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## **Agents of Change: Youth Development & Social Justice Activism**

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AGENTS OF CHANGE:  
YOUTH DEVELOPMENT & SOCIAL JUSTICE ACTIVISM

By

RACHAEL LEE FICKE CLEMONS

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE  
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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## ABSTRACT

Young people from urban areas who identify as people of color and who navigate poverty are often perceived as being ‘at risk’ and in need of intervention to prevent behaviors such as delinquency and violence (Pittman, Irby, Tolman, Yohalem & Ferber, 2003; Ginwright, Cammarota, & Noguera, 2005). Furthermore, popular perceptions of youth<sup>1</sup>, are also solidified in public policy, which tends to position them as “criminals, and the cause of general civic problems” (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002, p.82). Thus, deficit views of young people go beyond perceptions; they are also integrated in policies that impact the day to day lives of youth.

In response, a growing body of scholars, researchers and activists from the field of youth development (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002; Ginwright & James, 2002; Ginwright, Cammarota, & Noguera, 2005) are shifting attention to understanding (1) individual youth and groups of young people in relation to political and economic systems of power, and (2) how young people challenge these systems (Harvey, 2006 Lipman, 2011; Anyon, 2014).

To understand how youth and their adult allies engage in resisting systematic social inequalities, I explored non-profit agencies that support Social Justice Youth Development (SJYD). Utilizing qualitative methods, I investigated how nine youth workers from three different non-profit organizations, located in one urban community, engaged youth in social justice activism.

<sup>1</sup> In this dissertation, I use the term youth (sometimes referenced as young people) to reference people who are age 13 – 18, who identify as youth of color and who navigate poverty, and who live in urban communities. I use the term children to refer to all young people age 0 – 12, and the term adolescent to refer to all young people age 13 – 18.

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- Dylan: You taught me that being an ally in youth work means following the leadership of young people.
- Anna: You taught me that without 'official' rules, young people and adults can create and continue a positive culture in a space.
- Simone: You taught me that art is not disconnected from life, and that there is an important distinction between making art for myself and sharing art with the world.
- Isaac: You taught me that adults and young people can find ways to equalize power in relationships and learn with each other.

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## CHAPTER I INTRODUCTION

### **Statement of the Problem<sup>1</sup>**

Young people from urban areas who identify as people of color and who navigate poverty are often perceived as being ‘at risk’ and in need of intervention to prevent behaviors such as delinquency and violence (Pittman, Irby, Tolman, Yohalem & Ferber, 2003; Ginwright, Cammarota, & Noguera, 2005). Furthermore, popular perceptions of youth<sup>1</sup>, are also solidified in public policy, which tends to position them as “criminals, and the cause of general civic problems” (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002, p.82). For example, because of harsh discipline policies implemented by New York City school employees and police an alarming number of young people dropped out of school or were entangled with the penal system during the 2013 – 2014 school year (The Center for Popular Democracy & The Urban Youth Collaborative, 2017). Thus, deficit views of young people go beyond perceptions; they are also integrated in policies that impact the day to day lives of youth.

Ginwright and Cammarota (2002) suggested that “researchers and practitioners have not paid serious attention to the impact of racism, the influence of poverty, and the effect of unemployment and instead have favored explanations of urban youth problems that focus on individual and/or group pathologies” (p.82). Currently, in the field of youth development, individual youth and groups of young people are often

<sup>1</sup> The structure of the problem statement was inspired by Ginwright and Cammarota’s (2002) introduction.

<sup>2</sup> In this dissertation, I use the term youth (sometimes referenced as young people) to reference people who are age 13 – 18, who identify as youth of color and as navigating poverty, and who live in urban communities. I use the term children to refer to all young people age 0 – 12, and the term adolescent to refer to all young people age 13 – 18.

identified as “problems to be fixed” or even as “possibilities for development,” but both approaches are regularly separated from understanding youth in relation to systems of oppression (Ginwright, Cammarota, & Noguera, 2005, p. 27).

In response, a growing body of scholars, researchers and activists (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002; Ginwright & James, 2002; Ginwright, et al., 2005, Harvey, 2006 Lipman, 2011; Anyon, 2014) are shifting attention to understanding (1) individual youth and groups of young people in relation to political and economic systems of power, and (2) how youth understand and work to change systematic social inequalities. Ginwright and Cammarota (2002) argued, “youth in urban communities are subjected to political decisions and economic realities that impose significant constraints and become important reasons for resistance” (p.87).

Historically, young people have participated in social movements to address systematic social inequalities (Anyon, 2014); however, valuing young people and recognizing that youth are agents of change are still evolving in the youth development literature (Iwasaki, Springett, Dashora, McLaughlin, & McHugh, 2014; Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002). Agency is defined as, “the capacity of individuals to act independently and to make their own free choices... A person exhibits agency when they can act for themselves even in the face of social structures that oppress them” (Diversity and Social Justice Terminology, n.d., p. 2). In Social Justice Youth Development programs, young people often have agency or are agents in changing social structures, but I found few studies that focus on Social Justice Youth Development and social justice activism in urban settings (Cammarota, 2011; Iwasaki, et al., 2014). I found even fewer studies focus on the perspectives of youth workers

(Barcelona & Quinn, 2011). For example, Barcelona and Quinn (2011) found that only 8% of the youth development studies that they reviewed focused on the perspectives of adults that work with children and adolescents. Furthermore, LeMenstrel and Lauxman (2011) argued that there is a need for researchers to view youth development programming from the point of the youth workers, and there is a need for researchers to investigate challenges that youth workers encounter and navigate through their work with children and adolescents.

To understand how youth and their adult allies engage in resisting systematic social inequalities, I explored non-profit agencies that support Social Justice Youth Development (SJYD). I selected adult youth workers as participants to understand SJYD from the perspective of professionals from the field. By answering the following research questions, I investigated how nine youth workers, from three different SJYD non-profit organizations, located in one urban community, engage youth in social justice activism, defined as, “taking action to effect social change” (Permanent Culture Now, 2018, p.1).

## **Research Questions**

### **Overarching Research Question**

In urban communities, how do youth development workers engage adolescent youth in social justice activism?

#### **Dissertation research questions.**

1. How do youth workers describe their professional work with adolescent youth in urban communities?
2. How do youth workers describe and navigate the challenges, obstacles and problems they experience while working with youth in urban communities?
3. In what ways does context shape adolescent youth development practices in urban communities?



## CHAPTER II REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE & THEORETICAL FRAME

### **Introduction**

Researchers in the field of youth development use a variety of terms to define youth development practices. There is not a definitive term that defines youth development in the United States, but there are similarities in definitions that include supporting youth as they develop, and providing opportunities for them (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002; Walker, Gambone, Alberti, & Walker, 2011). Drawing upon the Council of Europe's (2010) definition, in my study, youth development is defined as,

[a field which] provides space for association, activity, dialogue and action. And it provides support, opportunity and experience for young people as they move from childhood to adulthood...it is guided and governed by principles of participation and empowerment, values of human rights and democracy, and anti-discrimination and tolerance (p.2).

This definition of youth development was selected for my study because it directly referenced the value of empowerment and human rights. Youth spaces are described as contexts that provide opportunities for youth to develop values and work towards anti-discrimination and equity which connects to the theoretical frame of this study (Council of Europe, 2010).

The community and organizational settings in which youth work is performed, the perspectives and ideologies adopted by youth workers, and the facilitation of different types of youth work add to the diverse nature of youth development practices. As a result, a variety of youth development practices have grown in a wide range of community settings (Wood, Westwood, & Thompson, 2015). The purposes of this chapter are to (1) outline a review of the contemporary literature in the field of youth development that unpacks (1) the backgrounds, roles, and expertise and

accountability of youth workers, and (2) the recognized youth development ideologies, (2) explain the theoretical framework of my study, and (3) describe the current literature surrounding Social Justice Youth Development.

### **Youth Workers**

The following section outlines three contributing dimensions of the literature about youth workers: (1) the background of youth workers, (2) the roles and responsibilities of youth workers, and (3) the expertise and accountability of youth workers.

#### **Youth Worker Backgrounds**

First, the background of youth workers is explored in one dimension of the literature. In the last 20 years, quantitative studies that have been conducted to provide insight into the education, compensation, recruitment and retention and diversity of youth development workers (Dennehy & Noam, 2005; Yohalem & Pittman, 2006; Yohalem, Pittman, & Edwards 2010). For instance, researchers from the Next Generation Study (2006) and the National After School Association Study (2006) together surveyed over 5,000 youth workers who work in after school programs across all 50 states. Findings suggest that youth development workers come from diverse backgrounds and experience, and most are under the age of 30. Most of the youth workers were very satisfied with their jobs; however, the inability to receive a living wage as a youth worker was a point of concern. The researchers suggested that “twenty-seven percent of full-time and 53 percent of part-time workers hold a second job” (p.6), and the primary reason that youth workers chose to leave the field of youth work was for better pay and benefits in a different field (Yohalem & Pittman, 2006). Although the

pay scale is low, the content of youth work practices is complex. In the next sections, I outline the roles and responsibilities and expertise and accountability in the field.

### **Youth Worker Roles and Relationships**

An emerging body of research highlights relationships between adults, and children and adolescents in out-of-school time. Researchers suggested the importance of adults building and maintaining positive relationships with young people. Youth development professionals must have communication skills that include, “knowing how to communicate and interact with young people, how to listen and how to ask engaging questions” (Hobbs & Yoon, 2008, p.158).

Furthermore, Walker (2010) found that there are multiple types of roles that youth workers assume when working with children and adolescents, which were identified as friend, parent, mentor, teacher, and boss. Each of the identified roles had a different range and function (Walker, 2010). For example, drawing on Rhodes (2002) investigation of mentoring relationships in youth development settings, Walker (2010) defined mentor as, “an older, more experienced person who provides ongoing guidance, instruction, and encouragement aimed at developing the competence and character of an unrelated, younger protégé” (p.643). After analyzing data from 12 adolescent youth development programs, Walker (2010) found that the mentoring relationships often provided guidance and support to adolescents.

## **Expertise and Accountability in Youth Development**

Another dimension of the literature addresses accountability and expertise in the field of youth development. Organizations which include the Children's Aid Society, the Child and Youth Care Certification Board, and the United States Department of Education are working to define and establish a definition of youth work, and what constitutes expertise and accountability in the field of youth development (Starr, Yohalem, & Gannett, 2009; Blyth, 2011; Jonas, 2012; Walker & Walker, 2012). Some organizations are working to standardize youth development practices through the development of core competencies (Starr, Yohalem, & Gannett, 2009; Walker & Walker, 2012) while others argue the importance of developing practitioner expertise (Walker & Walker, 2012).

Adding a core competency framework to youth development is a similar approach to the structure of other fields such as, early childhood and K-12 education (Starr, et.al, 2009). Starr, et al. (2009) suggested that

Core competencies articulate what it is that adults working with children and youth need to know and do in order to deliver high quality, developmental programming...Competencies should be concrete, research-based and achievable, establishing standards of practice that can serve as the basis for career development systems and policies that enhance quality and lead to increased recognition of those working in the field (p.3).

Where competencies focus on sets of skills, in contrast, expertise focuses on the broad understandings youth workers need to engage in a practice (Walker & Walker, 2012).

There is an emerging body of professionals who recognize expertise in youth work practice (Walker & Walker, 2012). Expertise involves understanding, action, and the ability to make sound choices in different situations. Blyth (2011), among others (Walker & Walker, 2012), argued that conversation about the future of the youth

development field should emphasize a shift from “proving impact to improving impact” (p.174). Walker and Walker (2012) suggested,

The tendency to reduce youth work practice to measurable terms risks reducing youth work to a purely technical skill. Deconstructing practice to the most measurable units can lead to a fragmented focus and one that attends to less significant elements such as the role of judgment. By whittling down practice to the ability to undertake specific tasks, it becomes largely stripped of social, moral and intellectual qualities. (p. 40)

The ways in which novice and expert youth workers navigate dilemmas of practice is one example of expertise in the field of youth development.

Dilemmas of practice are defined as, “significant challenging situations and problems occurring in daily practice that call for decision making by the practitioner, including whether and how to respond” (Larson & Walker, 2012, p.7). Dilemmas of practice include reduced youth participation, funding, program instability and inadequacy, and insignificant program effectiveness (Larson & Walker, 2012). Larson and Walker (2012) conducted a mixed methods study to better understand how novices and expert youth workers respond to dilemmas of practice.

Findings of the study indicate that experts and novices in the field of youth development view dilemmas differently. Larson and Walker (2012) found that experts are more likely to conceptualize a problem from more angles and levels of analysis. Also, they found that experts were more likely to answer questions with a youth centered focus and balanced multiple considerations before making a decision. The researchers suggested that to improve youth work practice, future youth workers need to experience ongoing training on the diverse dilemmas they may encounter and appropriate types of responses (Larson and Walker, 2010). The conversation

surrounding core competencies and expertise is emerging in the field, and is currently positioned as having tension with one another.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the literature surrounding youth workers informed my study by highlighting (1) the diverse backgrounds of youth workers, (2) the landscape of wages and benefits in the field, (3) the diverse roles that youth workers adopt when working with young people, including mentoring, and (4) the conversation around expertise and accountability, and the tension between two schools of thought: one which supports competencies, and another which supports expertise. Despite this growing field of literature, few studies specifically isolate the experiences of urban youth workers. My research study features the experience of urban youth workers which will add to the emerging literature in this area.

## **Youth Development Ideologies**

Youth development is approached in different ways, and I found the need to understand the different perspectives the field of youth development by unpacking recognized youth development ideologies, and situate and support my study with one frame of youth development. Ideologies are constructed by principles that inform a discipline. For instance, ideologies take up different stances about relational power and knowledge between adults and young people and also different beliefs about youth development organizations and practices. For instance, ideology informs ways social movements are framed, such as the Black Lives Matter movement. In one ideology, black teen activists are identified as disruptive while in another frame, they are identified as change agents. In the field of youth development recognized

ideologies include: Risk, Resiliency and Prevention, Positive and Civic youth development (Pittman, et al., 2003), and Social Justice Youth Development (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002). In the following section, each ideology will be discussed.

### **Risk, Resiliency and Prevention**

Risk, resiliency and prevention focuses on identifying problems with children and adolescents and intervening with education. Adults are responsible for identifying problems, and leading children and adolescents to understand the importance of preventing risky behavior. This model is a top down approach to youth development. Historically, risk, resiliency and prevention has been the primary ideology of many youth development programs, and is still the foundation of many youth development programs today. For example, adolescent drug and alcohol prevention programs, such as Drug Abuse Resistance Education (D.A.R.E) and Mother's Against Drunk Drivers (MADD), serve to intervene in the lives of adolescents; these, and other programs advocate for interventions that decrease behaviors like drug and alcohol use, sexual relationships, and violence (Pittman, et al., 2003).

Risk, resiliency and prevention was not the right frame for my investigation because it operates with a deficit view of children and adolescents. Adults are positioned as having the most power, and as being more knowledgeable than children and adolescents. This ideology focuses on managing children and adolescents and preventing risky behaviors. In contrast, I needed a frame that positioned children and adolescents as co-constructors of knowledge and with shared power in relationships with adults to disrupt the dominant knowledge and power frames of adult-youth

relationships. Through social justice activism, people challenge dominant systems of oppression, and in the context of youth spaces, that includes resisting traditional adult-youth relationships and power dynamics.

### **Positive Youth Development**

In the 1990s, a movement began to shift from the Risk, Resiliency and Prevention ideology toward a positive youth development ideology (Walker, 2000). In 1992, the Carnegie Corporation and the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development published a report that outlined the importance of supporting children and adolescents during out-of-school time. In particular, this report focused on youth from families who navigated poverty and who identified as people of color. Kwon (2013) argued that this report was a major factor in the shift from viewing children and adolescents as “at risk” toward a more positive approach to youth development. Positive youth development policy makers and program planners “recognized the need to broaden outcomes to help young people learn and develop across a full range of developmental areas, taking into account cognitive, social, moral, civic, vocational, cultural and physical well being” (Pittman, et al., 2003, p.6). The purpose of the shift was to help all children and adolescents achieve goals, and not only those who were labeled as ‘high-risk.’

Positive youth development is a child-centered and strengths-based approach to youth development (Pittman, et al., 2003). For example, the YMCA, 4H and Big Brothers/Big Sisters are examples of organizations that engage in positive youth development practices. The supporters of positive youth development believe that children and adolescents have a voice in the development and facilitation of programs.



In positive youth spaces, adults adopt the role of the facilitator. Positive youth development highlights the importance of continuous relationships with adults, children and adolescents to support positive choices (Pittman, et al., 2003). In sum, positive youth development, “aims to build strengths as well as reduce weaknesses” (Walker, et al., 2011, p. 9).

Today, many youth organizations engage children and adolescents in making decisions about their own involvement in activities for themselves, and practice Positive youth principles; however, the efforts of working with youth are not always tied to helping youth engage in their communities. Positive youth development programs (1) value the strengths of young people, (2) situate the work around the interests of young people, and (3) promote youth participants, but do not youth necessarily promote problem solvers (Roholt, et al., 2013). Because positive youth development does not always include a relationship with the community, it was not the best fit for my research study which seeks to understand how youth workers engage youth in social justice activism in the community.

### **Civic Youth Development**

The additional criterion of engaging youth in meaningful community service is the main distinction between positive youth development practices and civic youth development. Followers of civic youth development suggest children and adolescents are empowered to challenge mainstream culture and to change society (Roholt, et al., 2013); furthermore, they have a dual commitment to youth development and broader change. The adults use their role to support children and adolescents as they engage in conversation and action (Roholt, et al., 2013).

Civic youth development highlights the development of democratic citizens, and supports children and adolescents as they explore civic issues that they find meaningful. Working with groups of peers and adults, children and adolescents build common understandings of topics and make decisions together. Civic youth workers co-create knowledge and engage in civic action with children and adolescents; however, there are two reasons that civic youth development was not a fit to frame my investigation. First, civic youth development is often situated within the confines of the existing political and economic systems, which is different than working to change entire systems. Second, this ideology is often divorced from conversations about the ways in which race, socioeconomic status and poverty impact the work (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002).

## **Conclusion**

Ginwright and Cammarota (2002) suggested that the Social Justice Youth Development (SJYD) model provides a new lens to critique past and present social problems, and more specifically, it “examines how youth contest, challenge, respond to, and negotiate the use and misuse of power in their lives (Ginwright & James, 2002, p. 35). In the following section, I will discuss SJYD and explain why it was the best theoretical frame for my investigation.

## **Theoretical Framework: Social Justice Youth Development**

Drawing on the work of critical scholars, I support the idea that systems and structures are malleable, and people can challenge the conditions and policies which inform their contexts and lives (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Freire, 2010, Wellmer, 2014). SJYD organizations provide spaces for young people and adults to transform

structures and systems that directly impact young people. Through investigating society, its problems and its systems and structures, young people, alongside adult allies, work to understand and change themselves and their community. As young people engage with each other, their peers, and members of their community to create change, youth confront the challenges of their everyday lives through youth development (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002; Ginwright & James, 2002; Ginwright, et al. 2005; Ginwright, 2006). Drawing upon Ginwright & Cammarota's (2002) theory of SJYD, I constructed the theoretical lens for my research study that highlights the principles which include (1) the importance of understanding how young people navigate and respond to structural social inequalities that affect their lives, and (2) the belief that youth are subjects, agents, and not objects in the process of working toward changing systems of oppression.

### **Youth Navigate and Respond to Systems of Oppression**

Ginwright and Cammarota (2002) claim that by focusing on the societal context of young people's experiences, "we enhance our knowledge of how they navigate and respond to the oppressive forces that affect their lives" (Ginwright & Camarotta, 2002, p.85). Oppression is defined as,

The systemic and pervasive nature of social inequality woven throughout social institutions as well as embedded within individual consciousness. Oppression fuses institutional and systemic discrimination, personal bias, bigotry, and social prejudice in a complex web of relationships and structures that saturate most aspects of life in our society (p. 7).

Oppression includes a hierarchy of power created and continued by political and economic systems (Harvey, 2006). By power, I mean influencing the lives of others in different structures such as relationships, institutional and societal structures (Giroux,

1999). Systems of oppression include political and economic systems that create and continue privilege for some groups and harm to others. Examples include unequal distributions of wealth, opportunities for employment, and access to housing which are sometimes referenced as structural social inequalities in this study (Anyon, 2014).

