

**Planting the Seeds for a New Social Movement: How Educators Can Teach  
Collective Social Action in Urban Schools (Working Paper)**

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**Introduction and Overview**

This research examines efforts at a charter school in Milwaukee WI, “Social Action Charter High School” (SACHS) to teach collective social action skills to low-income urban high school students. This charter school follows a format called Public Achievement (PA), a school-based social action program which was developed by the Center for Democracy and Citizenship ([www.publicachievement.org](http://www.publicachievement.org)) and is one of the few programs operating in schools today which attempt to teach youth the concepts and skills considered necessary for engaging in collective social action and promote community change. In fact, unlike the vast majority of other schools which only utilize PA programs after school hours, SACHS has integrated PA into its regular school curriculum, which focuses on student-centered projects. Though many of these projects focus on traditional subject areas like reading, mathematics, history and science, all students are also required to participate in cooperative group efforts to improve their communities through PA.

This study contributes to a very small literature in education on the teaching of collective action in schools. Additionally, little data is available which analyzes the interactions that take place over time within PA groups and between PA groups and outside organizations (see Boyte, 2002; Hildreth, 2000; Schutz, 2006). Accordingly, this ethnographic case study will examine the within-group interactions which occur during

PA activities, and the interactions which take place between PA groups and outside organizations. Specifically, I will examine these interactions through the lens of social movement theory in an effort to explain how urban high school students and adult coaches “frame” community problems, and whether new identities are created or transformed while participating in civic engagement activities. These processes are important precursors to successful collective action movements and social change according to social movement theorists.

### **School-Based Community Engagement**

PA was developed from the research conducted by CDC director Boyte and his colleagues (e.g., Boyte, 2002; Boyte & Kari, 1996; Hildreth, 2000) and which discussed the significance of engaging citizens in “public work” opportunities to encourage democratic citizenship and community building. PA offers students a number of strategies, skills, and “core concepts” through its manual for “coaches” for dealing with school and community problems. In the past, students have started mentoring and tutoring programs, created urban community gardens, built playgrounds, started recycling programs, worked on community murals and graffiti abatement projects, protested unfair school policies, confronted police harassment, and challenged other community injustices. The goal for youth social action programs, whether school-based or not, is to encourage urban youth to actively participate in social change.

In contrast, school-based service learning programs as a means of civic engagement have been criticized by many. For example Wade (2001), a proponent of service learning, acknowledges that the objective should not be “charity, which can potentially perpetuate racist, sexist, or classist assumptions,” arguing that “ideally,

students will work alongside persons who have been oppressed or marginalized for mutual support and empowerment” (Wade, 2001, p. 26). Yet, according to Kahne and Westheimer (1999), most projects actually do focus on “charity.” Similarly, Schutz and Gere (1998) point out that the targets of service learning projects are often viewed as “clients” in need of services, not as partners or fellow collaborators, reinforcing a “deficit view” of the community. Another major problem with service learning models of community engagement is that they often focus on the symptoms of social problems rather than the root causes of these problems (Schutz, 2006). For example they may focus on picking up garbage along the shore of a river rather than investigating how a river became polluted in the first place and who or what is responsible. Still another problem inherent in the service learning model of civic engagement according to Schutz (2006) is that it has a rather limited approach to social and political engagement. Similarly, Abowitz (1999) contends that the discussion around service learning implies that social problems can generally be solved through “consensual dialogue”, rather than ever needing to use more confrontational political tactics. Nevertheless, few examples of schools that actually promote a more contentious political activism can be found (Abowitz, 1999; Kahne & Westheimer, 1999; Schutz, 2006). This should be somewhat obvious since if we were to teach youth social action skills for resisting oppression and institutionalized racism youth are likely to use these skills to affect change on the institutions they have the most experience with - schools.

Though PA shows promise as a tool for engaging youth in social action and as an alternative to the more traditional and common service learning programs in schools, it does present some problems. One problem according to Schutz (2006) is that PA is

imported from outside institutions (e.g. universities) and is often held after school. In this way it is not fully integrated into a school's curriculum like service learning programs often are. Another problem is that PA must essentially be "asked" into schools and therefore relies on the "good will" of school administrators and teachers. This presents a problem when PA projects becomes too "radical" and contentious for administrators, teachers, community or business leaders, and even parents causing some schools to get rid of the program altogether (Schutz, 2006). Though PA has potential for being expanded in disadvantaged urban areas, institutional resistance may keep it marginalized. Consequently, it would seem that service learning programs, though not ideal, are the only actual school-based programs which can realistically operate in schools at a large scale to engage students in their communities. However, the concern with the service learning mode of community engagement is that it will teach some students that the most difficult and complex social problems (e.g. poverty or institutional racism) can be resolved simply through "consensual dialogue", rather than ever finding it necessary to engage in a more transgressive form of politics (Kahne & Westheimer, 1999; Schutz, 2006). Nevertheless, the staff at SACHS seems more than willing to utilize PA, adopt "radical" identities, and engage in contentious politics along with students when necessary.

