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Theories of Social Action in Eighth and Ninth Grade Classrooms

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### Abstract

In this research, I analyze three cases of social action curriculum enactment, a form of citizenship education, as they occurred in New York City public schools. When engaging in social action, students both critically consider social problems and take action around these problems. I analyze the orientation of the curricula, the intended purpose, the knowledge utilized, the participation structures, and student and teacher authority to derive the theories of social action implied within the curricula. Scott oriented the curriculum within the literacy period with the goal of creating social change, utilized personal and researched knowledge, structured the unit towards independent participation, and shared teacher authority throughout the project. The Urban Youth facilitators oriented the curriculum as an add-on to the regular day with the goal of igniting student empowerment, utilized solely personal knowledge, structured the unit around collaborative participation, and primarily gave students authority at the initiation of the project. Each curriculum enactment reflects multiple approaches to justice and social change, revealing the complexity of this work as it occurs in classrooms.

### Social Action Curricula in Schools

This research documents and analyzes three cases of social action curriculum enactment. In this paper, I first outline the problem that brings me to the research then present the assumptions that frame it. At the heart of the piece, I analyze the cases and propose the theories of social action implied within the curriculum enactments. Finally, I share the possibilities and limitations of the curricula and explain how this work can shape teachers' work today.

In enacting service learning curriculum from a “social action perspective,” teachers show commitment to both service work and critical reflection (Wade & Saxe, 1996, p. 349). Through such curricula, students think deeply about social problems in the world and take action to respond to them. I see the work of teachers who enact social action curricula as rare and unique. Despite the historical precedent for Social Studies to provide an area for active citizenship to be taught (Wade & Saxe, 1996), social action curricula are rarely enacted within schools. Many interrelated factors have contributed to this problem. On perhaps the broadest level, within Western culture, we are socialized to

be competitive individuals and to avoid collectivism as it suggests weakness or the disappearance of one's identity (Kohn, 1990). Since much of social action involves working with others, this process is not often supported with our society. Furthermore, it can be argued that modern technology has saturated all of the claims on our sympathy and attention (Vela-McConnell, 1999). As a result, we turn away from issues of injustice more readily, even as we are more knowing of them.

Moreover, within many schools, the role of schooling to prepare students for civic participation has been overshadowed by the emphasis on standards, testing, and accountability (Berman, 2004). The tyranny of teachers' manuals and scripted curricula greatly decreases teacher autonomy (Cochran-Smith, 1995; Wirt & Kirst, 2005). Teachers are often left with little time and few materials with which to teach social action, as they are expected to use mandated materials covering solely literacy and mathematics. Schooling rarely addresses the individual and civic needs of citizens and instead focuses on rationalized processes that seek to control, predict, and measure intended end points of student learning (Eisner, 2004). In sum, schools do not often provide meaningful arenas for students to engage in civic participation, despite the perceived increase in patriotic sentiment following 9/11 (Galston, 2003).

When teachers do provide the rare opportunity for students to develop as active and critical citizens, they may engage in projects in which the students act as individuals where they presume to know what is best for other people (Wade, 1997). In these cases, "service can take on an air of loftiness that perpetuates rather than rights imbalance" (Ogden, 1999, p. 190). Service learning then can resemble individual acts of charity in which complex uses of power are avoided and injustice is addressed in a linear,

modernistic fashion. I wish to critique this focus on charity in schools. In that critical thinking is prioritized through social action curricula, students have to wrestle with difficult issues that cannot be changed quickly or easily understood. The students may continue to act with individualistic behavior as these projects will not radically change an entire social system, but at a minimum, through social action curriculum enactment, students can be made aware of the distance between individualistic norms and their ability to address the social problems in their world. In contrast to this vision, altruistic work that resembles charity has become the topic of much of the public discussion on service (Kahne & Westheimer, 1999).

Situated within these background problems are teachers with limited opportunities to envision themselves as educators for social action. Amidst norms of individualism and the limits of mandated curriculum teachers are frequently distanced from their potential role as educators teaching for a common good. Most do not know how to enact these projects. In addition, the work of the maverick teachers who do enact social action curriculum receives minimal attention through educational research and scholarship. The majority of the research on enlightened political engagement is “theoretical and philosophical,” emphasizing what should be done rather than what is being done and how (Parker, 2003, p. 47). When the work of teachers is considered, the research primarily describes the outcomes of social action without presenting pictures of how these results are attained (Butin, 2003).

There is some research, but not enough; there are some teachers who may want to do this work, but with they are not given enough opportunities to consider this option. The teachers also may not have a clear vision of what difference they can make through a

social action curriculum. At a time when the gap between the haves and the have nots is increasing, there is a need for these tools, leading to the potential enactment of a social action curriculum.

By producing and analyzing case studies of social action curriculum enactment, teachers may gain the opportunity to consider ways to enact such a curriculum in their own classrooms. In addition, teachers may be supported with a depiction of various theories of social action that can be used to inform curriculum enactment. This research will also suggest new possibilities of schooling that uphold collectivism and teaching towards a vision of social change. It will clarify and concretize ways to consider teaching for a better world. Teachers may state that they are interested in “teaching towards social change” or “in the name of social justice,” yet, such phrases carry vague and open-ended meanings (Wade, 2004). This research gives teachers and other readers lived examples of how public school education can be a site for social change.

#### Framing the Study

Social action curricula can teach students to address oppressive power imbalances in society. Critical theory has informed this project in that, like social action curriculum, critical theory can be used as a tool to help individuals critique and transform society (Lincoln & Guba, 2003). Critical theorists often look at how groups are silenced and others are privileged through the maintenance of hierarchies structured around race, class, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and others (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). This research examines the ways that social action curriculum provides opportunities for students to use power in society to address such social injustices.

In terms of how I view classroom practice, this research is informed by a vision of curriculum enactment in which learning occurs through the active participation of both students and teacher (Snyder, Bolin, & Zumwalt, 1992). When describing and analyzing the practices used within the social action curriculum, the teacher will be seen to build curriculum in response to and with the students, as through curriculum enactment, teachers and students are in dialogue with each other.

