Emancipatory Practices: Adult/Youth Engagement for Social and Environmental Justice

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Adults and youth who are engaged in social and ecological justice in community and educational work will find this book a critical overview of the role played by adults in the joint endeavours of adults and youth. Through various case studies, the book offers a glimpse into the work being undertaken by a wide range of international educators and community development workers where common themes emerge across the different sites. The book explores the development of, and the internal and external constraints upon, adult and youth emancipatory practices, as well as the effective adult and youth beliefs and actions that facilitate collaborative leadership in issues of social and ecological justice.

The authors offer a critical examination of the degree to which youth are able to participate in decision-making processes, or to the extent to which they were given space and power to truly explore democratic and dialogic partnerships. With an emphasis on the power dynamics inherent in adult/youth relationships, and the potential of these relationships to engage in democratic transformation, the book examines the patterns, benefits and limitations of the youth-adult connections.
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DEDICATION

To the courageous adults and youth who take the steps to bring about change that makes this world a better place for themselves and others.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We are grateful to the many people who attended the AERA conference session in 2005 who encouraged us to proceed with the book, all the authors who responded to the call for submissions, as well as to Allison Eades, our editorial assistant and proofreader, and to Sense Publishers for publishing this work.
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FOREWORD

With insight and originality, this book explores a determining dimension of youth engagement: adult/youth relationships. We learn how adults and youth negotiate their relationships through direct action in issues of social justice and the environment. We are reminded of the multitude of areas in which adults and youth can collaborate to transform practice, whether dealing with racism, mental illness, climate change, or community activism. Each chapter conveys an experience that sheds light on the complexity and potential benefit of transforming a relationship that has historically been uni-directional, with the adult as holder of knowledge and the youth as recipient.

Warren, Linda and Alison have beautifully woven together the chapters of the book. Their interdisciplinary backgrounds and experiential knowledge is refreshing. Their inquisitive perspectives are inspiring. The use of “ecotone” (the place where two ecological regions meet and transition into one another) as a metaphor for the phenomenon of youth and adults coming together is evocative.

As a practitioner, action researcher and activist supporting youth engagement for the past twenty years, this book gives substance and texture to my experience. Time and again, I have seen the energy that emanates when adults become willing to relinquish control, and move into an unknown landscape where the lines of responsibility are blurred, and where youth have the opportunity to act upon their agency. At a time of rapid global change, with more youth than ever before in the world, entering into intergenerational relationships is essential.

Perhaps one of the most significant contributions of this edited book is its emphasis on the importance of creative approaches to transform practice. Whether in the methods chosen to share the results of a study, or in how the study itself was carried out, we learn how space shapes the type of interaction between youth and adults. Space allows for the questioning and redefining required for the transformation of practice.

In my own journey as a youth advocating for the end of apartheid in South Africa, as a graduate student fighting alongside Indigenous women for the rights of children to participate in their culture, as an action researcher leading country-wide initiatives to involve youth in the design of our cities, and as an invited expert to elaborate policies to enact youth rights, I have seen change happen when there is space to co-create. Youth and adults are powerful collaborators for social change when they meet in zones where they can find new ways of relating and defining our world.

This book is a call to action for educators, researchers, environmentalists, decision-makers, parents and artists. It is an invitation to reconsider initiatives that supposedly promote engagement but are based on too simplistic concepts of youth
engagement, which ignore the fact that youth function within a context, with adults and embedded institutions. It makes us question the huge financial and human resources currently spent on creating one-off events that give voice to a select youth group, with little follow-up, or connection made to local community processes.

*Emancipatory practices: Adult/Youth engagement for social and ecological justice* contributes to actualizing treaties such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which recognizes children’s right to participate, and Local Agenda 21, which highlights the role of youth in sustainable development. Sharing and promoting practical applications that reflect lived realities are critical to implementing international legal frameworks. The stories in this book breathe life into the concept of engagement by sharing experiences of reflection, dialogue, innovation, risk, passion and action.

A strength of the book is its recognition of the importance of power, a dimension largely unexplored in the field because of a long-standing belief that adults are open to sharing power. The examples in the book show how power constrains but can also liberate. While formal institutions such as the school may limit the possibilities for adult and youth activism, naming the challenges and inviting conversation opens the doors for dialogue and agency. Shifting power requires a new way of thinking, and breaking down some old walls to create different spaces and places.

For all who work with youth or who are interested in creating a more just, democratic and sustainable society, it is a must read. I welcome its contribution to the field of youth engagement.
INTRODUCTION

Emancipatory Practices: Adult/Youth Engagement for Social and Ecological Justice

At the interface where youth and adult energy, experience, and ideas mix, there lies a source rich with the potential to truly design a future of ecological and social justice. Big ideas can very quickly gain momentum as youth couple their drive and optimism to adult support and wisdom.

(Garmulewicz & Ireland, 2010, p. 168)

If your passion, study or work takes you into the world of adult-youth partnerships in working for social and ecological justice, we invite you to join us as, through this book, we explore the ecotone of adult youth engagement. Ecotone [tone: from the Greek tonos meaning tension] is a “transition area between two adjacent ecological communities” (Merriam-Webster, 1976, p. 360) where permeable spaces bump up against one another. Ecotone is a term used in botany and ecology to designate the transition zone between plant communities such as marshland and better-drained ground. Ecotones are therefore borderland places where ecologies are in tension, where the interplay of resources and nutrients contain the characteristic species of each ecological community. These overlapping communities are places of complexity and dynamism, generating rich possibilities for change. Where the two ecologies interact, environmental conditions change abruptly as the ecotone regulates the exchange of energy, material, and conditions.

The potential for dynamic change is present in the ecotone of adult-youth partnerships, the complex space that is created between adults and youth when they come together to work for social and ecological justice. As educators and community workers, we often talk about the complexities of equity and respectful interrelationships in the communities in which we live, and the ways we seek to transform our world, but often fail to engage in reflective practice that models the transformation we seek. How can we achieve respect and reciprocity in our communities and in our world if these values are not enacted in the social relationships with the partners with whom we seek to make changes? This question is explored by the authors in this book through critical discussions of the adult’s role in developing equitable relationships and building democratic leadership among adults and youth, as together, they engage in social and ecological change.

This book is an international collaboration among the editors and authors working in youth leadership, environmental education, and community development in Canada, Australia, the United States, and New Zealand. The authors present
case studies grounded in their local context. The contexts of youth action in formal, non-formal and in-formal education, the engagement of socially marginalized youth in community development, and sharing authority through youth/adult partnerships are used to organize the chapters. Within their local contexts, all authors explore the questions:

- What are effective adult and youth beliefs and actions that facilitate collaborative leadership in issues of social and ecological justice?
- What are the internal and external constraints affecting adults and youth in the processes of collaborative social action?
- What do authors believe can facilitate the move towards youth and adult emancipation in their joint endeavours?

The formulation of these questions emerged at an international conference where the three editors of this book presented their research around emancipatory practice and community activism. We viewed emancipatory practices as those that enable youth to develop agency as active participants working in partnership with adults in the development of youth leadership and community change. In the discussions that followed our presentations, the complexity of the adult’s role in emancipatory practices surfaced as an area that had not been fully examined. We had found the lens to examine the ecotone of adult-youth engagement in social and ecological justice. In addition to the conference participants, we invited other international scholars and practitioners to participate in the interrogation of these key questions.

As educators who have engaged with youth in social and ecological justice, the three editors of this book each have a personal history that led to us to want to explore a deeper examination of the questions of this book.

Warren engaged in youth leadership development as a high school student and was often mentored by a teacher or advisor. For the past twenty five years he has been engaged with various methodologies, including popular education and popular theatre, and with youth in formal and informal spaces, to develop their capacities for social justice work.

As a teacher, both in school and at the university, Linda has been interested in interrogating her own practice to determine whether she was enacting the values she espouses. In her work in Indigenous education and with Indigenous youth, self-determination is a key goal. Under colonization, Indigenous peoples were not allowed to make their own decisions, so in that context, it is important that Indigenous youth be given the opportunity to learn and practice autonomy. The process of adult leadership with youth, of building youth capacity, of knowing when to step forward and when to step back is a complex balance of mutual respect, reciprocity and negotiated power, and a process that she is still learning.

Alison has engaged in activism as a university student and as a high school and university teacher. She has employed activism as a pedagogical tool to motivate students to explore ecological and social issues in their local communities. By allowing pre-service teachers to experience student-centred, student led activist projects, the students appreciate how this style of pedagogy can be incorporated
INTRODUCTION

into classroom practice. Further, as part of Alison’s curriculum, they begin the important task of deconstructing the dominant social constructions of ‘teacher’ and ‘student’ to see how these images benefit or constrain emancipatory pedagogies.

