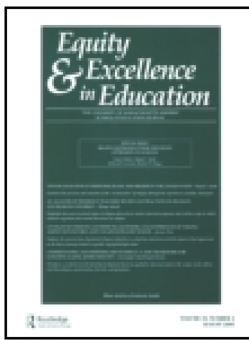

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Reclaiming Power and Identity: Marginalized Students' Experiences of Service-Learning

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This qualitative case study investigates how service-learning may enable self-direction and the development of a critical consciousness for marginalized high school students by exploring the dynamics of service-learning through a theoretical framework of critical theory. Service-learning is theorized to counter the oppressive nature of schooling as defined by critical theorists; however, little research exists to clarify the implications of the pedagogy on student empowerment. I consider the negotiation of power and knowledge that may empower students, redefining their experience of schooling and their identities as learners. By exploring processes of empowerment and the social structures created through service-learning, I document three marginalized, male, urban high school students' self-authorship as they negotiate learning spaces within community. Data analysis revealed how service-learning legitimized lived experience and enabled the re-writing of self through the construction of new social/intellectual spaces. Participants' experiences offer insight into the pedagogy of service-learning for encountering transformational moments between self, society, and other.

Empowerment is the process through which students learn to transform social order by critiquing aspects of the status quo that support inequitable relations while at the same time legitimizing and embracing their own history, language, and cultural traditions (McLaren, 1989). While schools commonly preserve inequalities through "contexts that narrowly constrict identities of youth" (Fine & Weiss, 2003, p. 3), schools also have the potential to become sites of self and social empowerment that "wedge open opportunities for new selves to emerge" (p. 3). Appropriately the focus of much recent attention, the discussion of educational inequality originates in the study of critical theory. According to critical theorists, culturally non-dominant students are marginalized as power is tacitly arranged within schooling structures that silence and exclude diverse voices (Kincheloe, 2008). The harmful practices that result in marginalization can, however, be countered by providing students with an avenue for acknowledging the valuable knowledge they possess (e.g., Freire, 2005, 2009; Giroux, 2005; Kincheloe, 2008; McLaren & Giarelli, 1995).

Service-learning is commonly advanced as a pedagogy for empowerment and social justice (e.g., Cipolle, 2004; Claus & Ogden, 2001; King, 2004; Stanton, Giles, & Cruz, 1999; Weah, Simmons, & Hall, 2000). A central aim is to shift the dynamics of learning space and power so that learning emerges in a shared territory (Clark & Young, 2005). Authors have outlined frameworks for critical service-learning (Masucci & Renner, 2001; Mitchell, 2008) and counter-hegemonic

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service-learning (Cipolle, 2004). These approaches highlight service-learning's potential towards self- and community empowerment, which may be especially vital for oppressed groups. However, a service-learning opportunity gap exists. While poor, urban students of color demonstrate the greatest interest in the pedagogy (Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Wulsin, 2008) and make academic gains that may lessen the achievement gap (Scales & Roehlkepartain, 2005), their schools report the lowest service-learning rates (Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Wulsin, 2008; Spring, Grimm, & Dietz, 2008).

The potential of service-learning to empower students and communities remains unclear. Although several authors have established that service-learning experiences are unique for racially and socioeconomically diverse students (e.g., Jones, Robbins, & LePeau, 2011; Swaminathan, 2007; Yates & Youniss, 1998), little is described about how empowerment of these students may actually occur. Although most attention has been given to service-learning as an avenue through which students encounter their own privilege (e.g., Batchelder & Root, 1994; Eyler & Giles, 1999; Henry, 2005), I was concerned with students' understandings of self as they grappled with their own oppression. Is service-learning a way to address educational inequalities, not only by legitimizing the knowledges and experiences of learners, but also through empowering them as change agents in their communities? To explore service-learning from the perspectives of marginalized high school students, I employed a qualitative case study design to gain an in-depth view of the spaces, relationships, and identities three low-income, African American males constructed through service-learning. Of primary focus was participants' lived experience—the prior knowledge, informed by daily interactions, that students bring to school that often conflicts with the curriculum and is therefore delegitimized through schooling (McLaren, 1989)—and how this may be granted power through service-learning.

SERVICE-LEARNING AS AN EMPOWERMENT PEDAGOGY

Service-learning is a postmodern pedagogy, according to Butin (2005b), in that "it is a pedagogy immersed in the complexities and ambiguities of how we come to make sense of ourselves and the world around us" (p. 98). A central tenet is student-school-community relationships, forged across socioeconomic boundaries (Bringle, Clayton, & Price, 2009; Clayton, Bringle, Senor, Huq, & Morrison, 2010; Eyler & Giles, 1999; Furco, 2001), which enable service-learners to develop cross-cultural knowledge and to adopt an understanding of the multiplicities of knowledge, power, identity, and learning (Boyle-Baise, 2002; Hopson, 2002). Connecting with others prompts students' critical reflection on their own perspectives (Baxter Magolda, 2000). As students encounter the complexity and multidimensionality of social problems (Batchelder & Root, 1994), identities are destabilized and potentially reconstructed (Butin, 2005a).