I came to this study with the understanding that young people navigate and respond to systems of oppression, and this principle informed both (1) where I situated my research, and (2) how I investigated SJYD spaces. First, I situated my research study in SJYD spaces that provide youth with opportunities to negotiate, challenge, and to respond to systems of oppression that they encounter in their daily lives, schools and communities. Second, I investigated SJYD spaces to understand what they looked like, and in particular, what professional youth workers did and said to challenge systems of oppression with young people.

### **Youth are Agents of Change**

The belief that youth are subjects and not objects in the process toward change, is another important dimension of SJYD (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002; Ginwright et al, 2006; Iwasaki, et al., 2014). Ginwright and Cammarota (2002) suggested that as subjects, or agents of change, young people work towards changing systems of oppression. In connection to Freire's (2010) definition of praxis, "reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it" (p. 33), in SJYD spaces, young people work to transform themselves and society through developing critical consciousness and engaging in social action. Specifically, Ginwright and Cammarota, 2002, describe the transformative process in which youth engage as,

Through their own praxis, they explore their own and others' experiences with

oppression and privilege. Critical consciousness and social action provide young people with tools to understand and change the underlying causes of social and historical processes that perpetuate the problems they face daily(p. 88).

As an educator and research, I support the belief that young people are agents of change, and I was curious how SJYD supporters supported and expressed this belief, if at all, when working with youth.

### **Conclusion**

Ginwright and Cammarota (2002) argued that some current youth development approaches are lacking in engaging young people in examining complex and inequitable political, economic and social systems. Furthermore, Ginwright and Cammarota (2002) suggested that, “A discussion of these forces is particularly important for youth who struggle with issues of identity, racism, sexism, police brutality, and poverty that are supported by unjust economic policies” (p. 82). I support the principles that (1) young people interact with systems of social inequality in their everyday lives, and also, (2) young people are agents of change.

These principles about society and about young people guided my study, and provided the best framework for my examination of how youth workers, together with young people, facilitate spaces and opportunities for young people to negotiate, challenge and respond to structures of social inequality. To connect and to build upon existing research surrounding SJYD, I found the need to explore additional literature surrounding SJYD practices that could inform my investigation. In the following section, I unpack the current literature around SJYD.

## **Social Justice Youth Development: Impact and Transformation**

In this section, I examine the emerging body of literature of SJYD which addresses the impacts of SJYD programs and the ways in which youth changed during the time they participated in SJYD programs.

### **Impact of SJYD Programs**

Researchers suggest that SJYD organizations made positive impacts on the lives of urban young people. Research suggests that SJYD programs provide an opportunity for youth to work towards fairness and justice in their communities (Kirshner, 2005), to confront challenges they observe in their everyday lives (Ginwright, et al., 2006), including power relationships (Christens & Kirshner, 2011), and to engage in advocacy with adult allies (Erbstein, 2013). For example, Christens and Kirshner (2011) studied two influential youth organizations, and found common elements of practice that include relationship development between youth and adult allies, popular education that includes critical perspectives of societal systems, and social action.

In SJYD development organizations youth, along with adult allies, work together. Erbstein (2013) highlighted the importance of youth workers building on local knowledge, engaging adult allies, taking a critical stance towards systems and shared cultural language and experience among adults and youth in SJYD spaces.

### **SJYD and Youth Change**

I found that much of SJYD research studies were from the perspective of young people and pertaining to the ways in which youth changed as a result of engaging in the programs in ways such as developing identity, engaging in community

activism and learning empathy (Cammarota & Romero 2010), understanding self-perception and empowerment, acquiring skills and knowledge for civic engagement (Schwartz & Suyemoto, 2012; Lavie-Ajayi, and Krumer-Nevo, 2013), and transforming beliefs and values. For instance, Coburn (2011) conducted an ethnographic study to understand what young people learn about equality through youth work. Findings suggest that youth benefitted from participating in a program that challenged them to reflect on their beliefs and values. In many cases, the reflection led to personal transformation. Specifically, youth changed, “in relation to the ideas of reciprocity and trust, through the youth exchange, volunteering, peer education, and in their relationships with youth workers and each other” (p. 488).

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the SJYD studies informed my research by underlining the topics of previous research related SJYD and the methodologies used to investigate. I found that each qualitative study focused on one or two youth organizations, and most of the studies engaged youth participants. The studies that were reviewed summarized the impact of SJYD, and the ways in which youth changed during their engagement in SJYD programs.

### **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I outlined a review of the contemporary literature in the field of youth development that unpacks the backgrounds, roles, expertise and accountability of youth workers, and I explained the recognized youth development ideologies. I also explained the theoretical framework of my study and described the current literature surrounding SJYD. I have argued that SJYD is emerging in the literature, and that

there is a need for studies that investigate the experience of SJYD practices in urban areas from the perspectives of youth workers. To get an in depth understanding of SJYD practices across organizational contexts, I designed a qualitative research study to answer the overarching question, in urban communities, how do youth development workers engage adolescent youth in social justice activism?



## CHAPTER III METHODOLOGY

### **Introduction**

Qualitative methods are particularly suited for understanding youth work process in context, the unit analysis of my study. Bogdan and Biklen (1992) explained the different attributes of qualitative methods which include collecting descriptive data, inductively analyzing data and making meaning of the processes in which participants engage. Using qualitative methods, I investigated how youth workers in urban communities described their work with adolescent youth (RQ1), the challenges that youth workers encounter and navigate in urban communities (RQ2), and how context shapes youth development practices (RQ3). For my dissertation research, I utilized multiple case studies and engaged in a cross case analysis to investigate my research questions (Patton, 2002). This chapter outlines the methodology of my research study.

### **Definitions**

Participants of my study were youth workers from different SJYD organizations who work with youth from one urban community. Before I outline my qualitative methods, I will define the terms that relate to selecting participants: urban community, non-profit organization, youth workers who engage adolescents, youth worker demographics.

#### **Urban Community**

Urban community is defined as an area that concentrates major financial, cultural, political and social institutions. Often people from diverse racial and socioeconomic backgrounds live in or near urban areas (Lipman, 2011, p.4). Sampling

in an urban community situated my study in a location with a large concentration of adolescents who identified as people of color and who likely navigated poverty.

### **Non-profit Youth Organizations**

A diverse set of public non-profit organizations offer youth development programs to youth in USA. Busse and Joiner (2008) stated that there is not one definitive definition for the non-profit sector, but it is often, “referred to as the not-for-profit, tax-exempt, civil, independent, third, social, charitable, or voluntary sector” (p.15). For example, some national non-profit youth serving organizations include 4H, Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, Boys and Girls Clubs, YMCA Girls Incorporated, and Big brother/Big sister. Youth programming in nonprofit agencies can include life skills, problem solving, decision-making, hands-on pedagogy, cooperation, and age-appropriate programming. The demographics of the children and adolescent participants of the programs differ by community (Quinn, 1999).

Examples of non-profit youth development organizations that work to address structural social inequality, specifically educational equality include: Baltimore Algebra Project (Baltimore, MD), Boston Youth Organizing Project in Boston, MA, Padres & Jovens Unidos in Denver, CO, and Sistas and Brothers United in Bronx, NY (Anyon, 2014). Non-profits were selected as research sites to investigate how youth workers engage adolescents in social justice activism.

### **Youth Workers Who Engage Adolescents**

Youth workers who work with adolescents were selected as participants for my study. Unlike youth workers who work with toddlers and children, youth workers who work with adolescents support them as they mature from adolescence to adulthood. In

the adolescent years, there is often less parent involvement in youth activities, so youth workers are responsible for developing relationships outside of a family structure (Quinn, 1999; Nakkula & Toshalis, 2006). Youth workers who engage adolescents are in an important position to give them space to discover who they are (Pittman, et al., 2003).

### **Youth Worker Demographics**

Education research suggests that educational practices are informed by race (Nieto, 1994; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Williams, 2004) and gender (Grumet & McKoy, 1997; Taylor, 2003). Youth development research suggests that youth workers' years of experience are varied, and they often do not make a living wage (Yohalem & Pittman, 2006). Participants for my study were sampled across demographics of race, gender, years of experience to help me understand how practitioners of different backgrounds engage in this work. I collected data on income after participants were engaged in the study.

### **Sampling**

For the qualitative sample, I used purposeful sampling to identify participants (Bogdan & Biklan, 1992). I purposefully sampled youth organizations and youth workers who engage adolescent youth in social justice activism. I utilized three sampling phases to identify organizations and participants for my research study: (1) community selection, (2) site selection and (3) participant selection (Appendix A).

**Community Selection.** One urban center in the United States was identified as the community for my research study. I identified the urban community by locating the cities in the state, and then I compared the free and reduced lunch statistics from each

city to determine which urban community would be the focus of my study. Free and reduced lunch is a common metric used to identify people who are classified as navigating poverty (Anyon, 2014). The city in which data were collected, people of varied demographics live, and it has the largest percentage of students with free and reduced lunch in the state. Specifically, 79% of the youth that attended public schools in the city qualify for free or reduced lunch (Rhode Island Education Data Reporting, 2016). I also considered the high concentration of poverty faced by youth of color in the community in which data were collected and I found that the city statistics suggested that there is a connection between poverty and youth of color in the community.

**Site Selection.** Next, I purposefully selected (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992) three youth organizations in the urban community by selecting organizations that engage adolescent youth in SJYD. I reviewed a range of organizations in the city that engage youth in social justice activism by (1) reading current news to learn which non-profit organizations had participated in social justice activism in one urban community, and (2) reviewing the online profiles of the non-profit organizations that appeared in the news. For each organization, I read the mission and vision statements to look for key social justice activism terms and phrases outlined in the SJYD literature such as critical consciousness and social action (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002). This process led me to select three organizations for my study. Three organizations were selected because I was interested in both understanding how participants from each organization engage young people in social justice activism as well as understanding social justice activism across organizations in one community.

**Participant Selection.** I purposefully selected participants from youth development organizations by making direct connections with each youth development organization. I emailed a member of each youth organization, and I asked to meet the staff. Next, I met youth workers to explain my study. Using a questionnaire, I collected the names, race, gender, and years of experience in youth work of the people who showed interest in participating in my study (Appendix B). Finally, I reviewed the information I collected, and selected youth workers with different demographics (Guest, Bunce, & Johnston, 2006), including race (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Nieto, 1994), gender (Grumet & McKoy, 1997; Taylor, 2003), youth workers' years of experience (Yohalem & Pittman, 2006). Four organizations were interested in participating in my study; however, three of the four organizations were selected based on my research timeline. One organization did not return paperwork until the end of data collection, and was not selected as a site.

#### **Qualitative Data Collection: Interview and Observation**

I learned and utilized a variety of qualitative research methods in my study. To address my research questions, I collected: (a) individual youth worker interviews (Appendix C and Appendix D), (b) observations of youth workers in the context of their youth organizations and public community engagements including conferences, workshops and protests, and (c) organizational artifacts, such as, promotional materials and information from organization websites. I collected data from August 2016 – February 2017. At each site, I conducted individual semi-structured interviews using open ended interview probes. Open-ended interview probes provide a personal approach to interviewing. Different types of interview questions were utilized

including: opinion and values questions to understand the values of participants, background and demographic questions to understand the background of youth workers, and knowledge questions to understand what participants know (Patton, 2002).

After each interview, I observed participants in the context of their youth development organization for approximately one and a half hours each. During the observations, I recorded descriptive and reflective field notes about the interactions between youth workers and youth, context, and the activities that occurred during the time of my observations (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). Finally, I interviewed each participant a second time to ask follow-up questions about the observation, and to ask additional questions about their work with youth including information about their responsibilities at work, and how they view their role and work with youth. Throughout the process of data collection, I also visited the organizations for informal observations to get a feeling of the organization culture outside of scheduled observations, and I unexpectedly ran into participants at community events, such as conferences. On January 16, 2017, participants from all three organizations worked to support a city-wide protest during the school day. I used this event to observe participants in action. The final interviews of three participants, one participant from each organization, also focused on follow-up questions about the Protest. All interviews were audiotaped and transcribed.

### **Qualitative Data Analysis**

To analyze the qualitative data, first, I prepared and organized data by creating electronic folders of data marked with pseudonyms on my computer desktop and in

the NVIVO software program. After data was prepared, I read through the data to reflect on the overall meaning.

Next, I began a detailed coding process using NVIVO software. I used the NVIVO program as a data warehouse, and I did not utilize the electronic coding process that it offers (Appendix E). I read through the data and looked for emergent codes. This process is often referred to as open coding (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). The open coding process took months. I began by reading and annotating each transcript. Finally, I reflected on my annotations to understand if categories emerged among individuals, organizations and across organizations. I engaged in focused coding by supporting each code with data from interviews and observations (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). This process was recursive. I coded each transcript for approximately thirty different codes that emerged from my annotations and subsequent coding. At times, I thought the process was complete, only to find new codes emerge that needed to be investigated.

After coding was completed, I identified themes in the data that related to how youth workers engage young people in social justice activism, professional youth work (RQ1), challenges (RQ2), and context (RQ3). As I identified themes, I interpreted the data and produced a series of memos (Maxwell, 2013). I wrote memos to understand my data about individual participants and across participants, and about organizations and across organizations.

Case studies for each organization emerged through coding, analyzing and writing about my data. After I wrote a draft of each case study, I engaged participants in the process of respondent member checking to ensure that I created valid profiles of

the organizations, and their youth work practices (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). My conversations with participants during this phase of the research process informed revisions to my report. For example, after speaking with one participant, I was able to reframe the way in which mentoring practices were described in a case study. The entire process of collecting, coding, analyzing and writing took approximately 20 months (Appendix F).

### **Trustworthiness (Validity/Reliability)**

In qualitative research, validity and reliability in a qualitative study is the concept of trustworthiness (Guba & Lincoln, 1981). Guba and Lincoln (1981) developed criteria to ensure rigor in qualitative research to assess the credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability of the research project. Guba and Lincoln's (1981) criteria relate to my study in the following ways.

#### **Credibility (internal validity)**

**Gaining entry.** In the beginning, I gained entry with participants by using my knowledge of the context of SJYD spaces. To introduce my study, I asked potential participants to select a color that represents their work with urban young people, and explain how that color represents their work. After the activity was debriefed, I felt that potential participants were more interested in listening to what I had to say and to learn more about my research study. One hundred percent of participants who were invited agreed to be part of my study. During observations and interviews, I let participants lead, and I worked to position myself as an observer.

**Triangulation.** I engaged in triangulation by making sure the codes I created and reviewed, and the claims I made in my research report were (1) supported by



multiple sources of data, and (2) data from different modes of collection that included, interview, observation and reviewing organizational artifacts. For example, at one point, I thought the idea of *belonging* seemed to emerge in the data; however, when I attempted to triangulate data to support this claim, I found that I did not have sufficient evidence to support it.

**Member checking.** All nine participants were sent excerpts from my research study in enough time to give feedback. For example, I prepared electronic and paper packages of my work to send and drop off two months before my deadline. Although one hundred percent of participants were invited to participate in member checking, sixty seven percent of participants, and at least one person from each organization, engaged in this process. The comments that participants provided helped me revise my research report.

**Debrief sessions with advisor.** Over the course of the last year and a half, my research advisor and I met approximately once every two weeks to discuss my research study. My advisor supported my engagement in this study by facilitating conversations about data collection, by debriefing coding and triangulating data, and by providing continuous and constant feedback about my memos and research report.

**Outside reader.** I engaged an outside reader to check my codes, and to read memos for clarity and for understanding.

### **Transferability (external validity)**

Given the small sample size (nine participants) and single city context, this study is not generalizable to larger populations. However, the themes and concepts that were investigated may raise questions for other contexts, so I provided rich

description of the research context, in the event this study is referenced or to inform future studies.

### **Dependability (reliability)**

During the research planning and proposal process, I reflected on my research design and made changes such as shifting my design from mixed methods to qualitative research methods, and focusing my sampling procedures to Social Justice Youth Development organizations. To account for these shifts, I describe the design, including information about the research design and implementation, the details of gathering data, and a reflective appraisal of the project.

### **Confirmability (objectivity)**

I created an audit trail throughout the research process. An audit trail is a step-by-step explanation of the research decisions and procedures that any person could trace (Patton, 2002). For my study, all data and analysis attempts were date stamped. For example, an audit trail of (1) the dates in which I went to each organization is available in an excel document (Appendix G), the decisions I made during the coding process is available in my NVIVO profile, and the memos and drafts of my report are in word documents and folders. Throughout the research process, I worked to document the procedures I used to collect and analyze data.

## **Role of the Researcher**

In the next section, I describe my subjectivity and role as a researcher.

### **Subjectivity**

I claim many identities which include being a woman, a mother, a partner, a daughter, a member of a privileged socioeconomic status, and a researcher who is

white. My lived experiences have led me to question and to challenge structural social inequalities, and in the process of discovering more about the ways in which society operates, I have worked, and continue to work, to understand my identity.

In particular, I often reflect on how being a researcher who is white relates to my engagement in social justice activism and my research of social justice activism in urban communities. In conversations with my life partner, Aarin, who identifies as a person of color, we often discuss the difference between dedicating one's life to studying in and working in communities of color and how that is different than experiencing life *as* a person of color. Court King, a youth leader with whom I work, summarizes this as, "let those who live that life lead you" (King, personal communication, February 2018). King's quote informed the way in which I engaged in this research study. Throughout my research journey, as a person who had different lived experiences as my participants, I learned with and from adult youth workers. I was conscious of my use of self and of taking up space with my voice or body. I also constantly reflected on my intentions and actions through personal memoing.

### **Role**

My role as a researcher was to collect and analyze data as an observer. Before I began my study, it was reviewed by the IRB (Appendix H), and I met with potential participants to disclose all aspects of my project, including ethical concerns before they decided to participate in my study (Patton, 2002). After participants agreed to participate in my study, I worked to gain trust with them and to become integrated in their organizational landscapes as much as possible. I approached data collection as a learner, and respected participants' ideas and opinions (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992).

Furthermore, I was conscious of my subjectivity and my tendency to identify with the youth worker role by being intentional about how I represented myself during data collection. For example, I built relationships with participants by being my authentic self, by working around their schedules, by bringing food to meetings, and by being honestly interested in learning more about them and their work.

Making connections with people without sharing much about myself posed a great challenge for me because I am a person who is outgoing, who loves to tell stories, and who often takes up too much space. Before I engaged in the interview process, I practiced asking interview questions without adding my opinion or connecting them to a story about me. After I collected data, I maintained my role as a researcher by leaving the sites after data were collected, being conscious of creating codes from the words of my participants instead of my own categories, writing memos to flush out ideas, and engaging in the recursive process of analysis.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the research study was designed using qualitative methods. Each stage of the design, data collection, and analysis process was reflected upon and monitored to ensure trustworthiness of the results. In the following chapters, chapters 4 – 9, the results of my study will be outlined

## CHAPTER IV PARTICIPANTS & PRINCIPLES

### **Introduction**

Participants<sup>3</sup> from three non-profit youth development organizations, Youth Empowerment, People for Change, and Neighborhood Arts<sup>4</sup>, have different life experiences and paths that led them to youth work. In addition, consistent with demographic information which outlined the races and genders in which Participants identify as well as their years of experience and income, I have come to know that Participants also claim diverse identities, see Appendix I for a detailed chart of the participant demographics. In this chapter, I introduced Participants of this study by highlighting their diverse life experiences and their individual reasons for engaging in youth development. I also described the Social Justice Youth Development principles that they support.

### **Participant Introduction**

#### **Youth Empowerment Participants: Selma, Mia, and Celeste**

**Participant:** Selma (pronouns she, her)

**Organization:** Youth Empowerment

**Position:** Executive Director

Selma grew up with two parents who are in academia. She was part of many communities as a young person – her school communities, her college town community, where her parents were professors, and her ethnic community, located an hour from her home town. When Selma entered college, her mother said, “You are a college student and that means that you are an activist. You don’t get a choice in the matter.” Because she grew up in watching her parents engage in political activism,

<sup>3</sup>Participants (capital P) refers to the participants of my study.

<sup>4</sup>Pseudonyms were used for Participants, organizations, and the location of each organization.

Selma believes that all the values she holds now in terms of politics and activism were rooted in experiences of watching her parents being passionate about something. When asked about why she engages in youth work, Selma shared that the work is part of her identity. She responded, “That’s a hard question... because I think if you love something as much as I love this, it just comes – it’s inherent and it’s instinctive... It’s like in my body to do this work.” Selma is the executive director of Youth Empowerment.

