BRINGING THE VOICES OF YOUTH TO THE TABLE: A SOCIAL JUSTICE YOUTH DEVELOPMENT APPROACH

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Abstract

There is a justified increasing call for the inclusion of youth voices in school leadership as a mechanism to promote socially just changes in school. At the same time, research has demonstrated the ways in which the oppressive and hegemonic structures present in schools and society work to undermine the ability of youth to develop their critical consciousness and engage in the necessary praxis required to bring their critical voices to school leadership. This critical qualitative case study investigates the ways a student led and developed Social Justice Youth Summit (SJYS) supported a team of high school students in developing their social justice identities (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002). Findings highlight how involvement in the process supported a group of students from one urban school district in honing their self, social, and global awareness in ways that simultaneously deepened youth awareness of oppressive forces acting in their lives and honed their ability to bring their voices to bear on school and community leadership. SJYS youth leaders were able to center their voices in formal and informal school improvement in ways that pushed schools, teachers, and students towards more equitable practices. Additionally, the very act of planning and implementing a social justice summit for 200 local high school students represents a meaningful enactment of student voice.

Introduction

Schools could and should be a forceful change agent to transform society, but all too often, schools seem to entrench dominant ideologies and perpetuate narratives of oppression through policies and practices such as academic tracking, discipline referrals, and assignments to special education (Chapman, 2013; Hehir, 2002; Kahlifa, 2010; Marx & Larson, 2012; Oakes & Saunders, 2008; Pollack & Zirkel, 2013; Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Peterson, 2002). Schools often fall into the trap of "past practice," so although demographics change and student needs are different, the system has a hard time keeping up and keeping pace (Ladson-Billings, 2006). Unless school leaders, district leaders, and systems embrace education for social justice—not just through the words of a mission statement, but through actions—many discriminatory and unjust practices will continue.

While there are no guarantees that education for social justice will lead to socially just outcomes, the pursuit is well worth the effort (Bogotch, 2008). Schools should cultivate, educate, and empower youth to lead flourishing lives (Grant, 2012). School leaders are essential in ensuring schools reach Grant's calling to support youth in flourishing and engage in socially just practices (Capper, 1993; Dantley & Tillman, 2006; Theoharis, 2007). Within the field of socially just school leadership, the practice of including the voices of youth in leadership is receiving increasing attention as a potential mechanism for pushing schools towards more equitable practices (Fielding 2004; Mansfield, 2014; Mitra, 2007). Student voice in school leadership can be seen as seeking youth knowledge of areas in need of improvement, bringing the voices of youth to the fore during the decision making process, and creating spaces for youth to collaborate with staff during school improvement processes. Additionally, student voice scholars have pointed to a need for schools to build the capacity of students to engage in leadership—the process of critiquing and protesting oppressive or unjust school practices (Mitra & Gross; 2009). However, as Ginwright and Cammarota (2002) demonstrate, marginalized youth are constantly acted upon by oppressive social forces, school being one of these, but that "youth still have the capacity to respond to forms of social control" (p. 86). So, for marginalized youth to fully participate in anti-oppressive school improvement there is a need to support their identity development as agents of change (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002). For youth leadership opportunities to be truly successful and bring the actual voices of marginalized students to the table, these experiences need to explicitly address the social justice identity development of marginalized youth.

This article highlights how one school district was able to support youth in developing their social justice identities and how that identity development supported youth in engaging in school and community transformative leadership. The specific research questions guiding this study include:

1. How does participating in the Leadership Team of a Social Justice Youth Summit support youth in developing their social justice identities?
2. How did the development of the social justice identities of youth empower them to bring their voices to school and community change?

The highlighted school district, Central City Public Schools, sponsored an annual Social Justice Youth Summit that was youth-planned and delivered. This two-day event created a space for youth to develop their social justice identities by providing a mechanism for youth

to shed the historical legacy of school-sponsored oppression and cultivate their leadership abilities.

Social Justice Youth Development

In their work on social justice youth development, Ginwright and Cammarota (2002) outline how to support marginalized youth in developing their social justice identities while highlighting problems with more traditional youth development. Unfortunately, because youth are traditionally viewed solely as students or participants in certain programs, instead of members of the community at large, youth are often unseen or ignored (Christens & Dolan, 2011; Ginwright, Cammarota, and Noguera, 2005). And, youth are traditionally viewed as problems to be fixed rather than as social assets. This pushed many to focus on preventing, changing, and fixing youth instead of shifting energy and resources towards activities to support the healthy development of youth and ways to bring the voices of youth to forefront of organizational change. An alternative approach, referred to as the possibility-driven perspective, did not do any better to move past a deficit-driven model (Ginwright, Cammarota, & Noguera, 2005). This model switched the focus from addressing problems youth face to developing youth through a focus on youth assets, but still emphasized changing the individual—not positioning youth as activists and agents of change.

These traditional youth development models are problematic for two reasons. First, neither model addresses the social, political, and economic contexts of youth. Ginwright, Cammarota, and Noguera (2005) argue that a focus on individuals and individual behaviors are not aligned to social theory and the analysis of youth in context. This primary focus on the individual, and not the social, political, and economic contexts in which youth live, fails to challenge the policies, practices, and places from which oppression stems. Both perspectives on youth development, problem-driven and possibility-driven, see youth as "objects of policy rather than as actors who possess the rights and abilities to shape policy" (Ginwright, Cammarota, & Noguera, 2005, p. 29). These models require the youth to change or be changed instead of shining a light on and advocating for change of the systemic forces that oppress youth.

