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# FROM TOXIC TOURS TO GROWING THE GRASSROOTS: TENSIONS IN CRITICAL PEDAGOGY AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

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**ABSTRACT:** *Structural inequalities in American public education are inextricably tied to deep-seated patterns of racial and economic segregation. Children in poor neighborhoods are less likely to have the household resources, neighborhood institutions, or school amenities necessary for a good, challenging education. In response, a growing number of organizations have launched initiatives to simultaneously revitalize neighborhoods and improve public education, emphasizing youth participation as an essential component in their efforts. We draw upon ethnographic data from two such organizations to examine their practice of place-based critical pedagogy in community development. We focus on how they engage marginalized, “hard-to-reach” youth via (1) experiential learning, to counter high-stakes testing models and cultivate a sense of ownership in the local community, and (2) empowered deliberative action, in contextualized ways. The tensions embedded in these organizations’ complex efforts have implications for other groups of marginalized youth engaged in community development, especially in their attempts to help students gain concrete outcomes in community development and achieve long-term sustainability.*

The young teacher placed an old-fashioned school desk on a table and asked students to tell him a bit about the purpose of the chair. They wrote for 10 minutes and reconvened. Students stated the chair helped them sit up straight, have a pen and paper, and face forward—toward the blackboard, where the learning was supposed to happen.

Then, the teacher quickly picked up the school desk and strolled out of the classroom, into a lush farm surrounding the modest Our School at Blair Grocery (OSBG) building. The students scurried to follow and keep up. The teacher placed the school desk in the middle row of mustard greens and arugula. A student sat at the desk and told them that the school farm was not about giving them a regular education, nor about vocational training. Finally, the teacher ordered the students to walk around the school grounds, picking up items that related to different official educational disciplines, such as language arts, science, mathematics, and the economy. They were to actively engage in learning, both inside and out.

This exercise might fall outside high-stakes standardized models of pedagogy that dominate American public schools these days, especially those scrambling to retain funding amidst No Child Left Behind or Race to the Top (Alonso, Anderson, Su, & Theoharis, 2009; Giroux, 2009).

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The high school students, many of whom are functionally illiterate, had dropped out of public high schools both before and after Hurricane Katrina. They were standing in a green patch in the desolate Lower Ninth Ward, in the middle of a massive food desert, with no other fresh produce or retailer for miles around. And they were not growing food just for themselves. They were deciding on their crops and growing produce to both address local neighborhood needs and to profit from upper-class hunger for organic, locally grown foods served at costly restaurants in upscale neighborhoods like the French Quarter. Through these exercises, they planned to meet all state standards and attain GEDs.

Newer youth-focused social change organizations such as OSBG aim to reinvigorate youth civic engagement in community development via hybrid models of critical pedagogy. They work with the premise that community development and urban education reform would each be incomplete without the other, and that youth, as the ultimate stakeholders, should have substantive say in how reform happens. Still, how do they do so?

Via an interpretive examination of two case study organizations—OSBG and the Hester Street Collaborative (HSC) in New York—we document two key elements of their critical pedagogical models that merit further research, namely, experiential learning and empowered deliberative action. In the experiential learning section, we analyze how experiential learning projects combat punitive models of pedagogy that focus on high-stakes testing and help students to become physically and creatively invested in their local communities. For example, the OSBG students speak of the moment they understood how to compost successfully in a way that accounted for weather, soil, and other conditions and that could not easily be translated into abstract instructions; HSC students speak of the moment they derived color theory principles themselves and successfully silk-screened their own designs through practice. Along the way, the students draw upon their lived experiences and local knowledge—knowledge about local conditions that could not be easily discovered by city- or state-wide policy-makers—in new ways.

Still, despite such experiential learning, the students would not be able to articulate, propose, and implement their own visions for community development without further critical training and support. In the empowered deliberative action section, we analyze how they become capable of demonstrating their new local knowledge to those outside their respective organizations. Specifically, we pinpoint tensions in how the case study organizations provide students with stable resources and financial support, instruction in basic transferable skills, and cultivation of collaborative and leadership skills, so that they can collectively work with peers on tangible local projects.

In the remainder of the article, we briefly describe the American system of educational governance, underlining the importance of neighborhoods and local politics in policy making, as well as growing disinvestment and displacement of certain American communities. We then outline the resurging and expanding role of youth-based social change organizations in this fractured landscape of American education. After reviewing the backgrounds of the two case study organizations and our methods in data collection and analysis, we present how experiential learning and empowered deliberative action play out in the two case studies. We end the paper by discussing implications for other groups of youth from marginalized communities engaging in community development, as well as remaining challenges for practice and future research.

## **A LANDSCAPE OF SEGREGATED EDUCATION AND “ROOT SHOCK”**

Although the American federal government provides some funding and mandates some minimum standards in public schools throughout the United States, no grand American school system exists. Education policy making is largely decentralized; the bulk of school financing comes from

state and local taxes, and schools are organized into roughly 15,000 semiautonomous school districts (Low, Ostrom, Simon, & Wilson, 2003).

Structural inequalities in American public education are inextricably tied to deep-seated patterns of racial and economic segregation. From 1991 to 2004, the percentage of African American students attending majority nonwhite schools steadily *rose* from 66% to 73%. By that time, 77% of Latino students attended majority nonwhite schools. The percentages of African American and Latino students attending *intensely* segregated schools (with 0%–10% white students) also rose since 1991. The flipside of the racial coin holds true as well; only 12% of white students attend majority nonwhite schools (Orfield & Lee, 2005).

American schools continue to be plagued not only by racial segregation, but also by unequal funding. Although some nonprofit organizations, parent groups, and state governments have attempted to reform school financing structures, status quo inequalities continue to prevail (Ryan, 1999). Local property taxes continue to serve as primary revenue sources for school funding, and the Supreme Court's 1974 *Milliken v. Bradley* decision rules out interdistrict, metro-wide desegregation programs. This provides a contrast to school systems in other industrialized nations, where funding is coordinated at the national level (Arnové & Torres, 2003).

