Introduction

It was 1993 and I needed a job. I had heard about a program called Youth in Action, located in a meeting space rented from a church in San Francisco’s Mission District, which offered full-time positions for youth workers. I was attracted to the energy, youthfulness, and diversity of its staff, its emphasis on cultivating youths’ strengths, and its focus on improving the city’s public spaces. They hired me to supervise and mentor middle school youth working on environmental conservation projects around the city. On any Saturday you could see young people wearing blue pants, white T-shirts, and yellow hard hats picking up trash in Dolores Park, gathering recyclables on Ocean Beach, or planting shrubs in Golden Gate Park. It wasn’t just manual labor: all the crews explored the ecology and sociology of San Francisco’s neighborhoods through our “urbanology” curriculum. Two media crews—journalism and videography—produced stories about issues that mattered to youth. Youth in Action anticipated several of the innovations in youth work that proliferated in the United States in the 1990s, including service learning, digital media, and positive youth development.

A few years into my work in the Mission District I walked around the corner, to the offices of Youth Making a Change (YMAC) on 22nd Street, and encountered something different. They had T-shirts too, but theirs said things like, “Jobs Stop Violence.” Instead of cleaning up parks the teenagers in YMAC were leading city campaigns to fund programs for children and organizing against state initiatives that would increase prison spending at the expense of schools. The staff seemed to treat the youth there differently—as people whose ideas about politics and social change mattered, as people with a sense of political agency. YMAC’s approach to youth work challenged my assumptions. Youth could be
treated more like partners than recipients of help. They were analyzing complex systems and strategizing about how to change them.

Several years later, as a graduate student studying education and youth development, it dawned on me that the kinds of activism I had seen at YMAC were not getting adequate attention from academic researchers. Studies of civic development tended to privilege skills and habits that maintain civil society rather than those that seek its transformation.1 Although research had begun to emphasize the strengths of urban youth rather than just their deficits, few were documenting an emergent ecology of youth activism that focused on social justice and change. Organizing groups were springing up throughout California in response to a series of state referenda that affected poor and low-income youth of color and immigrant youth, such as Proposition 187 (1994), which barred undocumented immigrants from public education and health care; Proposition 209 (1996), which prohibited the state from considering race, sex, or ethnicity in public education; and Proposition 21 (2000), which increased penalties for crimes committed by youth.2 The Bay Area, in particular, became a vibrant place for an approach to youth engagement that emphasized political empowerment, partnership, and social justice.3 Thousands of youth participated in a series of walkouts in the late 1990s to protest the underfunding of education in California and the state’s overinvestment in incarceration. Two organizers in the emerging youth movement described it this way:

For young people, the fight . . . against the rising public investment in punishment and prison is a fight for their lives. The cry is for schools and parks, not prisons; books, not bars; more teachers, counselors and nurses in their schools, not more police officers.4

Flash forward from the mid-1990s to Oakland, California, in 2003, where I studied firsthand this emerging activism: Denise, an African American high school student, recounted to me what it was like to speak to the Oakland School Board in support of greater student participation in school governance. “Oh my god, I’m being listened to,” she remembered. “I’m about to really bring it! . . . I’m not even going to shut up. I’m finally being listened to!” With supporters filling the first five rows of the meeting room, Denise and her colleagues from a group called
Kids First had taken to the microphone and reported results of more than 900 surveys showing that students wanted input into issues such as school safety and teacher quality. They submitted a “student power resolution” that called for stronger student councils that would work on “real issues—not just planning proms.” At the conclusion of the presentation, the school board president stated that he would vote for the resolution and asked that his colleagues do the same. Two weeks later, however, the Oakland school board lost its decision-making authority to a state-appointed administrator when it was reported that the school district faced a deficit in the tens of millions of dollars. Kids First’s student leadership resolution did not become policy and Oakland would not have an elected school board accountable to its residents. Organizers went back to the drawing board and reformulated their campaign to create a place for students in improving urban schools.