Given these personal and professional histories and the emergence of the book project, we as editors have two main goals in putting this book together. The first is to offer a glimpse into the work being undertaken by a variety of international educators and community development workers who engage in social justice. The book presents a variety of case studies that highlight the patterns, benefits and limitations of activism within ecological and social justice work as a form of developing youth leadership and awareness of, and action towards, community issues. The work of the non-formal and informal education sectors are included due to the rich history of community-based activism. The different case studies illuminate how our adult-youth relationships are embedded in the historical and social construction of our roles as adults and youth, and how those roles, and our subsequent view of how we can and should exercise power to create change, are shaped by the complexity of race, class, gender, ideology, and systemic structures that include hierarchical institutional and social practice.

The complexities presented in these case studies leads us to the second goal of the book: to interrogate the power dynamics within adult/youth relationships. Rather than presenting case studies as unproblematic, this book explores the social and power relationships of the adult/youth experiences in their work together. As such, the authors critically examine the extent to which the youth were able to participate in decision-making processes, or the extent to which they were given space and power to truly explore democratic and dialogic partnerships. With its emphasis on the power dynamics inherent in adult/youth relationships, and the potential of these relationships to engage in democratic transformation, we look at the patterns, benefits and limitations of the youth-adult connections.

Elements of Adult/Youth Interaction for Social Justice

In the dynamic space where adults and youth engage in joint social action, we see different practices in different contexts. As in different ecotones around the world, the different environmental conditions affect the interaction. So rather than viewing these case studies and their analyses as competing with one another to determine the one correct approach, we see these approaches as informing each other in terms of their praxis where reflective action, theory and practice are inseparable. We would like the reader to think of the chapters in this book as having permeable boundaries that enable different forms of practice and ideas to influence one another. So although each chapter describes practices applicable to local conditions, various themes and questions permeate each section, with ideas emerging across all chapters that appear to be common in the work of adult/youth engaged in ecological and social action. Some of the common themes relate to capacity building, the conscious and unconscious obstacles around dialogue, participation, and democratic decision-making, and the fine line that separates adult domination and adult facilitation.
All the chapters share the belief that adult/youth partnerships are multidimensional. Many of the authors describe the principles and values, skills and competencies of the adults and youth, as well as the action-oriented methods that motivated participation, fostered multi-generational partnerships, and encouraged democratic youth leadership. Others refer to a developmental continuum of fostering youth leadership, a continuum of negotiated power sharing, with the power shifting from adults to youth and back again in an iterative, changing spiral, dependent on the context and the particular circumstance. Questions emerge such as: what is the responsibility of adults in supporting youth in the process of looking at and building their future? How might adults model and enable youth to take over leadership? How do adults and youth negotiate their roles and differing responsibilities? How might youth and adults experience the basic building blocks of just development, including positive relationships within families, schools, and the community, meaningful participation, and learning appropriate skills (Perkins, Borden, Keith, Hoppe-Rooney, & Villarruel, 2003)?

Meaningful youth participation in leadership seeks to generate knowledge useful for their well being, the well being of their adult partners and the well being of their communities. It is not a set of steps, it is “a way of conceptualizing youth development, a willingness to engage in an intergenerational dialogue” (Noam, 2002, p. 2).

“Social justice is a value that recognizes the importance of distributing society’s benefits and burdens in a manner that is fair for everyone” (Walsh & Tufaro, 2005, p. 1015). As such, emancipatory relationships in addressing social and ecological issues involve a commitment to understanding systemic change, and the barriers to it. Along with understanding, to be effective in their struggle, youth and adults alike must learn how to participate in the process of change. In this process, both youth and adults benefit from “learning through social action, a frequently overlooked strength of youth and adults working together” (Jones & Perkins, 2005, p. 1160). As Bell (1997) points out, social justice organizing is both a process and a goal: “We envision a society in which individuals are both self-determining (able to develop their full capacities) and interdependent (capable of interacting democratically with others)” (p. 3). There seems to be overwhelming consensus by the authors that youth and adults should work together, and learn from, and with, each other to develop a common vision of social and ecological justice, and be engaged, as part of a community, in working against exploitation, discrimination and oppression.

Throughout the book the authors also emphasize that within adult/youth relationships, social and ecological issues should not only focus on youth and youth leadership, but also the ability of their adult partners to develop collaborative relationships among adults and youth. This capacity building can be understood as “an ongoing process of helping people, organizations and societies improve and adapt to changes around them” (James, 2002, p. 6). Partnerships, “the interdependence of different people with different roles engaged in the pursuit of a shared goal” (Kirk & Shutte, 2001, p. 238), are an important aspect of the capacity building process. As such, the chapters in this book address issues of adult/youth relationships and explore how these relationships can either promote or limit
democratic and dialogic partnerships. In the various chapters, the authors share their key learnings such as the need for meaningful dialogue and deep listening on the part of adults. Many adults are challenged in the development of shared leadership as they strive to model co-determined leadership skills while struggling with the meaning of equitable participation that includes the hand off: the when and how of letting go of decision making and action. It is hoped this book introduces a wide variety of theoretical and practical approaches for understanding adult/youth relationships, while also offering a place for sharing experiences that create insights for people to begin to explore, or expand upon, their engagements with youth in social and ecological community activism.

Implications for Action

This book raises, and addresses, many questions through the exploration of a wide variety of theoretical and practical emancipatory approaches in adult/youth relationships. The implications for action will vary depending on the reader’s context. However, we wish to ask you to consider these questions: What conscious and unconscious obstacles and possibilities do individuals and systems create that inhibit or promote the engagement of adults with youth in social justice work? How do we deal with these possibilities and obstacles? How do we as educators and activists theoretically and practically work with youth to recreate more dialogical and democratic forms of pedagogy and community engagement? How do we as adults create space in our practice to learn from the youth with whom we work? As we situate ourselves and our partnerships with youth in a socio-cultural history in the Western world of the contradictions of democratic movements and oppressive practices, how do we create the awareness of these internalised and institutional social relationships that are part of the history and current practices and beliefs of our shared space? How do we as adults interrogate our cultural beliefs and professional practice to ensure that our actions lead to self-determination and are in fact emancipatory for ourselves and the youth with whom we engage?

These are some of the themes and questions that will be addressed by the authors in this collection as we share our struggles and explore the complexities and possibilities arising from our practice and our theoretical understandings working with youth.

REFERENCES


SECTION A

Engagement in Formal Spaces: Youth Action and Schools

This section explores the topography of an ecotone of aspiring democratic Adult-Youth relationships with and in the structures and cultures of classrooms and school systems. Even though diverse, this section offers examples, voices, practices and critiques of the four authors’ experiences working with, or witnessing attempts to change school policies and practices to improve student voice or student engagement.

Maryam Nabavi and Darren Lund move us from student voice to student engagement in after school projects. This chapter unfolds as a discussion about the authors’ experiences with high school students in extra-curricular, student-led activist projects and offers a perspective on student engagement generated from their vast life experiences. The authors speak to their joint experiences in which they developed relationships with students to support them as the students challenged inequities associated with race, class, gender, sexual orientation, religion, disabilities, language, age, and other social markers. Through their conversation with each other, the authors offer a critique of the power dynamics of the adult-youth relationship and suggest that even though this relationship may be well intentioned, it can become essentialist, tokenistic and patronizing.

Makeba Jones and Susan Yonezawa describe the concept of student engagement as “the wide range of activities and settings students may participate in at the school or classroom level or in after school or outside of school settings”. This differs from student voice, which refers to “the inclusion of students’ perspectives in conversations and decisions making at institutions and classroom levels”. Using these descriptions, this chapter offers a glimpse into how students can be genuinely included, and have voice, in formalized adult developed projects. The authors critically reflect upon their work with students as co-researchers in studying school change. They analyse different situations where opportunities were created for students to co-research the important issues that impacted them, their education, and their community, as well as the processes used to facilitate student voice within the formalized system.

Juli Gassner explores student voice within formal educational systems but from a completely different perspective. The chapter provides an example of dialogic education occurring in a New Zealand school that seeks to democratize the learning environment. The author speaks to the epistemologies, conditions, structures, practices and experiences that need to be in place in order to prioritize and privilege ‘student voice’ in schooling and speaks to the pedagogic and student implications of this approach.