### **Why Teach Social Action in Urban Schools?**

Urban youth are increasingly sophisticated in how they interpret the *causes* of poverty and in their articulation of the structural barriers to economic success. For example, the urban high school students I have worked with have often pointed to joblessness, poverty wages, housing discrimination, incarceration rates of their peers,

lack of educational opportunities, and racism as causes of poverty during class discussions in which I used critical pedagogy strategies of instruction. However, just raising student consciousness, though important, is not an avenue to social change. Anyon (2005) and McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly (2001) argue that youth (and adults) become agents of social change through the actual participation in collective social action. They claim that when people actively participate in demonstrations, marches, sit-ins, and other forms of protest, they develop social identities as activists and a sense of belonging to that particular movement. Thus, the perceived political apathy, submission, despair, anger, or ignorance of urban youth by many adults and educators may really just be a natural response by an oppressed group which feels powerless to effectively act against social injustice; because it lacks committed adult assistance and realistic access to social movements. To make matters worse, recent studies show that few poor people, even those who graduate from high school, manage to escape from the inner-city (Anyon, 2005; Patillo-McCoy, 2001). The goal then for youth social action organizations, is to encourage urban youth to actively participate in social movements, and as a result, promote their personal development and affect social change in the communities they live.

Research also suggests that low-income students' participation in civic activism improves their connectedness to their communities (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002; Hilley, 2004; Strobel, Osberg, & McLaughlin, 2006), enhances their self-esteem, political self-efficacy, and academic engagement, and as a result, increases their academic performance, (see Forum for Youth Investment, 2004; Ginwright & James, 2002; Lewis-Charp, 2003; Morgan & Streb, 2001; Larson & Hanson, 2005; Strobel,

Osberg, & McLaughlin, 2006). For example, Hilley (2004) found that civic activism facilitated a sense of “connectedness” in youth by helping them realize they had something to contribute to their communities. He argues that youth are connected to their neighborhoods through the researching of real-life social problems and by gaining the knowledge and skills necessary to effectively engage those issues. Also, by connecting youth to concerned adults and other community organizations, youth began to recognize that they too had power. I argue that feelings of community connectedness by youth need to be facilitated by our urban schools as well. Urban students do not simply grow up in a vacuum in which they only develop at home and at the schools they attend – they develop in communities. In addition, many low-income families are functionally weak as a result of poverty and many urban institutions such as schools are also weak. Furthermore, although several researchers have shown that many youth organizations are effective at connecting youth to their communities through social activism (see for example Ginwright & Cammarota, 2006), these youth organizations only manage to reach a very small minority of urban youth (see The Forum for Youth Investment, 2004), and as a result, the community change they are able to affect is limited. I would argue then, that urban schools are strategically positioned to connect the greatest number of youth to their communities since they already operate in the communities they serve.

Youth participation in civic activism has also been shown to enhance the emotional, spiritual, and psychological well-being of youth. Ginwright and Cammarota (2002) for example showed that by utilizing a Social Justice Youth Development (SJYD) approach and by paying particular attention to the relationship between critical consciousness and social action, youth develop a greater political awareness and

understanding of institutional inequality, and as a result, a more positive self-regard, and racial and ethnic esteem. Likewise, Morgan and Streb (2001) found that students' self-esteem, political engagement, and attitudes toward out-groups improved when they were engaged in service-learning projects which gave them a high degree of voice and ownership. Additionally, by combining social action with the development of a critical consciousness, SJYD encourages youth to not only explore the causes of community and social problems, but to act on and solve them. This in turn builds in youth the capacity to change personal, community, and social conditions, and helps instill the feeling of being part of something significant and worthwhile (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002). Thus, urban schools and classrooms offer an excellent opportunity to develop the critical consciousness of youth and encourage them to take action against the inequality in their lives because they are situated in the communities whose students they serve. In addition, urban teachers can provide students with the analytical and critical thinking skills necessary for students to challenge the root causes of social inequality, and equally important, provide students with the opportunities to change their social and community conditions – provided of course that they have the courage and are allowed to do so.