Activism by groups such as YMAC and Kids First offers examples of youth of color building political power in a context of inequality and exclusion. Oakland students, for example, experienced education inequity every day in schools plagued by longtime permanent subs, undemanding classes, and deteriorating infrastructure. Young people’s experiences of inequity were compounded by their typical experience of exclusion from public decision making. Since the early twentieth century American human service institutions—schools, youth programs, and social work—have tended to operate on the basis of perceptions of youth as either dangerous or vulnerable. This pattern continues today, particularly for youth of color, who are more likely to be targets of remediation than partners in decision making. Denise’s excitement about “finally being listened to” was emblematic of the scarcity of opportunities for youth to be at the table when important decisions about their schools and neighborhoods are made.

Denise’s actions at the school board meeting confronted these problems. And, of course, she was not on her own. She had found her way to an organization that blended a youth development paradigm with a community organizing one. People there discussed inequality as a socially produced problem rather than part of the natural order. Denise and her peers talked about their shared experiences in Oakland’s schools, envisioned alternatives, and turned that vision into sustained public work. Such experiences benefited Denise, whose sense of
personal agency was fortified by her new repertoire of political skills. But just as important, her participation was good for the Oakland schools because of the way she and her peers introduced new ideas, during that brief moment before the state takeover, into a struggling system. Kids First persisted with its campaign, which has since earned acclaim for its successes. Its example signals how greater youth participation in the public square would enrich and enliven American democracy.

The interdependent relationship between youths’ political engagement, their development, and societal health is the central focus of this book. Youth and societal institutions are strengthened when young people, particularly those most disadvantaged by education inequity, turn their critical gaze to education systems and participate in efforts to improve them. The book’s case studies of youth organizing and student activism analyze what these experiences mean for young people and why they are good for a socially just democracy. This research is motivated by questions about the relationship between youth activism, human development, and democratic renewal: What is youth activism and how does it contribute to youth development? How might collective movements of young people expand educational opportunity in the United States and resuscitate participatory democracy?

The practical need for such research is stark. The long-standing practice in American schools has been to treat high school students as dependent recipients of services. This status, while providing important legal protections, reinforces social constructions of youth as immature and restricts them to limited forms of participation. How might schools become places where student voice is part of the fabric of institutional decision making? What kinds of learning ecologies are necessary to support youths’ engagement in public work with their teachers?

Similarly, although youth development programs have adopted rhetoric that emphasizes young people’s assets and strengths, youth-adult partnerships are still the exception rather than the norm. Youth-adult partnerships call for a more radical engagement with youth as people, by building sustained intergenerational collectives that deliberate and act together around an issue of shared concern. This book pushes and extends the asset-based approach by providing evidence about young people as partners in decision making rather than just targets of remediation. Rich examples, grounded in the exigencies of practice, are
provided that generate tools and strategies. What roles do organizers play? How do young people, who are typically novices in the political realm, learn the necessary skills for participation?

Values and Evidence

The argument for engaging young people as partners in public work, rather than objects of policy, is rooted in a set of normative values. Youth should not be treated as “citizens of the future”; they are citizens now who experience, interpret, and sometimes resist the policies that organize their everyday lives. They deserve to be heard about the institutions and policies that influence their lives, as enshrined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. These values shaped my approach to this research. I acknowledge having an agenda in the sense that I want to highlight the conditions under which youth develop and exercise their collective political agency. I draw on the view of Paolo Freire and others in the community organizing tradition that people who experience the sharp edges of systemic failures ought to be leaders in collective efforts to understand and dismantle them. As a white male from an upper middle-class background, I acknowledge my outsider status in this struggle and engage in ongoing reflection about how my racial privilege shapes my approach to this work. I aspire to provide insight that comes from careful empirical analysis and solidarity with young people’s claims to voice and dignity.

The empirical claims in this book draw on evidence from ten years of research in settings—both in and out of school—where youth of color interpreted and took action to solve complex problems ranging from inadequate schools to media bias to barriers to college. The book presents findings from three research studies carried out between 2003 and 2012.

The first study, an ethnography of youth activism, focused on groups in the San Francisco Bay Area where high school youth worked with young adults to develop campaigns to address issues relevant to youths’ everyday experiences. One group was motivated by Oakland’s dropout rate and wanted to expand opportunities for student voice and leadership in the schools. Another organized a campaign—Don’t Believe the Hype—which called for West Oakland’s youth to be portrayed with
dignity and accuracy by local media. The third organized a conference to educate young people about how the upcoming Iraq war (this was in 2003) would affect their Southeast San Francisco neighborhood.

