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Youth Civic Engagement for Dialogue and Diversity at the Metropolitan Level

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Introduction

Civic engagement is a process in which people take collective action to address issues of public concern, but what happens when the participants are young people, when the community is viewed as multicultural, or when the process operates in metropolitan areas that are becoming more segregated and more diverse?

This question relates civic engagement to people, issues, and places, in ways that are uncommon for engagement studies, at a time when youth civic engagement is uneven, and when segregation and diversity are increasing at the metropolitan level. There is growing research on civic engagement, but few studies that address questions such as this.

This article analyzes Youth Dialogues on Race and Ethnicity, a foundation-funded program designed to increase dialogue, challenge segregation, and create change in metropolitan Detroit. It draws on multilevel evaluation of the program and analyzes some of the lessons learned.

Perspectives on Civic Engagement

Civic engagement is a process in which people take collective action to address issues of public concern. It includes efforts by people to participate in the public decisions that affect their lives, and by civic agencies to involve people in their proceedings. It involves "people as citizens" in "public work" and "civic activities" that are limitless in number (Boyte, 2005).

Key Points

- Youth civic engagement can take various forms, of which intergroup dialogue is one. Some forms – such as electoral participation – are inappropriate for young people.

- This article describes Youth Dialogues on Race and Ethnicity in Metropolitan Detroit, the nation's most segregated metropolitan area.

- High-school-age students participated in intra- and intergroup dialogues, metropolitan tours, residential retreats, and community action projects.

- Youth participants increased their knowledge of their own racial and ethnic identities and those of others, increased their awareness and understanding of racism and racial privilege, and developed leadership skills and took actions to challenge racism in their communities.

Civic engagement can take various forms. For example, people can organize action groups, plan local programs, advocate in civic agencies, raise awareness on issues, or provide community-based services. They can increase dialogue, challenge discrimination, and address racial segregation as a force. There is no single form of civic engagement; there are many (Skocpol & Fiorina, 1999; Keeter et al., 2002; Zukin et al., 2006; Flanagan et al., 2007).

This construction of civic engagement broadens the concept beyond the definition by scholars who view civic engagement as a type of formal political or electoral politics involving activities

such as contacting a public official, attending a political meeting, voting in elections, or running for electoral office. These activities are civic, to be sure, but only one expression of civic engagement. Definitions are social constructions, and there is nothing a priori to suggest that electoral activities are any more appropriate measures of engagement than others (Andolina et al., 2002).

Dialogue participants marching for racial justice.

One way to assess civic engagement is in terms of its scope, such as the number, frequency, or duration of activities. Thus it is common to conclude that because a number of activities occur, or because a number of people take part in them, then engagement has taken place. However, the number of activities is not an adequate measure of quality. Quality engagement is when people influence a decision or affect an outcome (Checkoway, 1998).

Arnstein (1969) defines citizen participation as the power of "have-nots" to influence agency decisions. She formulates a "ladder of participation" in which each rung corresponds to the power of underrepresented groups to influence decisions, and she concludes that agencies often "manipulate" rather than "empower" these groups. Thus when an agency holds community meetings for people after the decisions are already made, these activities are "token" but not "real." This holds true for young people, who are usually have-nots in influencing agency decisions.

This article examines civic engagement from the perspective of young people involved in pub-

lic work, with emphasis on youth involved in intergroup dialogues in a metropolitan area. We work with young people of high school age, few of whom are old enough to vote in elections, and most of whom live in communities of color whose residents are traditionally underrepresented in formal political or electoral positions. In the growing research on civic engagement (Stanton, 2007), there are few studies that address phenomena such as this (Ginwright et al., 2006; Checkoway, 2008).

Even if they were old enough to vote, however, these young people might have actual evidence to conclude that their voting makes little difference. It is as mistaken to assess civic engagement by a measure of engagement that is inappropriate to the population as it is to overlook the engagement that a research methodology is unable to see (Checkoway & Richards Schuster, 2006).

This article assumes that civic engagement takes various forms beyond political or electoral activities. It places emphasis on efforts by young people to increase dialogue and challenge segregation at the metropolitan level. This is the world in which they live, they are experts on their own experience, and this is their engagement.

