Enhanced Participation: Creating Opportunities for Youth Leadership Development

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The term "leadership" appears frequently in the language and literature of youth development, and for many after-school programs it is one of many expected developmental outcomes for youth. What characterizes youth leadership development? What do youth participants identify as its key elements? Turning to youth who have been identified as leaders, this article looks at what they have to say about their own experience as emerging leaders.

Working in the youth development field, I saw many examples of participation in after-school programs that involved more than merely showing up, and I began to think about youth development and leadership in terms of enhanced participation. Through interviews, focus groups, and one in-depth arts and research project, youth and alumni from a community-based organization in New York City shared their ideas about leadership development, which are supported by a body of literature about youth development. These young leaders were in high school or college or were out of school altogether. For many, their status as older youth allowed them some perspective on their experience as emerging leaders. One older alumna could compare her current views on leadership development to those she had held several years before. As I listened to her and the others, a number of questions arose for me regarding the implications of leadership for youth in community-based settings:

- What is the potential and what are the challenges for community-based youth organizations in fostering and sustaining youth leadership development?
- What experiences do youth have in the process of emergent leadership development? What can the adults around them learn from those experiences?

Research Notes

The research for this essay was conducted at a community-based organization in New York City ("El Centro")[1], where I worked from 2005 through 2013. El Centro is rooted in the people, culture, and issues of the mostly Latino neighborhood in which it is embedded. Its mission is to develop leadership in a context of community development and social justice.

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[1] The names of all organizations and individuals used in this essay have been changed. Many of those interviewed chose their own pseudonyms.

Youth Development and Youth Leadership Development

For many organizations, development is a goal that is part of a range of expected outcomes[2] for youth participants. The Search Institute's "40 developmental assets" model provides youth development practitioners with a common language and is divided into internal and external assets and subcategories such as "support," "empowerment," "boundaries and expectations," "constructive use of time," "commitment to learning," "positive values," "social competencies," and "positive identity" (2007). Often, youth development is often framed as growth on a personal level, as young people move "further along on the spectrum from where they started" (J. McGoughlin, director of Youth Programs at the Center for Alternative Sentencing and Employment Services, personal communication, November 5th, 2010). For many youth leaders, alumni, and mentors, the aim of youth leadership development is connected to the aims of youth development. If development is an overall goal in working with youth, so that every young adult experiences personal growth and change, then leadership can be understood as the ultimate goal of that development.

Beyond Showing Up—Enhanced Participation in Leadership Development

Out-of-school organizations are uniquely positioned to cultivate leadership development among their participants because their programs can offer opportunities for enhanced participation, a concept that refers to the deep involvement that youth can experience in programs like El Centro. In their own words, the youth I spoke with described it as participation involving more than "just showing up." This can take different forms and will be discussed further below. Common elements include participation that

- develops voice and identity;
- allows for development of relationships with peers and adult mentors;
- provides opportunities for decision-making and problem-solving; and
- encourages involvement in real-world settings and connection to community.

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[2] In the *Afterschool Youth Outcomes Inventory*, the Partnership for After School Education (PASE) published a set of expected outcomes for out-of-school youth programs. Included in the "Social and Emotional Outcomes Inventory" section are outcomes such as "improved communication skills," indicated by both "effective expression of thoughts and feelings" and "increased assertiveness in social context" (PASE, 2013, p. 8). Another expected outcome is "increased leadership and civic engagement," indicated by both "increased ability and interest to lead others or activities" and "increased awareness of issues that impact life and community" (2013, p. 10). In "Confronting 'The Big Lie': The Need to Reframe Expectations of After-School Programs," Halpern, a staunch advocate for such programs, makes the case that their appropriate role is to provide opportunities for youth to grow in developmental tasks in such areas as "creativity, aesthetic sense, self-expression, interpersonal skill, sense of agency and voice, identification with home and community culture, individuality and relatedness, compassion, and physical vitality" (2006, p. 112).

When the youth who are discussed in this essay reflected on being deeply involved and having ownership over their experiences, they began to talk about themselves in terms of leadership.

