“Why Don’t We Learn Like This in School?”

One Participatory Action Research Collective’s Framework for Developing Policy Thinking

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ALTHOUGH WE ARE JUST STUDENTS FROM DIFFERENT SCHOOLS, I came (sic) to realize that we all have the same purpose in this whole thing. Our purposes are to make wrong right and to make right better….We are students; we have a voice. [This policy] is not affecting anyone else, but us students. So we the students are going to speak out and be heard because although they mean well, it’s not okay. I wish and hope that the State Board of Education can go into the schools and sit and talk to the students and see what the students think about this

(15 year-old youth researcher from New Jersey).

Education policy makers rarely solicit input from those most affected by the policies they enact, namely students. Never before has this compartmentalized policy-making process been more detrimental to public school students and communities. We are living in an era where the very foundation of our public education system is under attack (Lipman, 2004). As education becomes increasingly more privatized and restrictive (Fabricant & Fine, 2012; Ravitch, 2011; Watkins, 2011), policies are implemented that further lessen opportunities for historically marginalized communities (Karp, 2010; Lipman, 2003). The young people affected by those policy decisions typically have no input, which creates a closed system that is difficult to interrupt. The only feedback that is communicated from students is in the form of their standardized test results. To address this policy disconnect, educators and communities should equip young people with the means to speak out about the intended and unintended consequences of these policies. Engaging youth in the public dialogue that directly affects them

can lead to a shift in the way educational policy is determined (Darling-Hammond, 1998; Ginwright, Cammarota, & Noguera, 2005).

The introductory quote is a reaction from a youth researcher to a policy adopted by the New Jersey State Board of Education that, had it been implemented, would have rendered under-resourced schools incapable of preparing students for the required high stakes exams. The student was part of the New Jersey Urban Youth Research Initiative (NJUYRI), an effort to include youth in the public policy debate about high stakes testing. Her words were spoken during a 2009 culminating event. As facilitators of the project, we were surprised and pleased that an invitation to hear our panel of youth and adult researchers present their findings attracted more than 75 community organizers, educators, school board members, high school and college students, parents, and the media. This vibrant audience gathered on a hot and muggy Saturday in August to hear the panel of speakers share their statewide report[1]. The speakers took turns explaining the history of education policy, describing their process of using participatory action research (PAR) to affect change in New Jersey's high school graduation policies, and presenting key findings and recommendations. Punctuated with poetry and visual media, the presentation ended with a high school student stating, "So what should we do about this?" In effect, he was challenging the audience to take action on the new policy.

NJUYRI was conceived strategically as a multi-city, intergenerational, and cross-constituency research and policy group, with the authors as facilitators. Rooted in a set of community based organizations, urban high schools, a civil rights law center and three universities, NJUYRI was designed to document educational (in)justice, generate policy alternatives, feed data into local organizing campaigns, and inform the state debate about more stringent graduation requirements. Our initiative to incorporate young people in policy discussions seemed radical, particularly when we were hearing from youth, "Why don't we learn like this in school?" We were compelled further by reports from youth researchers that some teachers and administrators did not believe in the students' capacity to engage in critical scholarly work.

As with much participatory work, the project took on a life of its own. What followed were moments of surprise, tension, and at times triumph. Ideas germinated and traveled across local and regional settings. The risks we took collectively and the structures we created were fertile ground for learning new skills and addressing common problems. Reflecting on our pedagogical process, this paper focuses on policy thinking - the ability to process issues, understand interventions, and consider the implications of those interventions on society as a whole and on one's community, in particular. Utilizing PAR as a critical pedagogy structured across geographical, generational, and institutional boundaries, the youth researchers who were part of our collective had the opportunity to develop and strengthen their policy-thinking muscles.

In the tradition of other PAR-oriented educator-scholars (Brown & Rodriguez, 2009; Cahill, 2007; Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Torre, Fine, Stoudt, & Fox, 2012), we reflect on our practice and provide an interpretation of a set of experiences and events. We share pedagogical approaches that can potentially be used by others wishing to create research collaboratives that engage the community in policy critique and promote policy thinking. Our co-researchers are not subjects, rather the structures and the curricular experiences we created are the "objects" of our writing. Our aim is not to "study" members of our collective or to turn our gaze onto the youth researchers. Rather we aim to explicate the elements of our collaborative work that made it possible for us (and in particular the young people) to engage in policy thinking.