The second study, called Tracing Transitions, was a participatory action research project carried out with students whose high school had been shut down. Our goal was to document student perspectives about the closure and find out how displaced students fared in transitions to new schools. Because this was action research, when the study was over youth researchers shared their findings and recommendations with national and local policy makers, including testifying at a federal congressional hearing on urban education.

The third study differed from the first two by focusing on school classrooms as contexts for young people to engage in critique and collective agency. The project, called Critical Civic Inquiry, co-led with Shelley Zion and Carlos Hipolito-Delgado, worked with secondary school teachers to provide opportunities for their students to discuss, investigate, and take action to dismantle educational barriers such as unsafe school climates or inadequate facilities. We investigated sociopolitical learning among students and the conditions in schools that supported or frustrated action civics projects.

Some Context: Youth Activism in an Era of Education Inequality

Youth activism is fueled by a series of contradictions that implicate American society as a whole. The first is a structural contradiction: low-income youth of color are exhorted to work hard and fulfill their responsibilities to go to college, but for many this is a remote possibility, either because of failing schools, economic barriers to higher education, or citizenship laws that block children of immigrants from legal employment or financial aid. This structural contradiction is accompanied by a developmental contradiction: most youth are developmentally ready to participate under conditions of support, but lack opportunities to do so. Think of this as a lack of fit between paternalistic societal institutions and young people’s rapidly growing cognitive capacities and desire for personal agency. Both structural and developmental contradictions are shaped and twisted by the persistence of racial caste in an allegedly color-blind world.
Structural Contradictions

In 2009 President Barack Obama, during his State of the Union speech, asked “every American to commit to at least one year or more of higher education or career training.” In an update of John F. Kennedy’s plea to “ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country,” Obama presented educational attainment as a national duty:

[W]hatever the training may be, every American will need to get more than a high school diploma. . . . And dropping out of high school is no longer an option. It’s not just quitting on yourself, it’s quitting on your country—and this country needs and values the talents of every American.\(^\text{15}\)

Obama’s speech was an example of a broader discourse about closing the achievement gap, which has become increasingly pronounced since the advent of No Child Left Behind in 2002. It is a discourse that tells students that they can get ahead if they work hard. It exhorts them to graduate from high school and seek postsecondary education. It has a moral flavor, in the sense that it implies that students who do not contribute to boosting their school’s scores or who do not stay in school are letting others down.

You can see this achievement discourse in the kinds of messages communicated to students in the widely celebrated “No Excuses” schools, such as the Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP).\(^\text{16}\) The No Excuses phrase emerged from an effort to highlight the successes of charter schools in high poverty neighborhoods and identify the characteristics that made them effective.\(^\text{17}\) Echoing Obama’s call, No Excuses schools build a culture of college going by adorning hallways with college pennants, using call and response phrases (“when I say ‘[name of school],’ you say ‘college’”), and identifying student cohorts not by their grade level but by the year in which they will graduate college (e.g., “Class of 2021”). Students and teachers are told to make no excuses for failure.

So what’s the problem? Hard work is a virtue; achievement is good. But simultaneous with the drumbeat of “study hard” and “go to college” is a set of structural barriers that make education achievement for kids in neighborhoods of concentrated poverty accessible to only the most
exceptional children and schools. Here I mean exceptional in the sense of unusual or uncommon. Consider the metaphor of a public park, a big one, with all sorts of trails and paths, as a stand-in for the education system. Imagine that getting from kindergarten through high school and into postsecondary education is like finding your way from one end of the park to the other. Children from all types of backgrounds must walk through that park—it requires desire, effort, and endurance. But children of the affluent enter a park with well-maintained paths, clear signs, and detailed maps. Paid guides provide supplementary training in bird watching, orienteering, and stargazing. Students are encouraged to veer off the path and use a compass to get through dense forests. They sweat when it is hot, just like the others, but they have ample water, food, and sunscreen to cushion hardship.