Alison Sammel closes this section. Staying with the theme of student engagement in community activism in schools, this chapter offers a deconstruction of in class and after school activism. With many school-based ecological or social justice
programs being extra-curricular, the author offers a case study of one such program to explore why this project was extra-curricular rather than something the teacher undertook with her own classroom-based students and why she does not engage with these concepts in her classroom teaching practice. In doing so, it raises questions about the social construction of ‘teacher’ and ‘student’ identity and how these identities constrain co-operative adult-youth activist pedagogies in school settings.

Overall, this section highlights the complexity and the rewards of challenging the embedded, historical socially constructed relationships that adults and youth engage in within the formal educational settings of school. This ecotone is a vibrant new environment. It straddles traditional educational epistemology and its practices, and a plethora of epistemologies that demand democracy and justice be put into practice in daily, local pedagogic acts. As the passion of these authors attest, this ecotone’s survival globally will never be in doubt, but like any transitional environment, the question may be as to whether or not it flourishes.
MARYAM NABAVI AND DARREN LUND

1. YOUTH AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

A Conversation on Collaborative Activism

Maryam: Darren, I’m looking forward to beginning this conversation with you. Although our readers will get to know our scholarly and activist work while reading this piece, I would like to take a moment to introduce us to our readers. Darren is a nationally recognized figure on critical multicultural education, youth activism and critical pedagogy. In both his role as a high school teacher for 16 years and now an associate professor at the University of Calgary, he brings sound theoretical and practical knowledge to the discourse of youth and social justice.

Darren: I have had a chance to work with Maryam in various capacities over the years. She is currently pursuing her PhD in Educational Studies at the University of British Columbia where her research focuses on immigrant youth identity, citizenship and political learning. She brings over a decade of professional, activist and scholarly experience working on issues of youth anti-oppression locally and nationally.

I appreciate that we are using the same duoethnographic approach to this dialogue as we did for our recent research project (Lund & Nabavi, 2008a). As you know, duoethnography is a fairly new research method developed by Rick Sawyer and Joe Norris (2005) and further outlined in Norris (2008). It offers a dialectic form of enquiry that features two participants in conversation, and considers our life histories as pivotal to questioning traditional notions of voice and power in scholarly research. I appreciate that this approach helps keep the focus on our topic at hand, and yet allows for a deeper exploration of issues than might a solitary study.

In our work together with young people—in activist coalitions, planning groups, youth conferences, protests and research projects, to name a few—I have always admired your deep commitment to respectful engagement with young people. This book project has ignited in me a desire to undertake a more thoughtful examination, in dialogue with you as a colleague in this work, of our role as adult facilitators and partners in working with young people.

Our work has focused primarily on social justice issues, and with school and community-based coalitions in urban centres. By social justice, I’m referring to the ongoing quest to establish equitable opportunities...
and outcomes for all people. Kevin Kumashiro (2004) is helpful here, reminding us of the importance of resisting ‘common-sense’ understandings that can privilege only certain people and silence the oppression experienced by others. He exhorts those working with young people to engage daily in anti-oppressive education, challenging the status quo and attending to identities “on the basis of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, religion, disabilities, language, age, and other social markers” (p. xxiv).

Maryam: This approach fits well with George Sefa Dei’s (1996) notion of ‘integrative anti-racism’ that addresses the “problem of discussing the social constructs of race, class, gender, ability and sexuality as exclusive and independent categories” (p. 55). While the race, class and gender trio has long been the focal point for social justice scholars and activists, integrative anti-racism develops a framework specifically for education. It is an activist praxis that disrupts singular, hierarchical accounts as it questions interlocking forms of oppression. This suits our work with young people very well I believe. Perhaps I’ll begin by describing my initial interest in social justice work as a background to how I came to work with youth.

There is a long trajectory that has led me to this work and it really starts with a closer look at my social position/identity. I am a first generation immigrant, having left my native Iran when I was seven years old. I spent my early years in a society that was engulfed in war and where the national social and political tensions between Islamic revolutionaries and the Shah’s loyalists were rampant. My family was a member of the latter and I lived in the socio-economic cradle of privilege. As a child, I was acutely aware, and questioned the dualism, of martyrdom and force-fed religion in the public sphere that silenced secular values, Western romanticism and spirituality as embodied that was informally taught to me in the private sphere. These binary worlds caused an indiscernible tension, one that was suppressed during my experiences with emigration and in the process of negotiating a new identity.

When my family and I immigrated to Canada, I quickly became aware that the social position I was privy to was no longer applicable in my adopted country. The difficulties faced by my parents, and in effect me, of cultural integration, social position, revising their worldviews while maintaining their culture and heritage, have greatly influenced my commitment to and active participation in affecting social change. These experiences enabled me to understand the intersections between race and class early on, though I only came to name it that in recent years. I have spent the majority of my adult life channelling the complexity of these espoused ‘burdens’ through my professional and activist work and more recently, through my intellectual work. These were the early seedlings of a sense of social justice.
Darren: As you likely remember, my own background offers none of the richness of your tumultuous and politicized family experiences with emigration, nor of your early growth into acquiring a sensibility of social justice. Raised by a second generation Danish immigrant family, I spent my childhood immersed in unspoken white privilege, in a family that celebrated its Scandinavian cultural roots while downplaying, or even making light of, the struggles of other immigrant groups. I was most often rewarded for telling racist and other insensitive jokes, and remember my own father’s off-colour stories of his experiences as a tough beat cop. The lessons I learned as a child had more to do with our family’s uncritical narratives of ancestors overcoming their hardships as immigrant farmers, to having their grandchildren one day owning houses and attending university. Like most white Canadians, I never saw myself as a racialized person, nor implicated in any way in maintaining hegemonic structures and practices. My ‘redemption’ only came when I was an adult, and felt compelled to join students in an anti-racism project that became a life-long commitment. Maryam, could you talk a bit about your early work in this field?

Maryam: Recently, I have worked in local and international contexts on issues of social and political justice. It was during these formative experiences working with subaltern communities (Spivak, 1996), for whom social and political structures offered the least—such as low caste communities in India—that I was able to build a bridge between my own experiences and the politics of the outside world and, in effect, hone my critical-reflexive practice. For example, as a community worker in Southern Africa, I experienced power, class and race from a vantage point of being ‘white.’ In India, I worked deep within ‘caste politics’ as a community-based researcher. These experiences enabled me to problematise my own experiences growing up as a ‘non-white’ person in Canada. The critical process that enabled this awareness was instrumental in allowing me to use my social position as a tool to effect change.

I continued to work as an “external-outsider” (Banks, 1998) on several social-justice oriented initiatives. Being on the fringes of a community (unintentionally as a child immigrant, and intentionally in my professional experience), I realized what was most within my zone of comfort. Aware of the acute discomfort of being an ‘outsider,’ I directed my energy closer to ‘home’ on issues that had directly affected me, namely, into a steadfast involvement in anti-racism activism and advocacy. In hindsight, I have come to understand that my involvement in anti-racism work was an effort to be socially engaged and find, as Stuart Hall (1992) calls, “a moment of self-clarification” (p. 292). More recently, I have taken these experiences to continue working with, and on, them in a more academic setting. Darren, what are some of the key moments in your engagement with social justice work with youth?
Darren: Like you, I grew into my political activism on social justice issues from some grassroots diversity work with students and the community. The *Students and Teachers Opposing Prejudice* (STOP) group that formed in my English classroom in the mid-1980s (see Lund, 1998) was instrumental in propelling my own development as an advocate for equity on a range of issues. As a rookie teacher I was learning a great deal about racism, sexism and homophobia from my collaborative experiences with students who had a passion for activism in these areas. The external recognition that the students and I enjoyed in these early years really solidified my commitment, but almost through a growing sense of guilt at my unearned privilege. I knew I needed to learn and do more, and this daily activist involvement throughout my teaching career was instrumental in shaping my work in this area. I eventually learned I could study this work at another level, and continue my commitment to collaborations with youth at a broader level as a scholar/activist.

Maryam: Perhaps we can talk a bit about how youth-adult collaborations come about, and some of the salient issues involved in their formation. Based on my own experiences, I think there are two angles through which to articulate how youth-adult collaborative leadership unfolds. First, there are youth who come from the vantage point of privilege and who are able to critically reflect on these issues and challenge their own social position. This is done in the spirit of justice. I’ve worked with youth who fall in this category during my tenure leading a youth anti-racism group when I was just out of university. Second, there are youth who are socially and politically disadvantaged—often because of their social identities—and for them youth-adult collaborations is a form of subverting the dominant paradigm as a means to find voice. It is here that non-youth allies find a point of entry. I think our earlier research project (Lund & Nabavi, 2008a, 2008b) tapped into both these groupings of youth and their allies.