Ginwright and Cammarota (2002) push the youth development field to move past these traditional models to "include practices that encourage youth to address the larger oppressive forces affecting them and their communities" (p. 87). Through an approach Ginwright and Cammarota call Social Justice Youth Development (SJYD), youth become aware of oppressive social contexts in which they live and build skills to respond, challenge, and dismantle those systemic barriers. This awareness is a necessary step if youth voices are to lead schools and districts to more equitable ends.

Ginwright and Cammarota's (2002) social justice youth development encourages practices that push youth to address the larger oppressive forces affecting them and their communities. SJYD provides researchers and practitioners a framework for understanding the actions students take, the community/social outcomes, and youth social justice outcomes. SJYD calls for both reflection and action and organizes this call for reflection and action into three levels: self-awareness, social awareness, and global awareness (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002). This social justice framework is a tool that can be used by socially just leaders in schools to empower youth with a new lens for examining both historical and contemporary

political, social, and economic problems. We believe that focusing on SJYD provides a tool to include the voices of students in school leadership in a way that moves schools towards socially just improvements because it "examines the processes by which urban youth contest, challenge, respond, and negotiate the use and misuses of power in their lives" (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002).

Developing Self-Awareness

The first level of the social justice youth development framework focuses on the development of self-awareness, which is based on critical consciousness. There is a strong literature base which argues that healthy youth development requires the formation of a critical consciousness (Campbell & Erbstein, 2012; Christens & Dolan, 2011; Ginwright, Cammarota, & Noguera, 2005; Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002). Freire (2000) popularized the term "conscientisation," which means an awakening of or an increase in consciousness. Referred to as an increased awareness of oppression and marginalization, critical consciousness is necessary for the development of individuals or groups acting in pursuit of social justice. An awareness of oppression is not enough; youth as individuals or in groups must be empowered to take action and lead in transformation efforts, not just in their schools, but also their communities (Brooks, 2012; Freire, 2000; Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002). Campbell and Erbstein (2012) argue that youth are a "powerful—if often untapped—resource in promoting community change that benefits children, youth, and families" (p. 63). When youth develop a critical consciousness, they have the ability to make sense of their world, explore forms of oppression, and engage in praxis around their new understandings—all of which are necessary in transformative leadership (Weiner, 2003).

This focus on self-awareness calls on youth to explore their identity and to come to terms with "socially induced fractures in their identities" (Cammarota, 2011, p. 833). Through this exploration youth unpack the way in which race, class, gender, sexuality, language, citizenship status, religion, ability, etc. create meaning in their lives and influence their worldview and experiences. Youth must challenge the existing, negative social messages and stereotypes by learning "to question the answers, not answer the questions, in order to take control of their lives" (Brooks, 2012, p. 23). Rubin (2007) argues that youth in diverse settings that emphasize the analysis of inequities develop a "desire to become actively involved in social change" (p. 476). The micro and macro-aggressions unjustly experienced by youth of color rightfully frustrates and angers youth (Rubin, 2007). The development of critical consciousness provides minoritized youth with a lens to become aware of the oppressive role of systems and structures. Through self-awareness youth can critique the stereotypes and work towards a positive self-image. Self-awareness is empowering as it provides an opportunity to heal wounds and see their identities in a new light and is a necessary first step to praxis (Cammarota, 2011; Freire, 2000). The development of this self-awareness positions students to identity potentially oppressive structures in their schools and understand the ways they can use their voices to disrupt these oppressive structures.

Developing Awareness of Others

The second level of the social justice youth development framework, awareness of others, emphasizes increasing youths' knowledge base about social issues and building their cognitive skills that promote critical thinking, investigating, analysis, and problem solving (Cammarota, 2011; Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002). This level of the framework emphasizes the healing process for youth who have lived with the effects of oppressive systems such as inequitable schools, discrimination in housing and work, harmful stereotypes in the media, and negative interactions with law enforcement (Bonilla-Silva, 2010). Space must be created where youth have the opportunity to listen, share, and learn from and with one another with the goal of healing. Through praxis, students explore "their own and others' experiences with oppression and privilege" (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002, p. 88). With an understanding of the space and time in which they live, youth develop a better sense of how institutions could transform to create more socially just outcomes for the community (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002). Collins (2013) agrees, stating that when youth learn to question the status quo and confront structural barriers, they are able to take action to solve community problems. SJYD stresses praxis over community service and encourages youth to channel energy into developing methods and strategies for addressing authentic and relevant problems. Social awareness cannot be compared to traditional forms of community service such as volunteering to help a particular group or organization. Instead, social awareness positions youth as change agents who organize and use their power to transform a group or organization. Again, as with self-awareness, we can see how supporting youth in sharpening their social awareness demonstrates the potential to increase the ability of students to lead transformative school improvement.