At organizations like El Centro, becoming a leader is embedded in a context of community and social development. This idea is not unique. In Experience and Education, Dewey wrote about education that provides "continuity" to a wider community (1938). While youth development can focus on individuals, the larger goal of youth leadership development at organizations like El Centro is preparing young people to tackle real-world problems and create change in their communities. At El Centro, many youth characterized their leadership development in terms of community activism, referring to marches, rallies, political hearings, and campaigns in which they had taken leadership roles. Many spoke of participating not only in activities organized by adults, but also in initiatives based on issues that they and their peers had identified.

Developing Leadership Through the Arts

For many youth at El Centro, the arts are an entryway to leadership development. They made the case that participation in the arts can lead to personal and social transformation when it provides opportunities for the exercise of one's voice, creativity, original thought, imagination, and power. They illustrated that through high-quality and high-engagement experiences in the arts, they could develop their voices and identities, connect their own experiences to those of others, imagine realities beyond what they saw before them, and ultimately find opportunities for leadership.[3]
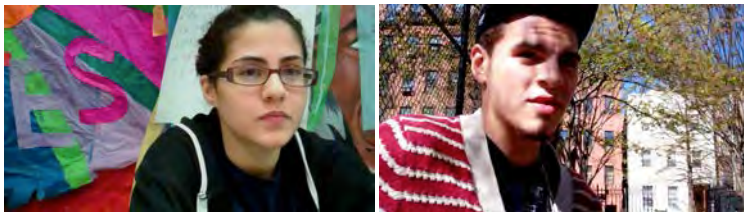
Alicia and Ben in the winter of 2012

I interviewed Alicia and Ben, two recent alumni of El Centro, together in the fall of 2009 and separately in the winter of 2012. The arts provided solid ground for both of them to develop a positive self-image and their identity as leaders in a program where they had the freedom to do so and where adults had high expectations of them. Both Ben and Alicia had returned in different capacities to the organization, but—like many of the youth I observed at El Centro—essentially neither of them ever really left it. Both started a youth dance crew when they were members and have continued with the group. Alicia became a paid staff member in a program at El Centro that she attended when she was younger. She and Ben continue to be members of arts ensembles that put on productions at the organization, and both

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[3] Shernoff is an excellent resource for looking at youth experiences in terms of participation; see "Youth Engagement in After-School Programs: A Perspective from Experience Sampling," which describes research on middle school participants' experiences in after-school programs (2008).

describe their leadership development as unfolding hand-in-hand with their development in the arts. Alicia commented, "When it comes to me, El Centro basically started it all. I came when I was six, that's when I started with the arts. As I got older, that's when I started learning about leadership."

Thriving as a Path to Leadership

In my interview with Alicia and Ben in 2009, Ben described his experience with theater. He was working intently with the drama instructor, ultimately writing and performing a one-man play. In 2012 he described several experiences that contributed to his ability to thrive in the arts. The concept of thriving, especially as it relates to success in school, is frequently discussed in literature about youth development (Benson & Scales, 2009). Through the arts, youth leaders at El Centro made clear connections between being able both to thrive in areas of their own choosing and to find opportunities for leadership in them. In the course of a year, Ben was cast as the lead in El Centro's annual professional production in celebration of Three Kings Day, won a citywide championship with his dance crew, traveled to South America to present his work in dance with a group from El Centro, and wrote, directed, and starred in a play about the death of his uncle in the World Trade Center attack on September 11, 2001. In each of these experiences, Ben positioned himself (intentionally or not) in a leadership role. In organizing and mentoring younger members of his dance crew, galvanizing his peers into performing in his play and then coaching and directing them in it, being a role model to his peers and younger performers in the Three Kings Day celebration, and representing youth and community in a delegation to South America, Ben was identified as a leader by adults and his peers, and ultimately by himself.

Opportunities and Outcomes of Enhanced Participation

What does it take for someone like Ben to develop into leadership roles? This next section looks at the conditions that enable such a trajectory. In the literature and databases of out-of-school programs, youth are often referred to as participants. This status is easily achieved; youth can sign up for a program or be signed up for one and then simply show up. But they may also have opportunities for enhanced participation, where they invest in and have power over their development. The youth I interviewed referred to many outcomes of enhanced participation that contributed to their leadership development, including experiences of speaking up, voicing opinions, and feeling that they are or have become "outspoken." They also pointed to opportunities for enhanced participation in public speaking and facilitation of workshops and presentations and speak of having a choice in activities and programs and power in decision-making and problem solving and over their experience in general.