Youth Dialogues on Race and Ethnicity

Youth Dialogues on Race and Ethnicity is a program to increase intergroup dialogue among young people in the neighborhoods and suburbs of metropolitan Detroit, the nation's most segregated metropolitan area.

The program began when a foundation official approached the author about how to address racial segregation and social isolation of young people in the metropolitan area. She had commissioned previous work that found that young people understand the limitations of segregation and want to communicate with people who are different from themselves, but lack opportunities to do so (Skillman Foundation, 2003).

The author responded that university students had facilitated successful intergroup dialogues inside and outside classrooms for years, that

university officials had special commitment to diversity, and that they wanted to increase their involvement in the community.

The foundation official prepared a paper with ideas, she and the author convened community collaborators for planning meetings, and a proposal was approved for youth dialogues on race and ethnicity. The project would increase youth dialogues on race and ethnicity, enable young people to plan projects that challenge discrimination and prepare them for roles as policy leaders and change agents, involve supportive adults in working with young people, and build organizational and community capacity for work of this type.

The program was based on a change theory that when intragroup dialogue in a homogeneous group is followed by intergroup dialogue with a group with whom they have difference, this will have effects at multiple levels. The change theory is informed by a knowledge base that is familiar to scholars (Robinson and Preston, 1976; Pettigrew, 1998), including empirical evidence on initiatives with college students (Gurin et al., 1999, 2002, 2004; Nagda & Zuñiga, 2003).

The change theory resulted in a curriculum that drew upon the approach of University of Michigan Program for Intergroup Relations (IGR), which has been the subject of intensive study and research publications (Zuñiga et al., 2007). The IGR approach to "social justice education" is one of various models that include "interfaith roundtables," "coexistence programs," and "community forums."

Community collaborators — such as neighborhood organizations, civic agencies, and school districts — that had shown commitment or potential commitment to "youth and diversity" were central to the program. Each collaborator designated an adult advisor responsible for recruitment and selection of prospective participants.

Community collaborators included Alternatives for Girls, Arab Community Center for Economic and Social Services, Asian Pacific American Club, Detroit Asian Youth Project, Farming-

ton Hills Mayor's Youth Council, Farmington Public Schools, Latin Americans for Social and Economic Development, Michigan Neighborhood Partnership, Peoples' Community Services, Renaissance High School, Rosedale Park Baptist Church, Sacred Heart Chaldean Church, Southfield Community Foundation Youth Advisory Council, United Family and Community Organization, and Youthville Detroit,.

The dialogues involved teams of neighborhood and suburban youth of African, Asian, European, Middle Eastern, and Latin American descent. Team members first met among themselves to discuss their own social identities, and then with another group with whom they had historical differences. With facilitation by trained university students, they developed their dialogical skills, explored their similarities and differences, discussed contemporary issues, and organized community projects.

> *The intergroup dialogues enabled them to build relationships, explore similarities and differences, and discuss concrete contemporary issues that they held in common*

Specifically, the intragroup dialogues employed experiential exercises for participants to share their personal experiences of growing up in the metropolitan area; discuss relationships between their personal lives and group identities; and explore their own social identities and group memberships. The intergroup dialogues enabled them to build relationships, explore similarities and differences, and discuss concrete contemporary issues that they held in common (Fisher, 2007).

Because of the isolation which accompanies segregation, we organized a metropolitan tour for participants. We drove down city streets known for segregated facilities and civil rights marches, stopped at cultural institutions and a concrete

wall built by real estate developers to separate whites and blacks, and passed new schools and shopping malls in the suburbs.

Participants attended a residential retreat at the university, in which they exchanged information and ideas and built mutual support for their common cause. They lived and worked together, which for many of them was the first time that they slept under the same roof with other racial groups.

> *Young people who live in segregation and participate in intergroup dialogues should not operate in isolation without adult allies, and some parents, teachers, and agency advisers provided special support before, during, and after the dialogues.*

At the retreat they planned joint community projects of their own choosing that complemented the overall objectives, including neighborhood and suburban school exchanges, public demonstrations and marches against racism, cultural diversity days, world music performances, racial justice wrist bands, high school outreach into middle schools, and overnight lock-ins to motivate students to establish their own dialogue programs.