Service-learning can be an avenue through which students confront their own privilege, facilitating growth in their interpretations of social issues, commitment to social justice, and intention to personally effect change (Batchelder & Root, 1994; Eyler & Giles, 1999; Henry, 2005; Jones & Abes, 2004; Jones, Robbins, & Lapeau, 2011). Jones, Robbins, and LePeau (2011) found students' norms were decentered as they "wrestled with how to integrate what they had experienced and learned into their daily lives and their sense of self" (p. 35). This can involve encountering socioeconomic and racial identities (Dunlap, Scoggin, Green, & Davi, 2007) while complicating perspectives of equality and opportunity (Seider, Gillmor, & Rabinowicz, 2010). Complicating

may be furthered as students unravel their own hegemonic assumptions around their role as "server" and those who receive the service, the "served" (Butin, 2005b; Dacheux, 2005).

According to Baxter Magolda (2000), the potential for opportunities that develop self-authorship is central to service-learning: "Reflecting on the meaning of service-learning experiences with supportive others . . . offers the opportunity to acquire an internal sense of self and to struggle with the relationship of agency and communion" (p. 154). Baxter Magolda views self-authorship as a process of constructing a self-directed identity based on the creation of knowledge of oneself in relation to one's reading of the social world. Therefore, social interpretations and constructions of the self are interdependent.

Service-learning's long-term impact on self-authorship is described by Jones and Abes (2004) and Yates and Youniss (1998). Mainly presenting the experience of white college students from privileged backgrounds, Jones and Abes considered how identity was impacted through ongoing reflection of the relationship between self and other through work at a food pantry and an AIDS service organization. Interactions in these settings "disrupted, challenged, and reconstructed" (Jones & Abes, 2004, p. 163) students' notions of self and other. Jones and Abes (2004) explain: "The context of service-learning enabled students to construct their identities in the complicated, challenging, and unfamiliar environment of a community service setting" (p. 163).

Yates and Youniss (1998), investigating the experiences of predominately middle class African American students at a parochial high school, similarly concluded that service-learning experiences at a soup kitchen "provided opportunities to apply and test notions of self, others, and society" (p. 500). These events informed students' notions of power and their belief in their personal responsibility to be politically active change agents. Importantly, Yates and Youniss' findings also highlighted students' self-authorship within the context of racial inequalities. As participants unraveled their understandings of being black Americans they engaged in an exploration of societal power and race and ultimately "reflected on their own political status in society and their ability to alter that status" (Yates & Youniss, 1998, p. 503).

Other authors also have considered how racially and socioeconomically diverse students experience service-learning (e.g., Jones, Robbins, & LePeau, 2011; Swaminathan, 2007). Swaminathan (2007) revealed "a hidden curriculum at play in the community service-learning sites that facilitated different types of experiences for different students" (pp. 141–142). She detailed how the aims of community partners, despite their good intentions, were tied to race, with students of color being perceived as "requiring skills that had to do with management and control of their time, space, and bodies" (Swaminathan, 2007, p. 141). Therefore, according to Swaminathan, regardless of teachers' aims towards social justice, service-learning experiences may confine youth of color to existing inequitable arrangements of power.

Jones, Robbins, and LePeau (2011) similarly contend that service-learners with "marginalized social identities experienced decentering differently than their peers with dominant identities" (p. 36). However, these researchers propose that "[b]ecause students with marginalized identities are more likely to have encountered these issues in their own lives, their sense of efficacy as agents of social change may not be shaken by even the most compelling service-learning immersion experiences" (Jones, Robbins, & Lapeau, 2011, p. 38). Therefore, they may be more likely to experience empowerment than their privileged counterparts who may be overwhelmed by the complexity of social issues they hoped to solve (Jones, Robbins, & LePeau, 2011). Given the possibilities for empowerment, or perhaps oppression, through service-learning, further scholarship is required to understand how marginalized students (re)encounter community problems and integrate social interpretations into their world views and constructions of self.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

Critical Theory

Critical theory is a philosophy of education based on a social and educational vision of justice and equality that acknowledges the political inscriptions hidden within education, It is committed to alleviating the suffering caused by discrimination and poverty, and confronts the "mechanisms of social and educational stratification that hurt socially, linguistically, and economically marginalized students" (Kincheloe, 2008, p. 15). A central concern is that schools "usher children and adolescents into ideologies and ways of interpreting social evidence that legitimate rather than challenge conditions of inequity" (Fine, 1991, p. 61). Consequently, critical theory's fundamental objective is the empowerment of marginalized groups, who, as culturally non-dominant, are further disempowered through the current structure of schooling (Kincheloe, 2008).

Critical theorists contend that the curriculum serves the dominant power in hidden ways by tacitly reinforcing and rewarding middle class values, attitudes, and behaviors (McLaren, 1989). Schools select for such cultural capital, favoring students who already possess the social and linguistic competencies valued in middle class culture, and thereby reproduce unequal distributions of power (Apple, 1990). Through their experience of schooling, diverse students may come to realize that success in school may come only "with a rejection of their ethnic and/or class backgrounds and the cultural forms on knowledge that accompany them" (Kincheloe, 2008, p. 15). Therefore, the underachievement of disadvantaged students is not representative of individual failure; it is a much larger phenomenon of economic and social constructs (McLaren, 1989).

