

WUE

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ANNENBERG INSTITUTE FOR SCHOOL REFORM • *Voices in Urban Education*



Free Minds, Free People: Education for a Just, Multiracial Future

Keith Catone

Countering the Master Narratives: The "Why?" of Education for Liberation

Charles M. Payne

Empowering Young People to Be Critical Thinkers: The Mexican American Studies Program in Tucson

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Education is Under Attack! What Do We Do? Stand Up! Fight Back! Teacher Activism in the Occupy Wall Street Movement

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A World Where Youth Hold the Power

Adeola A. Oredola with members of Youth in Action

This issue of *Voices in Urban Education* was developed in collaboration with the Education for Liberation Network (EdLib, www.edliberation.org), a national coalition of teachers, community activists, youth, researchers, and parents who believe a good education should teach people – particularly low-income youth and youth of color – to understand and challenge the injustices their communities face.

EdLib hosts Free Minds, Free People (FMFP), a national gathering that brings these groups together every two years to build a movement to develop and promote education as a tool for liberation. The network seeks to develop ways of teaching and learning both in and out of school that help us to build a more just society. The conference is a space in which these groups can learn from and teach each other, sharing knowledge, experience, and strategies. It takes place every other year. The last FMFP, of which the Annenberg Institute for School Reform was a co-sponsor, took place in Providence, Rhode Island, in 2011. The next conference will take place in Salt Lake City, June 27–30, 2013. Please visit www.fmfp.org for more information.

EdLib also co-publishes, in partnership with the New York Collective of Radical Educators, a unique social justice lesson plan book for teachers called *Planning to Change the World*. Please visit www.justiceplanbook.com to learn more and order the 2012-2013 edition.

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This issue of Voices in Urban Education is dedicated to Matthew Bradley, an assistant professor for the Honors College at the University of Utah and a teacher of honors classes at AMES High School. A longtime teacher activist, he was instrumental in bringing the 2013 Free Minds, Free People conference to Salt Lake City.



MATTHEW WADE BRADLEY

AUGUST 19, 1970 – MARCH 20, 2012

Déjenme decirles, a riesgo de parecer ridículo, que el revolucionario verdadero está guiado por grandes sentimientos de amor.

At the risk of seeming ridiculous, let me say that the true revolutionary is guided by great feelings of love.

– Che Guevara, letter to Carlos Quijano

This was one of Matt Bradley’s favorite quotes, words he lived by as an activist, teacher, scholar, friend, and community member. Matt believed in the transformative power of education for liberation and worked to create access to education for all people, and in particular he struggled with others to fight for undocumented students’ rights to education. Matt was a powerful life force in our community and universe, whose sense of purpose, commitment, and vision continues to inspire us all to be our best selves.

Carrying him in our hearts and minds, we commit to live our lives with full and wild abandon: to laugh, play, and imagine new ways to live together; to read poetry; to ride bikes; to grow gardens; to eat fresh tomatoes and chilis (any and everything spicy!); to be respectful of others; to create alternative creative spaces for dialogue, teaching and learning, organizing, critical thinking, collective action, art, and social justice.

– Mestizo Arts and Activism Collective
Free Minds, Free People Salt Lake City Team
June 2012

Free Minds, Free People: Education for a Just, Multiracial Future

KEITH CATONE

As the field of education follows myriad paths of reform, not enough of us are stopping to consider the essential question: For what? We must close achievement gaps . . . for what? We must measure and evaluate teacher effectiveness . . . for what? We must develop and adhere to high quality standards . . . for what? We must race to the top . . . for what? In other words, to what end are we engaged in educational experiences? Implicit – at times explicit – aims of the most popular mainstream education reform trends center around global competition and economic prowess.¹ Little seems focused on the core functions of education as the necessary threads weaving the democratic fabric of society. Even less focus is on the liberatory potential of education, on its importance in forming the most basic foundation of our individual and collective humanness.

The Free Minds, Free People (FMFP) conference and the Education for Liberation Network seek to understand, frame, and practice education for the purpose of freedom – a true collective realization of liberty and justice for all. In 2009, a group of young people and their adult allies from Youth In Action traveled from Providence to Houston to attend the second-ever FMFP. They experienced a space cultivated by the conference that was authentically intergenerational, supporting the voices and ideas of young and old alike to coexist in dialogue. They experienced a conference dedicated to lifting up those most historically marginalized from power and understood that such a space has the potential to empower people to imagine and then work to make real the change they want to see in the world. They returned to Providence energized and poised to work to bring FMFP to their city. I was lucky enough to be part of the Youth In Action family and served as one of the local conference organizers. The power of working with educators and young people from across the country to make FMFP a reality in Providence in July 2011 was awe-inspiring.

The most amazing part of the FMFP experience is the way in which the conference builds the space for all participants to be seen and heard. Participants do not gain special attention for their titles and degrees, but

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1 See, for example, the recently released “U.S. Education Reform and National Security” report from the Council on Foreign Relations (www.cfr.org/united-states/us-education-reform-national-security/p27618).

Keith Catone is a senior research associate at the Annenberg Institute for School Reform.

rather for the value of their contributions to the field of education for liberation. When university professors speak as equals alongside youth activists, and young people are treated as experts about their own realities, both groups are humanized. The conference aspires to have participants bring their whole selves to the fore and to contribute their full humanness for others to see and understand.

More broadly, our society is without an education for liberation, without free minds and free people. Instead, we live in a society with a stark inability to recognize the humanity of all its members. Two recent events illustrate our current society's severe limitations with respect to human liberation. First, take Arizona's attack on the Tucson Unified School District's Mexican American Studies (MAS) program, declaring it illegal, and the district's subsequent decision to cease the program. In this issue of *VUE* (page 12), Charles Payne writes: "Declaring Mexican American Studies illegal is the moral equivalent of white supremacists in the South burning Black schoolhouses after the Civil War." In other words, to ignore the life experiences, histories, and perspectives of communities of color in the United States is to ignore their human rights to freedom and equality. In essence, this active ignorance paints people of color one-dimensionally by forcing their histories and narratives into the dominant white mainstream, thus rendering invisible the human complexity of people and communities of color.

Related is the tragic murder of Trayvon Martin in Sanford, Florida. George Zimmerman, the man who pulled the trigger that ended Trayvon's life, didn't see a young man standing in front of him. Instead, what he saw was a brown-skinned male in a hoodie, and quickly assumed Trayvon was "up to no good" or "on drugs or something" in a call to a 911 dispatcher. A view that, in Zimmerman's mind, was grounds for murder. Subsequent reports leaking information about past school suspensions attempted to call Trayvon's character into question and represent extended efforts to deny his humanity, serving to try to justify his murder.

Education for liberation combats the refusal to see humanness in others, and in doing so allows us all to be fully human. Education for liberation makes necessary and central the full humanity of all people to exist and act upon their world. It assumes, as Charles Payne expresses (see page 13), that people need to be educated in a way that helps them understand and "think more critically about the social forces that shape our lives and think more confidently about their ability to react against those forces."

Ultimately, the social forces that prompted Zimmerman to see a young man with a bag of candy as a threat and that feed the fear and distrust Arizona politicians have of Mexican American youth who have found their voice through a curriculum that honors who they are and where they come from, must be challenged. Payne paraphrases Charlie Cobb, one of the lead architects of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee's Freedom School for the 1964 Freedom Summer Project (see page 13), as reflecting that students need "to challenge the myths

of our society, to perceive more clearly its realities, to find alternatives and ultimately new directions for action.” And as fellow civil rights movement leader Vincent Harding often points out, we are “citizens of a country that does not yet exist.”² Thus, it is our responsibility to work to create that country yet to be.

This issue of *VUE* seeks to raise up various voices and perspectives on what it means to engage in education for liberation, and what it means to free minds and free people. You’ll hear from movement historians, teachers and students, youth activists and organizers, and community-based educators and academics:

- Charles Payne, an academic historian, discusses how education for liberation helps young people identify the biases of mainstream narratives, examine the social forces that impact their lives, and take collective action for more just alternatives.
- Curtis Acosta and Asiya Mir describe their experiences as teacher and student in Tucson’s acclaimed Mexican American Studies program, recently shut down by state and district officials, and how the program has transformed the lives of its students and teachers.
- Vincent Harding, a seasoned civil rights activist and scholar, and Antonio Albizures, a young immigrant rights organizer, dialogue about how their generations can work together to create a more democratic, multicultural, and just future.
- Bree Picower, teacher educator and activist, shares the thoughts and ideas of teachers engaged in the Occupy the DOE movement in New York City who work to end the oppression standing in the way of a more just society, both inside and outside the classroom.
- Adeola Oredola and other youth and community leaders from Youth In Action reflect on how the space cultivated by their organization puts young people, traditionally marginalized by adult decision-makers, at the center of change in the community.

As you read through the dialogue created by the voices on these pages, I hope you’ll be challenged to consider where your own voice fits in. Taken together, these short articles aim to help all of us better imagine the world we seek to create for ourselves and the important role that education – in its various forms, through its multiple venues, and with its many participants – plays in our collective construction of this world. And, if you are so inspired, I hope to see you in Salt Lake City, Utah, from June 27 to 30, 2013, at the next Free Minds, Free People.

For more information on the conference, see www.fmfp.org.

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2 I have heard Vincent Harding speak two different times – at the 2010 U.S. Social Forum in Detroit and during the keynote conversation with Antonio Albizures at FMFP in Providence (see excerpts from this conversation on pages 27–33) – and during each one he has invoked this phrase, quoting an unnamed African poet he once heard.



Countering the Master Narratives: The “Why?” of Education for Liberation

CHARLES M. PAYNE

Education for liberation helps young people identify the biases of mainstream narratives, examine the social forces that impact their lives, and take collective action for more just alternatives.

Note: This article is excerpted from material that will appear in a forthcoming book to be published by Beacon Press.

Too many young people have been separated from both their past and their future leaving a vast and aching void, often to be filled with nothing more than the most destructive values of society.

– Vincent Harding, *Hope and History*

Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced.

– James Baldwin, “As Much Truth as One Can Bear”

A few years ago, some of us in Chicago started a program that was very much in dialogue with Theresa Perry’s work. Fundamental to her argument in *Young, Gifted and Black: Promoting High Achievement among African-American Students* is the proposition that the task of intellectual achievement for Black children is different because of the constant recycling of notions of Black moral, cultural, and intellectual inferiority (Perry, Steele & Hilliard 2003). Intellectual development for Black children, then, is ordinarily development under hostile conditions. What does it mean to teach to this context, to teach counter-hegemonically?

Over our first year or so, two incidents seemed to best epitomize the problem. One February, as a Black History Month activity, we sponsored a play

Charles M. Payne is the Frank P. Hixon Distinguished Service Professor in the School of Social Service Administration at the University of Chicago, where he is also an affiliate of the Urban Education Institute.

on Harriet Tubman for about 1,200 high school students from Chicago's South Side high schools, schools with essentially all-Black student bodies.¹ There was considerable anxiety about whether it was safe to have that many students from different schools sitting in the dark, but that part went off without a hitch. What was interesting was how the students reacted to the content of the play.

The play opens with a flashback involving an actress changing from smart, modern garb to the tattered, dirty clothing of a slave. At the sight of the slave, the audience started giggling and laughing. (And, if they were anything like the boys I grew up with, they were poking one another and whispering, "That's your Momma . . .") The actress, who expected that reaction, stopped the play, stepped out of character and did the Sistuh thing – hands on her hips – "What's so funny?" She challenged the audience to give her an honest explanation. That huge auditorium just shut down. No one gave a clear answer, and students seemed embarrassed that she had called them out. The actress's interpretation was that Black youth have been taught to be ashamed of the African American past, slavery in particular, and laughter is a way to distance themselves from the shameful. What we should hear in that laughter is "Niggers ain't shit – but I'm OK."

The other defining incident came during a professional development day that we held for teachers on the history of Emmett Till.² We shouldn't let Till's story be lost *anywhere*, but certainly

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- 1 For more about this production, see www.karenjonesmeadows.com/about_the_production.php.
- 2 Emmett Till was a fourteen-year-old boy from Chicago who was brutally tortured and murdered in 1955 by white supremacists while visiting relatives in Mississippi, after he was accused of flirting with a white woman.

not in his hometown. Because we were in Chicago, we could actually do it at the school that Emmett Till attended, which just a few years prior had been renamed in his honor. We talked to the teachers there about their attempts to teach that history in that neighborhood. They told us that when they first tried, they met resistance from both students and parents. Their students didn't see why the history was important, didn't see why it should matter to them, and frequently thought Till's murder was his own fault for doing something he should have known not to do; Till's uncle should have stood up to those white men. If they had been there, they wouldn't have let white people treat them like that. Not surprisingly, there were residents who opposed renaming the school at all. "What did he do that was so special?" – another version of "Niggers ain't shit."

Even before these experiences, Chicago schools used to frequently invite me to do Black History Month presentations, and an easy way to do that was to show some footage about the civil rights movement from the PBS television series *Eyes on the Prize* and use that as the basis of a conversation. When middle school and junior high students watched demonstrations with dogs being sicced on people and people being firehosed and clubbed by police, a very common reaction, perhaps the dominant one, was to decide the demonstrators were at fault for taking it. It was easier for some students to identify with the police doing the whipping than with the demonstrators being whipped. The demonstrators had to be punks: "If I were back there then . . ." Young people in whose names the movement was waged could not identify with it.

HOW DOMINANT NARRATIVES SHAPE US

In *The Fire Next Time*, James Baldwin (1993) gives his characterization of the Black past:

This past, the Negro's past, of rope, fire, torture, castration, infanticide, rape; death and humiliation; fear by day and night, fear as deep as the marrow of the bones; doubt that he was worthy of life, since everyone around him denied it; sorrow for his women, for his kinfolk, for his children, who needed his protection, and whom he could not protect; rage, hatred, and murder, hatred for white men so deep that it often turned against him and his own, and made all love, all trust, all joy impossible. (p. 98)

That is bad history and poor sociology. It's bad history because, to paraphrase the historian Herbert Gutman, it focuses on what was done to Black people, not on what they did with what was done to them. Had Baldwin looked at the latter, he would have found a history of resistance in forms both small and dramatic. And it's poor sociology, because it assumes that white people took so much from Black people that Black people had nothing left to give one another.

But this quote reflects a vision of the past too common in Baldwin's Harlem or today's Chicago. Even the most insightful among us have been shaped by the dominant narratives. History confronts children of color as an accusation – they were slaves or peasants or the militarily defeated or the colonized; Sambo or Dumb Pancho; they were the least intelligent, the wetbacks and the illegals, the poorest, the worst educated, or perhaps, most damningly, they just weren't there; they don't come into the picture. (And “contributionist” history – “Look what minorities have contributed!” – is probably not the way to answer this.)

At the same time, as much as anyone else, youth from stigmatized groups can see the “evidence” of collective underachievement all about them – the poverty, the troubled neighborhoods, the absent fathers, the academic failure, their own constant exposure to violence, real and symbolic. Nothing about being in a subordinate group automatically gives them deep insight into the contemporary forces reproducing inequality. Like many majority group members, they may not have sufficient historical or sociological understanding to explain those failures in any way other than some kind of collective deficiency – or to just not think about them.

