**Youth Civic Engagement Preconference**

**March 19th, 2014**

**Society for Research on Adolescence Biennial Meeting**

**Austin, Texas**

**General Description of the Event**

A group of nearly 50 preconference participants gathered for a shared time of making new and renewing old connections, listening to and engaging with our keynote speaker and discussants, and talking about the issues they found most exciting in small facilitated groups. The mood throughout the event was lively and enthusiastic, and conversations could have extended well beyond the allotted time!

We were all challenged to consider the concepts of critical consciousness and sociopolitical development, and how these – alongside the practice of youth community organizing – might interact with our own work. We considered the great potential of youth community organizing to help cultivate numerous developmental assets in youth in addition to working toward more just communities; we also considered the challenges that often come with facilitating and studying youth community organizing. Across our many different experiences, we were all challenged to consider how the discussions from this preconference might inspire our work and challenge us to continue to facilitate youth engagement toward a more just world.

This event was made possible through funding from the John Templeton Foundation to Laura Wray-Lake, Aaron Metzger, and Amy Syvertsen.

**Detailed Notes from the Preconference**

**Part 1: Keynote speaker and responses**

**The event began with a keynote address from Dr. Rod Watts.**

The work presented here represents a collaboration with co-PI Ben Kirshner and numerous collaborators from universities and community-based organizations.

Dr. Watts’ talk included four main points:

1. Youth community organizing (YCO) as sociopolitical development (SPD)
   1. YCO and 3 ways of being a “unizen” (a term used to indicate the idea of citizenship without evoking the legalities of being a citizen)
2. Linking YCO and Positive Youth Development (PYD)
   1. Leadership as a common good
3. Disenfranchised youth and other social injustices
   1. Reuniting the personal and the political
4. Integration in the real world
   1. A look at some data

Now we’ll consider each of these points in more detail:

1. Three ways of being a “unizen”
   * We consider a model linking critical social analysis and political and civic engagement (comprised of behaviors and commitments).
     + This relationship is mediated by an individual’s sense of agency and opportunity structure
     + Both political/social justice activism and civic participation/service are a part of civic engagement
   * Here, we consider Westheimer and Kahne’s (2003) three forms of civic activity:
     + Personally responsible unizen (works with United Way; promotes stability)
     + Participatory unizen (stays current on issues, slightly more involved/active; also promotes stability)
     + Justice-oriented unizen (believe that things need to change; change oriented)
   * The focus here is on the justice-oriented unizen – not because it is more important, but because it is the most neglected in research and practice
2. Linking YCO and PYD
   * YCO cultivates and uses many of the 40 developmental assets:
     + External assets (e.g., support, empowerment, boundaries/expectations, constructive use of time)
     + Internal assets
   * Leadership is especially important – youth organizers develop a bridge between personal and social issues to effect positive change
     + The problem is – no one agrees on what leadership is/means!
   * Youth leadership has lots of “radiating effects” for people and society
3. Civics for the disenfranchised – civics and leadership toward what end?
   * Disenfranchised youth must go beyond being personally responsible unizens, for example by becoming involved in “movements” rather than “traditional” engagement
   * It is critical to explore the origins and systemic causes of social and political power, and to apply analytical lenses based on a history or racial inclusions and exclusion and privilege
   * We can imagine a continuum of perspectives and actions as follows:
   * Critical social analysis involves thinking critically about accepted ways of thinking and feeling; coming to see the structures of inequality that operate in our mundane, day-to-day lives that fail to be questioned and therefore fail to be changed
   * This critical analysis is a process that leads to an outcome (action); however, we need to be able to measure this developmental process independent of outcomes
   * If you come in late to a movie, it’s hard to understand what’s happening – you need to know what came before to be able to understand why things are the way they are now, and to be able to make meaning of what you see

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| **Reflection** | **Sociopolitical Development** | | **Action** |
| Social Responsibility -Critical social analysis -Social values/identity | Justice-Oriented Neighbor -Collective work, critical stance |
| Personally Responsible -Character -Developmental assets | Participatory Neighbor -Engages in community  -Stays current |
| **Personal Development** | |

1. An integrated look at the real world – presenting information about ongoing work
   * There are 7 participating organizations that each have adult-youth partnerships, have been around at least 5 years, and pay attention to marginalized youth
     + Located in the U.S., South Africa, and Ireland
   * Ethnographers have been doing fieldwork at each site for two years
   * The main focus of this study is on process – how each organization does “what they do” rather than particular outcomes
   * One part of this project was bringing people from all 7 groups together to build collaboration
   * The closest thing to “outcomes” measured has been an analysis of the content youth talk about:
     + When youth talk about particular topics such as personal history, political history, equality, power, mental preparation for barriers, and more
     + Also consider when youth talk about the programs and the skills they have gained such as public speaking, developing social identity, and emotional regulation (e.g., managing anger)

**Next we heard a response from Dr. Brian Christens.**

* In study community organizing among adults, Dr. Christens found that as youth became involved in organizing, they improved the effectiveness of the organizing efforts
* This led to questions about how sociopolitical development (SPD) and empowerment fit together?
* There are 2 dimensions of empowerment: the emotional/interpersonal and the cognitive
  + Cognitive empowerment involves understanding how social power works – realizing you can’t make change alone and need a group
* Power plays a key role in this process: the nature of power is such that if we exercise power we will likely encounter conflict
  + 3-Dimentional view of power: the faces and instruments of power can be used to reward or punish people, and influences who makes decisions (agenda setting) and shaped ideology (e.g., mass media) as well as the reasonable parameters for debate
* Studying youth community organizing – developed a scale to assess some of these concepts in young people
* Scales to assess social attributions (to indicate cognitive empowerment through critical social analysis/awareness), experiences of oppression, and history (the reels of film)
* Discovered interesting relationship between cognitive empowerment and emotional sense of agency
  + Very few people have both critical cognition AND an emotional sense of “critical hopefulness” – we want people to be in this state of being aware of injustice and able to maintain a level of hopefulness
* Most studies of youth community organizing have been qualitative and have observed positive effects of YCO for both individuals and communities
  + We need to build on this initial research to quantitatively show the anecdotally observed benefits
    - Currently submitting a grant proposal about YCO and violence prevention
    - But there are many challenges to this work – students are not able to be randomized to participate in organizing or not, and youth tend to cycle in and out of organizing programs
    - We need quantitative data to promote YCO as an evidence-based practice