Opportunities for enhanced participation are facilitated by adults who work with youth. Outcomes of enhanced participation are recognized by youth and adults as the results of those opportunities. Opportunities for and outcomes of enhanced participation that contribute to leadership

development both depend on effective youth-adult partnerships (Petrokubi & Zeldin, 2006)—relationships between youth and adults where power is shared (Eames-Sheavly, 2007).

For many of these youth at El Centro, becoming a leader entailed losing some of the self-consciousness associated with putting themselves "out there." Several I spoke with described moments when they stopped worrying about what their peers and adults thought of them. They referred to occasions when they were faced with deciding whether to speak up in the midst of a conflict and ultimately did so because of a feeling that, as one said, "If I don't do this, no one else will." This perception is exemplified in Anastasia's comment:
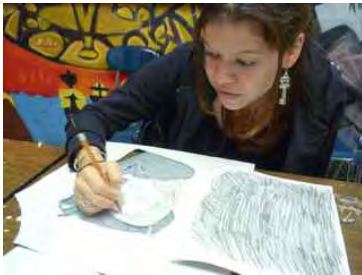
Anastasia in the art class, 2010

After I started participating more and speaking more, that's where everything started happening a little more. It's okay to be the quiet person, but if you're not really in there, and you're just in your own world, and not really expressing yourself, also to get ideas—but sharing ideas, you're kind of in a closed block. You're blocking yourself from a lot of things at the same time.

Anastasia is another recent alum of El Centro who became part of its internship program.[4] She has not always been recognized as a leader, and she has had a long journey in identifying herself as one. She joined El Centro's after-school program as a freshman in high school. She was quiet and kept to herself, talking only to her small group of friends and finding an outlet in visual art. During high school, she became recognized for her artistic skill and the contributions she made through her visual art. More recently, she had become increasingly recognized for her leadership capacity, emerging as a strong voice in group discussions and decision making, respected as a counselor among her peers, relied upon by adults to inspire other youth and accomplish the tasks she sets out to do, and participating avidly in visual arts opportunities both within and outside of the organization. How did Anastasia transform from a quiet observer into an active initiator? What conditions enabled her to develop as a leader?

El Centro Interns at school closings rally and hearing, winter 2012

[4] El Centro interns are high school, college, and out-of-school youth who take leadership roles in various activities and community-organizing intitiatives.

And what can her perspective on her personal trajectory tell us about the nature of youth leadership development? While her journey is unique, it has similarities and connections to the stories shared by a number of youth leaders. "I can't keep waiting and depending on somebody else to do something. Sometimes you're just gonna have to step in and do something yourself," Anastasia said; Alicia stated, "My opinion does matter. That's what I learned here. And I would think, if my opinion matters here, it matters anywhere."

Many youth described coming into leadership reluctantly. Ben commented:

> Everybody sees me as some type of a leader. I find it hard to believe! People look at me and say Ben…they put me on such a high pedestal, I'm not gonna say I don't understand why, I can see, but I don't think it's such a big deal. As far as [my dance crew]…there's no established leader…But for some reason, when it comes to decision making, it always comes down to me and Alicia. Everybody relies on me and Alicia… It's crazy…I'm like, we're a group, we're a family, we're supposed to make decisions together. But they feel like when they're stuck, they have to rely on me and Alicia. Inside it feels good, but at the same time, I want them to progress as leaders as well. That's why with some situations that come up, I try to ask them what they would do. And I try to get their opinion and I try to get them to lead, instead of just having me and Alicia. If they just rely on me and Alicia, they're not going to learn for themselves.

Ben's recognition of the responsibility that comes along with leadership is significant. His desire to foster leadership in his dance crew members was shared by many emerging youth leaders. Mulan, another intern at El Centro, also reflected on her leadership development:

> El Centro has helped me be more expressive…As a leader, you need to be able to express yourself. We do a lot of public speaking…That was a real point when I felt growth. I don't know if that is leadership? But I know it was definite growth…[M]y mentor, she put me through a lot of tough situations…I would say, "I don't want to do that, I don't want to speak, get someone else who likes to talk." Because of that, I taught myself, you gotta do it. Now I'm not afraid to talk in public, I don't hold back when I feel like I need to say something.