Both the past as imagined and the present as experienced suggest, indirectly, as if whispered, that there may be something wrong with Blacks and Latinos. On top of that, often irrespective of their class background, children of color have to negotiate their way through institutional contexts that are anything but welcoming – the stores and malls where it looks like you're being followed, the hassling from police, the harsh and punitive nature of many schools. Data from the U.S. Department of Education, for example, shows that Black students are three and a half times more likely to be suspended than white students (Adams, Robelen & Shah 2012). Previous studies have shown that Black and Hispanic students receive harsher punishments for the same offenses (Gregory, Skiba & Noguera 2010) and that this differential treatment is noticed by students and teachers and attributed to racism, although

white students and teachers perceived racial disparity in discipline as unintentional or unconscious, [while] students of color saw it as conscious and deliberate, arguing that teachers often apply classroom rules and guidelines arbitrarily to

exercise control, or to remove students whom they do not like. (Skiba et al. 2000, p. 17)

It shouldn't be surprising, then, if Black and Latino youth start off with a sense of being behind, of having something to prove that others don't. They respond as young people will, by creating, from the cultural materials around them, their own counter-narratives of worth, among them narratives that center on personal style, toughness, and aggressive masculinity and that create symbolic distance between themselves and previous generations. Without guidance and support, youth will create some counter-narratives that are useful, but also some that undermine their own development, that discourage them from taking advantage of such opportunities as they do have.

This should help us appreciate what we know about race and trust. A national survey from Pew Charitable Trust, for example, found Blacks and Hispanics substantially less trusting than whites. Only 32 percent of whites were in the lowest trust categories, against 53 percent of Hispanics and 61 percent of Blacks (Taylor, Funk & Clark 2007, p. 1).

Educators do not pay nearly enough attention to the implications of these figures. They suggest a profoundly defensive orientation to life; they suggest people who are not sure they fit into or are accepted by the larger community. Much of the national discourse is simply in denial about the difficult developmental terrain facing too many youngsters from socially marginalized communities. The way we continue to scratch our heads about achievement gaps is itself one form of denial; the presumption in many such discussions is that we're giving children what they need to succeed and they are still failing for some mysterious reason. A corollary denial is the idea that all would be well if we could just raise test

scores. Of course, that is important, but children may be wrestling with issues that are much more fundamental. And when they get help with that, there is reason to believe that some of the narrowly academic issues wither.

TEACHING TRUTH TO POWER

I have been teaching courses on the civil rights movement since 1979. When I've spoken with students about what they get out of the course, the answers haven't changed much over the years. Students of all backgrounds say they become more reflective about their own values; they find models for how they want to live their lives (Ella Baker and Fannie Lou Hamer probably top the list). Students of all backgrounds say they think more confidently about challenging the barriers in their lives. More, they wonder how they can be agents of change; the idea that ordinary people can be historical actors seems less far-fetched.

Intellectually, by far the strongest effect is that when they understand that most of what they have been taught about the civil rights movement is a fairy tale, they begin wondering what else they have been lied to about. When they learn that some of the most important shapers of the movement are people they have never heard of, when they learn that the movement began well before Montgomery, when they learn that Rosa Parks was an experienced and determined activist, not some nice woman who stumbled into history, they begin thinking about whose viewpoints are systematically built into or left out of other social narratives.

Black students, though, say something more. They say they respect their grandparents in a different way and they frequently refer to it in just that highly personalized way – “my grandparents.” Even though they may use the word “respect,” I've become

less convinced that it conveys the complexity of their feelings. Maybe “disregarded” is closer to how they felt previously; they hadn’t thought much about what kinds of people they were descended from because they didn’t see a reason to think about it. They “knew” they were descended from slaves and people who were always dominated by white people.

What is striking is the number of different ways students are undermined by discrimination.

Reconnecting them to a more complex history restores their ancestors to them as being as complicated and as capable and as troubled as anyone else.

Much talk about multicultural curriculum and diversity notwithstanding, youngsters are not likely to encounter much critical teaching before college (except youngsters from privileged backgrounds). Christine Sleeter’s (2011) review finds that the recent changes in textbooks have been pretty weak tea. Content has been added about African Americans, Latinos, Asian Americans, and Native Americans, but the narratives and interpretations continue to reflect a Euro-American centrality:

Whites continue to receive the most attention and appear in the widest variety of roles, dominating story lines and lists of accomplishments. African Americans, the next most represented racial group, appear in a more limited range of roles

and usually receive only a sketchy account historically, being featured mainly in relationship to slavery. Asian Americans and Latinos appear mainly as figures on the landscape with virtually no history or contemporary ethnic experience. Native Americans appear mainly in the past, but also occasionally in contemporary stories in reading books. Immigration is represented as a distinct historical period that happened mainly in the Northeast, rather than as an ongoing phenomenon. . . . Texts say little to nothing about contemporary race relations, racism, or racial issues, usually sanitizing greatly what they mention. (p. 2)

Strong ethnic studies programs are founded on a very different set of principles, which Sleeter sees as:

- explicit identification of the point of view from which knowledge emanates and the relationship between social location and perspective;
- examination of U.S. colonialism historically, as well as how relations of colonialism continue to play out;
- examination of the historical construction of race and institutional racism, how people navigate racism, and struggles for liberation;
- probing meanings of collective or communal identities that people hold; and
- studying one’s community’s creative and intellectual products, both historic and contemporary.

This is a far cry from the pablum students are ordinarily offered. While students cannot articulate it in this way, they do seem to have some degree of understanding that they are being cheated. Sleeter cites work suggesting that from middle school on, at least some African American students

are aware of the limited portrayal of African Americans in the curriculum, the absence of any sustained analysis of racism, and the unrelenting focus on victimization, all of which seem to contribute to an increasing disinterest and distrust in school history as they grow older.

The main point of Sleeter’s review of the literature is to ascertain the impact of ethnic studies programs. While there are concerns with the quality of the sample in many studies and with the grounds for causal inference, she concludes that there is considerable evidence that well-executed programs are associated with positive outcomes on a wide array of important social and academic indicators, including sense of agency, engagement, higher-order thinking, high school graduation, grades, motivation, and writing skills. The fact that so many different indicators seem to be involved and that some of them, such as agency and higher-order thinking, might be considered “master variables” may be a suggestion that something fundamental is changing in students in ethnic studies programs.

Random assignment studies are rare but not completely absent.³ Sleeter cites one that focused on African and African American history and culture, African rituals and practices, building communalism, student leadership and activism, and school/community partnerships for the experimental group. Youth in that curriculum outperformed students assigned to the

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3 *Random assignment* is a type of research design in which a lottery-like process is used to allocate individuals between two (or more) groups: the test group, which enrolls in a certain program or receives a certain treatment, and a control group, which does not. This maximizes the probability that any difference between the two groups is due to the test program or treatment and not to some other factor.

control group in school connectedness, motivation to achieve, and overall social change involvement.

Telles and Ortiz (2008) called attention to evidence showing that in recent decades, each succeeding generation of Mexican-descended youth has performed less well than the preceding generations. Sleeter (2011) cites a study of 185 Latino/a eighth-graders that suggests an explanation. Students with higher grades tended to have *bicultural* identities. Both those students who showed *little* identification with their ethnicity and the handful of students who identified *only* with their culture of origin did worse than those students who identified with *both* Anglo and Mexican culture. Earlier studies of African American students showed similar results.

Ominously, the researchers also found that each generation of Latino students identified less with their ethnic culture, giving up whatever buffering and affirmation that culture had offered the generations before them who maintained bicultural identities.

Wong, Eccles, and Sameroff (2003) have done another study that helps us think about the protective effects of strong ethnic identity. Their concern was with how Black junior high school students reacted to perceived discrimination from peers or teachers. They collected data from students near the beginning of their seventh-grade year and the end of their eighth-grade year. For these students, discrimination usually took the form of people thinking they were dumb or people thinking they were a threat of some sort. What is striking in their findings is the number of different ways students are undermined by discrimination. Perceived discrimination predicted declines in grades, academic self-concepts, self-esteem, and psychological resiliency, while also predicting increases in

depression and anger. It also predicted increases in the proportion of reported friends who were not interested in school and who had problem behaviors. We can only wonder how many other experiences drag students down in so many ways.

The other striking point is that having a stronger racial identity was, again, protective. When those students saw discrimination, it had less effect on their self-concept, academic ability, school achievement, or engagement in problem behaviors. They also chose more positive friends. This point about the possible impact of discrimination on friendship formation should give us pause. It seems possible that discrimination not only directly and immediately de-centers youth, but that it may also be leading them to select friends in ways that can have far-reaching consequences.

This research should help us more fully appreciate the destructive nature of the January 2011 decision by the city of Tucson making its widely praised Mexican American Studies program illegal.⁴ Here, too, participation in the program was associated with positive results – stronger reading and writing scores and a greater likelihood of graduating high school. In spite of that, critics of the program claimed that these classes were “promoting resentment toward a class of people” and “promoting the overthrow of the U.S. government.”

Declaring Mexican American Studies illegal is the moral equivalent of white supremacists in the South burning

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4 See Curtis Acosta and Asiya Mir’s article in this issue of *VUE* for more on the Tucson’s Mexican American Studies program. For a history of the protest movement unleashed by Tucson’s action, see the “No History is Illegal” website at www.teacheractivistgroups.org/Tucson.

Black schoolhouses after the Civil War. It is also a sharp reminder that youth of color are hardly the only people who need liberating. This is militant ignorance. What the critics seem to lack is any sense of “the relationship between social location and perspective,” to borrow Sleeter’s language, any sense that their point of view is a point of view, not a received truth. Mark Twain (1889) put it well:

The blunting effects of slavery upon the slaveholder’s moral perceptions are known and conceded the world over; and a privileged class . . . is but a band of slaveholders under another name. (pp. 224–225)

The people who destroyed this program are as much trapped by ignorance and fear characteristic of their social location as the young men who make our city streets unlivable with their misogyny and violence. Part of what they fail to appreciate is that for youngsters on the margins, learning to critique society is a way to become engaged with it. The ones to be feared are not the ones with critique but the ones who have given up on the larger society, the ones without a framework for understanding the constraints on their lives.

THINKING CRITICALLY, TAKING ACTION

Families and communities develop ways to support the development of children in hostile circumstances, but the effectiveness of those strategies may vary with time and circumstance. After World War II, it may have been increasingly difficult for minority communities to protect their children from a sneering or indifferent larger world. The growth of mass media – and by some measures, minority youngsters are especially exposed to mass media – meant that social imagery was

increasingly being shaped by forces outside the community. At the same time, the massive national decline in social capital that Robert Putnam (2000) has documented for the nation as a whole may have meant that some minority communities had less of the cohesion that had previously helped them buffer their children from the “outside gaze.”

If so, education for liberation becomes increasingly important. I use that term to mean those forms of education that are intended to help people think more critically about the social forces that shape our lives and think more confidently about their ability to react against those forces. It can take a variety of forms (Payne & Strickland 2008) – consciousness-raising groups, Freedom Schools, Afro-centric schools, Native American survival schools, Black Panther Liberation Schools. I have focused on race and ethnicity, but young people are also enmeshed in taken-for-granted narratives about gender, poverty, sexuality, and the operation of power in society. I suspect the groups that are doing the most effective work are moving on multiple fronts, as learning to think critically in one area facilitates thinking critically in others.⁵

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5 For example, see Susan Wilcox’s “My Brother, My Sister, Myself: Critical Explorations of Sexism and Misogyny at the Brotherhood/Sister Sol,” in Payne and Strickland 2008.

Charlie Cobb, who shaped the idea of the Freedom School for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee in the context of the Mississippi Summer Project of 1964, said that what he was trying to do was to

make it possible for Mississippi students to challenge the myths of our society, to perceive more clearly its realities, to find alternatives and ultimately new directions for action.

That is still hard to improve upon. When they discover who they are, as Ralph Ellison put it, they’ll be free.

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Empowering Young People to Be Critical Thinkers: The Mexican American Studies Program in Tucson

CURTIS ACOSTA AND ASIYA MIR

A teacher and a student in Tucson's acclaimed Mexican American Studies program, recently shut down by state and district officials, describe how the program has transformed the lives of its students and teachers.

INTRODUCTION | CURTIS ACOSTA

The memories overwhelm me as the question is posed, “What does education for liberation look like in Tucson?” I see the marches, the vigils, the *teatro*. I feel the music and voices of youth expressing their own view of the world through their art. A collec-

tion of powerful and poised faces of former students quickly flip through my mind, as they assertively and respectfully challenged the misconceptions and agendas of powerful political figures in Tucson and Phoenix. Along with them, I see the uncomfortable expressions of those *políticos* as they were held accountable to their constituency, to the voices, passion, and dreams of our youth. For those of us who have struggled to save ethnic studies and Mexican American Studies (MAS) in Tucson, these occurrences have become a part of a beautiful tradition of education for liberation that

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is handed from one cohort of students to another and will change our community forever.

MAS was born from generations of systemic failure in educating Chican@/Latin@ students in the Tucson Unified School District and the dogged determination of our elders and the rest of our community to ensure an equal educational experience for our youth.¹ Our classes were products of the Chican@ Movement in the 1960s and a further grassroots effort in the 1990s to build an educational experience

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1 For a description of the Mexican American Studies curriculum and its different programs, see the sidebar.

for our youth founded on the premise that the experiences, history, literature, and art of Chican@s/Latin@s were a necessary and valid area for rigorous academic exploration.²

Many people throughout the nation have dedicated their time, energy, brilliance, imagination, and love to our cause after witnessing the action of our students on YouTube or following our story through media reports

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2 Although empowering Latin@s is one of our major intentions, many diverse youth have benefited from our classes – including Asiya Mir, my co-author for this article, who is a Pakistani-American.

ABOUT THE MEXICAN AMERICAN STUDIES PROGRAM

The MAS program aims to use a comprehensive approach and integrated strategy for promoting academic success. Key elements are:

Student support incorporates both intervention and prevention goals, creating a critical consciousness and an academic identity.

Curriculum content brings Chicanos/Latinos and their cultural groups from the margin to the center and features cultural relevance, cultural competence, social justice emphasis, alignment with state standards, and academic rigor.

The Social Justice Education Project is a two-year, student-led social research program in some TUSD American History and American Government classes that connects social research with curriculum (see www.socialjusticeproject.org).

Chicano/a studies classes are taught as stand-alone classes and/or with co-teaching, depending on the grade level.

Teacher professional development uses a Latino Critical Race Theory framework to promote practices for educators that enhance the academic identity and achievement of all students, with an emphasis on Latino students in particular and students of color in general. The Mexican American Student Services Team offers professional development meetings throughout the school year; the Mexican American Student Services Summer Institute is a four-day conference that provides Chicana/o studies-based lessons and units to implement at all grade levels.

Parent and community involvement, through the Ce-Ollin Parent Encuentros program, provides parents with the opportunity to hear children deliver presentations on their intellectual growth and helps parents develop a foundation for engaging in social justice, social transformation, and educational justice activities.

Source: adapted from “Mexican American Student Services: Programs,” www.tusd.k12.az.us/contents/depart/mexicanam/programs.asp.

and blogs.³ The sidebar at the end of this article provides more information about the events leading up to and following the banning of MAS in January 2012. But what many people have never seen or been able to witness is the process of our classrooms and the cultivation of liberated and empowered youth from the inside. This was the challenge student-activist Asiya Mir and I received for how we should approach this article, and in the wake of the destruction of our MAS program in Tucson, it is a blessing and our pleasure to be able to recall such beautiful moments and experiences in our classrooms.

IN LAK'ECH – YOU ARE MY OTHER ME | CURTIS ACOSTA

In Lak'Ech is the embodiment of our MAS classes in Tucson and our guiding principle as we engage in the beautiful struggle that is learning and teaching. It is a Mayan phrase that translates to “you are my other me.” Each day as class starts, my students and I would recite a verse from the poem of the same name by award-winning Chicano playwright Luis Valdez (see the sidebar *In Lak'ech: You Are My Other Me* on page 19). It was a daily reminder for us all to remember how we should embrace the world.