Teaching social activism in urban schools also shows promise for improving academic achievement and for developing pragmatic reasoning or the “strategic thinking” skills thought to be necessary for young people to be successful in a globalizing economy. Larson and Hanson (2005) examined a youth activism program through the lens of cognitive psychology in which a group of youth of color was fighting for a more equitable suspension policy at a large urban school district. They begin by arguing that “human systems,” which include formal institutions and informal social systems, are

important venues of the contemporary world and that strategic thinking is essential to exercise agency within these systems. Further, exercising agency within human systems often entails dealing with multiple individuals or groups with different motives, protocols, and perspectives. They contend that youth's development of strategic thinking is important because "the high-performance economy of the 21<sup>st</sup> century demands employees and entrepreneurs with skills for planning and problem-solving within organizational environments"; and because movement toward a more just society requires political activists, "social entrepreneurs," and members of community organizations and government who have the "strategic skills" to challenge the social injustice and inequalities which pervade modern society (p. 328). Importantly, they determined that the youth in this study learned advanced forms of strategic thinking. The youth gained skills in gathering strategic information, motivating other youth to take action, engaging with school administrators, and executing change in their school district. Even more importantly, the skills they developed surfaced in other parts of their lives too, such as improved academic achievement and preparing for their futures.

The overall objective for this study then, is to develop an effective school-based model for teaching social action which empowers urban youth, increases student connectedness with their communities, influences positive socio-economic changes on low-income urban youth, urban schools, and the communities that surround them, while simultaneously enhancing student self-esteem and academic performance.

### **Theoretical Framework: Social Movements in Urban Schools**

Social movement theory is one method used by researchers to help explain youth collective action. For example, youth activism scholars Ginwright and Cammarota (2006)

assert that youth collective action “is a rational response to the state intervention and repression in their lives” (p. xviii) in seeking to understand why youth participate in activism. Still other researchers have shown that when traditional means for engaging in social change are out of reach, groups lacking political and economic capital will use contentious political tactics for addressing their grievances through marches, school walkouts, sit-ins, boycotts, and other types of civil disobedience (Piven & Cloward, 1977). However, many social movement researchers will agree that in order for successful collective social movements to emerge, participants need to first undergo a process of social identity construction leading to the development of collective action (Jenkins & Form, 2005; McAdam, Tarrow, & Tilly, 2001; Snow & McAdam, 2000; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). I will argue this process is also essential to facilitating urban school-based social action, particularly those which are political in nature; and urban educators need to encourage and support this process. This study will explore this overall process by examining two interrelated processes, “framing” and “social identity construction,” and the social interactions which occur as they unfold.

### *Framing Theory*

Framing theory argues that social movement leaders and participants create collective meanings of their immediate situations and attribute grievances to political elites (Snow & Benford, 1988; Hunt, Benford, & Snow, 1994; Cress & Snow, 2000). The framing process itself can be viewed as a continuous struggle in which grievances are facilitated, changed, and challenged through social movements, countermovements, the mass media, other third parties, and the state in an effort to get them on the political agenda (McCarthy, 1996).

Snow and McAdam (2000) argue that framing processes within social movements also facilitate identity construction. They make the additional point that identity construction is not only the product of framing processes but are formed through the participation in collective social action itself. Like Hunt, Benford, and Snow (1994, p. 185) have asserted, “not only do framing processes link individuals and groups ideologically but they proffer, buttress, and embellish identities that range from collaborative to conflictual.” Adopting a more tangible view, the formation of identities through framing takes place during the interaction between movement supporters and activists, while they engage and debate each other at movement meetings, explain the movement and its goals to others while recruiting, develop press releases and make public announcements, and while creating reports and newspaper columns (Hunt & Benford, 1994). During all of these interactions, framing occurs and identities are both accepted and rejected, and created and transformed.

Though framing processes are important, they also depend on more contingent interpretive “moments” at any given time during collective action. Claim making that people use in real-life situations are sometimes called “repertoires of contention.” Repertoires represent the “culturally encoded ways in which people interact in contentious politics” (McAdam, Tarrow, & Tilly, 2001, p. 16). These interactions can be viewed as “performances” similar to the “improvisatory manner of jazz or street theater rather than the more repetitious routines of art songs or religious rituals” (p. 49). Performances such as these emerge from inherited repertoires and often integrate ritual forms of collective action. Repertoires of contention are “innovative” in that they incorporate claims, choose objects of claims, include collective identities, and implement

means that are either unprecedented or prohibited within the government being challenged. Moreover, repertoires evolve due to improvisation and struggle. However, most innovative forms of action used by participants in a conflict are not really “new” but are creative modifications of more common actions (McAdam, Tarrow, & Tilly, 2001).