Finally, I wish for this work to raise a liberatory consciousness within the participants, the readers, and myself. As I am influenced by critical theory, the intent of this research is to provide a stimulus for action (Lincoln & Guba, 2003). I believe that “teaching is a moral and political act, and teachers can play a key role in facilitating positive social change” (Darling-Hammond, 2002, p. 2). In reading this work, teachers will be enabled to play this role through the enactment of social action curricula.

### The Cases

In order to recruit participants for this research, I posted a publicity flyer to my personal contacts and to list serves that attract educators committed to teaching for social justice. Subsequently, Scott Rosner, an eighth grade teacher, contacted me and welcomed me to conduct observations and interviews in his classroom, Class 345. I was also informed about a non-profit organization, Urban Youth, which employs facilitators to enact a social action curriculum in high schools in New York City on a weekly basis. The organizers of the Urban Youth program encouraged me to study two ninth grade classrooms using this program so that I could observe the different responses classes have to this curriculum. Within weeks, I began building relationships with the teachers, Urban Youth facilitators, and students in Foxlawn High School and the Leadership Academy.

In Foxlawn High School, Mory Calle was the teacher and Zaire Navaro and Yolanda Scott were the Urban Youth facilitators. In the Leadership Academy, Kris Stevenson and Carrie Janus were the teachers and Tanisha Maguire was the Urban Youth facilitator. Therefore, during the Spring of 2006, I studied three classrooms: Class 345 being taught by Scott; an English class in Foxlawn High School; and an advisory class in the Leadership Academy. All three classes were located within New York City. Within the remainder of the paper, I present the Urban Youth classrooms together, as they shared a curriculum and reflect a common theory of social action.

In this paper, I draw from thirty three observations in Class 345 and twenty one observations in the Urban Youth Classrooms (nine observations in Foxlawn High School and twelve observations in the Leadership Academy). I observed the most in Class 345 because the social action curriculum was a daily part of their routine through the Spring. The social action curriculum was only enacted once a week in the Urban Youth sites. In addition to classroom observations, I also conducted interviews with the teachers, Urban Youth facilitators, students, and school administrators and collected multiple documents of teacher and student work to use for analysis. Overall, I used ethnographic methods to collect observational case studies (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). Case studies bring life to the “local particulars” of classroom (Dyson & Genishi, 2005, p. 3). By bringing attention to local particulars, readers can learn how social action curriculum enactment is done in individual sites. Also, through case studies, teaching practices are not portrayed in isolation, as often seen in a “best practice” approach, but rather, I contextualize them within the constructed norms of the classrooms studied.

Within the social action unit in Class 345, the students created what Scott called “social justice writing pieces.” Each student selected a social problem to study, conducted research on this problem, created two different writing pieces addressing the problem, and presented the work at a school assembly at the end of the year. Through the Urban Youth curriculum, the students in each class collaboratively developed singular projects that could better their schools or communities. The cumulative action project in the Leadership Academy was a safe sex health fair, and the action project in Foxlawn High School was a mural on teen pregnancy and gang violence.

### Building Theories of Social Action

In reviewing the data that portray the cases of both Class 345 and the Urban Youth classrooms, it became evident that the teachers and facilitators in both environments actualized different theories of social action within the curricula. I compare the theories of social action evident within these classrooms based on five categories: the orientation of the curriculum; the intended purpose; the knowledge utilized; participation structures; and student and teacher authority. As these categories emerged within the cases, I looked for points of comparison between Class 345 and the Urban Youth classrooms. These comparative elements are summarized in a chart in Appendix A.

It is important to note that while I draw on particular comparative elements within each category, Scott and the Urban Youth facilitators’ stances were not fixed. Their approaches were fluid, yet I observed the trends described in this chapter as being dominant during the curricula enactment. I reference the teachers’ values and goals along with the content and skills exercised in the curriculum and, I then suggest various

theories these components imply about citizenship and social action. In this way, local pedagogy is seen as a possible reflection of other ideals, whether the participants are aware of them or not. Based on this analysis, I explain the educational principles that each curriculum privileges and subsequently those that the curricula foreclose.

In constructing the theories underlying the curricula, this chapter seeks to expose the “value frameworks” of each curriculum (Huebner, 1975, p. 222). While I depart from the frameworks around which Huebner theorizes, this work is informed by his idea that value can be associated with any educational activity based on a multiplicity of factors and as a result of multiple assumptions. These aspects of curriculum can be driven by specific ideological and epistemological principles, yet they are often hidden within curriculum and within discourse about the curriculum. In naming them, I aim to point out the ideals that teachers can consider when teaching a social action curriculum. Each theory also suggests that students, or citizens, can use their power in different ways to make change. In this way, the theory building in this chapter is rooted in critical theory. I aim to name how the students were both given and denied forms of power depending on the theory of social action actualized through the curriculum. I seek to explore the limits and allowances for citizens to have power through the analysis of Scott’s and the Urban Youth Program’s enacted theories of social action.

In addition, I see this analysis as significant to the field of citizenship education, and curriculum theory in general, in the way that it highlights the complexity of various social action curriculum enactments. In comparison to other writing on social action curriculum (e.g. Kahne & Westheimer, 1999; Westheimer & Kahne, 2004), this analysis draws from multiple aspects of the curriculum including its intended purpose and its lived

enactment. I argue that curriculum enactment is a complex process, through which teachers address multiple values and assumptions about students and learning.

#### Qualities of the Theories of Social Action Evidenced in the Cases

In this section, I describe the theories of social action implicit within the curriculum as seen within five categories: the orientation of the curriculum; the intended purpose; the knowledge utilized; participation structures; and student and teacher authority. Overall, Scott upheld a theory of social change in which students, working as independent researchers, utilized traditional school practices to advocate for the reform of identified problems in society. The facilitators and teachers in the Urban Youth classrooms upheld a theory of social change in which students worked collaboratively under adult leadership to enliven a goal-oriented process of civic involvement through which their personal advocacy skills would be enhanced. These statements are illustrated in the sections below.

#### *The Orientation of the Curriculum*

When defining the orientation of the curricula, I analyzed the extent to which the curricula were associated with what is understood as common or traditional school based practices. This analysis references Scott's stated goals and style of instruction placed in comparison to the stated views of the Urban Youth facilitators on the relationship between Urban Youth and "school."