The gift my students have provided me year after year is their presence in my class and the honor of being their teacher. Since there is only one Chican@/Latin@ Literature teacher on our campus, they all know what they are getting themselves into when they click the mouse during registration. But the secret joy that my students

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3 See the “No History Is Illegal” campaign (www.teacheractivistgroups.org/Tucson); the Save Ethnic Studies campaign (<http://saveethnicstudies.org>); and Three Sonorans: Progressive and Activist News in Tucson and Arizona (<http://threesonorans.com>).

give me is the mental picture of what they are like on those first days and a front row seat to their maturation as socially conscious scholars. I call it the “before” picture. In many ways, those early memories are filled with unique qualities that make each of my students special.

Yet, there are also some common characteristics that many teachers of urban, minority youth would recognize if they were next to me as the first bell rang for the first day of class. The lives of our students outside the school gates are largely marginalized and ignored in their daily school experiences. Our district invests little time and attention to neighborhood issues, socioeconomic realities, or the perspective and voice of youth who have their own ideas for transforming the world. This lack of empathy, commitment, and love within the school halls and classroom spaces creates distrust, cynicism, and disengagement. Students are desperate for an education that reflects their lives and are starving for inspiration.

I teach at the largest high school in our district, one that is majority Latin@ and nestled in downtown Tucson. Throughout the years, my students have reflected upon why they took the class and consistently expressed that selecting Mexican American Studies classes represented their last effort to give school a chance. This was it for them – the last possible chance that the public school system would have to inspire them to chase the elusive American Dream.

Many other students have articulated the need and desire they had for an education experience that mirrored their culture. In these responses, students spoke candidly of the dearth of Chican@/Latin@ themes throughout their previous eleven years of schooling. Very few of those early-day reflections include themes of liberation, equality, and social justice. That is not to infer

that the students do not have such a consciousness – nothing could be further from the truth, as their actions always prove while our days together roll forward.

But the early responses are intimate and personal. Our students look very similar to their counterparts throughout schools and communities that I have been fortunate to visit across the nation. They are eager and hungry for education that matters to them. This is an important point to emphasize, since the media, and even fellow educators, often portray students of color as apathetic and nihilistic – that they lack the passion to actively engage in their world. These are falsehoods meant to disempower students and teachers from creating academic spaces together that are student-centered, liberating, and democratic, while restoring human dignity to their educational experiences. Stories like ours are happening throughout the country. I hope that these stories provide an antidote to the widespread cynicism toward urban minority youth and show their potential to transform the world.

RECALLING MY FIRST DAYS | ASIYA MIR

I first took Chican@ Studies as a surly sophomore determined to graduate early after years in a school system that has continuously beat a desire to learn out of me and reinforced the idea that I am incompetent as a student, a common experience for students of color in public schools. However, I consider myself very lucky because I had the opportunity to take Chican@ Studies and improve my relationship with education, which is more than most students can say.

I entered the class unsure of what to expect – a Pakistani-Caucasian, completely unfamiliar with the literature, let alone all the societal implications my fellow students face of being Chi-

can@ in Arizona. I was not involved in my community and quite withdrawn into my own adolescent sphere. I was adamant in my desire to graduate early, partially because of my poor academic background, and more so, to shirk higher education altogether.

While I instantly enjoyed myself through our writing assignments, my earliest days in Mr. Acosta's class consisted of me being slightly detached and softspoken the same way I was in my other classes. It became obvious to me as the weeks went on that this was not like any of my other classes. Change occurred in me one day when I raised my hand for the first time and gave input on rape victims and how they are robbed of the intimacy in a physical relationship. While I expected this opinion to be met with victim blaming, my classmates were receptive and open. This was related to the book we were reading at the time, *Always Running*, easily one of the most enjoyable pieces of literature I have read in high school. Since that first year I like to think I have evolved as a Chican@ Studies student and activist.

I saw the same changes occur in my classmates. People whose lives seemed to revolve around typical teenage woes steadily became more socially conscious. That is not to say we all entered the Mexican American Studies classes completely oblivious to social justice issues and politics, but it was in Mr. Acosta's room that I saw myself and fellow students grow into academically and politically driven individuals. Our space itself quickly became a "home away from home" for several of us, as it has in the past for previous generations of students.

The early days will always be my favorite time in Chican@ Studies because they were so pivotal for the rest of our development both in there and in the rest of our high school careers. When I dug up my notebook from that class



IN LAK'ECH: YOU ARE MY OTHER ME

Luís Valdez and Domingo Martínez Paredes

Luís Valdez, regarded as the father of Chicano theater, is a playwright, writer, film director, and founder of El Teatro Campesino, a farm workers' theater troupe. The late Domingo Martínez Paredes was a professor at the National University of Mexico in the 1970s and the author of several books on Mayan thought and culture.

As a result of Arizona House Bill 2281 targeting the Mexican American Studies program, my plays have been banned in Tucson public schools, along with other works of Mexican American literature. I condemn this latest violation of American constitutional principles. I attribute it to a historic blindness and ignorance that will only embarrass the good people of Arizona for generations to come. Chicano Studies is quite simply the root of American Studies. Human history in this hemisphere does not begin in 1492 C.E. but rather in 3113 B.C.E. with the creation of the Mayan calendar, if not before with the Ancients in Peru.

In Lak'Ech is a timeless Mayan precept I incorporated into a larger poem called "Pensamiento Serpentino." More specifically, I inherited *In Lak'Ech* directly from the late Professor Domingo Martínez Paredes of the National University of Mexico in the 1970s. He was the renowned author of several books on Mayan thought and culture, and I had the privilege of being personally tutored by him. The meaning of the phrase is affiliated with the Mayan definition of the human being, which they called "*huinik'ilil*" or "vibrant being." In this regard, we are all part of the same universal vibration. This was the origin of the recitation, excerpted from my poem, that celebrated our collective human being in Tucson's MAS classes:

In Lak'ech

Tú eres mi otro yo.

You are my other me.

Si te hago daño a ti,

If I do harm to you,

Me hago daño a mi mismo.

I do harm to myself.

Si te amo y respeto,

If I love and respect you,

Me amo y respeto yo.

I love and respect myself.

For a video clip of Curtis Acosta beginning a class with this recitation, please visit www.preciousknowledgefilm.com.

I revisited early notes on the normalization of whiteness and from one particularly memorable class, an analysis on Islamic extremists who, as Mr. Acosta said, were dehumanized in the media. My notes read as being close to his exact words:

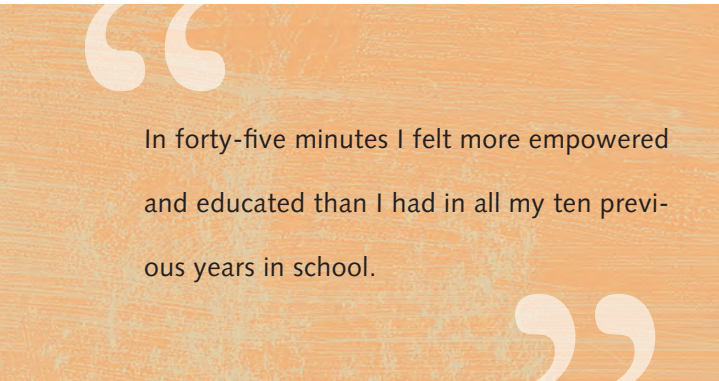
What point do you have to be at to blow yourself up or crash a plane? Look at the terrorists as humans. Desperate. Loss of hope leads to decisions that are less than human.

It was at this point that I felt more comfortable in my skin than ever before in school. Not only am I of a

rich in student voice. As a literature teacher, it was crucial for me to find engaging, provocative literature that was relevant to the lives and experiences of my students.

It was just as essential to include culturally responsive works that were reflective of the historical and contemporary context that makes Tucson and our Chican@/Latin@ *cultura* unique. I knew that my students deserved better than the literature anthologies that crowded the bookshelves at my school. I believed that I could build a literature curriculum that was not only rigorous and challenging, but beautiful and intoxicating. I was less concerned about presenting a historical perspective of literary movements than with finding literature that would inspire dialogue and generate ideas so powerful that my students felt compelled to write. It was my belief that the literature could be the tool used to create a liberated class, where I became one voice of many in the discussion of the art and the social political context of the story (see the sidebar on page 16 for more about the MAS curriculum).

Although this type of empowerment within the classroom was new to my students, they were willing to take risks and leave the confines of their seats to informally or formally present their own opinions and analyses of the literature. Students needed the time to develop trust and belief that our classes were different and that we would not be promising the false charity of academic freedom, only to retreat to school policies or classroom procedures that reinforced the traditional school hierarchy of power. It was essential to provide evidence that this was an entirely different kind of education at every conceivable instant. Whether it was through our morning recitation that confirmed our respect and love for one another, an edgy Ana Castillo or Sherman Alexie story, or



In forty-five minutes I felt more empowered and educated than I had in all my ten previous years in school.

Pakistani-Caucasian background, but my family members have also been the direct victims of terrorism. At that point the very last thing I wanted to do was view the men who had killed my cousins as being human. But that class taught me the importance of forgiveness in incidents of violence. In forty-five minutes I felt more empowered and educated than I had in all my ten previous years in school.

BUILDING ON CRITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS IN THE MAS CLASSROOM | CURTIS ACOSTA

In order for students to believe that the classroom can be a space of empowerment, liberation, freedom, and autonomy, it is critical that educators cultivate a learning environment

analyzing the messages in the latest Mos Def flow, it was crucial that literature study in our space needed to have energy, be cool, and offer college preparatory experiences.

As students became fully engaged in the curricular experiences, the dialogue in the classes centered around how the students were perceiving the literature and how they applied it to their own lives and the world around them. Thus, critical inquiry and pedagogy became the way for students to push each other toward developing social consciousness rooted firmly in themes of social justice. Literature study in our classes became a lens to analyze our *barrio*, school, or world and the platform for students to generate ideas for taking action to transform the inequalities in their lives.

An example of this was our annual ethnographic research project inspired by our reading of *Radio Mambo* by the Chicano *teatro* group Culture Clash. The project empowered students to interview *Tucsonenses* whose story they felt embodied the idea of counter-narratives, transcribe the interview, and convert the transcriptions into monologues that students would perform in a theatric showcase for our community. Thus, our students were becoming scholars, historians, and artists who were living our history and making history.

With that type of consciousness and discourse as the central focus of study for our classes, the time was right to have students determine the direction of the class. This evolution of our classroom was extremely important, since it completely reversed the typical school experience as students designed entire class sessions and became the *maestr@s*. As students worked in groups to develop the essential elements needed to offer a quality educational experience for their peers, they were also obtaining the qualities and

characteristics needed to be civically engaged and active in our community. By reversing the traditional teaching roles, students were not only liberated to choose themes and activities that were more exciting and relevant to their lives, they were also liberated from the role of submissiveness, passivity, and domestication that is so often the result of status quo educational experiences. We referred to these class sessions as “students taking over the space,” since this pedagogical practice gave students the experience and confidence to develop their own voice and organizational skills, which could then be applied to the community outside the classroom walls.

In our MAS classes in Tucson we have done this in a variety of ways. My literature classes where students engage in ethnographic research, create monologues, and perform an annual play for our community unearthed stories of our community that are often silenced. Members of our afterschool student organization Movimiento Estudiantil Chican@s de Aztlan developed the Unity Festival, a daylong celebration of youth hip-hop culture, art, voice, and expression. Our process is intimate, personal, and generated from the young scholars themselves. There is no other way.

MY STUDENT ACTIVISM AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT | ASIYA MIR

The story of my civic engagement is not solely my own – it belongs to the whole community, because they have supported the student movement at every board meeting, walkout, or candlelight vigil. Students had many an action like those, one of the most memorable being a creative attempt to disrupt a board meeting with a cardboard coffin in which students placed fake high school diplomas to represent the death of education.

It has always been apparent that our classes faced the threat of elimination. In fact, there was a feeling that our classes would eventually end specifically *because* they not only addressed the needs of students of color, but also empowered all of its participants. In such an unstable situation, it became clear that there was a need for student activism, which is what has kept us alive in the past.

During my junior year I became involved with a students' grassroots organization known as UNIDOS – United Nondiscriminatory Individuals Demanding Our Studies. We began as a collective of diverse yet like-minded youth, from various high schools around Tucson, and were assisted through the facilitation skills of MAS alumni and community members. UNIDOS has always maintained the objective of not only demanding, but also expanding ethnic studies.

The months that followed were spent learning about the dynamics of the public school system and strategies with which we could efficiently combat the impending attacks on our classes. We sought to make the headquarters of Tucson Unified School District a more youth-oriented space where our voices could be heard. While students inside reigned over the designated time to formally address the school board, those of us outside, beneath the ironically placed indigenous symbols adorning the building, mounted student art and testimonies, brought in local musicians, and set up open microphones. It was a wonderful juxtaposition to see break dancers performing while security personnel looked on uncomfortably.

After years of student presence at board meetings and our compliance with the democratic process, it was clear that our voices remained invalid to the majority of elected officials. Our experiences, opinions, spoken word, and candlelight vigils were as trivial to

them as our dropout rates. We knew that direct action was necessary to stop our classes from being turned into electives, and we succeeded in the spring of 2011 by creating a delay through an occupation of the school board meeting.⁴

The resulting takeover was a highly successful attempt to ensure the safety of our classes. While many community members reveled in the glory of this, our actions came with complications. The following school board meeting resulted in the amplified presence of police personnel, a SWAT team, and even immigration enforcement officers. While the board meeting continued inside, conflict between the police and protesters reigned. There were incidents of police brutality toward the nonviolent protesters and supportive community members that scarred and shocked our community.

As a result of these experiences, the words from Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. from his “I Have a Dream” speech seemed as relevant as ever:

Some of you have come from areas where your quest for freedom left you battered by the storms of persecution and staggered by the winds of police brutality. You have been the veterans of creative suffering. Continue to work with the faith that unearned suffering is redemptive.

King's sentiments almost expel the pain and simultaneously validate our struggle. We too have continued to fight since those monumental dates and the abuse that we faced has made us all the more resilient and determined to meet our goals.

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4 In April 2011, the Tucson Unified School District board introduced a resolution that would have ended MAS's accreditation to meet core social science requirements. For more on the student takeover of the board meeting, see www.huffingtonpost.com/jeff-biggers/arizona-ethnic-studies_b_854161.html.

THE ROAD TRAVELED |

ASIYA MIR

As my three years in the MAS space have passed, I have witnessed my brothers and sisters from multitudes of backgrounds overcome their own personal and academic struggles. The expectations of us, as Chican@ Studies students, far surpass those of other students, because we are expected to exceed our counterparts academically, lest we are not taken as seriously, while we fight for our education as it is persecuted.

The classes have introduced a new way of living that involves the concept of *In Lak'Ech* – promoting not only self-love, but equal love for others. We have carried this philosophy out of the classroom and into our hearts and minds as we are blasted by hatred. Indeed, it is often outside of school walls where our teachings are most needed. MAS students cannot escape the truth of our situation, which is that racist legislation outlaws empowering students, especially students of color. It is largely for this reason that we can't help but be political in most of the mediums we pursue, whether they are hip-hop, writing, academics, illustration, or activism.

However, life after the termination of our program has been surprisingly casual. We continue to go to what were formerly our ethnic studies classes, hesitantly beginning the Unity Clap – our homage to the same rhythmic applause practiced by Cesar Chavez, Dolores Huerta, and the United Farm Workers – and often quelling discussions that stray toward race, oppression, or feminism. My friends regularly browse through their phones to discover the latest derogatory rhetoric involving us, and student activism is as frequent a topic among us as any other. This behavior feels docile and muted. Our classes are no longer the vivid and free spaces they once were.

