

Chapter 12

Students on the Rise: Learning with Immigrant Youth in Out- of-School Spaces of Community Activism

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ABSTRACT

This chapter discusses the recent findings of the Drop Knowledge Project in New York City (DKP NYC). The DKP NYC is a cultural studies research project designed to excavate the discourses of urban youth activism and organizing in relation to critical literacy learning. In this chapter, the authors look at the work of the DKP NYC youth activists around issues related to immigrant rights and educational justice in out-of-school spaces. Amongst the interconnected issues surrounding this work, the youth participants in the DKP NYC all organize around issues related to the struggle of undocumented youth to access quality education in the United States. Data collected from the study is decidedly cross-cultural, with participants articulating visions of themselves and their future in relation to their cultural heritage and their inter-subjective ethical learning. Implications from the study provide insight to educators, researchers, and community-based organizations about educating immigrant youth and others on pressing issues around immigrant learning.

INTRODUCTION

The study explored in this chapter, the Drop Knowledge Project in New York City (DKP NYC), was inspired by many hours of work with youth activists in the Prospect Heights neighborhood of Brooklyn. At that time, I was co-facilitating the Human Rights Activist Project (HRAP), the social action program of the youth development work designed by Global Kids (GK) at an after-school program housed at a local public high school. I

had spent time teaching in the New York City Department of Education previously, and had not anticipated the level of shared intellectualism and inquiry the youth and adults involved brought to this after school program. As they worked together to build consensus for their unified human rights campaign, they advocated for the importance of organizing around topics from global poverty to the genocide in Darfur and access to education for urban youth of all backgrounds.

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In the pages that follow, you will meet five alumni of HRAP who agreed to create the DK-PNYC with me in its earliest stages: Vaga De Franx, Green Strawberries, Gentle Meadows, People's Republic of Mars and Awesome Woman (all self-selected pseudonyms). I got to know each of these participants to various degrees over the course of the time that I worked for and in relation to Global Kids. Collectively, these youth activists dialogued with me around a host of human rights issues, honing in on a diverse range of topics from socially just economic policy to LGBTQ civil and political rights, immigration, feminism, and labor organizing. I will first introduce each participant in detail and then begin a discussion that crosses the borders of the work that each youth activist pursues. I am interested in exploring the places where the work of these youth crosses over previously drawn lines, where connections are illuminated in zones that are frequently kept dark around issue of identity and nationalism. Specifically for this chapter, I focus on introducing these urban youth activists in dialogue around contemporary debates and issues in relation to immigration.

It is important here to note the iterative design of this work; the DKPNYC is the local New York-based instantiation of work that is cushioned in the Drop Knowledge Project globally. As such, the focus of the DKP work is relevant not only in terms of thinking about young people in the United States, but also about youth worldwide and the prevalence of studying "global citizenship" and assessing the connectivity and futurity of international thinking about learning, organizing and social justice. The focus on cross-cultural learning is most evident through an investigation into the ways in which these youth activists begin to think and talk about their own experiences as well as those of their peers in the human rights struggle.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

I will briefly introduce the layered conceptual frameworks I used to guide this study. Epistemologically, I continuously consider what it means to conduct ethical-political research with youth. Conceptually, I remain curious to learn what inquiry-based educational theories, including critical literacy praxis, could best serve to explain the processes of learning in which activists participate. Methodologically, I aimed to conduct participatory action research with urban youth organizers in ways that are critically auto/ethnographic and respect the humanity of each young person involved. Analytically, I envisioned an analysis of this work through a hybrid form of critical discourse analysis that is overtly political, where discourse is defined through a focus on power relationships expressed through language. Representationally, the final documentation is intentionally fragmented. Concerns for replication and validity were dealt with through the guiding light of Patti Lather (2007). She herself is re-spun through Derrida, Deleuze and Nietzsche and is thus an appropriate contemporary role model for my post-structuralist pursuits.

As a specific educational research project, the DKPNYC is a situated activist pursuit in and of critical literacy, attempting to illuminate the role of learning outside of formal educational institutions in ways that support productive, ethical action. This must be more than rhetorical critique. Rather than address a singular level of meaning-making (such as organizational outcomes or local policy victories), the DKPNYC documented the skilled (re) actions of urban youth organizers as they reckon with the repercussions of socio-political forces that they experienced across micro, meso, and macro levels (as embodied in terms such as 'glocal'). As such, I defined this project as 'activ-

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