You can guess where I’m going with this. Children from poor neighborhoods enter a different park. The path that leads to higher education and sustainable livelihoods is not well marked. There are numerous forks and diversions with little guidance about where they lead. The bridges built in prior decades to carry people across rivers are falling apart. On hot days children must use ingenuity and craft to find water, and even then it may not be safe to drink. Their families provide guidance and emotional support, but certain paths are unfamiliar, so they are unsure where to proceed at forks in the road. And, at risk of pushing this metaphor too far, those who are most resilient, who make it over hills and streams, graduate from high school only to be confronted by massive boulders blocking their path in the form of insurmountable tuition costs or admissions standards they haven’t met.

Worse yet, it all seems so natural. The eroding path and the foreboding trees have been like that for so long it just feels like the way things are. And some kids really do seem to try harder than others. Why can’t everyone be like the ones whose grit propelled them past hazards and stretches of barren land? No excuses!

Alas, we need a critical geographer to save us from this metaphor and point out all the ways that a supposedly “natural” space has been shaped by human interests and power, related to decisions about how to structure the intersecting pathways, the money spent to maintain them, and which neighborhood gets which choice piece of land on which to locate them. Lois Weis and Michelle Fine, for example, are two education
scholars who applied this kind of critical lens to the education system and they concluded that young people in high poverty neighborhoods move through “circuits of dispossession” in their everyday lives. The term “dispossession” signals the active role played by entities (public or private) to take away resources from certain classes of people.

One type is dispossession by categorical denial. People who arrive in the United States as children have the right, because of the Plyler v. Doe Supreme Court case, to attend public schools without having to reveal their citizenship status. But this relative sanctuary ends in late adolescence where, in many states, they are not eligible for in-state tuition rates or federal aid, not to mention legal privileges such as driver’s licenses and work permits. Consider how this must feel for undocumented young people who have embraced the achievement discourse but then find that it is not available to them.18

A second type of dispossession, harder to solve through changes in the law, stems from the “cumulative, cross sector disinvestment” that has eroded public institutions serving poor communities of color.19 One of the most powerful studies documenting this disinvestment, connected to changes in tax law, took place as part of the filings for Williams v. California in 2000. The opening paragraph of the complaint summarizes the widespread gaps in resources and opportunities to learn for children and youth in California, including a lack of “trained teachers, necessary educational supplies, classrooms, even seats in classrooms, and facilities that meet basic health and safety standards.”20 Philadelphia is another city that suffers from the erosion of support for public schools. After the state-appointed school board closed twenty-four of Philadelphia’s schools at the end of the 2012–13 school year because of lack of funds, parents, teachers, and students prepared to start school without sports teams, nurses, lunchroom monitors, and librarians. An organization called Philly Student Union curated tweets on the first day back at school under the header “The Worst of #Philly1stDay”:

My 11 yr old reads 3–5 books/week. Number she’ll be checking out from school library this year? 0. No librarian. Sad reader.

Water’s on at Masterman but my 5th grader was advised not to risk drinking it—“white and foamy.”
NE High has one counselor for 3,000 students. “I’m losing my mind,” says principal.

Straight A student. Can’t take the honors classes I signed up for because there aren’t any teachers to teach them.

Philadelphia offers an egregious case of inadequate support for public schools in multiple cities in the United States. Part of the reason that school closures and underfunded schools are tolerated stems from the increasing segregation of those schools from the broader population. Urban schools designated for turnaround status are highly segregated institutions where Latino and African American students are more likely than white students to be in class with other kids in poverty. Segregation has been increasing in districts that were released from court-ordered desegregation, and African American students attend on average more racially isolated schools than in 1970. As public schools have cut back on enrichment activities such as art and music programs, there has been a corresponding increase in affluent families’ investment in their children’s cognitive enrichment.

High-income families are increasingly focusing their resources—their money, time and knowledge of what it takes to be successful in school—on their children’s cognitive development and educational success. They are doing this because educational success is much more important than it used to be, even for the rich.

Families—whether rich or poor—recognize the diminishing safety net and an erosion of sustainable career options for those without higher education.

