Student-Led Activism: Disrupting Institutional Oppression

"There's a radical — and wonderful — new idea here... that all children could and should be inventors of their own theories, critics of other people's ideas, analyzers of evidence, and makers of their own personal marks on the world. It's an idea with revolutionary implications. If we take it seriously."

- Deborah Meier

Did You Know
Students are Activists Without Adults' Help

It is no secret that inequities are persistent in the public schools systems here in the United States; it is for this reason that one of the obvious solutions should be to welcome guidance from the most directly affected group: students. Student-led activism*, however, is more often than not seen as a disruption rather than a legitimate reaction to education inequity (Cabrera, Meza, Romero, & Cintli, 2013).

*In this issue of Equity Dispatch, student-led activism refers to intentional acts of

collective protest (e.g. rallies, strikes/mass walk outs, petitions, etc.) performed by students in response to oppression, within or related to the school system (Mitra, Serrire, & Kirshner, 2014).

Persistent inequities are the reason organizations like the Midwest & Plains Equity Assistance Center exist. However important to the work of technical assistance centers, disruption of the status quo in schools does not have to be facilitated or organized only by adult-led organizations. Youth have been at the center of major movements towards equitable change throughout our country's history—without prompting from adults. Salient examples include: the activist group Black Youth Project 100 out of Chicago IL; Black Lives Matter youth movements across the country; recent "die-ins" and walk-outs amidst the Parkland, FL school shootings; the protests of the removal of Mexican American Studies courses in Tucson, AZ public schools—which ultimately led to mass student walk-outs (Cabrera et al, 2013); and historically, youth-led sit-ins of the1960s that helped fuel the Civil Rights Movement (Carson, 2003)—among many others. Students of Color in particular have a unique position as bodies in spaces that claim race neutrality as an equalizer—effectively erasing the very salient race-based issues they face (Pearce, Coomer, Dagli, Skelton, & Thorius, 2017).

This edition of *Equity Dispatch* aims to reimagine a school environment where student-led activism for social justice against oppressive school systems is legitimized rather than marginalized. Social justice in this case means working towards an equitable learning environment by confronting the systemic structures and ideologies that justify inequalities (García & Guerra, 2004). We seek to highlight the legitimacy of student-led activism in the face of schools' oppressive systems, and encourage educators to allow gracious space (Hughes & Grace, 2010) for students to practice their democratic rights, without persecution. In particular, we aim to remove the stigma from what educators may view as disruptive behavior, towards the co-creation of a democratic learning environment. Student-led activism must move beyond adult definitions and understandings, towards actively listening to what students are expressing.

Why It Matters
Towards Disrupting the Academic Status Quo

Co-creating spaces for students to actively disrupt dominant oppressive narratives and systems within schools can move towards a rich learning environment (Gonzalez, Love, Johnson, Picón, & Velázquez, 2017). Student-led activism for change is often misunderstood as reactionary, being characterized as immature—

sometimes resulting in punitive disciplinary action as a consequence of educators not being attentive to the needs of the students—particularly for historically marginalized youth (Cabrera et al, 2013). Further, student-led activism can be diminished by adults—seen as a [negative] disruption—rather than as a legitimate vehicle for the right to illuminate and challenge oppression (Irizarry & Brown, 2014). Indeed, student-led activism contributes to the cognitive development and learning environments for youth, central to robust learning (Kirshner, 2007). For example, activism encourages students "to question the status quo and envision better alternatives for themselves and their peers," fostering an environment of collectivism that engages Vygotsky's (1978) " *zone of proximal development*, referring to the distance between what aperson can do alone and what she or he can do in collaboration with peers or anexperienced adult" (Kirshner, 2007, p. 370).

Relatedly, it is important for educators to consider that we must push for rigorous education not just for information's sake—but to empower students to transform society through social justice. Being able to criticize and affirm one's place in community, and society more broadly, should be a critical outcome of education, stemming from learning *how* to think—rather than *what* to think.