Mulan's recognition of her own growth and development is reminiscent of other youths' reflections. For the entire group of interns, using their voices, especially in public speaking, has been a core indicator of leadership development.

Working on issues with real-world implications is another powerful experience for youth. Alicia referred to a campaign against a nuclear waste site that posed a severe threat to the community. Alicia recalled going to rallies as youth and said, "[W]e spoke from our experience." Asked whether they were received differently because they were young, Alicia responded, "Yes, I think we made

more of a statement. It's not only the adults showing concern, it's also the kids. That should say something." In describing her dance crew's involvement in a citywide competition, Alicia talked about connecting the arts to issues that affect people personally. The crew started out with a focus on dance but ultimately saw the possibility of using dance to bring attention to gang violence an issue that affected everyone in the crew and many young people in the community:

> If it doesn't affect you personally, you're not really going to strive to make [it] happen. We all felt like we needed to discuss what was going on around us, what we feel like is a big issue. Because if we all want to change it then, in agreement we can make it work. People will see that we really want to change this. And seeing how serious we are, they will be serious as well, and support us.

Imagining a different world is not always enough. For Alicia's crew, embodying the conflicts and issues they were addressing and expressing those images in dance, and connecting to an audience were important steps in taking a lead in making change in their community.

Peer Support and Safe Space to Develop as a Leader

How do youth get to the point of being able to use their voices and make important decisions? Having a safe space to participate fully, express one's ideas, and speak freely is big part of leadership development. Anastasia described how peer support helped her become more outspoken:

> When you start to participate, start talking about things, and start helping out, start doing a lot of other stuff, you're getting your ideas out there but at the same time, you're getting new ones from other people...When you do that you get to know other people, you get support from people. And this is how a big circle of trust or friendship [is formed].

Rose, an alumna of El Centro and a site director in the organization at the time of my study, described the experience of having a safe space when she was a youth as something that occurred on a regular basis, which created a unique culture for emerging leaders:

Rose in the spring of 2012

And before you know it, we're having a safe space...So much came out of those meetings. People would cry, half of those people I'm still friends with because of the relationships and the openness that we had with each other, because we had space for that. We always did activities to have compassion for each other. We had all of those experiences every day. It all helped me figure out what I wanted to bring to the programs when I came back to El Centro.
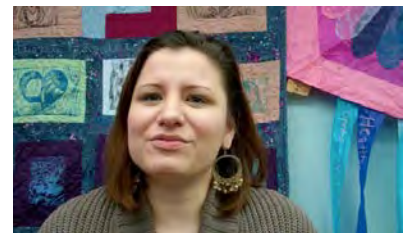
In a focus group conducted with El Centro interns, Adam, a new intern but a longtime El Centro member, emphasized the peer support characteristic of the group:

> One thing I like about being a leader in a group is that we all support each other. You see Zero is always trying to be in the background, but one day we are going to push her up there! Go speak Zero! It's gonna happen! It happens to all of us. One thing a leader should do is encourage other leaders to lead.

Montgomery, in his second year as an intern, was hesitant to label himself as a leader. But while speaking in the focus group, he identified aspects of his leadership training that he had already used in the dance crew he was in with Alicia and Ben:

> In a way, El Centro supplies me with these...tools to keep my crew together. We use the same sort of techniques that interns do. Like in my crew, everyone's a leader. But there's no one set leader. Everyone has an opinion and we give them that chance to voice it, the same way we do in the interns group...Being a part of the interns group is slowly helping me develop my skills as far as becoming a leader. I don't feel like a leader sitting here, but I guess I am in my own little way.