**We then heard another response from Dr. Jim Youniss.**

* Lots of people are talking about the issues we’ve been discussing today – this is important and relevant!
* We want to know how youth make meaning in life for themselves and for others – we are especially interested in this for marginalized youth
* We need to look at the individual in a political way:
* We often forget that we all live in a political context that restricts and enables who we are
* This work acknowledges that people are somewhat constituted by context, but that the people in a particular context can also make and change the context, for example through community organizing
* Sociologists have studied social history and social movements
* Having a grievance is a precipitant of change, but is not sufficient to make the change happen. So we have to ask – how do we move beyond the grievance?
* It takes structure to change structure
* Empowerment often draws focus to the individual who is supposed to confront power and injustice, which is why Dr. Youniss isn’t a fan of this term
* But in the world there are organizations – some of which are friends and some of which are foes, and one developmental task for youth is learning to identify friend from foe
* Joining with an organization is a more feasible pathway to change than is going it alone. Three books are helpful here:
  + *Cold Anger* by Mary Beth Rogers and Bill Moyers
  + *Blessed are the Organized* by Jeffrey Stout
  + *Dry Bones Rattling* by Mark Warren
* Getting beyond the grievance thus requires critical awareness AND engaging youth in structures/organizations that are friends
* Gimple argues that many areas where marginalized youth live tend to be “political dead-spots” where public political talk is deadened due to corruption, rare changes in the elected officials, etc.
* These same areas also tend to have a less lively civic life, as suggested by Hart and Youniss’s analysis of census data which indicated fewer civic organizations were present in youth “pockets” (areas with a higher percentage of youth)
* The civic organizations that are present are often churches which become powerful and well-resourced when they come together to form a coalition
* Language of liberation? Dr. Youniss suggests that the language of liberation might not be well suited to some audiences, and that our audience should shape the language we use – perhaps using “socialization” or “politicization” instead
* This essentially asks whether you want to arouse/talk to one particular group, or try to become as effective as possible in a political world
* International perspectives are important in helping understand how a person becomes a democratic citizen (particularly in places newly moving to democracy) – considering international perspectives can lead to learning more than you can imagine!

**Part 2: Small group discussions**

Participants at six tables engaged in lively small group discussions building off of the themes discussed by Dr. Watts, Dr. Christens, and Dr. Youniss. The highlights from each table were reported back to the whole group by a facilitator from each table and are presented here.

**Table facilitated by Laura Wray-Lake**

This table discussed three themes:

* Critical social analysis and action
* This link isn’t always present
* Focusing on small wins vs. taking a real-world approach and working through failure
* Letting issues arise organically vs. having adult-introduced issues in organizing and other youth-adult partnership settings
* Where and how parents are involved in youth community organizing, and how you keep an open dialogue with parents

**Table facilitated by Aisha Griffith**

This table discussed three main topics:

* How youth in the context of family develop critical consciousness
* How race, privilege and other factors influence this
* The political context
* What does community organizing mean for re-districted communities when people feel that their vote won’t matter?
* How does this relate to the Belgian context where voting is mandatory?
* What leads to youth civic engagement
* Gut feelings – issues that draw on emotional responses
* Food, friends, and fun

**Table facilitated by Aaron Metzger**

This group discussed the context of classroom settings:

* How do you facilitate discussions in classrooms to allow multiple perspectives
* How does this translate to action?
* How can involvement facilitate discussion?
* The importance of adults modeling excitement about engagement
* Being able to point out youths’ skill set and match it with involvement opportunities
* The importance of adults being aware of their own “political baggage”

**Table facilitated by Heather Malin**

This table discussed a variety of topics including:

* Youth community organizing and youth civic engagement research
* Leadership as an outcome – how to initiate and act on issues
* The importance of starting with building a sense of community to lead to youth civic engagement
* How this plays out for rural youth as a marginalized group (compared to urban youth) and how this influences the options for even being involved in a community
* There are lots of youth leading national movements in education in Chile
* Discussing ideas of personal vs. collective ideas
* How do young people without social grievances come to understand and act on them?
* Social media helps youth community organizing to be more efficient and to mobilize
* The idea of social justice – how and by whom is this defined? Who has access to power, and do youth see these people/this power as a resource?
* Youth with low community access might have low access to power

**Table facilitated by Amy Syvertsen**

This group focused on two main themes:

* Critical consciousness and how this can be measured
* Is a universal, process-focused measure possible? Useful?
* What do we know about developing critical consciousness (e.g., at what age might we expect this to happen)?
* Does critical consciousness show developmental continuity over time?
* What are the best practices for promoting critical consciousness?
* The role of relationships in youth community organizing
* Relationships between youth and structures/organizations
* Relationships among peers
* Relationships of youth with their family

**Table facilitated by Parissa Ballard**

This group discussed three main topics:

* The excitement in the field that centers around the interplay of positive youth development with positive community development
* The need to measure change in both individuals and communities
* The importance of considering person-in-context and the individual’s experience of context
* Experiences of discrimination
* Points of intervention
* Schools – and how to frame this work for schools
* Parents
* Peers