Youth Engagement in High Schools

*Developing a multidimensional, critical approach to improving engagement for all students**

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Foreword

The idea for this paper grew out of a body of innovative work in the fields of high school reform, youth engagement, and youth development that has been funded over the last several years by both Carnegie Corporation of New York and the Surdna Foundation. The goals of this work have been to recognize and understand the importance of engaging young people in their own learning and in educational reform initiatives. However, despite the success of much of this work, the lack of a research base to support its efficacy has made it extremely difficult for practitioners (all those doing the work both inside and outside of schools) to advocate or raise funds for "youth engagement" initiatives in an education climate driven by empirical data and test scores.

The Academy for Educational Development (AED) and the University of San Diego's Center for Research on Educational Equity, Assessment, and Teaching Excellence (CREATE), co-authors of this paper, together with their partners at Carnegie Corporation and Surdna Foundation, were interested in developing a research and practice base to help practitioners, researchers, policy makers, and other funders understand how engaging young people in their own learning and in educational reform efforts could improve their chances of success in school and throughout their lives. The research base would also serve to further aid practitioners in advocating for the continued support and deepening of student engagement in an effort to improve learning, learning environments, and, ultimately, academic performance—all of which are interrelated in the authors' perspective.

This paper is a response to the aforementioned challenges, and was generously supported by a grant from Carnegie Corporation of New York and the Surdna Foundation. It was also greatly served by the wisdom and experience of several experts and the authors would like to thank Jean Thomases, Peter Kleinbard, John Rogers, Alison Cook-Sather, Nicole Yohalem, Sandy Weinbaum, and Amanda Datnow for their helpful and wise comments on earlier drafts.

Preface

Addressing the problem of youth disengagement from school is of paramount importance to the improvement of academic outcomes. Unfortunately, today's climate of accountability under the federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) — with its focus on data from standardized tests — has created a policy environment that is makes it exceedingly difficult to provide students with an education that is both academically challenging and that engages and builds on their interests and passions.

In an effort to address this problem, the Academy for Educational Development (AED) and the University of San Diego's CREATE convened a group of experts in youth engagement at the American Educational Research Association's (AERA) Annual Meeting in New York City in spring 2008. The purpose of this meeting of distinguished university faculty members, youth-community organizers, youth development experts, and foundation representatives was to discuss the state of work and research on youth voice and school and community engagement by and for youth (*see* Appendix 1 *for list of attendees*). The intent of this discussion was to determine what, if any, aspects of existing research illustrated the interconnection between supporting engagement and improving learning environments and academic performance; and to determine what, if any, additional research should be supported.

From this discussion we learned that one difficulty facing educators, researchers, and youth workers in general is the lack of a common language and understanding around the term and practice of youth (student) engagement. The work — both in-school and out-of-school to engage youth — varied tremendously based on the definition of engagement, explanations of how and why youth became involved in their education, and even the overall goals of youth engagement, be they academic, social, or political. The transcripts of the meeting, email exchanges with colleagues, and a review of literature on youth engagement in the fields of psychology, education, and sociology underscored that what was needed was a careful look at the concept of youth engagement itself.

This paper is our response to that need. In the pages that follow, we discuss the dilemmas of youth disengagement and the definition of engagement, and offer suggestions about the types of research needed to improve an understanding of youth engagement and its critical importance in young people's learning and the improvement of academic and other important outcomes.

To this end, the authors suggest that researchers concentrate on understanding the relationship between settings for learning and identity issues when examining youth engagement in schools; we also discuss new and emerging studies in this area. Based on evidence from the research, we recommend that researchers study education settings that provide youth with opportunities to examine and critique the educational system in which they participate (or sometimes refuse to participate). We believe, and research confirms, that students need to understand and be engaged in defining/examining the purposes of their learning/education, and that their understanding is inextricably linked to their academic success.

The history of education reform is a history of doing things to other people supposedly for their own good.

— Levin, 2000, p.1

What motivates the young adolescent's brain and makes him/her excited about learning? Outside of school the answer might be more apparent — an iPod, a new cell phone, a MySpace page, a driver's permit — but creating the same level of excitement and engagement during the school day without obvious intrinsic motivators is far more challenging. Indeed, this is one of the major challenges facing educators: Creating and implementing a vision of education that embraces both high standards and accountability for students' learning while developing nurturing and supportive schools that engage students and enable them to thrive cognitively, socially, emotionally, and civically.

But learning to high standards cannot take place if students are in schools where they are anonymous, where learning is rote and disconnected from their lives, where they feel no stake in schools or in classrooms, and where there are no shared expectations for responsible conduct by students and adults in the school. It is also increasingly clear that learning to high standards cannot take place when students are bored, have no opportunities for experiential learning or civic action (civic education, service learning or other approaches), and have limited opportunities for extracurricular activities. The challenge, then, is to create a vision of schools, especially middle and high schools, in which students' learning and growth is supported in the context of their lives and interests (Joselowsky, 2007).