The framing of social issues and community problems is an important initial step in mobilizing youth for social action. Youth also learn to interpret social problems as a result of broader social conditions and policies with the aid of adult coaches or more experienced youth. Kirshner (2006) for example, observed that “modeling” sometimes takes place during informal conversations between adult staff members and youth at a youth organization called Youth Rising when adults or “old hands” expressed their “thinking strategies and beliefs” (p. 50). Sometimes adult staff members encouraged youth to “remember to reframe” a social problem from one “focused on individuals” to one focused on a larger structural system (p. 50).

#### Implications for Current Study

Youth in Public Achievement programs can also learn to interpret social problems as a result of broader social conditions and policies with the aid of PA coaches. Likewise, the preliminary data for this study reveals how PA coaches (and sometimes other students) will sometimes redirect students who are inclined to blame various social problems on individual weaknesses or transgressions rather than consider broader structural injustices. Additionally, PA groups in this study may also benefit from the formation of new social identities during the framing process through participating in debates during meetings, by interacting with other community activists and gaining from

their leadership and collective identities, challenging political elites, and by interacting with the media.

### *Social Identity Theory*

Social identity theory affirms that people tend to improve a negative identity, maintain a positive identity, and defend a positive identity when it is threatened (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). A social identity is part of an individual's self-concept that relates to his/her consciousness of belonging to a specific social group or category which has a certain value or emotional meaning. This requires that individuals divide their social environment into groups and categories and then assumes individuals will self-categorize themselves into one of these groups or categories. The social status assigned to these groups is the result of the process of "social comparison," namely, the comparison of your own group to other groups. Not only does the positive status of a person's group compared to the status of other groups enhance an individual's self-concept (Klandermans & De Weerd, 2000), but when social identification is high, individual group members become less concerned with comparisons between themselves and the outcomes of other individuals and more concerned with the status or outcomes of their social group compared with other groups. Because inter-group differences are usually more distinct and unmistakable than interpersonal comparisons, perceptions that an individual's group has been deprived or discriminated against are likely to be more powerful than feelings of personal deprivation (Taylor et al, 1990).

Tajfel and Turner (1986) argue that "shared belief systems" about inter-group relations are characterized by two dimensions they refer to as "social mobility" and "social change." Belief systems of "social mobility" are held by people who feel that it is

possible for them to move individually to a higher status social group. Whereas belief systems of “social change” are held by people who feel that it is difficult to dissociate from a poor, disadvantaged, or stigmatized social group membership and as a result, participate in social movements whose goals are to change the prevailing social conditions. Further, social identity theory predicts that belief systems of social change are more likely to develop when group boundaries are perceived to be impermeable, or put another way, when no individual mobility is possible.

But how are individual identities constructed or transformed during the course of a social movement? McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly (2001) argue that people become “radicalized” by actually participating in contentious politics rather than becoming “radical” and then participating in contentious politics. They examine how new identities were formed during the French Revolution and “analyze how contention itself transforms collective identities, then how such transformations alter the character and effects of contention.” Also, they “examine how the creation, transformation, and extinction of actors, identities, and forms of action in the course of contention alter both transgressive and routine politics” (p.62). To further emphasize their point, they argue that participation in political conflict produces new radicalized identities by recognizing “the ways that identities and their contents modify in the course of social interaction, with people adjusting their behavior as they acquire new identities” (p. 126).

Similarly, Snow and McAdam (2000) argue that identity transformation is often a “dramatic change” in which the outcome is not only a change in perspective and how things are seen but also a change in how someone sees his/herself. They further point out identity transformation’s link to collective identity by arguing that before individuals

become participants in social movements who will “act on behalf of and in concert with a movement,” it is important that their personal identities merge with a movement’s collective identity. In many movements, this merging is dependent on the construction of new identities (p. 52).

### Implications for Current Study

The preliminary findings of this study seem to show that Public Achievement participants mainly identify themselves as belonging to specific racial groups (primarily African American) and as disadvantaged. Consequently, they share a perceived negative group status. Many also seem to believe that individual social mobility is the most likely means by which lower-status people (including themselves) can move into higher status social groups, but largely through non-traditional means such as having “street-slickness,” sports, or music. This “belief system” is complicated by the notion that their group boundaries are relatively impermeable to more traditional vehicles of social mobility (education and employment opportunities). Thus, their “belief system” of individual social mobility through non-traditional means conflicts with the simultaneous belief that the social boundaries they live in are relatively impermeable to traditional means of social mobility, hampering the formation of collective identities and action. The challenge then, is for PA coaches and researchers to find a way to facilitate the development of belief systems of “social change” when working with low-income youth.