THE ROAD AHEAD |

CURTIS ACOSTA

Regardless of the darkness that has enveloped us since the decimation of our classes, our students still possess a will to create and sustain social transformation. They are reflections of the best part of being human: the ability to empathize and advocate for those who struggle the most, while showing resiliency and forgiveness to those who perpetuate inequality and propagate the agenda of institutions that exploit youth and people of color. Regardless of legislative attacks and intervention in our program, or the shameful actions of our district in boxing and banning our books, our students are liberated and empowered to alter the future direction of our community and state. I look forward to those beautiful days ahead.

ARIZONA STATE ACTIONS AGAINST THE MEXICAN AMERICAN STUDIES PROGRAM

The Mexican American Studies (MAS) program in Tucson Unified School District (TUSD) has been under attack by Tom Horne – then Arizona’s superintendent of public instruction – since 2006, when a keynote speaker at a Tucson high school, invited by MAS, made remarks critical of legislation passed by Arizona Republicans. Horne proposed legislation to ban ethnic studies programs, without success, in 2008 and 2009, accompanied by widespread student and community protests and considerable media attention. (Ginwright & Cammarota 2011)

In 2010, Horne promoted Arizona House Bill 2281, which prohibited classes that “promote the overthrow of the United States government, promote resentment toward a race or class of people, are designed primarily for pupils of a particular ethnic group, or advocate ethnic solidarity instead of the treatment of pupils as individuals.” If a district was found in violation, the state could withhold 10 percent of its budget. On May 11, 2010, Governor Jan Brewer signed the bill into law, codified as ARS 15-111 and 112, unleashing another wave of student and community protests. In October 2010, eleven MAS teachers, later joined by two students, filed suit in the U.S. District Court against Superintendent Horne and the state board of education to stop the implementation of HB 2281 on the grounds that it violates their constitutional rights. (Caesar 2011; Cambium Learning and NAEP 2011; Siek 2012; Martinez 2012; Biggers 2012b; Ginwright & Cammarota 2011).

On January 1, 2011, Horne – now attorney general – declared TUSD in violation of the new law. John Huppenthal, the new state superintendent of schools, ordered an independent curriculum audit of MAS. The audit by Cambium Learning Inc. and National Academic Educational Partners, released in May 2011, found no evidence of violations of ARS 15-112; on the contrary, the auditors had much praise for the program:

No observable evidence exists that instruction within [the] Mexican American Studies Department promotes resentment towards a race or class of people. The auditors observed the opposite, as students are taught to be accepting of multiple ethnicities of people. MASD teachers are teaching Cesar Chavez alongside Martin Luther King, Jr. and Gandhi, all as peaceful protesters who sacrificed for people and ideas they believed in. Additionally, all ethnicities are welcomed into the program and these very students of multiple backgrounds are being inspired and taught in the same manner as Mexican American students. (Cambium Learning and NAEP 2011, p. 55)

In spite of these findings and considerable evidence that students in the program far outperformed their peers academically, in June 2011 Huppenthal ruled that MAS was in violation of the law. The school district appealed the ruling. In December 2011, an Arizona administrative law judge, Lewis Kowal, affirmed Huppenthal’s ruling in a non-binding recommendation, asserting that the auditors has only visited a few classes (Caesar 2011; Catone 2012; Sleeter 2012; Martinez 2012).

In January 2012, threatened with the loss of \$15 million of annual state aid, the Tucson school board voted to terminate the MAS program, once again amid massive protests. District officials removed copies of textbooks from classrooms and made unannounced visits to monitor compliance. The teachers, now without curriculum or textbooks, were given no clear guidelines on what was permissible to teach (Siek 2012; Biggers 2012b, 2012c; Martinez 2012).

Ironically, Arizona's actions against MAS have led to a national surge of media attention and support for the program. The shutdown of MAS and banning of textbooks unleashed a national outcry from educators, activists, researchers, authors of the banned books, librarians, and civil rights organizations, among others (Catone 2012; Siek 2012). Many have argued that the program not only should not be eliminated, it should be used as a model across the country because of its well-documented positive impact on student engagement and academic performance (e.g., Sleeter 2012; Catone 2012; Menkart 2012). The national Network of Teacher Activist Groups has developed a curriculum guide, *No History Is Illegal*, based on the MAS curriculum and the events in Arizona, and nearly 1,500 educators have pledged to teach from it. The film *Precious Knowledge*, documenting the ways the MAS program has transformed its students' lives, has been screened across the country and on public television (Catone 2012). U.S. Representatives Raúl Grijalva and Charlie Gonzalez of the Congressional Hispanic Caucus urged the U.S. Education Department to investigate the possible violation of federal civil rights standards. Grijalva said:

This is not about one group of people wanting special treatment. This is about a successful educational program with a high graduation rate being shut down for purely ideological reasons. . . . Policy makers cannot look at history the way they look at items at a cafeteria, selectively picking what works for their agenda. (Herreras 2012)

The controversy continued to deepen after TUSD board member Michael Hicks appeared on the national television news satire *The Daily Show* with Jon Stewart on April 2, 2012, and made what many described as embarrassing and blatantly racist statements (*Daily Show* 2012; Hing 2012; Biggers 2012a). Shortly after, the TUSD school board voted to fire MAS director Sean Arce – who only days before had won a history teaching award from the Zinn Education Project – in spite of two and a half hours of passionate testimony from students and community members in support of Arce and MAS (Menkart 2012; Biggers 2012a; Zinn Education Project 2012).

As this issue of *VUE* goes to press, the federal case against the constitutionality of ARS 15-112 is working its way through the courts, and three TUSD board members face tough reelection battles this year (Biggers 2012b). And as the struggle on the ground continues, Sean Arce finds grounds for optimism (Hing 2012):

Our community is more assertive, politically active, organizing, getting out in the community. We are participating in electoral politics, getting people in office who are responsive to the needs of our communities. . . . Our youth are highly engaged, are highly committed to fight for social justice, to fight for equality. . . . The youth are not future leaders, they are current leaders, they're courageous. It's just unfortunate we can't say that about our public officials, or our school board, or local school administrators.

Further Resources

No History Is Illegal: www.teacheractivistgroups.org/tucson

Precious Knowledge: www.preciousknowledgefilm.com

Save Ethnic Studies: <http://saveethnicstudies.org>

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A Dialogue between Generations on Education for Liberation

VINCENT HARDING AND ANTONIO ALBIZURES
WITH ADEOLA A. OREDOLA

A seasoned civil rights activist and scholar and a young immigrant rights organizer dialogue about how their generations can work together to create a more democratic, multicultural, and just future.

As the keynote presentation of the Free Minds, Free People conference that took place in July 2011 in Providence, Rhode Island, Vincent Harding and Antonio Albizures held a dialogue, moderated by Adeola Oredola, on the mission of each of their generations in education for liberation. What follows are excerpts from their conversation.

CULTURAL AND COMMUNITY ROOTS

ANTONIO ALBIZURES

I came into this country at the age of one in the summer of 1992. My parents originally came from Guatemala. I was born in Guatemala, actually. They came escaping a thirty-six-year civil war that was happening around that time. They chose to come to the United States, which is portrayed to other countries as a land of hope and a land of opportunity. So my parents came pursuing the American Dream to provide me with a better future.

Vincent Harding is a historian, scholar, civil rights activist, and Professor Emeritus of Religion and Social Transformation at Illiff School of Theology in Denver, Colorado, known for his close personal and professional relationship with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Antonio Albizures is an immigration rights organizer at the Brown Immigrant Rights Coalition in Rhode Island and a teacher-mentor for at-risk youth in Woonsocket, Rhode Island. Adeola A. Oredola is executive director of Youth In Action.

I grew up here in South Providence and graduated in 2009 from Blackstone Academy, a charter high school in Pawtucket, Rhode Island. So Rhode Island is my community; this is where I'm from. I have never had the opportunity to be back in Guatemala due to restrictions that immigration policies have on me right now. Also I'm involved in the right for undocumented students to pursue higher education once they graduate from high school. Nationally and locally I'm involved in the Federal DREAM Act and in the state legislation.

VINCENT HARDING

I spent my childhood not far away from here in Harlem and in the South Bronx, New York. I, too, was the child of immigrants. My mother and father were born in Barbados in the West Indies, and they came to this country shortly after the end of World War I. I feel a very close connection to what's going on here now partly because my life has been deeply affected by teachers; and from the beginning of my schooling, in kindergarten, in Harlem, there were teachers who loved me, believed in me, cared about me, and pushed me and pulled me forward, and I can never speak adequately about how important I understand teachers to be in the shaping of our lives and in helping us to become the human beings we were meant to be. My sense is that one of the deepest purposes that calls us into existence in this world is for us to help each other to figure out what it means to be human and for us to help each other to be more human.

As I understand my own pathway, I was affected also by Mabel Harding, a magnificent woman who shortly after I was born became a single mother, and who, with an eighth-grade education, determined that I would learn, that I would grow, that I would go as far as I could possibly go because she believed that I had something to offer to the

world. I think that it is just magnificent that Mabel Harding, a welfare mother who had only an eighth-grade education herself, believed enough in the power of education that she kept pushing me, pulling me in that direction. The other part of my earliest development was in a little church in Harlem where everybody in that church adopted me, took me in as their child, as their son, as their nephew, as their student and taught me that I was capable of doing many things I would never have dreamed of. And there again, the lesson for me is that we cannot become who we are meant to be unless there's community around us who believe in us, who are willing to encourage us, and who are willing to move us forward.

BECOMING AN ACTIVIST

ANTONIO ALBIZURES

I can say that I am the activist that I am today due to prior experiences and my upbringing and due to mentoring by a former organizer from Brown University who passed away in May 2010. She was basically the poster child for the federal DREAM Act. Her name is Tam Tran. Unfortunately, she's not here with us any more. She was supposed to graduate this year with a Ph.D. in American Civilization and Ethnic Studies, but her life was cut tragically short in May 2010 in an accident up in northern Maine.

The most important thing I want our community, the youth, our educators, and all the amazing people who are at this conference today to know is that the work we are doing, it's already work that has started, and it's up to us to go on with the work. It's up to our generation to lay down the foundation and to keep going for the future generations, for our youth to keep going with that work that was started with the Black freedom movement in the South, with Dr. King, Malcolm X, Dr.

Harding, and such. It's our right to be educated, and it's up to us to use education as a form to liberate ourselves.

VINCENT HARDING

A very transformative period of my life came when I was a graduate student at the University of Chicago back in the 1950s. I had just begun to learn what was going on in the South, in the movement of the South. I was a part, in Chicago, of an experimental church group in which we were trying to develop an interracial church. In that group we kept saying to ourselves, "It's great to say we are sisters and brothers and that we care about each other, and that we want to serve each other, and that we want to serve our community on the South Side of Chicago, but would we do the same thing across racial lines if we were in the South – especially in the deep South? Is our faith in God, is our belief in the teachings of Jesus, really strong enough that we would do the same thing in the South?" And some of us finally said, "Let's stop talking about it. Let's stop arguing about it. Why don't we just go down there and see?" So five of us, three white guys and two Black guys, packed into an old station wagon in the fall of 1958 and decided we would just drive through the South – the deep South – and if at all possible not allow ourselves to be separated because we believed that we were brothers and that we were not meant to be separated. After we passed through Mississippi and got into Alabama, we said, "You know, we shouldn't be in this state without trying to visit with Martin Luther King, Jr." We were down in Mobile, Alabama, at first and went to a place where they kept the telephone books. And there it was, M. L. King in Montgomery, Alabama, and we called, just like that.

His wife, Coretta Scott King, answered the phone and said that her husband was just recuperating from a bad wound that he received being stabbed

in New York City on a book signing tour. But she said we could come and see if he could see us. We went to Montgomery and we had a wonderful long conversation with him about what he was doing, what we were trying to do. Then, at the end as we were about to leave he said to us two Black guys, "You guys are part of one those peace churches. You know something about what we're trying to do here in a non-violent movement. You ought to come back down here and help us out some time."

As a result of that, three years later, after I had been married for a year, my wife, the late Rosemarie Harding, and I found our way back down to the South, and we began to live in Atlanta right around the corner from Martin and Coretta King. We began to be a part of that great movement which I do not call "a civil rights movement" but a movement for the expansion and deepening of American democracy. A movement for the transformation of this country. Civil rights was one piece of it, but the transformation of human beings and society was a larger piece. There is no way that I can account for the next fifty-eight years of my life without remembering that meeting with Martin King and the long history that we had together until he was assassinated.

There's much more that I could say, but that was where I began; and since that time, I am perhaps most deeply moved by remembering something that I heard back in the 1950s on the radio. I was listening to a broadcast, and someone being interviewed was a poet who had grown up in West Africa. And I heard them say something about the struggles that were going on there for a new opportunity for new life in West Africa and all over Africa. Then the poet said this: "I am a citizen of a country that does not yet exist." And increasingly that's the way that I feel. I am a citizen of a country that does not yet exist. And as I see it, my mind is free

in order to create that new country. I am free *from* the past but free *for* the future, and I hope that all of you will continue to join in the task of creating that which does not yet exist – a truly democratic, just, and multiracial American society filled with schools where children are taught how to be the best human beings that they can possibly be.

WHAT IS EACH GENERATION'S MISSION?

ADEOLA OREDOLA

In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Franz Fanon said, “Each generation must discover its mission, fulfill it or betray it in relative opacity.” What do you think is your generation’s mission when it comes to education and how has it been fulfilled and betrayed?

ANTONIO ALBIZURES

I attended public education here in Providence, Rhode Island, and I graduated in Pawtucket. Providence and Pawtucket are the two biggest cities in Rhode Island, which is like the size of my hand. My family chose to move out to a small suburb outside of the city, predominantly white, and the public education right there – the education that my siblings are receiving – is in no way, shape, or form equal to the education that’s given to the urban communities, even though it is public education and it is funded by our tax money. We are not receiving an equal education. In our community we are not receiving the same because we have outdated textbooks. We don’t have the same technology. We don’t have the same things that my brothers or my siblings who live just five minutes away from the city do.

In 1954 in the decision of *Brown v. Board*, when education was integrated, that’s what we were fighting for. We

were fighting to integrate students no matter skin color, race, or ethnicity to have an equal education. But have we had an equal education? I would say a role model of mine is Geoffrey Canada. He wrote a book called *Fist, Stick, Knife, Gun*. He talks about his struggle and how he was able to create an opportunity zone, called the Harlem Children’s Zone, with the education to equalize society. He said education is the greatest equalizer. Education will be used for us to liberate ourselves. Now what we can do as students, as educators, as professors, is to achieve that moment when we are all receiving the same education, because I believe we still aren’t there yet.

VINCENT HARDING

One of the great missions at this point for the generation that I see coming up and the generation that I believe I exist to encourage (for me one of the major roles of elders is to encourage those who are doing the work of this generation) – the important work for you folks and for my generation is to recognize that we are in a very different situation now than we were even when I was in school in the thirties and forties. We are in the midst of what may well be a diminishing empire that no longer can tell the world what to do, can no longer dominate the world, and must learn how to live with the world rather than to push the world around.

It seems to me that our mission now is to figure out, How do we develop the education that will not make us competitive with China, but an education that will make us more human beings? Right now I think that part of that job is for the kind of conversation that you and I and Adeola are trying to have here, for this kind of a conversation to open up in as many places as we can possibly encourage it to take place.

You and I, for instance, certainly know that at this point in history that Black

people and Brown people must be talking together, but we are posed as threats to each other. We are discouraged from recognizing that we have great connections with each other. And it seems to me that one of the great missions of the educational agenda for this next period is to help us to figure out how we are connected to each other. What are the connections between our various stories, now that we have given up on the old dominant white story that this society was trying to put on us? What is that new story?