Some participants stepped forward and played leadership roles. They established a leadership group in which they discussed the causes of segregation and assessed alternative solutions to problems. We created learning activities for critical thinking and public speaking and enabled participants to make presentations to stakeholder groups.

As a vehicle for discussion, we devised Down Woodward, an experiential exercise in which they traveled the full length of Woodward Avenue, stretching from the central city into the distant suburbs. They observed distinct areas, took photographs, shared observations, and prepared presentations about school and community disparities.

We brought the youth leaders to Lansing to meet with state officials and to Washington to present their ideas to congressional and senatorial representatives. The notion of young people from a segregated metropolitan area crossing racial and ethnic boundaries to formulate policies and make their case to public officials was unprecedented.

Young people who live in segregation and participate in intergroup dialogues should not operate in isolation without adult allies, and some parents, teachers, and agency advisers provided special support before, during, and after the dialogues. As a result, we identified adult allies who seemed sympathetic and brought them together to discuss what adults might do to assist young people working for racial justice and community change.

Overall, youth dialogues were a unique partnership of a foundation, university, and community collaborators. The idea originated with discussions between a foundation official and a university professor, it was launched in partnership with suburban and neighborhood collaborators, and it had strong support on campus and in the community.

Multilevel Evaluation

Evaluation was central to the program, and ours had a multilevel design.

Youth leaders and adult allies formed an evaluation team and employed participatory community-based age-appropriate methods to assess the program. Young people were codirectors of the evaluation; they gathered information through weekly journals, individual interviews, and focus groups and analyzed data and produced reports with findings and recommendations (Chang et al., 2005; Adkins et al., 2006; Davis et al., 2007).

Our evaluation approach assumed that young people should assess the programs that affect

Engaging youth of African, Asian, European, Middle Eastern, and Latin American descent.

them, and that the process contributes to their own civic development. Participatory evaluation with young people is an emergent methodology, and our process was consistent with its principles (Checkoway & Richards Schuster, 2003, 2004; Sabo, 2007).

Evaluation team members created a pre- and posttest questionnaire to assess changes through the Color-Blind Racial Attitudes Scale, Conflict Questionnaire, Global Belief in a Just World Scale, Multigroup Ethnic Identity Scale, Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, and other scientific instruments. They administered the pre- and posttest questionnaire during the selected program year to 88 youth dialogue participants from 16 neighborhood groups, community agencies, and school districts, with a response rate of 92 percent. Pre- and posttest evaluation showed that as a result of participation in the program (Appendix 1).

1. Young people increased their knowledge about their own racial and ethnic identity and that of others.
They described greater understanding and self-esteem about their own identity, increased awareness about how their own identity affects their life, and increased confidence in their ability to work with others across racial and ethnic boundaries.

2. Young people increased their awareness and understanding of racism and racial privilege.
They demonstrated more understanding of racism and racial privilege and awareness of current social issues related to race and ethnicity.

3. Young people developed leadership skills and took actions to address issues of racism in their community.
They described an increase in their leadership on issues of racism and in action taking to address

racism in their families, schools, and communities during the program.

Individual interviews produced the following illustrative statements:

- I have learned that we can and will make change more likely, but that we have to work together and understand each other to really make a difference. (Neighborhood Arab-American)
- I learned that there are many stereotypes about my own group, and that there are stereotypes of other groups. I also learned a number of historical facts about my group and others, both through the dialogues and the action projects. (Suburban African-American)
- Personally the program impacted me a great deal. I realized that even though I do not think of myself as privileged, I am because of my skin color — and this needs to change. It will cause me to work harder to change racism in the nation and the world. (Suburban European-American)
- I feel like I don't have to be so angry about ignorance all the time. (Neighborhood African-American)
- This program has helped me answer some of these questions I had about segregation and racism, and it also has brought up new ones. I want to continue with these topics and take action against segregation. This program has helped me to see what's important, that as an individual, I need to change myself before I can change others. (Suburban Asian Pacific-American)
- The youth dialogues program made me want to learn more about other racial and ethnic groups. Now, I understand more about discrimination in my community. (Neighborhood Hmong-American)
- I feel accountable for all that I learned, and will be more accountable for my actions, because now I "know better." I also will share and teach others what I have learned. (Neighborhood African-American)

As an integral part of evaluation, we collaborated with the Mosaic Youth Theatre of Detroit in dissemination and outreach. Theater staff facilitated a special workshop, gathered information from the participants, studied their journals, and prepared a script for public presentation.