Developing Global Awareness

The third level of the social justice youth development framework, global awareness, supports youth in understanding and analyzing global issues. Exploring the causes and effects of colonialism across space and time provides a way for youth to see the often invisible dominant paradigms. Youth begin to demonstrate empathy and a sense of connectedness with marginalized populations around the world. Through this development of global awareness, youth can come to see the world as a place of possibility and change (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002). This level of awareness "involves understanding how oppression affects the lives of others while contributing to social justice practice that counters this oppression" (Cammarota, 2011, p. 834). Global awareness entails youth understanding how oppression influences the lives of others, outside of their community. Cammarota (2001) posits that when youth feel empowered to improve the lives of others, they develop a confidence in making positive changes to their own lives. Through global awareness, youth develop a larger sense of purpose for their praxis. Developing empathy for others can lead to a desire to improve society for all. (Cammarota, 2011).

The questions then become, "How might we create spaces for marginalized youth to develop social justice identities?" and, "How do we support them in using that new identity in bringing their voice to school and community change?" The sections that follow outline how a medium-sized urban school district in the Midwest was able to create this space and

opportunity through the development of a Social Justice Youth Summit that local youth planned and implemented with the support of two teachers.

Methods

This single-case study (Yin, 2011) employed a critical qualitative methodology (Cannella & Lincoln, 2011; Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2011) to understand the ways that a school sponsored Social Justice Youth Summit (SJYS) supported a group of youth in developing their social justice identities and how that identity development empowered youth to bring their voices to school and community change. Sources of data for this study included focus groups with students on the SJYS Leadership Team, interviews with district teachers responsible for the SJYS, participant observations of relevant events, and artifacts including media releases and program documents. This research is part of a larger project assessing the impacts of a program, RunCentralCity, designed to center the voices and experiences of marginalized youth on their educational experiences (Please see Authors, 2016a; Authors, 2016b; Authors; 2015 for more detail). Similarly, RunCentralCity and the Social Justice Youth Summit were purposefully selected (Patton, 2002) for this study.

Description of the Case

Central City is a medium-sized urban center in the Midwest with a population of approximately 250,000. Central City School District has almost 35,000 students across over 60 schools, of which six high schools. Demographically, Central City Schools are primarily students of color, with 44 percent of students identifying as white; 24 percent LatinX; 18 percent Black; seven percent Asian; six percent multiracial; and one percent Native American. Additionally, 18 percent of students receive special education services, 19 percent receive ELL services, and just shy of 70 percent of students receive free or reduced lunch. As a district, Central City openly and regularly communicates an embrace of the community in which it is situated and is striving to identify ways to better serve and support marginalized social groups within the community. The venue of student voice is one area in which the district has invested towards this end.

RunCentralCity (RCC) is a program in Central City Schools intended to support youth in developing their critical consciousness and engages youth in bringing their voices and actions to justice-based school and community change. RCC supports over 120 students across all schools in Central City ranging from elementary school to high school. Their programming includes a spoken word club for elementary students, which is run by high school students, an urban arts program, a high school spoken word program, a youth advisory board, and two academic classes for high school students entitled Urban Leadership I and Urban Leadership II. RCC programming is run out of a high school centrally located in Central City that houses all special programming within the district such as the auto mechanics program or specialized AP courses that are too small to be offered at individual high schools. One of, if not the most recognized, programs that RCC has developed is their two-day youth conference, Social Justice Youth Summit, that aims to bring local youth into conversations about social justice and school/community change.

Social Justice Youth Summit (SJYS) is a two-day event that engages approximately 200 youth from across Central City high schools in learning about and participation in

collaborative conversations around issues of social justice in their local community and schools. Logistically, during the first day of SJYS, participating students attend town hall meetings that focus on issues of social justice relevant to both local and larger contexts. During the primary year of investigation, the topics for town hall meetings included the N-word, impacts of colorism on communities of color, the news and media's impact on the world, LGBTQI rights, and white privilege. The second day of the SJYS includes artistic performances by local youth related to topics discussed in town hall meetings and artistic presentations by nationally renowned artists. Artistic performances can include sculptures, paintings, dance performances, or spoken word performances. One of the defining features of SJYS is that it is almost exclusively a youth space—students in RCC's Urban Leadership classes select topics, research the topics, plan the town hall meetings, create art installations, and recruit national artists. Additionally, as means to create a safer learning space for youth, adult presence at the actual SJYS is kept to a minimum; district personnel are on sight, but are not in the actual rooms where the town halls take place. A team of approximately 40 students who represent the six high schools in Central City are charged with planning the SJYS each year. As part of the planning and delivery of SJYS, involved youth collectively enter a space that allows them to develop their social justice identities and, relatedly, develop their voices as school and community leaders.

Background on the Authors

The first and second authors of this manuscript are professors in educational leadership programs with strong commitments to socially just school leadership. Both undertook this research through a lens of engaged scholarship with simultaneous goals of supporting the work of RunCentralCity and developing conceptual understandings of RunCentralCity's practices that could further inform the field of socially just school leadership. The third author is a graduate student in educational leadership who also served as a curriculum coordinator in Central City during data collection. Her work in Central City Schools and future research focus on developing academically rigorous learning spaces for traditionally marginalized youth.