*Class 345: Utilizing the core curriculum.* Scott and his students enacted a social action curriculum that was oriented in the Social Studies and English core curriculum. The students read about and researched various social problems and subsequently created writing pieces on these topics and presented them to their peers. Scott valued traditional

school skills such as “writing the five paragraph essay,” and sought to give his students this experience during the social action project. He was committed to teaching social action through the commonly accepted processes of a middle school Social Studies or English classroom. He remained accountable to external forces, including the broader standards movement within the New York City Department of Education. In turn, the students practiced skills taught and reinforced in these subject areas including reading, writing, and research skills.

This approach builds on Delpit’s (1995) assertion that educators must teach children academic skills, along with critical and creative thinking, so that they can participate fully in society. By teaching the students standard literacy and writing skills, while enacting a social action curriculum, Scott worked to prepare the students in this way. The social action project was used as an additional opportunity to give the students academic skills and not viewed as a separate, “special” or elective course. In addition, by integrating the “normal” school subjects into the social action curriculum, the social action work may have been more enriched than if it were done in isolation. Kesson and Oyler (1999) posit this in reference to their study of an Oklahoma based social action project through which students used literature, chemistry, and economics to address environmental racism. The authors argue, “with the multidisciplinary knowledge, the students’ activism and political engagement have been strongly enhanced” (p. 147).

As a result of this orientation, Scott forwarded the message that schools can provide a setting for social action education, and through the teaching of traditional school based skills, students can practice using the tools of social change. On a broader level, this orientation implies a theory of social action in which change can be made

within the provided and traditional structures and assumptions of a democratic state. In this case, the provided structure is the system of public schooling and the assumption is that students be taught academic skills including reading and writing.

*Urban Youth classrooms: A break from the regular day.* Conversely, the students, teachers, and facilitators of the Urban Youth curriculum strongly differentiated between the Urban Youth program and the rest of the school day. The program did not reference the students' subject oriented knowledge or their "normal" school life. The Urban Youth facilitators and the classroom teachers viewed the Urban Youth program as separate from the rest of the school activities. Similarly, the facilitators were purposefully marked "not teachers" and the teachers were distanced from the weekly enactments of the social action curriculum.

At the start of each Urban Youth program, the classroom desks were pushed out of the way and the chairs were placed in a circle. The students were then given the opportunity to express themselves using modalities not commonly used during the rest of their day. These tasks often included the use of art as the students in Foxlawn Highschool created a mural on gang violence and teen pregnancy and the students in the Leadership Academy spent much time creating signs and visual displays to be used during their safe sex health fair. The Urban Youth facilitators and the cooperating classroom teachers seemed to be concerned with disrupting what Jackson (1990) calls "the ritualistic and cyclic quality of the activities carried on in the classroom" (p. 8).

In their interviews, the facilitators and teachers also identified the Urban Youth program as being distinct from normal school. The Urban Youth facilitators believed that as non-teachers they could enact a student centered curriculum. Zaire, a facilitator at the

Foxlawn High School explained, “There is more freedom in this versus being a regular teacher where you are mandated to do x, y, and z and you have to report to all these different people.” Conversely, he feels that in the job of the facilitator they can help students “make their own discoveries.” Tanisha, the facilitator at the Leadership Academy and Lara, the director of the Urban Youth program, both agreed that in presenting in this “open” way, they believed they were not met with the resistance that they think is usually present when the students interact with their teachers.

The classroom teachers reinforced this idea of the Urban Youth program being separate from school. After commenting that the Urban Youth facilitators gave the students “less structure” than what they give the students, Kris and Carrie, teachers from the Leadership Academy, both commented that the program should stay flexible and less structured because if it became structured “it would be like school.” They felt that it was important that facilitators enact the curriculum in a way that was distinct, and importantly, more relaxed, in comparison to what the students were accustomed to within their other classes. Mory, the classroom teacher participating in the Urban Youth program in Foxlawn High School, also said that distanced himself from the curriculum enactment and served as the disciplinarian in the classroom, taking students out of the classroom when they were not behaving according to the group’s norms. He explained that he felt good about the hands off role that he played within the creation of the actual project.

Clearly, the Urban Youth facilitators and cooperating teachers worked with specific assumptions about the role of the teacher and the nature of schooling. They perceived teaching as a structured process that shut down student inquiry. They wanted

the social action project to be student centered, and in believing that teachers could not be student centered, they framed the project as separate from school. They oriented the social action curriculum as an add-on to what they believed the students expected and routinely did in school.

This forwards a theory of social action that suggests that change comes about within fringe, or special, settings and is an extracurricular process of sorts distanced from the routine day-to-day lives of citizens. In addition, this theory implies that social action stems from personal inquiry, discovery, and open dialogue – qualities they tried to foster within their program.

### *The Intended Purpose*

In this section, I explore Scott and the Urban Youth facilitators' motivation to implement the social action units with an attempt to better name their intended purpose and their understanding of the work. This analysis builds on Scott and the Urban Youth facilitators' values and curricular goals.

I will note that when explaining their work, both Scott and the Urban Youth facilitators intended to emphasize the process of change making as opposed to any particular social justice “win” or the mastery of any content knowledge. In this way, both the curriculum enacted in Class 345 and Urban Youth curriculum are aligned with what Ross (2002) calls the “process-driven curriculum.” The curricula were differentiated, however, as they sought to teach different processes. Scott wanted the students to be able to identify and feel outrage towards injustices in the world and make changes in the name of democracy to bring about a better social order. The Urban Youth facilitators were less

interested in instilling a sense of outrage or changing the world, and more committed to preparing the students to deal with the world as it is.

*Class 345: Create a change in the world.* Scott feels outrage towards injustice, utilizes the power of critique, and longs for systemic social change. In the classroom, he works to instill the same ideals in his students. He can be identified as enacting curriculum with a social reconstructionist orientation (Eisner, 1985).

This orientation is basically aimed at developing levels of critical consciousness among children and youth so that they become aware of the kinds of ills that the society has and become motivated to learn how to alleviate them. (p. 76)

Scott embraced both parts of this description: the critique and the action.

Scott wanted the students to be able to critique the society around them. He modeled this behavior in class. He explained that he would bring a strong sense of social concern into the classroom and say, “Do you see this? Can you believe this?” He asked students to research multiple perspectives and, in their searching, to identify the ills or problems in society. Then, with knowledge of these ills, Scott wanted the students to impact their surroundings. He believed that they could “organize” themselves, their community, and then the larger country and world. Through this project, he wanted them to “affect things” and “make a change.” He consistently told the students that they could make a change and organized the curriculum in a way that would enable that.