Funding inequalities are not randomly distributed. Differences between city and suburb exacerbate differences between the schooling of white and nonwhite children, since most suburban schools are predominantly white. Because of the ways in which racial and economic inequalities intersect in the United States, "the share of schools that are high poverty increases as minority population increases" (Orfield & Lee, 2005). Such racial chasms and funding inequalities go hand in hand, even among schools in the same district. A study of 89 elementary schools in Columbus, Ohio found that "inequality in spending appears to correspond to the racial and class composition of schools," and intradistrict per-pupil spending varied from \$3045 to \$8165 (Condrón & Roscigno, 2003). Children in poor neighborhoods are less likely to have the household resources, neighborhood institutions, or school amenities necessary for a good, challenging education.

On the national level, the bulk of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation focuses on penalties that would serve as "incentives" for achievement (on standardized exams). Thus, NCLB pushed schools to give 65 million more mandated tests on top of those already being given (Karp, 2007). Under the Act's provisions, schools that fail to meet specified Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) goals face increasing penalties, like parent notifications allowing parents to transfer children elsewhere, increasing district control, and reconstitution. At each juncture, more control and resources are handed to charter schools or private education firms.

Schools that serve large minority and immigrant populations have been hardest hit. As many have documented, the drive to raise scores and avoid penalties forces instructors to "teach to the test," putting aside other skills and subjects, such as the arts (Hursh, 2005). Other provisions meant to encourage market-like competition in public schools, such as the promise that children attending low-performing schools could transfer to better-performing ones, also failed (Gootman, 2004). There are not enough good schools to transfer to, especially in the poor districts where minority students are concentrated.

The housing boom of the 1990s and early 2000s, alongside recent foreclosure and economic crises, wreaked further havoc. Easy credit and skyrocketing housing costs fueled gentrification in many neighborhoods. While some residents could now afford much higher rents or mortgages, many long-term residents saw their previously largely working-class neighborhoods fill with new housing developments and higher-end retailers that only a small (but growing) percentage of residents could afford to patronize. Gentrification is a "physical, economic, social and cultural phenomenon" transforming lower-income neighborhoods into ones aimed at higher-income households, residents, and visitors (Hamnett, 1991). In New York City, for example, the 2010 census showed that the number of African Americans and Puerto Ricans declined for the first

time in half a century (Roberts, 2010). These populations moved to the suburbs, to southern states like North Carolina, and to Puerto Rico.

Through processes of simultaneous educational disinvestment and exclusionary neighborhood change, many residents feel “root shock,” the “psychological response to the trauma of losing one’s community” at both school and home (Fullilove, 2005; Gardner, Irwin, & Peterson, 2009). Root shock can disrupt learning via direct trauma and stress, by exposing student learners and residents to increasingly poor living conditions, and by exacerbating a family’s poverty and lack of socioeconomic mobility. Researchers have demonstrated strong links between root shock, poor childhood cognitive development, and low educational attainment. In turn, they suggest that challenges in urban education or neighborhood revitalization must be addressed in tandem, and that neighborhood stability (with relatively low levels of displacement and relatively long periods of residency by local families) matters just as much as the quality of neighborhood services in promoting educational achievement (McAllister, Thomas, Wilson, & Green, 2009).

## **NEWER MODELS FOR YOUTH PARTICIPATION IN COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT**

Social change organizations (SCOs)—grassroots organizations embedded in local communities and working toward systemic social change—play an integral role in contexts where stakeholders cannot easily make their voices heard (Chetkovich & Kunreuther, 2006). SCOs argue that their involvement leads to many of the traditional benefits of civil society actors in democratic governance—a keen sense of real-life, street-level problems and strengths, the ability to help with the execution and the monitoring of implementation, and a stamp of stakeholder legitimacy (Fischer, 2006; Fung & Wright, 2003; Polletta, 2002). They play an integral role in helping members to define their collective identities, “political purpose,” and positions vis-à-vis social and economic structures (Marquez, 2001). They help constituents to not conjure up new grievances, but to find alternative public stages to official policy-making ones, and to perform new roles as political stakeholders, rather than disgruntled audience members.

Scholars have begun to consider the central role of SCOs in helping youth to articulate interests in community development (Shirley, 1997, 2002; Warren, 2001). SCOs provide essential links between youth and policy-makers, providing a nonconventional opportunity to “challenge hegemony in urban schools” (Stovall, 2005). For example, youth groups nationwide assert that structural inequalities in American public education are inextricably tied to deep-seated patterns of racial and economic segregation (Ishihara, 2003).

Indeed, a growing number of SCOs—charter schools, community organizing groups, and others—have launched initiatives that implicitly broaden the scope of “community control,” to simultaneously revitalize neighborhoods and improve public education. They have expanded their campaigns to address not just public education, but other significant aspects of community development as well—affordable housing, the built environment, and the economy.

Scholars have taken notice of these newer efforts as well, especially appraising the service, development-charter school, and organizing approaches (Warren, 2005). Other scholars have investigated recent youth-led campaigns in social inquiry and activism (Oakes, Rogers, & Lipton, 2006), with some critiquing these efforts as either “navel-gazing” without political power, or as campaigns lacking meaningful participation (Schutz, 2007). Much of this literature argues that youth empowerment is essential to these efforts, but that organizations have varied in their ability to transform students into critical and capable political constituencies. Further, to grapple with the complexities of improving neighborhoods and schools, organizations must transcend existing typologies of service, organizing, inquiry, and development. There remains room, then, for analyses that articulate how SCOs employ critical pedagogy to both elicit personal transformations and policy changes in the built environment (Hajer, 2005; Hart, 2008).

## CASE STUDY ORGANIZATIONS AND METHODS

This research draws upon two ethnographic case studies that work on critical pedagogy and community development in American cities: the Hester Street Collaborative (HSC) in New York and Our School at Blair Grocery (OSBG) in New Orleans.