The construction of new social identities through the actual participation in social activism may be possible during PA projects. As McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly (2001) argue, people become “radicalized” by actually participating in contentious politics. By participating in meetings with political authorities, organizing petitions, writing speeches,

and participating in marches and sit-ins, people often develop identities as activists and later identify themselves as part of a social movement. Similarly, Anyon (2005) argues that “we do not typically get people involved in activism or social movements through exposure to critical pedagogy, social justice curricula, or books....” While this exposure is essential too, “people are radicalized by actually participating in contentious politics” (p. 170). Accordingly, it may be important that PA coaches involve group members in protest activities when opportunities arise. This strategy may in turn aid in the development of new social identities in which youth become “politicalized” and begin to work toward community change.

### **Research Participants**

The participants in this study included about 50 students from SACHS who each chose to be in 1 of the 6 PA groups led by the participant/observers for this study. The remainder of SACHS students (about 60 students) was taught PA by the staff of SACHS. Students range in age from 14-18, most of which are low-income youth of color (92% are African American). Participants also include 5 university graduate students (including myself) and a professor who will participate as Public Achievement coaches and in the collection of data as participant-observers. Of the 6 participant/observers, three are African American, two are white, one is Indian, and all but two are female. Most of the students at SACHS come from the Milwaukee Public Schools system and many of those students were expelled for behavioral problems, chronic truants, or were pulled out by a parent or guardian with the hope of a better education or that their teenager will “fit in” better at SACHS. Additionally, SACHS boasts a near 90% daily attendance rate as evidence they are connecting to kids and providing a safe learning environment.

### **Methodology and Data Collection**

This study began by teaching PA concepts and practices to a group of 6 University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee graduate students. This group of students made up the research team. This current study expands on research conducted last year (2005-2006) in which the PA model for teaching social action was modified in an effort to make it more effective. Using the PA coaches manual as a guide, each PA group will attempt to explore and challenge social issues or problems which the students themselves chose to act on, and simultaneously integrate the PA core concepts of public work, politics, citizenship, democracy, freedom, public, free spaces, interests, diversity, power, and accountability/responsibility into the discussions. During the fall semester of 2006, we had two groups which addressed police accountability; a group which teamed up with an urban sustainable agriculture organization to build a community garden; a “get-out-the-vote” group which worked alongside college students; a graffiti art group which collaborated with a youth-organization to empower youth through legal graffiti; and a group which worked on finding solutions for the truancy problem in the broader community.

This year, the participant observers/coaches were trained and encouraged to be more like “community organizers” and “activists” rather than simply be “facilitators” with no clear guidelines like most coaches were last year. Efforts were also made to involve students in direct social action early rather than later in PA this year, concentrate more on “small and tangible goals,” and as a result possibly secure some quick “wins.” Additionally, PA groups were given the resources needed to connect with and collaborate with other established community-based organizations and youth-activist organizations,

in order to build power and self-efficacy while confronting their chosen social issues. The 6 different PA groups met once a week for a total of about 13 meetings a piece. To supplement the students learning experiences, some coaches brought in community speakers or took their groups on field trips to community organizations or agencies. Research and homework was sometimes required of students, but emphasis was placed on it being student generated and meaningful to the completion of the project. Each participant-observer collected data by audio taping their weekly group meetings, and then writing field notes from the tapes.

To ensure the confidentiality of the participants, no high school student were identified in the field notes, nor were any individually identifiable data collected on students. In addition, signed informed consent forms were obtained for all participants and their parents, participant-observers, and teachers. Institutional Review Board approval was obtained before starting the study. Additionally, weekly meetings were held with the participant observers to trade insights, discuss new developments, and plan. The collection and later sharing of data by all participant observers and the weekly meetings are partly designed to minimize observer bias. Moreover, by analyzing and reviewing the field notes and audio tapes of the other participant-observers, the trustworthiness of the research will be better established by addressing the issues of descriptive, interpretive, theoretical, and evaluative validity of the study.

Finally, following the collection of data through audio taping and the writing of field notes, I will analyze the data by “coding” my own and the other participant-observer’s field notes around specific themes or patterns observed (e.g. different coaching or organizing strategies and their effectiveness, effective and ineffective

collaboration with community organizations and their characteristics, effective or successful social action projects and their characteristics, interactions leading to new identity development or change, collective identity development, shifts toward or away from community or school change, changes in student attitudes, self-esteem, efficacy, and motivation, etc.). Particular attention will be given to student voices while coding and during the analysis of the data. Structured and unstructured interviews of students and participant-observers will also be conducted within each PA group to assist in identifying and measuring the above areas and to help guard against observer bias.

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