Indeed, he viewed his curriculum as connected to the questioning of authority, a process that he said is both dangerous and absolutely essential to ensuring justice for those living without various privileges in society. He said the work that the students did in the social action unit entails

the kind of thoughts that have gotten people killed. I mean it really is. A questioning of authority and questioning of power is dangerous...but for people

who aren't privileged - you don't rock the boat and you get nothing and you stay having nothing forever. So that's not a good thing.

Scott wanted the students to learn that they can “rock the boat” – make changes that would impact more people than just themselves - through critical thought and action.

His theory of social action suggests that citizens should be critical towards society and act to change what is around them. According to this social reconstructionist perspective, citizens have the ability to “build a new, healthier, and more just social order” (Eisner, 1985, p. 76). Teachers utilizing this theory of social action imbue students with the obligation of creating structural change.

*Urban Youth classrooms: Self empowerment.* In comparison to Class 345, the Urban Youth facilitators aimed to develop open dialogue and self empowerment for the individual students, not a sense of outrage or doubt leading to a change in the students' world. They focused on developing the advocacy skills of the individual students so that they could navigate and be accomplished in their own lives, not necessarily change the social structures around them. This orientation may be labeled “social adaptation,” and those who operate with it “seek no fundamental change in the basic structure of the society,” as they aim to raise the students' consciousness level about the world as it exists (Eisner, 1985, p. 75).

This leaning of theirs was apparent in my first meeting with Tanisha and Lara during. They explained that they were not focused on getting the students to identify social problems or develop a level of critique. They aimed for the students to use their voices, but not necessarily to criticize what they saw around them. Their orientation was also made apparent in their analysis of the discussion that ensued in the Leadership Academy after the students watched music videos that showed problematic portrayals of

sexual relationships. These videos were shown based on the students' suggestion and were going to be used during the safe sex health fair. During this conversation, Mona, a student, expressed frustration of the images of the women in the video. When I asked them about this, Tanisha and Lara both commented that that critique is not regularly seen in other Urban Youth sites, and this incident within the video lesson was an exception to how the Urban Youth program usually runs. This comment underscores the idea that critique is not necessarily valued within the program. They then explained that when such emotion is introduced, they aim to push that critique into an open and critical dialogue. Tanisha explained, "We are not asking them to say is this bad or is this good. What is this? Let's talk about what it is."

Tanisha explained that after Mona expressed her anger, she was able to represent her point of view and the boys in the class could see how people might feel about the videos. It was this opening that was aligned with Tanisha's views of the goals of the Urban Youth program. She said, "It's always positive and forward thinking...our intent with it is to get them to analyze it in a positive way...because everyone has their own response to something they see." In this way, anger and critique is a means to an end with the end being open dialogue between multiple view points and self awareness. Within this orientation, students are not encouraged to label a problem and they are released from any social obligation to critique their surroundings.

While Scott's view asked the students to question authority, recognize systemic injustices, and change the world around them, the Urban Youth leaders asked the students to better understand their own perspectives and their personal ability to make a difference. Lara explained that she felt the program was a success this year because

If not all of them then ninety percent of them know that when something in their life happens that they want to change, they have the tools and they have the skills to change it. So whether or not it is that I don't like the high school I am going to, or my parents are divorced and I don't want to live with my dad anymore and I really want to live with my mom, or I want to change my major in college.

Whatever it is, that they understand that one, that they have the power to make that change, and if it is something on the level of "Oh, there is that torn down house and I really want to see if I can turn it into a garden," then they will know that they have to make the phone calls, figure out what their resources are, rally their peers, and do all those things.

Here, Lara uses the word "change" and aims to give the students voice. Yet, she

envisions the students using their voice in different ways than Scott intended. Scott wanted the students to problematize their surrounding and make change around the issues, and Tanisha and Lara wanted the students to be aware of their surroundings and create local change for themselves or those immediately around them. As reflected in their value of student ownership and student leadership, the Urban Youth facilitators wanted the students to develop so that they could face the world and succeed for themselves. They wanted the students to change, not the world.

Within this understanding of the social action project, the Urban Youth facilitators forwarded a theory of social change in which the citizens' responsibility is to listen to other points of view with a positive outlook and use their voices to reach their personal goals. This theory builds on a view of citizenship in which the goal is inclusive civic engagement for individuals and supports the idea that individuals are rational agents who have the drive to meet their needs and preferences to the greatest extent possible. In comparison to Scott's understanding of his work, the Urban Youth facilitators forwarded a theory of social action that did not include questioning authority, possibly with anger and critique, or the consideration of injustices that may be beyond the students' individual abilities to change. They believe that social action can happen when citizens

are placed in positions of enhanced empowerment within their own individual lives and community and given the opportunity to act with agency in these personal arenas.

### *The Knowledge Utilized*

In this section, I discuss the knowledge that the students utilized when constructing their social action projects. This analysis stems from my observations of the content used within the social action units. Before comparing the knowledge utilized in the cases, it is important to point out that all the students accessed “funds of knowledge” from their personal worlds outside of the classroom (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992, p. 134). By accessing these funds of knowledge, the students utilized ideas and opinions based on their personal experiences. In engaging the students in a process that allowed them to access their own personal knowledge, the teachers acted as what Freire (1970) identifies as “revolutionary leaders” who dialogue with their students about “both their objective situation and their awareness of that situation” (p. 95). Both Scott and the Urban Youth facilitators engaged the students in conversation so that the students could speak about their “situation,” and then they scaffolded an opportunity for the students to act on their awareness. In Class 345, the students also consulted knowledge from outside resources, namely articles in newspaper and various websites on the internet. Using Freire’s language, in encouraging the students to seek and learn from researched knowledge, Scott enabled the students to potentially connect with other people’s “situations” and acquire new knowledge in this process.