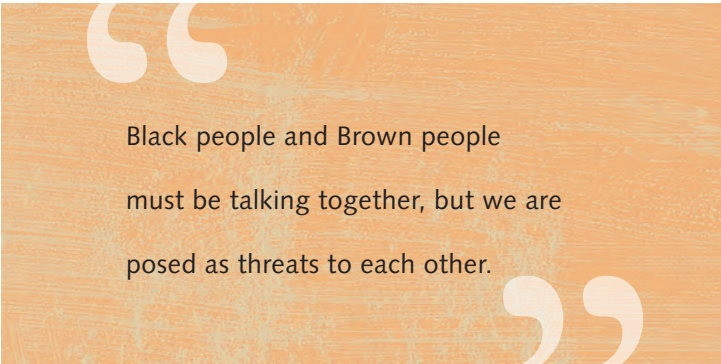
And quiet as it's kept, I feel that white Americans who want to know what it means to be human must enter into this new conversation as well, because the American education that we consider to be so wonderful has not been wonderful at all. It has put white people in a frame of mind to think that there is something that is really wonderful about being white, and that is not a good thing. That is the miseducation of white people. And so we all have a new agenda to help each of us, all of us, to figure out how we can become really aware of our connections to each other, of what we have to teach each other, of what we have to learn from each other, of how we can walk together, and how we can create this country that does not yet exist. That, I think, is a task that we all have together at this next stage. That's why we're free now – free to create that which does not yet exist.

ADEOLA OREDOLA

I went to high school right across the street at Central High School. The school has come a long way since then but I had an experience of having teachers that slept through class and didn't teach me and found myself not knowing algebra and how to write or read properly by the time I was a senior. I left high school, made it to college, struggled through college but finished, and I left frustrated.

I came back to my community angry about my experience and so one of the things I did was join the school board right out of college. I tried to bring my experiences and what I heard from my peers to policy making. And I think that that doesn't happen enough and it was a scary experience, but it was one that really helped me to channel back anger.

So, I do think that we need to be the decision makers, but what I've found, Dr. Harding, is that I don't have enough mentors around. I'm looking for people to support me to get to the next level and I think it's hard as young people especially, but then as people in my generation, the thirty-somethings, to find people to look up to. Often-times people leave communities that need the most help, so you can't find those mentors.



Black people and Brown people must be talking together, but we are posed as threats to each other.

VINCENT HARDING

I fully agree with you that we cannot be who we are meant to be as long as elders and young people keep separate lives apart from each other. As far as I understand the history of the human race, we are at our best when we operate together. When young people and elders respect, love, and care for each other and recognize that each has something to teach the other, it is in that context that we're able to move forward.

One of the things that I encourage people to do is to develop situations where young people can, with a small camera, with a small mic, interview elders who've been involved in movement, in social change, and activities in teaching. To have young people actually sit with elders in an informal or formal way and ask them: "Please tell me about your life. What did you do to get started in what you're doing now? What kept you going in hard and tough situations? What would you do differently if you were just starting out now?" To get young people together with elders asking those kinds of questions really does great things both for the elders and for the young people. So I would recommend very strongly that wherever you can get elders and young people together and get elders to tell their stories by young people asking their questions, there is something very vital and very exciting that can take place as far as teaching is concerned there.

RACE, DIVERSITY, AND "MINORITIES"

ANTONIO ALBIZURES

A big problem, not only with education but with any social justice issues that we're trying to conquer is conformism – accepting what is given to us. I believe we should take the Socratic approach and question: "Why is this so? Why should I accept what's given to me?" We should not just stand back and be silent, because silence is consent for the oppressor. Silence is consent to divide the minorities, to divide us as individuals, and to keep us conformed with how society is. And that's not where we should stand.

Minorities is an old term. If you look at the new census, the only way they actually claim us to be minorities is by dividing us, splitting us apart. In reality, we are a majority if we work

together in coalition to better ourselves, to liberate ourselves [see Figure 1 for a depiction of demographic changes]. Diversity is important and it's beautiful because we're here to learn from each other. Each of our upbringings, education, ideologies, and culture is so different that we will never be able to learn everything at once. So if we take bits and pieces from each other and form a coalition or work together in unity, then we will never be a minority. And in reality, what are we? We all are humans. We all are one. We are the same person whether we're light-skinned, Asian, indigenous, or whatever, we are one. From a student perspective, diversity is something that we should cherish and uphold, especially in our communities, and we should stop building up walls or setting up divisions between our own communities.

VINCENT HARDING

One of the things that I feel we need to figure out in a setting like this and in the places we go away to from here is that we need to take on – without being afraid, without being worried about how we do it, but just trying – we need to talk about this matter of race.

Now, for me, we cannot be free people with free minds unless we examine this matter of what it means, for instance, to be white and teaching young people of color. How do we free ourselves to be able to take on that tough issue? How do young people of color free ourselves to be able to speak to the unclearities and uncertainties that we have about all of that? I would hope that a setting like this one and the other conferences that we represent would really encourage us to just honestly, lovingly, openly engage each other around this issue of who are we, and where did we come from, and how do we connect with each other, how do we disconnect, and how can we make up for the

disconnections? All of those things, it seems to me, are absolutely necessary in order for us to have the kind of new society that we are believing must take place in this country.

Someone briefly mentioned that old, old word, “minorities.” Look at the census data that’s more and more coming up over these years and ask: Who are minorities in America? We are living in a new time when clearly we’re going to need new language to describe who we are and what our relationship

is to each other, and we also are going to need to recognize that because of the new time, some people are scared to death, because a new America is emerging that they never expected and were not and are not prepared for. How do we create an educational system that will prepare us all for the new America that’s already being born? Let’s see if we can do it. I think that that’s who you are – the makers of the new education for the new America. And I’m going to hang around as long as I can to see what you do.

AMERICA WILL BE A MAJORITY PEOPLE-OF-COLOR NATION BY 2042

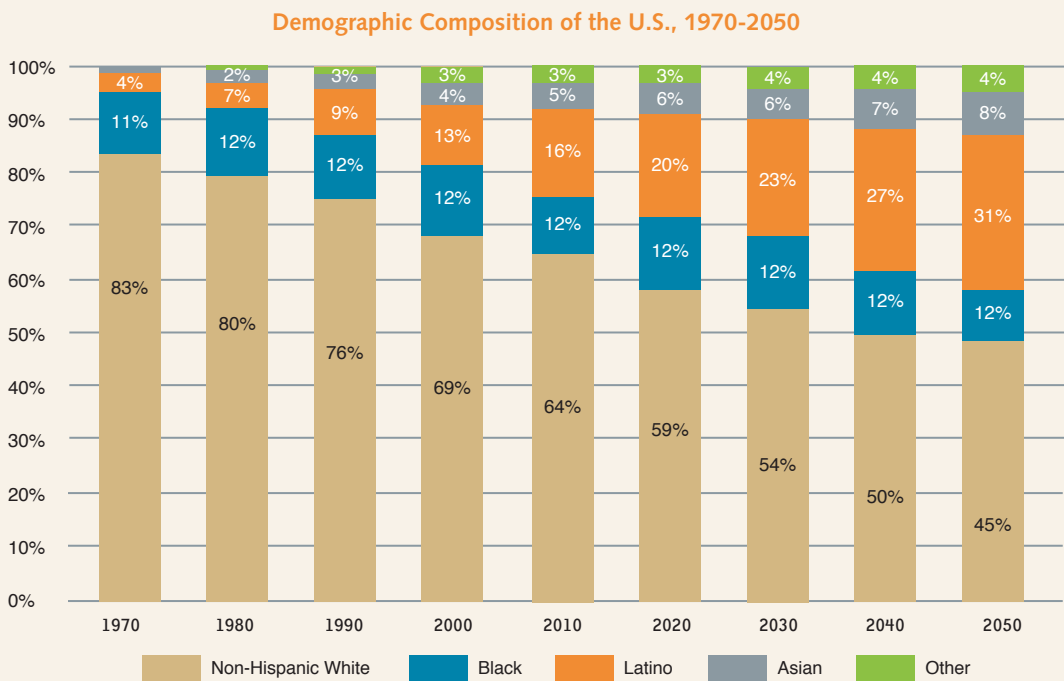


FIGURE 1. DEMOGRAPHIC TRENDS IN THE U.S., 1970–2050

Note: “Other” includes all persons who are not included among other groups shown, and includes non-Latinos who identify racially as being Native American or Alaska Native, some other race alone, or multiracial.

Source: PolicyLink/PERE analysis of Statistical Abstract of the United States (1970 and 1980); U.S. Census Bureau, decennial censuses (1990 STF3, 2000 SF3, and 2010 SF1); U.S. Census Bureau Population Projections, 2008 (2020-2050), adjusted using the results of the 2010 Census.

This figure is reprinted with permission from *The Color of Change: Inter-Ethnic Youth Leadership for the 21st Century*, by M. Pastor, R. Ortiz, J. Ito, V. Terriquez, V. Carter, J. Tran, and T. Cheng, Program for Environmental & Regional Equity, University of Southern California, 2010. The full report is available online at <http://college.usc.edu/per/publications/index/cfm>.



FREE MINDS, FREE PEOPLE CONFERENCE 2013: SALT LAKE CITY

Matthew Bradley

Matthew Bradley was assistant professor for the Honors College at the University of Utah, where he led the Honors Social Justice Scholars, the Honors Think Tank on Social Change, and the Mestizo Arts and Activism program. He also taught honors classes at AMES High School.

Editor's Note: It is with great sadness that we report the news of Matthew Bradley's death in an accident shortly after he completed this sidebar. Please see the dedication page for more about Matthew.

In 2007 a small group of educators and students from Salt Lake City, Utah, traveled to the first Free Minds, Free People (FMFP) conference in Chicago, Illinois. Our goal was to attend the presentations and present workshops and discussions on the video documentary work we were working on around issues of immigrant rights and racial discrimination in public schools. It was a transformative experience for us. We were inspired, motivated, and moved by the other presentations, dialogues, plenary sessions, and performances in which we participated. So much so that one of the youth in our group volunteered to be a part of the FMFP planning committee for the Houston conference that followed in 2009.

We had such a powerful and empowering experience at the Chicago conference that when the call for presentations for Houston was announced we encouraged many of the organizations in Salt Lake City with whom we have connections to submit proposals. Most of them were accepted, and so we raised \$15,000 to hire a bus and make the thirty-hour bus ride with forty-five students, parents, educators, and artists from Salt Lake City to Houston. Again, it was an amazing experience both to be able to share our work and to connect with others from around the country who are similarly engaged in seeking to transform our educational spaces into more democratic and liberatory learning environments.

On the bus ride home, before we had even made it out of Texas, many of us were talking about how exciting it would be to bring FMFP to Salt Lake City. It wasn't long after we got home that we started the application process, so we couldn't be happier now to have been selected to host the 2013 conference.¹

Salt Lake City is a bit of a paradox. It has historically been white and conservative and has its share of racist and homophobic legislation and policies. But is also has a vibrant LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning) community (Salt Lake City was even named the "gayest city" in the U.S. by *The Advocate* magazine, albeit using a somewhat non-scientific system) and numerous active and thriving political and activist

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1 The FMFP conference is held every two years. The 2011 conference took place in Providence, Rhode Island.

groups that work hard for more equal opportunities in educational, social, and economic spheres. Salt Lake City is classified as an “emerging gateway” city because of its burgeoning immigrant and refugee communities, and many of the schools in Salt Lake School District have majority minority populations. The Salt Lake Valley also hosts one of the largest Pacific Islander communities outside of the Pacific Islands.

We look forward to hosting our FMFP brothers and sisters in Salt Lake City, both for the opportunity to show off some of the incredible work that is happening here, and to continue to learn from and be invigorated by the work of others. FMFP has provided so much inspiration and encouragement, as well as such an important space for critical dialogue and thought, that we hope to contribute with the same energy and success as Chicago, Houston, and Providence.

Flor Olivo and Caitlin Cahill

Flor Olivo is a mother of three and community member in Salt Lake City. She is managing editor of the West Views Community Newspaper and co-editor of Venceremos Student Newspaper. Caitlin Cahill teaches at the City University of New York. She formerly co-directed the Mestizo Arts & Activism Collective in Salt Lake City with Matt Bradley and David Quijada.

Salt Lake City is an especially critical space for youth activism because there is so much work to do. Utah is one of the “reddest,” most conservative states in the country and also one of the whitest. But this is changing as Utah is undergoing massive demographic changes. It is notable that political and public debates over immigration status, schooling, geographic boundaries, and states’ rights have become increasingly hostile as Utah’s almost 90 percent white majority has decreased in the past ten years. Recently, for example, the Utah State Legislature passed the controversial “Show Me Your Papers” racial profiling legislation (modeled after Arizona’s State Bill 1070). It is within this context that we organize and youth activists take great risks for social justice for all. Together youth activists, community members, students, and artists organize to collectively transform our community and create equitable conditions.

We have strong, sustainable community partners who take seriously young people’s commitments to social change and who have been supportive of our efforts in concrete, material ways – for example, supporting us to go to Houston, Texas, for Free Minds, Free People 2009, with very little notice. While we are thankful to all funders near and far who have supported our work over the years, we work most closely with local partners who know us intimately. Salt Lake City is a small place where you cross paths frequently, and over time we have seen each other grow up. Our community partners share our commitment to educational and immigration rights and at times even engage with us in the struggle. Local community-based organizations who we work closely with include the Mestizo Arts & Activism Collective, the Brown Berets, the FACE movement, the University of Utah, University Neighborhood Partners, and the ACLU of Utah, among others.

Our community is thrilled to host a national conference, as we know it's an exciting way to share and learn from each other. Community partners are stepping up to support the Free Minds, Free People conference in all kinds of ways, from donating space and organizing events to supporting the conference through funding. This feels especially important now in honor of Matt Bradley's legacy, as it represents another opportunity to engage more folks in the struggle for social justice.

The Free Minds, Free People conference has different meanings for each of its participants. But for many in Salt Lake City, it provided a much-needed space for our experiences to be valued as students, educators, and activists, which created a very deep bond. The long bus ride to Houston was an opportunity for the Salt Lake City activists to practice the essence of our work. We bonded on issues of social justice that we were all deeply passionate about – for example, ways to better organize our youth groups and ideas on better representation of our communities in the media, among others. We were able to forget our everyday worries, tell stories, sing, and build community. Many of our misunderstandings washed away, and we were able to see a vision of our city where we could all work together. Through the preparation process and later, in presenting, we were able to see the intersections of our struggles with racism, homophobia, patriarchy, classism, environmental justice, and other issues.

At the conference, from one day to another, our volunteer work acquired greater meaning and value in the world. The work and knowledge of our students and youth acquired significance as we absorbed the work of others throughout the country, because we saw others fighting for the same things. The voices of educators and mentors began to ring in our minds as we distributed our student newspapers, networked our ideas, and added our creativity and art. The words and work we had been told were going to change the world began to gain meaning to others. The Brown Berets and FACE Movement workshop was one of the most popular at the conference, and attendance increased throughout the presentation and activities. We had a shirt spray paint activity where each person could make a shirt representing their struggles. The last day of the conference we saw students from all over the country wearing our shirts.

The FMFP experience wasn't a temporary high or something any of us will easily forget. Education for liberation is an essential tool for restructuring our growing city. Recently with the passing of our beloved comrade, Matt Bradley, it has become even more special and important to share this understanding with his much-loved home state. These experiences have influenced our hearts, and we are excited to bring these types of memories and knowledge to our friends and family as we welcome the new family that the Free Minds, Free People community has become to us.



Education is Under Attack! What Do We Do? Stand Up! Fight Back! Teacher Activism in the Occupy Wall Street Movement

BREE PICOWER

Teacher activists engaged in the Occupy the DOE movement in New York City are working to end the oppression standing in the way of a more just society, both inside and outside the classroom.