**Participant:** Mia (pronouns: she, her)

**Organization:** Youth Empowerment

**Position:** Operations Director

As a young person, Mia would frequently spend hours in the public library.

She would find hidden spaces in the library to read and she gravitated toward books that could teach her something or that could help her improve some part of herself.

Mia is in a Master’s program at an Ivy League University, and she often shares her ability to relate to the challenge youth face when trying to balance all their

responsibilities. She believes in giving young people a space to imagine what is possible. Much of her work at the organization is administrative in nature. She is

responsible for grant writing and running operations. Although Mia does not facilitate programming, she is very much invested in the mission of the organization.

**Participant:** Celeste (pronouns: she, her)

**Organization:** Youth Empowerment

**Position:** Accountant and Programming Leader

Celeste is an alumnus of the organization. She describes the positive influence

the organization had on her life. Specifically, she remembers the relationships she had with mentors. When she was a young person, Celeste was an ethnic minority of her

neighborhood and her family was often judged by neighbors. At times, Celeste spent

time alone at her house after school because her mother was working multiple jobs and her siblings were much older. Celeste opposes adultism, as she describes as, the prejudice of young people by adults, and believes in working with young people to help them grow. Celeste wants to be a positive role model for young people as stated by her,

I want to be the person for youth that I had when I was their age... I want to be the adult that someone looks back and says, "she really helped me." Or even if I am not, I just want to have a piece of this work. It's something that makes me feel good and it's challenging in ways that helps me grow as a person.

At the organization, Celeste facilitates programming and she is responsible for the financial aspects of the organization. During the time of data collection, Celeste was completing a degree in accounting.

### **People for Change Participants: Nora, Jean, Dylan**

**Participant:** Nora (pronoun: she, her)

**Organization:** People for Change

**Position:** Organizer

Nora grew up outside of the United States and attended international schools, and she spent many of her adolescent years in Nairobi, Kenya where she was a member of the Model United Nations. Nora came to the United States when she was accepted as an undergraduate anthropology student at an Ivy League University. She believes her work with young people, particularly young women, is a transformative process and she states, "what excites me the most is when I see young women feeling like they have power to – to make change, but also just lead." Nora also engages in organizing work outside of People for Change on campaigns for immigrant rights. For example, Nora shared that she volunteered and engaged in paid interpreting for an immigrants rights group. The immigrants' rights group was working to pass a law that

would give access for undocumented people to apply for driver's licenses. Nora's role at People for Change was an organizer, and she facilitated programming at the People for Change offices and within the schools.

**Participant:** Jean (pronouns: they, them)

**Organization:** People for Change

**Position:** Organizer

Jean was also an organizer at People for Change. As a young person, Jean engaged in youth spaces that supported their leadership skills. They were a member of Neighborhood Arts for some time as a young person, and they found it to be a liberating experience because there were no restrictions on the classes they could take or the amount of work they could do. In college, they participated in student action and learned what it is like to form a community of resistance. Jean stated, "that resistance was marked by a need to find comfort, to find relief and to find safety." When asked why youth work is important, Jean shared, "I think that's like for me, that's why it's so important to be – to feel empowered and included in your own education.... When I found those people, people who were willing to see me as a person first and not a youth, that really sort of changed the way I started learning and really changed the way I viewed the world."

**Participant:** Dylan (pronouns: he, him)

**Organization:** People for Change

**Position:** Executive Director

Dylan grew up in a suburb of Florida. He feels disconnected from the community in which he grew up. In his home town, Dylan describes the interaction among people as social atomization, meaning people often go through their daily lives without encountering people they don't know. Dylan moved to the city in which data



were collected to attend an Ivy League University. He shared that he feels comfortable living in the city, and he is invested to making things better with his neighbors.

Dylan believes that young people everywhere sense hypocrisy and that is the lens in which they approach justice. Specifically, he stated, “Any young people I’ve met have a really strong like compass for hypocrisy and inconsistency.” As the executive director of People for Change, Dylan viewed the macro and micro aspects of the organization, and together with young people, he hopes to build the organization to become a model student union. Dylan reported, “I am excited about what will happen when young people achieve a full-fledged union!”

**Neighborhood Arts Participants: Simone, Anna, Isaac**

**Participant:** Simone (pronouns: she, her)

**Organization:** Neighborhood Arts

**Position:** Artist Mentor

Simone grew up in a Caribbean neighborhood in New York and moved out of state to attend an Ivy League graduate school for her MFA degree. The diverse nature of her home environment and her access to arts programs as a young person have shaped her lens of the world. Simone is a writer, and that title is very much part of her identity. Through writing, Simone engages in reflection about her work and the world, and works to find new and alternative ways to relate to people in what she describes as, “the various states of chaos in the world.” She believes her life away from her own writing process is an important part of her work, and when she is at the Neighborhood Arts, she engages young people in conversation and in reflecting on the world through art making. When she reengages in her own writing, she is influenced by her work with young people. As Simone affirms, “That’s often what my work is about, like relationships and how people love and reflect and support each other. And so in order

to write about that, I have to like involve myself in the practice of that.” Simone was a writing mentor at Neighborhood Arts.

**Participant:** Anna (pronouns: she, her)

**Organization:** Neighborhood Arts

**Position:** Youth Program Manager

Anna is alumnus of the organization. Born and raised not far from the poster covered windows of Neighborhood Arts, Anna was introduced to Neighborhood Arts when she was in high school, and found it easy to keep coming back. As a young person, Anna made strong relationships with her own mentors at Neighborhood Arts; which, were maintained while living in many states across the United States. Anna believes young people are important and powerful. When reflecting on her work at Neighborhood Arts, Anna shared, “I do this work because young people are some of the most important people in the world. They are the ones who will be change makers long after we are gone. They inherit the world we give them and I feel that I need to do whatever I can to help them get to the future and navigate the troubles they are inheriting.”

**Participant:** Isaac (pronouns: he, him)

**Organization:** Neighborhood Arts

**Position:** Artist Mentor

Isaac grew up in Alabama and moved to Philadelphia when he was a young adolescent. He recalled memories of being engaged in art making, fantasy and outdoor activities as a young person because he was given freedom to explore what he called “kid world,” or his backyard space. Furthermore, he remembers watching his mother engage in resisting the status quo and thinking outside the box to solve problems. In high school, Isaac described his realization of the importance of being himself, specifically, he described, “don’t stop being yourself to conform to what other people

think, because the people who are really cool will know that there's something there.” Isaac's life experiences influence his work with young people.

At Neighborhood Arts, he engaged young people who were interested in screen printing and he felt his job allowed him to share and use his knowledge of screen printing, and he felt privileged to engage with youth in the process. Isaac described his view of young people,

I'm psyched about young people in general and I'm like they're fun and cool and smart and like thoughtful and interesting. And I feel privileged that I have the chance to hang with them, you know, a chance to be in their world a little bit...I think the student based, student driven environment here is really important.

Isaac's positive outlook on young people became evident in his engagement with youth as an artist mentor.

### **Principles**

The organizations in which Participants work, Youth Empowerment (YE), Neighborhood Arts (NA), and People for Change (PFC), co-exist within the same community. The Participants' dedication to social justice activism and their shared interest in change often positions the organizations in support of one another.

Although Participants have diverse backgrounds and experiences, as described in the section above, they support similar principles that stem from SJYD which include (1) being conscious of political and economic systems that influence their work, and (2) considering youth agents of change. In the next section, the principles will be described.

#### **Principle: Political and Economic Systems Influence Youth Work**

Across organizations, Participants often discussed their understanding of how political and economic systems, in particular poverty, influenced the daily lives of

young people. Poverty is a broad concept which is often connected to food and housing insecurity, unreliable transportation, and underfunded public education systems (Anyon, 2014).

Assessing the number of people who navigated poverty within a city is often accomplished by analyzing population statistics, including city wide data of subsidized lunch (Anyon, 2014). For example, in 2015, in the city in which data were collected, 23,867 children who navigated poverty attended public schools in the district (Rhode Island Education Data Reporting, 2016). In the city public schools, seventy nine percent of youth in the city received subsidized lunch, compared to 47% of students statewide. Of the 79% of students receiving subsidized lunch, 65% of the students identified as Hispanic, 17% identified as Black, 9% identified as White, 5% identified as Asian, 4% identified as multiracial and 1% identified as Native American (Rhode Island Education Data Reporting, 2016). The city statistics of public school subsidized lunch highlighted a disproportion among people who identify with different races, and most people who received subsidized lunch identified as Hispanic or Black.

The city statistics of poverty mirror the systematic and real life challenges that Participants navigate with youth in their programs. Mia (YE) reports, “I would say that like sadly they’re just the same challenges that I faced as a young person. I think that poverty is pervasive.” At the organizations, the symptoms and consequences of poverty often became apparent as Participants supported youth as they coped with food and housing insecurity, engaged in unreliable transportation systems, and maneuvered public education systems. In the following sections, each will be described.

**Example: Food and housing instability.** Food and housing instability emerged as one aspect of poverty in which youth navigate. Participants shared that youth are often engaged in supporting their families financially while balancing school work and engaging in after school activities. For example, Dylan (PFC) discussed the need for young people to work:

...youth get older and they need to find jobs to help support their families or pay for their own rent, which is something that parents will ask for a lot. So it's just—it's—yeah, a lot of the organizers' job is trying to work around those—you know, those kind of structural socioeconomic issues that come up. Participants reported that young people do not know where they will wake up or eat a meal next (described as food and housing instability).

**Example: Transportation.** Access to constant and reliable transportation emerged as another aspect of poverty in which youth navigate. Selma (YE) described the struggles young people have with transportation that include the need for money to purchase a multi-pass or a monthly pass for the bus which costs significantly more than a one ride pass that used to be available. Instead, youth found other modes of transportation, such as biking, which also posed challenges. For example, Selma described one young person's experience being hit by a car and having his bike stolen more than one time:

Then there's like my youth that ride the bike, right? He loves riding his bike. And in the span of like a couple months, his bike got stolen like three times. He got hit by a car. Like and the person didn't even stop for him. So like riding your bike is not really feasible either, right? When you're from certain neighborhoods.

Transportation impacts how young people get around the city and their access to opportunities in the city, such as engagement in after school programs.

**Example: City Wide Education Systems.** Engaging in the public education system was a robust area of data, and I included a few examples to illustrate this aspect of poverty in which youth navigate. Tension at school is one challenge that young people often maneuver. Often the structure and the expectations of school can hinder progress and stifle youth voice. Youth are under stress and pressure to perform to educational standards. Selma (YE) shared her view of the pressure youth experience in schools:

...we have youth consistently coming in here like in tears about their grades or about like how a teacher didn't give them a break on something or didn't want to listen to them about something. Or that they're not—like we have one girl, she's a senior, and the like class ranking came out. And she's been obsessing over the fact that she's not in the like 100. She got like—her class ranking was like 107 or something. And she's thinking about it, like obsessing over it...and I think like it is harder to get into college these days.

Teacher and student relationships were also shared as being stressful.

Participants from Youth Empowerment and People for Change describe the friction that sometimes occurs among young people and teachers over school policies. For example, Dylan (PFC) described the inconsistency in school policies as described by youth:

[Often young people share] 'This teacher—like my teacher suspended me for wearing headphones in class, but they didn't suspend her.' 'They let me do the make-up assignment, but they didn't let my friend do the make-up assignment.' Or, you know, 'My teacher did like a re-exam after everyone failed, but my other Spanish teacher didn't.' And so a really strong sense of inconsistency.

Young people and adults at school often disagreed on grading practices and consequences.

Participants were aware and had first-hand experience navigating symptoms of poverty, including housing and food insecurity, transportation, and the public

education system alongside youth. It became evident that Participants understood how political and economic systems influence their work, and in many cases, Participants also had similar experiences with political and economic systems in their own lives, such as Mia (YE).

**Principle: Youth are Agents of Change**

Another principle that emerged among Participants is that they consider young people to be powerful agents of change. Mia (YE) summarized the belief about youth that Participants shared, “I think – and as we know, young people are agents of change. They are the ones – they have always been the ones to create any kind of social change.” Participants were aware that their opinions of young people were different from dominant views of youth. For example, Jean (PFC) stated, “I think there’s this sort of perception that, a teenager is this wild and uncontrollable thing in our society.” This quote exemplifies the ways in which Participants shared their understanding of how young people are often viewed as uncontrollable. Furthermore, Mia (YE) unpacked the ways in which young people are systematically not valued as a result of both ageism and their actual legal rights, specifically, “I think it’s a little bit of both. It’s a little bit of the—just this is the way the world works because of laws, and then this is just like assumptions that society makes about young people...[including the idea that] youth are not as invested in solving issues in our community and in our world and in our education system—in any system.”

In contrast to dominant views of young people, Jean (PFC) shared their experience supporting a young person at a school committee meeting, and the young person’s response to the opposition she faced for engaging in social justice activism:

[the young person shared] I'm a black woman and I'm still going to be a black woman after my education. Like this stuff is going to carry with me, you know... like, 'I'm not going to change after I graduate high school and become this sort of just like, magical adult.'

Jean (PFC), and other Participants support the idea young people are agents of change, and they do not need to wait until adulthood to make an impact, specifically, Jean (PFC) shared a message to adults who work with young people.

[Jean suggested] Like this is who they are... the sort of message I want to give to any educator and any teacher and anybody's who is working with young people, is to stop thinking of youth simply as young people and recognize that like they're people—fully functioning and fully capable of anything.

More specific ways in which Participants and organizations diversely support the principle that youth are agents of change will be outlined in the case studies.

### **Conclusion**

I found that Participants shared similar principles which include (1) understanding that political and economic systems influence the everyday lives of young people, and (2) considering young people agents of change. The principles outlined by Participants connect to the principles of the SJYD ideology which highlight contextual factors that influence work with youth, and that position youth as agents of change. Although Participants shared fundamental principles which are informed by SJYD, approaches to SJYD were different at each organization. The individual case studies of each organization that outline the different processes, structures and mentoring relationships at Youth Empowerment, People for Change and Neighborhood Arts will be explained in the next chapters, followed by a cross case analysis of the three organizations.



CHAPTER V  
CASE 1: YOUTH EMPOWERMENT

*Participants: Selma, Mia, Celeste*

**Introduction**

Across artifacts like the mission statement, social media profiles, organization promotional materials, interviews with Youth Empowerment Participants, and observational data, Youth Empowerment maintains a consistent and multi-layered approach to social justice activism that, in several ways, attends to issues of power. When I discuss power, I include power dynamics, meaning the power among human relationships, and power structures, meaning hierarchical systems of power among people. In this case study, I introduce Youth Empowerment by describing the location and physical space followed by background information about the organization, and I outline how Youth Empowerment Participants attends to issues of power through (A) sharing power among adults and youth in the organizational structures, (B) developing youth knowledge that includes critical compassion, critical thinking and inquiry, and communicating in different contexts, and (C) nurturing *life mentor* relationships.

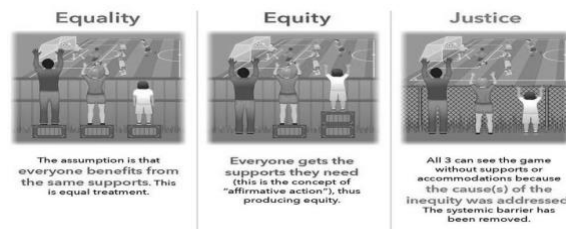
**Location and Physical Space**

Youth Empowerment lives in the south end of the city; an area with a high density of houses, chain restaurants, churches, and people walking on the street at all hours of the day and night. I regularly observed adults dressed in professional and informal attire headed to and from work, children being escorted by slightly older youth or adults, and public transportation making frequent stops. Some individuals carry their belongings with them as they hold signs that read, “Anything helps, God bless,” while others sell mobile phones, bicycles and insurance on portable roadside

tables. Because of the nearby location of three public high schools, this area is heavily populated with youth. Before and after school, young people sit at bus stops, and enter and exit corner stores with peers. In this one space, the youth and adult worlds engage with each other as toddlers do while parallel playing – each group focusing on their own priorities but rarely involving each other.

Located away from numerous youth organizations on Washington Street, Youth Empowerment is literally housed in a two-family apartment building where, as Selma described, they “take residence on the first and second floors,” and a tenant lives on the third floor. Across the street is a corner store, a church and an abandoned hospital; while vacant and occupied residences surround the rest of the area.

From the front door of Youth Empowerment, a long narrow hallway leads to a permanent room, the Social Context Room. The Social Context Room showcases pictures, quotes, newspaper articles and advertisements of diverse peoples and how they are exemplified in dominant narratives. Young people and guests of the organization have access to sticky notes where their thoughts and questions about the images and quotes are written and anonymously posted. Both adult staff and youth lead discussions following time in the Social Context Room. For example, following is a picture of an image that temporarily lives on one of the walls:



*Figure 1.* Poster from the Social Context Room. This picture is an example of an image that hung on the wall of the Social Location Room (Xiong, 2017)

People who participate in the Social Context Room may put a sticky note on top of the poster that says,

“Yes! Exactly!”

“Why can’t dominant culture understand this important difference?”

“We are not all equal in this current system.”

After sticky notes are written, there is an opportunity for people to make connections as a group and to debrief their experience engaging in the room.

Offices, a technology room, a meeting space and a bathroom also branch off the narrow railroad hallway. Sounds of young people talking and laughing and work being completed just in time for deadlines is accompanied by loud reggaetone music blaring from passing cars. Upstairs is a full kitchen stocked with snacks that diminish as the month progresses, a large gathering space that feels cramped when more than 20 people sit in a circle, and two small breakout spaces.

### **Background**

Youth Empowerment is a curated youth leadership program where young people gain experiences and skills for public speaking and making change in the community. The organization addresses challenging issues that young people face and navigate like community violence, entry into higher education, housing stability and food insecurity.. Youth Empowerment believes a more equitable and safe world is possible when young people take action in the communities in which they live (Youth Empowerment, 2018).

Young people who are enrolled in a city high school and who are interested in the program complete applications for admission. Once young people are enrolled in the program, they participate in a week-long wilderness retreat to build bonds and

community. Selma described the way in which Youth Empowerment uses the wilderness retreat as an introduction to the program by showing them aspects of the culture of the organization. For example, Selma shared, “They come for the wilderness retreat. And during the wilderness retreat, I don’t tell them what Youth Empowerment is, I show them.” Selma described showing young people that the organization is safe, that there is very little filter on what is discussed, and that members of YE form a strong support network. Specifically she stated,

I tell them, ‘You got this. You can do this. Um this is possible.’ Or I say to them, ‘I trust you to be safe.’

I make food for them. I make sure that, ‘Hey are you okay? Like are you warm enough? Are you—did you have water today?’...

Or like I will at the fire, when they tell their story, I will say to them like, ‘Thank you for sharing and that must be really hard.’ And I’ll ask the group like, ‘Is this person alone in that experience?’...So and that’s how I show them.

When young people and adults return to the city from the wilderness retreat, they begin programming to explore how youth are perceived in society with conversations that start with, “What does it mean to be a young person here in this society? How does society perceive you and how would you like to be seen?” In addition, Participants are more specific about the mission of Youth Empowerment. Selma shared,

I ask them, I say, ‘What do you think Youth Empowerment is?’ I don’t tell them at this point, I just ask. And they will often say things like, ‘Oh, it’s youth leadership. We learn public speaking, we do volunteer work, we change our community for the better. We go camping, we meet new people.’ And I say, ‘Yeah, so it’s all of that, plus you get to be whoever you want.’

In this example, Selma described her support of understanding each young person and working to develop their understanding of their own identity. This work is supported

through programming at Youth Empowerment which often bridges over years and is separated by dimensions:

1. Nucleus: core programming focused on identity development, and critical consciousness. During Nucleus, young people engage in weekly programming together as a group.
2. Concentration: programming focused on youth's individual engagement in social action. For example, young people join committees to engage in workshop planning in areas of health and education.
3. Unified: a small group of young people who become leaders of programming and mentors of other young people.

Each dimension was designed to support identity development, critical consciousness and social action.

### **Youth Are Agents of Change: Young People Can Challenge Power Dynamics**

Participants work to create more equitable and democratic power structures with youth. These dynamics contrast with unfair power dynamics where adults are set up to be in total control and position themselves as the most knowledgeable. At Youth Empowerment, participants challenge power dynamics that negatively impact youth. For example, in contexts outside of Youth Empowerment, young people are often ignored and adults assume their opinions do not matter. Celeste described this power dynamic as, "it's the idea that adults have more power because they're older and have more experience and youth are just supposed to kind of sit and listen and learn from adults. Like that we can't learn from young people, only young people can learn from us." At YE, Participants work with young people to understand and to challenge power dynamics.