Overview of Data Collection

The first two authors collected data for this case study over an academic year spanning the development and planning of the third annual SJYS, the delivery of SJYS, and youth reflection on the process. While the third author did not participate in data collection, she had an active role in data analysis and conceptualizing and writing this manuscript. Data collection during the planning of the SJYS included participant observations of student planning sessions, collection of documents, and interviews with teachers responsible for the high school course where the SJYS was planned. Since the SJYS is a youth-only space; researchers opted to respect this norm and collected data related to the actual SJYS through focus groups with youth leaders where they were asked to recall the events of the two-day summit. These focus groups also included opportunities for youth to reflect on their involvement with the SJYS and major areas of personal growth through the process. In total, three focus groups were held with approximately 30 youth; 26 identifying as students of color and all qualifying for free and reduced lunch. Each focus group lasted approximately 75 minutes. Beyond focus groups interviews were conducted with both teachers responsible for RunCentralCity and SJYS; one

formal interview was conducted with each teacher lasting just over 60 minutes and multiple informal interviews after observations. Informal interviews varied in length and were intended to make sense of observations. Formal interviews were intended to gain historical understandings of the SJYS, intended outcomes, and general thoughts on how planning and delivering the SJYS impacted youth leaders.

Data Analysis

We entered our data analysis with a theory-driven set of provisional codes (Miles & Huberman, 2013) based on Ginwright and Cammorta's (2002) conceptualization of social justice youth development. As such, the first step in our data analysis process was to review our data through the lens of these provisional codes. It is important to note that our data analysis and subsequent representation unapologetically centered the voices of youth in general, and youth of color in particular. As a result, focus group data drove our initial data analyses with other sources of data serving to contextualize, deepen, or support analysis of student focus groups. Beyond our provisional coding, we continued to make sense of our data through axial codes and eventual theoretical/conceptual categories related to our research questions (Miles & Huberman, 2013). These theoretical and conceptual categories served to structure the findings and discussion section of the paper. As a means to increase trustworthiness, the first and third authors engaged in individual data analysis and then collective discussions of data analysis procedures and results were held with all three authors. This process allowed the research team to intentionally participate in sense-making related to bringing individual analyses together into one joint analysis of available data (Houghton, Case, Shaw, & Murphy, 2013).

Findings

The sections that follow highlight the ways in which participation in the planning and delivery of the SJYS supported youth in developing the social justice identities and then demonstrates how that identity development supported youth in centering their voices in socially just school and community improvement. Ginwright and Cammarota's (2002) model of social justice youth development serves as our organizer for the remaining findings section as their model served as our theoretical framework during our sense-making process.

Developing Self-awareness

Social justice youth development highlights that an important step to marginalized youth sharpening their critical consciousness and praxis is the development of their self-awareness (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002). Within the self-awareness stage, youth engage in examination and exploration of their personal and cultural identities, develop an understanding of power, privilege, and oppression, and how those forces threaten their identities and increase their ability for self-determination. As part of their planning and implementing the SJYS, students were able to develop the type of critical self-awareness foregrounded in the social justice youth development model and later leverage that self-awareness in centering their voices in school improvement processes. Specifically, youth participating in the SJYS planning

and implementation processes developed self-awareness by engaging with personal reflection and learning, in addition to developing a sense of self-purpose.

Personal reflection and learning. Participating youth were able to embark on a journey of personal reflection and learning via determining focus and selecting topics for the SJYS. In addition, participants personally researched selected topics and attended team meetings where learning was shared. In one meeting, Jasmine shared her thoughts on this process, saying, "I feel like I learned a lot. I mean we had to research this stuff and talk about [it]. It all made me think about my life and who I am." Students were also able to connect their personal learning to their eventual ability to engage in school and community change as Juan and Marcus stated in conversation with one another:

> Juan: "I just feel like when I first came here [SJYS Planning Team], I had the tools to help people and listen and everything. But, I didn't feel like I needed to and I learned it's important to listen, it is important to use your gifts and knowledge—during SJYS, or at school, or in the community—to make a change. I just didn't see myself like that before.
> Marcus: "Yeah, I always felt like I had the tools, like Juan said, but I wouldn't say or do anything. I have a mentality of, 'It's none of my business.' So, I said nothing about it or didn't do nothing. I was taking care of other things, things I thought mattered. Now, I'm going out there and saying things, calling people on stuff, telling teachers they got to do better. I'll be respectful, but I'm gonna say something. Being part of SJYS pushed me to be comfortable with me and say these things."

Thus, being part of the SJYS Planning Team also supported their identity as school and community leaders.

In addition, youth openly discussed how the responsibility for identifying study topics also encouraged them to reflect on their personal lives and pressing issues in their schools and communities. Natasha shared the following:

> It was hard to pick our topics. Ms. Tyler and Mr. Adams [the teachers who supervised SJYS] told us to go home and think about the issues that impact our lives. They wanted us to think about how we think society is unjust. That got me thinking about things that happened to me.

Once the students brought their personal lists to the team, they were asked to individually reflect on the combined list and identify and rank the five most important to Central City students. Jasmine noted, "I was kind of shocked by the list, but realized, 'No, this stuff impacts me all the time.' "

In addition to determining the focus of the group, the youth engaged in critical reflection via artistic performances and town hall meetings. Carmen shared how planning a town hall on colorism forced her to reflect, saying, "Working on [the colorism town hall] got me to reflect and look at myself. I don't do that too often." In discussing his work in preparing his spoken word performance, David shared the following: "I know when I prepared my poetry, I was thinking about things that've happened to me. Being able to write and spit something about a controversial topic, it goes to who I am as a person." Thus, both selecting

topics and preparing the actual SJYS activities created a space for youth to reflect on themselves, their multiple identities, and how those identities impact their daily lives. Marcus verbalized it best: "I have to say, the whole thing helped me, to be honest with you, helped me discover myself. In discovering myself, I feel like I can help people discover themselves and change things."