Over the last century social science and education researchers have demonstrated that US secondary education, because of the structures and underlying cultural and political beliefs that support it, has been largely unsuccessful in engaging generations of youth in their learning and hence in improving their chances for success in life. (Tyack & Cuban, 1995; Achieve, 2004; 2005; Blum & Libbey, 2004). At the same time, researchers and practitioners increasingly believe that engagement in learning in all its aspects is related to productive adulthood (Blum & Libbey, 2004; Gambone, Klem & Connell, 2002).

The Disengagement of American Youth in Education

What helps students connect to learning in their classrooms and schools and what causes them to shut down and refuse to learn? For decades, educators, social scientists, and researchers have studied the aspects of schools and classrooms that engage and disengage generations of youth (Tyack & Cuban, 1995; Achieve, 2004; 2005; Blum & Libbey, 2004). The amount of energy devoted to studying engagement makes sense, given the obvious relationship between engagement and academic success. Students cannot simply go through the motions of school if they are to learn and retain information and be able to apply it critically in new contexts.

Increasingly, educators and policy makers recognize that improving young people's academic achievement in high schools requires greater attention to the engagement of young people themselves (Pittman & Tolman, 2002). There is growing evidence that youth are disenfranchised and disengaged inside and outside of school, and that school and community environments are failing to adequately support youth's social-emotional and academic development (McNeely & Falci, 2004; McNeely, Nonnemaker, & Blum, 2002; National Research Council and Institute of Medicine, 2004). Students are failing school and dropping out at alarming

rates, with many reporting feeling disconnected from the adults charged with educating and caring for them (Furrer & Skinner, 2003). In addition, many youth do not know their teachers or feel that their teachers know and care about them; many have infrequent contact with counselors and remain unconvinced that adults at schools are invested in their futures (Tierney, Corwin, & Colyar, 2005; Lee & Smith, 1995; 1997). This is alarming since students report that individual caring relationships with adults in schools are vital to their education, but are infrequent or insufficient (Schultz & Cook-Sather, 2001; Cook-Sather, in press).

To address these issues, much work has been done over the past decade with students across the country who have been committed to examining the ways in which their schools and communities serve — or fail to serve — the needs of young people. We have run student inquiry groups (Jones & Yonezawa, 2002), district-wide student focus groups (Yonezawa & Jones, 2007), systemic student engagement initiatives (Joselowsky 2005; 2007), and student co-researcher projects (Jones & Yonezawa, 2008). These experiences have led us to conclude that students, when asked, are an excellent source of information and motivation. More than any other group in education, students are the ones who can quickly and accurately pinpoint the times and places that they are more or less engaged in their education — the mathematics classrooms where the teacher inspired them to connect mathematical formulas to life or the painfully boring science classroom where the teacher demonstrated lab materials but refused to let the students touch them. Still, despite students' capabilities, the efforts of educators over the past decade to personalize American high schools have rarely engaged students directly to improve their educational experience. Reforms, such as reducing the size of high schools (e.g., the small schools movement) and improving student-teacher relationships (e.g., advisory programs), abound (Cotton, 1996; Darling-Hammond, 2002a; 2002b). Yet reformers' efforts remain disconnected from classrooms and students' voices, often focusing on improving teacher culture and personalization, with less attention to curriculum and instruction, and to the learning needs of young adolescents (Lee et al., 2000; Kahne, Sporte, de la Torre & Easton, 2008). This is particularly troubling given that effective learning environments are critical to motivating young people to be active members of the classroom and achieve at high levels (Marks, 2000; Newmann, 1992; Newmann & Wehlage, 1993; Nystrand & Gamaron, 1991; Steinberg & Allen 2002).

Researchers increasingly conclude that understanding students' developmental trajectory as adolescents is essential to addressing their overall needs — academic and psychosocial. Nonetheless, educators and policy makers continue to be staunchly and solely focused on academic rigor. The academic focus is welcome; research has suggested that some students were trapped in watered-down, remedial coursework that did little to improve their life chances (Anyon, 1997; Gamaron, 1992, Oakes, Gamaron, & Page, 1992). The dilemma, however, is that the myriad of reforms over the last decade have made few inroads to ensure that the quality of curriculum and pedagogical practices are pertinent to young people. Greater behavioral engagement increases students' expectations of success (Eccles & Barber, 1999; Bandura, 1997). But American high schools retain a traditional core curriculum that addresses classic content through traditional pedagogical practices (Stigler & Hiebert, 1999).