What follows is the development of a conceptual framework for policy thinking based on our experience as facilitators of the NJUYRI. We describe the theoretical underpinnings of this work, the curricula and structures that helped cultivate policy thinking in the collective across four dimensions, and review the implications of PAR-based policy thinking as a social justice civic education.

Theoretical Framework

The Pedagogy of PAR

As PAR scholar-activists, our work is situated in a rich tradition of participatory action research, with roots in Latin America and Asia (Fals-Borda & Rahman, 1991), which frames the goal of community-based research as disrupting social inequalities. Also important to recognize are the Lewinian approaches emphasizing the importance of participant knowledge in social change (Billies, Francisco, Krueger, & Linville, 2010). Rather than a single research method, PAR is an approach or framework for doing research that presumes those who are most impacted by a particular issue should be part of the research process (Torre et al., 2012). PAR attends to questions of power and epistemology challenging the notion of research subjects and repositioning them as co-researchers. Within this construct, co-researchers collectively frame research questions, decide on methods, collect data and formulate action responses.

Youth participatory action research (YPAR), builds on the idea that youth are legitimate knowledge holders and creators who, therefore, can and should take part in this type of critical inquiry and action. There is a growing body of YPAR work that takes seriously youth contributions to tackling issues that affect their lives and communities, rather than viewing youth as problems in need of intervention (Krueger, 2010; Linville, 2011; Rodriguez & Brown, 2009; Tuck et al., 2008). Since educational institutions figure prominently in the lives of youth, YPAR can feature school-related concerns or take place in school-based settings, whether in the classroom or as part of extracurricular programs. As such, YPAR can be understood as a pedagogy, in the Freirean sense, creating opportunities for youth to develop literacies of empowerment (Freire, 1993), as well as a research stance. Creating common frameworks of understanding research problems and processes is an important step in working as a collective, that involves a dialectic of co-teaching and learning between youth and adults-- this is the pedagogy of PAR. In education terms, YPAR can be defined as a transformative pedagogical approach that provides young people with the skills they need to become engaged in advocacy, action, and participatory policy-making (Fine, Ayala, & Zaal, 2012). YPAR pedagogy provides scaffolded learning experiences through which young people can hone their analytical and critical thinking skills.

Youth and Policy Thinking

As a concept, the development of policy thinking in youth has been under studied. A search of the academic literature in this area yielded very few texts referring to "policy thinking." Policy studies that use the term focus on "policy thinking" about youth (as in policy thinking about pregnant teens or "at-risk" youth) not as a process engaged in by youth. More scholarly

work has been done using the term "policy thought" (see Avery, 1988). Other terms worth mentioning, but which we will not address here because they refer to the political process, are "political thought" (Grande, 2004), and "political socialization" (Journell, 2010).

Scholarly writing about policy thinking is grounded in developmental learning theories. Several of the constructs present policy thinking as an insular cognitive process isolated from particular actions and orientations (i.e., social justice). Avery (1988) defines the term "policy thought" as "the abstract manner in which one conceptualizes and approaches policy issues" (p. 6). Merelman (1971) defines policy thinking as "the styles of cognition and evaluation that adolescents employ when they confront the policy problems of politics" (p. 1033). The existing literature supports that adolescents have the developmental capacity to develop policy thinking (Avery, 1988; Merelman, 1971, 1973). Although this may be a contested notion amongst policy-makers, we assume that the young people in our research collective, given the opportunity to learn, can (and will) develop policy thinking. It is not our goal to evaluate or assess youth researchers cognitive ability or developmental stage as it relates to policy thinking, rather we are evaluating the curricular experiences that generated policy thinking within the context of this PAR project.

Based on a study conducted in the 1960s, Merelman (1971, 1973) developed a theory of policy thinking in adolescents, focused on identifying the developmental stage at which young people exhibited policy thinking. Although researched within a very different context (i.e., middle-class suburban Wisconsin), the four dimensions of policy thinking he offered warrant consideration. Merelman's four dimensions were: 1) moral thought, 2) cause-effect thought, 3) sociocentrism, and 4) imaginative thinking. He described the dimensions using a total of nine variants (p. 1036).