### **The Structure: Power and Organizational Systems**

Guided by the mission statement, "Youth Empowerment gives the space for youth share their stories, practice leadership, and create change in their

communities” (Youth Empowerment, 2018, p.1), power is shared among youth and adults through aspects of the structure which include operations, leadership, community agreements and the organizational culture.

First, power is shared among youth and adults because they both have roles and responsibilities in keeping the organization operational. Young people are involved in aspects of the organizational leadership, including hiring staff, facilitating programming, and sitting on the board of directors. To ensure the program structure is designed to be accessible by young people, YE occurs during after school hours and during the summer. At times, youth are signed out of school, without penalty, to facilitate workshops in the community. Participants offer young people free bus passes and transportation when needed.

Second, power is shared among youth and adults because meetings are structured, designed and facilitated by both youth and adults. Adults lead meetings and support youth in designing and facilitating meetings. Prominent signage in the main programming space uses a color spectrum to outline the balance of adult and youth led meetings at the organization. The roles and responsibilities of meeting participants bridge from Infrared (adult meeting and no youth present) to Ultraviolet (youth meeting and no adults present). Throughout their time at Youth Empowerment, youth will participate in different types of leadership. Furthermore, in one meeting, the leadership may change between adults and youth often, as outlined in the following table.

INFRARED Adult Meeting – No Youth Present	RED Youth Observe and Adult Meeting	ORANGE Participate, Adults Run and Control, Youth	YELLOW Youth Assist, Adults Hold it Together	GREEN Youth Lead, Adults Guide and Support	BLUE Youth hold it together, adults assist	INDIGO Youth Run and Control, Adults Participate	VIOLET Adults Observe a Youth Meeting	ULTRAVIOLET Youth Meeting – No Adults Present
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Adults create agenda</li> <li>• Adults facilitate meeting</li> <li>• Adults lead all activities and present all agenda items</li> <li>• Adults manage decisions</li> <li>• Youth give no input</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Adults create agenda</li> <li>• Adults facilitate meeting</li> <li>• Adults lead most activities and present most agenda items</li> <li>• Adults manage decisions</li> <li>• Youth give input and make decisions as requested.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Adults create agenda</li> <li>• An adult and youth co-facilitate</li> <li>• Youth lead some activities and present some agenda items</li> <li>• Youth make decisions with heavy adult input</li> <li>• Youth do some of the talking</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Youth meet with adults to create agenda</li> <li>• Youth and adults co-facilitate meetings</li> <li>• Youth lead most activities and present some agenda items</li> <li>• Youth make decisions with some adult input</li> <li>• Youth do most of the talking</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Youth create agenda with adult input</li> <li>• Youth facilitate meeting with adult support</li> <li>• Youth lead all activities and present most agenda items</li> <li>• Youth make decisions with little adult input</li> <li>• Youth do most of the talking</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Youth create agenda</li> <li>• Youth Facilitate Meeting</li> <li>• Youth lead all activities and present all agenda items</li> <li>• Youth manage decisions</li> <li>• Adults give input as requested</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Youth create agenda</li> <li>• Youth facilitate meeting</li> <li>• Youth lead all activities and present all agenda items</li> <li>• Youth manage decisions</li> <li>• Adults give no input</li> </ul>	

Table 1. Poster from Youth Empowerment. This table is an example of an image that hung on the wall of the main programming space at Youth Empowerment. It highlights the different ways in which youth and adults share leadership in meetings.

Third, power is shared among youth and adults because both groups of people follow the same community agreements. For example, youth can speak without raising their hand, or to get up to leave the room at any time, unlike other contexts, like school classrooms. Celeste described,

Youth don't have to raise your hand in order to speak, they don't need to ask to go to the bathroom, they don't have to ask to get some water or a snack. You know, the space—you know, this space is ours. Whatever I can do, you can do.

Youth and adults frame the foundation of the community by creating agreements together. Each year new agreements are created and maintained by youth and adult community members. Celeste shared, “youth like make their own agreements and

they're in charge of them, and their voice matters here.” Examples of agreements are following table.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Treat others the way you want to be treated</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Stay Nourished (food)</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ONE MIC</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Clean after yourself</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Always Keep your Head Up/be Positive</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Start together, End together</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Be Mindful of your Language</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mindful Laughing</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use Phones Appropriately</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Be mindful of your children</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Speak for Yourself</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Advocate for each other</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What Happened at YE Stays at YE</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Don't yuck my yum</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Come from Love</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Keep each other in check, respectfully</li> </ul>

*Table 2.* Youth Empowerment Agreements. This table showcases the agreements made by Youth Empowerment young people and adults during the 2016 – 2017 programming year.

The agreements written in language that is selected by young people. For example, “keep each other in check, respectfully,” was described as keeping each other on task in a respectful way. The power of creating the agreements is shared among youth and adults. Because young people have the agency to describe and define the framework of the space, they have investment in maintaining and following the agreements.

Finally, power is shared among youth and adults because they maintain the organizational culture together. Celeste described the Youth Empowerment culture as everyone taking ownership of it, specifically she shared,

It's—you know, everyone takes ownership of them and their peers. Accountability is huge here. And you know, like any—like any blood family, you don't have to get along with everyone but you have to respect one another and understand that everyone is here for the same reason—some of the same reasons. You know, everyone came here to have a safe space, so it's not—it's not only yours. It's everyone's.



Because youth and adults take ownership of the space, the culture is maintained is through leading by example. Celeste described,

[It happens by] mostly like taking care of the space and taking care of each other. So it could be something as simple as someone leaving trash around and another youth saying, 'Hey, like you should pick that up,' rather than us always going and cleaning up after them.

Um but also staff are to be accountable as well. Like you know, we don't leave our things laying around. We kind of lead by example.

And as generations of youth keep coming, it's their job to lead by example as well, because they've experienced the culture here, they've experienced what it means to keep the safe space and welcoming. So it's like passing down the traditions.

Adults and young people live by the same agreements and pass down traditions that have maintained a safe space. Celeste's example highlights the ongoing attention that youth and adults give to creating and continuing the community culture. Community building activities, such as chek-ins (where youth share their name, age, school and an answer to the question of the day), purposeful play (play activities that has implicit purposes and values), bonding experiences (through monthly community time), and an overnight wilderness retreat at the beginning of each programming year also contribute to the continuation of the positive culture at Youth Empowerment.

Participants work to share power among youth and adults within the organizational structure. As youth participate at Youth Empowerment, they experience different dynamics of power that bridge to their development of knowledge in this area.

### **The Process: Power and Knowledge**

Youth Empowerment works develop knowledge surrounding issues of power that include critical compassion, critical thinking and inquiry, and communicating in

different contexts. Youth participate in a recursive process of developing their diverse identities, naming power dynamics and systems, understanding communication skills across contexts, and engaging in authentic experiential learning; in the following section, this process is explained.

### **Identity Discovery and Social Context**

Youth engage in storytelling and identity development through directly naming and exploring different aspects of identity including race, sexual orientation, ethnicity, and culture. Young people develop their own story, their own voice and understand the collective strengths of the group. Celeste described one example of discussing identity with youth,

A lot of what we do here is helping youth kind of figure themselves out and figure themselves out as leaders. And so a part of that is having hard conversations around things like gender or identity or stereotypes... I feel like conversations like that really help youth understand more about what's going on in the world and going on with themselves, and makes them—helps them make them feel a little more comfortable about whatever they may be going through personally or experiencing.

At Youth Empowerment, identity discovery is intertwined with understanding issues of power and social context. Social context is defined as, “the immediate physical surroundings, social relationships, and cultural milieus within which defined groups of people function and interact” (Barnet & Casper, 2001). At Youth Empowerment, participants and youth explore the ways social context factors, like systematic social inequalities impact young people. Selma shared that in her experience working with youth, many conversations, programming hours and support is dedicated to unpacking identity and power structures to explain contextual factors that influence systems of oppression, and the social context of different groups. Often, youth have only had

experience learning dominant narratives that position social mobility as an individualized feat, for example, “if they just work hard, they can pull themselves up from their “bootstraps” or “all people are equal, I don’t see color.” In contrast, at Youth Empowerment, young people learn about structural racism and the societal factors that limit the progress of underrepresented groups. Selma explains the importance of making sure youth, particularly youth of color, have a space to deconstruct identity, issues of power, and social context to understand that they are not the problem.

### **Naming Power Structures and Systems**

At Youth Empowerment, youth develop skills and knowledge to name power structures and systems. Through programming around intersectional themes including gender, race, class, and sexuality, youth participate in hands on problem posing projects and debatable discussions. The programming builds a foundation knowledge that is integrated into controversial conversations that allow youth to contemplate and name power dynamics and structures. For example, during one programming observation, facilitated by Selma, adults and youth discussed social stratification, disadvantage and social inequality. The youth participated in an activity of how wealth is distributed among the country. Youth worked with adults to understand the inequity and connect the information to different movements across the country, such as the *occupy* movement and the *black lives matter* movement.

### **Communication skills across contexts**

Youth learn to communicate across contexts. For example, young people learn how to “code switch” among peers, adults and community stakeholders. One

partnership is with a local domestic violence support house to help youth develop skills for programming to teach their peers in the community. Celeste explained,

I have Care House coming in every other week because some of our youth are going to be teaching at rec centers about healthy relationships and healthy eating. When Care House does their workshops here youth have an idea of how those workshops look and how they can—how they can tweak them to be, you know, comfortable for them to facilitate. And kind of gaining—learning the information, but also being able to teach it back out to their peers.

This is an example of how youth learn information about healthy relationships and healthy eating with an audience of peers, and how youth begin to learn how to facilitate workshops with different audiences.

### **Authentic Experiential Learning Opportunities and Initiatives**

The experiential learning opportunities and initiatives often include engagement in the following process steps.

**Planning.** Youth engage in planning workshops, community events, or meetings with the support of adults from the organization and from the outside community. For example, during one observation, Celeste was facilitating the planning process with youth. She asked youth to break into their initiative groups, and then had each team work on what they needed to get done. During this observation, Celeste made herself available for questions, but asked youth to use the knowledge that had gained in previous programming sessions to plan their own initiatives.

Another example of the planning process occurred during a partnership between Youth Engagement and a local college. The local college asked youth from Youth Empowerment to facilitate a workshop for college students and adult youth workers. The Graduate Assistant from the local college went to Youth Empowerment to assist in planning the workshop with youth.

**Facilitating.** After youth plan workshops, community events, or meetings (with the support of adults), they facilitate the workshops. For example, to continue with the example from the local college, the youth facilitated the workshop while Selma and Mia engaged in the workshop with other adult participants.

**Debriefing.** Next, youth debrief the workshops, community events, or meetings and discuss questions such as, what went well? What they would change for next time? During the college workshop, youth debriefed with the adult participants of the workshop as well as Youth Empowerment Participants.

**Improving.** After debriefing, youth make changes to a workshop, community event or meetings and if the opportunity presents itself, follows up the workshop, workshop, community event or meeting again. For example, during another workshop with the college partnership, youth engaged college students in a workshop about organizing and activism on a Thursday evening. After they facilitated the workshop and debriefed, they made changes for the workshop that was planned for the next day.

## **Conclusion**

Selma described the process of the work at Youth Empowerment using a metaphor of throwing clay. First, a base is needed, the same base is used for all the different types of pottery. After the base is formed the clay can be shaped into different pottery such as a bowl, a vase, a plate. At Youth Empowerment, young people engage critical discourse and action to help them understand themselves and the world, as young people grow within the organization, their work takes different shapes. Through this process, Youth Empowerment Participants hope that young people learn critical compassion, critical thinking and inquiry, and communication while developing and

understanding his/her/their individual identity as an activist. From engaging in community meetings and to making speeches during protests, young people learn how to recognize and act on their individual identities as activists.

### **The Relationships: Power and *Life Mentor Relationships***

The structure and process at Youth Empowerment is supported by positive adult-youth relationships where power is also addressed. Young people are respected as mature and responsible people who can handle sophisticated and controversial conversations. Celeste described the relationships at Youth Empowerment as being *life mentors* where young people and adults have space to ask questions, to build relationships of different depths among people with who they feel most comfortable, and to engage in opportunities where they can be vulnerable with each other. This approach is in contrast with how youth are often treated as immature people in other contexts including school, home, and at places of employment. Instead, participants are intentional about positioning youth as joint participants within a relationship, and how they nurture relationships with youth. I found that Participants nurtured relationships by being genuinely interested in each young person, through storytelling, and the skillful negotiation use of self.

### **Showing Interest in Youth**

Participants nurture relationships by sincerely showing interest in youth. Selma shared, “[We are] really interested in them. Like there’s actually nothing fake about it. Like you actually have to take an interest in them.” Because each adult is different, they relate to youth in different ways. For example, some adults may share jokes or interests with youth; while others give advice. Celeste made it clear that there is no

one right way to relate if youth are not scared of the adults or feel inferior to them. The different personalities, roles and responsibilities of the adults within the organization influences the depth of the relationships. Mia reports, “I think it sort of all depends on the dynamic. I think young people, like anyone else, they’re drawn to a particular like personality or style.”

### **Storytelling**

Another way that Participants nurture relationships with youth is through storytelling. Storytelling can be used to “examine the kinds of stories we tell and for imagining alternative stories that account for history, power and systematic normalizing patterns to justify inequality” (Bell, 2010, p.4). Stories help make meaning of our lives, and good stories have the power to change perceptions. Young people and Participants engage in storytelling at Youth Empowerment; however, I focused on the ways in which Participants used storytelling to build relationships with youth. During data collection, stories were shared by Participants to normalize topics that are often viewed as taboo to relate to one another and to make connections to topics of discussion. Selma described how she uses stories to engage young people,

Sometimes I’ll use like—so I have a couple of strategies with it. Like sometimes I use stories from my life to shock them. Because if I can talk about something really taboo and crazy and out there, then their guard goes down and they’re like, ‘Oh okay, we can talk about it.’ And then they’re willing—like if I’ve gone worse than them, then they’re willing to go there with me....Or I’ll use it because it’s applicable, right?...

In Selma’s example, she uses stories to normalize something that is taboo, and to add something that is applicable to the conversation. Specifically, Selma has described openly discussing sex with youth to normalize it,

I have to be able to share. But I'm not going to tell them like what position my partner and I have sex in. (Laughs) But like I am going to say to them, 'I really like—have you ever tried this position?' Or like I will talk to them generally. Because it's important. Like with the sex example - Like I think, after doing HIV prevention work, if one of my young girls knows, 'Hey, you know what? I actually really love doggystyle,' and they feel confident saying that, they're also going to feel confident saying, 'You know what else I like? Safe sex.'

In contrast, during another programming session, to help youth brainstorm about a personal experience, Selma used a personal story to help youth think about their experience with activism. At the time, young people were aware of or participated in a protest the week prior to the programming session, and Selma wanted the youth to reflect on their experiences. Selma used the story of her experience at the Protest and then her experience driving to Washington D.C. for the national Women's March. She provided details about her story and her feelings of solidarity with other women.

Other Participants shared stories to relate with youth. For example, Mia shared her experience of being poor as a young person, and her willingness to work with youth to navigate their problems,

I think when you—when you're faced with whatever problems you're faced with, like not having enough money or um, you know, not living—not living in a place where you feel safe—physically safe—if on top of all of that you feel like you have to hide those things because there's no one that you can talk to—which is definitely like I think a little bit how I felt when I was a young person.

A lot of my youth was spent like being ashamed that I was poor. You know, I felt like it was something I had to hide. And I think that that's like stuck with me a little bit as an adult.

So I think it's about like—I may not have a fix for your problem, but like I'm going to like engage in the conversation and I'm going to strategize with you about potential solutions.

Participants engaged in storytelling to normalize something that is taboo, to connect with a topic of discussion, or to relate to a young person.



## Use of Self

Participants also nurtured relationships by being conscious of their use of self. It was clear that the stories Selma, Mia and Celeste chose to disclose were intentionally selected and for specific purposes. In the field of social work, this practice is often referred to as use of self (Dewane, 2006). Use of self is defined as, “the use of self in social work practice is the combining of knowledge, values, and skills gained in social work education with aspects of one’s personal self, including personality traits, belief systems, life experiences, and cultural heritage” (Dewane, 2006). In working with youth, Youth Empowerment Participants make conscious decisions about how much of themselves that want to share. Going back to Selma’s example about sex, it is understood that discussing sexual positions with youth may be viewed as inappropriate in some contexts; however, Selma believes that if a young person is able to identify the positions he/she/they enjoys, he/she/they may also speak up about wanted to engage in safe sex. Selma explained there is a line between what is acceptable and what is not acceptable when working with young people,

In the past (at an organization that is not Youth Empowerment), one of my staff came to work high one day and I was pissed. And I was like, ‘That’s just not acceptable.’ Um and I said to him, ‘You know, I know that we have a very laidback environment with our youth and that we talk about sex and we talk about drugs.’ I said, ‘I talk about sex. I’m not going to have sex on the table in front of them.’ Like you can talk to them about being high, but like that doesn’t mean that you need to get high with them or that you’re high in front of them. (Laughs) There’s a difference. There’s a fine balance, right?

Selma’s example outlines the balance between bringing up controversial topics with young people, while maintaining a positive and appropriate relationship with them. It was evident that adult-youth relationships at Youth Empowerment broke traditional power structures between youth and adults, where adults tend to have more power.

Participants were intentional about the stories they used to highlight points, and the boundaries they felt were appropriate when working with youth to share power.

### **Conclusion**

At Youth Empowerment, power exists at multiple levels. Power is connected to individuals, where “power comes from within” (Diversity and Social Justice Terminology, n.d, p.8), and power is also connected to the group, where youth have situational power within the context of their work and their relationships with Participants at Youth Empowerment. Finally, power is connected at the societal level, where youth who are supported by Participants challenge systems of oppression at the institutional level (Diversity and Social Justice Terminology, n.d). Participants attend to issues of power through (A) sharing power among adults and youth in the organizational structures, (B) developing knowledge that includes critical compassion, critical thinking and inquiry, and communicating in different contexts, and (C) nurturing *life mentor* relationships.

At Youth Empowerment, engagement in social justice activism encompasses opportunities for critical thinking about identity and social context, transparent and critical conversations about systems of oppression, and meaningful and authentic engagement in the community, followed by reflection. In spaces outside of Youth Empowerment, youth are often not supported by adults as they critically think about themselves in relation to the structures and systems of society; however, Participants work to change the way youth understand and are positioned in power in the organization, in the community, and in society.

CHAPTER VI  
CASE 2: PEOPLE FOR CHANGE

*Participants: Dylan, Nora and Jean*

**Introduction**

People for Change Participants engage young people in social justice activism by supporting them as they organize and fight for educational policy change at the city level. In this case study, I introduce People for Change by describing the location and physical space followed by background information about the organization, and I outline how Participants support young people as they challenge education systems through (A) shared leadership roles, (B) organizing (arranging a structure of a whole group) that includes base building (recruiting more youth at each school to join the organization and/or the current campaign) and action (engaging in campaigns to create change), and (C) building *informal mentor* relationships with them.

**Location and Physical Space**

People for Change is located on Washington Street, a short distance from the heart of downtown. Two high schools, numerous youth organizations, a coffee shop, a vintage store, an electronics repair shop, a pizzeria and a bubble tea café live on the block. Sirens, noisy trucks and loud horns pierce ears; while J-Walkers scurry to avoid being hit by oncoming cars. The street and cafes are filled with cross generations of people, although the heaviest traffic comes before and after school hours.

From the street, People for Change is not visible, instead visitors are met by a heavy wood door that swings open to creaky dark brown stained stairs. The People for Change offices are located at the top of the stairs. Inside the offices, visitors are

welcomed in an office pod of four. Open doors, open ceilings and thin walls are stationary, and there seems to be little privacy in the space.

The walls hold posters that were created by young people. Notably, the community agreements scrawled in marker by adult and youth participants, stand out. Often young people and adults will be present in the space during and after school hours. Food is always available and there is a fuzzy distinction between work time, community meeting time, and what seems to be a blend of both. Meetings are often held in the largest room, and the configuration of the physical space changes depending on the topic and purpose of the meetings.

