

Youth as Knowledge Constructors and Agents of Educational Change

Morgan Gardner

Faculty of Education, Memorial University of Newfoundland

Ann McCann, Murphy Centre

Angela Crockwell, Community Youth Network

Abstract

In this paper we examine how youth are making a difference in our educational community. Drawing from previous and on-going research and change initiatives with marginalized youth, we attend to three central themes. First, we explore the importance of situating youth voice and engagement within a social justice conceptual frame. Second, we discuss our understandings and experiences of youth as knowledge constructors and theorizers. Third, we articulate how youth are active agents and change-makers. In positioning youth as 'knowers' and 'actors' in educational change-making, we argue that deficit-based perspectives of youth facing forms of marginality become interrogated and challenged. As educators, we cannot become leaders of social justice education reform without embracing the leadership of youth who are experiencing the very inequalities we are trying to remove from our schools.

Introduction

There is a growing recognition and commitment in the province of Newfoundland and Labrador to address forms of social, economic, cultural and educational disenfranchisement faced by youth in our communities. Initiatives within government, the community, and K-12 and post-secondary education systems are seeking to address inequities so that *all* youth and their families are able to successfully navigate the complexities of our current societal contexts. Four examples of such initiatives include the provincial government's *Poverty Reduction Strategy*, the federal government's *Vibrant Communities Initiatives*, the Coalition for Educational Opportunities and Eastern School District's (ESD) collaborative efforts to create an alternative school for marginalized youth and Memorial's Faculty of Education's *Meeting the Challenge* report which proposes diversity and social justice as a guiding orientation to teacher education in this province.

Certainly, for those involved in social justice work in education, these initiatives are welcome because they strive to further justice and equality. However, in order to assess the meaningfulness and success of these projects, we need to consider how youth voice and engagement (as students, citizens, leaders and partners) are taken up in these initiatives. Youth facing forms of social and educational marginalization have the greatest stake in social justice and democratic change and their contributions to educational change should not be underestimated. As university and community-based educators we seek to expand marginalized youths' involvement in educational reform to ensure that they are part of decisions which affect their lives.

Goals and Contexts of This Paper

In this paper we draw from our previous and on-going research and educational change initiatives with youth to articulate how they are making a difference in our educational community. Examples of these initiatives include two participatory action research studies funded by Memorial University and youth involvement in the *Coalition for Educational Opportunities*.

The *Coalition for Educational Opportunities* (CEO) is a multi-stakeholder coalition spearheaded by the Community Youth Network. Created in 2001 to identify solutions to youth who have left school and/or are disengaged in their learning, the CEO views youth as central stakeholders. The CEO's report, *All Youth Learn....All Youth Succeed*, is a proposal created in collaboration with youth voices. This proposal calls for the creation of an alternative school within the Eastern School District (ESD).

The participatory action research study called, *In Good Hands: Youth Envisioning Curriculum*, engaged youth in the educational change processes of envisioning curriculum for the proposed alternative school and disseminating this vision to local educational stakeholders. A second study, *From Transformative Vision to Transformative Practice*, involved youth at the Murphy Centre (a community-based educational program) in the design and implementation of changes to aspects of their learning environment.

In drawing from these educational change engagements with youth, we attend here to three central themes. First, we explore the importance of situating youth voice and engagement within a social justice conceptual frame. Second, we discuss our understandings and experiences of youth as knowledge constructors and theorizers. Third, we discuss how youth are active agents and change-makers. In positioning youth as 'knowers' and 'actors' in educational change-making, we argue that deficit-based perspectives of youth facing forms of marginality become interrogated and challenged. As educators, we cannot become leaders of social justice education reform without embracing the leadership of youth who are experiencing the very inequalities we are trying to remove from our educational contexts.