Merelman (1971) attributed part of the development of policy thinking to "intellectual ability" and allowed for the possibility that some effect may be the result of genetic predisposition (pp. 1046-1047). This theoretical claim does not account for inequities and stratifications that have a direct impact on opportunities to learn. While we critique some of the basic assumptions of Merelman's theory, the construct he offered is useful as an analytical tool. The dimensions of greatest relevance to our case are cause-effect, sociocentric, and imaginative.

Our framework is contextually bound within the framework of PAR. Therefore, it assumes a particular outlook of the youth involved that does not fit neatly with prior formulations of policy thinking. In the following section, we posit connections between existing understandings of policy thinking and extend our own framework.

A PAR-Based Policy Thinking Framework

We argue that PAR provides the necessary conditions for young people to develop and/or strengthen their policy thinking skills. By policy thinking, we mean being able to examine and analyze an issue, its related policies, hypothesize about and/or present evidence of intended and unintended consequences of such policies, and imagine its alternatives. Moreover, as a process of active engagement, policy thinking allows youth to question, discuss, debate, and reconsider their positions. Policy thinking is thereby a form of critical thinking and combines multiple higher order thinking skills.

Through a constructivist approach, youth researchers practice policy thinking as they define and articulate policy issues. We envision policy thinking as a form of literacy (Zeidler,

1984) that employs varied mediums to define a problem. Policy expert Stone (1997) offers us multiple means through which a problem can be defined - numbers, symbols, causes, interests, and decisions. Problem definition is a significant element of policy thinking because as Stone described, it is about the representation of one's point of view, and we would argue, it is also about recognition. For many marginalized youth engaged in PAR projects, they are in effect using "the language that has been used against them - to have their views and experiences understood" (Billies et al., 2010, p. 282). They are exhibiting agency by deciding how to define a problem and contributing multiple perspectives to a problem's definition.

Policy thinking is not a means to an end. It does not necessarily lead to changes in attitudes and behaviors and it does not necessarily progress in a unidirectional cause and effect relationship. Policy thinking is a concrete process that is ongoing and cyclical and which can be clarified through action. For instance, in the context of PAR, policy thinking can lead to an action that then shifts a person's perspective and results in furthering policy thinking. In fact, policy thinking can begin with an action and subsequent reflection of that action.

We revise the dimensions of policy thinking formulated by Merelman (1971, 1973). Specifically, we draw from and expand the dimensions of cause and effect, sociocentric, and imaginative thinking, and we contribute another dimension – risk-taking. We do not explore Merelman's moral dimension because within PAR we assume particular orientations that are not homogenous or neutral. We do not "shroud [our] work in the image of objectivity" (Noguera, 2009, p. 15). Instead, we claim our social justice oriented goal to disrupt inequity and oppression. The following section will further explore Merelman's dimensions along with our revisions.

Dimensions of PAR-Based Policy Thinking

Cause and effect thought. Similar to Merelman's (1971) definition, cause and effect speaks to one's ability to recognize the multiple and related causes of a problem. Like Merelman, we see that effects can be felt by individuals and groups. The results of these effects can be structural, psychological, behavioral, etc. We ask the following questions: What are the implications of the problem? Who is affected by the problem? What are the ripple effects of the problem? Are some affected more than others (i.e., based on an accumulation of factors)?

Social and individual thinking. Unlike Merelman (1971) who described a sociocentric dimension, we posit a dimension that considers the interplay between social and individual planes. Merelman described the sociocentric dimension as "an individual's capacity to explain a social problem by reference to distinctly social rather than individual, psychological, or personal causes" (p. 1035). Moreover, he placed some of the power of defining the problem on society as a whole. We suggest that the effects of problems on society and on individuals should be recognized. It is not a matter of one or the other, but the interplay that occurs within a broader ecological system (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). In the context of PAR, individuals have the sovereignty (Tuck, 2009) to define social issues and to identify the extent to which these social issues affect their lives. Moreover, this dimension includes positioning one's self within the issue at hand and recognizing the direct and indirect effects that may result. Rather than distancing and privileging one's position as outside of the issue, one recognizes the interconnections and power

relations between members of a society (Collins, 2000). In the sense that the personal is political, as feminist theories assert, individual responses, reflections and experiences, particularly from the margins, are important knowledge areas from which to consider social problems.