It was often difficult for these youth leaders to describe themselves in those terms. And in many ways, they talked around that idea—identifying moments when other people looked to them as leaders (Ben), identifying moments when they felt challenged and moved outside their comfort zone to voice their opinions (Mulan and Anastasia), and identifying moments when they used those leadership skills in other contexts (Montgomery, Alicia, and Ben).
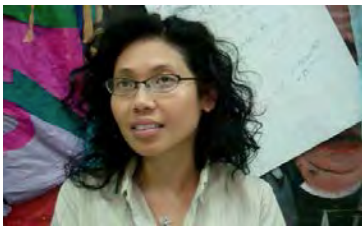
Magdalena in the spring of 2012

Magdalena, the director of El Centro's internship program, pointed out that many in it do not readily see themselves as leaders:

A lot of them, they don't identify themselves as leaders, they haven't even taken an opportunity to reflect that, "Oh, I've had this growth from when I used to be like this," until someone else points it out to them.

When interns exemplified leadership, Magdalena would explicitly call their attention to it. While many were hesitant to call themselves leaders, they could nonetheless clearly identify and talk about times when they spoke up, used their voices, expressed their opinions, facilitated a program, and stepped up when it was uncomfortable to do so—all elements of enhanced participation that lead to youth leadership development. Magdalena's point that it often takes someone else to point out one's leadership development is consistent with the reflections of many youth.

The Nudge Factor: Mentoring Relationships as Opportunities for Enhanced Participation

They need a BIG imagination. They need to have high self-esteem, and put their mind to it, because if they don't—see, El Centro just gave us that push. And it brought us there. But people that don't have programs like this, it's hard…they need that extra push. (Ben)

A recurring theme expressed by youth at El Centro (which is also supported in much of the literature about youth development) was the impact of relationships with caring adult mentors. The words the youth used in speaking of the adults' actions—like "push," "nudge," "support," and "challenge"—all indicate the importance of mentoring in establishing and upholding expectations. At organizations like El Centro, mentoring relationships are developed intentionally by adult staff members and sought out by youth. In interviews with youth, alumni, and mentors, the idea of growing as a leader with the support and encouragement of a mentor emerged as quite significant. Several youth described experiences of taking on mentoring roles as a part of becoming a leader, and indicated that mentoring itself was strong evidence of leadership. Anastasia commented:

As a leader you have to have an open mind about things. Sometimes you have to sit there and listen. Sometimes it's OK to let other people make their mistakes. Because by being a leader you have to let them learn to make their mistakes, but also, how to fix them. I think that is a big part of being a leader, and for someone to teach someone else how to be their own leader. A leader is not just about being a leader for everyone, but also helping others to be their own leaders, and to figure their own steps.

Alicia described the mentoring relationship she started to develop with the young people she worked with this way:

> They have a little [dance] crew, and…they were going through some problems. They asked me how [my crew] does it, and I said that "You guys are picking a person who is in charge," Even when someone steps up to do certain things, we all come to an agreement. I want to be there for them, because I want to see their group progress. They were talking about quitting, and I said, "Together you are a family, and you guys shouldn't quit on each other."

Essentially, Alicia was coaching this next group of leaders in the skills of collective leadership. In Alicia's experience, leadership entailed mentoring leadership in others, listening, and synthesizing a community's desires.

Many youth commented that they felt cared for and supported by adult mentors. Alicia noted that being at El Centro felt like being in a family and contrasted that with her experience in school, saying, "In school, teachers are teachers, you can have a relationship with some of them…when you come to El Centro, everybody knows everybody [and] [e]verybody is looking out for

everybody." In *The Challenge to Care in Schools: An Alternative Approach to Education,* Noddings describes the importance of such relationships: "At every stage we need to be cared for in the sense that we need to be understood, received, respected, recognized" (2005, Page xi). She also writes about caring being "relational" and "mutual" (2005).

The youth also acknowledged that they felt accountable to their adult mentors. For Rose, developing strong relationships with adult mentors when she was a young person at El Centro was an arduous process. It took a lot of positive reinforcement for her to see leadership qualities in herself.

> [Y]ou don't know it when you're in it. I didn't think, "I'm a leader." If you asked my mentor, she would agree. One day, all the young people were complaining about something, but they were only complaining to me. I was upset because then I would be the only one to say something, and I would get into trouble. I told my mentor, and someone else pulled me to the side and said, "You know, you have leadership skills. You are a leader here." I said, "I don't want to be the leader, I didn't ask to be a leader!" They just told me, "Rose, you might not think you are a leader but you are. You can either use that power to do something good, to promote justice, or use it to persuade negativity." That stuck with me after that. I guess leadership and people looking up to you is not your choice. And sometimes you have to embrace that responsibility. From then on I looked at things differently. When my peers did complain to me, I tried to figure out with them how we could voice our concerns and negotiate certain things. So when growing up, people may tell you "You are a leader," but you really won't understand what that means until you go through your own experience.