Although youth-adult collaborative work is often done with good intention, when looked at critically, it can be essentialist, tokenistic and even patronizing. For example, collaborations may be initiated with a view that youth may not understand the issues at the same depth, and so an adult is needed to help pave the way. In this, there is a danger that the knowledge, wisdom and lived experience of the youth is negated—not only losing the intended youth-driven nature but perhaps even changing the course of what the collaborative work could be. There is a socially accepted hierarchy between youth and adults and effective collaborative work demands that adults be reflexive about this. Have you come across this sort of situation in your experiences with, and studies of, youth-adult collaborative work?
Darren: I have seen a number of instances where this situation has developed, and primarily with community-based diversity groups who are seeking involvement from young people. However, they do not engage them at a level that honours them as equal partners in a collaborative project; rather, as you suggest, they seek charismatic young people who ‘advise’ the adults on their work, and whose views are really relegated to a token representation, typically for funding or recruitment purposes. I am thinking here of diversity-themed conferences and training initiatives organised by groups who suddenly realize that they have no young people on their boards or attending their events. The late appropriation of ‘youth leaders’ does very little to engage them in meaningful ways toward implementing their ideas for any substantive impact on the initiative.

I have also been a part of some groups that have successfully engaged young people, not as ‘leaders of tomorrow’ but as leaders of today! In many significant ways, our younger citizens are far more conscious of global issues than their adult counterparts ever have been, and they are better able to mobilize their peers, communicate effectively using innovative technological tools, and locate and critically evaluate information on issues more quickly from a wide variety of sources. My friend Paul Gorski (2005) continues to document this through his own innovative work with web-based diversity resources for young people. With this in mind, community and school activists need to find the best ways to engage young people on a level playing field from the outset, rather than as a cynical afterthought. What are your thoughts about this?

Maryam: I agree with you that young people are engaged in the global community in a way that we’ve not seen before. Anoop Nayak (2003) reminds us that young people are not passive recipients of social transformation and that they are very much embedded in the social, cultural, political and economic changes on a global scale; he writes that in global times, young people “take inspiration from products, events or happenings that occur outside their immediate spatial vicinity” (p. 178). In fact, I would argue that the youth demographic is contributing to these changes in instrumental ways. As you note, their use of technology has increased.

For example, the ideas of space and place have taken on new meanings and have, as a result, influenced the ways they mobilize, resist, express and engage in issues of social justice. Drawing on Hall’s (1996) “new times” (p. 223), Nayak (2003) provides pedagogical considerations to reconsider what a social justice intervention looks like in new times; one of these is to “appreciate that young ethnicities are multiply positioned in changing relationships of dominance and subordination, marked across lines of gender, class, sexuality and dis/ability” (p. 174). I think this is one of the biggest lessons that community and school activists who are engaging with young people need to remember.
Young people are living in an era where space and place have new meanings. The process of identity formation is informed by a plethora of global popular culture influences that they develop at the local level. This is a reminder that young people are in a constant negotiation with, and articulation of, their shifting identities. As we engage with young people as respectful partners we need to be mindful of this, not just conceptually, but also consider practical guidelines for how to address these issues. What do you think are some of these pragmatic considerations?

Darren: These issues of shifting and negotiated identities are really key, as Daniel Yon’s (2000) work reminds us; he writes, “the desire to know cultures, races, and identities as stable objects detracts from the possibility of engaging with the multiple identifications and affiliations which we have seen are central to the ways that identities, race, and culture are made and lived by youth” (p. 132). I would also add sexual diversities to this discussion—an area that often brings great discomfort even to many diversity activists and rights-seeking groups. Forming Alberta’s first Gay/Straight Alliance with a courageous small group of our STOP members in Red Deer was extremely challenging for a number of reasons (see Lund, 2007). However, allowing students to express themselves in their own terms and take a leadership role in the group seemed crucial to its successful launch. Students pitched their wish to form a GSA to the principal, and then to the staff, and they planned activities and ran the weekly meetings.

An ongoing concern I’ve always felt in working with young people is in mediating my privileges and power as an adult. When I first collaborated with students to form the STOP program back in 1987, I was woefully under-prepared on the topics of human rights and social justice. When I asked them to study up on the issues themselves, our class turned into an extended inquiry project on diversity in which we were all engaged in trying to find out the right questions to ask, the best sources for answers, and then making sense of it all in terms of our choices for activist projects. By being sincerely open to learning more, and willing to hand over the reins to students, I was able to allow them to assume ownership of the project from the start. In much of the research and collaboration I’ve done since then I would suggest that this is one the most common difficulties for adults working with young people. We believe that our age and experience may give us the right to take leadership on projects, but I believe that many young people already possess the necessary background knowledge, global understandings, motivation, idealism and sense of social justice to be leaders themselves. Adults seriously undermine the full engagement of young people if they do not allow them full partnership in collaborations.
Maryam: As you know, I coordinated a youth anti-racism program *Youth Reach Out Against Racism (ROAR)* and, although our impact in the community was not as significant as that of STOP, we engaged in a model that enabled space for youth to be the leaders. Inspired by a Popular Education approach, based on the influential work of Paulo Freire (2000, 2003), youth participants identified the issues that they wanted to learn more about, how they could take action on those issues to instigate individual change and lead initiatives where they educated other youth. The model was based on action-reflection-action, where each time the youth engaged with a topic, they would delve in a bit deeper and would begin to see the systemic underpinnings of the issues. We engaged with a variety of topics ranging from ways to address racist language in their social spaces to articulating institutional forms of racism. The youth identified all the topics themselves and identified how they could shed light on issues during Human Rights Day, Black History Month, and March 21st. My role in this process was in part administrative—facilitating discussions and acting as a liaison with groups that we were collaborating with—and in part to lead critical discussions. I think it was especially helpful that I was also considered young; they appreciated that I was able to speak their language and stood back when they had a good idea.

I remember one time when we were invited to facilitate an anti-racism session for grade-school children. The youth identified the topic, how to execute it, and how best to engage the younger children in meaningful discussions. It was an authentic *for-youth-by-youth* experience. They not only felt pride at their ability to do this but also satisfaction in their ability to get the participants to think in ways they may not otherwise think. Could you share an example of adult-youth collaborative work you thought was successful?

Darren: One example that comes to mind is from the late 1990s when two 15-year-old students, Heather and Courtney, raised the issue of Tibetan autonomy at a STOP meeting. They had undertaken some balanced research on the matter, through organizations such as Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and other sources. Deciding to raise awareness in our school and community, they showed Tibet-themed films and documentaries in the hallway, sought student signatures for a petition to the federal government, and used the student bulletin. Their intention was to re-examine Canada’s trade relations with China in order to promote attention to basic human rights. Within a few weeks, they had gathered over 800 signatures and our local Member of Parliament, Bob Mills, offered to have their petition ratified and submitted formally to the House of Commons. Subsequently, they corresponded with the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Lloyd Axworthy, and invited our city’s Mayor and other dignitaries for a ceremonial installation of the Tibetan flag in our
high school’s International Hall. In all of this, the teacher advisers to STOP intentionally stood back, seeing how capable these young people were organizing the events and focusing on the issues in a critical and purposeful way. They did not need leadership here. Our only role as adult advisers was to book spaces for events or gain administrative permission for certain activities the girls had organised.

I was very proud that Heather was later selected by Canadian Living Magazine for a national youth contest for her leading role in the Tibetan project, awarding her a free trip to an international youth conference in Northern Ireland, accompanied by fellow youth activist Craig Kielburger. I knew that I couldn’t take much credit for her accomplishment, besides providing an activist club as a vehicle, and some resources in kind to support her and Courtney’s Tibetan awareness project. There are numerous other examples like this one where, as you suggest, we as adults had to step aside to allow our student leaders to lead the way.

What other factors do you see at play in achieving positive results with collaborative projects with youth?