Imaginative thinking. We borrow from and expand on Merelman's (1971) dimension of imaginative thinking. He defined imaginative thinking as one's ability to hypothesize and imagine alternatives. Moreover, it includes the ability to take on an oppositional role and imagine a perspective that is contrary to one's own. In this dimension, one would ask: What would happen if the policy went into effect? What if the policy was defeated, what might the possible consequences be? What are the alternatives to the policy? What were the possible intentions of the policy makers who put forth the proposal?

The dimension of imaginative thinking lends itself to the kinds of actions and products often created by youth engaged in PAR projects. Beyond traditional research reports, PAR pedagogy creates the possibility for youth researchers to respond, react to, or re-present findings using artistic expression (Cammarota & Romero, 2009; Fine, Roberts, & Torre, 2004). Taking actions supports the development of policy thinking because the learning occurs in the doing.

Risk-taking. An added dimension that belongs in this framework is that of risk-taking. By engaging in PAR we are asking young people to take actions related to the issue at hand, often throughout the project. These actions come in many forms - speaking out in the collective or in a more public forum, engaging in artistic expression, or sharing ideas and challenges regarding the issues of debate. Therefore, in developing policy thinking one must take risks and communicate one's ideas.

The dimensions described above are not discreet. Because the process of developing policy thinking is ongoing, not linear, there is some overlap. For instance, imaginative thinking and risk-taking are both addressed by seeking and exposing alternatives. Attending to all of these dimensions helps promote the development of policy thinking in young people in the context of PAR. In the following section, we provide an overview of our project and the curriculum. We then operationalize the dimensions of policy thinking using examples from our curriculum.

Building Our Collaborative

The debate in question centered on a new set of policies that in addition to new course requirements, would increase the number of high stakes exams public school students needed to pass in order to earn a high school diploma in New Jersey. With minimal collaboration from schools, educators, and communities, the State Board of Education's (SBOE) goal was to better prepare students for college and for the twenty-first century labor market (Epstein, 2009). Without a credible assessment of the costs and capacity issues raised by such a goal, the SBOE adopted new regulations in 2009 requiring a series of end-of-course exams in Algebra I and II, English, Biology, Chemistry, and another laboratory science as part of its high school redesign plan. According to the SBOE's plan, these exams (which had yet to be developed) would be rolled out over a seven-year period and would eventually replace the existing high stakes test called the High School Proficiency Exam (HSPA). Unbeknownst to most teachers, parents, and

students, the new policy was scheduled for implementation the following school year, beginning with a new requirement that students pass an end-of-course exam in Biology.

In response to this new policy measure, educators, activists and high school youth from New Jersey's three largest cities - Newark, Paterson, and Jersey City - were invited to be a part of the NJUYRI collective. The 19 youth hailed from 12 different high schools while the nine adults included educators, activists, and leaders from a set of community based organizations and universities. The youth researchers all attended schools with varying degrees of opportunity and resources. They were all students of color from urban communities, each bringing their own level of expertise and prior knowledge.

Our primary goal was to create a New Jersey based, inter-city coalition of educational and community based organizations that would collaborate to influence youth participation in the statewide debate about New Jersey's education policy and high school graduation standards. These research teams formed what Torre (2005) calls "contact zones" - intentionally diverse gatherings of researchers who collaborate, over time, folding their distinct knowledges and skills into a shared, community-based research project. Youth from NJUYRI worked within their schools and across cities to conduct research throughout three major urban communities in New Jersey to investigate their school's current capacity to satisfy graduation requirements and to document perceptions and evaluations of these new graduation requirements.