### **Background**

People for Change is a political organizing collective that supports young people in their work uniting youth to fight for education policy change. Starting in 2010, they officially became a non-profit in 2016. The mission is to build student power so young people can improve education systems and their wellbeing. Youth workers at People for Change lead campaigns with young people that make direct impact in the community with a primary focus of improving education systems. Campaigns at People for Change have included organizing to remove the standardized testing requirement for high school graduation, to offer ethnic studies coursework to high school students across the city, to impact school lunch offering in one city high school, to change the high school student eligibility for free bus passes one mile closer to the school, and to develop a student Rights campaign as a city education policy.

## **Youth are Agents of Change: Young People Organize and Resist on Their Own**

Participants from People for Change believe that young people are powerful and often organize and resist on their own without adult support. Specifically, Dylan described his view of organic youth resistance in an interview,

I think is important for the way that I at least approach People for Change and organizing, especially among young people, is that people will organize anyway, and people will resist anyway, regardless of whether or not there's—there is leadership.

It'll just be in small ways, like, 'I'm not going to do the homework because this teacher is making me angry.' Or, 'I'm not going to go—like I'm going to leave lunch because I'm sick of the way that they're running discipline during it and I need to use my phone.'

So all of those different kinds of resistance are happening all the time, and then we try to—in the way that we talk with young people and work with young people and create this space—recognize that, that people are doing things regardless of our presence.

With the foundational belief that youth will organize and resist on their own, meaning youth will pushing back against the status quo or the accepted idea of the ways things are, People for Change works to help young people coordinate their voices for educational change.

### **The Structure: Resisting and Adult – Youth Leadership**

Each of the adult staff at People for Change participates in community service outside of the organization. Dylan is heavily involved with city and state politics.

During the time of data collection, he participated in organizing and protesting violations of civil rights in the city community. Jean discussed their work in the city community to organize and establish programs for people who identify as part of the LGBTQI community, and Nora shared that she was actively involved in an immigrants rights group that worked to support the civil rights of immigrants. People

for Change Participants came with different types of experience organizing and making change in the community. The work to challenge educational policy at People for Change is led by experienced adult organizers with input from youth. Dylan outlined the role adults play in the process, “Youth are in power and can make change. Staff supports, pushes, and joins youth. Everyone teaches each other.”

During observations, I observed Participants leading the meetings with support from youth. The Participants are responsible for structuring the logistics and facilitating meetings, and supporting youth on their designated tasks as needed. Youth are involved in providing information about the educational systems that they experience, selecting campaigns, carrying out tasks assigned from meetings, fundraising with adult support, and actively engaging in protests.

Although most of structural elements of the organization are planned, facilitated and led by adults, there is space for youth to alter and add input into meetings, campaigns, tasks and initiatives. For example, in the middle of one meeting at the People for Change office, a youth delegate asked the group if she could lead an energizer. An energizer is like an ice breaker where people engage in a brief activity with the purposes such as community building, getting to know each other or getting energized. The energizer is one of many different ice breakers and community building activities that occur at People for Change to “build a group that works together,” stated Jean. At that moment, the young person assumed a leadership role and lead an energizer that changed the vibe of the room from stale to engaged. In addition to the distribution of leadership, the level of comfort between adults and

youth was often noted during data collection. Together, young people and adults worked to challenge educational policies.

### **The Process: Resisting Through Organizing (base building and action)**

The process of organizing, which includes base building and action, was inspired by the principles of ordinary time and movement time in Catholic organizing. Although People for Change does not identify as a Catholic youth space, and many different traditions of organizing influence their work, the frame of ordinary time and movement time are used to describe the organizing process at People for Change.

### **Catholic Organizing: Ordinary time and Movement Time**

Dylan described the concept of ordinary time and movement time when describing how campaigns are selected:

There is an interesting Catholic organizing idea. The idea between ordinary time and movement time in organizing. Ordinary time is when you discuss issues, but there is misalignment in beliefs, and not having consensus. If you can go up to someone and talk about an issue and they have an immediate and similar response to it, then that's a movement time. If everyone is talking about the same issue, then that's also movement time.

Ordinary time provides young people and adults opportunities to explore issues and emotional responses to situations. For instance, at People for Change, the first few years were spent in ordinary time at a few of the city's schools. Young people were frustrated with some education systems and policies, but no issues precipitated into movement time until 2013 when high stakes testing was going to be a requirement for high school graduation. Movement time happens when multiple individuals and groups identify a particular problem or issue, and begin to talk about and plan for action. To continue with the testing example, a movement time happened in 2013. In 2013, youth learned that high stakes testing would prevent some students from

graduating in 2015. As a result, young people across schools started discussing similar concerns and wanted to do something about the policy. Dylan described his conversations with youth across the city, who he said often told him, ‘You mean I’m not going to graduate because I didn’t pass this test? That’s bullshit.’” Dylan described that the comments were spread across every school. He explained, “You could go to any lunch table in the city and youth are frustrated by the exact same thing. And that’s a huge—those are moments for organizing opportunities.” The conversations across city schools turned into movement time to campaign against the test requirement graduation policy. Ordinary time and movement time will continue to be explained in the following examples of additional campaigns in which People for Change has engaged.

**Ordinary Time: Base Building – Individual School.** Since 2013, ordinary time is spent base building at individual schools. For example, Nora and Jean, the two adult organizers, support the development of this process at different public schools across the city. Base building is defined gaining support for a particular campaign or idea. During the school year, chapters are set up by People for Change members across the city in public school classrooms. A chapter is the connection between People for Change and the school. If a chapter is established, an adult from People for Change will design a schedule to engage young people directly at the school for an entire school year. People for Change adults are clear about the expectations and the risks of getting involved with the organization, specifically Dylan shared, “Youth may be working with you 95% of the time, but 5% of the time, young people are going to be mad at your principal and he’s going to be mad at you...so you are taking on a little



bit of risk here by doing this.” Once teachers commit, People for Change adults and young people work recruit members (base build) to join the chapter. Student leaders, called delegates, are voted in or assigned to each chapter. During data collection, People for Change had partnerships with seven of the nine city public schools.

When base building, youth support adult organizers by helping them build agendas and facilitate meetings, go to school lunches to speak with youth, and support the generation of ideas for campaign initiatives. Nora describes,

You know, there’s student leaders at each of those schools....And so—and then we also do base-building together with them, so like um train them in like knowing how to talk to someone who doesn’t know anything about People for Change, like talk about what we do, recruit people basically...the students at those schools.

Base building occurs at all the schools; however, not all campaigns lead to action across schools. The following section details three examples of movement time. The first is an example of movement time at an individual school highlights a change in the school lunch program. Another is an example of movement time across schools which outlines a change to the public school transportation program. The final example illustrates how movement time leads to continued work to transform policies once a campaign is won through an explanation of the ethnic studies task force.

**Movement Time: Action – Individual School.** One successful school wide campaign aimed to improve the quality and value of school lunches in one high school. The campaign started in a high school cafeteria when a student was allegedly served a moldy lunch. Young people at that school transitioned from ordinary time to movement time and took action to change the lunch offering. One student took a picture of an inedible burrito from school lunch that was shared on social media. Jean

describes, “basically there was like a small social media storm and like people kept sharing this picture and it got around and the company that provides lunch got in a panic and contacted about like setting up a meeting with students and like how can we improve the school lunch.” The situation prompted support and action for the People for Change chapter at that school. Young people and adult organizers highlighted the problem that had occurred at lunch and had conversations with members of the community, including adults in leadership roles, to make change. Because of the attention and student voices behind the conditions of the food at the school, this campaign gained momentum and led to change at that individual school.

**Movement Time: Action – City Wide Campaign, Across City Schools.**

Some campaigns move beyond individual schools to engage young people who share a common interest like affordable transportation to school or access to an ethnic studies class across the city at different schools. When People for Change engaged in a city-wide campaign across different schools, it was a two step process, first, Participants and delegates met with members of their individual schools during the week, and second, the delegates from each school met together to discuss what is happening and to distribute tasks across schools. An example of a city-wide campaign was the bus pass campaign. During the two-year buss pass campaign, youth and People for Change Participants worked to get bus passes for students who lived outside of three miles of the public high schools in the city. Transportation was an identified challenge that young people in the city navigate, so it was important to the youth of People for Change to get free passes for young people who lived in places

further than a two-mile radius. Nora shares her experience with the campaign by first describing the process of base building,

It was a campaign that a lot of people—a lot of youth were angry about—well they were angry about the situation, about not getting transportation to school. So I think it—I think it united people and like people were fired up about it.

I mean I think in general everyone cared about it. But you know, like I saw it at the schools that I was at. Like when we'd go—when we were doing base-building and telling people what People for Change was and mentioning the bus pass campaign, people would be like, 'Oh yeah, I'm so mad. Like I live 2.4 miles and I don't get a bus pass.' So that stood out. (at the time) Um you could only get a bus pass if you lived three miles away from school, which was super far.

During base building, Nora went to schools and discussed the transportation situation with young people in school. The conversations led to action which included, "A Walk in our Shoes, where they made politicians walk to school with them, and they got it reduced to 2.5 miles. So that was before I came in. And then the second year when I was around, that's when we did the rally at City Hall." Because of the campaign, youth brought the bus pass radius down to two miles and over eighteen hundred youth now get a bus pass for free.

**Transition: Rebuilding.** Much of the work at People for Change is dedicated to engaging in campaigns; however, when campaigns are won, youth and adults from People for Change also engage in the transition process. For example, after the campaign for educational studies was won, young people met with educational leaders to discuss the logistics of implementing ethnic studies curriculum. Through their engagement in an ethnic studies task force, some young people use their time to meet with educational leaders and to complete work to follow-up meetings.

## **Conclusion**

Through engaging in organizing, specifically in base building and action, members of People for Change have met success with different campaigns. Together young people and adults engage in this work. People for Change aspires to be youth led; however, currently, Participants often assume most leadership responsibilities in the organization, and the work to plan and facilitate campaigns alongside young people.

### **The Relationships: Resisting Through *Informal Mentor Relationships***

In some ways, the dynamics between adults and young people at People for Change resist traditional adult – youth relationships. At People for Change relationships mirror those described as *informal mentoring*, defined by Inzer and Crawford (2005) as, “the natural coming together of a mentor and protégé. This is done in friendship, through personal and professional respect and admiration from each to the other” (p. 33).

First, adults and young people openly and honestly communicate with one another which is one dimension of informal mentoring relationships among them. During lighthearted conversations, such as sharing jokes, and in more serious conversations, such as sharing heavy information about their pasts, Participants listen and support youth. For example, when conversations go past, “making jokes and shooting the shit really,” as Jean described, Participants listen and help solve problems with young people. For example, Nora described the support of conversations as, “I think we just try to support the best we can through conversation and like, you know, not stigmatize anything. Just be like, you know, we all go through stuff like this.”

Second, adults share personal information with young people which is another dimension of their informal mentoring relationships. Jean shares that they believe in being open and honest about their own struggles with youth. Specifically, Jean shared, “I feel like a lot of the relationships are developed through very much like open, vulnerable—or like sort of cycles of just like being sassy, you know, being honest, and then being vulnerable with our issues and being honest with them, you know, what’s happening.”

Finally, Participants are available to support young people outside of the planned program times which serves as a third dimension of the informal mentoring relationships. For example, Nora described a situation where a young person needed help after 9:00pm. The young person called her and asked her to pick her up because she was not feeling safe. With hesitation, Nora decided to give the young person a ride home because she was worried that something may happen to her.

At People for Change, Participants and young people participate in informal mentoring relationships. The informal mentoring relationships among youth and Participants have different depths because Participants connect with young people at different levels.

### **Conclusion**

Dylan shared, “People for Change is adversarial, we collaborate, and we would rather be solving the problem.” Youth engage in democratic processes to select and engage in campaigns for educational change. At People for Change engagement in social justice activism is situated around campaigns, and each campaign is accomplished by different forms of direct action. Direct actions included inviting

politicians to walk the radius from a student's home to school, protesting school policies, and making a powerful space for youth voice at city wide policy meetings.

Participants shared that it is not enough to unite youth voice, but that People for Change wants to establish support and power behind youth voice. In a final interview with Dylan, he stated that a 'seat at the table' is not enough, People for Change wants to build a powerful youth union, like a teacher's union, to change current power dynamics in policy decision making. Through (A) shared leadership roles, (B) organizing that includes base building and action, and (C) building *inform mentor* relationships, People for Change works toward challenging and changing systems of education.

CHAPTER VII  
CASE 3: NEIGHBORHOOD ARTS

*Participants: Anna, Simone and Isaac*

**Introduction**

Participants at Neighborhood Arts support youth as they explore themselves and the world through the creative arts (Freire, 2010). In the process of exploring themselves and the world, young people have opportunities to engage in social justice activism. In this case study, I introduce Neighborhood Arts by describing the location and physical space followed by background information about the organization, and I outline how Participants *work with* youth to (A) build organizational expectations and culture, (B) support artistic expression, and (C) develop *artist mentor* relationships.

**Location and Physical Space**

Neighborhood Arts is located on Washington Street, steps away from People for Change, and it is nestled between a café and a personal injury law office. “Black Lives Matter,” “Refugees Welcome,” and “Misogyny is Not Normal” signs are peppered across the cloudy windows. At first glance, it is hard to determine what takes place on the other side of the glass, and many people walk past the organization with a puzzled look, possibly wondering “what is this place?”

Neighborhood Arts is an art studio “drop in” youth organization for high school aged youth. On a typical day, people aged teen through adult are engaged in conversation or art making while ninety’s hip hop creates a laid-back atmosphere of background sound. In different stages of development, youth and adult art is on the walls, the ceilings and the tables. Young people and adult staff were often observed wearing hats, skinny jeans, clothing representing diverse cultures, glasses with and

without lenses, and bright and unusual accessories. Some people's clothing is handmade and other people's clothing speaks to their work showing bits of paint, charcoal, and pencil shavings.

The space is free flowing; both adult staff and young people engage with projects and with each other. Upon entering, newcomers are welcomed at the door by a member of the staff or a young person. The front door opens to a long and wide open studio space. Rectangular tables are placed around the front of the space and the middle of the room is met with a huge open staircase that leads to the basement floor. To the left of the stairs are open desks for staff, to the rear of the stairs lives the screen printing program materials, and to the right of the stairs are the art making supplies including paper, acrylic paints, materials for screen printing, and drawing materials. The front window space holds a variety of chairs for sitting and talking, and they are often utilized. Downstairs features a fully functioning music studio, a sewing area, computers, a small breakout room surrounded by glass walls, and a curated library.

### **Background**

The mission of Neighborhood Arts is to empower young people as leaders and creative thinking artists. Young people and adult artists, called *artist mentors*, engage in collaboration and self-directed learning. Neighborhood Arts believes in youth voice, making authentic connection, inclusion, and risk taking (Neighborhood Arts, 2018). At Neighborhood Arts, youth walk around the space, gather materials and join a group or work independently at any time during programming hours, including leaving and returning to the physical space. Simone described her initial surprise of the program model in contrast to other program models in which she has participated.



Neighborhood Arts is different than youth program models that follow a plan and have an intended arch of content to cover during the programming time spent together.

Instead, Neighborhood Arts is an authentic art studio, Simone shared,

I was surprised though at the program model, which is essentially not a program. It's a drop-in thing. And so like I was really curious about how that worked, and they'd kind of gather all these mentors in a bunch of different disciplines...

And with Neighborhood Arts, it's very much like this is an art studio or this is just like some other place you can go do a thing. And that was something that I didn't—um yeah, I just didn't—I had never really seen work before.”

Neighborhood Arts' primary recruiting strategy is word of mouth and social media. Young people tell peers about the programming, their own work and the organization. When new youth are interested in the program and arrive at Neighborhood Arts, the Student Advisory Board (SAB), a youth advisory board, gives the new student a tour. If a member of SAB is not available, another young person or adult in the space will provide a tour and share information about the program. On the tour, a Neighborhood Arts representative may say something like, “Does any of this interest you? If not, you can just come in and hang out. If you don't want to hang out with me, you can also just hang out by yourself in this end zone. Or like whatever, just pull up a chair.” There is no application process for admission to Neighborhood Arts; however, young people must bring back a waiver signed by their parent with emergency contact information on it.

### **Youth are Agents of Change: *Working with***

Neighborhood Arts believes that across the United States in communities in which many people are in poverty, young people “are systematically denied access to high-quality, creative learning opportunities” (Neighborhood Arts, 2018), and their

work aims to provide high quality creative arts opportunities for youth in the citywide community. *Working with* youth was described as (1) young people and adult staff respecting the differences and opinions of one another, (2) young people and adult staff having power and being included decision making, and (3) young people and adult staff co-constructing art and knowledge alongside one another.

*Working with* is different than working for or working against each other.

*Working for* is defined as adults doing something for young people and telling them what to do. For example, the parents of young people often tell them what to do without including them in decisions. Anna defined *Working against* as situations where adults engage in youth work for self-serving reasons; she shares, “it is when adults say they are doing things for young people but somehow, they are doing youth a disservice.” An adult *Working against* youth may say something like, “Oh like they just—they need to be saved,’ you know?, ‘And I know how to save them and I only I know how,’ Anna states. When adults try to save young people, they position youth as helpless and without agency. In contrast, *working with* positions young people with shared power with adults.

### **The Structure: *Working with* to Construct Expectations and Culture**

*Working with* young people, Participants from Neighborhood Arts build community. The purpose of building a community culture at Neighborhood Arts is to make sure everyone feels safe. Safety is sometimes thought about as deterrent from risky behaviors; however, at Neighborhood Arts, a safe space means both youth and adults, all “human beings,” feel included, heard, respected and valued. The studio motto hangs over the entrance of the space, and reads: “We take care of ourselves, we take

care of each other, we take care of the studio.” Few formal rules guide the culture; instead, members of the community, youth and adults, work together to maintain a safe space. For example, Anna explains the importance of her role welcoming youth to the space. Anna is genuinely interested in meeting each young person who comes to Neighborhood Arts and attempts to make youth feel comfortable when they walk into the organization. One way community members make youth feel comfortable is by greeting each young person when they enter and exit the space. The purpose of greeting youth people is so they recognize that people are aware of their presence. Specifically Anna shares, “one thing that I think is something we try to do as mentors and staff here at Neighborhood Arts so that youth know that we see them and we’re aware of them. And it’s nice to be greeted (laughs) and to be asked how we’re doing.”

Anna is hyper aware and present in the space, and she works to ensure that the needs of the young people are valued over all else. During programming, she does engage in other tasks such as meetings, and her own art projects; however, she always prioritizes engaging with youth. Anna reported,

Yeah, well I think it’s funny because someone else pointed this out to me. It’s really no matter what I’m doing, I’m still hyper-aware of the space... To just always be on and always be—always pay attention, I guess.... And having a meeting then I feel like people know or should know that that means that I can be—our meeting can be interrupted or like that my main priority is everything else—you know, everything else that’s going on.

Even when Anna feels the need to support a young person doing something that may not be considered safe or respectful, Anna’s interactions with members of the community are positive.

For example, she described how she supports young people in the space, “I try my best to not like yell or seem accusatory or—or aggressive, or to be like attacking in any way. Because that isn’t my intention...I want to set them up for success. So how can they be successful if they just don’t know? And sometimes I have to explain that.” Anna models positive support of situations and is not the only member of Neighborhood Arts that supports the culture. Other adults and youth help to maintain the safe space. She reports that a young person or adult may say something like, “don’t feel bad, but that’s not how we act here, how we behave here or how we talk to each other,” in a way that is not accusatory, aggressive or attacking in any way.

The intention of positive support is to set community members up for success and to not feel alienated. Often youth leaders who are elected members of the Student Advisory Board will also intervene during programming hours and support other young people as needed, Anna describes this as a “Jedi Magical Moment.” Anna describes the Jedi Magical Moment as being when she observes a young person, usually a member of the SAB, provide encouraging support to a situation where unsafe or disrespect occurred. When a young person does support a situation, Anna makes sure to follow-up with the young people involved to make sure they do not feel alienated. Anna described,

We have our studio team advisory board, and they are like the youth leaders of the space. And so often times when they are... in the room or in the area and they hear something...they know when it’s—when there’s something wrong or when there’s something happening. It (the support) comes from them instead of coming from me. And it’s like this Jedi magical moment... When that happens, I like to make sure to go in like, ‘Okay, it’s not a big deal...’ so that the person or the student who does the thing doesn’t feel alienated, because that’s not what we want either.