Youth actors performed *Speak for Yourself,* in which they played out the experiences of the dialogue participants in their own words. They performed in school assemblies and community centers, some of which reached more than 1,000 young people. Following each performance was a "talk back" in which audience members asked questions and shared thoughts about discrimination in their school or community (Hammock & Checkoway, 2008).

Thus the evaluation enabled young people to assess young people, and young people to perform their stories to large audiences of young people across the metropolitan area. The performance won a popular audience and sparked additional dialogue and new initiatives area-wide.

In addition, some participants took part in a special writing workshop and produced *Our Dreams Are Not a Secret,* a book in which they express their experiences of "growing up in segregation and living the edges of change." At this writing, television producers have come forward with an agreement for a series of programs devoted to the dialogues.

Observations

Our program is only one example, but it is possible to make the following preliminary observations.

Young people from various racial and ethnic backgrounds are aware of segregation, open to dialogues on diversity, and want to communicate with others who are different from themselves, an observation that is consistent with other studies. We have no data to substantiate that their attitudes toward diversity are more supportive than earlier generations, although this too would be consistent with other studies (Strauss et al., 2003).

Given an opportunity, young people will participate in intergroup dialogues, metropolitan

tours, residential retreats, and community action projects which challenge segregation. They begin the program with these activities in mind, they take part in them during the program period, and their experience strengthens their attitudes toward diversity.

The notion that young people will participate in intergroup dialogues and community action projects contrasts with media portrayals of youth as "disengaged from democracy" rather than as active citizens. When adults accept media portrayals of young people as disengaged, and youth accept these conceptions of themselves, this weakens expectations of their engagement (Kurth-Schai, 1988).

Young people are willing to take action against segregation, and in our program they planned programs of their own design. Youth participation against injustice is not new but contrasts with contemporary constructions of young people as lacking efficacy or the sense that they can make a difference.

Young people arise as program leaders, whether as planners, organizers, or evaluators. When the dialogues were done, some of them continued to meet, discussed the root causes of segregation, and formulated ideas for addressing their concerns. Youth leadership development is a long-standing movement with traditional emphasis on individual achievement, but our leaders worked together in teams across racial and ethnic differences to strengthen racial justice in a segregated metropolitan area.

There are adults who support these initiatives. There are parents, teachers, and agency advisers who coordinate the program, foundation officers who provide funding, and university officials who collaborate with communities. These adults are not necessarily typical of their peers, but there is reason to expect that if youth participants grew in numbers, that supportive adults also might increase.

Community collaborators are instrumental to youth dialogues at the metropolitan level. In our

case neighborhood organizations, civic agencies, and school systems represented racial and ethnic groups, built organizational capacity, and assigned adult advisers to instrumental roles. They were uneven in their resources, but provided a foundation on which to build.

There is evidence that the program increases participants' knowledge of themselves and others, their understanding of racism, and their actions against racism. There is no evidence about the duration of its effects, or about what happens when participants return to families and friends who are not part of the program.

> *Young people from various racial and ethnic backgrounds are aware of segregation, open to dialogues on diversity, and want to communicate with others who are different from themselves.*

But the finding that youth involvement in a summer program can alter their attitudes and behaviors toward race and ethnicity is highly promising. We make no claim that if this program grew to a large scale it would have similar effects, but we believe that its promise is limitless.

Conclusions

Our program expressed a vision, involved youth and adults, and affected attitudes and behaviors. We do not know about the duration of its effects, or about what happens when its participants return home. Nor do we know about what might happen if others try to adapt its purpose and process. But we know that the program works in metropolitan Detroit, and we offer its lessons for consideration elsewhere.