Dispossession can also be seen in policing practices, such as New York City’s Stop and Frisk policy, which make routine movements through public spaces unsafe for youth of color. It is seen in Trayvon Martin’s tragic shooting walking home after buying Skittles, for which his killer was exonerated because of Stand Your Ground laws. And, in 2014, a police officer’s shooting of Michael Brown brought the crisis of extrajudicial violence against African American males into the open, even if it was not new.
Racial profiling is also rampant in schools, where ample evidence has documented that Latino and African American students are more likely to be referred to police for nonviolent infractions. A national database analyzed by the National Council on Crime and Delinquency, for example, reported that among youth with no prior detentions who were charged with the same offenses, African Americans were six times more likely than whites to be incarcerated and Latino youth were three times more likely.27 To return to the park metaphor, watch out: If you are a Latino or black young person walking on the main path, you are more likely than white counterparts to get stopped and have your backpack checked for illegal substances. And if you do happen to break one of the rules along the way, you’re more likely to get kicked off the path altogether.

These examples of dispossession amount to a structural contradiction facing youth of color in working-class and poor neighborhoods. They are exhorted to stay on that path and to make no excuses when they get fatigued or take a wrong turn; many adopt this high standard and judge themselves or their peers deficient against it. But certain diversions and barriers make it out of reach for all but the most gritty and resilient youth. This structural contradiction goes hand in hand with a developmental contradiction, in which teenage youth are ready for mature roles in their communities but tend to be excluded from civic participation.

Developmental Contradictions

Going back to early twentieth-century debates between G. Stanley Hall and Margaret Mead, two narratives about teenagers have competed for attention.28 The first, driven by the discipline of psychology and reinforced by the mass media, has promoted an image of adolescence as impulsive, emotional, and irrational. This “tribe apart” narrative emphasizes the strangeness of teenagers as a separate subgroup within American society. Early in the formation of the discipline G. Stanley Hall argued for a distinct stage of adolescence that he described as “emotionally unstable.” This narrative resurfaces today in breathless reports about the immaturity of the teen brain. An NPR story referred to teenagers as “an alien species,” TIME described them as “a famously reckless species,” and the New York Times titled its article “Why Teenagers Act Crazy.”29
These examples show that despite important advances in brain research, the “tribe apart” narrative persists, so much so that it has assumed a taken-for-granted quality, one that does not require logical argument or rigorous evidence.

Framing teenagers as a tribe apart has destructive consequences for their opportunities for participation in the public square. Policy makers fail to recognize teens’ local knowledge, hard-won skills, or capacity for mature roles. Sometimes this takes the form of punitive policies such as zero tolerance in schools. But even benevolent approaches that try to “help” youth can be counterproductive when they treat youth as passive or vulnerable objects of intervention rather than capable contributors.

Beginning, however, with anthropologist Mead’s critique of Hall, a more critical and contextual perspective has fought for attention. This second narrative argues that behaviors and pathologies psychologists attribute to youth—in fact, the notion of an “adolescent stage”—is socially constructed and culturally variable. This narrative recognizes the ways that young people live up (or down) to the roles and behaviors adults expect of them. Referring to youth as “alien,” “emotional,” or “immature” creates the very object it then ridicules. Mead critiqued Hall’s stance in her book, *Coming of Age in Samoa*, first published in 1928, where she described a Samoan adolescent experience featuring little of the storm and stress typical of American teens. Mead argued that teenagers in the United States developed a separate youth culture in large part because they rarely had the chance to be part of mature community practices. Contemporary scholars such as Barbara Rogoff refer to this phenomenon as “age segregation,” in which, “instead of routinely helping adults, children are often involved in specialized child-focused exercises to assemble skills for later entry in mature activities.”

By making context more central in adolescent research, contemporary scholars have begun to document the many ways that youth of color in the United States defy pervasive stereotypes about them. Many working-class and poor youth of color contribute to their family sustenance or livelihoods. Children, for example, take care of younger sisters and brothers. Teenagers who can find work contribute their paychecks to pay for their families’ basic necessities, such as food and electricity. Children from immigrant families translate for parents during high
stakes encounters with doctors or lawyers.38 Contrary to assertions by public figures about the lack of work habits among the urban poor,39 evidence shows that low-income youth often play more adult-like roles in their families than their middle-class counterparts. This body of research offers a useful corrective to biologically reductive accounts of adolescence or those studies that isolate the young person from her social context.