Maryam: Thanks for the great example of a high profile that had impact. I’ve also been on the other side of the table, as a youth participant working with adult allies. I was a founding member of the National Youth Anti-racism Network (NYAN), an aspiring policy and advocacy network of anti-racism leaders from across the country. We were entrusted with the task of establishing the network and were supported, in part, by the Canadian Race Relations Foundation. Our success depended a great deal on institutional support by our ‘parent’ organization; however, in the spirit of being youth-driven, we did a great deal of the work ourselves. Ultimately, the network failed and some in the group thought we were not getting the institutional support we needed to move forward. There were some very caring and dedicated people in the parent organizations at all levels, but somehow, the youth initiative felt unsupported, primarily because we needed political and institutional will to move forward. Rather, we received practical support such as office space and a website and, at best, endorsement from the Board of Directors. I share this example to highlight that there is a fine balance between lending the right level of support and stepping back to let youth lead. I am an advocate of youth-led initiatives that are institutionally supported in concrete ways such as administrative assistance, providing funding, mentorship, and the like.

In light of your experiences, what are your thoughts on how much collaboration is too much collaboration?

Darren: As you correctly note, it’s a matter of achieving a fine balance, and I’m certain this varies so much from situation to situation, and depending on the specific mix of youth and adults in each group. This isn’t meant to be a simple cop-out answer, but to remind activists of the importance of continually attending to the ongoing tensions within collaborations,
between wanting to step in and take control, to standing back to let young people gain ownership. I’ve seen examples in my research where teachers have flat-out told students they could not tackle certain topics, or take certain approaches. The results have typically been that students have either stopped their activism entirely, or gone outside the school environment in coalitions that don’t involve adults. Either way, something important has been lost in the pedagogical and mentoring relationship that we have the responsibility to develop and sustain with young people.

What are some of the other key issues you think are crucial for effective collaboration?

Maryam: From this discussion, there seem to be a number of things that are instrumental to adult-youth collaboration. First, it must be done solely for the social justice causes that the young people have identified. Far too often we see youth-adult collaborations that are designed to move a personal agenda forward (i.e., relieving privileged guilt) or enhancing an institutional profile (i.e., to please funders who want to see youth involvement). In these cases we can see a tokenizing of youth, or an essentializing of their participation. Second, collaborative work must be embedded institutionally to be successful. There are many examples of adult collaborators who begin to ‘burn out’ (see Lund & Nabavi, 2008b) or initiatives that are not successful because the necessary political will and resources simply aren’t there. In the case of the ROAR and NYAN coalitions, specifically, it was primarily unstable financial support that led to their demise. Finally, we need to take into consideration and be respectful that youths’ identities are fluid and how they take up issues, the spaces in which they do this, and their understanding of these issues all shift at a rapid pace. There are no guarantees and no fixed quantities that are stable or static. As such, adult collaborators need to be very open to these changes, even sometimes part way through a project, and have the flexibility to allow for and accommodate these changes.

Darren: These are excellent. I would add that it’s important to allow young people to take the reins of projects in meaningful ways. Of course adults need to craft ways to guide young people to find productive and non-violent means of activism, but in too many cases, we can succumb to the temptation to stultify innovative ideas (i.e., saying “we tried that ten years ago and it didn’t work”), or to take over the organization of social justice events and activities. When students in the STOP program asked to host an alternative music fundraising event, I knew I had to step back. My gut response was to say no; after all, the school’s administration hadn’t allowed live rock music for many years. The students needed to pitch this to the administration themselves. Positioning it as a ‘benefit fundraising concert’ in their meeting with our school principal, they were successful. Now, they would need to step into leadership roles with the entire event.
Students with current musical knowledge and a sense of what other young people would want to hear became the leaders in auditioning and hiring the bands for what became our annual ‘all-ages’ gigs. My role was to offer an adult telephone identity (and in some cases, a VISA card) to book the sound system and venues. Students competently handled all of the publicity, ticket sales, security and door duties, as well as invitations for parent chaperones. These events were massively successful over 15 years, with never a single person kicked out for fighting or drinking (unlike most other school dances!). Students raised thousands of dollars for our work, engaged hundreds of ‘alternative’ youth who would otherwise never have attended a school-organised event, and gave the young leaders some hands-on experience in organizing community activist events.

Another piece for me would be to anticipate some hostile backlash to certain initiatives, and be prepared for thoughtful responses to hatred and resistance. It is never easy to imagine what extremists might do, but it’s always good to have a plan to respond that highlights safety without succumbing entirely to intimidation. In many cases our STOP group faced resistance to our work, as have other youth social justice coalitions (see Lund, 2006), but effective collaborative activism will find a way through this.

Considering this warning, I always include in my talks with fellow activists that they need to find ways to relieve tension and actually have fun along the way. The topics are always deeply felt, and sometimes even involve life and death issues that touch people in very personal and significant ways. Coupled with the prospect of ongoing backlash and denial, conducting work in this area can easily lead to burnout, as you mentioned earlier, and high levels of stress. Finding ways to celebrate and blow off steam in positive and affirming ways is absolutely essential. Any final thoughts?

Maryam: I agree with you. What I’m taking away from our conversation is that collaboration is an important part of the political and logistical support of adult-youth social justice work. From our cumulative experiences, spanning three decades, it appears that the adult role has primarily been to foster respectful relationships and to enable a space where relevant issues are taken up critically, offering engagements in which youth have a sense of ownership. We are increasingly seeing critical youth-driven initiatives on a variety of social justice issues; this can allow adult collaborators to exercise their important roles as mentors and as enablers of institutional support.

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2. ADULT AND YOUTH ENGAGEMENT IN DEMOCRATIC INQUIRY FOR EDUCATIONAL CHANGE

In 1916, American progressive educator and philosopher, John Dewey wrote,

A democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience. The extension in space of the number of individuals who participate in an interest so that each has to refer his own action to that of others, and to consider the action of others to give point and direction to his own, is equivalent to the breaking down of those barriers of class, race, and national territory which kept men from perceiving the full import of their activity. (p. 87)

Dewey advocated practicing democracy in everyday life through our interactions with others in our communities and in society. A democratic way of life means interacting with individuals in ways that demonstrate genuine respect for and openness to multiple perspectives and voices, and a critical analysis of problems in our communities and in society based on a common concern for other people and their rights, particularly minority groups (Beane & Apple, 1995). Dewey’s conception of democracy encompasses equity values such as open-mindedness and acceptance of people as individuals. The education system has a crucial function in a democracy to socialize children and youth to value equity (Dewey, 1916; Meier & Schwartz, 1995).

Higher education, particularly education research, has a responsibility to assist schools and communities to develop sustainable policies and practices that represent democratic values. As social justice education researchers inspired by Dewey, we work to bridge the worlds of research and practice in urban secondary school reform. In recent years, education research has undergone intense self-scrutiny as educational researchers call for the field to become more practice-oriented, use-inspired, and to generate ‘useable knowledge’ that bridges the research-practice divide (Donmoyer, 1996; National Academy of Education, 1999; Lagemann, 2002). Our research responds to this call by asking youth to investigate the structures and cultures of their classrooms and schools by analysing their first-hand experiences in these spaces. Through the voices and experiences of secondary students our work attempts to alter school policies and practices that impact students’ learning, engagement and achievement (Jones & Yonezawa, 2002).

As Dewey reminds us in the above quote, democratic beliefs and everyday actions are synonymous with equity and social justice. We agree with Dewey, and we see equity and social justice as similar in that both refer to increasing individuals’ and minority groups’ access to important resources and opportunities in life, as well as shifting dominant societal views and stereotypes about minority groups (Jones & Yonezawa, 2002). Our work merges a traditional respect for the continued advancement of educational research as a field with a commitment to dismantling traditional power relationships between the researcher and research subject. Youth from largely low-income and ethnic minority backgrounds are too often forgotten in conversations among teachers and administrators, for example, about needed educational improvement.

In this chapter, we trace our early work on youth engagement in high school reform within the San Diego Unified School District. Since 2000, we have attempted to inform the high school reform efforts of teachers and of school and district administrators by creating spaces for youth to voice their perspectives about important educational challenges and necessary solutions in each of their schools. We reflect on the limitations of this early work in this chapter. We then discuss our recent work that promotes democratic interactions among educators and students to improve relationships between adults and youth and to shape school and classroom policies about curriculum and instruction. We suggest that adults working with youth in a range of school and community settings create opportunities to co-inquire or co-research with young people important issues that impact youth, their education, and their futures. We end the chapter by discussing the implications of adult and youth democratic inquiry for school and community change efforts, and for youth leadership development. Before tracing our early work, we first situate our work within current research on student voice.

RESEARCH ON STUDENT VOICE

In recent years, researchers have examined students in a range of roles: as critics and consultants to the school change process (Rudduck, Chaplin & Wallace 1996; Pollard, 2000; Wilson & Corbett, 2001); as evaluators and researchers of reform (SooHoo, 1993; Campbell, Edgar & Halsted, 1994; Nieto, 1994); and as co-reformers (Wasley, Hampel & Clark, 1997; Fielding, 2001). Clark and Moss (1996), for example, engaged students in a collaborative, change-oriented study of literacy practices by inviting the students to participate as ‘co-researchers.’ These authors have written about the ethical and epistemological issues confronted in such jointly constructed work.