*Class 345: Personal and researched knowledge.* Scott positioned the students in Class 345 as researchers capable of learning from their personal experiences as well as the more distant experiences and views of others. At the start of the unit, Scott asked the

students to consider their personal experiences by making ethnographic observations in their neighborhood and consulting the newspaper. Their observations about the world grounded their writing in their immediate surroundings. When they began to look for “inspiration” in the newspapers, Scott was concerned that he asked them to leave their local and personal understandings too fast. Therefore, in concluding the brainstorming phase of the project, he told the students to “stay close to home” and “describe something you have seen.” He wanted the students to use the funds of knowledge (Moll et al., 1992) that they accumulated within their local, personal lives.

Based on the list of social problems that the students addressed in their projects (see Appendix B), it is clear that some students chose to focus their work around problems that they have experienced in their personal lives. Others focused their entire projects on researched knowledge, as illustrated by the students who worked on international issues. Regardless of whether the students based their projects on personal knowledge or researched knowledge, once they identified their topics for the social justice writing assignment, the students continued to research their identified problems in the computer lab. This helped the students form conceptual and historical understandings of their problems. For example, when researching high school drop out rates, Darion found a map of the United States portraying comparative drop out rates between states. She was able to use this information to compare New York City to other areas in the country and in turn build a broader understanding of the problem beyond her personal experience. In her power point, Urshan referenced environmental advocacy work from the 1970s that helped ameliorate water pollution when protesting the lack of this

advocacy now. In these cases, students broadened their understandings of or arguments against their chosen social problems through research.

Through the theory of social action suggested by Scott's utilization of knowledge, citizens are empowered to learn and consult various sources of knowledge, both personal and researched, as a means to social change. Through research, citizens may unearth hidden knowledge that may expose a social ill or enhance their critical thinking about one particular problem. The complexity of the problem is highlighted, as one cannot know how to address a social problem before learning different pieces of knowledge about it. In researching the problems, citizens may also come to develop a conceptual framing of the problem and locate the problem in a wider web of power and injustice. Scott operated within a theory of social action in which a well-researched line of critique can lead to change and learning can lead to power.

*Urban Youth classrooms: Personal knowledge.* Through the Urban Youth program, the students utilized their own personal knowledge when choosing and addressing a particular social problem. They first brainstormed all of the problems that concerned them, using their own experiences as their source of knowledge. Then, after the classes chose their topics, teen pregnancy and gang violence in Foxlawn High School, and safe sex in the Leadership Academy, they taught each other about these subjects using their own personal stories and understandings. Within the Urban Youth classrooms, students were given the opportunity to recognize the power of their own knowledge and collaboratively shared personal knowledge.

Tanisha explained the objective behind this when she said that the intention of the program is “about critical thinking and analyzing what you would normally look at

anyway.” The students were not asked to integrate the ideas of other people, outside of their classroom, they just were to consider their own. For example, through the video lesson, outside material was utilized yet it was material that the students “would normally look at anyway.” In this way, the facilitators did not encourage or expect the student to access researched knowledge in the way it is being defined in this study. In accessing researched knowledge, students look to primary and secondary sources with which they had little or no prior familiarity. The videos were an intimate part of the students’ lives and following the viewing, the students spoke exclusively about their own views.

This pattern could have possibly been disrupted at the closing health fair where professionals from various hospitals and safe sex organizations shared outside knowledge about safe sex with all of the students in the school. However, the teachers, facilitators, and students all commented that the students were already familiar with most of this information as a result of another health fair from earlier in the year. Carrie, one of the teachers said, “I don’t think anything was really new.” Similarly, when I asked Jason, one student in the class, what he had learned about safe sex, he commented, “I already knew about it to tell you the truth.” The “experts” from outside of the school, possibly bearing new knowledge derived from outside of the students’ personal experiences, did not seem to make an impact on the students.

The students in Foxlawn High School also shared their own personal knowledge when talking about what the pregnant woman in the mural should be doing. One student commented that she should be going to the liquor store. This suggestion was passed over during this period, but the next day the students started speaking about what happened to women they know who drank alcohol while pregnant and debated whether or not women

who drink alcohol can give birth to healthy children. The students shared their own personal knowledge, some of which was based on looking at particular children, to share in this conversation. Outside expert knowledge was not brought in to add to this conversation.

Just as scholars of color may be “tired of bending their ears to hear the master’s book talk” (Ladson Billings, 2000, p. 270), the facilitators may have inferred that the students were tired of learning information that was distanced from their own experiences. Therefore, the Urban Youth curriculum utilized community based, personal knowledge to the exclusion of researched knowledge. As a result, the students were not able to build conceptual or historical understandings of the issues at hand. Positively, the students’ voices and experiences were fully validated. The theory of social action guiding this decision values personal knowledge and suggests that citizens can make a change by consulting their own experiences. Additional understanding or knowledge about this problem is not required for one to speak out.

### *Participation Structures*

In this section, I analyze the participation structures seen in each program. A participation structure describes how the students interact with each other as they participate in class. I largely describe two different models for participation structure: collaboration and independent work. These participation structures were observed as the students learned and exercised various skills within the social action units. In Class 345, the students worked independently, forwarding their own individual projects. When utilizing the Urban Youth program, the students worked collaboratively towards a collective goal.

*Class 345: Student independence.* Scott opened the unit by asking the students to read independently. The students independently delved into newspapers and various, chosen biographies of people whose voices have changed the world. This began the unit on an independent note. The writing component of the unit began in a similarly open way when Scott told the students that they could write on whatever topic elicited their strong feelings. As they generated and shared their ideas, he regularly praised the class for collectively addressing a wide variety of newspaper articles and issues overall. Scott also enabled them to write for social change through a variety of genres. The students made their own choices as to what problems they would address, how they would express themselves, and how they would pace their work.

As the students wrote their social justice writing pieces, they worked on independent projects. The activities in the classroom, therefore, were highly differentiated. Once the project was up and running, the students were rarely asked to address a singular text or construct a response based on a standardized construct when enacting the social action curriculum. During any one independent writing period, I observed students researching their identified problems, drafting their writing pieces, editing this work, or conferencing with a peer or Scott. While the students came together at the closing of the year to collaboratively present an assembly to the school, the assembly displayed their own independent research projects.

In sum, the nature of this work asked that the students work independently. While Scott thought that the students may form coalitions with each other, at the closing of the project he said that he was glad that the students worked independently. He thinks that

the collaborative work would have “slowed things down instead of pushing things forward.”