Some of the pressure for schools to increase academic success — without attending to curriculum and pedagogical innovations that improve student engagement — result from the frenzy of accountability that has focused educators' attention since the arrival of No

Child Left Behind (NCLB) in 2001. NCLB, the federal accountability act that requires all schools, districts, and states to test their students in reading and mathematics in grades 3–8 and once in high school, has forced schools to show "annual yearly progress" (AYP) via students' standardized test scores, otherwise risk a series of increasingly severe sanctions, including restructuring. Schools, particularly those serving traditionally low-performing student populations, find they must use their limited resources on efforts to raise test scores, rather than develop engaging curricula.

Thus, despite well-intentioned efforts by all, the disconnect between the academic focus driven by the current policy environment and youth's needs and interests has created a crisis, particularly in our nation's high schools (Lee & Smith, 1995;1997). Adolescents are increasingly at odds with their schooling experiences. Reversing this historic trend means expanding the focus of school reform from solely improving academic achievement to improving the general engagement of young people in their schooling, in the classroom, and in their overall development (Newmann, 1992; Pittman et al., 2003; Rose, 2004).

School Engagement: The Current State of the Concept, Measures, and Outcomes

Part of the difficulty with remedying the disconnect between the current state of secondary education and the needs of youth is our collectively poor understanding of engagement as a theoretical construct. Over the past decade, researchers have examined engagement from a number of orientations that operationalize it in a variety of ways: "participation," "motivation," "attachment," "self-regulated behavior," "anti-alienating behavior," "thoughtfulness," "belonging," along with school related content, ideas and skills (Fredericks et al. 2004). While commonalities exist across these modalities, the differences in the units of analysis make it difficult to determine causes and effects.

In the following section, we describe the past decade of work in engagement and argue that the literature has examined mostly individual dimensions of the term. These studies, which focused largely on behavioral conceptions of engagement, were helpful in laying out a connection between engagement and achievement; but they are limited in how well they capture all the facets of engagement and, as a consequence, researchers are now calling for a more multidimensional definition of engagement.

Unidimensional constructs of engagement

Early work on student engagement tended to characterize it in unidimensional terms. Fredericks et al. (2004) argue that much of the research literature over the past decade or more treated engagement as a static concept with these three separate and distinct components — behavioral, cognitive, and emotional — and erroneously assumed that studying one component would lead to understanding student engagement as a whole. Such a static view of engagement suggested a linear relationship between educational programs or interventions and improving students' engagement.

Behaviorally minded researchers, for example, examined how students acted, typically defining engagement as positive actions or conduct, perseverance, and participation in school-related activities such as attention to a particular school task, membership in athletics, or avoidance of unruly behaviors (Finn & Voelkl, 1993; Birch & Ladd, 1998). Although much of this research began in the 1990s, behaviorally oriented research is still conducted today, including a recent study of Latin American immigrant students by Green, Rhodes, Hirsch, Suarez-Orozco, and Camic (2008) that used a measurement tool called the "Academic Engagement Scale" and asked students to rate themselves on three

behaviors that are considered necessary for school success: 1) finishing work; 2) turning homework in on time; and 3) paying close attention in class.

Cognitive engagement refers to students' psychological and social investment in their learning and mastering ideas, knowledge, and skills (Newmann, 1992). For example, Newmann and Wehlage (1993) assert that there are three overarching criteria to define what they term "authentic achievement," which in many respects paralleled the concept of cognitive engagement. To be truly engaged, they claimed, students had to 1) "construct meaning and produce knowledge;" 2) "use disciplined inquiry to construct meaning;" and 3) "aim their work toward production of discourse, products, and performances that have value or meaning beyond success in school" (p. 1). Work on cognitive engagement also often focused on increasing students' intrinsic motivation to learn (Brophy, 1987; Ames, 1992) and/or self-regulated metacognitive strategies (e.g., summarizing) to improve learning (Zimmerman, 1990).

Emotional engagement refers to the role of students' affect in schools and classrooms, "including interest, boredom, happiness, sadness, and anxiety" (Fredericks, et al., 2004, 63). Researchers such as Finn (1989) and Voelkl (1997; 1995) claim emotional engagement also included the extent to which students felt connected to school and had a sense of belonging or membership. Program developers working to enhance the social-emotional needs of youth claim that these programs increased engagement and correlated positively with achievement (Klem & Connell, 2004). For example, Blum and Libbey (2004) argue that increased school connectedness correlated to educational motivation, classroom engagement, and better attendance, which were linked to higher academic achievement. Unfortunately, the evidence base linking emotional engagement with higher academic achievement is weak (Glanville & Wildhagen, 2007).

Multidimensional constructs of engagement

Engagement-related research has evolved over the past ten years, moving away from unidimensional definitions of engagement and toward more multidimensional notions of engagement that combine two or more aspects of the concept. While this shift has yet to be completed, more recent research is focused on combining several aspects of engagement, such as emotional and behavioral, and examining their interrelationship, and students outcomes.