The interpretive study reported here reflects two phases of inquiry. First, we identified the public arts and food justice movements as two quickly growing but understudied fields with lively debates about critical pedagogical practices and community development (Crane, 2010; Ferris, Norman, & Sempik, 2001). While funding for public art has increased dramatically over the past two decades, critical analysis remains limited (Becker, 2004). Organizations in both public art and food justice movements have been critiqued for “the production and reproduction of whiteness” in their work, and for focusing on consumption and access to art and good food, rather than on coproduction and participation in marginalized neighborhoods (Akom, 2011; Elwood, 2002; Guthman, 2008, p. 431). We conducted environmental scans of organizations working on public art and food justice issues (De Vita, 2001). For in-depth investigations of the relationship between critical pedagogy and community development, we selected organizations that (1) are at least 3 years old and have developed official curricula, organizational structures, and stable organizational practices, (2) have gained some national recognition in their respective fields, as documented via foundation grants and media coverage, (3) focus their work on youth participation and community development, (4) work in specific neighborhoods, and (5) work with low-income populations. The cases represent a theoretically driven sample and are not meant to be representative, but to showcase the richness and complexity of SCOs’ critical pedagogical practices, and to surface themes that merit further research (Patton, 2002).

We collected fieldwork data via semistructured interviews, direct observation, and interpretive analysis (Yanow, 1999; Yin, 2002). We conducted 1- to 3-hour semistructured interviews with 21 people from the two organizations—staff, community allies, and youth participants. Each of these included in-depth discussions on the interviewees’ roles in the organizations, the organizations’ activities and practices, how the experiences there resembled or contrasted those of other school or educational experiences, and what potential outcomes in the neighborhood might look like.

In addition to conducting interviews, Su attended over a dozen HSC events, acted as a judge in a charrette on students’ tee-shirt designs and public policy presentations, and reviewed youth participants’ diary blogposts from 2005 to 2011. She also took the lead in conceptualizing and writing the article. Jagninski spent 5 weeks at OSBG, observing class lessons and working alongside the students. As part of this participant observation, she also volunteered in courses on gender empowerment and food security. Field notes included not just extensive notes of specific events, but structured weekly summaries of observations. Both of us also reviewed grant proposals, curriculum guides, and other organizational documents for both case studies, and engaged in informal conversations with allies, students, and staff. We coded observation, documentary, and interview data according to thematic codes, reviewed field notes, and reviewed each other’s coded data. We engaged in several interpretive iterations of fieldwork, data analysis, triangulation and data verification. Through case analysis, we further explored patterns grounded in the data. We explored critical pedagogical practices in the organizations’ work, and how those practices helped students to move their community development work forward. The names of all fieldwork participants have been withheld for confidentiality reasons.

Both case study organizations emerged from disasters, namely Hurricane Katrina and 9/11, and subsequent periods of economic disinvestment. The Lower Ninth Ward in New Orleans and Manhattan’s Chinatown in New York have not fully recovered, partly because recent efforts have focused on attracting middle- and higher-income residents, not bringing back those who had been displaced.

**TABLE 1**

**Key Characteristics of the Case Study Organizations and Their Neighborhoods**

	Hester Street Collaborative	Our School at Blair Grocery
Neighborhood characteristics		
Neighborhood(s)	Chinatown and Lower East Side, Manhattan, New York	Lower Ninth Ward, New Orleans
Local poverty rate	31%	37%
City-wide poverty rate	19%	24%
Local population by racial/ethnic backgrounds	41.8% White 8.9% African American 23.1% Hispanic (any race) 34.6% Asian 12.0% Other	0.5% White 98.3% African American 0.5% Hispanic (any race) 0.0% Asian 0.1% Other
Key languages spoken	English, Chinese (primarily Cantonese, Fujianese, and Mandarin), Spanish	English, Spanish, Yat (and other local dialects)
Number of students served per year (including interns and after-school participants)	200–300	200–300
Signature curriculum and key units	Grounding Up 1 Introduction to architecture, design, and public art 2 Visual representation 3 Site research 4 Design 5 Build	Food security 1 Compost 2 Growing food 3 Selling food 4 Telling the story/ documenting the process 5 Food systems analysis

Indeed, both neighborhoods continue to be poor. Of the 149,000 housing units lost in New Orleans during Hurricane Katrina, 112,000 or 79% were considered affordable housing units, but there were funds for just 8,900 affordable units in 2008. Meanwhile, as of October 2009, rents had risen to more than 50% above pre-Katrina levels (Gardner et al., 2009). Likewise, in Chinatown and the Lower East Side, the number of new building permits, largely for luxury condos, grew from 40 in 1990 to 970 in 2006. Prices for multifamily buildings rose by 42% between 2005 and 2006 alone, and real estate prices in New York have not dropped significantly in the current recession. A survey of Chinatown tenants reported that 73% had been harassed by their landlords, and half already knew of someone who had been displaced (Fernandez, Romero-Alston, Garry, & Wong, 2008). Among Asian families there, nearly 40% of children live below the poverty line (Fernandez et al., 2008).

Table 1 uses public data from the Census Bureau, the American Community Survey, and organizational materials to summarize key characteristics of the two case study organizations and their neighborhoods. Both organizations provide a range of classes and programs, but this table highlights only their signature curricula, which were developed to meet their respective states' standards and requirements for grade-appropriate proficiency.

HSC focuses on civic engagement via community art and design, design education, and advocacy initiatives. Anne Frederick, an architect at the Leroy Studio in Chinatown, began working with art teachers at a local intermediate school during the economic downturn after 9/11. The organization quickly expanded both in size (in terms of number of staff) and in scope (in terms of including adults as well as youth, and in terms of helping residents engage in research, visioning, and design of local land use and parks projects).