Schools are hierarchal organizations; students are often positioned as passive receivers of information (Coomer, Jackson, Kyser, Skelton, & King Thorius, 2017). This structure can lead to adultism, or discrimination and oppression of youth by adults (Flasher, 1978). In the context of student-led activism, then, adults often minimize the actions of youth, constructing a narrative of deviance when youth disrupt their agenda(s)—rather than seeing their resistance as a way to interrupt oppressive hegemony in their world (Cabrera et al, 2013). Counter-narratives seek to center the voices and stories of historically marginalized people, challenging negative and stereotyped views through dominant society's lenses (Stefancic & Delgado, 2012). Activism, then, acknowledges students as informed, critical, socially driven actors—rather than as reactionary and "completely devoid of the possibility that [they are acting] intentionally, thoughtfully, and in a critical, strategic manner in the fight for education" (Cabrera et al, 2013, p. 10).

Educators must understand that student-led activism is not adversarial in nature, but rather is working to bridge gaps between students and their adult counterparts; this understanding is critical for the co-creation of an environment towards true democracy, inciting transformative student resistance, and acting from a critique of oppression motivated by social justice (Cabrera et al, 2013).

For Equity Now
Student Activism in Class Instruction

It is critical to note here that students have First Amendment rights to assembly, free speech, and protest, as long as it does not interrupt the school day; in fact, school officials must have a compelling and justifiable reason to interfere (Lunenburg, 2011). Further, First Amendment rights do not protect "defamatory, obscene or vulgar, and inflammatory communications" (Lunenburg, 2011, p. 1)—especially including disparaging expressions that violate the rights of disenfranchised, historically marginalized, and protected classes via the Civil Rights Act of 1964. However, much like any other law, pushing the boundaries of given parameters are at the discretion of the individual(s); there are countless examples of protests towards social justice that fell outside what was legal—with the actors willing to face the consequences for their cause. Educators claiming to be allied to students engaged in activism have a duty to walk alongside and protect students who may face unsafe, and sometimes violent, opposition.

Further, it is important to understand that the right for students to organize themselves against oppressive school systems is not contingent upon permission from adults; what we are suggesting is open communication and collaboration that invites the democratization of educational spaces, allowing for students and educators to begin to understand each other (Abowitz, 2000).

The capacity for student-led activism, towards advocating for equitable learning environments does not have to be mutually exclusive from the curriculum; elements of youth-led research can be operationalized to support students while *enhancing* the curriculum. Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) is a youth-led method used by researchers that aims to provide youth the agency to study areas of inequity that are relevant to them, with the goal of actively addressing those issues (Mitra et al, 2014). Bridged with student-led activism, YPAR "teaches young people that the conditions of injustice are produced and not natural; are designed to privilege and oppress; but are ultimately challengeable and thus changeable" (Cammarota & Fine, 2008, p. 2). These principles are part of an emancipatory education—and cornerstone to co-creating a space for students to feel empowered to rise up in the face of oppression.

Following are four salient principles offered by Cammarota (2014) that can be operationalized in the learning environment, towards co-creating a mutually exclusive transformative space, ensuring students are not silenced in their efforts toward activism and social justice (p. 109):

The lesson should be relevant to the students' lives.

In this way, the students can engage with subject matter that has a direct impact on them personally, taking this information and crafting it to have the optimal influence on the institutions that can change oppressive policies.

The lesson should be collaborative and student-centered.

The purpose of this principle is to provide as much space as possible for the youth to explore, discover, and reach their own conclusions. Educators act as guides in this

way, rather than perpetuating the banking method (Freire, 1970), or seeing students as beings that take in knowledge only to regurgitate it. This principle respects students as autonomous beings who already come with useful knowledge, important to the lesson.

The end goal of the lesson should be transformative.

The purpose of YPAR, and what should ideally be the focus of education, is that the lesson is emancipatory in nature, positively transforming the lives of the learners (or participants) in the process. Adopting this principle means that the results are transformational, liberatory, and sustaining for the students.

The entire experience should be empowering.

Throughout this process, educators should work alongside students towards a sense of empowerment to take ownership of their educational space, towards disrupting oppression. This is particularly important considering the unspoken dynamic of adult-dominated spaces where educators are the enforcers of control/holders of knowledge, and students are the passive receivers.

Meet the Authors

This February 2018 issue of Equity Dispatch was written and edited by: Robin G. Jackson, Nick Pearce, Cesur Dagli, Seena M. Skelton, and Kathleen King Thorius

References

Abowitz, K. K. (2000). A pragmatist revisioning of resistance theory. *American Educational Research Journal, 37*(4), 877-907.