A small but growing number of researchers identify student voice as helpful to understand structural and cultural problems within schools (SooHoo, 1993; Nieto, 1994; Mitra, 2001; Shultz & Cook-Sather, 2001; Silva, 2001). Nieto (1994) has long advocated inviting students to the table and eliciting their perspectives regarding needed changes in schools. Mitra’s (2001) and Silva’s (2001) research demonstrates how students’ voices can be embedded in reform planning and implementation. (For a comprehensive and recent review of student voice and engagement in schools see Cook-Sather and Thiessen, 2006).
We believe students’ perspectives about school and classroom life are central to understanding the teacher-student-curriculum dynamic at the heart of any school change effort. For clarity, we use the term student voice to refer to the inclusion of students’ perspectives in conversations and decision-making at institutional and classroom levels.

We use the term student engagement to refer to the wide-range of activities and settings students may participate in at the school or classroom level or in after school or outside of school settings. These activities may include student clubs, governance, community service, advisory boards, or co-researcher roles. We use the term youth development to refer to specific efforts and activities to cultivate leadership behaviours and roles for youth. These roles may include clubs within the school as well as community involvement outside the school.

Student engagement and youth development efforts in schools have rarely involved an examination of student voice in classroom life. This is particularly true of schools serving predominantly low-income or minority youth. The premise of our work has always been that minority youth, particularly, can actively help educators develop a deeper understanding of how to better engage students in classrooms and schools. Failing to invite students to be partners in the school reform process could likely mean that reforms will not yield improvements in learning and achievement with sustainable impact.

ENGAGING STUDENTS IN INQUIRY ABOUT HIGH SCHOOL

We work at an education research centre called CREATE (Centre for Research on Educational Equity, Assessment and Teaching Excellence) at the University of California, San Diego (UCSD). In 1998, CREATE-UCSD formed partnerships with local elementary and secondary schools as part of a state-sponsored, University of California initiative to increase college eligibility rates among the state’s low performing public schools. We were responsible for developing and studying UCSD’s school-university partnerships at that time (Jones, Yonezawa, Ballesteros & Mehan, 2002). We helped bring a host of ‘technical’ resources to partner schools, such as new books, computers, science lab equipment, and college tutors for after-school programs. Early on, however, we realized these important resources were inadequate to address more intangible issues, such as adults’ low expectations of students whose home language is not English and African American students.

To help us address the deficit beliefs about minorities that dominated the schools’ cultures, we started conducting what we call student inquiry groups in the four partner high schools. We view inquiry as a sense-making process. Within a group setting, students’ made sense of their schooling experiences by having authentic and critical dialogue with one another and with us. As the facilitators, we constructed the group as a semi-structured setting where every student was invited to join an authentic and critical dialogue about school-related topics co-constructed with us (Jones & Yonezawa, 2002). By authentic and critical dialogue, we mean that: 1) all the participants’ experiences offer equally important lessons regardless of their status.
within the school (e.g., ‘low achiever’ or ‘honours student’), 2) participants are open to hearing and learning from others’ perspectives, 3) participants’ assumptions are made explicit without criticism or ridicule (Yankelovich, 1999), and 4) participants analyse theirs and their peers’ schooling experiences for similarities and differences.

The student inquiry groups were what we have called in other writings ‘cultural wedges’ into school reform in the partner high schools (Jones & Yonezawa, 2002). We presented to each of the faculties in the four high schools the students’ perspectives on their relationships with teachers and counsellors and on the quality of curriculum and instruction. We usually chose a range of excerpts from the inquiry groups for the presentations. Using word-for-word quotations was a powerful way to convey to adults in the schools that students had strong opinions about what helps or hurts their education, including the role of adult beliefs about students’ capability, race, or cultural background. Teachers and administrators listening to students’ presentations heard their perspectives about the quality of their relationships with their teachers and the quality of the curriculum. Several teachers in each of the four schools reported to us that they took away specific suggestions from the presentations to improve their interactions with students (e.g., greeting students at the classroom door while they enter) or to improve their instruction (e.g., shorter lectures, more small group work).

However, there were two limitations to the student inquiry group work. We were only working with four high schools in San Diego, limiting the impact of our work to a few schools within the San Diego Unified School District (SDUSD), the second largest urban district in California. Second, the work entered the schools through a university partnership, outside the school system, which marginalized its potential and value for schools across the districts within which we worked.

In the SDUSD from 1999 to 2002, district reformers focused intently on improving classroom instruction (Hubbard et al., 2006), initially by converting principals into instructional leaders, mandating new curricula and pedagogy, and centralizing professional development. During this time, we worked with the SDUSD and encouraged district leaders to embrace students’ perspectives about school and classroom life as a lever to prompt reflection among adults about high school structures and cultures, expand their understandings of classroom life, and improve the teacher-student-curriculum dynamic (Cook-Sather & Thiessen, 2006). From 2000 to 2002, in collaboration with district officials, the district asked us to expand our work with students and funded us to run student focus groups in 16 SDUSD high schools. The goal of the focus groups was to provide students a voice in the changes undertaken, and to provide administrators and teachers another vantage point for understanding the teaching and learning in their high school. Involving over 200 students, we cultivated and helped share the students’ perspectives to evaluate the district’s high school reform initiative at the time (Yonezawa & Jones, 2006).

We found, however, that once the district and some of the schools had heard from the student focus groups, the school and district administration turned their attention to the nuts and bolts of structural reform and away from the inclusion
of students' voices in the manifestation of those reforms. Student voice, the
administrators seemed to feel, was helpful in prompting teachers to attempt
classroom reforms (e.g., changes in curriculum or instruction), but they could not
see any relevance for student voice in shaping the reforms during implementation.
As a result, the student focus group work had limited impact on the course of
reform at school and district levels.

PROMOTING STUDENT VOICE AND ENGAGEMENT IN THE CLASSROOM

The SDUSD shifted its high school reform focus and began promoting slightly
more teacher input in classroom decisions around curriculum and assessment from
2002–2004. Consequently, we concentrated our work on helping the district, adminis-
trators, and teachers negotiate and evaluate the reform with much less active input
and inclusion of students, although we conducted some student focus groups. An
opportunity emerged after leadership changes in SDUSD in 2005 when we were
asked to re-focus our work with them on youth voice and youth engagement in
district high schools and classrooms. Through a formative, qualitative study, we
agreed to assess the state of youth engagement in district high schools and classrooms,
and provide useful and timely feedback to the schools and district to assist their on-
ging efforts to improve student learning, achievement and engagement.

We added a unique component to this qualitative, formative evaluation of high
school engagement—students as co-researchers. We share this recent work in the
hopes that reform-minded administrators, program coordinators, and other adults
working with youth will implement the democratic practice of engaging students as
cr-inquirers in educational change efforts.

Students as Co-Researchers of School and Classroom Engagement

At the district’s request, we studied eight high schools: four new, autonomous small
schools and four comprehensive high schools. We conducted one-day site visits
at each school for interviews with teachers and administrators and classroom
observations across content areas. At each school, we worked with administrators
to identify three to five student co-researchers to help us collect data on student
engagement in the school and in classrooms. We trained these student co-researchers
(all of whom were juniors and seniors) to conduct teacher and student interviews as
well as formal classroom observations regarding engagement. We taught students
skills such as how to ask open-ended interview questions, establish rapport with
interviewees and take notes while conducting an interview. Students worked in pairs
to practice their skills before conducting the interviews. We also taught students how
to use an observation tool to take organised notes about specific topics during visits to
classrooms. After students completed their data collection, we worked with them to
briefly summarize what they heard and saw during data collection. We asked students
to skim their interview and observation notes for preliminary patterns. Students shared
their preliminary findings with the principals and other administrators at their school
sites through an informal conversation that we facilitated.
For the most part, schools selected students from a diverse range of skills and backgrounds. The student co-researchers were effective and engaged fully in the research process. Through their data collection, the students helped the schools determine the kinds of classroom engagement definitions from which their teachers operate; examples of practices teachers believe promote classroom and school engagement; teachers’ and administrators’ future plans to enhance school and classroom engagement; and the supports teachers say they need to improve classroom engagement. In total, the students conducted 82 teacher interviews and 117 classroom observations across core and elective courses.