Research from a critical theory standpoint, as described by Kincheloe (2008), explicitly seeks to construct information that is useful in the struggle against oppression and suffering. With this critical perspective, I aim not only to describe experiences of service-learning, but to espouse a commitment to explore and initiate change for marginalized students (Eisenhart, 2006). This approach requires understanding multiple contexts, building trusting relationships with research participants, and developing concrete ways to address the concerns of diverse groups (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007).

As I explicitly shared my aims to explore how schools can be sites of empowerment with participants, the theoretical framework of critical theory demonstrated my commitment to social justice, which addressed participants' concerns and enabled supportive relationships to develop between us. Given my status as an outsider in the participants' school and city, this approach was especially valuable in conveying my intentions to engage in a collaborative exploration. Critical theory attended to the dimensions of race/class/power that often are inherent between the "researcher" and the "researched" by providing an avenue to express my commitment and take a stand on the issues with the participants. As a result, trust was established, enabling access to rich data as the participants and I embarked on a voyage of discovery together.

METHODS

Context of the Study

The study occurred in a city in New York during the 2011–2012 school year. In recent years the city has experienced growth in charter schools, including the first charter high school, which

opened in 2008. This school, which I refer to as Grandview Community Charter High School (Grandview), was the site of this research. An all boys school, Grandview espoused aims to address the most challenging issues facing the city's public high school. These include wide disparities between the academic achievement of white students and students of color, high dropout rates, heavy gang involvement, and poverty.

Although little clear evidence exists that the school has made strides towards these goals, Grandview's reported 2011–2012 graduation rate of 67% appears hopeful, compared to 55% at the public high school. However, consistent with what Ravitch (2014) and other critics of charter schools maintain, student participants in this study described that approximately half of the 150 boys enrolled in their class were expelled or otherwise left school during their first year. By the end of the second year only 50 boys remained. Nonetheless, participants conveyed a great deal of school pride. They felt that they were thriving in Grandview's culture and curriculum. With its college preparatory focus, participants had access to a variety of special programs and they reported close relationships with teachers who they believed to be committed to their success.

During the study, 90% of Grandview's enrollment of 320 male students were eligible for free/reduced lunch. The student body was predominantly African American, constituting 76% of the population. Grandview's students also were Latino (14%), multiracial (5%), white (4%), and Asian (1%). On the other hand, nearly 60% of the 46 school staff and faculty were white, while 32%, including the principal, were African American. Asian and Latino staff constituted the remaining 8%.

The Service-Learning Curriculum

With components woven throughout everyday school culture, service-learning was a main tenet of Grandview, especially for seniors who were required to complete 100 service-learning hours prior to graduation. Grandview's approach integrated community engagement with school-based learning and reflection with aims for social change. The intention was to develop independent, well-rounded, active citizens. The service-learning coordinator described the aspiration to "create change agents—individuals who recognize the problems and assets within their communities who are equipped with the knowledge and experience to make real change."

Community action projects selected by students commonly involved mentoring opportunities with neighborhood afterschool programs. Students also addressed issues of food security and hunger by working at food pantries or community gardens. Other opportunities chosen by students included art-based neighborhood revitalization projects, anti-violence campaigns, and anti-poverty initiatives. Additionally, a week-long service-learning trip to the Dominican Republic offered students "a firsthand lesson on social justice with relevance to educational and economic disparities across the globe," according to the service-learning coordinator.

Hands-on community work was academically grounded through an ongoing consideration of social justice. School-based inquiry included morning homeroom and freshman advisory sessions and culminated with a social justice class. Through discussions facilitated by a teacher or a twelfth grade student, homeroom and advisory sessions provided a format for students to tie their acts of service to a broader consideration of social change as they reflected on their community experiences in light of the inequities and complexities they encountered. The social justice class was a capstone course for seniors, which examined historical and present day oppression and

unequal arrangements of power, including a critique of students' own lives. In both the class and the sessions, student voices and experiences were part of the curriculum.

Participants

Purposeful sampling (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007) was utilized to intentionally select three, male, twelfth grade student participants to deepen an understanding of service-learning, empowerment, and self-authorship. Participants were selected from the first students to enroll in the school. Entering their senior year at the start of the study, these students were required to complete a service-learning requirement and link their community action commitments to the study of social justice. The three students invited to participate in the study were selected based on their dedication to service-learning and their potential to demonstrate growth through the program, and were selected with the help of the service-learning coordinator.

All participants were African American. Overall, participants were mature and serious students who described themselves as immersed in service. Possessing an awareness of injustice, informed through first-hand experience, they demonstrated a personal ambition to elevate their community. Despite participants' achievements at Grandview, academic success and even graduation were not always certain to them. A brief depiction of each student participant follows. Although pseudonyms are used, I refer to each participant with a surname, a standard Grandview practice.