Cabrera, N. L., Meza, E. L., Romero, A. J., & Cintli Rodriguez, R. (2013). ''If there is no struggle, there is no progress:" Transformative youth activism and the school of ethnic studies. *Urban Review, 45*(7), 7-22.

Cammarota, J. (2014). The social justice education project: Youth participatory action research in schools. In J. Cammarota & A. Romero (Eds.), *Raza studies: The public option for educational revolution* (pp. 107-121). Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press.

Cammarota, J., & Fine, M. (2008). Youth participatory action research: A pedagogy for transformational resistance. In J. Cammarota & M. Fine, (Eds.), *Revolutionizing education: Youth participatory action research in motion* (pp. 1-12). New York, NY: Routledge.

Carson, C. (Ed.). (2003). *Civil rights chronicle: The African-American struggle for freedom.* Lincolnwood, IL: Publications International.

Coomer, M.N., Jackson, R.G., Kyser, T.S., Skelton, S.M., & Thorius, K.A.K. (2017). Reframing the achievement gap: Ensuring all students benefit from equitable access to learning. *Equity Dispatch.* Midwest & Plains Equity Assistance Center (MAP EAC). Retrieved from file://C:/Users/Dr.%20Robin/Downloads/2017_4_4_April%20Newsletter_PDF.pdf

Flasher, J. (1978). Adultism. *Adolescence, 13*(51), 517-523.

Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed.* New York, NY: Continuum.

Gonzalez, T., Love L.D., Johnson, M.L, Picón, N., & Velázquez, J. (2017). Youth rising: Centering youth voice in the quest for equitable and inclusive schools. *Equity by Design.* Midwest & Plains Equity Assistance Center (MAP EAC). Retrieved from file://C:/Users/rgjackso/Downloads/2017_07_20_Taucia%20Gonza lez_Youth%20Rising_Final%20(2).pdf

Garcia, S. B., & Guerra, P. L. (2004). Deconstructing deficit thinking working with educators to create more equitable learning environments. *Education and Urban Society, 2*(36), 150-168.

Hughes, P., & Grace, B. (2010). *Gracious space: A practical guide for working better together* (2nd ed.). Seattle, WA: The Center for Ethical Leadership Publications.

Irizarry, J. G., & Brown, T. M. (2014). Humanizing research in dehumanizing spaces: The challenges and opportunities of conducting participatory action research with youth in schools. In D. Paris & M. T. Winn, (Eds.), *Humanizing research: Decolonizing qualitative inquiry with youth and communities* (pp. 63-80). Los Angeles, CA: Sage Publications.

Kirshner, B. (2007). Introduction: Youth activism as a context for learning and development. *American Behavioral Scientist, 51*(3), 367-379.

Lunenburg, F. C. (2011). Do Constitutional Rights To Freedom Of Speech, Press, And Assembly Extend To Students In School?. *FOCUS On Colleges, Universities & Schools, 6,* 1-5.

Mitra, D., Serriere, S., & Kirshner, B. (2014). Youth participation in U.S. contexts: Student voice without a national mandate. *Children & Society, 28,* 292-304.

Pearce, N., Coomer, M.N., Dagli, C., Skelton, S.M., & Thorius, K.A.K. (2017). Empowering students to become agents of social change. *Equity Dispatch.* Midwest & Plains Equity Assistance Center (MAP EAC). Retrieved from file://C:/Users/rgjackso/Downloads/2017_12_29_Equity%20Dispatch_%20December_Empowering%20Students%20to%20Become%20Agents%20of%20Social%20Change%20(2).pdf

Stefanic, J., & Delgado, R. (2012). *Critical race theory: An introduction (2nd ed.).* New York: New York University Press.

Vygotsky, L. (1978). Interaction between learning and development. *Readings on the Development of Children, 23*(3), 34-41.

A PROJECT OF

GREAT LAKES EQUITY CENTER

IU SCHOOL OF EDUCATION
INDIANA UNIVERSITY
IUPUI

902 W. New York Street Rm. 3116, Indianapolis, IN, 46202