HSC has regularly worked with roughly 10 to one dozen classes at three neighborhood schools with its Ground Up curriculum, providing instruction in using art to interpret the built and social

environments, to elementary, intermediate, and high school students. Elementary school students go on field trips to local farmers' markets and gardens and create stop action animation films on seasons, local plants, and their natural and built environments with their science teachers and HSC instructors. Middle school students work with social studies teachers and HSC instructors to learn about the neighborhood's immigrant history, issues in gentrification, and urban planning. They also draw upon these lessons, as well as the neighborhood's Chinese–American traditions from the past century, to design and execute new art murals, Lunar New Year decorations, and other public arts works throughout the neighborhood. Finally, high school students engage in a year-long investigation of inequalities in urban planning, while learning about public policy making and architectural design. They meet with architectural firms, the Parks Department, and potential policy makers before developing their own proposals for community development.

Outside of these school-based activities, HSC also participates in other neighborhood coalitions focused on critical pedagogy and community development. For example, the Organizing and Uniting Residents (OUR) Waterfront coalition includes Asian Americans for Equality, Jews for Racial and Economic Justice, Public Housing Residents of the Lower East Side, and the Lower East Side Ecology Center. Alarmed by prospects of exclusionary and luxury sports complexes and housing development slated for local waterfront piers, they are focused on developing resident-friendly developments to replace or accompany existing private sector plans on these public lands.

The second case study organization, Our School at Blair Grocery (OSBG), focuses on youth empowerment via employment and alternative education initiatives. Students and volunteers attend classes, grow healthy food, and sell produce (at a premium to high-end restaurants, and with a subsidy to local residents). In 2008, Nathaniel Turner left his position as a history teacher at the Beacon School, a public school on Manhattan's Upper West Side, to move to New Orleans and start a school in the Lower Ninth Ward. He began by working with the People's Organizing Committee (POC), a local grassroots organizing group, with the hopes of founding a "freedom school" like those from the Civil Rights Movement (McAdam, 1990). POC folded soon thereafter, but Turner remained in the community to found the school on his own. Using homeschooling laws that were originally designed to help white families keep their children out of racially integrated schools, Turner started a GED program with four African American young men he met while attending church services and other small community events. At that time, these young men had not attended a school in their community since 2005.

Turner worked with a long-standing community leader George Blair to reclaim a hurricane-damaged building that once housed the neighborhood's first Black-owned business, a family-run grocery store. The organization quickly expanded its teaching staff. Together, staff and students transformed the Blair Grocery building's backyard into a community garden. OSBG students also recently integrated animal husbandry into their curriculum.

In 2011, OSBG worked with 41 full-time students, approximately 60 after-school students and 189 short-term service-learning students, many of whom hail from other U.S. cities. OSBG's activities with these students focus on tending produce and livestock, running the retail farmer's market and restaurant wholesale businesses, and following a high school curriculum that works toward the students' GED and community development goals. The students take interdisciplinary classes that incorporate lessons from traditional high school subjects: food security (biology, chemistry, and civics), social media and journalism (English language arts), accounting (financial literacy and math), and marketing (public speaking and business management).

## **CRITICAL PEDAGOGY AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT**

Before youth are empowered enough to collectively forward well written and well articulated policy proposals on neighborhood issues, they must first individually gain the confidence, literacy



and numeracy, critical analytical, and teamwork skills to do so (Fine, 1993; Fine, Weis, & Powell, 1997; Su, 2010). Such processes of personal transformation and collaboration are especially difficult and crucial among low-resourced/marginalized youth in the context of a diminishing democracy, as youth from different demographic and socioeconomic backgrounds respond to different models of critical pedagogy and civic engagement (Jahromi, 2011; Youniss & Levine, 2009). Much of the literature emphasizes the importance of “safe spaces” in helping marginalized youth articulate their own visions of what works, so as not to be labeled “troublemakers” in public policy debates. These are not only physical places, but consistent opportunities for meeting, conversation, and exchange in forming a collective identity, somewhat akin to so-called “free spaces” (Evans & Boyte, 1992). Guinier and Torres state that “free spaces” help constituents to recognize commonalities that “those who have been [socially] raced often experience;” along the way, they construct political, rather than essentialist, notions of race and “enclaves of resistance” (2003, pp. 95, 147).

The sections below highlight the role experiential learning plays in SCOs’ efforts to create such safe spaces and empower students in community development, as well as tensions in their attempts to engage in deliberative empowered action.

## **GROWING ROOTS IN THIS PLACE: EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING**

Here, experiential learning refers to “making meaning from direct or lived experience” (Itin, 1999). In our discussion of experiential learning, we use a combination of models forwarded by Dewey (1986) and Kolb and Fry (1974), alongside lessons from the literature on participation in community development (Freire, 1968; Leal, 2007). Following Dewey’s model, we paid attention to the students’ (1) observation of surrounding conditions, (2) knowledge from classroom lessons and other contexts, (3) judgment and critical analysis of observations and knowledge together, and (4) impulse and desire to redress wrongs and/or learn more (Dewey, 1986; Kolb, 1984).

### **An Alternative to Traditional Pedagogy, in Its Proper Place**

Again and again, youth at both HSC and OSBG emphasized notions of creativity, fun, and play in experiential learning. Students at HSC blogged such statements as, “We get to work with cement! Time to get messy!” This contrasted with many students’ notions of “regular” school, whereby subject matter is divorced from their organic interests, social conditions, and learning styles.

One HSC staff member noted, “The teachers are clearly not trained to come up with innovative or creative projects. They sometimes get flustered at really simple suggestions, like helping the kids make Mother’s Day cards . . . Everything is so testing-oriented . . . So it’s really, really important that our projects are not directly tied to assessment.”

In this lower-stakes environment, the students stated that they were better able to discern the logic of different lessons because of hands-on experiences: “Trial and error. Once you stop making errors, it’s a success . . . The learning process is both hands-on and verbal . . . I think that it’s better [than school] because . . . you learn faster, because you are experiencing it.” Another stated that it was only in such contexts that he asked *why* certain different forces he learned about in science class led to disparate effects: “You see what went wrong and say ‘oh, that’s what happened! Oh ok.’ Then you can do it.”