Behavioral, Cognitive, and Emotional Engagement[1]

- Behavioral engagement studies measured how students act as an observational measure of how engrossed they are in a school task.[2]
- Cognitive engagement studies examined students' investment in learning and mastering ideas, know-ledge and skills[3] and students' intrinsic motivation to learn[4] and/or use of self-regulated metacognitive strategies (e.g., summarizing).[5]
- Emotional engagement studies referred to students' affect in schools "including interest, boredom, happiness, sadness, and anxiety."[6]

1. Fredericks et al., 2004
2. Finn & Voelkl, 1993; Birch & Ladd, 1998; Green, Rhodes, Hirsch, Suarez-Orozco, & Camic, 2008
3. Newmann, 1992; Newmann & Wehlage, 1993
4. Brophy, 1987; Ames, 1992
5. Zimmerman, 1990
6. Fredericks et al., 2004, 63; Finn, 1989; Voelkl, 1995; 1997

Given that behavioral engagement has shown a tighter relationship with achievement, researchers are attempting to prove that other types of engagement, such as emotional or cognitive, can improve achievement by first improving behavioral engagement. For instance, Green and her colleagues (2008) show that students' perceptions of emotional engagement through supportive adult relationships at their school were correlated with their level of behavioral engagement in school.

In addition to the appeal of linking engagement to student achievement, why else are researchers approaching engagement through a more multidimensional lens? There is increasing agreement that representing engagement as a static concept with separate and distinct components neglects the critical relationships among youth, their identities, and the contexts in which they live and learn. Moreover, there is a recognition that such a view could help solve some of the methodological problems that have produced slim evidence of the effects of engagement (Blum & Libbey, 2004; Klem & Connell, 2004; Green et al., 2008; Glanville & Wildhagen, 2007).

For example, the designs of most engagement studies rely on teacher ratings and student self-report data, through surveys or student focus groups, to measure student perceptions, reactions, and even metacognitive thinking about their social and academic experiences in school settings (Fredericks et al., 2004). The variety in operational definitions of engagement and in how these definitions are measured has resulted in a jumble of assessment packages and scales that all purport to measure engagement. Multidimensional definitions of engagement may help consolidate the hodgepodge of engagement approaches and provide greater explanatory power. Glanville and Wildhagen (2007) recently confirmed this hypothesis by showing that only a model (Finn and Voelkl 1993) that used a more multidimensional concept of school engagement was adequate to measure the concept.

A multidimensional approach may also help push the field into producing empirical data that supports the claim that improving students' engagement increases students' academic achievement. For too long, studies in one area of engagement (e.g., behavioral) made claims about another area (e.g., cognitive) without empirically addressing what distinguishes the two and how each component impacts student learning and achievement. As Fredericks and colleagues write, "because there has been considerable research on how students behave, feel, and think, the attempt to conceptualize and examine portions of the literature under the label 'engagement' [has been] potentially problematic; it [has resulted] in a proliferation of constructs, definitions, and measures of concepts that differ slightly, thereby doing little to improve conceptual clarity" (2004, p. 60).

A move toward this multidimensional approach is occurring slowly, but it shows great promise to further the work conceptually and empirically. Yet, despite the potential of this approach, the concept of engagement as it relates to school settings needs to be pushed further if it is to provide the evidence and clarity needed to improve student learning and achievement.

The Importance of Setting, Identity and Critical Youth Voice

What are the next steps? How can we add to the research literature on engagement in ways that help educators, reformers, and policy makers create educational opportunities and institutions that engage young people's minds and hearts and inspire them to actively participate in their learning and education?

Like those currently working on a more complicated version of engagement, we, too, call for a multi-dimensional and critical characterization of the concept of engagement. However, we push the conversation even further by claiming that we must pay particular attention to three additional components — **setting**, **identity**, and **critical youth voice** — as we study youth engagement.

Examining the Features of Youth Settings to Support and Sustain Engagement

The first key component to a deeper understanding of engagement is a renewed look at the role that **setting** plays in youth engagement. Although reformers have embraced the idea that altering educational settings will help to improve student achievement, they have not have not always made the connection between settings and engagement. But understanding the facets and interplay of social settings involving youth and adults are central to improving engagement. Youth do not live, work, and play in black boxes. Their homes, schools, neighborhoods, clubs, teams, and workplaces help determine how engaged they do or do not become.

In our work with student co-research teams and district level student governments, we have found that creat-

ing thoughtful educational settings for our students is essential to engaging them in the work. In developing these settings we pay attention to positive adult-youth relationships and peer relationships among youth by deliberately allowing youth to collaboratively create respectful rules, norms, and tasks. And, although the settings our teams create are often in a school or classroom space, sometimes after school and sometimes during school, because of the attention we pay to the setting, the students often do not equate their work in the co-research teams as "schoolwork," as these settings feel so different — they are ones where students are expected to hold each other accountable for tasks they have decided are meaningful and engaging.