Beyond self-reflection, SJYS Planning Team members also engaged in personal learning that supported the development of their self-awareness. Personal learning primarily occurred through youth-led research, planning the town hall meetings, and developing artistic performances. Raphael discussed what he learned in researching the media's influence on society, saying, "I didn't know how jacked up the media is. They don't talk about us [LatinX populations] in positive ways at all. They keep selling the same story." Jasmine shared a similar learning experience about the use of the N-word, "I made a sculpture to go along with the N-word town hall. I just kept finding stuff online, it was hard to settle on something to make. I wanted it to be positive." Throughout the planning process, youth were constantly learning about critical topics and how their discoveries were reflected in their individual lives. Moreover, this process facilitated collaborative conversations that helped youth in their learning and sense making. Finally, this new knowledge informed youth's aspirations for their schools and communities, ensuring that the SJYS had local relevance. Stacey highlighted the impact personal reflection and learning had on her self-awareness, saying, "I'm going to be an adult soon, and doing this, learning this stuff, it makes me see things differently. I guess I see my place better."

Developed sense of self-purpose. Many of the participating youth discussed how their participation in the SJYS Planning Team shifted or refined their sense of self-purpose. For example, they more strongly affiliated with being a leader of socially just change in their schools and communities and communicated a moral commitment to engage in the necessary work. Manny commented on this broadly by stating, "I feel very engaged and positive. It really made me engaged and wanting to make changes. If not us, who?" Carmen was more emotional in discussing how her sense of self-purpose was honed through participating, saying, "You come here [to planning meetings] and you realize you gotta do great things. I am responsible. I can't accept any less than that. Before this, I really focused on me and what I needed. Now, I want more." During all of the focus groups, youth spoke at length about their growing sense of self-purpose; and, that they saw this self-purpose being intricately connected to improving their schools and community. One focus group spent time discussing how this work was more for their younger siblings, cousins, or friends. Comments such as, "this isn't really for us," or, "we owe it to them [younger people]" were interspersed throughout the conversation.

Participants did not indicate specific aspects of their work on the SJYS Planning Team that supported them in honing or developing a justice-oriented sense of self-purposes. Instead, youth discussed this development as something that evolved and was spread throughout the process. Juan discussed how his justice-oriented sense of self-purpose was strengthened through leading a town hall discussion, saying, "When it was done, I was on such a high. I kind of said to myself, 'That was awesome, you got to keep doing this.' So, now I think I should keep pushing myself like that." Carmen shared that over the course of planning and implementation her sense of self-purpose shifted: "One day after class it hit me that I can do this. I want to be a teacher. People like me can be teachers." Dez talked more about how the

culmination of the entire process shifted his sense of purpose, saying, "I was thinking the other day, I realized, we're all affected by this stuff [SJYC topics], in one way or another. So, it's on us, on me, to do something about it." While their sense of self-purpose developed in different ways, the students overwhelmingly shared that going through the process sharpened their purpose towards social justice and, as a result, they were more committed to leading change in their schools and communities.

Developing Social Awareness

The second way youth participating on the SJYS Leadership Team were able to strengthen their voices for school and community leadership was through the development of their social awareness. Ginwright and Cammarota (2002) discuss that as youth develop their social and community awareness they begin to understand how their immediate social world functions in terms of power relationships, are able to critically think about their community and those power relationships, and develop an ideological structure of their social world. Through this development, youth are able to change personal, institutional, and community conditions through their voices and actions while feeling connected to something generative. As part of their participation in planning and delivering the SJYS, youth developed their social awareness in three ways: 1) The contextualization of the personal knowledge that they fostered as part of honing their awareness of self; 2) The realization that they are members of a coalition of youth focused on improving their communities; and 3) An understanding of the impacts they could have on their community and school system. Additionally, and most importantly, youth engaged their voices and power to impact change in their schools and community.

Contextualizing personal knowledge. As part of developing their personal awareness, youth leaders were able to gain personal knowledge around numerous issues of power, oppression, and injustice, such as the use of the N-word, or whiteness, but spaces were also created for the youth to bring that knowledge to bear on their social awareness. This was accomplished through contextualizing knowledge in ways that fostered youth understanding of localized injustices. Nadine discussed how she was able to make this connection, saying, "First, I was just learning about white privilege, I didn't know much about it. That got me thinking, I wondered how it happens in my school or in Central City." Courtney responded, "Yeah, I had to think about that for my poem. I couldn't talk about colorism and not talk about how it impacts me. People [students attending SJYS] need to relate to the stuff." David shared a similar idea about planning the town halls, saying, "We had to bring the ideas we were learning to Central City and our schools. I kinda felt like if we didn't do that, people wouldn't have left the town hall with anything to think about." It was clear that youth leaders developed their social awareness as part of designing the learning environments at SJYS and that they were able to draw connections from the learning they engaged in to develop their self-awareness and their community awareness.

Beyond contextualizing their understandings of oppression through developing learning environments for SJYS, youth leaders were also able generalize their personal learning to their local context. By this, we mean youth were able to question and push against local inequities that were not topics of the SJYS. Carmen highlighted this during a focus group:

> It's not just about me—I can't fight for the black community here, but not care about the LGBT community. You gotta care about it all. You can't say, "I support women, but not trans women, or not black women." That's crazy! Now I can just be all sophisticated like that.