Contexts of Youth, Voice and Participation

The influence of schooling on the lives of youth in Newfoundland and Labrador cannot be overemphasized. Schools are sites where possibilities for inclusion, democracy and justice are both exercised and constrained via school governance, curriculum, pedagogy and assessment. As studies document social and educational inequalities, it is ever more apparent that we need to reconfigure schools as sites of democracy and social justice. Experiences of inequality and oppression based on race, class, gender, sexual orientation, disability and other aspects of students' subjectivities are connected to many students' experience of marginality and lack of success, agency and voice in school (Taylor, 2007; Archer, Halsall & Hollingworth, 2007; Arnot & Reay, 2007; Bhimji, 2005; Wotherspoon & Schissel, 2001). In addition to literature which documents inequalities, there is a growing recognition of the synergistic relationship between justice and democracy in schools and justice and democracy in civic society (Loder, 2006; Bolmeier, 2006; Davis, 2003; Gale, 2003). Specifically, youth who experience democratic practice in school are better able to address issues of democracy and social justice in their community engagements.

As educators become attentive to youth's investment in contributing to democratic and social justice educational change, the need for rigorous study of youth voice and engagement becomes critically apparent (Yohalem & Martin, 2007; Checkoway & Richard-Schaster, 2006). This is not an easy task for researchers. The breadth of justice and democratic issues in education, and their contested meanings, create a complex terrain on which to examine youth voice and engagement. Many researchers are also striving to avoid homogenizing youth, ignoring their complex life worlds or constructing idealized or simplified notions of youth engagement (Archer, Halsall & Hollingworth, 2007; Torre & Fine, 2006; Fine, 1991).

In 2006-2007, five peer-reviewed journals devoted special issues to explore youth voice and involvement in school, community and civic contexts (e.g., *Educational Review*, 58(2); *International Journal of Leadership in Education*, 9(4)). Recent collections exploring youth as social-educational change agents contrast notions of 'disaffected' youth reliant on adult visions and practices of justice and democracy (Ginwright, Noguera & Cammarota, 2006; Checkoway & Gutiérrez, 2006). Case studies of youth participation in educational change report benefits to youth, schools and the community (Gardner & Crockwell, 2006; Osberg, Pope & Galloway, 2006; Bolmeirer, 2006; Brown Easton, 2005; Morrell, 2006; Checkoway & Richard-Schaster, 2006; Suleiman, Soleimanpour & London, 2006; Nygreen, AnKwon & Sanchez, 2006; Ginwright, Noguera & Cammarota, 2006; Checkoway & Gutiérrez, 2006).

Reports of increased youth academic success and school attendance as well as youth's strengthened sense of empowerment, hope and leadership relay benefits to youth from their involvement in educational change. Schools and the community benefit from youth voice and engagement in change. These contexts recount, for instance, enhanced awareness of youth issues, creation of new innovation programs, strengthened sense of community and youth participation, prevention of problems and enhanced program effectiveness.

Examples of youth voice and participation in educational reform are located within broader educational landscapes which often fail to involve youth in such initiatives. Accounts document the paucity of student voice and power in educational reforms which prioritize the access, participation and contributions of adult stakeholders (Checkoway & Richards-Schuster, 2006; Checkoway & Gutierrez, 2006). Exclusions of youth are supported by educational discourse which assumes that youth lack the skills capacities and/or entitlement to play such participatory roles. Education systems relay lack of time, resources, structures, policies and capacity to engage youth in educational reform (Ginwright, Noguera & Cammarota, 2006). Uncertainties in how to incorporate youth engagement and potential adverse ramifications further dissuade change (Golombek, 2006; Jennings, Parra-Medina, Messias & McLoughlin, 2006). There are also accounts that youth get offered minimal or token input. Youth are not positioned as authentic partners who are afforded decision-making power in educational change (Angus, 2006; Osberg, Pope & Galloway, 2006; Guajardo, Pérez, Guajardo, Dávila, Ozuna, Saenz & Casaperalta, 2006). Unsurprisingly, many youth also relay that their attempts to engage educational change have been met with resistance by educators, governments and the community (Ginwright, Noguera & Cammarota, 2006).

Youth Voice and Engagement in Educational Change: A Social Justice Issue

Our partnerships with youth strengthen our resolve that youth have the right and capacity to be engaged as partners in educational change. We witness how the education system affects the life long development of youth. And we recognize how crucial it is for youth to be fully engaged, not only in the process of being educated, but also in processes of educational delivery and policy/program development. Youth voice and engagement are irrevocable social justice and human rights issues within our current political, social and economic contexts. To address these issues effectively youth need to be positioned as 'knowers' and 'actors' who have the right to participate as students, citizens and partners in educational policies, practices and reforms.