Facilitating Policy Thinking: Curriculum & Structures

To establish a common framework of understanding and build community as a multi-generational research team, we held a series of research camps (Torre & Fine, 2006) over the course of one year. These camps scaffolded collective members' efforts towards understanding the history of the issue, unpacking the current policy debate, designing our research, and determining appropriate actions and products for multiple audiences. Through our joint work in the camps, we established ourselves as a collective, recognizing each member as embodying expertise and knowledge that would contribute to the whole. The youth in the three city-specific research teams met regularly within their local organizations with the facilitators and other adult members of the collective.

Cause and effect thought in action. To help us examine the policy issues and its history, a lesson on the history of funding equity was led by one of the community partners. The lesson began with the landmark Brown v. Board of Education case and progressed to the decades-long struggle for equitable school funding in New Jersey. Leveraging our networks across institutions allowed us to invite speakers to help unpack the current policy issue. We heard from an assemblyperson who described the debate at the state level and others who provided important ongoing updates on the issue. The historical context was followed by an analysis of publicly available school, district, and state level data. We created a facilitation guide and in cross-city groups, youth examined school performance indicators formulating comparisons across the three largest cities. They asked questions about inconsistencies they recognized in the data such as: How many teachers are certified in math and science? Could they teach the newly required math and science courses?

Armed with historical references and an understanding of the policy under question, the youth researchers formed links between the data and the possible causes. For instance, what explained bigger class sizes in some districts versus others? They pointed out that schools with higher percentages of special education students, English language learners, and students who received free and reduced lunch also had lower scores on the standardized tests. They connected the data to what they had learned earlier about the history of inequitable funding suffered by those same districts with lower standardized test scores. By forming connections across several indicators, the youth engaged in what Merelman (1971) described as "an advanced form of causal thought" (p. 1035). They conceptualized the causes of a problem. They probed further, asking questions about the rates of school leavers and suggested that the new high stakes tests would cause those rates to increase as students would be unmotivated to stay in school if they failed any one of the six exams. Using their expertise of the high school environment, they imagined the effects of the policy on the attitudes and behaviors of their peers, further demonstrating their ability to frame cause and effect. This also exemplifies the unique knowledge contributions of youth, to which adult allies do not have as much access.

Social and individual thinking in action. During the secondary data analysis activity described above, youth researchers were asked to review the school, district, and state level data that was available from the Department of Education and describe the ways in which these data did or did not represent their experience and that of their peers. The youth researchers generated long lists of the ways in which their circumstances compared to those represented by the data. They were positioning themselves within the larger issues and recognizing that their particular experience did not necessarily align with what was represented as the general experience. Moreover, they compared experiences across cities and across schools. One young woman wrote,

> We were talking about different things in our school and in our neighborhood. I learned that although we are only cities apart, there are a lot of differences in our style, slang, and neighborhoods, but there are big similarities in our school systems.

Operating this way allowed a broader-angled view of the policy, one that encompassed observations not limited to a single locality and validated their individual experiences as part of a set of a larger systemic problem.

While the new policies would not go into effect until after most of the youth graduated, they worried out loud for themselves and others, asking questions such as: How could they compete against other youth who attended schools where the science labs were fully equipped and where there were enough biology classes for all incoming ninth graders? What would be required of special education students? What would happen to students who did not pass one or more of the exams? They were aware of the implications and these questions informed our research.

Members of the collective expressed disbelief at the lack of information the state had provided educators, parents, and youth regarding the newly approved requirements. Youth researchers were particularly astounded to learn that they knew more about the new policies than their teachers or parents. They continued to ask questions about the state's plans to provide

resources and support to aid in the implementation of the new requirements. Demonstrating concern for himself and others, one youth researcher, a high school senior, wrote:

> Is it an accident that I feel that everything is stacked against me? Why are graduation requirements being changed, made harder for all schools in New Jersey, if I know my school does not have the resources conducive for student success?

To gauge the anticipated impact of the changing graduation requirements and bring attention to the lack of resources available, youth researchers engaged in multi-method data collection. They sought out multiple perspectives on the issue allowing them to further develop their understanding of the issues and be able to represent a broader, more generalizable perspective through their research findings. They constructed interview protocols for parents, peers, administrators, graduates and teachers asking open-ended questions about people's knowledge of and attitudes toward the proposed changes. To gather information about the public's perception from a broader sample, intergenerational teams developed a survey that was administered at educational meetings and online. Samples were drawn from low income and moderate to high-income districts to compare views on increased graduation requirements.