Significantly, this hands-on approach successfully engages marginalized youth who, because of socioeconomic or linguistic barriers, do not thrive under more traditional lecture environments. For example, to one HSC staff member, “It’s really hard to get the recent immigrant students to talk . . . It’s often easier to get them to express themselves visually, and a lot of them have

impressive drawing skills, but . . . verbal communication can be really difficult, even if they're chatty with their friends."

Students who are marginalized because of learning disabilities and placed in special education classes also benefited from critical pedagogical models: At HSC, "The fifth-grade special education class really took to playing in the pit . . . Some of them have ADHD (attention deficit hyperactive disorder) and fight every day, and suddenly they were working to make a [stop-action animation] movie together." Likewise, OSBG students "see school as 'I can't' and this is something they 'can' do . . . With something like this they're pushing themselves . . . to succeed."

### Drawing upon Local Knowledge

In this section, we discuss how students at HSC and OSBG experienced the first two steps of the experiential learning process, observing and acquiring knowledge, in the context of community development work. At both organizations, the students could not highlight the key tensions of their local built and natural environments upon arrival, as students more readily can regarding their teachers, classrooms, and educational experiences (Alonso et al., 2009). The students had to learn to interpret and harness their local knowledge about their neighborhoods. Community mapping and neighborhood tours loomed especially large in both case study organizations. At OSBG, students went on "toxic tours" to learn more about the history of urban planning in New Orleans, especially the inequitable disposal of hazardous materials and other environmentally risky activities in certain areas. In a common ice-breaker exercise at HSC, students mark not only landmarks on a large map together, but their favorite memories. Combined with workshops on the history of immigration and land policy in the neighborhood, this sort of community mapping exercise reinforces the students' intimate knowledge of their built environments, such as which streets are safer to traverse at night, and encourages them to think of themselves as stakeholders in local community development.

The hands-on approach helps the youth to consolidate local and technical knowledge. Local knowledge consists of alternate, site-specific knowledge that cannot be easily summarized as general principles or transferred to other contexts (Scott, 1998). For HSC students, this meant mastering crafts like silk screening and attempting to distill replicable lessons for younger children. Youth at both case study organizations could not rely upon a single set of instructions in their community development projects; instead, they had to constantly account for changes in humidity, temperature, and limited if not scarce resources—whether mixing concrete, silk screening, or gardening.

Students could attempt to accomplish these tasks by reading about climate change, predatory insects, and emulsion, but they only performed these tasks well when they combined technical knowledge with bodily experience and local knowledge. One elementary public school teacher wrote that Hester Street projects "grounded the abstract knowledge" that she had taught them, and "connected to the social studies as well as science curriculum. . . . They could make connections to . . . the life cycle [and use] new and familiar science vocabulary." Drawing analogies to the process of learning kung fu in the movie *The Matrix*, one OSBG student asked herself: "What did you learn? Who taught you . . . something and . . . you felt something click for you? I answered [those questions] by talking about when [a teacher] and I were using the electric tool to fix the compost bin, with all the soil we are making ourselves, and I built it back up by myself."

Students better understand causal mechanisms via direct observation, and in doing so, they become invested in what they produce, whether these "products" lie in stop-action animation films, community gardens, or neighborhood community development projects: "In the garden, what they learn is relevant to what they eat, and watching their plants grow and actually getting to try them and see what they taste like makes a difference."

## Beginning to Critically Analyze Structural Conditions in the Community

In this section, we discuss how the students experienced the latter two steps of the experiential learning process, judgment and impulse, in their work. By combining “vocational” work with research in an inter-disciplinary manner, experiential learning also helps youth to critically analyze form and content as mutually reinforcing aspects of their projects, and to begin to discern the ways in which structural factors shape individual behaviors in their neighborhoods. For example, many of the HSC youth spoke of the ways in which Chinatown is “dirty,” with “lots of garbage.” One student’s blog entry includes similar statements, such as, “Obviously, Chinatown has poor sanitation and smells funny, traffic is congested, and the air is polluted.” But then, via in-person interviews, neighborhood walks, and online research, she concludes that,

[W]hen Chinese men first arrived many married and had children with Irish women because both were seen as an unwanted class in American culture. Many were also opium addicts . . . Chinatown has, in many ways, remained unassimilated due to the need to survive in a [larger American] community that has denied acceptance . . . I connected three factors of the Chinatown community: history, social issues, and the usefulness of open spaces. I did this by internet research primarily based on the Rebuild Chinatown Initiative website, an interview with Chinatown Progressive Associate member, other websites containing information on Chinatown environmental issues, and a memoir of Chinatown history called *Tea that Burns* . . . [and] a long walk . . .

The students spoke of how their community development projects are not just essential to their education, but to neighborhood survival and quality of life. One OSBG student emphasized the immediacy of his work: “It’s a good way to actually be immersed . . . right here in the Lower Ninth Ward. You can read books, and watch movies and stuff . . . but it’s a different experience to actually be in a community where you are witnessing all of the inequality and devastation.”

Several community members spoke of how their experiences compelled them to act upon the issue: “Well, since Katrina and people feeling let down and betrayed by the Federal government, there has been a push to be more independent and self-sustaining, that’s definitely helped with this push . . . there are a couple corner stores but there are no grocery stores as far as fresh produce, it just doesn’t exist around here. So, people are starting to do it on [their] own.”

These experiences also led the students to develop the impulse to scale up, in order to make an impact upon the neighborhood: As one OSBG student noted, the school “is starting to be a part of the community [now]. I think if we had more money it would be better because we could employ more kids . . . It brings [in] kids like me and changes the way they think . . . We could buy more land and grow more food and employ more teenagers like me.”

Older youth were eventually also able to critically analyze their own work and develop evaluation protocols for themselves. One HSC student wrote how, “we discussed some of the ways in which we can improve the design camps [for younger children] . . . To fix that, we are planning to hold a meeting each day after the design camp ends to plan for the next day.”