Youth, themselves, also recognize their participation in education reform as a justice issue. Our experience shows that, contrary to common-sense notions that youth are 'apathetic' and 'disengaged,' when given the opportunity to collaborate as partners and leaders, they show clear understanding of themselves as knowers and actors. Youth explicitly identify their motivations for participating in action research and change initiatives. Their desires are grounded in their beliefs of a better education system for themselves and their siblings, their children, and peers who also face multiple forms of disenfranchisement.

Youth who experience ageism, violence, homelessness, poverty, sexual exploitation, addictions, disruptive family contexts, mental health issues and other life challenges, are often aware that they, and their needs and strengths as learners, do not 'fit' in mainstream education systems. Typically, however, youth who experience marginalization do feel there are avenues to have their voice heard, to tell their story, or become agents of educational change. They are often keenly aware that they are not safe to fully disclose their complex lifeworlds because their lives do not fit dominant societal and educational norms and expectations.

In conjunction with youth, we experience the continual reliance on deficit-based notions of *individual need* within education and social service contexts. As youth well know, this frame requires them, as individuals, to articulate that there is something wrong "with me," "with my family," or "with my life." Youth, for example, poignantly relay their stories that they work hard to cover up the fact that they cannot read or write. They report being afraid of their teachers finding out that they do not live at home or being embarrassed that they cannot continue to attend school full-time because they need to support themselves or their families financially. One youth who participated in an action research project spoke of living on her own at sixteen, and how her teacher could not understand this. Her teacher repeatedly asked questions like, "What do you mean you don't live at home?" or "Where are your parents?" This lack of understanding sent a clear message to the young person that she could not voice her complex lifeworld. By framing this student's reality through a deficit-based and individualized lens which did not take into account her context and agency, her voice became further marginalized. In our effort to ally with youth we recognize that promoting youth voice and engagement needs to be framed as a social justice issue. Youth voices are often systematically excluded due to the lack of understanding and accompanying judgement of their lifeworlds. As educators, it is our responsibility to create in partnership with youth, a truly safe and vibrant learning environment where youth can be authentically and fully engaged in the context of where they are and where they want to go.

In our partnerships with youth, we see how the meanings and priorities for educational change vary by, for example, race, class, gender, age and sexual orientation. Youth are not a homogeneous group. In our collaborations with youth, this has meant considering the diversity

of youth while we strive to re-create, with youth, an education system that reflects their varied lifeworlds. In this way, framing youth voice and engagement in its *diversity* has become an important social justice dimension of our collaborative education change initiatives.

Engaging youth as educational change makers through a social justice lens requires the education system to embrace inclusion in all its complexity. It means, as a starting point, attending to the complex and inter-related processes of the need for youth to have adequate income, shelter, equity, human rights, access, ability to participate, valued contribution, belonging, and empowerment (see for instance, the model of inclusion of Health Canada's Population and Public Health Branch, Atlantic Region). Attending to a model of inclusion is more than an intellectual project; it offers insights on a practical level. Concepts of inclusion strengthen our capacity to critique current practices of youth engagement, as well as allow us to develop increasingly meaningful strategies to engage youth at all stages in the education change process. Youth passionately relay that superficial notions of voice and participation are not enough to ensure their equitable inclusion. We recognize that youth opportunities for voice and engagement must be accompanied by supports, resources and approaches which reduce their barriers to participation. To support meaningful engagement, youth need access to transportation, child care, food, computers and phones. Youth have the right to forms of involvement which draw from their strengths and acknowledge their multiple commitments and responsibilities. Most importantly, youth need to be partners in the decision-making processes taking place within a reform initiative.

Through their experiences of difference and marginality, youth often report that their voices become further silenced, ignored and/or disciplined by education systems. In partnering with youth, we become aware of the multiple and nuanced ways youth 'knowing' and 'acting' are taken-for-granted and depoliticized within education, when in actuality, youth 'knowing' and 'acting' are crucial social justice and human rights issues. Making this visible is central to educational change in Newfoundland and Labrador.