“**M**ic Check!” shouts a teacher who stands up from her seat in a crowded auditorium and turns her back to the Panel for Educational Policy that is arranged on the stage of a public high school in New York City. Although Schools Chancellor Dennis Walcott has already convened the meeting and is speaking

into his microphone on the stage to a room of more than 200 parents, teachers, and students, the audience echoes the young teacher’s call and bellows back, “MIC CHECK!” The response fills the auditorium, drowning out the chancellor’s speech and focusing all eyes on the teacher who stands in the middle of her row facing the people she considers her allies.

With a resolute yet high-pitched voice filled with emotion and determination, she continues: “The Panel for Educational Policy,” she yells, looking at the

Bree Picower is a core member of the New York Collective of Radical Educators, assistant professor of early childhood, elementary education, and literacy education at Montclair State University, New Jersey, and author of Practice What You Teach: Social Justice Education in the Classroom (Routledge, 2012).

crowd, who without missing a beat, echo her words back to her:

“THE PANEL FOR EDUCATIONAL POLICY”

“Claims to be a democratic forum”
“CLAIMS TO BE A DEMOCRATIC FORUM”

“For parents, teachers, and students!”
“FOR PARENTS, TEACHERS, AND STUDENTS!”

“They make their decisions” “THEY MAKE THEIR DECISIONS”

“Way before coming here” “WAY BEFORE COMING HERE”

“Regardless of what people have to say” “REGARDLESS OF WHAT PEOPLE HAVE TO SAY”

“This is not a democracy!” “THIS IS NOT A DEMOCRACY!”

Electrified by the power of their unified voice, the audience erupts in cheers, while the members of the panel and their invited guests stare down at the crowd like deer in a headlight, trying to figure out how to take back control of their carefully orchestrated “hearing” (at which parents have previously been informed that their avenue for being heard is to write their comments on notepaper that will be collected). This “people’s mic” drowns out the sound system of the panel while parent after teacher after student stands up to voice their concerns about the anti-democratic nature of the New York City Department of Education (DOE). Finally, the chancellor and the rest of the appointed body of panelists walk out of the auditorium in frustration to convene their meeting upstairs with less than fifty audience members in tow, while at least 200 remain in the auditorium for the next two hours to truly “hear” from the people affected daily by the education system – the parents, teachers, and students.

TEACHER ACTIVISM

This action was organized by a group connected to the Occupy Wall Street (OWS) movement called Occupy the Department of Education, or Occupy the DOE (O-DOE). Many of the people who participate in this group are already activists within a variety of grassroots groups involved in the struggle for educational justice in New York City. As a member of one such group, the New York Collective of Radical Educators, I, too, have participated in some of O-DOE actions and work alongside other teacher activists involved. I interviewed seven such educators to learn more about the issues that galvanized them to participate in this movement and what they hoped their actions would accomplish. All of the participants work in New York City public schools and were interviewed within the first three months of the OWS movement.

To understand what drove the teacher activists (TAs) to participate in O-DOE, it is important to clarify some of the characteristics of educators who are also involved in activism. In some of my previous work (Picower 2012), I outline three commitments that typify teacher activism. The first commitment is to reconcile a vision of a socially just world with the realities of inequality that TAs see around them. Part of what drives this commitment of reconciliation is the fact that TAs believe that education can be both liberatory and oppressive at the same time. Rather than acknowledge one of these functions and ignore the other, TAs make additional commitments to address both the liberatory and oppressive nature of schooling.

The second commitment is to create liberatory spaces in their roles as classroom teachers. Through developing caring relationships and democratic spaces, TAs work toward their vision of liberation by delivering culturally

NEW YORK COLLECTIVE OF RADICAL EDUCATORS POINTS OF UNITY

New York Collective of Radical Educators (NYCoRE) is a group of public school educators committed to fighting for social justice in our school system and society at large, by organizing and mobilizing teachers, developing curriculum, and working with community, parent, and student organizations. We are educators who believe that education is an integral part of social change and that we must work both inside and outside the classroom because the struggle for justice does not end when the school bell rings.

POINTS OF UNITY

1. Racism and economic inequality in the school system reflect and perpetuate the systematic and historical oppression of people of color and working class communities. As educators in the New York City public school system we have a responsibility to address and challenge these forms of oppression.
2. In order to combat economic, social, and political systems that actively silence women and people of color, we are committed to maintaining majority women and people of color representation in our group.
3. We oppose the current policy of high stakes standardized testing because it reflects the standards and norms of dominant groups in society, it is an inaccurate and incomplete assessment of learning, and it stifles pedagogical innovation and active learning.
4. Punitive disciplinary measures such as “Zero Tolerance” further criminalize youth and are not an answer to crime and other social problems. We believe economic and social priorities should be toward education of young people and not incarceration.
5. We oppose the increased efforts of military recruitment in New York City public schools. These efforts unfairly target the recruitment of low-income communities and make false promises about educational and career opportunities. We believe that these efforts are an extension of an imperialistic strategy to maintain a powerful military force in order to protect and promote U.S. world dominance.
6. New school funding policies must be adopted in order to ensure equitable resources for all. Current policies based upon property taxes discriminate against low-income communities and urban areas, which disproportionately affect people of color.
7. Schools must be safe spaces for females and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ) individuals. Verbal and physical abuse targeting these groups is extremely prevalent in most schools, and cannot be tolerated and must be challenged by all faculty, staff, and administrators.
8. Schools should be places of questioning and critical thinking that encourage students to see themselves as active agents of change. The present educational system is derived from an assembly line model that stifles critical thinking by focusing on the regurgitation of facts and information.
9. Schools should provide a neighborhood space through which community voices are heard. Teachers are an integral part of this space and must be held accountable to the community by being involved in addressing community needs.

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relevant, community-responsive pedagogy that helps students develop their own political analysis and the skills to take action.

In the third commitment, TAs stand up to oppression by engaging in ongoing and collective action to rally against the ways that schooling reproduces existing inequalities and maintains the status quo. In their view, to engage in liberatory pedagogy inside of the classroom without fighting injustice outside of it would be inadequate in reconciling their vision of the world they wish to see. As Ella, a math teacher, expressed:

I have to work to make a better system. . . . I know that I'm doing good for [my students] but my day is filled with so much inane stuff that is such a waste of my time and money that should be going to my students' education. I feel I would go crazy if I didn't try to change [the larger system] in some way.

This article shows how the TAs who participate in OWS and O-DOE stand up to oppression and work to change the system that Ella described by reconciling their vision of a socially just system with the reality of what they feel to be a bankrupt, undemocratic dictatorship.

“EDUCATION IS UNDER ATTACK”

In their vision of a more just world, the TAs all believed that the people who are affected by the system should be the ones who make democratic decisions about how education should function. As Alexandra, a high school educator, stated:

I believe that students, teachers, and parents should collectively run education. I think that all decisions that are made about our schools should be the decisions made by the people who actually attend and run those places.

However, in keeping with the commitment to reconcile this vision of democratic decision making with the reality around them, the TAs were quick to name all the ways in which this vision was debased within the current context. All of the TAs interviewed shared a common analysis about the problems of the social and educational system, critiquing the lack of democracy in a society in which people with the most wealth exert disproportional influence over decisions and policies that affect all. This includes an analysis of the ways in which corporations and privatization are unraveling the very nature of the public sphere.

They applied this broader analysis to education, looking specifically at how mayoral control in New York City plays out. As Alexandra explained:

There's the 99 percent, and then there's the 1 percent. This [analysis] really resonates with most people's experiences in the Department of Education, where people feel like students, teachers, and parents, who make up the vast majority of public education, feel like they have little voice or decision-making power in what our schools look like.

By looking through the lens of economic and power disparity, Alexandra recognized the same trend within the field of education and how school policy is shaped. She continued:

Mayor Bloomberg and Chancellor Walcott seem to make almost all of the decisions on public education, and so that kind of framework of the 99 percent versus the 1 percent really made a lot of sense in public education.

They noted a shift to corporate control and management of schools under Mayor Bloomberg's reign and contend that educational decisions are made based on profits over children's needs.

Adding to their analysis of the anti-democratic nature of education under

mayoral control, the TAs pointed to the Panel for Educational Policy (PEP). The PEP was set up as an advisory board, but the majority of panelists were appointed by Bloomberg, who has been known to fire members who don't intend to vote in the direction he wants (Herszenhorn 2004). The TAs lamented the lack of voice or power of parents, students, and teachers under this "puppet panel." Niki, who teaches immigrant high school students, explained:

The students, parents, and teachers will come and pour their hearts out until four in the morning, and panelists will sit there and act like they are listening, but they still vote the way they were going to before they even walked in the door.

The TAs believed that under mayoral control, with the PEP and chancellor appointed by one person, key stakeholders have no avenues in which to be heard.

Ultimately, the TAs understood how students suffer from economic injustice inside and outside of schools. Alexandra described,

My students face massive unemployment, families face evictions, students come to school hungry, tired because they work night shifts, living below the poverty line.

Seeing these issues firsthand gave her a sense of empathy. She said:

When you are confronted with that every day, not always in your personal life, but when you see it among the young people you work with, you realize how little chance they have been given from the start.

For TAs like Alexandra, empathy turned to solidarity:

It certainly makes you even more outraged and much more willing to fight on their behalf, but also on yours, because you feel connected.

As exemplified here, the disconnect between the reality of inequality faced by students and the vision TAs want for them is what drives Alexandra and others to action.

"WHAT DO WE DO?"

It was within this context of economic crisis, extreme disparities of wealth, and increased grassroots organizing that the Occupy Wall Street Movement (OWS) was born. The teacher activists, already active organizers in the social and educational justice worlds, were drawn to this movement because it called into question the economic injustice that their students faced, along with the very foundation of the corporate capitalist system. As Niki explained:

I think there is another way. I see every day with my students how the odds are stacked against them, and this is the first movement in my lifetime that feels like people are challenging that.

This movement provided an opportunity for Niki and the others to re-imagine their vision of a different system in which direct democracy and consensus building are part of both the process and product of change.

Along with the critique OWS offered, the TAs were also attracted to the way in which the structures and processes of the movement provided people with a voice, a voice that had been silenced in the undemocratic system they struggle against. Sucre, an elementary teacher, reflected upon how she felt at OWS:

I feel like I'm not being silenced. No one is telling me: "You can't talk because you are a person of color, because you are an educator, because you are working class."

OWS created a space and introduced the TAs to tools such as the people's

mic, general assemblies, and consensus building that allowed them to put into practice the direct democracy they craved. Niki explained the appeal of the people’s mic:

We can rely on each other to project our voices. We can just take any space and make it ours as long as we have enough people, and that is a metaphor for organizing.

Because the vision of justice the TAs subscribed to included parents, teachers, and students having democratic power in decision making, they were immediately drawn to such tools that allowed people’s voices to be heard.

The TAs reported that they were initially skeptical that “young white kids” would overrun the OWS space but came to acknowledge that while it was not immune to reproducing oppressive patterns, OWS was open to all who chose to participate. Samuel, an English as a second language teacher, explained:

I really saw it as . . . counter institutional to have a space like this, so it opened our eyes in terms of not criticizing as much because really anybody can do anything there if they want to.

Sarah, a government and economics teacher, continued:

People feel empowered to take it and run with it. It’s sprawling and not specific, but it is also owned; people feel ownership over it in so many ways.

With this sense of empowered ownership, the TAs were able to participate in new ways of meeting, such as consensus building. As Ella extrapolated:

While people may be critical of consensus, what they don’t understand is that what comes before consensus is consensus building. Through the process of conversation, through the

process of talking everything out and thinking about it and making your argument and having someone else respond to it and having conversations that way, you build consensus to the end point where everyone has come to an agreement that this is the decision that makes the most sense.

Galvanized by these new types of conversations and strategies, the TAs re-approached their education activism with new energy. They soon realized, however, that while they shared an economic analysis with many of the people at OWS, the broader group did not apply this lens to the field of education. Ella recounted:

Because OWS was challenging corporate interests in every aspect of our society . . . it seems to make sense that it would start to challenge education. To me, that connection is very clear. But then I realized that people in OWS weren’t really talking about that. It wasn’t coming up.

Even the “education subcommittee” that was convened spoke more to higher education and did not seem to be leaning toward issues of public education and injustice.

Samuel saw OWS as a resource and an inspiration but was also quick to name what he saw as the differences between the OWS activists and the “radical educators of New York” of which he felt a part. He explained:

They don’t really know who the chancellor is, they don’t know anything about our specific struggle here – the education stuff, which is logical. Pretty much nobody knows except for the people, us, who have been involved.

While the TAs felt they found a movement that shared their overall political analysis, they recognized the way in which it was not a seamless fit.

“STAND UP!”

In the meantime, different teacher activist groups in the city started holding grade-ins at Zuccotti Park as an act of solidarity, to make public the private work of teachers and to create a space for teachers within the movement.

Within these grade-ins, conversations between educators began to take shape. Ella recalls a conversation she had with Alexandra, who said to her:

You know, if someone’s going to make the education subcommittee, it’s going to have to be us, the activists who are already doing it.

Ella described her reaction:

It was a lightbulb moment. It’s not going to be something that we tap into; it’s going to be something we invent. We have to make that happen, because we are the ones already working on educational justice.

We’re the ones already working to fight corporate interest in education.

In keeping with the commitments of teacher activism, they began to put into place the vision they had for what the struggle for educational justice could look like. As well-connected organizers within the local scene, now armed with the tools and strategies picked up from OWS, the TAs, along with parent and student activists, took up the charge, as Niki avowed, to “bring the spirit of Occupy Wall Street to the education movement.” As a result, they created a group connected to but not necessarily part of OWS called Occupy the DOE (O-DOE).

Through O-DOE, the TAs worked to bring in representative voices of diverse parents, students, and teachers, particularly attracting new people into the existing activist work going on in the city, which they found exciting. Xiomara, an elementary teacher, explained the development:

In Occupy the DOE, we’re seeing a lot more teachers coming in than a few months ago, so it’s happening Just knowing that you can be part of something bigger, and you’re seeing other people come together, it’s a powerful feeling.

With the energy, vocabulary, and tools drawn from OWS, a larger group of teachers, students, and parents were drawn into the mix and began to participate in new conversations about economic injustice and educational reform. O-DOE began organizing actions that drew larger and larger numbers and garnered more press. The TAs and others became increasingly inspired and transformed by each other and by these actions. As the movement continued to build, the TAs became more and more motivated and empowered to continue to fight for change.

“FIGHT BACK!”

Through the creation and actions of O-DOE, the TAs developed a stronger sense of solidarity and collective presence. Rather than waiting for someone else to create change, the TAs acted, and it was both the process and product of their actions that they saw as part of a liberatory movement. As described in the introduction to this article, the TAs decided to use a Panel for Educational Policy (PEP) meeting as a target for their first action in an attempt to expose the lack of democracy of the PEP and mayoral control. Sarah described her reaction to this event:

The unifying element of all this work is demonstrating the power of regular people and that we now believe that we have power if we act together. That’s the key tenet of any social movement: the power in numbers.

By acknowledging this power and working to bring in more parents, students, and teachers, the TAs believe

that O-DOE will be positioned to take larger actions and obtain real results. While one of their goals is to continue to expose the lack of democracy within the current system, there has also been talk of attempting to stop the impending closures of forty-seven schools. They believe that as more and more people become aware of the inherent injustice in the system, the numbers of people willing to step up for change will grow.

While the TAs have unity around the vision of bringing in more and more representative voices to flip the power imbalance of the current system, the TAs seem to negotiate a tension between two views of change: demand versus creation. This tension is internal to the group, as well as internal to each individual, as many of them express both views at different times.