The data amassed by the students across all eight high schools provided important benchmark data regarding the state of youth engagement in schools and in classrooms. At the end of each site visit, we and the student co-researchers from that site met with the school principal and, at times, other administrators to discuss the students’ initial impressions of their school based on their interviews and observations from the day. The purpose of this meeting was for the students to help the principal ‘see’ her/his school through the eyes of the student co-researchers. It was also a way for the principal to receive direct and immediate feedback about the site visit from the student co-researchers and us.

At each of the eight schools, the student co-researchers indicated that they had learned much about their school by having the opportunity to ‘see the school’ through different, researcher, eyes. Many of the students noted that they did not realize how challenging their teachers’ jobs were and some joked that they should have been better behaved as freshmen when they were younger. Their observations also caused many of them to question certain taken-for-granted structures in schools. For example, the large size of some courses, particularly courses serving underclassmen or lower achieving students, was questioned by several student co-researcher teams. The results from the student co-researchers’ interviews and classroom observations touched on several salient points that affirmed the professional development work of principals with their faculties, and illuminated potential areas principals might consider addressing in the future. Students took care to present their results in ways that showed their respect for the challenges teachers face in their jobs (we explicitly talked with them about presenting the data in sensitive ways so that the tone was not accusatory). But students also understood the importance of being honest about their findings as they described their interview and observational data. In the debrief meetings with principals, the student co-researchers skilfully presented their findings to principals and, in many cases, used their own experiences as high school students to lend further support for the importance of the findings with regards to improving student engagement.

For example, the data collected by the student co-researchers at one school focused on providing multi-cultural experiences to its predominantly Latino and immigrant student population, and showed that freshman classes were not only larger than classes for upperclassmen, but engagement in ninth-grade classes was much lower than in the junior and senior classes. During the debrief meeting, the student co-researchers raised this as a concern with their principal. The principal responded by asking two 12th grade student co-researchers if they would mind larger senior...
classes, which would result if he lowered freshmen class sizes. Seniors, the students reasoned, could probably concentrate, even if there were more students in the classroom. From their perspective, and based on the data they had gathered, it made sense to reduce freshmen classes rather than senior classes. The student co-researchers also drew from their classroom experiences to ‘triangulate’ their research findings with observational data; they hypothesized that the school’s large second language population was less likely to feel comfortable and engaged in large ESL (English as a Second Language) and ELD (English Language Development) classes. The principal told the students he would take their recommendation seriously when he created the master schedule for the following year.

The student co-researchers at another school learned that their teachers see project-based learning, student debates, computers, and a new grading system called ‘consultant learning,’ which several teachers recently adopted, as key to promoting classroom engagement. Students also learned that, because of teachers’ beliefs about how best to support students’ classroom engagement, teachers felt they needed more technology in classrooms and time to plan projects with other teachers if engagement was going to improve. The students’ classroom observations helped the principal unpack engagement at the classroom level, and underscored for the principal what professional development was needed to improve overall classroom engagement, particularly where instruction was concerned.

Below are some additional examples of results from the student co-researchers’ teacher interviews and classroom observations regarding student engagement. It is not surprising that the issue of large class size emerged in several student co-researcher projects as class size is often a major issue in school reform efforts in urban neighbourhoods.

– In some schools, freshman classes tended to be larger than classes for upperclassmen. As a result, some freshman classes, particularly in science, appeared unstructured and somewhat chaotic.
– Classroom management, generally, is a challenge in large classes.
– A variety of instructional strategies and activities promote greater student engagement, such as short lectures, class discussion, and small group work.
– Rigor is commonly misunderstood as only applicable in advanced placement (AP) classes; on the contrary, every class should be rigorous.
– Classes observed at one school were largely productive with students taking notes using the Cornell note-taking style and asking questions of the teacher.
– Student talk and participation is important to engagement. Teachers need students to talk to create engaging classroom environments, and it is partly students’ responsibility to be engaged in the classroom.
– Teachers try to promote student engagement in their classrooms by connecting the subject matter to the ‘real world.’
– Teachers noted that reading the school bulletin is one important way to encourage student engagement in the school.
– At one school, teachers’ definitions of student engagement included student involvement and encouragement in the classroom and in school (i.e., through student clubs or athletics).
Principals across the eight high schools valued the opportunity to hear from their students, and generally, they found the student co-researchers’ research results about student engagement significant and insightful. They welcomed a new and fresh way to interact and dialogue with students, and they recognized that students, regardless of their skill level or background, are capable of thinking critically and analytically, as researchers do, about their school. Principals appreciated hearing the analytic insights of a range of students about specific school issues, and felt their insights could make a powerful contribution to the school’s efforts to improve student learning, achievement, and engagement.

How Can Adults Working With Youth Implement A Student Co-Researcher Model?

As a result of our work, we suggest that school administrators, program coordinators, and other adults working with youth in community and/or school settings create opportunities for collaboration with youth to inquire about important educational issues and challenges. Youth participating in a co-researcher project, particularly students who are disengaged from their school and classes, might learn to see school in a different way, perhaps in a way that inspires them to re-engage with school. Moreover, these same students might learn to see themselves as members of a school-community because adults working with them asked for their assistance in making sense of challenging issues in the school-community. Shifting how students see themselves requires adults working with youth to shift the power dynamic between themselves and students. Joint adult and youth inquiry requires adults to let go control over the work and allow students to lead.

Adults and youth working jointly on identifying, understanding, and changing educational challenges in a school-community promotes greater dialogue and positive relationships between adults and youth, and better educational experiences for youth. More specific to this chapter, joint work on educational challenges by adults and youth promotes understanding important issues from multiple perspectives, promotes listening to multiple voices, and, with John Dewey in mind, encourages acting in the interests of the common good.

In this section, we present an adaptation of our student co-researcher work for adults working with youth (for a discussion on classroom implementations of student inquiry see Jones & Yonezawa, 2008). While different adaptations are appropriate for different professional contexts, three fundamental principles of purpose, design, and communication should guide any joint inquiry work between adults and students.

Before discussing these three principles, for student selection in any project, we recommend inviting 4–8 students from a range of backgrounds and skill levels to be co-inquirers. It is also important that the student co-researchers feel comfortable approaching and speaking with adults and/or other youth, and that the student co-researchers take the inquiry work seriously.

The adult co-researchers need to clarify the purpose of the joint inquiry. What is the primary issue of interest, for example, student engagement, school safety, or community involvement? Student researchers are useful when considering the
creation of opportunities for students to connect with the community surrounding the school. Offering students such inquiry opportunities also helps them learn about themselves as members of the school-community. Adult co-researchers need to determine the purpose for eliciting students’ perspectives or asking students to conduct research in their school or community.

Adult co-researchers will also need to decide whether or not the inquiry purpose can be generated along with students. We suggest adults think about a particular dilemma they are experiencing in their professional work. If adult co-researchers construct the purpose without student involvement, it is important to communicate the reasons to the participating student co-researchers. The students will need to know why the specific inquiry matters to adults, to the betterment of the school-community, and why it should matter to them as members of the school-community.

Second, adults and youth will need to consider what kind of research design makes sense for the joint inquiry. The research design, for our purposes, refers to the organization of the inquiry project, what you can think of as the ‘who, what, when, and how’ of the project: Who is involved in the inquiry? What will be asked of those involved? What are the demands on their time? What method will be used to record what those involved say? The answers to these questions are based on the purpose of the joint inquiry, which is partly determined by how much time adults and youth can dedicate to the inquiry work.

For example, if a principal wants to know how students feel about the school, and their perspectives about their learning, he/she could set up a Student-Researcher Committee of five students. Based on the purpose, the students and the principal would interview other students in the school (the who) about how students feel about school, their classes, and their teachers (the what). Since the research team will be interviewing students, the principal would need to think about the best way to gain access to the students (the when): during lunch, before or after school, during an Advisory period, elective, or other class. Adults will need to find a time for both the research team and the student interviewees to meet. We asked principals to excuse the student co-researchers from all their classes for our one-day site visit to schools. Again, depending on how much time is available, adult co-researchers will need to decide if it makes sense to concentrate the time into one day or spread out the inquiry project over several days, or even weeks. The principal, in our example, would need to decide if the interview work of the Student-Researcher Committee is a one-time project or an on-going project.