The visual, hands-on approach thus breaks the “discursive code” of punitive, testing-oriented, right-or-wrong pedagogy, inviting the students to themselves assess the strengths and weaknesses of their efforts: “The teachers were surprised by how the [younger] kids were critical, that they had begun to evaluate which movies were better, which ones they liked, why.”

At OSBG, the students developed “wheelbarrow proficiency” and “shovel proficiency” that then prompted them to research farming and animal husbandry in general, develop their own hypotheses for what would work on *their* farm, and successfully lobby the staff to begin keeping bees and other animals. The beekeeping project, for instance, is significant because it is relatively long-term; honey can only be harvested once every 6 months. The students articulated the need for alternatives to processed sugary foods and made necessary preparations on their own.

Experiential learning appears to be essential at both HSC and OSBG, helping students—especially ones from marginalized communities, who may face barriers to attaining traditional academic achievement—to critically engage with their natural and built environments, and to develop a sense of ownership in their local communities. In order to substantively engage in community development, however, they must also develop the concrete skills, especially in articulating policy proposals for community development.

## THE REVOLUTION LIES IN A SLOW EVOLUTION: TENSIONS IN EMPOWERED DELIBERATIVE ACTION

Our conceptualization of the second key element of critical pedagogy at HSC and OSBG, empowered deliberative action, evolved from the existing literatures on participatory democracy (which tends to be adult-focused) and decision making and on youth participation. Critics have noted that both literatures have historically focused on ideal models, arguing for an empirical turn (Dodge, 2009; Dryzek, 2002; Hinton, 2008).

The 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child prompted national governments, nongovernmental organizations, and foundations around the world to mandate children's participation in public decision-making (Hinton, Tisdall, Kay, Gallagher, & Elsley, 2008). The United States, however, has been slow to join this trend; the United States and Somalia are the only two of 194 United Nations member states to not sign the convention. Thus, much of the worldwide explosion in research on children's participation has focused on case studies elsewhere, especially in Brazil, India, South Africa, Australia, and the United Kingdom (Tisdall & Kay, 2008). Significant themes arising from this literature include the challenges of moving beyond youth consultation and implementing the changes they advocate (Taylor & Percy-Smith, 2008).

Our framework of *empowered deliberative action* (EDA) draws upon both case studies and existing research in participatory democracy and children's participation. We especially take inspiration from Fung and Wright's framework of empowered participatory governance (EPG), which outlines three principles: (1) a focus on specific, tangible problems, rather than larger policy debates such as redistributive taxation; (2) participation by ordinary people affected by these problems and authorities close to them; and (3) deliberative development of solutions to these problems, rather than command and control or aggregate voting (Fung & Wright, 2003). Our framework of empowered deliberative action largely abides by these principles, though we refine EDA principles to better fit our contexts: (1) a practical and educative orientation towards neighborhood problems, (2) participation by youth in articulating the problems and making the decisions at hand, (3) deliberative—that is, collective and discursive, with a stress on reason-giving and acts of persuasion rather than intimidation—development of solutions to these problems, alongside other stakeholders, adult allies, and organizations, and (4) concrete actions—campaigns or projects that build upon policy and program proposals—addressing neighborhood problems. This latter contrast of *action* with EPG's *governance* underscores the fact that youth participation in community development is rarely institutionalized, and that the youth in our case studies continue to abide by adult-led decision-making processes at the neighborhood level.

Empowered deliberative action is a slow process at both HSC and OSBG. Contextualized praxis emphasizes the constructive, as well as the instrumental or direct, role of participation (Sen, 1999). That is, youth meaningfully participate not just as a manifestation of their freedom of expression or to lobby for specific ends, but to articulate their needs in and develop their visions of community development in the first place. Key tensions include balancing more traditional basic skills training with “sexier” political education, facilitating teamwork and mitigating power inequalities among different youth participants in the organizations' collaborative efforts, and

sustaining efforts to move beyond individual-level transformation (yielding concrete outcomes, especially improvements in the local built environment, and systemic, policy-level changes).

### **Now, Back to the Basics**

First, to become *empowered*, the students need not only the sort of experiential learning and consolidation of local and technical knowledge discussed in the section above, but also organizing resources and basic skills in numeracy, literacy, and writing. Notably, even just these two case studies demonstrate that no universal set of basic skills exists for place-based critical pedagogy; the skills emphasized in architectural and design work at HSC are quite different from the marketing, accounting, and agricultural work at OSBG.

For marginalized populations such as those served by OSBG and HSC, organizing resources include not only relevant materials and workshops, but also hourly wages and means of transport. At OSBG, a staff member would personally pick up and drop off certain students every single day of the school year, or else the students would not show up. There is no public transport system, and the students' parents may be absent, or unable or unwilling to provide a ride to school. To many OSBG youth, such seemingly small gestures rendered the school staff members important sources of reliable, stable, and responsible mentorship and care. At HSC, staff custom-built a movable model of the East Side Waterfront area, furbished it in wood carved by a carpenter, attached it to a trailer, and transported it by bicycle to different housing projects, nonprofit organizations, and public parks around the neighborhood, to better engage the traditionally hard-to-reach. Youth participants, in turn, become adept at facilitating neighborhood visioning workshops and leading sessions with other youth and local residents.

Both organizations also pay all youth participants for their labor. In community development, paying youth for their participation can sometimes be seen as coercion, or as counterproductively subverting learning for learning's sake. On the other hand, not paying them can be seen as exploitation. Since there are few universal standards for ethical conduct in youth empowerment or community development programs, both of the case study organizations decided to pay youth because of their high-poverty contexts. One OSBG staff member stated, "We partially pay them because they are doing work and partially we pay them so they come back and learn some of the things that are going on here." Again and again, older HSC students also noted that their participation there constituted a job.