Youth Knowing: Youth as Knowledge Constructors and Theorizers of Educational Change

In partnering with youth in educational change and research initiatives, we witness youth engage the terrains of their lived experience to construct knowledge and theorize educational change. In doing so, we recognize the importance of discourse which positions youth as 'knowers' and 'partners' in educational reform. We can attest to the ways youth are expert meaning-makers of their lives who know what they need as learners. We have experienced their intellectual competence and qualifications to interrogate and re-constitute dimensions of schooling and their lives. We have observed the unique and varied ways youth conceptualize and make apparent the need and possibilities for educational change. And we recognize the many ways their "lived theorizing" affirms current education scholarship.

While education systems often assert their adoption of constructivist learning, marginalized youth often relay they do not experience school as a site for their active inquiry and knowledge production. Many recount feeling like passive recipients within an epistemological world *not* of their own making (Berry, 1998, see p. 42) or re-making. Within these systems of knowledge, many youth share their feelings of being framed as 'not knowers' - as 'dumb', 'problem learners', 'non-achievers' and 'non-academic'. Similarly, while there is literature centring marginalized youth's experiences as starting places from which to theorize educational change, there are few

studies which position youth themselves as the theorizers of their school experiences and desires for educational change.

Through our collaborations with youth, we have learned the importance of youth's own theorizing and knowledge production in their struggle against social-educational exclusion and injustice. Via inquiry and meaning-making, youth create spaces to critically examine their educational contexts and subjectivities as learners. In the spaces they weave they re-engage their experiences and re-vision their relations to school in ways which empower and draw forth their own subjugated forms of knowing and knowledge construction; that is, knowledge not taken up in school (such as their social and cultural capital and curriculum lived and created outside of school). In doing so, youth become active agents of their own meanings and theories of learning, schooling and educational change. Within these meaning-making processes, we witness how youth re-constitute their visions, subjectivities and lifeworlds as school and learning *strengths* rather than as mainstream educational problems.

In our reflections we have come to position critical knowledge production and theorizing as constituting a transformative pedagogy and educational politics for youth who are marginalized in school. In doing so, we are mindful of the disjuncture between this transformative project and the currency of many education practices which do not embody this work. For instance, youth often report skills-based learning, non-academic streaming, expulsion, assessments which focus on their deficits and behavioural management as prescriptions approaches for their lack of 'success' in school. As youth allies, researchers and educators, we believe this disjuncture needs to be centrally positioned within post-confederation education reform discussion and debate. In particular, our work suggests that as educators we need to move from the *rhetoric* of viewing learning as embedded in students' active, complex knowledge-production to the *reality* of its deep and meaningful embodiment in education practice for *all* students. Our experiences tell us that this shift cannot occur without positioning youth as our partners and allies. Through their strengths, experiences, insights and passion, youth facing forms of marginality have too much to offer. We, as educators, cannot do it without them.

One contribution we offer this project is to make explicit, in partnership with youth, the ways in which youth are knowledge constructors and theorizers of educational change. To develop our analysis of youth knowledge production, we begin wherein knowledge is viewed as discursively framed and socially constructed. Here the meaning-making of youth is seen to occur within the complex dynamics of their ever-emergent subjectivities, voice and agency which are situated and informed by their socio-cultural contexts and 'languaged' realities.

We view youth theorizing and knowledge production as their "attempts to understand and act on the social world, critiquing social practices and relationships and providing explanations and answers to real social dilemmas (Hoy & McCarthy, 1994)" (Wilson, 1998, p. 23). Here youth engage in "lived theorizing" (Kirk & Okazawa-Rey, 2004) by actively creating and re-creating systems of interpretation and meaning which make sense of experiences, phenomenon and events in their lives (Davis, Sumara & Luce-Kapler, 2000). In this regard, we position theorizing as the active engagement of meta-cognitive and meta-multi-modal processes. Some of these processes include, for example, culling, creating, sorting, organizing, mapping, connecting, assessing, conceptualizing, integrating and synthesizing.