The nature of their work forwarded a theory of social action in which citizens can use their own, independent power to gain knowledge through research processes and use this knowledge to critique and work for change. In this model, citizens do not need to collaborate with others, particularly as they develop their visions. They are positioned as agents of change, capable of doing their own change-making work.

*Urban Youth classrooms: Student collaboration.* In comparison to Class 345 where the students each worked on their own action project, the students in Foxlawn High School and the Leadership Academy all worked together towards singular action projects. In Foxlawn High School, the students worked as a whole group as they painted or discussed the details of the project. In the Leadership Academy, the students both discussed the health fair as a whole group and worked together in small groups. For example, they were in three groups of approximately seven students each as they created the graphs to hand out on the day of the health fair. The students were never asked to work independently on their own assignments. During her interview, Mona, a student, stated: “We got to work together...we had so much to do in so little time so we all had to work together and rush through it and push all the negative things to the side and just focus as one.” They all shared one specific goal. As a result, the students related to each other as a collective.

Within Foxlawn High School and the Leadership Academy, the students contributed towards common products. For example, in the Leadership Academy, the students worked in groups on graphs to be hung at the health fair. In one group one

student wrote the title, another read the words of the title as they were being written, the third held the ruler, the fourth marked the outlines of the bars, and the final three waited attentively on hand to switch or take on new jobs. The students saw what needed to get done and communicated with each other, either verbally or non verbally, so that they could complete their shared task. Similarly, the students in Foxlawn High School worked as a group when they painted their murals. Building on what their classmates were doing or had done, the students filled in different sections of the mural, mixed paint, cleaned brushes, commented on their classmates' color choices, and placed new strips of tape on the mural. Importantly, a high level of collaboration was required as the students worked together on one specific product.

This approach builds on the presumption that group projects can build "team spirit" and orient students towards "community welfare and the common good" (Kesson & Oyler, 1999, p. 147). In this theory of social action, citizens work together to combine efforts and move towards a singular end goal. This theory assumes that collective action leads towards a grander outcome than anything individuals could have created on their own. Group work and collective decision making are valued.

### *Sharing Authority*

In this section, I seek to describe the way that authority was shared within the social action units. In all three settings, the students and teachers shared authority where sometimes the students took the role as leaders and other times teachers led the way with the students following (Oyler, 1996). This sharing of authority was seen in reference to the content accessed within the social action units and the students' exercising of particular skills. When I consider students and teachers sharing authority, I do not

envision this as a process through which students and teachers ultimately have equal authority. Rather, I studied the data for instances where the teachers gave the students some authority, and then questioned what this authority looked like. In reviewing the data looking for this pattern, it was clear that the students in Class 345 were given authority by being allowed to express agency over their own work. The students in the Urban Youth program were given a piece of authority at the start of the unit and were subsequently positioned to respond to the authority of the facilitators.

Reflecting Oyler's (1996) ideas about sharing authority, both Scott and the Urban Youth facilitators enabled the students to use authority during the development of the projects, enhancing their own authority as the adults and professionals in the classroom. The students were invested as they completed their projects, and therefore, gave their trust to the facilitators at various points in the process. In this section, I explore and compare how this authority was shared during the social action curriculum. When teachers question how and if they are teaching democratically, they can look to issues of authority and consider them at the heart of the answer (Poduska, 1996).

*Class 345: Integrated teacher and student authority.* Throughout the unit, both Scott and the students had opportunities to use their authority. Scott opened the unit by expressing his authority: the unit would comprise a writing project and the writing would have the potential to make a change in the world. The students then made their own decisions as they identified the particular problems they would address, researched their problems, chose the genre of their writing piece, and determined their own participation in the closing assembly. Scott explained this choice of his when he said, "I can't image taking the choice away and calling it social justice."

It is particularly interesting to note how students used their authority around the conclusion of the projects because of the contrast seen between Class 345 and the Urban Youth classrooms. Similar to the Urban Youth programs, the idea for the closing program – an assembly in this case – came from Scott. After he used his authority to propose the idea of the assembly, he then gave the students control over the logistics for it. On the second to last week of school, Urshan, a student in Class 345, walked around the classroom and asked the students how they wanted to participate. Eight students signed up to present to the audience and the rest distributed printed copies of their material, or hung up poster size versions of their projects. In allowing them to make this decision, Scott gave the students authority over the assembly. Building from the previously discussed theme of independence, this decision further shows how Scott valued the students as independent agents.

During the days before the assembly, the students worked to prepare their contribution to the event. Students rehearsed their power points, created posters, and those who had completed their own personal work made a banner. Scott asked the students to decide the order of the power point presentations and whether or not the posters should be hung separately around the auditorium or all together in the back of the auditorium. On the day of the event, the spotlight was on the students as the master of ceremonies and all of the presenters were students. During his exit interview, Scott commented that in reference to the assembly, “I gave minimal, minimal support to any of it.” The students were given a high level of authority in the running of the assembly. Scott was often concerned that he imposed his authority on the students when he spoke openly about his political views. In stating his opinions openly, he may have influenced

the students to value his perspective. He recognizes and was concerned about the strength of his own voice and its potential to possibly silence student views. He said, “I’m a part of the forum too...so, I definitely try to say, ‘Ok, this is what I think’ ...ideally, other kids would then be able to chime in.” In this quote, Scott identifies his efforts to mitigate his authority by integrating other students into the conversation.

There was, however, an incident when Scott shut down a student initiative. After hearing from a tenant organizer who was organizing against the city wide community service requirement, students suggested that they should also organize against the community service requirement in their school. Scott told the students that the nature of the service work and the consequences if it is not done are different between these cases. He explained to me that he didn’t want the students to walk away with the message that they could protest the community service requirement in the school so he told the students that the issues were different. Scott used his authority to terminate a student initiated idea. This shows that Scott’s commitment to sharing his teacher authority is circumstantial. When he felt that the students would pursue a direction that he did not support, he stepped in and used his authority to end this possibility.

Overall, it is clear that both the teacher and the students had integrated levels of authority within the project. This implies a theory of social action in which citizens can participate in an entire process of change – from the identification of the problem through to the action steps intended to implement this change – while gaining direction from those more experienced. This suggests that citizens, and community leaders, can share authority and work together to create a change making initiative that reflects all voices involved.