Imaginative thinking in action. Understanding the historical and current context of the issue provided a framework for imagining possibilities. Given what we knew about the situation in high schools in the three most populated cities in the state and the proposed end-of-course exams, we hypothesized what might happen if the new requirements went into effect. Youth identified questions based on what they thought might happen in their schools. They discussed who might benefit and who would be left out if the new requirements went into effect, leaving us all with more questions than answers.

They discussed alternatives and considered possibilities from multiple standpoints by surveying others (283 in total). In the surveys, they asked respondents: "What might be some of the positive or negative results that emerge if this proposal were adopted?" They imagined the possible intentions of the policy makers, and to further investigate, they interviewed the President of the State Board of Education and asked her directly.

After gathering our data, we decided as a group that we needed to communicate our findings in a way that made them accessible, using multiple modes to reach a broader audience. To this end, youth created poems, videos, skits and postcard campaigns to raise awareness of the issue, both in the context of the camps, and separate from the collective within their home organizations. Considering the potential impact of requiring multiple end-of-course exams for graduation in the daily life of a student and her family, one group created a high school graduation party invitation. Using bright and cheerful colors on one side, and a harsh red cross out sign on the other signaling that the fictional student would not be graduating on time, youth researchers communicated a subtle analysis of a potential negative outcome for future students - a drop in graduate rates. [insert Figure 1]

Risk-taking in action. We were learning from each other and struggling with what we knew and what we did not know. Young people were valued as significant contributors to the dialogue not just as a separate entity with a limited perspective. When we created scaffolded activities, we were thinking about all of the members of the collective as learners. Our goal was

to provide ample opportunities for scaffolded learning and to create an environment that promoted risk taking, but with adult allies as safety nets.

Having adults at different levels of hierarchical power allowed youth to speak and state their claims and expect that they would be heard because the adults would support them. Although the adults served as facilitators and guides, they came to the process vulnerably and willing to learn from everyone involved. Knowing that their peers and the adults were sharing in the risk-taking, young people could express their surprise, dismay, agreement, and feel safe enough to test out their reasoning, and formulate recommendations and alternatives.

Simply conducting this study without taking action would have been a set-up for all of us, in particular the young people who had put themselves out on the line, and who wanted to affect change. Through their methods, youth researchers were engaging in blended-method action (Tuck, 2009). They were educating adults, namely teachers and parents, who did not know or were not yet informed about the policy that was being voted on and later approved by the state legislature. Through their actions, they took risks, were generating public awareness of the issues, and engaging others in the public debate. One parent reported at the final community event that, had it not been for her daughter, she would not have known that a new graduation policy requiring additional testing had been passed.

The moment of greatest risk taking occurred during our culminating event. Youth and adult members of the collective presented the data as a multi-generational team. They created postcards with slogans and shared them with the crowd of 75 that included top officials from the State Board of Education. A number of recommendations were offered:

- Raise standards, not stakes: Deliver rigorous education by strengthening our schools and educator–not encouraging push outs.

- Get tough on accountability. Hold the State accountable: Make sure that the State of New Jersey and our school districts equitably fund and educate all youth with high level courses, facilities, books and materials.

- The road to hell is paved with good intentions: Study the impact of end of course examinations on students, by district, race/ethnicity, and immigration status before you create permanent policy change.

- Redesign with us, not against us: Include youth and community voices in making such important policy changes. We are the youth and want to have a say in our education.

At the end of the presentation, rather than simply invite questions, one of the youth researchers closed with a challenge to the audience to work towards action. The state level administrators in the audience listened respectfully and then pushed back, suggesting that, "You don't really appreciate the complexity of the situation." "Unfortunately, students who go to college from urban schools often can't write." "It's so sad that so few urban parents show up for events."

Though the presentation itself was impactful, it was the presence of allies in the room, in addition to those promoting the policy that moved the dialogue forward. In these ways, we drew from one another's strengths and resources, and spread the pressures and responsibilities so that they would not weigh too heavily on any one person or group's shoulders.