Youth's knowledge construction and theorizing is evident throughout our collaborative research and changing-making projects. Youth engaged in diverse, rich conversational meaning-making. Expressing and assessing their experiences of school, we have watched youth organically

ignite their textures of curiosity, observation, creativity, comparison, critical reflection, doubt, sense-making, decision-making and action. Across these interactions we have been struck by the ways youth insights are grounded in their complex lived experiences and astute assessments of social and educational systems. On many occasions we have discussed with youth the ways their meaning-making echoes prominent theoretical scholarship in education; we have also listened to youth make these connections for themselves. We have seen youth's capacity to attune to and conceptualize aspects of educational change which we, as educators, have been unable or unwilling to notice due to our privileges of age, income, position and so on. We have, in turn, listened to youth articulate new possibilities to educational challenges as well as envision forward-thinking educational futures which stand in relation to educator's best thinking and efforts.

Illustrations of youth's educational change knowledge-construction and theorizing make explicit the need to move towards a transformative pedagogy and educational politics for youth. For instance, in the *In Good Hands: Youth Envisioning Curriculum* study, youth's knowledge construction of their curricular experiences reveal an ecological model of curriculum. Specifically, in defining curriculum as more than what they learn, youth became actors of curriculum innovation and educational change. In critically examining their experiences in and out of school, they saw that curriculum needed to be re-constituted and expanded to include how, why, where and with whom they learned. Further still, curriculum involved, in their view, not just what happens in the classroom but also what occurs in the hallways, school yards and auditoriums; it involves what happens to them on the streets and in their homes, neighbourhoods and communities. While residing in education systems too often structured to separate or ignore these complexities of lifeworld within curriculum development and delivery, youth's subjugated experiential and intuitive knowing reveal this separation is not possible.

In alignment with youth, many curriculum theorists posit such an 'ecological' view. These theorists articulate conceptual visions and frames which are increasingly (ecological or) inclusive of students' diversities, complex lifeworlds and subjectivities (see Slattery, 2006; Doll & Gough, 2002; Kincheloe, Slattery & Steinberg, 2000). Youth need to be acknowledged for the sophistication and complexity of their "lived theorizing" and for the ways it both resonates and also furthers educators' understandings. In living and experiencing the non-separable realities between home and school and between dimensions of schooling, youth possess a depth, nuance and complexity of experience guiding their knowing which we, as educators, do not possess. Many youth have knowledge, for instance, of bus systems, family systems and of street, cyber and youth cultures -- and the ways they are linked to schooling and their education experience -- in ways which we, as educators, can only glean at a cursory level. Our research with youth make explicit that only through partnerships with youth can this kind of complex lived theorizing shape needed curriculum change in a meaningful and an on-going basis.

Youth Action: Youth Agency at Work

Parallel to educators who outline the centrality of praxis (i.e., theory and practice), many youth embody a deep understanding of the inseparability of knowing and acting. In particular, for many youth who have experienced marginality and injustice in school, to 'know' what is not working in school is accompanied by a desire to 'act' on this knowledge. Through collaboration, we witnessed youth's passionate and competent translations of their knowledge into action as they inform and create change. We have noticed, moreover, the consistency with which youth strive to challenge the disjuncture embedded in school systems which often separates their knowing from their ability to be actors of this knowledge in school.

It can be difficult for people in education systems to position youth who are dis-engaged in school as actors and educational change-agents. Youth in these situations are often seen as lacking 'follow through' and motivation as learners. Educators often narrate their experiences of youth's incomplete assignments, their lateness for class and lack of class attendance; they recount youth's lack of engagement in class discussions and non-participation in school activities. And when, in fact, youth do act in school and in their lives, their actions often become framed by educators as acts of impulsiveness, defiance and resistance, rather than in terms of 'agency' for educational change.

In listening carefully to youth's educational narratives, and in creating contexts for partnership and educational change, alternative narratives of youth as educational partners and leaders emerge. These narratives become further strengthened by paying attention to youth's agency and action. Through our work with youth, we have become increasingly aware of youth's interplay of spontaneous and planned actions which create complex and sophisticated understandings of educational change-making.