Unfortunately, much of the past research on social settings has been completed by community psychologists who have focused on the impact of settings on individuals rather than on the social settings or systems that surround individuals (Tseng & Seidman, 2007). It is our belief that the contexts that surround individuals are important in shaping how adults and youth interact and, consequently, the ways in which these interactions affect the students' academic futures.

The research community is slowly building a greater understanding of the importance of setting on engagement. For example, researchers are actively studying the ways in which after-school programs (Mahoney, Larson & Eccles, 2005), teacher expectations (Cohen, Raudenbush, & Ball, 2003), youth-adult relationships (Gambone, Klem & Connell, 2002), peer social networks (Ream & Rumberger, 2008), and the allocation of resources (Tseng & Seidman, 2007; Oakes, 2003), among other features, affect social settings and how youth and adults interact within them. Researchers and theorists studying settings believe that a better understanding of what makes particular settings more effective and supportive for youth will enable policy makers and educators to alter social settings systematically to improve youth outcomes.

Yet, even as we gain ground on social setting theory, today's educational settings are often much more complicated than they appeared even a few years ago. We know from talking to students they are learning in an ever-changing, high tech world that defies traditional notions of space and time. For instance, Alvermann and Eakle (2008) write about how youth today are engrossed in a world that is "increasingly blurred by information communication technologies that tend to heed neither place nor space boundaries" (p. 143). Students tell us that texting, blogging, instant messaging, and emailing are forms of communication that challenge our now old-fashioned binary notions of in- and out-of-school time. Studying adolescents attending after-school programs in public libraries and museums, Alvermann and Eakle also revealed how what they call the "deregulated attention economy" reshapes how student do, re-do, and undo schooling.

While we build our understanding about how the processes and practices through which today's various educational settings support or undermine engagement and learning, unanswered questions remain. We must know more about the interplay between engagement that is in planned (e.g., scripted curriculum/lesson plan) versus in unplanned (teachable moments) settings. We must also unpack how the processes of learning and engagement vary when the tasks at hand require cognitive interdependence among many people (group work) versus individual work (Hutchins, 1990; 1991). And, we must study how power dynamics shape relationships and interactions among actors in school and classroom settings (Fine et al., 2004), and how cultural and economic power as a "feature" of settings support and derail educational change (Wells & Serna, 1996).

We believe a fruitful area of social setting research might build from prior research showing how students are capable of performing complex cognitive tasks outside of school that they appear incapable of in classrooms (Lave & Wenger, 1991). This has certainly been our experience with students in the student co-research teams we work with in San Diego (Jones & Yonezawa, 2008a; 2008b) and with students we have worked with across the country on a variety of district-wide initiatives. This research suggests that how participants

become part of a community of practice, and develop an identity within and to that community, shapes their ability to participate fully in the community (Wenger, 1988). This helps explain why, when students study diverse subjects such as math, geography, or language arts, those tasks studied in real-world contexts of athletics, local neighborhoods, automotive repair, or shopping are often more manageable, understandable, and engaging. Some of the research on after-school and non-traditional schooling activities speaks to these findings as well (Nasir & Hand, 2008; Rose, 2004).

We suspect that new settings may afford students the chance to "reinvent" themselves. The students in our research teams often find that teachers and administrators begin to see the students differently — less as troublemakers and more as serious students — after participating in the research team work. Similarly, recent research by Hopkins (2008) found this to be the case among students in work-related learning (WRL) settings in the United Kingdom. When questioned in focus groups, students reported that the key to help them access the benefits of the WRL programs was the fact that the activities occurred outside of traditional school settings. Students reported that having the opportunity to attend WRL courses tapped into their interests, but it was the opportunity to attend WRL activities on college campuses — with their superior physical amenities, older student bodies, and smaller teaching groups — that held the students' attention. The new WRL settings differed so dramatically from students' traditional school environments — and the peer pressures and other disruptive behaviors common on secondary campuses — that students adamantly argued that the WRL courses could never be held on the secondary campuses and have the same effect. Hopkins's research strongly suggests that the interplay between setting and identity is critical to understanding engagement.

Studying Relationships Between Youth Identity and Settings

This then brings us to our next point — a second key feature of future research on engagement should consider issues of youth **identity**. Our work with students

in secondary school research teams and with district-level student governments has shown that students see themselves very differently than adults see them. They fancy themselves to be the "rebel," the "smart one," the "gang banger," or the "friendly girl," and these self-proclaimed identities — some of which have racial and cultural undertones — can shape how they interact with one another and adults.

Yet, despite the intense role identity plays in young people's lives, the role of identity in influencing engagement remains understudied. Much of the work thus far has focused less on identity per se and more on students' background characteristics as a proxy for identity. For instance, to increase engagement among historically disenfranchised student populations, school systems have tried to alter settings to meet students' specific multicultural or linguistic needs (Finn & Rock, 1997; Finn & Voelkl, 1993). Multicultural education, bilingual education, and single-gender schooling are specific, deliberate attempts to alter the curricular offerings and structures of schooling to mesh with students' cultural, linguistic, and gendered background characteristics.