At first glance, "unsexy" activities (such as accounting for OSBG's urban farm produce sales, moving tiles under the hot sun for a garden's new pathway, or cleaning and reorganizing studio spaces at HSC) appear to counter some participants' ideas about activism or critical pedagogy. Even some of the staff, students, and allies complain that they would rather be working on overtly political campaigns, "develop[ing a] vocabulary around injustice, around what being a good global citizen is." Thus, some OSBG staff members enthusiastically teach activist classics such as *Autobiography of Malcolm X*, while others contend that many of the students there are illiterate, and that they should instead teach communication skills through interdisciplinary activities such as basic farm work and social media. To the latter group, students' real-life ambitions to become a botanist at OSBG or a graphic designer at HSC are, in some ways, more radical than aspirations to become community organizers.

A similar tension exists at HSC, although all of the staff agree that substantive participation entails providing technical training and asking constituents for their views, without giving preference to seemingly more progressive or attractive visions of community development. In fact, allies around the neighborhood testify that HSC is seen as a credible and powerful ally because it does not forward its own agenda, indoctrinate its participants, or forward visions that just happen to fit its organizational mission. One local ally declared that, "For the decade they have been

working here, they have been working with real integrity, as a pure organization that listens to what all these different people in the community want.”

### **Group Assignments are the Hardest**

Second, to engage in *deliberative*, collective action and not just personal transformation, the students must learn to collaborate and communicate with their peers. Youth at both organizations expressed gratitude, and sometimes even dismay, that they got along with almost everyone else there. Working alongside one another, rather than competing for high grades or attention, changed their social dynamics. According to a public school teacher working with HSC, this sort of collaboration was unusual at school: “Teamwork . . . is hard and not emphasized, because you can’t test it. So the students tend to not learn” it.

Over time, the youth build systems of mutual support, citing specific strengths in one another’s work. One HSC student blogged: “I also liked [his] presentation . . . [it] demonstrate[d] humor and it was short and straight to the point . . . Also the topic he presented on was quite amusing.” Another benefited from constructive criticism: “It is my first time presenting and I was a little shy. I did not make eye contact while I was speaking; I was looking at the paper so I messed up my first presentation. The [others] keep giving me tips that I need to know so the next time when I do my presentation I will rock it!”

Nevertheless, collaborative efforts at the two case study organizations inevitably come with tensions, especially when participating students come from disparate backgrounds. A dozen New York public school students founded New York 2 New Orleans Coalition (NY2NO) in 2007, after joining students from other New York schools that had sponsored trips to New Orleans. Although these youth also attend public schools, most of them attend elite ones like the Beacon School on the wealthy Upper West Side of Manhattan, and they have access to a much more generous welfare state and more extensive public infrastructure (in terms of cultural institutions, public transportation systems, etc.) than OSBG students do. Their curriculum guide for their summer work-study visits to New Orleans include much higher-level vocabulary, reading lists, and exercises than standard OSBG curricula.

As one NY2NO student described it, “Most of the kids who come down are from New York and the majority of them are very privileged and have grown up with a life of total security and comfort.” Working alongside one another in a structured environment helps the two groups of students to overcome these differences: As one youth stated, “just hearing about their experiences and their lives, which in some cases are very different from our own, and seeing them actually find something constructive to do” helps students to disrupt stereotypes, articulate common goals, and negotiate delegated tasks.

OSBG has employed Augusto Boal–inspired Theatre of the Oppressed exercises to mitigate tensions among different stakeholder groups, and to encourage meaningful deliberation among the youth. In one workshop, OSBG students, neighborhood youth, and visiting Job1 service learners acted out three scenarios: (1) a biology teacher cannot engage his students in learning about the life cycle and loses control of the class, (2) some friends make a mess in the kitchen, leaving one student’s mother to clean up after them, and (3) a young woman is receiving unwanted attention on a public bus, with many other passengers surrounding her and the aggressor. Each scenario is first acted out by a smaller group of actors who rehearsed their roles. In each subsequent iteration of the scenario, audience members can “pause” the scene, replace an actor, and change each character’s actions until a positive outcome is reached. In each of these scenarios, students debate the “proper” roles of different characters (such as successful students and engaging teachers), the changes needed, and proposed courses of action.

### In the End, What Do You Get?

Third, in order to engage in concrete *actions* for community development, they must navigate existing political structures and forward policy-oriented, solution-oriented proposals, rather than more sweeping manifestos, declarations, or value statements. Ironically, in order to be taken seriously by policymakers, they must also partly do so in exactly the sort of hegemonic discursive code they attempted to break in the first place. Specifically, they must learn about the appropriate government agencies to approach and the technical terms to use in presenting their concerns, even as they draw upon their bodily experiences to substantiate their ideas.

Both organizations therefore also give students opportunities to learn about and discuss specific policy issues, and to present their ideas to larger audiences such as the Highlander Research and Education Center, for OSBG students, and at local planning meetings, for HSC students. Sometimes, the students are able to draw upon their combined local and technical knowledge, newfound leadership skills, and critical analysis to present well-developed proposals in public forums. The students learn to collaborate in ways that emphasize each individual's special contributions and comparative advantage. In a project between HSC interns and local high school students, the interns helped the local students

. . . to create their idea of a boarding school. The project would be built on the SPURA (Seward Park Urban Renewal Area) parking lots across from their school . . . many of the students who attend [a local high school] do not have stable home lives . . . We helped the students by making examples for each step of their process in designing their buildings. The first step was making a model using cardboard, construction paper, wood figures, and clay. Once the models were done, the students picked an aspect of their design to focus on and then they drew detailed sketches of what the insides/outside of parts of their schools would look like. They also sketched a plan (a bird's eye view) of their schools, and a 3-D image as well. [Two other interns] and I scanned all of their sketches so the students were able to input them into an InDesign layout on the computer. Finally, each student presented his or her work, explaining why they chose to include certain features in their designs. The designs were all different; however there were many recurring features, such as study areas, gardens, basketball courts, and of course housing.

By collecting ideas, modes of presentation, and constructive critiques, the students are then better able to deliberate over issues of community development. Later, several HSC interns were able to present their boarding school idea to neighbors and policymakers at a community board meeting:

We sat and listened to two speakers talk about the SPURA site and its background history from two different points of view. [Later in the meeting] we all were given 20 yellow dots which represented a million dollars each. We were given a list of potential things we can do on the site and added whatever wasn't on the list that we felt should have been on it.