Mr. Harper

Harper was a top ranked student who was awarded for having the highest number of service-learning hours, 497, in the school. As a freshman he nearly walked out of Grandview—standing at the door, he recalled thinking: "I don't have anywhere else to go but jail or the streets." His decision to stay was fueled by his desire to "build something new up within myself and within my community." Harper drew clear connections between the challenges faced by young African American men and larger societal inequalities. Motivated by a desire to overcome injustices, Harper had a big vision for his future. College was his first priority. When Harper discussed his acceptance into Morehouse College he beamed with pride: "I prayed to God that I could get into any college . . . so I don't know . . . I'm very excited, I'm happy, I'm blessed with that honor, I can't wait to start."

Mr. Jackson

Jackson conceded that school was easy for him, but "family problems at home" made his academics much more challenging. During his senior year, Jackson completed additional service hours to earn money for college through an AmeriCorps program; he explained: "It's going to be hard to try to pay for college on my own, since I don't live with either one of my parents and they both don't have a job right now." He continued: "They [family] don't want me to leave for college, but I have to." Despite these difficulties, Jackson was awarded for having 425 service-learning hours. In fact, it seemed that hardships were his motivation: "Anytime I can help out people it's

an achievement. Where I grew up, I seen a lot of people struggle. And a lot of people in my family still struggle. How can I help people that's just like them?"

Mr. Quinn

Quinn was skilled in the subtle expressions he employed to retain his street image, which gave him a distinguished status in the school. However, he did not tolerate younger students' misconduct and was adept at using his popularity to be a positive influence. Quinn's tough guy exterior was just that. He openly expressed his affectionate connection with his teachers: "They're more than just teachers to me. Like they love us, and I love my teachers too." Quinn selflessly extended his compassion to fellow students as well:

> I got one of the ninth graders that got the most demerits in the school. I keep him with me, I take him to his classes, see how he's doing, help him with his homework . . . I made it my personal business to take care of him.

Quinn could relate to the problems of younger students as he too faced many challenges during his freshman year. His dedication positioned Quinn to earn an award recognizing his 267 service-learning hours at the graduation ceremony.

Data Collection

The data collection methods employed were participant observations, interviews, and the review of documents, including the researcher's journal. Each participant was observed during at least ten hour-long social justice classes, where open discussions and collaborative group work enabled a critical reflection on social issues encountered through service experiences in the community. Four additional hour-long observations occurred during freshman advisory sessions in which participants facilitated a student-directed dialogue on service-learning, community problems, and social change. Five interviews, 45 minutes in length, were conducted with each student participant. Interview guides (Patton, 2002) were developed to direct an informal conversation that provided flexibility to discover the student's interpretations of service-learning activities. Documents included written assignments, composed by participants for the social justice class, as well as my own reflective journal (Merriam, 1988). Data collection methods yielded three data sources: expanded field notes, interview transcripts, and documents. Within these varied sources I looked "for the detail of interaction within its contexts" (Stake, 1995, p. xi). In this way, I became the research instrument as I detailed the intricacies of participants' experiences (Spradley, 1980).

Data Analysis

Data analysis techniques involved a cyclical process of coding, re-coding, analytic memo writing, and categorizing as detailed by Saldana (2009). Through these techniques, I engaged in an iterative process of inductive analysis to reduce data to "manageable chunks" (Marshall & Rossman, 2006, p. 156). Data coding and re-coding was conducted using both In Vivo and Process Coding

techniques (Saldana, 2009). Codes were assigned to portions of data by the author. Analytic memo writing also was employed as an analytical approach for facilitating reflection (Saldana, 2009). A codebook was compiled and the process of defining codes was helpful in identifying relationships among codes. This involved grouping codes by their similarities, a process Saldana (2009) called codifying. The process of arranging and ordering, as suggested by Saldana, allowed categories to begin to form. By comparing and consolidating categories, I identified themes that developed insight to participants' meanings and experiences. Themes took further shape from reflection, analytic memo writing, reviewing the codebook, and by sketching graphic organizers to impose structure on categories and codes. Finally, interpretation of findings involved strategies of triangulation, peer debriefing, and member checking as described by Creswell (2009) to ensure the trustworthiness and rigor of the study.

FINDINGS

Cross Case Analysis

Cross case analysis revealed a series of processes that each of the three student participants engaged in through lived experience, service-learning, and their interactions. Six major themes emerged that were central to participants' experiences of empowerment and self-authorship. The themes were: (1) Developing an Awareness of Oppressive Structures, (2) Resistance, (3) Forming Community, (4) The Empowering Practices of Service, (5) Expanding Identity, and (6) The Dangers of Sinking.

Developing an Awareness of Oppressive Structures

The entirety of participants' learning through service and the school occurred within a reality framed by oppressive social arrangements. Harper explained that his neighborhood, the "ghetto," was like "a swamp that engulfs and wears away at everything in it;" it was a place where people "sink." In social justice class he told his peers you can be a positive force "in the ghetto, but it's like a swamp or bog. You'll just end up sinking, you might as well just give up."