Magdalena emphasized that part of the role of mentoring in leadership and in all youth development is providing opportunities for reflection and assessment:

> If there are different levels of leadership, then how far someone gets and having the awareness of it—"I'm emerging into something"—knowing that versus not knowing that, will either [encourage] you, or you'll resist…I think unless the leadership is guided and there are opportunities to assess and reflect, like, "Oh I did that, or how could I do that better? I didn't do that so great. That's a weakness, how do I work on that?" it doesn't allow the enhancement to be as enhanced as it could be in regards to their participation as a leader or a bystander.

Putting Enhanced Participation into Practice

How can after-school educators provide opportunities for enhanced participation? The following is an account of a project that engaged young people not only in the creation of art and expression of their voices, but also in the ongoing reflection and study of the work they were doing and the effect it was having on themselves and others. In the fall of 2010, curious about young people's

perspectives on their experience of creating art, I brought the idea of a participatory action research[5] project to high school students in the visual art class at El Centro. I was particularly interested in how youth saw themselves developing as leaders (something that the adults around them recognized and aimed for) and as the creators of art for social change (another goal of the organization).

The participatory character of the project emerged naturally from a class discussion. Andre, one of the members of the visual art class, mentioned that the video class had worked on a project about human rights and asked, "Can we make art about human rights?" What follows is a paraphrased account of the discussion that ensued:

> Andre: We should do something like that in here.
> Jessenia: You're trying to make this like social studies! We're not in school!
> Anastasia: That sounds like history.

I then asked the group why they thought we had started the semester by making maps about our lives. If this was an art class, why didn't we just start by drawing?
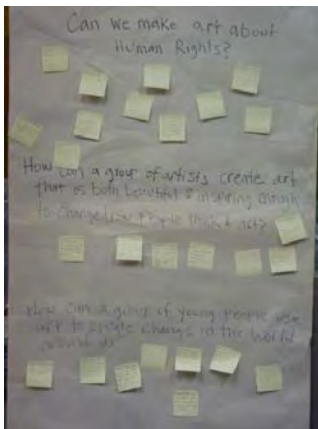
Post-it note Inquiry Wall, fall 2010

> Anastasia: So we can learn from others' experiences and understand our own better.
> Clara: So El Centro is not just about making pretty art.
> Jessenia: It's about social art.
> Clara: Can we do both?

By the end of the class, we had generated three questions and written them on a large piece of paper on the wall:

1. Can we make art about human rights?
2. How can a group of artists create art that is both beautiful and inspiring enough to change how people think and act?
3. How can a group of young people use art to create change in the world around us?
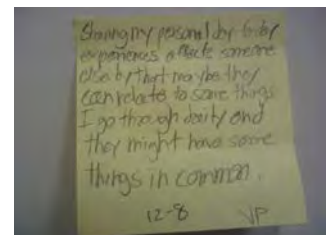
Post-it note response to question # 2, fall 2010

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[5] Social psychologist Orlando Fals-Borda was one of the creators of participatory action research (PAR). He and others used PAR as an "alternative paradigm" to classic subject-object research (Fals-Borda, 1987). They aimed to turn the power imbalance of subject-object research on its head in their quest for social justice and transformation. PAR relates directly to the principles of the Education for Liberation Network and the work of Paulo Freire, whose "see, analyze, act" methodology was a cornerstone of Catholic liberation theology in Brazil in the 1960s (Freire, 1970). The work of Augusto Boal (who built upon Freire's work) and of Luis Moll is also connected to PAR (see Boal, 1979 and Moll, 2010).

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As the semester continued, students added Post-It notes with responses to these questions to this ongoing "inquiry wall," which reflected significant changes in the participants' thinking. The wall served as a group journal, with ideas developing for everyone to see.