The HSC intern's group chose his design as their top priority, and his reasoning regarding youth in foster care. This would not have been possible without the myriad pedagogical practices discussed earlier in this article, applied in a real-life policy-making forum.

At OSBG, the entire school is an attempt to leverage existing institutions, such as Louisiana's homeschooling laws, in new ways that serve the community's needs—to put the “public” back into public institutions that have largely failed them. Thus, the students view all of their school activities as integral components of a larger campaign to revitalize the neighborhood's public education, food systems, and land use. In fact, the students were the ones who first articulated the need to grow produce, and they were the first to sell produce in front of local churches on Sundays.

Later, they moved their weekly farmer's market to the school grounds, so that their neighbors could see firsthand where the food came from. The youth do not view their weekly subsidized sales as private transactions, but as necessary public services that they hope will become the neighborhood norm.

The students recently collected hundreds of signatures and presented a petition to a local district council member; they wanted him to sell nearby vacant lots he owned to OSBG. This additional land, in turn, would allow OSBG to apply for a permit to begin raising additional livestock. When the district council member did not reply, OSBG students developed a plan to buy foreclosed land at public auctions. Many of their relatives had already attempted to regain old homes after being displaced, but they did not know how to navigate the auction process. OSBG students and staff worked together to research local auctions, acquired the necessary number of acres, and obtained the livestock permit.

Despite such victories, staff and students at both OSBG and HSC expressed frustration that it remains too difficult for students to reap the rewards of what they sow. So much attention is spent on ensuring substantive participation that students rarely see the new community development projects come to fruition. One HSC community ally called this "disempowering," as substantive neighborhood change is what motivates everyone involved in the first place. Outside of the organizations and their safe spaces, the youth often fear that they will never gain the substantive legitimacy they seek. OSBG students who were previously drop-outs have begun to dream of college, but they fret that the GEDs offered by OSBG will not help them gain admittance to competitive schools. Although they recently began a campaign to gain diplomas via a high school in a neighboring parish, they want their model of critical pedagogy to be the default, not an addendum or alternative, in community development and urban education.

## CONCLUSION

These case studies suggest that youth can play an important role not just in education organizing (which has been garnering increasing attention), but in neighborhood revitalization as well (Checkoway, 2011; Shirley, 2009; Stone & Whelan, 2011). In some ways, the interviewees' testimonies better define the relationship between critical pedagogy and community development by articulating what it is not rather than what it is. The students do not see themselves as martyrs, as beneficiaries of foundations' or outsiders' noblesse oblige, as insiders or outsiders, or as armchair revolutionaries. They get their hands dirty in community gardens, but they refuse to surrender the little sense of security and stability they do have, especially via regular wages and a safe and supportive space to go to every day, in order to better fit a romantic vision of activist revolutionaries. They perform tedious mathematical calculations to settle account books or draw scaled maps of their policy proposals. The two organizations' curricula fit state educational standards, so that students can obtain relevant credits and credentials via their work there. Their critical pedagogical models aim to simultaneously change local schools and neighborhoods by emphasizing process more than specific sets of outcomes.

The critical pedagogical models at the two organizations help the students to cope with and combat the "root shock" of imminent displacement and neighborhood change. Our preliminary delineation of experiential learning and empowered deliberative action makes a contribution by addressing current concerns in the literature on how youth participation in community development happens. Studies on youth organizing have long emphasized the importance of critical pedagogy (Fine, 1993; Fine et al., 1997; Hart, 2008; Su, 2009). Nevertheless, our findings broaden the scope of the *how* of community development and urban education reform, by focusing on emerging practices and frameworks that belie wholesale models such as service learning or development.



We elaborate on the critical pedagogical practices that create the conditions for individual and collective action. The case studies suggest that experiential learning helped the students, especially marginalized ones who did not respond as well to traditional pedagogical practices, to observe the local built environments and draw upon local knowledge, and to begin to critically analyze the ways in which social structures are often place-based. By literally planting roots in their neighborhoods, they develop a strong sense of ownership over local public spaces.

This practice of experiential learning belies critiques of critical pedagogy and social inquiry as overly theoretical navel-gazing (Su, 2009). Nevertheless, experiential learning is not enough to elicit empowered deliberative action. Several tensions become prominent when the students attempt to pursue community development projects. Among marginalized student populations, political education workshops are insufficient without basic skills training, leadership training in teamwork and deliberation, and specific, solutions-based proposals. The students often struggle in their collaborative efforts, especially if they come from different social backgrounds.

While evaluative efforts are beyond the scope of this paper, several emerging tensions merit further research. Our findings suggest that experiential learning focuses most on changes at the individual level, that empowered deliberative action focuses on the group and organizational levels, and that students, staff, and allies at both organizations questioned their ability to ensure long-term, systemic change at the neighborhood and societal levels. Indeed, staff at both organizations complained about the long timelines of substantive change, even for limited community development projects such as park renovations. Students expressed intense pride in the projects, and the eventual outcomes suggested that meaningful participation made a difference. Many interviewees cited Hester Street Playground, for example, as a contrast to the “cookie-cutter designs” that dominated other local city parks. Most of the students, however, cannot realistically work at these organizations for the number of years it takes to see a project from beginning to end. To what extent are these labor-intensive critical pedagogical practices sustainable? Are different pedagogical practices required for the youth to participate in yet wider public forums and policy-making arenas?

Other important questions demand further research at the neighborhood level, rather than at the organizational level. Do the organizations help to build increased civic capacity that the students then take with them, into new policy-making arenas? What additional critical pedagogical practices are needed for the youth to shape the *implementation* of neighborhood-level changes and policy solutions for which they fought? To attain new institutionalized channels for youth participation in community development? More comparative analyses are needed in the growing field of children’s participation in community development, to interpret and evaluate how youth develop and struggle to realize their visions for good neighborhoods, and good schools.

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