The positive culture is cultivated by constant interaction, support and attention. Adults *work with* young people to maintain the safe space. The positive and safe culture of Neighborhood Arts frames a space for adults to *work with* youth as they engage in critical thinking through the creative practice of artmaking together.

### **The Process: *Working with* to Create Art**

Neighborhood Arts engages youth in creative practice to support their artistic development. The organization defines the process of creative practice “A creative practice helps us to create new sites of creative experimentation and transformation; spaces in which we can create, collaborate, document, reflect, and most importantly, engage. It is meant to be accessible, loose, and most importantly, *relational*” (Neighborhood Arts, 2018). This quote exemplifies another dimension of *working with*.

*Working with* is a collaborative approach to engaging young people, and at Neighborhood Arts, Participants *work with* youth as they engage in (1) creating art for themselves, defined by Simone as a strategy for self-reflection and individual change. Simone suggested, “Like you can paint, you can draw, you can even write poems that are sort of like not invested or interested in what is currently happening in the world in a way, and know that that is a thing that you do for yourself and in your own time and it’s like personal and it’s not about you sharing that publicly.” Participants also *work with youth* as they (2) sharing art with others. In this part of the process, Simone argues art becomes projected into the world and has a different consequence and meaning than when one creates art for personal refuge. During both processes of creating art for self and sharing art with others, young people are encouraged to reflect

on their art practices. Simone referenced a Nina Simone quote that went something like, “How can you be an artist and not reflect the times?” to exemplify this point. In the following section, creating art for self and sharing art with others is explained.

### **Creating Art for Self**

Participants *work with* youth by engaging youth in programming to gain skills and knowledge of the arts and to develop their individual artistic voice (Neighborhood Arts, 2018). Youth and adult staff engage in art making projects such as screen printing, music recording, sewing, painting, drawing and writing poetry with each other and with *artist mentors*. For example, during an observation of Isaac, the resident screen printing mentor, a student approached him to learn how to make a screen printing design for the first time. Isaac gave the young person a tour, showed her examples of work and engaged her in the process of designing an image and screen printing it onto a shirt. When reflecting on the observation, Isaac shared the process of introducing screen printing to young people,

They come in and I’ll kind of introduce them to the process if they seem to need it...So kind of give them a quick list of possibilities, and then try and see them through whatever process they choose. So if they’re like, ‘Oh, I think Photoshop, I think this, I think the computer, I think—you know, uh let’s try that.’

I feel like that process that you saw was very hands-on, and sometimes it’s very hands-off and like, ‘Okay, I’m going to let you work and figure this out,’ and give them a couple of tools to do that, whether it’s like, ‘Well, here’s this one adjustment setting in Photoshop that you can use. Play with this back and forth.’ And then try—but try to get them to a point where they’re like, ‘Okay, I can see how this is going to go. I can see where—what I’m trying to get to. Isaac points out the process can be hands on and hands off depending on the individual student which, highlights how other adults and youth interact with each other at Neighborhood Arts through *working with* them. Young people and adult staff work

independently, and in groups. Some projects are started, and not finished; while, others are completed at the discretion of each young person.

Participants were observed supporting youth in their art making processes and working side by side with young people on their own art projects. Because the program is a drop in program that is driven by student choice, youth select and engage in art making initiatives and other activities, and have agency in deciding how they will execute them. The structure of the program is in contrast with traditional approaches to art education where young people work to complete individual representations of an art making task, such as a landscape watercolor painting, or a self portrait drawing. At Neighborhood Arts, youth have the power and choice to decide how they spend their time and the projects in which they engage. If young people do not want to work on art, there are opportunities for other interactions. For example, sometimes young people and adults play games such as Uno, while others use the computers and help each other with academic school work. The conversations that occur during programming time include topics about current events, trends and the world. Participants *work with* young people by letting them drive their individual art making processes.

### **Sharing Art with Others**

At Neighborhood Arts, Participants *work with* young people as they create and share art with others. Sharing art with others provides another opportunity for adult staff to create and share art with others alongside youth. A distinction between creating art for self and sharing art with others was described as a transition, Simone stated,

Yeah, and I think sometimes especially when you're young, you sort of like look at art as like an escape, as this thing to do that's like sort of like outside the stresses and craziness that's happening in the world. And I guess like really sharing with these—young people that perhaps part of growing up is to know that yes, art can be a refuge, but sometimes it has to creep—especially if you're going to decide to call yourself an 'artist,' that there's like a step after that.

And so when does your art not get to be just a refuge anymore? Because you've committed to that as your work. So I think that's the thing that I find myself thinking about, is like how can you be an artist and reflect the times? And how that is quite literally like one of your job qualifications. Like otherwise it's a hobby.

The transition between keeping art to oneself and sharing art with the world is supported at Neighborhood Arts. Events such as gallery openings, fundraisers and holiday markets are produced to showcase the different types of work that young people create at Neighborhood Arts and to provide a space for exchange. Some young people choose to showcase work and sell work at holiday markets while others use their art to engage in political activism. For example, in a conversation about Isaac's support of a political protest, he shared his experience supporting a student who wanted to make a protest sign that said, "Fuck Trump." The idea for the sign was started by a student, and Isaac supported her as she discussed, created and reflected on the impact the sign had in the community, the discussion went like this:

So like screen-printing, ... people can make multiples. And I definitely don't push like, 'Oh, do a political thing,' because that's up to them. And one student was like, 'Can I just make a thing that says *Fuck Trump*?' And I was like, 'Yeah, like I'm sure other people feel that way and other people will like that poster.' You know, 'Like I'm sure you'll get good feedback on that from a certain crew.' ...Another person was like, 'Yeah, let's do it. I mean people might—it might be—you might have some complicated conversations, but people will probably be psyched.'

When the print was completed, it went up into a window. The print was met with opposition as Isaac described, "Then somebody from the neighboring school across



the street... called and complained and then it became a thing ...and then it was on the news. Isaac reflected with her about her print as she discovered the new meaning it took on in the community.

Yesterday the student was like, 'Look at this. There's this whole other thing, this whole other statement.' Like it was like—She was like, 'Oh, I got on the news. But like I don't know why these people didn't like it because it had a curse word. Whatever. Like high school students, they know what curse words are.'

Adults and young people use Neighborhood Arts as a space for individual artistic development and for connecting art to the world. Because the “Fuck Trump” sign went up in a window, the city community could form and share opinions about it, including opinions that differed with those of the youth artist. When art is showcased in the world, it is not always received in a positive light. In this example, Isaac supported the young person in the process of creating this work, and supported her after she was critiqued by members of the community. He states, “You know, so I think—and that's less of like my work, but more of like, oh, how does print-making or like making art that goes out into the public then engage you with society, you know?” Participants *work with* youth by supporting their individual art making interests, as well as, supporting them as they share their art with the community.

## **Conclusion**

*Working with* young people to support creative processes is different than traditional art educational spaces. For example, in traditional art education spaces, young people sign up to learn an artistic skill, and through art classes, work to produce art while utilizing the new skill, such as learning how to throw pottery, draw human figures, and painting still life. Instead, through the structure of a ‘drop in’ program,’

young people have more agency in how they spend their time, what they work on, and who they talk to, as well as, opportunities to critically reflect, think and communicate about how their art connects to themselves and to the world.

### **The Relationships: *Working with Through Artist Mentoring***

The artistic mentoring process at Neighborhood Arts is another dimension of the ways in which they *work with* youth. *Artist mentors* are positioned as guides in the learning process, and they are hired by a committee of youth and adults. The young people ultimately decide who they want to work with and what type of art they want to make. *Artist mentors* are hired for their (1) ability to relate to young people and (2) diverse expertise in different art media. Of the three Participants selected for this study, two were *artist mentors*, and one was the Neighborhood Arts studio organizer.

Neighborhood Arts Participants have diverse art backgrounds, education and experiences. Youth are given support and advice as they develop their artistic skills. Adults are not “assigned” to young people at Neighborhood Arts instead youth choose to engage with as many or as few adult mentors as they wish. The adult and youth *artist mentor* relationships mimic the ways in which authentic adult artists engage with one another. The conversations and the uncensored ways in which people interact at Neighborhood Arts took shape in ways such as mentors and youth discussing internet posts. For example, a young person showed Simone an internet post of a young white person who dressed up as a thief for culture day. The meme claims, “dressed like a thief for culture day bc white people steal everyone else’s culture.”

dressed like a thief for culture day bc white people steal everyone else's culture



*Figure 2.* Meme that was discussed at Neighborhood Arts. This picture represents an image that was shared and discussed during programming time at Neighborhood Arts (Sieczkoqski, 2016).

Simone and a group of young people informally discussed the internet post, and during the conversation, it was observed that Simone asked the young people's opinions of the post first, instead of sharing her own opinion. Young people often sought mentorship for art making processes, and for advice about relationships, family dynamics, world politics and their lives.

Participants engaged different mentoring approaches when working with young people. For example, Isaac intentionally made his work with young people about the process of art making, instead of creating a product. For example, Isaac was interested in teaching the skills and knowledge of screen printing instead of focusing on collecting a product from screen printing. Isaac describes his view that high school teachers often focus on the reproducible goal or a learning goal while his approach supports each individual student and their art making process. He believes the student-driven environment is important, and described the work done with youth at

Neighborhood Arts, “is similar to like if I were working with um like artists to make prints, like adult artists to make prints.” Isaac usually positions himself at the screen printing area and youth come to him. During one observation, Isaac went downstairs to get a book from the library with a young person, and when he returned he had engage two other young people who had questions about their own screen printing projects.

In contrast, Simone’s process of mentoring was different than Isaac’s approach. Sometimes Simone positions herself in a space around a group of young people who are working on their own projects and she joins what they are doing. At other times, she gathers her own materials and sits near a group of youth to engage in a project. Simone intentionally integrates herself into the environment, and is generally engaged by youth that she knows. Young people approach her to ask about topics such as how she is doing, or how they can be involved in something she is doing. If she does not know the student, Simone will engage him/her/them and start a conversation by asking about the work. Simone’s process of mentoring youth is best described by depicting the ways in which she engages youth in poetry writing. Simone describes,

My approach has always been to not even kind of bill myself as the like creative writing or storytelling mentor. I just happen to be (laughs) a lady who’s like around to talk. And that’s sometimes why I do a lot of the stuff with the collaging, so my hands could be a little busy but it kind of feels like it sort of seems like I’m just hanging out. So I’m kind of like the every-mentor, except like I really don’t know how to screen print or actually paint or like do (laughs) those kind of like hard material crafts...but just like being there to kind of drum up conversation or feelings or questions.

The close mentoring relationships and authentic conversation topics create a support system for youth to explore their individual artistic abilities, and their transition to sharing their art making with the organizational and city wide community.

A range of *artist mentoring* approaches emerged at Neighborhood Arts that include relationships that begin from the shared experience of art making, such as Isaac's approach, or the relationships that begin from conversations about individuals, experiences, and the world and lead to art making, such as Simone's approach. An added layer to this process is youth choice. Youth have the choice of who they engage in conversation, and who they create art alongside. The *artist mentoring* relationships are different to relationships such as teacher to student, or parent/guardian to child where adults are often in the position of power. Furthermore, the mentoring relationships are collaborative and supported by a nontraditional education setting. The adult – youth relationships are not intertwined with pre-determined achievement goals or punitive consequence structures for not completing work that are often observed in different educational settings. Instead, they are focused on relational processes grounded in mutual respect and growth on both sides. Participants often shared that their work with youth energizes their own art making.

### **Conclusion**

Through *working with* youth to (A) build organizational expectations and culture, (B) support artistic expression, and (C) develop *artist mentor* relationships, Simone, Anna and Isaac engage young people in dimensions of social justice activism. At Neighborhood Arts, creating signs for protests is one concrete way that young

people and Participants engage in social justice activism; however, additional engagement in social justice activism also occurs.

The co-constructed culture and process of art making with youth, who don't traditionally have access to spaces where critical thinking and reflection is engaged, is another way in which Participants at Neighborhood Arts engage youth in social justice activism. Through art making, young people process and connect their thoughts to their art, to their peers and to their community. This process is designed to lead them to a better understand themselves and the world. Furthermore, the ways in which youth are valued and integrated in the structure and the relationships of the organization provide a space oriented toward supporting youth as they explore their thoughts and relationship to broader contexts and systems. Neighborhood Arts' progressive approach to supporting critical and conscious thinking contrasts with traditional education models; therefore, positioning the approach as separate from the dominant way of engaging young people in arts education.

## CHAPTER VIII SOCIAL JUSTICE ACTIVISM ACROSS CASES

### Introduction

By unpacking elements like structure, process and mentor relationship in each case study, many differences emerged in the way in which Participants engage youth in social justice activism, as summarized in the following chart.

	Youth Empowerment	People for Change	Neighborhood Arts
Principle: Youth are Agents of Change	Young people can challenge power dynamics	Young people will organize and resist on their own	<i>Working with</i> to construct learning
Structure	Power between adults and young people is attended to within: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>the organizational structure;</li> <li>planning and facilitating meetings;</li> <li>following the same community agreements;</li> <li>maintaining the organizational culture.</li> </ul>	Organizing with youth through adult – youth leadership: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Most of structural elements of the organization are planned, facilitated and led by adults with youth support.</li> <li>Adults are responsible for structuring the logistics and facilitating meetings, and supporting youth on their designated tasks as needed.</li> <li>Youth are involved in providing information about the educational systems in which they experience, selecting campaigns, carrying out tasks assigned from meetings, fundraising with adult support, and actively engaging in direct action.</li> </ul>	<i>Adults work with</i> youth to create <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A safe space;</li> <li>positive culture.</li> </ul>
Process	Youth and adults challenge power by: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>the exploration of identity and social context;</li> <li>young people and adults as they openly; name power structures and systems;</li> <li>communicating across contexts;</li> <li>engaging in authentic experiential learning opportunities and initiatives.</li> </ul>	Adults organize with youth to create educational change through: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Ordinary Time involves base building and discussing issues.</li> <li>Movement Time involves taking action at individual schools and across schools depending on the campaign.</li> </ul>	<i>Adults work with</i> youth to support creative practice as young people: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>create art for self;</li> <li>share art with others;</li> <li>learn a craft through apprenticeship.</li> </ul>
Mentor Relationship	Power between adults and young people is attended to through <i>life mentor</i> relationships. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Adults genuinely show interest in youth;</li> <li>Storytelling is used to build bonds between adults and youth;</li> <li>Adults are conscious of their use of self in their interactions with young people.</li> </ul>	Organizing with youth through <i>informal mentor</i> relationships: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Adults communicate and support young people in informal ways;</li> <li>Adults are open and honest with young people about their own struggles;</li> <li>Adults are available to support young people whenever needed.</li> </ul>	<i>Working with</i> youth through <i>artist mentor</i> relationships: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Adults relate to young people.</li> <li>Adults have diverse artistic expertise.</li> <li>Adults engage young people in the art making process and build relationships which start from the shared experience of art making.</li> <li>Adults intentionally place themselves in conversations with young people and build relationships that sometimes include art making.</li> </ul>
<b>Engagement in Social Justice Activism</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Opportunities for critical thinking about identity and social context.</li> <li>Transparent and critical conversations about systems of oppression.</li> <li>Meaningful and authentic engagement in the community, followed by reflection.</li> <li>Development of individual activist identity</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Youth engage in democratic processes to select and engage in campaigns for educational change.</li> <li>The work is situated around the campaigns, and each campaign is accomplished by different forms of direct action.</li> <li>People for Change works to establish support and power behind youth voice.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Creating protest signs.</li> <li>The co-constructed culture and process of art making.</li> <li>Through art making, young people process and connect their thoughts to their art, to their peers and to their community.</li> <li>Youth engage in critical thinking to understand themselves and the world.</li> <li>Youth are valued and integrated in the structure and the relationships of the organization.</li> </ul>

Table 3. Social justice activism across organizations. This table represents the ways in which each case study engages young people in social justice activism.

The case studies and the chart above illuminate the differences in approaches and engagement in social justice activism. At Youth Empowerment, Participants

support each young person as he/she/they discover their sense of self and individual purpose of engaging in social justice activism; while, at People for Change, Participants support youth as they reach consensus, build youth power, and address unfair policies as a group. The distinction between focusing on the individual or focusing on the group summarize two very different approaches to this work. A third approach, as highlighted by Neighborhood Arts, connects young people with opportunities to engage in social justice activism through providing a safe space for youth to explore themselves in relation to broader contexts through the creative process of art making. Youth Empowerment and Neighborhood Arts are more focused on self-in-context while People for Change is more about groups finding consensus and organizing to change policies.

Each organization, in their own ways, supported young people as they resisted the status quo. At Youth Empowerment Participants work to address the way youth are positioned in power in the organization, in the community, and in society, at People for Change Participants work with youth toward challenging and changing systems of education, and at Neighborhood Arts Participants engage in a progressive approach to supporting critical and conscious thinking.

During my time immersed in the organizations, the opportunity arose for Participants from the three organizations to participate in direct action, in the form of a planned protest. Participants from Youth Empowerment, Neighborhood Arts and People for Change joined young people as they planned and participated in a protest of the inauguration of the 45<sup>th</sup> president of the United States, Donald J. Trump. This event further highlighted the different ways in which Participants across organizations



support youth as they engage in social justice activism. In the sections below, I describe the Protest and then outline the differences in roles and responsibilities that Participants assumed, and the impact of the Protest.

### **The Protest**

The Protest made national news. It was January 16, 2017, and young people across the city planned to leave school in the middle of the day and protest the presidential inauguration. Jean (PFC) explained, “The point is– they want to get out there and show that they have a voice and state an opposition.”

### **The Inception**

The idea of the Protest began before winter break. At youth organizations and People for Change school chapters across the city, young people expressed frustrations about the results of the recent presidential election, and they were concerned about the policies that Trump supported on the campaign trail, including (1) policies that support deportation and strict border control, and (2) policies that take away civil rights of underrepresented populations. Furthermore, young people were frustrated by the negative, patriarchal and divisive rhetoric in which Trump engaged. Young people felt that although they didn’t have the right to vote, they did have the right to voice their opinions. Jean (PFC) describes the process of joining with Youth Empowerment and other organizations across the city to discuss how young people were feeling about the political climate and ways youth could make their voice heard.

So the process for that, to be honest, started from multiple organizations. It was like People for Change, Youth Empowerment and other organizations that came together. And we were all just sort of like, you know, seeing where the political climate was going and feeling frustrated and sort of scared. And so there was like a lot of emotion involved in that....

So it was like a split. And so like half the young people were like, ‘Yes,’ half the young people were, ‘No.’ And so we didn’t actually think it was going to happen.

Jean (PFC) shared that during the school winter break, not many young people were talking about the Protest; however, when youth came back to school, many were fully invested in their desire to make it happen. Two weeks before the Protest, the real planning began. Jean described the energy as explosive and reported that youth said, ‘We have to do this. We have to do this.’

### **Planning the Protest**

Tension arose among young people, youth leaders and adult community members. The Protest was going to happen, but it faced criticism, and Participants met challenges with people who had opposing views of the Protest. For example, adults from the community shared their critique of the Protest on a public social media application (Facebook, 2018), adults posted messages such as,

“These idiots don’t even know the English language anything to avoid education,”

“Expel their asses! You don’t care enough for your public education that’s federally funded to protest OUR next president!!! Oh, and don’t plan to go on welfare either... that’s federally funded too,”

“Fuck them they can’t even vote. Go to fucking school and learn how to analyze politics so you can take part in it when you’re an actual functioning adult and not a pimple faced asshole trying to get out of school,”

”Youre all morons... he is your president.. and mine and everyone elses.. enjoy the pepper spray.”

In the face of adversity, Participants from Youth Empowerment and People for Change worked to bridge adult allies with youth, and planning the logistics of the Protest. Participants and young people from Youth Empowerment and People for

Change did most of the planning and facilitation of the Protest, and once the Protest gained momentum, Neighborhood Arts opened its space to youth across the city for scheduled poster making sessions.

### **The Main Event**

The day of the Protest arrived quickly, and Jean (PFC) reflected on the moment young people walked out of their school building:

When the students left the school building, it was—it was great. It was a beautiful feeling to like—to welcome them. You know, some of them were hesitant... We got like about fifty students to walk with us (from that school), and it was like a great—just like a great group of students who—you know, some of them are very vocal about how they feel and the political environment, and some of them are not. And it was like great to like see them on like the same footing and in the same place together, shouting through the streets of our city...