Participants' stories were rich with the ways they encountered "sinking." Quinn described a constant barrage of "You can't do this, oh, you're a failure"—a dialogue that occurred through interactions with peers outside of the school. This dialogue of "failure" also was evident in the actions of those in power (i.e., in the ways participants were ignored). Whether spoken or unspoken, participants recognized the tacit message that Quinn described through interactions with police on the street: "You're never going to be anything . . . you're gonna be a drug dealer." Jackson added: "It's really hard to get into college being from my community . . . You don't see older people going to college." Instead, as Quinn detailed, they were accustomed to watching others lose sight of their aspirations at a young age, "becoming drug dealers . . . getting locked up." Harper recalled a newspaper article he read while in middle school that reported the statistics on his neighborhood's educational achievement, concluding, as he saw it, that: "Anyone coming from the [neighborhood] will never get to college." Each participant also shared their experiences of losing friends to neighborhood violence. Bearing witness to the plight of their peers was another

way of sinking as they carried the weight of their shared identity as young African American men in an unjust society.

Participants' accounts highlighted their perception of isolation from mainstream society and its forms of power. As Harper explained, "Minority groups aren't really a part of mainstream society." It was clear that he perceived a limited access to cultural forms of power. Exchanges with those viewed as being in the "mainstream society," or dominant culture, confirmed participants' perceptions of isolation. In one instance, Harper encountered the city's mayor:

> I see him [the mayor] walking around sometimes, he gives me a smile, a big old cheesy smile, "Hey you want a dollar? Ya, you guys are citizens of this city, so you know . . . so you should vote for me, vote for me. Do you want a dollar? Do you want a dollar?" Going around asking teenagers if they want a dollar. No, we want our schools to be better though, can you do that?

Harper would have appreciated a genuine conversation with the mayor; instead, he was not taken seriously as a citizen and his identity as an exceptional student with aims to change his community was delegitimized. Although participants resiliently navigated oppressive structures, such day to day experiences informed a deficiency view of self and community. From participants' perspectives, sinking or standing strong in the swamp seemed to be a choice left up to the individual, supporting the illusion that students are accountable for their success or failure in an unjust system.

Resistance

Entering the school as freshman, participants' sense of self was informed by the lived experiences they projected onto their own futures. Harper offered: "We were in a trance that we were going to jail." Participants described the challenge of being in limbo between two colliding ways of being, as school culture opposed their street culture. As a result, participants resisted school norms that conflicted with their street culture and identity. Participants attempted to maintain their resistance through anger, acting out, and silence, as Quinn conceded: "I would not say nothin' at all 'cause I was so angry." The behaviors were effective defense mechanisms that enabled neighborhood-based constructions of self, street identities, and cultural ways of being—direct products of lived experience—to be maintained.

As a part of their struggle against the school culture, participants resisted the service-learning program during their first year. Service was perceived by Quinn as a "pointless waste of time" and Jackson described how he "just didn't want to do it." Their plan, Jackson continued, was to simply complete the minimum requirement: "I thought I was going to do just 100 hours and then stop." Dynamics of race and power also were at play within resistance. This involved confronting a culturally dominant paradigm that equates community service with punishment. Quinn encountered his peers' perception: "thinking that you gotta commit a crime to do community service." Harper especially offered an interpretation of the service-learning requirement that highlighted an ideological conflict with his lived experience:

> I know a lot of people, like older men that got imprisoned, and they were sentenced to do community service. So I'm sitting here like wow, is . . . it because I'm of black origin or like African American? Is this why she's saying this? . . . So I felt kind of disrespected, like less than myself since she said community service. I sat here, like, wow, community service. I'm not doing any community service.

Harper felt sentenced to do service upon entering the school and the result was his firm conviction not to engage in the program, which he initially interpreted as an oppressive, racially-charged mandate.

Forming Community

Community formation began as participants became conscious of their inner dialogue of self-defeat as they glimpsed the power they possessed to direct their own lives. This process was furthered by constructing a supportive network with peers and teachers based in a self-directed vision of the future. Participants recalled how the transformation began at the start of freshman year when the school principal, Mr. Groves, led an orientation. Harper recounted his central message to the students: "You are so powerful." This pivotal exchange began to shift participants' ways of seeing themselves within the school, as well as society, as they began to develop an awareness of the visions they held for themselves:

> [Mr. Groves said] "Oh, don't you see what you can do, you're so powerful. Oh, your mind is beautiful. What are you doing? Why can't you just sit down and look at yourself? What do you want to do? What do you want to be when you're older?" Most of us were like, we're going to jail. Don't you see me going to jail?

Mr. Groves' words demonstrated belief in his students' potential by valuing them as powerful individuals with the ability to effect change, even as they sat there in anger and resistance.