Adult co-researchers will initially need to meet with the research team (the student co-researchers) to discuss the purpose of the inquiry, the interview questions, and how to record the interviewees’ responses. Appendix A provides examples of questions to use for student or teacher interviews. In order to generate interview questions start by thinking about the purpose of the inquiry, and what kinds of categories of questions might illuminate the purpose. In our principal example above, categories such as ‘feelings about school,’ ‘relationships with teachers,’ and ‘classroom learning’ could generate several of the questions found in Appendix A.
We also gave the student co-researchers who worked with us a script to read to their interviewees. We communicated to the student co-researchers that part of their job during the interview was to help the teachers feel comfortable enough to be honest as they answer questions, and that one way to encourage comfort is to make sure the interviewee clearly understands the purpose of the interview and how the information from the interview will be used. As a general rule, we recommend keeping all interviewees anonymous; co-researchers could note student interviewees’ gender and grade level, for example, or teachers’ general subject area (i.e., science, mathematics, elective course). No names or other identifying information about the interviewee should be recorded or revealed. People in positions of power need to assure those interviewed that they will not be penalized for anything said during the interview. Appendix B is a version of the student co-researcher script we provided to students. We share our script only as one example and encourage adaptation of the script to the specific inquiry project.

In our Student-Researcher Committee example, the research team needs a common method of recording what interviewees say during the interview (the how). Appendix C is a version of the student co-researcher note-taking sheet we provided to students. The areas for writing are relatively small because we also had the student co-researchers use audio-recording equipment. We had more than one source of getting good information from the interviews. However, when relying on hand written notes, we suggest pairing student-researchers to do the interviews to increase the chances of getting good notes. You can see from the sheet in Appendix C that there were only five questions that students asked of teachers (the first question the researchers asked teachers to write their response on the sheet and then hand it back to the researchers). We decided that we did not want to take too much of the teachers’ time and, therefore, limited the number of interview questions; we also only had one day for the teacher and administrator interviews. Time is an important consideration! However, we did encourage the student co-researchers to feel free to ask any other questions related to the inquiry purpose if something interesting stood out for them during the interview. It was important to us that the student co-researchers felt some ownership over their inquiry work, and a shared responsibility to collect ‘data’ that would help the administration and, ultimately, the school, better understand how to promote greater student engagement.

And finally, once the research team has completed all their interviews for the inquiry project, the team will need time for communication about its tentative research findings. This is the point in the joint inquiry work where the research team collectively makes sense of the interviews and communicates with one another about their impressions of how what they heard during the interviews helps the team better understand the overall purpose of the inquiry. Adults will need to be particularly mindful of the power dynamics during these discussions of data. For instance, students could point out themes about unfair disciplinary practices by teachers that administrators find disturbing and hard to believe. It can be difficult hearing about perceived discrimination in classrooms.
Adult co-researchers should be open to understanding the data from the student co-researchers’ points of view and make sure not to dismiss students’ analytic insights too quickly. In our example with the principal, the research team would need to engage in dialogue about student interviewees’ feelings about the school and their learning experiences in classrooms. For example, are the student interviewees’ responses mostly favourable towards the school and their teachers? If so, what reasons did students offer for their positive feelings? If no, did students indicate why?

Communication also means deciding how the research team might share the results of the inquiry work. The sharing of the research results should help adults in their own professional work with students, schools, parents and the community. Publicizing the joint inquiry work could push forward efforts to improve the educational experiences of youth. We have already argued what kind of impact joint inquiry work can have on adults and students engaged in the inquiry. Yet, we also strongly believe that sharing the research results and experiences of the ‘researchers’ with different audiences (i.e., faculties, school boards, or community groups) are important opportunities to educate different groups of stakeholders about significant educational issues impacting schools, the surrounding communities and, most importantly, youth.

IMPLICATIONS OF ADULT AND YOUTH DEMOCRATIC INQUIRY

After a debrief meeting at one school with the principal and an assistant principal, an African American female from the student co-researcher team, Alissa’s, exclaimed how thrilling she found the research process, and that she wanted to pursue research in higher education. We were excited to hear this and we talked with Alissa for a few minutes, encouraging her to pursue her interests after high school graduation. We suspect that because we emphasized during the students’ training that morning that many researchers spend their careers studying issues and topics that are dear to them, Alissa was inspired to think about issues in her community, in society, or in the world that are so important to her that she might consider research as a career.

Alissa’s experience was so powerful partly because she knew the adults at her school genuinely wanted students to educate them about needed improvements to promote equitable schooling practices that benefit all students. By working together on a joint educational research project, adults and youth in all the schools we worked with were actively engaged in democratic inquiry for the common good of the entire school-community. By enlisting the active inquiry and engagement of youth, schools have a greater chance of developing sustainable school and classroom practices to improve student learning, engagement, and achievement. Furthermore, inviting youth to be partners to solve real educational problems pushes the adults involved to examine the too often narrow assumptions held by educators, assumptions that are often grounded in negative beliefs about students’ ability, motivation, race, culture, or language, for example (Nieto, 1994; Jones & Yonezawa, 2002). When adults and youth work in collaboration to improve
communities and/or institutions, they promote and model the open-minded and respectful interactions that Dewey tells us should be pervasive in everyday democratic living.

NOTES

1 All monthly and bi-monthly inquiry group sessions at the four partner high schools were conducted during the school year before, after, or during school (usually including lunch time). All sessions were audiotaped with parent permission and professionally transcribed. We conducted PowerPoint presentations to the high school faculties in which we shared a combination of word-for-word student quotations and summary statements from the transcripts. Teacher names and other identifying markers were removed from the student quotes for the presentations.

2 Pseudonym

REFERENCES


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APPENDIX A

Sample Student Interview Questions

– Do you enjoy your classes? Why or why not?
– What makes a class interesting?
– Do you think you have good relationships with your teacher? Why or why not?
– Do you feel your teachers understand what you need in order to learn in their classes? What has a teacher said or done that makes you think she/he understands or doesn’t understand how to help you learn?
– Do you feel comfortable in your classes? What about a class makes you feel comfortable or uncomfortable?
– Do you feel like you are learning in your classes? Why or why not. Discuss specific assignments, tests, quizzes, grading policies, homework, teaching strategies, etc.
– Do you have too much, too little, or the right amount of homework?
– What’s the student’s responsibility in this classroom?
– What’s the teacher’s responsibility in this classroom?
– Do you feel like you know what your teachers expect from you? If so, how do your teachers communicate her/his expectations (what have teachers said or done)?

Sample Teacher Interview Questions

– What would you say are your goals for teaching ____ (insert subject)?
– Think about student engagement in the classroom, what does engagement mean to you? What do you think low engagement looks like? Medium? High?
– Think about student engagement in the wider school, what does engagement mean at the school level?
– What practices are currently in place within classrooms that you believe promote student engagement?
– What practices are currently in place in the wider school that you believe promote student engagement?
– What supports do teachers and administrators need to improve classroom practices and school-wide practices to promote greater student engagement?
– What’s the relationship between engagement and rigor in your mind?
– What supports do teachers need to increase the level of rigor in the classroom?
– How do you make decisions about your instruction?
– How do you try to meet the needs of students with different skill levels in your classroom?
Student-Researcher Interview Script

Please read to each teacher before starting the interview!

Hello, my name is _________________ and I am here to interview you for the youth engagement study that UCSD is doing. I am helping UCSD today as a student-researcher. The principal should have let you know that UCSD is here today doing interviews and classroom visits. Do you have 15–20 minutes for an interview?

Before we get started, I need to ask for your permission to audio-record the interview. Only the UCSD researchers will have access to the tapes and the notes that we’ll take during the interview. We will give the tapes and our notes to the UCSD researchers this afternoon. If you have any questions or concerns, please contact them (hand out Susan and Makeba’s business cards).

Do I have your permission to audio-record this interview?

_____ Yes. Teacher’s initials ____

_____ No
Youth Engagement Teacher Interviews

Date: ____________________________ High School
Teacher’s Subject & Grade Level: __________________________
Name of Student-researcher: __________________________

Interview Questions

1. I’d like to start the interview by asking you to please take a couple of minutes to write down your definition of student engagement in the classroom.

2. Think about student engagement in your classroom. Can you give us examples of things you do that you believe promote student engagement in your classroom?

3. Think about student engagement in the school. Can you give us examples of things this school is doing to promote student engagement?
4. What supports do you think you need as a teacher to improve students’ engagement in the classroom?

5. Do you have plans this year to try to improve student engagement in the classroom? Does the school have plans to improve student engagement in the school?

Thank you for your time!

**Researcher Notes** – Think about the teachers’ responses to the interview questions. Use the space below to write down any thoughts or impressions about any of the teachers’ responses based on your own experiences in your classes.