Through the lens of demand, the TAs discussed their work in terms of forcing change through traditional activist methods such as protests, actions, and marches aimed at forcing the power structure to respond to their demands. As Sucre described her vision of change:

I feel like when something drastic happens, like a strike, which is what I'm hoping teachers are able to do, it will shine light on our problems and it will force the Department of Education and Wall Street bankers to rethink how we are treated and rethink the distribution of wealth.

Sucre demonstrated the “demand” vision of change – that to move to a system in which parents, teachers, and students gain power, there must be protests and actions that force the powers-that-be to take action on their demands.

At other times, the TAs move more to the OWS model; that change happens not by demanding that someone give

them power, but by building it themselves. As educator Jessica reflected:

At the first O-DOE PEP action, it was exciting that their [PEP's] meeting was disrupted. . . . But to me, it was even more exciting that we [parents, teachers, and students] had our own.

While some TAs saw this event as successful through the “demand” lens of change, such as Samuel in his statement that, “We got under the Chancellor's skin,” Jessica saw success in the fact that O-DOE convened their own meeting of key stakeholders. She continued:

What I have found so inspiring about OWS is that people aren't waiting around for politicians to respond any more. There is so much work happening focused on building our own power in and across our own communities to make the world of our imaginations a reality.

She envisioned what this creation could look like in education:

The PEP decides they want to shut down a school; well, maybe it doesn't shut down. Maybe it gets occupied and re-imagined, and in that space there are dreams about what a school could be.

Dreaming about what schools could be, such as the occupied one that Jessica described, exemplifies the types of commitments that teacher activists make. They envision a more socially just world and work toward it by standing up to the oppression blocking it from being reality. Regardless of whether they think the road there involves demand, creation, or both, the teacher activists share a vision of education in which the key stakeholders – parents, students, and teachers – work together through democratic practices to create schools that guide students toward liberation.



PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT FOR THE TEACHER ACTIVIST

Jessica Tang

Jessica Tang is a Boston public school teacher and a founding member of the Teacher Activist Group – Boston (TAG-Boston).

Sometimes we experience in life a strong sense that something is very wrong, but we cannot always clearly articulate what it is or pinpoint what may be causing us to feel this way. Sometimes the feeling is so unrelenting that we begin to ask questions, research and read, and discuss our feelings with our friends, family, and colleagues to seek out answers. This is how I felt as a committed and passionate English language arts and social studies public school teacher about my own profession. This is how I felt about the state of public education when I arrived in Providence, Rhode Island, for the Free Minds, Free People Radical Professional Development session. I knew something was very wrong, and I knew I needed to do something about it, but the answers were only coming in pieces.

Thankfully, the pieces came together for me that weekend in a way that was empowering and transformative. Professor Bree Picower clearly articulated what I had been experiencing but had been unable to fully convey within a greater political and economic framework as she described how the education sector is the last remaining public sector that has not yet been privatized, and how the greatest hurdle to accessing billions in profits from the public education sector are unions. This explains why teachers unions are increasingly becoming scapegoats for education reform, despite the fact that states with unions have higher achievement and those without rank the lowest. This explains the move to expand charter schools, which can be run by private institutions and for-profit companies. This explains why so many more “education nonprofits,” such as Stand for Children, that promote these types of agendas are getting major funding from corporations like Walmart and Bain Capital.

After the session, I finally felt that I had a better grasp of the language and concepts I needed to contextualize my own observations and experiences of my classroom, school, and community. It also became powerfully clear that I was not alone. Participants heard from Tucson teacher Curtis Acosta about the struggles to preserve the successful ethnic studies program in Arizona (see Curtis Acosta and Asiya Mir’s article in this issue of *VUE*). We heard from teachers about the harmful anti-labor legislation in Wisconsin and the inspirational organizing and uprisings of concerned citizens in response to it. We shared stories about school closings in cities across the nation and about the damaging effects of the corporate reform agenda, backed by well-known philanthropic foundations, that pushes for charter school expansions, unreliable new data-based teacher evaluation models, and an increasing emphasis on standardized tests. Perhaps most importantly, we had the opportunity to talk, discuss, and strategize about what to do about it all.

In the winter of 2010, a number of other concerned colleagues and I created a social

justice educator's group called Teacher Activist Group (TAG)-Boston, inspired by the National Teacher Activist Groups Network. Like many new grassroots organizations, we were struggling to define our own mission and create our own vision. During our time at the FMFP session, we were able to meet with organizers from more well-established teacher activist groups such as the New York Coalition of Radical Educators (NYCoRE) and Teachers for Social Justice in San Francisco. We were also able to trouble shoot with organizers from similar grassroots organizations in Philadelphia and Atlanta. Oftentimes budding grassroots organizing groups struggle with sustaining the work due to time constraints (especially for teachers with full-time jobs), or maintaining democratic involvement while being able to make decisions quickly as a group. We had questions about meeting structures, maintaining diversity, and how to keep the momentum of our work going, all while practicing the values we believe in such as equity, anti-oppression, and collaboration. The specific challenges were local, but the themes and struggles were universal, and the sharing of knowledge, experiences, and strategies was invaluable.

One year later, at our TAG-Boston meetings, we still refer to suggestions and ideas we collected from our time in Providence. Our monthly meetings are structured similarly to NYCoRE's; we strive to maintain a 50 percent female and 50 percent people of color coordinating group; and our organizing work is reflective of the TAG-National education platform. Through e-mails and monthly conference calls, we are able to coordinate our efforts, such as the national "No History Is Illegal" response to the attacks on ethnic studies in Tucson, and also share both our successes and our challenges. The national network of teacher activist groups has been an incredible source of support, strength, and hope. It is our continuing hope that as radical educators, we will continue to create more opportunities to educate ourselves and others about the real needs of our students and our schools in the struggle to create an equitable public education system.

For more information on Boston TAG, see <http://tagboston.org>.

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A World Where Youth Hold the Power

ADEOLA A. OREDOLA WITH MEMBERS OF YOUTH IN ACTION

The space cultivated by the youth leadership development organization Youth In Action puts young people, traditionally marginalized by adult decision-makers, at the center of change in the community.

I am the proud executive director of Youth In Action (YIA), a Providence, Rhode Island, organization that's all about young people – their capacity to lead, their natural ability to innovate, and their desire for positive change. YIA was started in 1997 by teenagers driven to build stronger communities by engaging their peers in arenas of influence that they are typically excluded from, including school reform, politics, media, organizing,

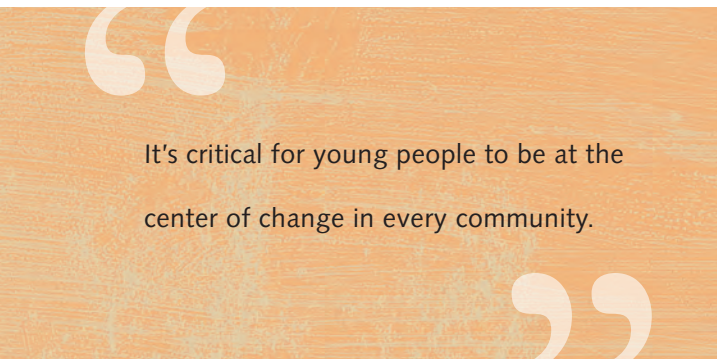
community health, entrepreneurial innovation, and creativity. Since its inception, youth have played key leadership roles at every level of the organization, making up the majority of YIA's board of directors and running all of our community programs. Teenagers run our organization and are part of every decision, from approving our budget to choosing the color of paint on the walls to hosting the 2011 Free Minds, Free People conference this past summer.

Supporting young people to be at the forefront of this work is an honor, and I have to say, youth are consistently better at taking the lead than most adults I know. I deeply believe that

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young people are every community's best problem solvers, and we demonstrate that at YIA every day. In fact, I believe it's critical for young people to be at the center of change in every community if we're ever going to see that better world we all know is possible.

From the U.S. civil rights movement to the Arab Spring and Occupy Wall Street movements, few large-scale pushes for social change have been successful without youth. They have been



It's critical for young people to be at the center of change in every community.

the lifeblood of social change efforts across this globe, but they have yet to be acknowledged and valued for the seats they've earned at the table (or for their feet in the picket line). Like many cities across the country, Providence is a place where young people – particularly youth of color in under-resourced communities – are marginalized in almost every decision-making circle. This problem has historical roots in the narrow power structures and practices that constitute Providence and is part of the bigger economic crisis facing the city today.

As a young person of color, you can view yourself as powerful or powerless within the systems that impact you. A young person who is supported to be powerful will fight to have a say when it comes to their schools or their neighborhoods. A young person who feels powerless will see their environment as something that can't be changed and

will ultimately give up hope of ever seeing a difference. In so many cities across the country, people are full of hopelessness due to overwhelming poverty and struggling schools. The young people best positioned to give their voice and power to help fix what's broken in these cities usually move on to "better" places and opportunities as quickly as possible. In the communities they leave behind, a small few (usually those least impacted by these problems) make all of the important decisions, and others either follow their lead or leave. This is the pattern of a broken city.

To create a new narrative in Providence, many local leaders and activists are publicly challenging perceptions of young people as passive consumers of their environment and embracing innovative strategies that support youth as co-constructors and powerful agents for change. What's slowly emerging is a dynamic youth community with knowledge about the systemic challenges it faces and the ability to mobilize the city to drastically shift power, policy, and practice. What would our cities look like if we all started to truly see youth as powerful assets instead of problems? I grew up in Providence around adults who saw my potential to be a strong force in my community and supported me to follow that path. As an adult, I partner with youth throughout the city, building their potential to bring about social justice because I see it as the way for us to heal our city. In Providence and other small pockets across the country, young people are taking the lead to fix what's broken – successfully tackling issues in community health, the justice system, public transportation, and education.

At YIA, the power of youth starts with our building. In 2001, YIA youth leaders bought and renovated a four-story building. After raising half a million dollars, working with architects, and

shedding lots of sweat and tears, we have a youth center in the heart of South Providence where YIA's programs are needed most. When you walk through the doors at 672 Broad Street, you immediately feel that the energy is different from other places you've been. I believe it has to do with a different mindset, learning process, power dynamic, and perspective about what's possible that we all share. In many ways, we see this building of ours as a second home, a studio, and a laboratory where we're beginning to create the better world we envision.

Over the past fourteen years, YIA has become a positive, youth-driven force in our community. We believe the key elements of what we do – and the practice that's emerging in small pockets across the country – can and should be transferred to other spaces. Authentic youth engagement in every classroom, neighborhood, and policy-making circle holds the power to transform an entire city. Recently, I sat with a group of YIA members to ask what they think are some of the key elements of our work. In addition to creating a space for youth to thrive and create change in our community, they believe we work hard to promote *a new definition of youth*; we have the expectation that both *youth and adults are growing together*; we create opportunities to regularly engage in *a practice of disagreement*; and we focus on *learning and speaking truth* even when it's difficult or uncomfortable. The following is a series of YIA moments and reflections to provide some context for how these elements play out in the world of YIA, from the perspectives of the youth and adults who bring it to life each day.

A NEW DEFINITION OF YOUTH

NWANDO OFOKANSI • AGE 20

• YIA CLASS OF 2008 • FORMER

COMMUNITY HEALTH TEAM

COORDINATOR

YIA is where you realize that youth have much more power than we're given credit for. That's the cognizance that you have when you come here, because your voice really does matter. Outside you're just a kid, your parents pay the rent, they buy the food, and make the decisions – so it's like you're not even a person yet. You're basically somebody else's person, somebody else's property. When you come to a place like YIA, that's when you realize you have a mind of your own and wisdom that people don't expect someone your age to have. It's here that you can actually channel that wisdom into something tangible.

You can clearly see the huge impact we've had on the city with the way “urban” youth are standing up and being perceived. Each young person in my community represents some of the negative and some of the positive statistics surrounding our schools and neighborhoods. But we don't need those labels; we need people to really know who we are. At YIA you have the opportunity to define yourself, but that can go against who you've been told you are. We're defining ourselves as smart, educated, and powerful. I was so altered, and in a way damaged, by things I had known from outside – like what I'm not supposed to be capable of saying or doing because of my age, or the perceived lack of beauty and intelligence among my race. It was hard to start with a clean slate and begin to think about myself and my community in a new light. But that's what needs to happen when you're trying to set goals for your life and your community that are different from what you see everyday.

YOUTH AND ADULTS ARE GROWING TOGETHER

**ERROLL LOMBA • AGE 37 • YIA
DIRECTOR OF YOUTH PROGRAMS**

YIA's community health team was in a place where they needed to look at the roadblocks holding back their work. They recognized the biggest challenges were internal issues like maturity, communication, and lack of accountability. A series of hard conversations needed to take place in order for everyone to get back on track.

We decided to use a YIA team tradition called the "Plus Delta Hot Seat." It's basically an opportunity for everyone to give and receive feedback on contributions to the team and areas for growth. A piece of newsprint with a person's name on it is set up with a column for pluses (strengths and contributions to celebrate) and a column for deltas (areas for growth). The person is asked to leave for a few minutes so the team can begin to discuss their pluses and deltas. Then they're invited back to join the discussion. Now I know it sounds brutal here on paper, but believe me, the whole process comes from a place of love and respect. No one leaves hurt, broken, or under attack because we're a family and we just don't do it like that.

When we talked about doing this, I felt it was important for the adults to participate, too, and I offered myself as the first to be evaluated. Saying it was one thing, but when the time came to do it I was definitely feeling nervous (despite all of the things I said above about love and respect). I was afraid they would say things like, "Erroll smells like onions" or "He's really bad at his job!" But when it was my turn, I stepped out of the room and allowed the team to begin the process. Once I was back in the room and the discussion about me continued, I looked at what they wrote. I felt both relieved

and happy that the pluses were great! I actually had to look away for a second to wipe away a few tears. I also felt grateful for the deltas. They were accurate and led to a good conversation. We were able to start problem solving right away.

Engaging in this activity with our youth means that I'm just as accountable for what happens on the team as they are. My expectation was that they would evaluate and critique me honestly and without fear because that's what we welcome young people to do here. Our belief is that if you can push back against adultism and create a different dynamic here, you can do that anywhere. Youth have the right to expect this from us.

**GIOVANNI LARRACUENTE • AGE 15
• YIA CLASS OF 2013 • MEDIA TEAM
MEMBER**

High school is usually a pivotal time where teens are extremely self-conscious and very careful of what they say and do. I was fortunate enough to find YIA early, so I was a bit more comfortable with myself starting high school. My insecurities took a back seat to the acceptance and encouragement I became accustomed to with my YIA family. At YIA, it's actually weird when you don't voice your opinion. Schools are missing that interpersonal aspect of the learning experience. YIA adults are open books, and they don't want to control us. They want to work with us regardless of or maybe even because of our age. Teachers and administrators tend to demand respect but feel like treating students with the same respect is pointless. It's hard to get to acceptance and encouragement when respect isn't even there.

On a typical day at YIA, learning is happening everywhere – it's usually in a conversation, a documentary, a meeting, a song, or a workshop. It's

in whatever we do, but nobody is speaking at you. We don't sit and listen to lectures or do dittos. We raise the issues we care about and discuss or debate before, during, and after program meetings. We're learning in the real world in a fashion that builds logic and builds all of us up as people. Schools don't seem to grasp this yet. Teachers tell you what to think and never actually ask what you need or encourage critical thinking. I suggest that school districts look at YIA's model because our success is not based on a piece of paper, but on the decisions students make and the confidence they have moving forward in their lives. That's the real success.