*Urban Youth classrooms: Students as initiators then followers.* Similar to Class 345, the Urban Youth program began with the facilitators using their authority to lay the framework for the project. Within this framework, the students were to work collaboratively on a social action project. The students in the Urban Youth program then showed their authority when they voiced their opinions to the class and helped the group come to decisions about their action projects. The key decision the students made as a group was when they identified the problem that they wanted to address through the action project. At this moment, the students led, by advocating for the topic that was meaningful for them, and the facilitators followed. It is noteworthy that after this decision was made, the facilitators largely led and the students followed. Through the remainder of the projects, the students worked collectively to complete tasks that were determined by the facilitators and teachers. For example, this was the case with the creation of the mural and the graphs.

I will spotlight interactions that occurred during the conclusion of the program to illustrate the use of teacher authority during the Urban Youth program in the Leadership Academy. The role of facilitator authority was more obvious in the conclusion of the project at Foxlawn High School, as the students spent their final days in the program filling in a mural the outline of which had been created by Zaire. The students may have chosen which section of the mural to paint, but the sections themselves were delineated by Zaire. When the program came to a close and the mural was not complete, Zaire finished it. It was displayed without the students' message on it and looked like it had been completed by professionals. Indeed, within the relationships observed in Foxlawn High School, the facilitators acted with great agency.

Facilitator authority in the Leadership Academy classroom was more nuanced. In April, at the conclusion of the lesson, Tanisha said to the students,

We are finishing up so I am leaving a copy of the schedule with your teachers so that you know what is going to be happening. There is an organization that is partnering with you to make this happen. We told you about this. What is the name of the organization?

When no one remembered, Tanisha reminded them that it was Steiner and Koop (a pseudonym), an investment bank. She then read the schedule to them. When she read the section noting that there would be a speaker, one student asked “Who is the speaker?” Clearly, Tanisha arranged the logistics for the day.

A similar dynamic evolved when Tanisha revealed to the students the roles that the students would play on the day of the fair. In May, Tanisha told the students “Each person is going to have a role so that everyone knows what their responsibility is for the event.” These particular roles were reported to the students the day before the fair. One particularly strong leader in the class seemed a bit concerned about this when she said two weeks before the fair, “So we are not going to know our roles for the fair until next week?” Tanisha responded with, “Yes, I think if I tell you before that, I will just have to go through it again next week.” On the day before the fair, the student jobs and the schedule were reported to the students. Mona alluded to the facilitator’s control over the health fair when she described it during her interview. She said, “Everybody had a part....And Urban Youth was making the fair.”

The Urban Youth facilitators were aware of the way that they used their authority when planning the health fair. During her final interview, Tanisha explained that if she could do it again she would make a paper document listing the steps that a person needs to take to “impact community change.” She explained that this would be necessary

because the students were not aware of some of the steps that the facilitators took when planning the health fair. She said, “The things that we had to do behind the scenes, they aren’t necessarily privy to all that information. They helped generate the ideas of some of the things you think we need to do.” Clearly, the students used their authority during the phase of idea and topic generation and then the facilitators used their authority to plan and carry out the actual event.

In sum, the nature of this work asked the students to act with authority when choosing the topics for the action projects and then follow the facilitators’ authority through the completion of the projects. Interestingly, despite this, the students frequently commented that the project was theirs. Jason, a student in the Leadership Academy, said during his closing interview, “We felt in charge...like if we would have never voted for sex, the category itself, they wouldn’t have had a health fair.” This student authority stemmed from the fact that the students chose the topic of the project and, in turn, the facilitators gained the trust from the students to act on their behalf. It is also possible that increased teacher authority was needed within this unit, in comparison to the unit in Class 345, because of the once a week nature of the curriculum. The facilitators may have felt that without strong authority on their part, the students would not have arrived at a closing product given the time limitations.

Within the Urban Youth classrooms, the teachers and facilitators forwarded a theory of social change in which the citizens feel authority over the seed idea within a social reform. This root can establish the citizen ownership of the reform. This theory goes on to suggest that once this root, or base, is established by the people, other authority figures can direct the process leading to change.

### Possibilities and Limitations of the Theories of Social Action

The theories of social action actualized by Scott and the Urban Youth facilitators provide certain possibilities and limitations for social action curriculum. As this research leans on critical theory, I wish to point out that these possibilities and limitations imply the ways that the students were taught to yield power in order to make change. I present the possibilities and limitations in reference to the five categories explored in this chapter: the orientation of the curriculum; the intended purpose; the knowledge utilized; participation structures; and student and teacher authority. I conclude this section with an explanation of how these possibility and limitations can be situated within liberal and critical visions of justice as seen in political philosophy.

#### *Class 345*

The curriculum in Class 345 presented the students with the possibility to embrace various forms of agency. By orienting the social action curriculum within the core curriculum, the students were able to reinforce their reading, writing, and research skills while developing their citizenship skills. With his intended purpose, Scott aimed to empower the students to critique their surroundings and work towards systemic, structural change. By utilizing both researched and personal knowledge, he gave the students the opportunity to build larger, conceptual, understandings of their chosen topics. Through the participation structures, the students acted as independent agents. Finally, as explained in the section on shared authority, Scott gave the students authority over various aspects of the project leading up to a closing assembly.

I locate the main limitation of the social action curriculum in Class 345, in comparison to the Urban Youth curriculum, within the participation structures and the

orientation of the curriculum categories. By framing the project as an independent endeavor, the students did not have an opportunity to form coalitions around a common goal. Also, Scott may have used more creative materials including paint and film if he had not sought to address mandated literacy and Social Studies standards and teach traditional literacy skills, while still making time for test preparation, during the social action curriculum enactment. The other categories, intended purpose, knowledge utilized, and shared authority, however, did not limit the students' in the same way because they allowed for multiple approaches on the part of the students. While Scott's intended purpose was for the students to build a sense of outrage and critique, the students were observed to build personal empowerment through this process. Similarly, they were encouraged to access multiple forms of knowledge and share authority to varying extents throughout the project.

### *Urban Youth Classrooms*

The Urban Youth curriculum, conversely, positioned itself as a non-school oriented program and therefore empowered the students to utilize creative materials including paint and film. In addition, through the intended purpose, this curriculum allowed the students to obtain personal empowerment skills that may help them advocate for themselves. The students' personal funds of knowledge were drawn upon as valid and important when their life experiences, opinions, and questions were integrated into the curriculum. The participation structures enabled the students to gain power by building coalitions. Finally, this curriculum positioned the students so that they could follow strong teacher or facilitator leadership, as seen in the way that authority was

shared. As a result, the class was able to construct closing projects through a once a week program.