Jean (PFC) describes this experience as beautiful. They were in the same place and with the same footing, shouting in the street with young people. It took Jean (PFC) and the group thirty minutes to arrive at the meeting space, and when they arrived, Jean (PFC) recalls his astonishment of the number of adult allies joined to support the Protest. He describes,

When we arrived at the meeting point, it was beautiful just to see and be welcomed by this massive crowd of people, of students coming together. And it was just like this sort of like euphoric feeling, like all this hard work finally paid off. And it was nice to see like the—I was expecting sort of like a thin band of adults around people. But it was like great to see like hundreds of adults, you know, in this sort of like semi-circle, crescent moon shape barrier.

Adult allies were positioned in a crescent moon shape around the steps of the statehouse. Alongside young people, adult allies were cheering and clapping after young people made speeches. At the Protest, only young people had access to the

microphone, for this day was for them; however, behind the scenes, the Protest was supported by adult allies.

As an observer, I was present at planning meetings before the Protest, at the statehouse during the Protest, and after the Protest, I spoke with one participant from each organization about their experiences to better understand the dynamics of the relationships of the three organizations around this event. I found that two themes emerged (1) each organization fulfilled different roles and responsibilities in the Protest, and (2) Participants from each organization perceived the impact of the Protest in different ways.

### Roles and Responsibilities

There was a mix of strengths from each organization that were bridged during the planning, facilitation and reflection of the Protest. Each organization assumed different roles and responsibilities in the Protest as described in the following.

Responsibility	Youth Empowerment	People for Change	Neighborhood Arts
<b>Planning the Protest</b>			
Faced opposition to the Protest	Yes	Yes	Yes
Led the Planning and Facilitation of the Protest	Yes	Yes	
Hosted planning meetings	Yes		
Facilitated planning meetings	Yes	Yes	
Participated in planning meetings	Yes	Yes	Yes
Coordinated adult allies	Yes	Yes	
Gathered supplies, snacks and first aid kit materials	Yes		
Supported young people as they wrote speeches	Yes		
Coordinated press briefs, and delegating tasks	Yes	Yes	
Listened to youth's fears and concerns, as well as, their vision for the Protest	Yes	Yes	Yes
Shared and clarified information about the Protest with young people	Yes	Yes	Yes
Recognized and responded the needs of young people	Yes	Yes	Yes
Networked with individual schools, the Superintendent and the city Police	Yes	Yes	
Opened the organization for poster making			Yes
<b>Day of the Protest</b>			
Greeted young people as they left school.	Yes	Yes	Yes
Walked with young people to the meeting place.	Yes	Yes	Yes
Supported young people at the Protest	Yes	Yes	Yes
<b>After the Protest</b>			
Cleaned up	Yes	Yes	
Debriefed with young people	Yes	Yes	Yes
Participated in a school committee meeting with the Superintendent of city schools	Yes	Yes	
Coordinated adult allies to make calls on behalf of young people		Yes	

Table 4. Roles and responsibilities of the Protest. This table illustrates the different responsibilities members of each organization assumed during the Protest.

For example, Youth Empowerment and People for Change were two leading organizations of the Protest. As organizations, they already had pipelines set up with other community organizations and schools, and they used their connections to engage in dialogue within the community to plan and facilitate the Protest. Youth Empowerment is known for their youth leaders, People for Change is known for their campaigns and ability to organize young people, and Neighborhood Arts is known for supporting youth voice, and through these strengths, each organization assumed different roles and responsibilities in support of the Protest.

### **Youth Empowerment: Roles and Responsibilities**

**Youth Empowerment preparation for the Protest.** As an organization that led the planning and facilitation of the Protest, Youth Empowerment was involved in many aspects of the event which included listening supporting young people and supporting them as they planned for the event, coordinating adult allies and prepared supplies and speeches with youth.

*Listening and Supporting young people.* A lot of time was spent listening to fears and concerns of youth, for example, Mia (YE) described her experience listening to young people before the Protest,

A lot of the time before the Protest was spent just listening to the young people. I say ‘just,’ but like listening to the young people who were engaged around the action and who were part of planning it – listening to their concerns, their fears, what their vision was for it, and then strategizing with other adults to support what they [youth] envisioned.

Mia (YE) listened and strategized with young people, which included the need to coordinate adult support of the Protest. Youth Empowerment Participants had a

primary concern that other adults would try to take power away from youth, or drown out their voice to propel their own agenda.

***Coordinating Adult Allies.*** Participants spent most of the time coordinating and preparing adult allies. This process included inviting adult allies to Youth Empowerment to discuss the Protest and to damper adult agendas that posed a risk for silencing youth voice, for example, at one planning meeting, the idea of making the Protest around police brutality was brought up and dismissed because it was not what the young people wanted to protest. Outside of Youth Empowerment, Participants such as Selma, met with police officers, the Superintendent of Schools and coordinated medical staff to make contingency plans in the event of an emergency. Selma (YE) shared, “we wanted nothing to go wrong that day.”

***Preparation.*** Furthermore, Participants responded to the needs of young people by working with them to prepare supplies, such as gather donations of water and supplies, coordinate the Protest meeting place, rent sound equipment. Young people from Youth Empowerment prepared speeches for the Protest with support of Participants.

***Youth Empowerment day of the Protest.*** During the Protest, Participants of Youth Empowerment assumed similar roles to Participants from People for Change and Neighborhood Arts. For example, Participants waited at different city schools for young people to greet young people as they left the school building in the middle of the day, walked across the city with young people to the Protest, and supported the Protest by encouraging speakers and participating in the event.

**Youth Empowerment After the Protest.** At the conclusions of the Protest, Participants from Youth Empowerment cleaned up, debriefed with individual young people and groups of young people during programming the following weeks, and attended a school committee meeting to debrief the day with members of the committee, Superintendent of city schools, and parents.

### **People for Change: Roles and Responsibilities**

**People for Change preparation for the Protest.** Along with Youth Empowerment, members of People for Change led the Protest. The role of People for Change Participants was primarily focused on using their established pipeline to different schools to recruit young people to participate and to clarify misconceptions about the Protest. For example, People for Change Participants gained and continue momentum for the Protest. They were clear that each young person had a choice in his/her/their participation in the initiative. Jean also describes conversations that they had with youth who were not current Participants of People for Change. The conversations included opportunities to clarify information and to make sure the facts about the Protest were accurate. Jean (PFC) describes their work clarifying misconceptions with youth,

Because there were like all these rumors and misconceptions, so like talking about, you know, like the safety plan and talking about like what were—what we're doing to make sure that students don't get in trouble and what—you know, what are your rights. Because like you have a right to protest and a lot of students don't feel—they didn't know that. So I think a lot of my work was just sort of education work and making sure the facts were in line with reality.

Furthermore, because of their existing relationships with youth across the city with their established networks in schools, People for Change Participants engaged with youth throughout the planning process. Jean engaged members of different

schools in the process of organizing and base building during the planning stages. The process was like other campaigns where Jean went to schools and had discussions with young people about the campaign, to get youth input- Jean (PFC) describes,

My role was really to sort of like keep the conversation going and sort of like really like flesh out the idea fully in various chapters and ask people like what do they think about, ‘What do you want to do with it? Like this is an idea, but like you don’t actually have to participate if you don’t want to. Like so if you do want to, what is your level of engagement?’ And sort of like collecting those people who have said that they really want to do something....

Participants from People for Change did participate in co-facilitated meetings with Participants from Youth Empowerment to coordinate adult allies as well.

**People for Change day of the Protest.** Like Participants from Youth Empowerment, Participants from People for Change were stationed at different public schools to walk with young people to the Protest. At the Protest, Participants supported the young people and participated by listening to their speeches and cheering them on.

**People for Change after the Protest.:** Participants contacted adult allies who said they would make calls on behalf of young people who left school during the day, in hopes that young people would not get punitive consequences. For example, it was speculated that one school planned to have students write essays as a punishment for leaving school during the day. Furthermore, Participants debriefed the Protest with young people during programming, and were also attended the school committee meeting with Youth Empowerment the following week.

### **Neighborhood Arts: Roles and Responsibilities**

**Neighborhood Arts preparation for the Protest.** Once the Protest gained momentum, Neighborhood Arts became supported the Protest by opening the



organization for poster making. Many other non-profits did not choose to publically support the Protest because it was controversial. Neighborhood Arts provided their space for youth to congregate and create objects and art for the Protest alongside adult allies. Isaac (NA) reflected on his experience supporting the Protest,

I think Neighborhood Arts really like supported the Protest—you know, we actually talked about this or like there was kind of a larger conversation. Nobody was like against it, but they were kind of like, ‘We see you participating in the Protest and supporting the Protest as like supporting youth voice, and that’s actively in the mission of Neighborhood Arts, is like youth voice and youth leadership.

Neighborhood Arts Participants viewed the Protest as an expression of youth art and youth voice, and were supportive of young people that decided to engage in the event, and, some although they were not leaders of the Protest, some Participants from Neighborhood Arts volunteered to participate in the Protest.

**Neighborhood Arts day of the Protest.** Participants from Neighborhood Arts also engaged in greeting young people who walked out of school, walked to the Protest, and supported the Protest.

**Neighborhood Arts after the Protest.** Participants had conversations about the Protest with young people during regularly scheduled programming time the next week.

Across organizations, the Protest was supported in different ways. Youth Empowerment brought their integrity to make the Protest safe and meaningful for young people, People for Change brought their communication pipeline and their ability to organize youth, and Neighborhood Arts brought their support, in a time where support was controversial, and their space for artmaking. Selma (YE) described

the mix of strengths led to “a perfect storm of support.” The perceived impact of the shared engagement is social justice activism it is described in the next section.

### **Protest Impact**

In addition to adopting different roles in the Protest, Participants across the three organizations reported the ways in which the experience was transformative for youth, for youth workers and for adults. The ways Participants spoke about the impact of the protest further reveals the differences among their approaches to Social Justice Youth Development.

### **Youth Empowerment: Impact on an Individual**

Mia (YE) shared her understanding of the impact on the transformation of one young person,

I think that they (youth) feel so proud and so powerful. I don't know how something—like doing something like this as a young person doesn't change you forever. Like I really feel like I look (one young person) and I feel like he's changed forever like by having done this. He was very involved in the planning of the walkout and in meeting with the administration at his school and also in giving like guidance to young people who did and did not want to participate in the Protest.

Mia's (YE) explanation of the impact of the Protest is closely aligned with the work that is done at Youth Empowerment to provide a space to challenge dynamics of power.

### **People for Change: Impact on the Group**

Jean (PFC) shared how the pushback from the Protest impacted their future work at the organization,

I think that definitely like—you know, when you do activist work like this, it's sort of necessary to have that tension, I think, you know? So I think that pushback—and it was really like a lot of negativity, just ugly negativity—like

death threats and like people wishing harm on students. And it was just—we were flabbergasted and just like, ‘Whoa, what?’

But you know, like I think it definitely supported our cause and definitely made us like want to do this more...how do you communicate a message and how do you poke at the right places rather than just sort of like, you know, yelling at someone on the internet. Thinking about picking your battles and like, you know, how do you do things the right way, regardless of what people are saying about you—that sort of thing.

Jean (PFC) was motivated to continue to organize and act with People for Change.

His use of “us” in the sentence, “made us want to do this more” outlines his view of the potential power of organizing and engaging in action with young people. They also recognized how to identify negative tension and to be confident in the work that is being done at People for Change. On a more person level, Jean (PFC) described their own experience as being empowering. They shared,

And it was—you know, it was like really inspiring and empowering for me to be in that space and know that like the work I do with young people isn’t just this like, you know—on an individual basis, you know? That like we can sort of gather in the masses and really have an impact and sort of force a conversation.

Jean’s description of the impact of the group further highlights his support of building youth power to make change.

**Neighborhood Arts: Impact on Youth and Adults.**

Isaac (NA) explained his take on the Protest and the transformative outcome of the experience for youth and adults:

Youth really saw their power and their like unity. And I think that—and I think just the fact that like people were daring enough to protest was really impressive...they just wanted to get out there and show that they have a voice and state an opposition.’ That’s like really crucial... they seem to have met their goals and be psyched about what they proved to themselves. And also like they inspired a lot of grown-ups, I think.

Isaac's (NA) statement is aligned with the strengths based views of youth that are supported by Neighborhood Arts. At Neighborhood Arts, young people are valued and adults are open to learning with youth. The collaboration and partnership between adults and young people is framed by youth leadership, and the agendas of young people. Adults work to support that leadership in ways that does not diminish the interests, needs and vision of youth.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the Protest provided a frame that further highlighted the individuality of each organization as well as their shared vision of supporting young people as they engage in social justice activism. I found that the roles and responsibilities in which Participants fulfilled were aligned with their diverse approaches to this work, and I also found that the ways in which Participants processed the Protest was aligned to their different approaches social justice activism. For example, Mia, from Youth Empowerment, shared her reflection about one young person's participation in the Protest and how he transformed as a person. At Youth Empowerment, their process is focused challenging dynamics of power. When reflecting on the impact of the Protest, Mia, from Youth Empowerment, focused on individual stories of young people and how she saw them change as people, and how they felt empowered to continue to engage in social justice activism as individuals. Jean, from People for Change, reflected on the impact the Protest had on future work at the organization, and how they was inspired by youth power, and they were motivated to continue to do this work with young people. Isaac, from Neighborhood Arts, reflected on the ways in which the Protest impacted both adults and young

people. A core belief of Neighborhood Arts is *working with* young people. The ways in which Isaac (NA) compared the transformation of both adults and young people because of the Protest, further supports Neighborhood Arts dedication to valuing and respecting young people. From the roles and responsibilities that were adopted by Participants in support of the Protest to the way in which Participants processed and learned from their experience, Participants supported their diverse approaches to engage young people in social justice activism.

## CHAPTER IX NAVIGATING CHALLENGES

### **Introduction**

The cross-case analysis of the Protest further highlighted differences among the organizations, and it outlines a shared challenge that was met by Participants which include facing opposition to their work, balancing their vast responsibilities and supporting the mental health of youth. In the following chapter, the challenges in which Participants navigate while working with youth will be described.

### **Challenges**

#### **Opposition to Social Justice Activism**

As Participants supported young people in planning and facilitating the Protest, they encountered opposition from other adults. There was both strong support and strong opposition from adult members of the community. Opposition to the Protest was shown in ways such as (1) it was reported that some schools sent letters home outlining punitive consequences that young people faced for walking out of school, and (2) local media articles were published in opposition to the Protest. Participants from across organizations navigated these challenges by meeting with policy makers of the schools, including school committee members and the Superintendent, organizing adult allies who would support the Protest, and reflecting and debriefing with youth about the resistance to the Protest.

The opposition to the Protest was not the only challenge that Participants faced and navigated in their work. During interviews and observations, Participants from each organization often discussed the challenges that they continued to navigate in

their work with young people. In the following section, additional challenges will be explained.

### **Balancing Responsibilities**

An area of challenge that Participants navigated was balancing their responsibilities. For example, at the time of data collection, there were few adult youth workers who took on most of the roles and responsibilities of supporting the day to day operations of Youth Empowerment and at People for Change. Using Youth Empowerment as an example, I will explain the ways in which Participants balanced responsibilities. Selma, the executive director of Youth Empowerment, had multiple responsibilities in her position that included programming, grant writing, engaging community partners and the board, fundraising and being a landlord. Celeste (YE) split her time between planning and facilitating programming, and being responsible for the financial aspects of the organization. Mia's (YE) work was primarily administrative; however, she had many responsibilities behind the scenes including securing new funding, planning and preparing youth experiences in the community and being available for young people as they wanted to talk. This challenge is ongoing because the work that needs to be done does not match the time that is available; however, one way that Participants are working to navigate this challenge is by hiring more staff, when possible. At the end of data collection, Youth Empowerment hired a new staff member to assist with programming, and People for Change was working to redistribute adult leadership responsibilities. The number of adult staff that work at non-profits is often connected to funding. If more funding were available, organizations could hire more staff, and retain current staff with living wages and

benefits. Participants of my study, across organizations, were either asked to take on multiple responsibilities or to engage in part time work.

### **Supporting Mental Health**

Understanding ways to support young people who struggle with mental health who participate in SJYD programs is another example of an ongoing challenge that Participants navigated. Participants reported that young people often shared with them their struggles with mental health and addiction. One dimension of mental health that was addressed was the stress that young people face from being in poverty. Systematic stressors are very real for youth, and adult Participants worked to navigate this challenge with them.

For example, Selma describes her perception of the ways in which systems are connected to the young people at Youth Empowerment:

I think that's a big thing: their mental health. Um I think that (sighs) I think like kind of inadvertently Black Lives Matter and police brutality and all of that is affecting them and is affecting their psyche and how like they operate in the world. But it's not in any kind of like concrete, tangible way right now. Um like I think they're aware of it and they see it constantly on social media.

Participants said they were working to better understand the relationship between systematic stressors and youth mental health, and ways in which the mental health of young people could be addressed and supported in SJYD spaces. Jean felt that society doesn't care enough about mental health by giving the example, "we send people with mental health issues to prison instead of actually giving them the treatment they need." Participants discussed the need for mental health support in youth spaces, support outside of and in addition to the realm of clinical support. The current strategies in which they employ include involving adults from other youth organizations, and



families to support young people with mental health struggles, but they were interested in understanding more about supporting these challenges in youth spaces.

### **Conclusion**

Participants said they navigated challenges with opposition to their work, as highlighted by the Protest, with balancing responsibilities, and with supporting the mental health of young people. There is a direct connection between the literature and some of the challenges that Participants identified (Walker, & Larson, 2012). For example, in the literature, young people are identified as problems to be solved (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002). My study frames youth as agents who question and address problems created and continued by oppression alongside adult allies. This is not easy work, and I have documented the ways in which adult allies support youth as they engage young people in social justice activism. This study highlighted specific examples of challenges young people and youth workers encountered when young people resisted the system that included facing punitive consequences in school, being questioned by authorities and the media, and being subjected to hate speech.

In a field of youth development that is subjected to opposition, youth workers are also asked to assume an abundance of responsibilities with little pay, benefits or full time status. In the emerging body of literature about youth workers, researchers suggested that youth workers are underpaid which influences their retention in the field (Yohalem & Pittman, 2006), and my data further highlights the need for youth workers to make a living wage with benefits. Participants in my study are certainly not in this work, “for the money,” but their work is extremely important and highly undervalued. In the SJYD spaces, Participants work with young people with the hope

of changing current systems and structures that impact the everyday lives of urban young people.

## CHAPTER X DISCUSSION & IMPLICATIONS

### **Discussion**

When I began this research journey, I was committed to gaining a better understanding of how youth workers engage young people in social justice activism. Through the process of engaging in this study, I gained a first hand and in-depth perspective of the importance of understanding people in relation to their contexts. My research study was framed by the principles that (1) it is important to understand how young people navigate and respond to oppressive forces that affect their lives, and (2) youth are agents of change, as outlined in Ginwright and Cammarota's (2002) theory of Social Justice Youth Development. Drawing upon Freire's (2010) work, the theorists argued the importance of critical consciousness and social action, praxis, in SJYD spaces. My research suggests that SJYD is approached in different ways, and that the approaches are supported by youth practitioners who exemplify particular principles, competencies and expertise. In the following chapter, I discuss my research findings and implications.

### **Social Justice Activism**

I have come to know that social justice activism in SJYD spaces is complex. When I first defined social justice activism to frame my investigation, I used a basic and broad definition of the concept, "taking action to effect social change" (Permanent Culture Now, 2018, p.1). However, I am now able to produce a more robust definition of social justice activism as it pertains to my research of SJYD spaces. In SJYD spaces, one way to define social justice activism is, young people, and adult allies of

diverse identities, working to understand and transform themselves and systems of oppression for present change. Present change means that there is a need for current change to systems of oppression instead of waiting for young people to mature into adulthood to start impacting political and economic systems. Within the context of SJYD spaces, together, youth and adults work to challenge systematic social inequalities.

Youth Empowerment, People for Change and Neighborhood Arts had diverse ways in which they engaged young people in social justice activism, which are summarized in the following section.

**Youth Empowerment.** At Youth Empowerment, Participants supported social justice activism by engaging young people in the processes of exploring identity and social context, of naming power dynamics, and of participating in authentic experiential learning opportunities. Knowledge that is discussed and learned during programming time is directly connected to authentic work in the community. Young people were given opportunities to reflect and make meaning of themselves and the world through this process.