Agency involves the capacity to initiate and create change. While drawing from this notion, we further position youth agency within a politicized context of power relations and issues of difference. Specifically, we use the terms actor, agency and change-making to refer to the multiple ways youth act to minimize, challenge, subvert and/or transform unjust and disenfranchising material and discursive conditions in their lives. By material conditions we refer to basic amenities (such as food, shelter, clothing, transportation, safety) as well as the structures and practices which comprise our societal and education systems. Discursive conditions refer to the array of educational and societal discourses, policies, ideologies and narratives about youth, education, schooling, being 'at-risk' and so forth. These material and discursive conditions in youth's lives are intimately connected processes shaping their lives and forms of knowing and agency.

Youth Agency as Action Researchers

Youth's agency to challenge and change inequities they experience in school, and in their lives, is situated and complex. Our two action research initiatives have served as one site from which to witness and explore, with youth, their experiences and enactments as change-agents. These projects centre youth voice and participation, using cycles of action and reflection, to create more democratic and just educational contexts for youth who have experienced marginality in school. Consistently youth have shown passion, commitment, focus, creativity, resourcefulness and expedience when they experience authentic openings to become change-agents. Having decision-making power, working in democratic partnership with educators and working on

projects that can affect tangible change are key features of youth's understanding of meaningful involvement. In the *Good Hands* study, youth became passionate curriculum-builder actors knowing their vision could inform the curriculum in the proposed alternative school in their community. Youth in the *Transformative Vision to Transformative Practice* study became involved because our central research mandate is to effect concrete changes within their present schooling context.

Youth resonate strongly with action research because it is embedded in action. Action research serves as a mirror which affirms and reflects back to youth their care and desire to be learners in empowering contexts and their ability to be central players in making change happen. Many youth express the significance of being able to make a difference so that their siblings, children and other youth do not encounter the same kinds of disempowerment they experienced in school. They recognize that while they are our future, they are also our present. They express their desire to contribute now. As powerfully relayed by one youth action researcher, "I have ideas NOW. I have dreams NOW. Why wait until I'm a so-called adult to fulfill my dreams. I am living in the present and I have ideas for the present. By the time I'm older my ideas may be obsolete to the new generation, just as the ideals of the present education system were manufactured for the generations past."

In this vein of energy and determination, we have watched youth become fearless actors in expecting success in their initiatives -- and they have experienced real success. For instance, the Coalition for Educational Opportunities (CEO) formally adopted youth's curriculum vision as part of their alternative school proposal, which in turn informed the Eastern School District's (ESD) curriculum design for the proposed alternative school.

Inclusivity and representation are central themes within youth's subjectivities as change-agents. Acutely aware of their own experiences of exclusion, these youth allocated significant time and resources to soliciting, representing and being informed by a diversity of youth voices. In our action research projects youth created open youth forums, youth feedback sheets, conducted interviews, solicited the views of other youth on blogs, visited classrooms to engage youth in discussion, posted on graffiti walls and created feedback boxes. Youth are keenly aware of the need for multiple and on-going strategies to reach their peers and often they express feeling very energized and engaged by this aspect of the research process. This sense of commitment to represent a diversity of youth voices is matched by youth's desires to ensure that their peers' ideas are put into practice. For instance, youth often choose to develop multiple strategies to represent and communicate their findings. They traverse boundaries between the logical-linear and the creative-metaphoric to create forms of outreach and dissemination which are multi-media blendings of power point, poetry, visual arts, music, journaling and graffiti walls. Effective representation, however, is not viewed as an end in itself, rather it is viewed by youth as a tool they can use to strengthen their access, power and ability to implement their findings. Putting their findings into practice are framed by youth as acts of hope, as demonstration of the relevancy of their peers' ideas and as evidence that change is possible. Here again, for youth to 'know' means to 'act'. Youth live and create understandings of research which are deeply tied to acting on knowing.

In our work with youth, we have also witnessed youth's agency as persistent problem-solvers and reflectors-in-action. In tackling barriers they encounter we have remarked on the ways they often treat obstacles as opportunities. Youth have, for instance, responded to the constant movement and shifting in their own, and in their peers' day-to-day educational lives by re-orienting and shifting plans to connect to the realities of the present-moment context,

atmosphere, possibilities and audience. Here youth have been leaders in positioning research within a model of continual action -- action that is initiated through planning, but then informed in its implementation by the present-moment.