The youth and adult researchers were beginning to grow frustrated and demoralized, but the audience acknowledged the significance of the challenges being put forth by the youth researchers. The audience insisted that the work be carried to other places, and challenged the policy makers to do more research and incorporate what they learn from youth and communities into their policy decisions. They honored most the youth researchers and the leadership they demonstrated. The invitations from the room created a deep accountability for everyone as youth were invited to church groups and school openings, which then forced the hand of the state department and board of education to agree to invite the youth as well (Fine et al., 2012).

From the discussion, concrete suggestions were made, building upon the work presented and the ensuing dialogue. For instance, the state should first conduct a needs assessment similar to the inventory the youth had conducted in their schools. Additionally, they should create and implement a capacity building plan to ensure equitable implementation addressing the key issues of inadequate resources so that all schools had sufficient support to carry out expected changes. It did not come as a surprise to many in the collective that those responsible for enacting the new requirements would resist the group's challenges. After all, PAR has traditionally been used to disrupt hierarchies of power and shift the conversations from those in power to those most affected by the top down decisions being made (Cammarota & Fine, 2008). The audience insisted on recognition of the youth's knowledge and expertise, their engagement in the democratic practice, and their right to research and speak back to policies that had direct implications for their lives.

Conclusion: *Got Education?*

> Imagine who I could be with equal opportunity.
> See between the lines.
> Redesign with us, not against us (slogans created by NJUYRI youth researchers).

In this article, we synthesize ideas related to PAR and policy thinking in the context of a youth and adult collective. Focusing on one aspect of the pedagogy of PAR, we consider four dimensions of a PAR-based policy thinking framework, including cause and effect, social and individual, imaginative, and risk-taking. We discuss several ways in which we co-developed conditions, in the form of flexible and participatory curricula and structures, that can promote policy thinking in youth. In the context of this project, we found that intentional collaborations between youth and adults, across cities and institutions, can create the kinds of spaces in which this sort of development can be nurtured. Because this framework exists within the context of PAR, it assumes that policy thinking is linked to concrete action, and when applicable, to participatory policy making.

We do not suggest, however, that policy thinking can develop in a smooth and linear fashion, that all of these elements must be present in order to develop conditions for policy thinking, or that policy thinking necessarily leads to policy change. The members of our collective were self-selected. They volunteered to participate and were already oriented in terms of their social justice lens. In particular, many of the youth who were involved were already politicized and active in their communities, local organizations, and schools. They had developed an affect toward the political.

Policy thinking can be a foundational skill for youth, particularly in the context of social justice-oriented civic education. Proponents of social justice-oriented civic education suggest that teaching participatory citizenship can make a difference in the ways young people envision their role in their communities (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). Moreover, some state standards call for teachers to teach participatory citizenship (e.g., in Virginia) (Journell, 2010) or to engage students in active citizenship (New Jersey Department of Education, 2009). Still these learning experiences in civic education are often limited to learning about voting, understanding the importance of volunteering in one's community, and "keeping informed about public issues" (Journell, 2010, p. 356). In these models, engaging in public policy debates is presented as the purview of adult experts and politicians, certainly not youth. Policy debates that reference youth do so because they are the subjects of the policy not the agents discussing the policies.

Through the NJUYRI, we offer one example of an intergenerational collective engaging in a specific policy issue, and the related analytical skills that were developed in the process. While focusing on the potential for individual youth, we recognize the transformative impact that this work can have on adult allies and communities. Framing youth as policy thinkers, capable of the cognitive, affective and endurance work involved in community organizing, PAR also positions youth as policy actors. Ultimately, this collective work could further legitimize the power youth can yield as policy thinkers and actors, in the present not just in the future. We end with a reflection from one of the youth researchers:

> This initiative has opened the minds of many students to the idea that their opinions actually do matter and make a difference. To know that your opinion is actually valued by someone or something makes students believe that they can achieve just about anything. In this project we had numerous opportunities to convey our opinions verbally, physically, and on paper. The constant discussions, the poetry, skits, and video work we have shown expressed how we have felt about the injustice we are being faced with.

Notes

[1] For *NJUYRI's Report of the Statewide Survey on New Graduation Requirements* see http://192.107.46.20/pdffiles/sociology/njuyriReport.pdf

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