Individuals who initially answered "no" to "Can we make art about human rights?" later described how their answer changed to "yes." They pointed to changes in their responses on other occasions throughout the semester and explained how various experiences had altered their thinking. From October to December, members of the art class visited museums, art galleries, and community murals around New York City to see examples of art that inspired social change. They also created their own artwork with that same goal. Providing support for ongoing reflection, engagement in posing and answering questions, and discussions among the class members—all part of the PAR process—is one model for involving youth in enhanced participation in an arts class.

Starting with Self, Connecting to Others

One of the most salient ideas that emerged from the youths' research was that to inspire change, they had to create artwork that people would relate to. The identification process started with youth in the class making art that told stories about their everyday lives. Sharing "what they went through" every day, members created works of art that examined their own lives and made connections to each other. They highlighted this as a critical step in creating transformative work. Aesthetics educator Greene writes that finding meaning in artwork is a collaboration between artist and audience that creates a personal and shared experience (2001). Essentially, she argues, we can understand our own experience better by learning and understanding the experiences of others.

Members of the art class at El Centro, fall 2010.

In "Mobilizing Culture, Language, and Educational Practices: Fulfilling the Promises of Mendez and Brown," Moll refers to "funds of knowledge," a concept with pertinent connections to sharing one's life experience (2010). He describes the "mobility of knowledge" acquired informally at home and in neighborhoods, through families, language, and culture and characterizes these "funds" not as liabilities but as assets that are part of the makeup of the whole individual. The youth's engagement in participatory action research revealed similar funds of knowledge. Responses to the questions that the class had generated at the beginning of the study included "We can use art to create inspirations, emotions, expressions that people can see and feel and want to be the reason of change and support it," "They can draw what they see going on in the world around them," "Create from your heart. Draw about things that are really important to you and that you yourself want to see changed," and "It starts with the message that you are trying to send into the world. If the message is powerful enough, people will listen." The youth increasingly referred to the use of their voices as the project continued.
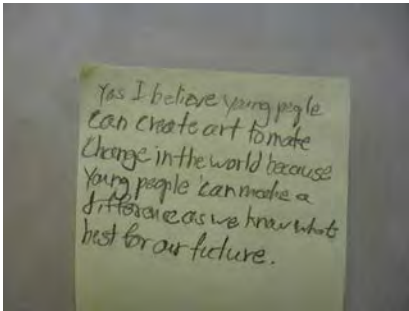
Post-it note response to question # 1, fall 2010

In "Curriculum as Window and Mirror," Style describes students becoming windows and mirrors to each other—sharing and understanding personal experiences as well as identifying with what is shared, as the youth in the visual art class did. "If the student is understood as occupying a dwelling of self," she writes, "education needs to enable the student to look through window frames in order to see the realities of others and into mirrors in order to see her/his own reality reflected" (Style, 1996, Page 35).

In "Critique: Where Art Meets Assessment," an article about a youth audio documentary program that used in-depth, youth-led assessment processes, Soep discusses the importance of youth having control of their experience and describes the "commitment to creating conditions that allow students to serve as producers and judges of their own development" (2005, page 40). She underscores the significance of youth taking part not only in the creation of work but also in analyzing the impact of the experience on themselves personally, as a community, and as a society at large (2005).

In this inquiry project, it was critical to engage youth not only in creating art but also in research and reflection. Both aspects contributed to powerful revelations about youth leadership development. As artists, authors of a study, and the ones who pose the research questions, young people are put in decision-making and problem-solving positions. In "From Voice to Agency: Guiding Principles for Participatory Action Research with Youth," Rodriguez and Brown address the significance of providing youth with opportunities to participate in action research: "[T]he realities of their lives were used as bases from which to investigate and build more complex theories about their own and others' schooling experiences" (2009, page 26). The authors also write that the youth participants began to see "their own experiences as worthy of serious investigation and their knowledge as legitimate" (Rodriguez and Brown, 2009, page 26).

Artwork created by youth in the visual art class, fall 2010.

Conclusion

What a simple and powerful idea: to work with youth toward the notion that their experiences are "worthy of serious investigation" and that "their knowledge is legitimate." In essence, that is what providing opportunities for enhanced participation means. Out-of-school organizations cannot create youth leaders, but they can create spaces and opportunities for youth to come into their own power and potential.

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