Research about mature roles played by youth is accompanied by a new focus on positive youth development (PYD), which aims to reframe the enterprise of adolescence as the cultivation of strengths and purpose rather than the avoidance of risk or delinquency.40 The PYD program of research has yielded important findings about the kinds of emerging capacities that teenagers have for strategic thinking, taking the perspective of others, and managing biases. Brain research supports this approach, particularly in terms of the affordances of the prefrontal cortex for a “developing executive” that is capable of thinking scientifically and analytically.41

But the institutions that organize young people’s movement through adolescence are out of step with these capabilities. This is the developmental contradiction. Similar to findings by Jacqueline Eccles and Robert Roeser about the lack of “stage-environment fit” between the competitive, impersonal structures of middle schools and early adolescent development, there is a lack of fit between societal institutions and young people’s need to participate and matter. Even within schools where student voice is supported, such opportunities are often limited to high achieving students.42 These trends converge in a country divided by age segregation. The United States is one of only two countries that have not signed on to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which asserts children’s rights to express their views and be heard in policy matters.

Youth activism is fueled by this kind of developmental contradiction. A poignant example of this can be seen in students’ responses to the closure of Jefferson High School, which was closed by its school district because of persistently low test scores and declining enrollment.43 The district called the closure a “rescue mission” to enable the school’s population of African American and Latino students to attend other district schools. At an early community forum a school board member
defended her vote to close the school by saying, “You seem to think we’re doing this to you. But we’re not. We’re doing it for you.” But the effort to couch the decision in benevolent terms did not resonate with students, who answered that they were “not down with the shut down.” They organized rallies, spoke at school board meetings, and engaged media outlets in the effort to try to keep their neighborhood school open. They voiced a message popular among youth organizing groups that was first coined by disability rights activists: “Nothing for us, without us!” One student explained, “It was just like they decided to close it and there was nothing that the community could have done or said.” The Jefferson fight emerged because students wanted to participate but felt excluded from the decision-making process.

The Persistence of Race

These two contradictions—one structural, the other developmental—are twisted by the persistence of a racial caste system in the United States; twisted because it can be difficult to get a handle on the ways that racial hierarchies operate in the contemporary United States. The social movements of the mid-twentieth century arose in a context of explicit legal apartheid against African Americans and Mexican Americans in the system known as Jim Crow. Dr. Martin Luther King’s dream that his children “not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character,” was revolutionary in a context where racism was enshrined in state policy and law. Social movements could be mobilized around a relatively specific and tangible set of statutory goals: voting rights, fair housing, and antidiscrimination in employment.

In 2014 the legal apparatus of racism has changed. But the dismantling of legal apartheid that followed from the civil rights movement has been followed by a severe retrenchment of those interests seeking to maintain a racial caste system in the United States. This can be confusing, because few advocates of racist policies espouse racist language. Supreme Court Chief Justice John Roberts famously said, in striking down desegregation policies in school assignments, “The way to stop discrimination on the basis of race is to stop discriminating on the basis of race.” Roberts’s formulation enshrines color blindness as the morally right response to America’s racist history. But in extolling not
seeing as a virtue, it hides the ways in which racial ideologies intersect with structural and developmental barriers to participation.

Sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva attributes contemporary inequality to “racism without racists,” because the kinds of structural dispossession discussed above land disproportionately on people of color: inadequate schools, restrictions on voting rights, mass incarceration and its attendant disenfranchisement from the vote, and immigration deportations. The persistence of a racial caste system is hidden or obscured by the ideology of color blindness and the insistence that the United States is a meritocracy.

Age-based exclusion from decision making is also amplified for youth of color. There is a well-documented gap in opportunities for civic education, which means that most poor youth and youth of color are not getting the chance to learn and develop democracy in their schools. Urban schools with fewer financial resources are less likely to have student councils. Affluent and white youth can count on the political clout of their parents to represent their interests; youth from marginalized backgrounds do not have the same power.

Understanding the contemporary moment as one of “racism without racists” is crucial to understanding activism among youth of color. Doing so helps to explain why organizations and classrooms that catalyze youth activism often spend time investigating and framing the root causes of educational dispossession. Educators create spaces where young people can reconcile everyday experiences of discrimination with dominant discourses of meritocracy and color blindness. Americans of all hues have a tendency to psychologize racism—to conceive of it as a property that belongs to a few bad people. Social justice educators, however, encourage young people to view racism as emerging in a system of relations, enacted in institutions and policy, and legitimated via racial ideologies. Part of the work of educational settings is to make visible taken-for-granted discourses about race in American society. In this context, social science research has an important role to play documenting and making visible various forms of racial discrimination. In contrast to Kenneth and Mamie Clarke’s doll experiments cited in the 1954 Brown v. Board of Education decision, which focused on the personality development of African American children, today’s research documents the presence of systemic biases that might otherwise be hidden from
view or ignored, such as in disproportionate referrals to police for drug possession or racial microaggressions.