Dez discussed the same process in a different focus group: "This [being on the SJYS Leadership Team] is just like a window into the whole wide world of corruption and social justice issues. This is just the beginning. There is so much work to do here." While Dez's comment may seem pessimistic or fatalistic, he stated with a sense of agency and verve demonstrating a desire to act, not resign. He demonstrated this later by stating, "Know that when you step into this, you need to take that step and continue that step to make Central City a better place." Youth leaders were supported to both contextualize their personal learning and research to their local context through the development of a SJYS learning environment, and generalize their learning about the N-word, colorism, white privilege, etc. to larger issues on oppression that were relevant and impactful in their schools and local communities; both supported youth in developing the social awareness and ability to enact local change.

Connecting with a local coalition. While Ginwright and Cammarota's (2002) model of social justice youth development foregrounds individual youth development, it does not explicitly foreclose the idea of developing individual identity amongst a group. Additionally, within social-awareness development, social justice youth development posits the importance of being part of something productive and valuable (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002). Members of the SJYS Leadership Team consistently framed their social awareness development in conjunction with ideas of coalition and affinity groups. Jasmine mentioned, "When you're talking about issues like the ones we talk about [SJYS topics], you start getting closer to the people in the room. [We] didn't really know each other before, but now we are in this together, fighting together." Juan discussed this notion of coalition in greater detail and highlighted how it supported youth in developing his social awareness.

> We have a right to be angry, we don't got to just be happy. If you're sad, you can be sad, if you mad, you can be mad. You can be anything you need to be [during planning meetings], we're still going to love you. That helps us, it helped me, to realize that I got a right to be pissed at what's going on in my school. I'm not crazy, this is happening.

Jasmine highlighted this feeling of coalition supports youth in fighting injustices together, but Juan goes even further; he discussed how being in a coalition where he is provided space to be angry and that his anger is accepted as legitimate helps him to understand that oppression is real. It is not a large jump to assume that without legitimation of Juan's feelings of oppression or inequity that he would be unlikely to actively bring his voice to school or community improvement. Nadine captured this idea with her comment: "I've been part of this and all of this energy surrounds me so it's not as hard for me to act. I know we're all in it."

In addition to seeing membership in a coalition as a component of their social awareness, youth leaders also were quick to recognize how their newly formed coalition sharpened and grew their social awareness. Blake opened this conversation in a focus group while discussing the shifting demographics of Central City, saying, "I want to say, Central City is getting more and more diverse each year and because of that, people, teens, and the youth

have to be more aware of their surroundings. We have to keep pushing each other to see things and fight back against this stuff [racism]." Manny discussed how this peer-driven growth in social awareness worked during the planning of SJYS:

> People give their performances, then we have to critique it and we had some time where we have some harsh feedback. But, we just let them marinate in their sauce, just get their engine running and get the motor running and finish their product. In the end it makes everyone better and we all experience those critiques—that's just the creative process, it's intense! When I got my feedback, I was pushed to think more and find ways to make my poem more tight and talk more about the stuff going on in our community.

Other youth discussed how peer feedback on their art installations or what they had planned for their town hall presentations supported them in developing the awareness of the local community and how they could act as resisters to local inequities.

Understanding potential impacts. Beyond connecting with a coalition and contextualizing their knowledge base, youth leaders of the SJYS were able to develop their social awareness through recognizing the potential impacts of their actions. While similar to engaging in actual community and school improvement actions discussed below, this was different in that youth discussed more hypothetical actions in which they could engage. Stacey pointed this out during a focus group: "I feel like we can't save everyone. But, SJYS is a way to save some people and make some change. People [students attending SJYS] are going to go back to their schools and be different—that is something." A conversation between the first author and Erica provides more insight into youth thinking:

> Erica: "I feel like everyone can leave SJYS feeling more empowered to make changes in the community and at their schools. And, the more youth that feel empowered, the more change that is brought among the community. Because they would say like, 'The youth are the future of the community.' If they were more empowered, they actually feel like they can make change."
> David: "What would the results of all of the people being engaged or empowered be?"
> Erica: "Bigger, better changes. More activists making Central City better, doing more for our community."

This idea was present during planning meetings as well. During one of the final planning meetings, the group of students putting the final touches on the N-word town hall excitedly discussed how they felt that students at the SJYS would respond to the town hall and that they felt less students would say the N-word at school. Equally important, these youths began talking about their future roles and impacts as activists. Marcus shared, "Can't you all see us doing this after SJYS? We can keep these conversations going and do something bigger in Central City." Other students shared that they felt like SJYS was a starting point and that they now see the need to engage in community and school level activism to support equitable changes.

Engaging in critical action and reflection—praxis. Lastly, youth participating in the SJYS Leadership team were able to sharpen their social awareness through engagement in critical reflection and action—or the Freirean idea of praxis. Ginwright and Cammarota (2002) clearly articulate the need for youth to engage in praxis as a valuable step in developing their social justice identities, social awareness and personal wellness necessary to engage in fruitful transformative leadership. A clear example of youth leaders practicing praxis was in the very development and implementation of the SJYS. Throughout the entire process, youth were constantly engaged in the cyclical acts of reflection and action. For example, when the youth discussed how through their poetry they were able to take their general learning about one of the selected SJYS topics, then contextualize that knowledge, then write a poem that had local meaning, then present their poem to peer critics, then revise the poem, and finally perform the poem, the youth were not just taking action or reflecting—they were critically reflecting and acting in an iterative process. This same process was true for the individuals who created art installations and designed town hall meetings.