Developing caring, supportive relationships with Grandview's teachers and staff powerfully shifted participants' relationship to the school. Full engagement in the school was nurtured by teachers' beliefs in the abilities and resiliencies of students who felt labeled as unfit for higher education, as Harper depicted: "We really figured out that they really did love us and really did care about our education. That's when we really started to reach for like goals, like, oh yeah, college is possible." Quinn portrayed how his teachers were there for him in different ways:

> Teachers help you with your work. Talk to the teacher. If you have personal problems, you talk to the teacher about it, too. It's like they are there for you in different ways. Like, if I'm stressed, they're asking me "What's wrong?" They're trying to get to it and give me some good advice or say something that's going to make me feel better. Like, this morning, I walked inside band. Usually I go to straight to my keyboard and start playing it or whatever, but I was just sitting there. And then my teacher came straight to me and took me out in the hallway, and was like "What's wrong with you? You don't look like yourself."

Close bonds with several teachers who, according to Jackson, "don't let me fail, they're always on my tail" gave the school the feel of "a family surrounding." Quinn, who commonly stayed at the school into the evening, echoed: "It's [Grandview] like home. Like, to tell you the truth, I do not go home until like seven, eight o'clock."

Peers were an essential support network as well. Although students initially held stereotypes against each other, Harper explained that "now we embrace each other as brothers." Quinn described:

> So I think it's a good thing to be around [the other Grandview students], cause when we're not here, we're around a whole bunch of people that are not doing nothing with their life. We [Grandview

> students] set goals for each other. We counsel each other. We strive, we compete with each other. We do everything together.

Jackson believed their common experience of striving to overcome obstacles and succeed in school built camaraderie and he felt united with his peers in that "we all want to make it together."

As community was constructed, participants experienced a merger of purpose with the school, greatly shifting their identities as learners and enabling a self-directed vision of self to develop while deconstructing resistance. Harper used the school motto as a powerful extension of his own ambitions. He stated: "I'm on a mission to elevate myself, my community, and humanity." Similarly, Jackson saw achievement at Grandview as a way to: "uplift me, uplift my school, and benefit my community." Harper, who once felt confined by the realities of neighborhood life, shared his "ivy league picks" for the colleges he hoped to attend. Participants embraced roles as advocates for the school. Here, participants were not just products of the school culture but were co-creators, contributing to and advancing Grandview's mission, as Quinn described:

> If I was walking down the hall and I see two kids play fight, it don't matter. You're not supposed to do that at school, I'll stop it, I'll break it up. I don't work for Grandview, but still, I still stop it. And I tell them we don't do that at Grandview, we're brothers, that's what I do.

Jackson also saw himself and his peers "like college recruiters for Grandview" who supported younger students as they transitioned into the school. He emphasized: "Everyone here is family. If someone is struggling, someone is trying to help them."

The Empowering Practices of Service

Through service-learning, participants experienced relevant learning and community action as they impacted their communities and, at the same time, they engaged in powerful growth themselves. Participants' full engagement in all aspects of service initiatives enabled them to gain first-hand experience in approaching social problems, as they not only engaged in physical work but also were involved in researching, planning, interviewing, attending meetings, assessing weaknesses, and identifying ways to strengthen projects. Quinn's work with the city's community gardens involved him in every step of the process, starting with attending an Outdoor Nation Summit where Grandview's group proposed the idea for the gardens, explained their community's challenges, and were awarded funding. Quinn shared his community's struggle as a food desert and the rationale for the community garden:

> A food desert is a place that has no healthy food. It's not a place that don't have food, it's just a place that's not surrounded by healthy food. So there's probably like a Price Chopper across town or something. A lot of people don't have cars that travel over there. So they usually eat unhealthy food.

After receiving the funding, Quinn completed a large part of the physical labor to establish a garden in a vacant lot and witnessed the final stage, as community members received fresh, free produce. For Quinn, the opportunity to engage in each step of the process allowed him to develop an understanding of the garden's purpose that incorporated his own understandings of his community.

Within the school, Harper, Jackson, and Quinn worked together to facilitate freshman advisory sessions. During these sessions, free of staff, service-learning was in their hands, as they were entrusted to use their own knowledge and experience to engage freshman in a consideration of social change in light of community problems. Harper described: "Our discussions have focused on ... self-growth, self-reflection, what do they [freshman] think service-learning is ... how they should impact their community." Their dialogues also became a place for analyzing service-learning experiences. In one instance, each participant shared an example of being ignored or stereotyped by the public during service activities; Jackson detailed how a woman he approached on the street "tried to get away like I was trying to sell them crack." By weaving an exploration of such complicated interactions, which often involved dimensions of race, into the service-learning curriculum, participants exercised their voice to construct culturally relevant understandings.

Overall, participants were invested in creating positive change in their communities. They demonstrated a sense of ownership for the projects they dedicated themselves to and a resolve to make an impact. Harper stated: "It's one thing to serve, but if you want to make an impact, it's even harder. It's like school, there's a difference between knowing and understanding." Beyond feeling responsible for isolated acts of service, participants felt impactful in the sense of driving broader social change in their city. An understanding that service-learning should aim to "empower our community," as Harper portrayed, informed their perspectives. Jackson detailed:

> I think if you see a problem in [the city], where most of us live, then you see that there needs to be change there, then we can have something like the Civil Rights Movement or something different that will help bring change to that aspect of [the city].