Youth Agency in the Lives of Youth

Our understanding of youth agency has been enhanced by listening to youth share their navigation of inequities which present themselves across their day-to-day contexts -- actions youth often take-for-granted because they are so familiar to their own daily lives. Just as youth's knowledge was rooted in their experiences of inequities, challenges and strengths, so too, was their action. Youth's understandings and practices of action were often shaped by forms of agency they engaged in relation to these issues in their daily lives.

Youth relayed a variety of experiences of educational change actions, such as: a) standing up to teachers and peers when negatively labelled; b) advocating for appropriate supports and resources for themselves and their sibling and/or children; c) challenging school administrators on inequities within school policies and practices; d) proposing ideas and solutions to school barriers they face; e) providing forms of social support for students who are treated disrespectfully at school; f) creating spaces in school to improve feelings of belonging; and g) leaving mainstream schools to find educational contexts which better reflect their strengths, needs and visions as learners.

As seen here, youth's actions to minimize, challenge, subvert and/or transform unjust and disenfranchising practices and ideologies in school can be seen, at least in part, as normative aspects of their school relations. These acts are often isolated and lost in the shuffle of larger school power relations. Action research provides a site from which youth can re-claim and re-constitute their histories of advocacy. Further, it gives value to the ways in which youth's current educational change initiatives draw from these experiences of action.

Conclusion

By forming partnerships with youth in educational change projects, educators have the opportunity to deepen their understanding of youth as 'knowers' and 'actors'. Educators stand to gain first-hand experience of youth's competency, passion and leadership as agents of educational change. Currently our education system fails to position youth, and in particular, marginalized youth, as key partners in educational change initiatives in this province. Material and discursive conditions in education still (predominately) position educational reform as something that is enacted by adult stakeholders (e.g., educators, parents, business and community leaders) on youth's behalf. As educators, policy-makers and administrators, however, we must realize that we cannot become leaders of social justice reform in education without embracing the leadership of youth who are experiencing the very inequities we are trying to remove from present-day educational contexts.

Through our action research and coalition partnerships with youth we have had the privilege of transforming our own understandings of educational change. In this paper, we have offered our own experiences with youth as 'knowers' and 'change-agents' as one illustration of the need for transformation within our education system. Youth, and in particular youth who are not thriving in school, need to become our partners and allies in conceptualizing and enacting educational

change. In doing so, our ability as educators to embody our commitments to democracy and social justice in education will become deepened and energized.

References

- Angus, L. (2006). Educational leadership and the imperative of including student voices, student interests, and students' lives in the mainstream. *International Journal of Educational Leadership in Education*, 9 (4), 369-379.
- Archer, L., Halsall, A., & Hollingworth, S. (2007). Class, gender, (hetero) sexuality and schooling: paradoxes within working-class girls' engagement with education and post-16 aspirations. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 28 (2), 165-180.
- Arnot, M. & Reay, D. (2007). A sociology of pedagogic voice: Power, inequality and pupil consultation. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 28 (3), 311-325.
- Berry, K.S. (1998). Nurturing the imagination of resistance: Young adults as creators of knowledge. In J.L. Kincheloe & S.R. Steinberg (Eds.), *Unauthorized methods: Strategies for critical teaching* (pp. 43-55). New York: Routledge.
- Bhimji, F. (2005). Latina/o youth contest for equity in the public school system in Boyle Heights, Los Angeles: A political and theoretical perspective. In H. Helve & G. Holm (Eds.), *Contemporary youth research: Local expressions and global connections* (pp. 135-146). Hants, England: Ashgate Publishing.
- Bolmeier, E.C. (2006). Six steps to pupil participation in democratic school control. *The Clearing House*, 79 (5), 198-201.
- Checkoway, B. & Gutierrez, L. (2006). Youth participation and community change. An introduction. In B. Checkoway & L. Gutierrez (Eds.), *Youth participation and community change* (pp. 1-10). New York: Haworth Press.
- Checkoway, B. & Gutierrez, L. (2006). *Youth participation and community change*. New York: Haworth Press.
- Checkoway, B. & Richards-Schuster, K. (2006). Youth participation for educational reform in low-income communities of color. In S. Ginwright, P. Noguera, & J. Cammarota (Eds.), *Beyond Resistance! Youth Activism and Community Change: New Democratic Possibilities for Practice and Policy for America's Youth* (pp. 319-332). New York: Routledge.
- Davis, B., Sumara, D., & Luce-Kapler, R. (2000). *Engaging minds: Learning and teaching in a complex world*. New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Publishers.
- Doll, W., & Gough, N. (Eds.) (2002). *Curriculum visions*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Fine, M. (1991). *Framing Dropouts*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Gale, T. & Densmore, K. (2003). *Engaging teachers: Towards a radical democratic agenda for schooling*. Philadelphia: Open University Press.