It is true that some researchers and educators, particularly those who study low-income students of color, have long advocated incorporating students' background knowledge into the classroom by suggesting that educators draw from the "funds of knowledge" that all students carry with them into school each and every day (Moll & Gonzalez, 2004). But encouraging educators to incorporate students' backgrounds in the curric-

ulum and instruction to increase engagement failed in many cases to increase engagement because educators were ill equipped to "take up" the knowledge students brought into classrooms (Thomson & Hall, 2008).

Yet youth backgrounds and youth identity are not equivalent concepts. While one's gender, race, and (to a lesser degree) language remain fairly static over time, identity changes and develops, sometimes rapidly, over time across various contexts and as individuals engage with different communities. Because of this fluid nature of identity-building and its important interactions with social settings, we believe that any study of social settings and engagement requires a simultaneous concern with identity formation. Interestingly, one area of research that has explored the connection between identity formation and learning environments can be found in science education research. Science educators and researchers have long been concerned with the disenfranchisement of students and teachers who feel disconnected from scientific curricula. As such, many informal educational contexts have emerged that coax youth and educators into "doing science" by reframing who participates, where science occurs, and in doing so, the identities of the participants (Rahm & Ash, 2008).

In the student co-research teams we helped establish and worked with in various cities around the country, the students rarely saw themselves as researchers before they began the work. Their prior experience with research was primarily in science class, mixing chemicals or writing up a lab experiment. Occasionally a student reported that he or she had filled out a survey for school as a research subject. However, during and after participating in the student co-research teams, the students we worked with often began to see themselves differently. They found they could speak with confidence about designing research, protecting subject confidentiality, and forming conclusions based on the research they had designed and conducted, and the data they had analyzed. We began to realize, as did the students, that their identity had shifted from borderline high school student to promising researcher.

While the work with the student co-research teams was an in-school academic activity, other researchers have shown that non-academic activities can also be studied for their academic impact. A recent study by Nasir and Hand (2008) of African-American high school basketball players on the court and in mathematics classrooms is a good example of work that is trying to understand how non-academic, engaging settings for youth outside of school can inform in-school engagement, particularly for underserved populations. In their work studying basketball players, Nasir and Hand claim that engaging in hands-on activities helped alter students' identities as they moved through the different settings of basketball court and math classroom because identity is formed partly through practice. Using a term they call "practice-linked identities," the researchers show that students' identities are shaped and re-shaped as they engage in a given practice (e.g. basketball or mathematics). The more a person is allowed to really engage in the practice's domain (play basketball or do mathematics) the more likely he or she is to participate intensely and thus have his or her identity altered. What is especially interesting is that Nasir and Hand found in their study that the youth were more likely to be given "access to the domain" in basketball (allowed to really play all aspects of the game), whereas in mathematics class they were more often observers (p. 174). It is not surprising then that students were therefore more likely to develop a basketball identity than a mathematics identity. For Nasir and Hand, "engagement then has to do with students' feelings of competence and mastery in a social context, as well as their sense that the context will offer relationships that support and value their unique selves" (p. 145).

Emerging research on social settings, identity, and

engagement suggest that altering social settings can impact the ways in which individuals in those settings interact with one another. Changing the ways schools and classrooms are organized and resources allocated can reshape what Tseng and Seidman (2007) refer to as transactional social processes between individuals. Altering how youth and educators interact can, in the end, have a broad impact on the engagement within various settings and, ultimately, students' academic outcomes.

Engaging Youth in the Critical Study of Education

The issue closest to our hearts has been the raising of **critical youth voice** in support of student engagement. For the past ten years, we have advocated for students to play a more active and important role in the shaping of their educations. Our fundamental premise has been that adolescents have important knowledge about schooling from a student's perspective and that this knowledge — of which adults are not privy — can help people with power make important changes and improvements to schools and classrooms (Jones & Yonezawa, 2002; 2008a; 2008b; Joselowsky, 2005; 2007).

But this perspective — that students are agents of change — remains a challenge as adults still see students as youth to be developed, supervised, or controlled. We believe that for youth engagement to flourish, students must be given opportunities to do more than participate in academically rigorous, adult-sanctioned activities. Rather, youth must partake in the active and critical creation of the educational institutions they attend. The student co-research teams we help create at high schools are an example of the ways in which adults can help create opportunities for students to formulate a **critical youth voice** in schools and communities (Jones & Yonezawa, 2008a; 2008b; Yonezawa & Jones, 2009).