The limitations of the Urban Youth curriculum relate to the following categories: orientation of the curriculum; intended purpose; knowledge utilized; and the participation structures. By orientating the curriculum as separate from the core curriculum and utilizing only personal knowledge, the facilitators did not give the students the power to build a conceptual view of their identified social problems. From this limited viewpoint, the students may have been given the tools to think about their own lives, not to necessarily envision broader social issues. Without a consideration of the problems that exist outside of the students' immediate perspective, we can question how they were prepared to work towards systemic change. In addition, by framing the project as a collective endeavor, the Urban Youth curriculum limited the students' ability to act as independent agents. The way that authority was shared did not present such a limitation in that through the unit, the students, facilitators, and teachers all obtained authority at different points in the project.

#### *Liberal and Critical Views of Justice*

The theories of social action can also be used to consider how particular categories within the enactments reflect liberal and critical approaches to justice. The liberal vision of justice is largely associated with theories of distributive justice (Fletcher, 2000), which assumes that citizens are individuals (Sandel, 1997) and addresses social problems as they exist in current time (Nozick, 1997). The critical vision of justice honors group identities, and places social problems within broad social and historical frameworks (Young, 1990, 2000). In that these frameworks are honored, the structural

and systemic aspects of social problems are addressed within a critical model of justice. For the purposes of this conversation, I look mainly to the intended purposes of the curriculum enactments, the knowledge utilized, and the participation structures as these categories seem to reflect liberal or critical approaches to justice. In that focus is being placed on only three of the five categories of the curriculum enactment when drawing connections between the enactment and political philosophy, it is clear that curriculum enactment is an endeavor that contains great nuance and cannot be associated in its entirety with a particular political ideology. In addition, it will be clear that even within these categories, a social action unit can simultaneously forward aspects of both liberal and critical approaches to justice. I illustrate the way that differing theoretical approaches to justice are blended and extended within curriculum enactment.

The intended purpose and knowledge utilized in Class 345 seem to be modeled after a critical approach to justice. Scott's intended purpose was to help the students build a sense of critique and outrage towards a broad number of injustices around them. Critical political philosophy similarly identifies systemic social problems as illegitimate and exploitative. Using academic knowledge, they were taught to place isolated social problems within a broader conceptual framework and in turn build their understanding of systemic injustice. This curriculum, however, does not fully fold into the critical model in that the students largely exercised their authority as individuals, as opposed to a collective. Therefore, the chosen participation structures observed within the social action curriculum enactment complicated the alliance of the enactment with a critical approach to justice.

Conversely, the intended purpose of the Urban Youth curriculum seemed to be to give students the power to act towards change as it is largely perceived of in the liberal vision of justice. The facilitators wished for the students, as individuals, to become empowered. In addition, in the way that knowledge was utilized, the students considered only their current moment, not the historical precedents to any of the problems. This can be seen as a key characteristic of liberal theory, in that the “current time slice” is all that is being considered (Nozick, 1997). As a result, historical or structural precedents were not discussed. Yet, despite these liberal leanings and in contrast to the participation structures in Class 345, the students in the Urban Youth classrooms were positioned to work collaboratively. This reflects a viewpoint of critical theorists who argue that people should be recognized as existing in groups, not as independent agents (Young, 1990, 1997a, 1997b, 2000). While liberal political philosophy assumes the individualism of people (Fletcher, 2000; Sandel, 1997), the Urban Youth facilitators advanced a collaborative model of citizenship.

The participation structures of the units, in comparison to the intended purposes and knowledge utilized within the curriculum enactments, show that social action curricular enactments can simultaneously reflect facets of liberal and critical political philosophy. Therefore, educators can draw on these political philosophies in varying degrees.

### Conclusion

Teachers can consider the theories of social action implicit within Class 345 and the Urban Youth curriculum to reflect on their own social action teaching practices and their theory of social action. When addressing their teaching, they can ask the following

questions and use the descriptions to help them arrive at their answers: Should the social action curriculum be oriented within the core curriculum or framed as a break from the regular day? Should I work with the expectation that the students learn to create a change in the world or should they work towards their own personal empowerment? What knowledge should be utilized within the classroom: personal or researched knowledge? How should the students participate during the project: independently or collaboratively? How will I share my teacher authority? I do not advocate that teachers form yes or no answers to these questions. Rather, they should consider them as a means to arriving at their own nuanced answers that would fall in line with the needs and interests of the students. This is what Scott and the Urban Youth facilitators did.

On a broader level, teachers can explore their theory of social action by asking: In what social structures is social action oriented? What is the purpose of social action? What knowledge is needed for citizens to engage in social action? How should citizens interact with each other when participating in social action? How should authority be used within social action projects? Teachers can better understand their teaching decisions during a social action unit if they form an explicit vision of their theory of social action. In this article, I analyze two distinct curricula and on the theories of social action implied within them. This analysis can serve as a starting point for other educators enacting a social action curriculum.

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## Appendix A: Theories of Social Action

Category	Class 345	Urban Youth classrooms
Orientation of the curriculum	Utilizing the core curriculum	A break from the regular day
Intended purpose	Create a change in the world	Self empowerment
Knowledge utilized	Personal and researched knowledge	Personal knowledge
Participation structures	Student independence	Student collaboration
Student and teacher authority	Integrated teacher and student authority	Students as initiators then followers

## Appendix B: Chart of Students' Topics and Writing Genres from Class 345

Social Problem	Writing Genres
racial profiling	brochure and flyer
trash collection	letter and power point
high rent	letter and flyer
war in Uganda	brochure and poster
Fear	poem*
bad nutrition/McDonalds	letter and power point
water pollution	letter and power point
AIDS epidemic in Africa	letter and poster
high stakes testing	essay and website
alcohol abuse	letter and poster
high school drop out	speech and brochure
free speech/civil rights violations	letter and brochure
poor sexual education programs	speech*
domestic abuse	essay and poster
water pollution	essay*

\*In the cases where only one genre is listed, the student either did not create two assignments or I do not have the record of the second assignment.