Youth dialogue is a form of civic engagement in which young people take collective action to address issues of public concern. It places special

emphasis on youth of high school age, a stage of development at which people are constructing their identities and searching for social justice opportunities to express them. It views the community as multicultural, and thus enables them to recognize differences and build bridges across boundaries.

The program presently operates in a metropolitan area that is segregated and diverse, an environment which fits its purpose, although we do not know what might happen in areas that are segregated and not diverse, which are most areas in the world.

> *But the finding that youth involvement in a summer program can alter their attitudes and behaviors toward race and ethnicity is highly promising.*

We believe that this program offers opportunities for adaptation elsewhere, but are realistic in our beliefs and recognize obstacles to work of this type. Powerful external forces — such as institutional racism, housing discrimination, economic disparities, and community disinvestment — contribute to segregation. In metropolitan Detroit, for example, the persistent lack of public transportation means that even if it were possible to overcome other obstacles, young people would still have difficulty in getting from one area to another. The forces that limit dialogues are stronger than those that facilitate them in the present environment.

Foundation officers can learn a great deal from programs that demonstrate that civic engagement can take various forms. The work is not only electoral, and there is no empirical evidence to conclude that voting in elections is a stronger form of engagement than the work described here.

Furthermore, foundation construction of civic engagement as an electoral phenomena — which includes belonging to political parties, voting in elections, contacting elected officials, and testifying to administrative agencies and legislative bodies — runs the risk of giving disproportionate influence to higher income youth rather than lower-income youth of color (Checkoway & Richards-Schuster, 2006).

Evaluation professionals can learn from programs that actively involve people as active participants rather than as subjects of study. There is a tendency to frame evaluation as a technical task requiring expert professionals who define problems and gather information according to positivist principles. Yet when evaluation is participatory, it does more than gather information and develop knowledge, but itself becomes a process of civic engagement.

Despite the obstacles, our program demonstrates that it is possible to increase youth dialogues on race and ethnicity in a segregated metropolitan area. If its participants do not end segregation or solve problems that are not of their making, their efforts are no less significant for their trying. Indeed, the obstacles only amplify their accomplishments.

Acknowledgments

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APPENDIX 1

Statistical Analysis

Eighty-eight young people from 16 schools and community agencies from 10 neighborhoods and six suburbs participated in the program. Their self-identified racial and ethnic composition was African-American (32%), European-American (21%), Arab-American and Chaldean (12%), Latino and Latina (11%), Asian-American and Hmong (13%), and multiracial (11%).

Pre- and posttest evaluation surveys employed the Action Scale, Collective Self-Esteem Scale (CSES), Color-Blind Racial Attitudes Scale (CoBRAS), Communication Scale (CS), and Multigroup Ethnic Identity Scale (MEIM), with a 92 percent response rate.

Seventy-eight percent of the participants agreed or strongly agreed that they had a better understanding about their own racial and ethnic identity as a result of the dialogues. They demonstrated a statistically significant increase in their knowledge of their own racial and ethnic identity and how their identity impacts themselves and others (CS Knowledge $t(80) = 6.32$, $p < 0.001$; CS Awareness $t(80) = 3.33$, $p < 0.01$; MEIM $t(77) = 1.98$, $p < 0.10$); and reported an increase in their knowledge of other groups, cultures, and histories ($t(80) = 1.85$, $p < 0.10$).

Ninety-three percent agreed or strongly agreed that they increased their awareness and understanding of racism (CoBRAS $t(77) = 3.34$, $p < 0.01$) and racial privilege (CS Awareness $t(80) = 3.33$, $p < 0.01$).

Ninety-three percent agreed or strongly agreed that they better understand social issues related to race and ethnicity as a result of the program.

More than 80 percent of the participants agreed or strongly agreed that they developed skills about how to create an action plan, form coalitions, and address issues of race and ethnicity.

They reported a statistically significant increase in their behavior and action to address issues of race, ethnicity, discrimination, and/or segregation, as a result of their time in the program (Action Scale $t(80) = 9.82$, $p < 0.001$). For example, they challenged or checked family members and friends using a racial slur, attended meetings, or joined groups concerned with race, ethnicity, segregation, or discrimination.