Service-learning became an avenue for expressing participants' motivations for social change. Harper concluded that service "is not about the hours ... it's about bettering the community." This shift in perception involved participants' development of the competencies needed to engage in community work as well as a compassionate outlook. Service-learning made a deep impression on Quinn not only academically but "as a person, as a whole." According to Harper, service-learning involved discovering how to "be selfless" in order "to be down for a higher purpose." He cultivated "kindness, sincerity, humbleness, teamwork, humility, and acceptance."

Expanding Identity

Expanding identity was the result of participants' development of new interpretations of social ails, while at the same time realizing their power over the issues that framed their lives. Service-learning often occurred within participants' own communities, placing their identities of home and self central to their work. Shared identity and experience were evident throughout their accounts. Harper, who volunteered at his community's soup kitchen, described recognizing his neighbors' emotions:

> So I start passing out food and stuff and I see people from my neighborhood. Sometimes they feel ashamed and I can see it in their eyes, like "I'm going to the soup kitchen and I don't have any food."... Why are they ashamed? I used to eat here, too.

Quinn, who completed a project to combat street violence, shared: "My last day of the program, that same night, somebody I know got killed. ... I just spent a whole 40 hours making this

program against violence." Clearly, participants' experience was not as detached observers, but as vulnerable insiders. The processes that unraveled as participants engaged and confronted what Jackson perceived as "ordinary" aspects of life enabled a deeper view of self and community, prompting a reflection on oppression and power.

Participants' lived experience with poverty, violence, and crime became a source of motivation for deep investment in the work of social change. To Jackson service was a "gift back to my community." On a deeper level, as injustices coincided with their identities, service brought the participants closer to self and allowed for a re-examining of their own norms. Harper reflected: "What you think of your community is what you think of yourself. Because first you have to be a product of your environment and [then you can] make your environment be a product of you."

Harper shared his vision of himself as a "pillar," the "strength" of the community. In his words, pillars are "positive role models who try to uplift their community in some kind of positive way." In their own way, each participant asked himself: "How can I be a real pillar?" According to Harper, pillars are capable of transforming their environment. Mentoring was one way to make an impact:

> Kids where I'm from, they don't have father figures, and it's not like I'm trying to be a father figure, I'm just trying to be a figure in their lives that they can like look to. Like "Oh, he really did help." Because, like you have to believe in the kids, so I tell them I'm proud of them, because no one ever told me they was proud of me . . . A lot of people come up to me for tutoring. Like, I have a lot of kids, we run our own tutoring program here, but I also have a lot of kids in my neighborhood like, "Oh can you help me? I don't know how to do algebra. School is dumb, I'm gonna go smoke." No, you're not, come here, let me help you with your algebra.

As the pillars of their neighborhoods, independent from the service-learning program, participants were civically engaged, socially aware, and critically reflected on the status quo and their abilities to transform it. This was a powerful state where participants believed they were not only changing the direction of their lives but creating a path for their peers as well. Jackson offered: "If I can be a chain that pops in the cycle, maybe I can influence some others to be something positive."

The Dangers of Sinking

Participants detailed how even as pillars they continued to face the dangers of "sinking" by falling into norms and stereotypes, as Harper depicted: "You can be a positive pillar in the ghetto, but it's like a swamp or bog. You'll just end up sinking, you might as well just give up." As participants constructed a service-informed identity they were challenged by their heightened awareness of oppressive and unjust systems. Participants increasingly described their neighborhoods as "boiling" with injustice, as Harper stated. Additionally, interactions outside of the school challenged participants' constructions of self and the change they believed they were capable of affecting.

Neighborhood environments were not nurturing to participants' emerging sense of self as change agents. Conflicting messages and mindsets, products of the oppressive status quo, had to be navigated. Despite the positive changes he initiated in his community, Jackson experienced moments where he felt: "I'm probably going to be looked at as a nuisance, like a criminal

anyway." Service-learning was a vehicle for confronting these stereotypes, according to Harper, as participants' "good work" went unacknowledged:

> But they [youth] all see the effects that one crime in [city] can do to every other teen in [city]. Like they put us all in a bracket, that's how we feel. And we all get recognized the same way . . . Even though they're doing all this hard work and all this good work. They sit here, like, "Well I'm just gonna be a statistic anyway. I don't care. No matter how much good I do, I won't get recognition, I won't get recognition for being a good person."

Being stereotyped was a way they were delegitimized as powerful individuals with the capacity to uplift their community. Harper concluded: "I'm not just battling the world, I'm battling stereotypes."

THE SOCIAL-INTELLECTUAL SPACES OF SERVICE

Coming into the school, participants' world views and identities were informed by their day to day experiences within oppressive frameworks that manifested social ailments, such as poverty and violence. Critical theorists contend that as schooling delegitimizes lived experience, students engage in a process of resistance to school culture, since it is infused with a cultural capital to which they have little access (Fine, 1991; McLaren, 1989). In this study, resistance represented the tenacity of participants to retain their street identities and cultural ways, as lived experience collided with the new directions advocated by the school. The root of resistance was located within the confrontation between participants' limited, hegemonic view of self and the school's dialogue of achievement and possibility.

