolved by the results of this study, which is limited to a small, self-selected population, and for which we did not gather data on school outcomes. However, it provides exploratory evidence in support of the idea that critical perspectives take on special meaning when combined with opportunities to act on those perspectives. Presumably, critical awareness, if left alone, could just as easily lead to apathy as it could lead to empowerment. However, when young people have opportunities to influence their world, rather than merely be passive objects of it, critical awareness can take a productive direction.

Finally, this study suggests that participatory research is a promising educational strategy for promoting skills and dispositions of citizenship. Through its focus on skills of data gathering, collaboration, public speaking, problem-solving, and civic participation, this type of program develops competencies associated with “public work”

(Boyte, 1991). Unlike typical service programs, participatory youth research asks youth to work together to study about and act on concerns that affect their own communities. It offers youth a chance to deal with problems in a creative, constructive manner, and to get first hand experiences in the workings of a local democracy where they are treated as thoughtful resources rather than as needy clients. Such an approach may have particular resonance for youth who, by virtue of their ethnicity or socioeconomic status (or both), brush up against inequities or discrimination in their everyday lives. Further research would profit from comparisons between community service and public work to see the different outcomes for youth who are involved.

In conclusion, this paper has described the activities of a group of young people in an after school program whose goal was to make their city better for youth. The program provided structured opportunities for young people to become engaged, active citizens through doing research and advocating based on their findings. We discussed how young people interpreted their surroundings and how these interpretations were connected to their civic engagement. The field of youth development and citizenship would benefit from further studies that examine the ways young people make sense of their social and political context, and the possibly adaptive features of critical engagement.

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