- Gardner, M. & Crockwell, A. (2006). Engaging democracy and social justice in creating educational alternatives: An account of voice and agency for marginalized youth and the community. *The Innovation Journal: The Public Sector Innovation Journal*, 11(3), 1-19.
- Ginwright, S., Noguera, P., & Cammarota, J. (2006). *Beyond Resistance! Youth Activism and Community Change*. New York, N.Y.: Taylor & Francis Group.
- Golombek, S. (2006). Children as citizens. In B. Checkoway & L. Gutierrez (Eds.), *Youth participation and community change* (pp. 11-30). New York: Haworth Press.
- Guajardo, F., Pérez, D., Guajardo, M., Dávila, E., Ozuna, J., Saenz, M., & Casaperalta, N. (2006). Youth voice and the Llano Grande Centre. *International Journal of Educational Leadership in Education*, 9 (4), 359-362.
- Jenning, L., Parra-Medina, D., Messias, D., & McLoughlin, K. (2006). Towards a critical social theory of youth empowerment. In B. Checkoway & L. Gutierrez's (Eds.), *Youth participation and community change* (pp. 31-56). New York: Haworth Press.
- Kincheloe, J., Slattery, P. & Steinberg, S. (2000). *Contextualizing teaching*. New York: Longman.
- Kirk, G., & Okazawa-Rey, M. (2004). *Women's Lives: Multicultural Perspective* (3rd ed.). Boston, Mass: McGraw-Hill.
- Loder, T. (2006). Why we can't leave public schools behind: The inseparable legacy of public education and American democracy. *Educational researcher*, 35 (5), 30-35.
- Nygreen, K., Ah Kwon, S., & London, J. (2006). Urban youth building community: Social change and participatory research in schools, homes, and community-based organizations. In B. Checkoway & L. Gutierrez (Eds.), *Youth participation and community change* (pp. 107-124). New York: Haworth Press.
- Osberg, J., Pope, D., & Galloway, M. (2006). Students matter in school reform: Leaving fingerprints and becoming leaders. *International Journal of Leadership in Education*, 9 (4), 329-343.
- Slattery, P. (2006). *Curriculum development in the postmodern era*. New York: Routledge.
- Suleiman, A., Soleimanpour, S., & London, J. (2006). Youth action for health through youth-led research. In B. Checkoway & L. Gutierrez (Eds.). *Youth participation and community change* (pp. 125-146). New York: Haworth Press.
- Taylor, Y. (2007). Brushed behind the bike shed: Working-class lesbians' experiences of school. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 28 (3), 349-362.
- Torre, M. & Fine, M. (2006). Researching and resisting: Democratic policy research by and for youth. In S. Ginwright, P. Noguera & J. Cammarota (Eds.), *Beyond Resistance! Youth Activism and Community Change: New Democratic Possibilities for Practice and Policy for America's Youth* (pp. 269-285). New York: Routledge.

- Wilson, S. (1998). Curriculum theorising amongst secondary school students. *Curriculum Perspectives*, 18 (3), 23-32.
- Wotherspoon, T. & Schissel, B. (2001). The business of placing Canadian children and youth "at-risk". *Canadian Journal of Education*, 26 (3), 321-339.
- Yohalem, N. & Martin, S. (2007). Building the evidence base for youth engagement: Reflections on youth and democracy. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 35 (6), 807-810.