Unfortunately, opportunities for youth to speak up and be heard are not commonplace. Systemic educational change requires involvement from multiple constituencies and stakeholders in the school community; however, youth have rarely been considered as "partners" in education reform (Loutzenheiser, 2002; Nieto, 1994; Silva & Rubin, 2003). In fact, in the 500 pages of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation, the notion that students can help improve their schools does not appear once. Moreover, youth who struggle academically or socially have been most often ignored (or silenced) when adults come together to advance new ideas aimed at improving school environments (Fine, 1991; Forum for Youth Investment, 2005; Joselowsky, 2005; 2007; Rubin & Silva, 2003; Schultz & Cook-Sather, 2001; Weiss, 2003). This continues to be the case in most education contexts, despite researchers' efforts to document marginalized youths' school experiences (Cook-Sather, 2002; Mitra, 2001; Theissen & Cook-Sather, 2007; Yonezawa & Jones, 2007).

Recently, researchers and community activists have called for increasing the civic, moral, and critical engagement of youth in shaping their educational opportunities. Proponents of youth voice and engagement argue that, to be meaningful to young people, education needs to embrace a more critical dimension (Cook-Sather 2006; Fielding, 2001a; 2004a; 2004b; Fine et al., 2007; Joselowsky, 2005; 2007) that encourages students to make meaning, articulate interests, set agendas, and enact power as an end in itself (Rogers, Morrell, and Enyedy, 2007). Tseng & Seidman (2007) recognize the power differential between teachers and students as "one of the central differences between youth organizing programs and other youth settings such as classrooms and youth development programs" (Gambone, Klem & Connell, 2003 as cited in original). The key difference here is the idea that youth organizers[1] — those who advocate for youth voice — believe that students should not be encouraged just to navigate school — they should help challenge and change it as well (Cook-Sather, 2007a).

The student voice movement — ourselves included — has long considered the importance of setting and identity in its work. Rudduck, Chaplain, and Wallace (1996), proponents of critical youth voice, have argued for over a decade that students' critical engagement at

1. While we use the term youth organizers here rather loosely, we recognize that many researchers and activists who advocate for youth voice — ourselves included — do not use this term to describe themselves.

schools must be developed with full acknowledgement and recognition of their lives inside and outside of school, including the ways that they perceive opportunities or injustices. That is because the ways students see themselves — their identities — are developed in part through their interactions with social settings, including schools. It is often in school where students "learn" that they are "smart" or "slow," and it is the interaction between their developing identities and their school and non-school settings that further shape their identities and the settings themselves (Johnston & Nicholls, 1995). Fielding (2001b) has also written extensively about the ways that organizational structures and cultures as well as social and cultural hierarchies shape student voice efforts including who is allowed to speak, to whom, about what, in what language, and, importantly, who listens.

Critical youth voice advocates argue that pursuing the development of youth voice across a variety of settings is important because it can help reshape the identities of the youth and the settings in which they are immersed. Engaging youth in re-shaping their educational opportunities benefit the youths' identities (Rudduck, 2007), as they are afforded access to new knowledge, skills, and relationships that empower them and simultaneously ready them for post-secondary work. For example, Oakes, Rogers, and their colleagues (2002; 2006) created a series of what they called "social design experiments" — known locally as the "Futures Project" — which included creating new communities of practice with a group of Los Angeles-area high school students. In these newly enacted communities, the diverse group of students studied, designed, and completed sociological research projects on issues that mattered deeply to them and their communities. In doing so, they became sociological apprentices and participated in social inquiry in their school, communities, and the nearby university. These activities fundamentally changed the way the Futures students saw themselves. Rogers, Morrell, and Enyedy (2007) claim that the students were able to take on new and more powerful identities — ones that embodied skills and knowledge and ways of being that would help the youth in the future schooling, and as they pursued college-level work.

Critical youth engagement can also provide considerable value to educational institutions (Cook-Sather, 2007b; Lodge, 2005). Students are uniquely situated as "insiders" in school contexts with ready access to information about what does and does not work — information to which adults are often not privy (Levin, 2000). With training from willing adults, student co-researchers can work individually or in teams to study issues of educational importance in their schools and communities (Fielding, 2001a; Jones & Yonezawa, 2008a; 2008b; Yonezawa & Jones, 2007). Youth can also be engaged in dialogue with adults on governance boards, committees, and even in their classrooms to shape district- , school- , and classroom-level policies.

The notion of engaging students in educational change is not new. It has early roots in the "student power" movement of the 1960s and early 70s (Levin, 2000; Rudduck, 2007). The student voice movement's recent resurgence, however, argues that greater civic engagement by students in school and community change efforts can help students develop into participatory and justice-oriented citizens (Westherimer & Kahne, 2004) and see the value in becoming well educated (Feldman, Pasek, Romer, & Hall-Jamieson, 2007; Rubin & Giarelli, 2006; Syvertsen, Flanagan, & Stout, 2007). In addition, developing moral engagement in youth is seen as a way to emphasize "questions of justice, ethical conduct, and reactions to interpersonal circumstances" (Thorkildsen, 2007a, 115; Thorkildsen, 2007b).