**People for Change.** People for Change supports young people as they engaged in social justice activism by helping them organize to create policy change in education systems. Through the process of organizing, which includes base building and action, People for Change supported young people as they learn about themselves and their social contexts.

**Neighborhood Arts.** At Neighborhood Arts, Participants supported social justice activism by engaging in creative art practices with youth. Adults *work with*

youth to explore their individual selves and the relationships between themselves and broader contexts. The program was designed as a ‘drop in’ arts program, and young people had the power to choose how they spend their time, the types of art projects in which they engaged, and who the art is for – for themselves, and/or to share with others.

Furthermore, in a shared experience of direct action, the role of each organization and the perception of the impact of the event was different. The case studies highlighted three diverse ways in which SJYD can be practiced, and each approach supports the idea that this work is not a destination, it is a process.

### **Social Justice Youth Development**

SJYD is different from other youth development ideologies: civic, positive, risk, resiliency and prevention, in that it is not just changing individual -it is about changing the system. This approach supports making fundamental changes to systems of oppression by bringing youth voices to the table in an authentic way, and with decision making power. Furthermore, SJYD is not about modifying or reforming the systems, instead it is supportive of a complete rupture and demarcation systems to create another way that society views the function and purpose of issues (Ginwright, 2006).

This rupture happens in at least two dimensions in my study. First, the process of supporting youth as active agents of change is itself a rupture to the fundamental belief that young people are problems to be solved. Across organizations, youth have agency within the structures of youth spaces. Adult Participants respected young people as equals and challenged traditional adult-youth relationships that are

positioned as hierarchical structures where adults have power. Second, each organization, in their own ways, supported young people as they resisted the status quo. At Youth Empowerment Participants worked to address the way youth are positioned in power in the organization, in the community, and in society, at People for Change Participants worked with youth toward challenging and changing systems of education, and at Neighborhood Arts Participants engaged in a progressive approach to supporting critical and conscious thinking. Each of these strategies were vehicles to question current social and economic policies and educational structures that assume youth should be compliant, silenced, and not walking the streets of the city in protest. In their work to disrupt systems, Participants met serious challenges to navigate, including opposition to their work, balancing responsibilities, and supporting young people with their mental health. The challenges illuminate the needs to dig deeper to understand them, and to find sustainable solutions.

### **Principles, Core Competencies and Expertise**

After reflecting on the ways in which SJYD is approached across cases, I better understood the principles, competencies and expertise that are needed to support SJYD. To add to the conversation that is highlighted in the youth development literature surrounding expertise and accountability in the field, my research provided insights into the need for youth workers to have preparation across many areas, including developing core competencies, gaining expertise, and recognizing the ways principles inform practice in contexts. Competencies are defined as the sets of skills a youth worker possesses (Walker & Walker, 2012) while Expertise involves understanding, action, and the ability to make sound choices in different situations

(Walker & Walker, 2012). Youth work principles provide a frame that informs youth development practices. For example, the principles which inform risk, resiliency and prevention are different than the principles that inform Social Justice Youth Development. Risk, Resiliency, and prevention approaches to youth work are informed by a principle that adults need to provide interventions to keep young people from making bad decisions. This principle contrasts with a principle in SJYD that young people are agents of change. In the following section, the principles, core competencies, and expertise that were identified in this study will be described.

**SJYD principles in action.** I found that the beliefs of Participants connected to SJYD principles (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002) which included:

1. ***Political and economic factors influence youth work.*** Political and economic systems create and continue symptoms, such as poverty, in which young people and SJYD workers resist.
2. ***Young people are agents of change.*** Young people are valued as equal contributors in the process toward change, and have the power to remake society:
  - a. ***Young people are assets.*** Across cases, young people were viewed as assets. Participants view young people through a strength based lens, and they were aware that this lens is in contrast with dominant views of young people.
  - b. ***Young people have a voice.*** Participants believed young people already had strong voices and opinions, so their role as adult allies, was to support youth voice.

- c. *Young people can challenge dynamics of power.* Youth Empowerment's approach to SJYD is connected to their understanding that young people can challenge dynamics of power.
- d. *Young people will resist on their own.* People for Change supports the idea that young people will resist on their own, with or without the support of adults.
- e. *Working with young people positions young people as co-creators of knowledge.* Neighborhood Arts Participants modeled through their structure, relationships and process that youth and adults can co-create knowledge together.

**Core competencies.** My research suggests each participant held Core Competencies that supported their diverse work at each organization. Below are the Core Competencies that emerged:

1. ***Content knowledge specific to the work.***
  - a. *The knowledge and skills of engaging in conversations about power, identity, and social context.* At Youth Empowerment, each participant had knowledge of how to support conversations about power, identity, and social context.
  - b. *The knowledge and skills of organizing.* At People for Change, Participants had knowledge of systems of democracy, and the understanding of how to organize groups of people.
  - c. *The knowledge and skills of specific art processes.* In the role of artist mentor at Neighborhood Arts, specific knowledge of art



making processes was imperative. One important criteria for artist mentors was their ability to share knowledge of art making processes.

2. ***The knowledge and skills of making authentic connections with the community.*** Across organizations, young people engaged with the community to share knowledge, to change systems, and to make connections through art.
3. ***The knowledge and skills of leading debrief and reflection conversations.*** Across organizations, Participants engaged young people in debriefing and reflecting on their experiences.

**Expertise.** Five areas of expertise emerged in my study:

1. ***Identifying as individuals from underrepresented or immersed in communities of underrepresented groups.*** Representation matters. Participants of my study were diverse in terms of race, gender, and socioeconomic status. Their expertise of directly navigating the world as people who identify with underrepresented populations, or, in one case, an ally with direct experience and immersion working with communities of underrepresented populations, is important in SJYD. The adults who engage in this work need to be conscious, and intimately understand how structures of social inequality work, and when working to rupturing these systems, allies need to understand the reasons why fundamental change is needed. This knowledge cannot be standardized, instead, it is an ongoing of process of questioning and understanding the world.

2. ***Committing to continuous growth.*** The idea that adulthood is a destination is challenged by Participants. Participants understand that along with young people they were continuing to develop as people which means challenging their own views of the world, and gaining skills and knowledge far after they reached adulthood.
3. ***Constructing mentoring relationships with young people.*** The different relationships in which Participants adopted with young people: *life mentors, informal mentors and artist mentors*, were reflections of intimate relationships that oppose adult-youth relationships where adults are positioned in power. Instead, the relationships across organizations provided a platform for healthy and trusting relationships.
4. ***Building safe space with young people.*** Together with young people, Participants build safe spaces. For example, though check-ins, purposeful play, and storytelling at Youth Empowerment, engaging youth in an advisory board at Neighborhood Arts, and norm setting and ice breakers at People for Change, Participants worked with young people to create and maintain diverse organizational cultures.
5. ***Navigating Challenges.*** SJYD is met with challenges. Part of this work is to understand the challenges and work toward solutions.
6. ***Coordinating adult allies and support.*** SJYD is often met with opposition. Some Participants had the expertise to coordinate adult allies and support, so engagement in direct action was helped by adult allies, but young people were at the center of the decision making and the Protest.

Participants highlighted specific principles, competencies and expertise that inform their work with young people. I recognize that there are limitations to my study. For example, I know my results cannot be used to make generalizations about large populations because of (1) the number of Participants and organizations that were sampled, and (2) data were collected in one city.

### **Implications**

Keeping the above limitations in mind, I outlined implications for SJYD practitioners, preparatory programs, and policy makers, as well, as ideas for future research in the following section.

#### **SJYD Practitioners**

1. **Engage in Professional Development.** Coming to this work with good intentions is necessary, but not sufficient; there is a balance among principles, competencies and expertise that make a well-rounded and effective SJYD practitioner. Participation in meaningful professional development to reflect on and enhance principles, competencies and expertise will help practitioners grow.
2. **There is no recipe for SJYD.** Youth workers are shaped by principles, competencies and expertise in different ways. Furthermore, the diverse offerings of organizations provide a mix of strengths when brought together. Thinking of new and innovate ways to engage young people in social justice activism should be celebrated and approached in partnership across organizations.

#### **Preparatory Programs for SJYD**

1. **Recruit Diverse SJYD Practitioners.** Youth development preparation programs need to make efforts to recruit and retain diverse SJYD practitioners because

representation of youth practitioners from different race, gender and socioeconomic status is important to support SJYD from people of different identities, social contexts and lived experiences.

2. **Prepare SJYD practitioners.** Preparation of SJYD practitioners should include (1) building and maintaining a safe learning environments, (2) exploring of principles about young people, identity and social context, (3) learning mentoring practices, (3) developing specific skills in areas related to social justice activism, (4) engaging in authentic SJYD spaces, (5) reflection.

**Policy Makers** (specifically, those who work in systems that engage and make decisions with young people, such as, K-12 schools and youth spaces)

1. **Professionalizing the Field – Salary and Benefits.** It is not acceptable that the most of Participants in this study, one hundred percent of who graduated from college, four of them being Ivy League Universities, were living close to the poverty line because of their salaries as SJYD professionals. Youth development is often not funded or valued as a professional field, and this needs to change. I turn to 21<sup>st</sup> century grant funding and believe this may be a place to start. The 21<sup>st</sup> grant funding is a federal grant that allocates over one billion dollars a year to support and sustain community learning programs in high poverty areas during out of school time (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). This funding is often discussed as being cut, most recently as the Trump administration transitioned into office. Finding ways to make this funding permanent, and well-funded and valued would be a start to structuring more sustainable salaries for youth workers.

2. **Professionalizing the Field – Accountability.** Already, there are core competencies that have been developed by different stakeholders to inform the discussion of accountability in the field of youth work. For example, these competencies include the Youth Work Core Competencies (Starr, Yohalem, & Gannett, 2009). However, I found that as members of the field of youth development develop accountability measures of the field, it is important for us to consider principles, competencies and expertise. The complex processes of engaging in SJYD cannot be standardized to practices that are demonstrated by traditional metrics, such as program audits and assessments.

### **Future Research**

I identified areas in which additional research would continue to inform the field of SJYD, and I reflected on ways in which the design of the study could be changed. I share the areas in which additional research is needed.

1. **Dimensions of SJYD.** In researching three organizations, clear and important differences emerged; however, I recognize my comparisons are limited to the three sites in which I studied. To add to the emerging body of literature more research is needed to better understand dimensions of the different approaches to SJYD and how the approaches interact with each other.
2. **Dilemmas of Practice.** More research from the perspective of SJYD practitioners is needed to understand challenges that they navigate. If dilemmas and solutions are uncovered, ways in which SJYD practitioners navigate dilemmas could potentially inform future practice.

3. **SJYD Practitioners and Background.** Additional research is needed to further investigate SJYD practitioner backgrounds, how they came to this work, and their own experience navigating structural social inequalities. My research left me with the desire to further unpack the reasons SJYD practitioners choose to engage in this work. I believe if researchers understand why SJYD practitioners engage in this work, it may provide additional insight into ways the field can continue to be developed. For example, in better understanding the backgrounds of SJYD practitioners, what brought them to this work and the reasons they stay, we could provide opportunities and encourage others to find similar routes to this work. Also, we could compare SJYD participants with other adults who engage youth, such as school teachers, to understand the differences among their lived experiences and what brought them to their work with youth.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, my research suggests that systems of power needs to change toward valuing young people, their voices, and their experience. Adult policy makers in the fields of education and youth development need to do more than just include young people in policy conversations, instead, young people should have decision making power, and be an integral part of the ongoing conversation and action toward change. Within the context of SJYD spaces, together, youth and adults work towards this change. The partnership between young people and youth workers thrives off a balance of responsibilities, of power, of voice and of investment in making a difference in present systems of oppression. Together, youth and adult allies are

powerful agents of change who are not silent, instead, alongside one another they resist popular perceptions and public policies as a unified voice.

## APPENDICES

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APPENDIX A  
Purposeful Sampling Strategy

<b>Site Selection</b>	<b>Community:</b> Urban
	<b>Non-profit Youth Organizations:</b> Youth organizations that engage youth in Social Justice Youth Development within the urban community.
<b>Participant Selection</b>	<b>Youth Workers employed at each non-profit youth organization:</b> 3 youth workers at each organization who identified with different demographics (race, gender, youth work experience and income).

APPENDIX B  
Youth Worker Questionnaire<sup>4</sup>

1. Full Name:
2. Youth organization:
3. What is your age?
4. Tell me about the children/youth you work with (check all that apply):

- Elementary school-aged
- Middle school-aged
- High school-aged
- Over 18

5. What is your race/ethnicity?

- African-American/Black
- American Indian/Alaskan Native
- Asian
- Caucasian/White
- Hispanic/Latino
- Native Hawaiian/other Pacific Islander
- Multiracial
- Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

6. What is your gender?

7. What language(s) do you speak fluently?

8. How long have you been working:

in your current position?	in your current organization?	in the field of youth work?

9. How similar would you say your background is to the youth participants in your program (i.e. ethnicity, neighborhood, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, faith, etc.).

- Very similar
- Somewhat similar
- Somewhat different
- Very different

<sup>4</sup>Questionnaire adapted from The Forum for Youth Investment, n.d.

APPENDIX C  
Participant Interview 1<sup>5</sup>

*Background*

1. In what ways, if at all were you part of youth spaces?
2. What do you remember?
3. Where did you grow up?
4. Tell me what it was like growing up in your community.
  - Areas of strength?
  - Struggles of the people?
5. In what ways is your childhood community similar or different to the community in which you work?

*The Organization*

1. If I were a perspective youth, what would I need to know about this organization?
2. What is your official title and role?
3. How did you get this job?
4. What path brought you to this place?

*The Nature of your work*

1. Describe a typical day at your organization.
2. Tell me about a youth with whom you had a good relationship.
3. Tell me about a youth with whom you had a challenging relationship.
4. Can you share a specific time that you engage youth within your community, if at all?
5. Describe how you engage youth within your organization.
6. Tell me about a time that you engaged youth within your community, if at all.
7. How are the projects in which youth engage selected and implemented?
8. Tell me about your role with youth.
9. Tell me about a time when working in youth development was particularly challenging for you?
10. In what ways, if at all, do you navigate the challenges?
11. Tell me about a time when you knew you made a difference with youth?
12. How does your community shape the nature of your work?
13. Why is the youth development field important to you?
14. Is there anything else that you want to tell me about that I haven't asked?

<sup>5</sup>Survey adapted from The Forum for Youth Investment (n.d)

APPENDIX D  
Participant Interview 2<sup>6</sup>

*Observation Follow-up*

1. Is the observation accurate reflection of your organization? Why or why not?
2. What parts of the observation would you like to discuss?
3. How do you engage youth that seem like they don't want to participate?

*Follow-up*

4. What are some of the challenges youth face?
5. How do you work with youth to navigate those challenges?
6. What are some challenges you face?
7. How do you navigate the challenges?
8. How does society impact your work with youth?
9. How do you build relationships with youth?
10. How do you involve you in the work you do at your organization?

*Your Employment*

11. What is your employment status?
12. If part-time or consultant/contractor, would you like to work full time at this organization?
13. How long have you been working here?
14. Do you currently have another job outside of this one?
15. What is your income?
16. What benefits, if at all, do you receive in your position as a youth worker?

<sup>6</sup>Survey adapted from The Forum for Youth Investment (n.

## APPENDIX E

### NVIVO Profile (example of NODE Categories)

The screenshot displays the NVivo Pro software interface. The main window shows a list of nodes with columns for Name, Sources, and References. The nodes are organized into a hierarchical structure. The following table represents the data shown in the 'Nodes' list:

Name	Sources	References
Adult and Youth	1	1
Power	0	0
Relationship	5	13
View of young peop	3	7
Challenges	0	0
Context	0	0
Politics	0	0
Program Structure, Pro	4	31
Community Engage	4	9
Other Youth Or	2	2
Content	0	0
Engagement	3	13

The interface also includes a top menu bar (FILE, HOME, CREATE, DATA, ANALYZE, QUERY, EXPLORE, LAYOUT, VIEW), a toolbar with various editing and analysis tools, and a left-hand navigation pane with categories like Nodes, Cases, Relationships, and Node Matrices. The bottom of the window shows a search bar and a 'Code At' field.

APPENDIX F  
Project Timeline

<b>Month &amp; Year</b>	<b>Project Timeline</b>
May 2016	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Defended Proposal</li> </ul>
June 2016	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Obtained IRB Approval</li> </ul>
July 2016	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Contacted research sites</li> <li>• Visited research sites</li> <li>• Gained entry into research sites</li> </ul>
August 2016	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gained entry into research sites</li> <li>• Invited Participants to engage in my research study</li> </ul>
September 2016 – January 2017	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Collected data at Youth Empowerment, People for Change, Neighborhood Arts: Interview, Observe, Interview Participants at each site</li> </ul>
January 2017 – April 2017	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Coded data: Engaged in open coding of individual participant data</li> </ul>
April 2017 – August 2017	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Coded data: Engaged in open coding of individual participant data</li> <li>• Analyzed data: Engaged in memo writing</li> </ul>
August 2017 - February 2018	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Wrote dissertation</li> </ul>
March 2018	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Defended dissertation</li> </ul>

APPENDIX G  
Interactions with Participants in October 2016

<b>October 2016</b>	<b>Interactions with Participants</b>
10/1/16	
10/2/16	
10/3/16	(YE) Celeste Interview 1
10/4/16	
10/5/16	
10/6/16	
10/7/16	(NA) Open House
10/8/16	
10/9/16	
10/10/16	
10/11/16	
10/12/16	
10/13/16	
10/14/16	
10/15/16	
10/16/16	
10/17/16	(YE) Celeste Observation at YE
10/18/16	
10/19/16	
10/20/16	Nora Observation at school chapter meeting, (NA) informal observation
10/21/16	Ran into Participants from NA, YE at a conference where (PFC) Dylan was observed
10/22/16	
10/23/16	
10/24/16	(YE) Informal observation at YE
10/25/16	(NA) Simone observation at NA
10/26/16	
10/27/16	(YE) Selma observation at a college campus
10/28/16	(PFC) Nora and Jean observation at PFC office
10/29/16	
10/30/16	
10/31/16	

APPENDIX H  
IRB Approval Letter

THE  
UNIVERSITY  
OF RHODE ISLAND  
DIVISION OF RESEARCH  
AND ECONOMIC  
DEVELOPMENT

OFFICE OF RESEARCH INTEGRITY  
70 Lower College Road, Suite 2, Kingston, RI 02881 USA  
p: 401.874.4328 f: 401.874.4814 [web.uri.edu/researchecondev/office-of-research-integrity](http://web.uri.edu/researchecondev/office-of-research-integrity)



FWA: 00003132  
IRB: 00000599  
DATE: October 19, 2016  
  
TO: Minsuk Shim  
FROM: University of Rhode Island IRB  
  
STUDY TITLE: Challenging Context through Social Justice Youth Development  
IRB REFERENCE #: 975616-1  
LOCAL REFERENCE #: HU1617-075  
SUBMISSION TYPE: New Project  
  
ACTION: DETERMINATION OF EXEMPT STATUS  
EFFECTIVE DATE: October 19, 2016

Thank you for your submission of materials for this research study. The University of Rhode Island IRB has ceded review of this protocol to the Rhode Island College IRB per the URI/RIC IRB Authorization Agreement. **Approval is valid for the duration of the project.**

No changes to procedures involving human subjects may be made without prior IRB review and approval. You must promptly notify the Office of Research Integrity of any problems that occur during the course of your work using Appendix S - Event Reporting.

If you have any general questions, please contact us by email at [researchintegrity@etal.uri.edu](mailto:researchintegrity@etal.uri.edu). For study related questions, please contact us via **project mail through IRBNet**. Please include your study title and reference number in all correspondence with this office.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Matthew Delmonico".

Matthew Delmonico, Ph.D., MPH  
IRB Chair



APPENDIX I  
Participant Demographics

<b>Race</b>	Seventy eight percent of Participants identify as people of color.
<b>Gender</b>	Sixty seven percent of Participants identify as women, eleven percent of Participants identify as gender nonconforming, and twenty-two of Participants identify as male.
<b>Years of experience</b>	Participants' years of experience ranged from two years to sixteen years. Thirty-three Participants had between two to five years of experience and twenty two percent of Participants had six to nine years of experience. Forty percent of Participants had ten or more years of experience.
<b>Income</b>	The average income of Participants during data collection in the year 2016 – 2017 was \$7,000 for part time, and \$30,000 for full time. Most Participants, sixty six percent, earned under \$35,000 per year. All Participants were four-year college graduates by May 2017.

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