McLaren (1989) posits that confronting the voices inherited through oppressive arrangements is an essential function of an empowering education. An unraveling of such oppressive structures was initiated through the construction of community. Grandview became a safe environment, inspired by the "lovingness" (Freire, 2005, p. 74) of teachers, the message of social critique, and through the support of peers. Importantly, participants were not just products of the school culture but were co-creators, contributing to and advancing Grandview's mission. The formation of community demonstrates a merging of initially opposing identities: self and school. As participants re-wrote identities of self that were synergistic with the values and culture of the school, and as their understandings of self—initially based in a deficiency view of their neighborhoods—were reconceived, they engaged in a deconstruction of their resistance. In its place, a self-directed vision of themselves and their futures emerged. In this sense, the essence of community was rooted in more a conscious awareness of self and therefore the potential to re-write the self.

Within the nexus of community, service-learning was empowering as participants were immersed in an array of responsibilities and roles, understood how their actions addressed local issues, and had the opportunity to contribute their knowledge and express their motivations for social change. As a result, participants became invested in creating positive change and developed a sense of responsibility for impacting their community. Seeing the effects of their commitments while being empowered through the practices of the program permitted a new relationship to service-learning to develop; it was no longer a requirement being imposed upon them. Participants' motivations were due to their newly emerging sense of self as individuals capable of

bringing concrete change to their neighborhoods. Service-learning experiences placed participants within the world and its social complexities, so that they were not merely observers of community ailments, but knowledgeable and impactful change agents.

McLaren and Giarelli (1995) contend that to reclaim power and identity, students need the opportunity to re-write the relationships between self and society while cultivating a political imagination. For our participants, service-learning enabled the construction of a new social/intellectual space that permitted them to develop interpretations and perform informed actions upon the world. In this space, participants' readings of their social world advanced a re-writing of their identities as learners and community members. Service-learning offered a means of challenging and disrupting interpretations of reality, infused with race and power, facilitating participants' construction of a deep and empowering view of self and community. As race and power were acknowledged and legitimized through a critique of structural injustice, service-learning brought the participants closer towards an empowered self and away from hegemonic, unconscious interpretations. Participants' self-written vision of themselves were as pillars charged with aims towards self and community uplift.

However, participants also experienced the challenges of maintaining new, fragile identities in the harsh realities of their neighborhoods and in the hegemony of society as a whole. Daily exchanges positioned participants in the midst of intellectually hostile neighborhood environments that delegitimized their stance as effective young men with the capacity to uplift their community. This dichotomy provided participants a place to test out and struggle to maintain their self-directed, critically engaged visions of self.

FINAL REFLECTIONS

This study detailed how a school community and its service-learning curriculum enabled a transformational journey within a city that struggles with educational disparities and other manifestations of failing social arrangements. Participants in this study entered the school with internal dialogues that were unconsciously informed by oppressive constructions of reality. Service-learning positioned students to confront and deconstruct the voices they used to make sense of their worlds through community-enabled critique where social problems were explored and given voice. As their realities were acknowledged, a more conscious awareness of the constructions of self emerged, preparing fertile ground for the re-writing of self. Meaningful service-learning experiences widened this intellectual space as students' informed actions co-created a curriculum for social change. Identities were re-written and contested in the interactive contexts between self, school, and society. Participants' stories demonstrate the power of legitimizing lived experienced and cultural knowledge, and the potential of schooling as a place of social critique and empowerment.

The study was concerned with marginalized students who may "find it impossible to define their identities through the cultural and political codes that characterize the dominant culture" (Giroux, 2005, p. 24). The intent of the research was to identify approaches for empowerment for students who are harmed, excluded, and silenced through hidden educational frameworks. Fine, Bloom, and Chajet (2010) documented how school experiences that delegitimized student voices quelled students' belief in their ability to affect social or political change, as school-based alienation carried over to a resentful disengagement from civic life. On the other hand,

as demonstrated at Grandview, schools that engage marginalized students as knowledgeable, capable, agents of change in the complicated and challenging contexts of real life (i.e., their neighborhoods) make a powerful statement. Grandview's resounding message was that students mattered, not only in the school, but in the larger public sphere as well. Service-learning was a way of exercising power that became empowering when it permitted the marginalized student a means of critiquing and transforming oppressive structures while recognizing the ways their own narratives maintained harmful arrangements of power.

As any pedagogy, service-learning may be used to empower or oppress, to critique or silence, to legitimize or exclude. Clearly, at this time of unprecedented inequality, service-learning must aim for self and community empowerment. I advocate for the intentional incorporation of critical pedagogy to strengthen service-learning as an empowering practice for marginalized students. The starting point of this vision of service-learning is within the experiences and voices of students. Service-learning, as a critical pedagogy, must "confirm and legitimate the knowledges and experiences through which students give meaning to their everyday lives" (McLaren, 1989, p. 235), since the greatest potential for empowerment may involve confronting and rewriting students' own world views.

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