A more powerful example of critical reflection and action that SJYS Leaders engaged in is to look at ways that leaders were able to bring their voices to school improvement throughout their schools and district. In many ways, this represents the ultimate expression of youth voice in school leadership as these students were often not asked to bring their voices into most of these spaces—they saw an inequity and raised their voice. Blake discussed how he pushed his teacher and principal to engage in a more culturally relevant curriculum in an interaction with Natasha and Jasmine:

> Blake: "They need to be more culturally, we're working a cultural continuum thing to try and make teachers more culturally proficient. I think that's the problem. Public Schools is so white-washed, when I go, all they read is Shakespeare and Othello. I don't read no Latino authors, I don't read no immigrant from Turkey. I always reading white-people stuff. How can you see yourself being strong, being independent, being black if you don't see other strong independent people like you?"
> Natasha: "We get one day!"
> Jasmine: "Ruby Bridges, Rosa Parks, and then it's not even the whole story."
> Natasha: "They take the whole semester to teach you about Shakespeare, but one day to teach you about Rosa Parks."
> Blake: "I don't remember one day at my school when they talked about Black history."
> David: "So what did you do?"
> Blake: "You cannot allow things like that to happen. I check my teachers and school. I don't get disrespectful, but I said something and pushed them."
> Jasmine: "Inside the classroom, outside the classroom, in your communities. I think we don't hold our teachers accountable for some things, and cultural proficiency is one of [the] things that we need to hold them accountable for. We have to speak up, we are speaking up."

Another example that Stacey shared centered on her standing up to students at an assembly recognizing athletes. During the announcement of the women's soccer team students began saying heterosexist comments about one of the players, which school staff ignored. Stacey described her response: "I told them to stop making those comments, that those comments did

not belong in our school, and to be better. They stopped. Not sure they won't do it again, but it's a start." A final example occurred six months after the SJYS, a group of the students involved in the SJYS planning learned of what they perceived as a racist and discriminatory immigration policy being proposed at the national level and openly supported by their State governor, so they took action. According to Mr. Adams, one of the lead teachers of RunCentralCity programming:

> I got a text from them at like 4:00 in the morning saying they were planning a walkout from all district high schools and potentially some of the suburban schools. They assured me it would be peaceful and that the youth walking out were going to walk to the State Capitol building in protest [Central City is the state capitol]. They did. We supported them, but they did. A few hundred students from across the city and three suburban high schools walked out of their schools. I mean, they made that happen in a couple hours, at 4:00 a.m.!

While the walkout served as the opening step, this group of students continued to press on the school district and School Board until the School Board made Central City School District a sanctuary district. Through these three leadership actions, and others that space limitations prohibit us from discussing, it is clear that youth involved in planning the SJYS were able to develop their social awareness in a way that supported critical reflection and action.

Developing Awareness of Others

The final way that youth leaders of the SJYS were able to develop their social justice identities and capacity for bringing their voice to school leadership was by developing their awareness of others. Ginwright and Cammarota (2002) go further in their discussion around awareness of others as a type of *global* awareness where youth develop their ability to empathize with oppressed people throughout the world and foster their understandings of historical forces of oppression such as capitalism and colonialism. While involvement in the SJYS leadership team had supported youth in developing their awareness of others, it was probably the least centered area of social justice youth development in the process. Much of the growth amongst youth was concentrated in their knowledge acquisition and connection of global issues, but there were places where youth brought their voices to the table on issues of global oppression.

Through research on the different topics included in the SJYS, youth leaders were able to develop their understandings and knowledge of globally oppressive actions. This was particularly true of their research around the media influence in society and the N-word. During one planning meeting, students were discussing the history of the N-word and were sharing new knowledge that had come across during their research. Blake energetically shared with the group how the N-word has evolved over time and that he read throughout history, "people have grouped folks of color into different groups to keep them down. Not just here, but across the world." Other students then talked about how racism is not just a U.S. institution, but has global impacts. Carmen then brought up the *Fair & Lovely* cream that is sold in places around the world and how that connects to their topic of colorism, and is "racist as all get out." The students were not able to generate a complete or fully complex understanding of racism as a

worldwide force or its differential impacts in different spaces, but they were developing this awareness.

Within their research on the media's influence in society, youth were able to initiate their awareness of globalized oppression through capitalism. One particular conversation during a planning session included a lengthy conversation about how the media portrays people of color from around the world. At one point, Juan interjected, "They [the media] show people as jokes. If you from Africa, they show as uneducated, if you from Asia they show you a tech person or cab driver. That makes no sense." Students then started discussing how the media portrays people from different cultures or countries in characterized ways and why the media engages in that practice. Jasmine stated, "They want to keep people down, then we don't have to pay them." Jasmine was making the connection that if the media shows people from Asia or Africa as less than human, then there is less push to pay workers from those countries a respectful salary. The group did not continue through this analysis or include it in their town hall on the media, but they were beginning to hone their awareness of how the media perpetuates oppression, and racialized oppression in particular, of people living outside of the United States.