A Word of Caution

We, like most other youth voice proponents, recognize that encouraging youth to take a critical perspective of their educational experiences is not without its challenges. More than once we have found ourselves having to mediate between well-intended adults and youth trying to being heard. Moreover, we have also found ourselves trying to help youth communicate better with one another when they fail to see eye to eye with each other. Youth, like adults, do not embody a singular culture or political perspective, and divisions between adults and youth and within groups of young people can foster struggles over the nature of their collective work and who gets to define it (Fielding, 2001b; Silva, 2001). For instance, in a study we conducted with one

youth group, the students in the inquiry groups hotly debated notions of tracking practices, with some advocating for greater tracking while others were disturbed by what they saw as the inherent inequities in a stratified school system (Jones & Yonezawa, 2002). Similarly, Bragg (2001) discusses how difficult it can be for adults to listen to and take seriously youth opinions that adults disagree with, or even find distasteful.

Another common danger in promoting youth critical engagement is adult domination (intended or unintended) and the creation of false opportunities (Mitra, 2004; 2007; Silva, 2001). Lodge (2005) describes how efforts to promote a critical youth engagement can range from those that promote active student participation to those that encourage relatively passive involvement by youth. She further explains that some critical engagement projects are more about improving organizations and less about developing the people within those organizations — the youth included. Projects established to be more dialogic in nature are, Lodge explains, the most likely to produce democratic and critical engagement of youth.

Recommendations

Policy makers, foundations, educators, and the public are calling for the increased academic achievement of youth. At the same time, there is a growing realization that academic success will require a renewed effort to engage youth across multiple learning environments. Engaging youth, we have argued in this paper, necessitates that educators and researchers better understand how to create educational settings that support the development of academic and critical youth identities. But the theoretical development of the interplay among youth settings, identities, and critical youth voice needs to be accompanied by greater attention to specific measures of academic achievement.

One of the dilemmas of the present research literature is the lack thus far of studies that examine youth programs through multiple phases: early, intermediate, and long-term. Much of the current research on educational settings and identity provide snapshots of spaces that youth occupy, but longer-term examinations of these settings and their impact on youth identity, voice and, ultimately

achievement, are necessary as well. In addition, few rich, ethnographic descriptions of programs and their implementation efforts exist to help understand if programs impact youth, and if so, in what contexts, under what conditions, why, and how they do so.

In addition to the lack of strong qualitative research on engaging settings and youth identity, there is at the same time a lack of quasi-experimental research on and evaluations of youth engagement interventions in order to establish if outcome gains are statistically significant. Because of the lack of such studies, we often have thin evidence regarding the relationship between student engagement in multiple forms and student achievement. Currently, there is an overreliance of engagement literature on student surveys or other self-report data from and by youth to measure students' perceptions of the academic programmatic impact and a lack of other forms of data.

The holes in the evidentiary base regarding youth engagement can result in confusion and a lack of urgency among educators and policy makers. In order to change this, rigorous research needs to be conducted that assess the development and impact of youth engagement, in multiple settings and among varied youth populations. Through such research and program development we can better sense how engagement can be improved and what the academic, cognitive, social, and political impacts of such engagement are for young people. Doing so will help frame and articulate an evidentiary base for the importance of improving academic outcomes through careful efforts to engage youth in authentic and meaningful ways. Such an evidentiary base is a criti-

cal lever in moving the work of youth engagement, and ultimately students' academic achievement, forward.

Conclusion

Our attention to the areas of setting, identity, and critical youth voice come from our years of experience in creating spaces for youth in schools to become part of the effort to improve their educational institutions. We have found, through our work with secondary students in inquiry groups, focus groups, and student co-research teams that much of the work on student engagement thus far has typically advocated for finding ways for students to learn to "do school." The end goal of much research on student engagement has been for students to be successfully incorporated into the structures and cultures of educational institutions. Researchers and practitioners hope that students will become more attentive, productive, and, although rarely stated, compliant. Little work on youth engagement seeks to disrupt schooling as it is currently enacted or to engage students in critically assessing their educational opportunities — or lack thereof.

Yet, student engagement cannot simply be about teaching kids to "do school." Our goals must be loftier and our reach longer. Rather we must ask ourselves in what ways and with what tools can we re-engage students in learning. A first step towards this will be our own efforts to re-orient the settings in which students live and learn — schools, classrooms, and community centers — in ways that help re-shape and support their unique identities and their potentially powerful voices. Only when we improve how we create more engaging settings for youth can we alter youth identity and voice, and, ultimately, improve students' academic achievement. A multidimensional and critical view of engagement — one that considers the interplay among setting, identity, and critical youth voice — can go a long way in improving youth engagement in school.

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Appendix 1

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