In many ways contemporary ideologies of color blindness and meritocracy make today’s activist work more challenging. The legal basis for depriving people of rights based on skin color is no longer viable in the United States. That legal battle, rooted in Enlightenment logics of equality and fraternity, took two hundred years to win but it was finally achieved. Yet we see new proxies for skin color that lead to similar kinds of deprivation, based on stand your ground laws, mandatory minimum sentencing laws, immigration laws, anti-school integration laws, voting eligibility laws, and public housing policies.

Youth activism represents a logical response to these contradictions and challenges: You’re not creating ongoing systems for me to participate and share my views? Then I’ll find a way by walking out of school or showing up at school board meetings with scores of my peers. You want me to achieve? I do too. Let’s figure out a way to make college more affordable and get police out of schools.

Youth organizing campaigns tend to be guided by these twin goals: expanded participation and expanded opportunity. It’s also true that many young people—and their organizations—seek more radical or revolutionary social transformation. But the language and objectives of the campaigns tend to focus on access, participation, and opportunity. They are a combustible mix of imaginative and practical, best described, borrowing from language and literacy scholar Kris Gutiérrez, as “social dreaming.” Social dreams, in this sense, are dreams for the future that are yoked to a strong collective identity. They focus on creating a better future for oneself, one’s peers, and one’s family; they are rooted in a strong sense of interdependence with others.

A Sociocultural Perspective on Activism

The emerging literature about youth activism reflects different disciplinary traditions and foci. Shawn Ginwright’s *Black Youth Rising* offers a case study of Leadership Excellence, an organization in Oakland, California. Ginwright, a sociologist of education, combines historical analysis of changes in black urban life with ethnography to identify what it takes to promote “radical healing” for youth suffering from racism and
trauma. Hava Gordon, also a sociologist, published a comparative study of activism among middle-class white youth in Oregon and working-class black and Latino youth in Oakland, California. Gordon’s book, called *We Fight to Win*, looks at how the social production of age-based subordination intersects with race, class, and gender. Soo Ah Kwon, drawing on ethnic studies and critical feminist theory, examines the contradictions facing progressive youth organizing groups in a capitalist state. Her book, *Uncivil Youth*, highlights the political accomplishments of Asian and Pacific Islander youth while also documenting the ways that youth foundations and nonprofits, including those aiming to empower youth, perpetuate “kid-fixing” discourses about youth of color. Several other books, although not focused centrally on youth activism, contribute to a growing interest by scholars in the role that young people can play in democratic renewal and equity-oriented school reform. In developing this book’s central arguments I happily claim kinship with this cohort of scholars who write about youth participation and activism; we all take an approach that emphasizes young people’s agency in the face of deep-seated, structural racism and inequality.

This book, rooted in sociocultural and critical approaches to human development, departs from other books in a few ways. It examines a broad range of settings for youth activism, including community organizations, school classrooms, and geographically distributed social movements. Some of these settings utilize youth organizing strategies; others draw on participatory action research or student voice. This diversity of approaches allows for recognition of their shared features while also highlighting the ways in which institutional contexts enable and constrain varied types of activism. This comparative element will contribute to the generalizability of claims about developmental outcomes of youth activism and the kinds of settings that foster it.

This book is also distinct in its sociocultural lens, which examines individual development in relation to the broader ecologies that either nurture or inhibit youth engagement. Sociocultural theory enables close analysis of the interplay between human development and societal change. Prior civic engagement research has often kept these two sets of questions separate by focusing on either how youth change through their participation or the kinds of social structures and policies that shape youth participation. Sociocultural theory, on the other
hand, examines how individuals change in the context of diverse and
dynamic cultural practices. This approach attends to how young people
are simultaneously becoming part of existing practices and transform-
ing those practices through their participation. This dual focus is par-
ticularly suited to the study of civic engagement and activism, which are
by definition contextual and culture-bound.