THE PRACTICE OF DISAGREEMENT

MARLIE CHATELAIN • AGE 17 • YIA CLASS OF 2012 • BOARD CO-CHAIR

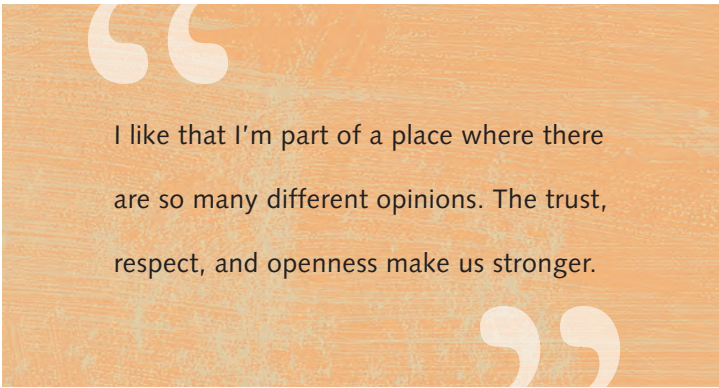
When ideas flow at YIA, relationships form and minds are opened. In fact, regular debates help us build from disagreement, which is an important part of what we do. I remember one day Izzy, Chris, Olu, and I had a debate about faith. It was pretty emotional – with Izzy who is agnostic, Chris not believing in a higher power, Olu a Muslim, and myself a Christian. Ordinarily with such different backgrounds, it could've been an impossible discussion to get through. But this is one of the many conversations I cherish at YIA because it changed me. My core values and belief in Christianity are the same, but I have a different perspective because now I fully understand all of their views too.

As a young person, if you raise a controversial issue you're usually shut down. I like that I'm part of a place where there are so many different opinions. The trust, respect, and openness make us stronger. If you disagree with a teacher, a police officer, or the mayor

or if you talk about politics, want to read a different book, or believe the rules adults have set up are a mistake, people usually don't want to hear about it. You don't have permission to disagree in other places. Because we do here, we get to a deeper understanding of one another, and then suddenly a new community program is starting or we're finding better ways to support each other.

DIANA JACQUES • AGE 17 • YIA CLASS OF 2013 • COMMUNITY HEALTH COORDINATOR

I argue with someone at YIA at least once a week – but in a good way. In the world, there are a lot of controversial topics like race, faith, abortion, or gay marriage. YIA is filled with different opinions and beliefs, but the trust we have in each other makes it easier to get past the controversy and find solutions.



I like that I'm part of a place where there are so many different opinions. The trust, respect, and openness make us stronger.

There are a lot of pregnant or parenting teens in Providence. That's why one of the things YIA teens do is teach our peers in the larger community about comprehensive health education (which unfortunately isn't happening in schools). But sometimes a conflict arises for me between the work I do and my own beliefs. Most of us at YIA are children of immigrants, and there are traditional values that we're pulled to follow. For example, my family is

from Haiti and is very old-fashioned when it comes to relationships. I know it's kind of weird for someone my age, but I actually agree with many of my parent's values. I plan to get married before having sex and believe that others should wait for marriage, too. We have heated debates about this at YIA and during our community workshops. The reality is that Providence has one of the highest repeat teen birth rates in the country. But for many Providence youth, even using the word sex at home is forbidden and the belief in abstinence before marriage is the expectation, no matter what that teen might think or feel. So for me the conflict is – how do I help my community and still remain true to my own beliefs?

Through our debates and disagreements at YIA, I usually find my answer. I learn that it's not just about me. It's about the people around me too. I feel a responsibility to take the ups and downs of my community personally. In the past few years, I have seen too many freshmen at my school get pregnant and then permanently disappear from the hallways. I can do something about that. Our community is faced with so many issues, and we have to come together (even if it starts with an argument) to create something better. I'll always be affected by the injustice of others and will do whatever I can to change a situation that holds us back.

LEARNING AND SPEAKING TRUTH

BUKKY OLUGBEMI • AGE 18 • YIA CLASS OF 2011 • FORMER YOUTH 4 CHANGE ALLIANCE MEMBER

Understanding my voice helped me outside of YIA. My public speaking skills and confidence grew drastically from freshman to senior year. I found myself advocating for my classmates more. In my English class we were reading “The Most Dangerous Game,”

a short story by Richard Connell. It's a story that contains an overflow of male stereotypes – like many of the books we read in that class. I felt very uncomfortable and decided to voice my opinion during our first class discussion, and then again when it seemed like my concerns were pushed aside. I asked my teacher why we were spending so much time on a story where the male ego was so dominant. The teacher replied, “Well that's just a part of the story; don't read too much into it.” How could I not do that?

I decided to start a small group to discuss the issue outside of class, which is how we would do it at YIA. As a young woman of color, I was eager to start spending some class time reading about and discussing the power and impact of young leaders like me. I found that many of my classmates felt the same way, but they also felt that if they voiced their opinions in class it wouldn't matter. So as a group we went to the teacher and made our voices heard. We were against continuing to discuss stories like this, but excited about working together to identify new reading material that was more relevant to our lives. In the end the teacher agreed that we had concrete concerns, and he decided to move on to a new story more empowering to the students. Through this experience, I learned that no matter where you are, there is power in numbers when youth use their voices together.

MONAY THREATS MCNEIL • AGE 19 • YIA CLASS OF 2010 • FORMER MEDIA TEAM COORDINATOR

At the Free Minds, Free People conference, I became a teacher of teachers and it was amazing! The workshop I presented in was called “Radical Professional Development” and centered on how public education fits (or doesn't fit) the needs of students. I was invited to share my perspective

as a recent graduate of Providence Public Schools. I told everyone in the room about my experience as a student in the system, the ways in which I felt unsupported, and how YIA was a major catalyst for my personal growth as a teenager.

One of the most important aspects of learning at YIA for me was the sense of investment in the lessons, in each other, and in everyone learning and teaching at the same time. The cool thing is that a similar dynamic was created in this workshop. As a student in a public school, I always felt like I was a box in which information was placed, something useless and irrelevant. Traditional education never addressed my needs as a person. It can be hard for educators to hear that feedback, that truth. But during the workshop, the teachers were actually ready to listen and problem solve with me. From my experience at YIA, I know that's where the change begins – through listening and being heard. It felt good to finally be able to tell someone on the opposite end – the teacher, that is – what it's like to be a student in a system that doesn't seem to understand you. I know that students are best positioned to speak this kind of truth and change our schools. I'm grateful to Free Minds, Free People for creating an opportunity for me to be the educator and deliver an important message that I believe every teacher in urban schools should hear.

THAT BETTER WORLD

**ADEOLA OREDOLA • AGE 31 • YIA
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR**

My heart lives in this work because I personally know its impact. I grew up in a struggling neighborhood in Providence. I went to public schools and faced the typical challenges of less-advantaged young people in urban communities – not because they are any less capable, but simply because they have less. The biggest difference

between me and most other young people in my neighborhood was that a few people in my community decided to help me access my power as a leader.

I always tell people about the time I went to my guidance counselor at my high school and said that I wanted to go to Brown University. He looked at me with this pained expression on his face and said “students from this school don't get into Brown.” Well, he was the expert, so I believed him – until a few of the community leaders in my life at the time set me straight. They encouraged me to ignore the counselor's words and apply. They worked with me every step of the way, and when I got my acceptance letter from Brown in the mail, I made sure I left a copy of it right in the middle of that guidance counselor's desk.

Fast forward to the following fall. I was finally a college student, the first in my family to make it. I was feeling proud and confident walking through those famous gates onto campus. A few weeks into the semester, those feelings melted away and turned into anger because I realized I had been severely underserved by my education before getting to college. It was a difficult year of catching up on the academic skills I was never taught. I eventually reached out for support after almost failing a few classes. I used every resource on campus and got used to endless nights at the library when most students were already in bed. As a young woman of color at a school filled with a predominately privileged, white student body, I struggled to define my identity and my place amidst it all. At some point, I realized I was actually used to finding solutions in the face of hardship and struggle. In order to get through, I had to reignite the same resilience and self-validation that initially moved me to apply to an Ivy League school in the first place – the life skills that my mentors and family always pushed me to develop and utilize.

It was a big deal for me to finish at Brown because it meant so many amazing things for my family, but I remained bitter about my education and knew that students were continuing to be underserved in Providence. I also didn't want people to believe that the traditional narrative of "poor people can get ahead with a little hard work" was what my journey to get a college degree was about. What got me through college was my ability to critically reflect on my own life history, the systems that had shaped me yet often excluded me, and the vision I had for all the young people behind me. The fall after I graduated from college, instead of leaving Providence like so many others, I decided to stay. I joined the local school board to advocate for students and took a job at YIA to help teenagers fight for a better city. I chose to stay because I felt my community had given me so much, and whether it was overzealous or not, I felt both responsible and powerful enough to give it all back.

This past summer I saw YIA and Providence in a new light when we hosted the 2011 Free Minds, Free People Conference. Hosting Free Minds, Free People was important because it gave us proof that in small pockets across the country people are shifting traditional power dynamics. Adults and youth are partnering in new ways to change their communities. The next step is for all of us to collectively broaden our reach and grab onto that better world we know is possible. Those of us who believe in youth power need to help adults collectively realize that – as history has taught us – we will continue to be stuck without the strength and creativity of young people.

Then we need to invite others to learn about our practice. Every classroom, household, and community organization should know how to create an

environment where youth and adults can work together toward social justice and education for liberation. For example, educators could begin to create space in their classrooms for students to give honest feedback or contribute to the curriculum. Together, parents and children could begin to learn about the history of social movements and build pride in the natural skills and power they possess themselves in spite of (or in many cases because of) the hardship and oppression they may face in their neighborhoods and schools. Community leaders could begin to create meaningful opportunities for young people to speak for themselves (with support) when it comes to important decisions within their organization or the larger community.

Because of the foundation that's already been laid across the country, the possibilities are endless. It's our responsibility and our right to pave the way for a better world by unlearning what keeps all of us bound, relearning the things that liberate all of us, and knowing the difference between the two.

For more information on Youth in Action, see www.youthinactionri.org.



THE INTERSECTION OF RACE AND QUEER IDENTITY

Kathy Vang is a youth member of Southeast Asian Queers United for Empowerment and Leadership, a program of the Providence Youth Student Movement.

Southeast Asian Queers United for Empowerment and Leadership (seaQuel) is an LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning) program within the organization Providence Youth Student Movement (PrYSM) that helps young people to become more comfortable with their sexuality and gender identity in their community. It is the only program working with queer youth of color in the state of Rhode Island that has a focus on the Southeast Asian community.

The queer Southeast Asian (QSEA) experience is a unique one because of our history. Many in the Southeast Asian community came to America as a result of the “Vietnam War,” also known as the “American War.” They came as refugees to escape death and create new lives for themselves. The war devastated the countries in Southeast Asia, and those who escaped to America had to rebuild their lives.

Because the older generation lost the country they once knew, many have held tight to their traditions, customs, and values, which has often made it hard for QSEA individuals to come out to their families. Many feel pressure to hide their sexuality, because to be queer can bring shame to the family. There is a sense of indebtedness that the younger generation feels they owe to the older generation for escaping to America to give the younger generation a better life. The language barrier between generations can also make it hard to create dialogue. This makes it tough for the older generation to understand the younger generation and the coming-out process.

Within the broader LGBTQ community, QSEA individuals have often felt invisible and marginalized – seaQuel gives them the opportunity to discuss common issues they face as a community before they step out into the larger LGBTQ community. We as youth leaders speak up about issues facing our community and educate others, giving them the courage to speak up. We organize community events addressing issues affecting the QSEA community, such as racism in the LGBTQ community and homophobia in the Southeast Asian community.

Along with these events, we are publishing a national report with other QSEA organizations. This report is one of the first to document QSEA individuals’ experiences facing homophobia, coming out, gang violence, family dynamics, racism, and exclusion, as well as many other issues. This report consists of responses analyzed and taken from surveys disseminated across the nation by seaQuel youth and other QSEA organizations. The report will help the older generation and the straight community see what LGBTQ individuals have to go through in their daily lives, as well as reach out to other QSEAs who are dealing with similar issues.

Through educating the community on LGBTQ issues, the young generation can create a world where they would want to live. Through engaging the older Southeast Asian generation, young people can educate and create dialogue with them on the topics of sexuality and gender identity and come to a mutual understanding and support for change. Involvement in seaQuel develops young people’s leadership so they are able to create the change they want to see in their community. Our generation is the generation of change, and through our work, we will make a difference for our community.

For more information on PrYSM, see www.prysm.us.



NATIONAL STUDENT BILL OF RIGHTS: BUILDING A MOVEMENT THROUGH ASSERTING RIGHTS

Bryant Muldrew and Thomas Nikundiwe

Bryant Muldrew is an educational organizer with the Baltimore Algebra Project (BAP) and the co-director of Follow Your Dreams, Inc. Thomas Nikundiwe is an Education for Liberation Network advising board member.

The United States has a long history of suppressing people's rights. It has just as long a history of people asserting, organizing, and formalizing their rights. Whether at the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, in 1787, or the Free Minds, Free People (FMFP) conference in Providence, Rhode Island, in 2011, or the thousands of times and places in between, people have demanded protection from tyranny. In 1791, ten amendments to the constitution were ratified, protecting people's constitutional rights. In the decades and centuries that followed, people's demands to be counted as full citizens with guaranteed rights resulted in more amendments that redefined who counted as a citizen. But among those initial rights that were asserted and later expanded, education was nowhere to be found. To this day, there is no federal protection of education in the United States. Young people across the country are trying to change that and are doing it on their own terms by creating a National Student Bill of Rights.

Connecting the Local to the National

With the support of parents, educators, community organizers, and adult allies, young people have been working in solidarity to draft a National Student Bill of Rights for All Youth that will become a unifying document for youth nationwide and driving force for youth movement building. Taking up the struggle of all the generations before them to be recognized, youth at the 2009 FMFP conference in Houston, Texas, launched a process that would eventually result in a national student bill of rights for all youth. Youth from Oakland, Providence, Baltimore, Chicago, and Salt Lake City pledged to take this idea to their home cities to develop local versions of the National Student Bill of Rights.

Why We Have to Have It

The young people at FMFP in Houston understood that the National Student Bill of Rights is both a significant document that will sit alongside our Declaration of Independence and Constitution and an organizing tool that will build power for young people. The federal protection of education is important and necessary, but not any more important than the organizing work that it will take to make the collective demand for it to exist. In devising rights like: "students and youth shall have the right to safe and secure public school facilities of equal quality regardless of wealth, poverty, or place of residence" and "students and youth shall have the right to study curriculum that acknowledges and affirms the ongoing struggle of oppressed peoples for equality and justice and that addresses the real, material, and cultural needs of their communities,"

young people are demanding a full education as they define it. As it stands now, the national conversation about education is happening largely without those the conversation impacts most: students. Students are obligated to participate in the system, yet have no control over their education. The National Student Bill of Rights is working to change the conversation by inserting the idea and language of student rights into the conversation and as a result building a national network of students, parents, educators, and communities all invested in genuine educational transformation.

Where It's Headed

Currently, youth in the South and on the East and West coasts are at work on the current draft of the National Student Bill of Rights. Students, organizations, teachers, schools, organizers, and coalitions are working to get the draft considered at the National Democratic Convention in September; collecting testimonies; creating curricula; devising street theater; refining language in the draft; presenting at conferences, in classrooms, and workshops; and tweeting, following, and liking National Student Bill of Rights updates using social media. It is in the work of creating a demand for a National Student Bill of Rights that the power to enact a National Student Bill of Rights resides. In building this power, youth are starting to identify that they do have educational rights and that they will assert these rights regardless of the passage of any legislation. Through their assertion for the right to a high-quality education, including those things that impact their ability to be and learn in school, young people are building a national movement.

For more information on the National Student Bill of Rights, see www.facebook.com/groups/96854348156.



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