Youth leading the SJYS were also able to bring their voices into a small number of issues connected to global awareness — the primary one being the walkout and subsequent Board of Education action labeling Central City a Sanctuary School District discussed above. This example fits into both community awareness and global awareness because it was motivated by ICE raids in Central City and the recognition of the importance of accepting Syrian and other global refugees. In reality, this example demonstrates how the youth were able to see how global injustices and local injustices are often overlapping. Beyond this significant example, most other examples of youth bringing their voices to global issues of oppression were more isolated. For example, Marcus shared a comment that likely explains why youth were less involved in global issues:

> There's a lot of covert and overt things that happen in the world and I guess we're brought up to not see those things or to just put them aside or brush them under the rug because apparently they're not there. Not things that we should be worried about… Like with immigration, oh, there's so much stuff with immigration, there's things with the smallest topics. But, people just think about, like the day-to-day. There's more depth to that and people need to know that [and] realize that.

So, even while students were not regularly bringing their voices or leadership actions to global issues, they were recognizing that these oppressive circumstances existed and saw that action was necessary.

Discussion

Through our analysis, we were able to demonstrate how focusing on social justice identity development (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002) in youth leaders creates opportunities for youth to sharpen their critical consciousness and bring a critical voice to school leadership. By creating opportunities for youth to develop their self-, social, and global awarenesses, the Social Justice Youth Summit Leadership team supported a team of young adults recognizing and pushing back against oppressive structures in their schools and community. Furthermore,

through their leadership activity, youth delivered the Social Justice Youth Summit that brought issues of social justice and oppression to the attention of students attending their local high schools.

In focusing on supporting youth in developing their self-awareness, SJYS leaders engaged in personal reflection and learning, coupled with developing a sense of purpose. This was accomplished by creating opportunities for students to critically reflect on their personal lives in order to identify topics for the SJYS, followed by having students participate in individual and collective learning related to the selected topics. Through this personal reflection and learning, youth leaders honed and deepened their understandings of how issues related to power, oppression, and privilege play out in society—a necessary step in developing one's critical consciousness (Cammarota, 2011; Ginwright, Cammarota, Noguera, 2005). Additionally, youth leaders saw themselves as potential leaders possessing the ability to change their schools and communities. Important in this aspect of self-awareness development was the fact that youth leaders saw themselves as leaders who were working for and with others as opposed to working individually for individual goals. Consistently centering the needs of others is a foundational practice of socially just leadership.

Youth leaders leveraged their participation in the SJYS Leadership Team to engage in deep opportunities to develop their social awareness. Through the contextualization of knowledge acquired through research, youth leaders became acutely aware of how different issues of oppression played out in the local communities and schools. This was evidenced through youth discussions of ensuring town halls and poems were connected to local spaces. This contextualizing also created a condition for youth to see beyond the selected topics for the SJYS and begin to see broader patterns of inequity in their community (Cammarota, 2011). Beyond contextualizing knowledge, youth envisioned themselves as part of a coalition of leaders acting towards socially just changes. This coalition was important for youth identity development for a number of reasons; but, largely because it produced a norm that it was acceptable for youth to be angry at oppressive conditions and the coalition created an incubator for youth development. This incubator was demonstrated through the ways that youth leaders participated in collective critiques of town hall preparations, art installations, and poem performances. All of these social-awareness development opportunities layered on top of one another to foster praxis amongst youth leaders. Youth engaged in the necessary reflection and action included in Freire's (2000) idea of conscientization. This layering towards praxis was clear in the ways students developed their town hall meetings and poems. First, they learned the requisite knowledge. Then, they reflected on the new knowledge to make sense of local context. Next, they developed an action plan and then presented to peers for feedback. Finally, a presentation-quality product was developed. Through this process we see a constant process of reflection and action.

Lastly, youth developed their global awareness through the leadership work. While this was probably the least-developed aspect of the youth leaders' social justice identity due the fact that SJYS was intended to focus on Central City, there was still tangible development in this area for youth. Two particular examples come to the fore: the youth's inclusion of global issues of racism in their discussions of colorism and the influences of media, as well as the walkout that youth organized in response to proposed U.S. immigration policies. Both examples highlight the ability of youth to empathize with oppressed peoples from around the

world and a willingness to act upon those feelings, which are essential components of youth developing the global awareness (Cammarota, 2011; Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002).

We would be remiss if we did not discuss the more traditionally valued and recognized leadership activities that youth demonstrated by planning and implementing the SJYS. The very act of creating a two-day session for local high school students to come and learn about issues of social justice relevant to their own community is a meaningful exercise of leadership. Youth leaders openly talked about how attendees openly reflected on the experience of attending SJYS and that it seemed to change the actions of students in their school. Additionally, various district level leaders commented on separate occasions how impressed they were with these youth leaders and the success of the SJYS; all of which cannot help to bring issues of equity and social justice closer to the center of district level conversations of school improvement. Between the leadership involved in planning and delivering the SJYS, and the other leadership activities youth leaders engaged in after the SJYS (for example, the walkout or bringing the whitewashed curriculum to the attention of teachers and leaders), it highlights that through involvement in the SJYS Leadership Team, students are able to hone their voices and push their schools and district to become a more socially just space.

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