Scholars taking this approach have a rigorous bar for what counts
as evidence of learning and development. Rather than focus solely on
cognitive change in a young person, such as deeper understanding or
changed attitudes, sociocultural theory examines shifts in relationships
between people. Learning and development are social processes. This
calls for attention to how adults in positions of power, such as prin-
cipals or politicians, position youth in social interaction. Just as impor-
tant, the sociocultural approach examines how youth defy deficit-based
frames and author powerful identities through their roles and actions in
public spaces.

Lastly, sociocultural theory offers tools for analyzing constitutive
features of a learning ecology, including people, practices, and the lin-
guistic and technological tools that mediate people’s intentional activ-
ity. This focus on learning ecologies enables analysis of the kinds of
opportunity structures that facilitate people’s democratic participation.
Such work can generate practical implications for educators in and out
of school.

Organization of the Book

The first section of the book focuses on activism as a vehicle for youth
development and a more just and equitable democracy. Chapter 1, “Cri-
tique and Collective Agency in Youth Development,” argues that we
need to expand current assumptions about positive youth development
to include greater attention to sociopolitical development. I support this
argument with a case study of a high school where emerging bilingual
students in a sheltered English class developed a Critical Civic Inquiry
project to raise awareness about racism and xenophobia at their school.
The case shows what it means for youth to develop as sociopolitical
actors, both in terms of their capacity to think critically about systems
and to exercise political agency.
Chapter 2, “Millennial Youth and the Fight for Opportunity,” shifts from a focus on individual people’s development to societal change. This chapter presents two cases, based primarily on analysis of newspaper articles and other secondary sources, where millennial youth defied the steady consolidation of political power in the hands of the few and developed successful campaigns for human rights and education opportunity. The first case focuses on DREAM Activism, an intergenerational movement for immigrant rights and opportunity. The second focuses on a statewide campaign to end the school to jail track in Colorado led by Padres & Jóvenes Unidos. Both cases show how organizing in response to issues that affect the everyday lives and future aspirations of young people can mobilize young people to develop political power.

Chapter 3, “‘Not Down with the Shutdown’: Student Activism against School Closure,” discusses what ensued for young people whose interests were not represented adequately in a school closure decision. The chapter chronicles what young people wanted from their school and why they objected to the decision to close it. The chapter offers an object lesson in why stronger opportunities for student voice and participation are needed in the struggle for educational equity.

Part II of the book transitions away from evidence of the impact of youth participation toward analysis of the kinds of learning ecologies that foster it. Chapter 4, “Teaching without Teaching,” is based on ethnographic research about youth activism in the San Francisco Bay Area. Early in my fieldwork I was intrigued by a puzzling observation: youth participants, most of whom were novice activists, played key roles implementing complex social action campaigns, but I did not see any teaching. How did youth learn to carry out campaigns? This chapter describes the kinds of guidance provided by young adults in youth organizing groups and critiques naïve conceptions of youth voice.

Chapter 5, “Schools as Sites of Struggle: Critical Civic Inquiry,” focuses on schools as contexts for sociopolitical development. Can the kinds of learning environments common in youth organizing and participatory action research take root inside school classrooms? This question is important for developing new forms of democratic education in schools and theorizing sociopolitical learning processes. The chapter draws on research from the Critical Civic Inquiry project to explore this question.
The concluding chapter highlights themes that cut across the prior empirical chapters and identifies implications for settings that foster youths’ political participation. I articulate specific examples of how community programs and schools can develop a partnership approach that contributes to democratic renewal and human development.

Throughout the book I use pseudonyms to refer to people, schools, and school districts.

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Income inequality has become a familiar term in American political discourse. It limits social mobility and has a damaging effect on U.S. democracy. Education inequality is its close sibling. People are more and more aware that public education has not delivered on its promise of providing equal opportunity. These are deep and persistent problems that youth activism will not solve alone. But new youth movements, some intentionally cultivated in educational settings, others formed in response to unwelcome policies, point a way forward. They provide hope in a time of dispossession; not just hope, but strategies for expanding educational opportunity and sustaining a more participatory democracy.