



## *Examining How Youth Take on Critical Civic Identities Across Classroom and Youth Organizing Spaces*

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### **Abstract**

*This paper documents the ways that two learning spaces—a community-based youth organizing group and a high school social studies classroom—provided different opportunities for Latinx youth to take on critical civic identities characterized by a critical consciousness, a motivation for social justice, and feelings of civic agency. By examining two structurally unique learning sites from a situated perspective, this paper highlights how youth critical civic identity processes are negotiated within figured worlds over time. In particular, the goals and membership expectations of the two sites positioned the study participants on different identity trajectories, with classroom students more likely to adopt an aspirational critical civic identity, while youth participating in community-based organizing took on more practice-linked identities as critical civic activists. In particular, positioning youth as valuable contributors to critical civic action was a key resource for youth to take on these practice-linked identities as individuals with agency to address social injustices.*

**Keywords:** *youth; identity; organizing; civic development; critical consciousness; learning environments; urban*

### **Introduction**

Latinx in the United States continue to be marginalized in civic life and schools. The urban communities where many Latinx live are more likely to have fewer opportunities for youth civic engagement (Hart & Atkins, 2002) and the schools that most Latinx attend are less likely to provide them with quality civic learning opportunities (Kahne & Middaugh, 2008; Torney-Purta, Barber & Wilkenfeld, 2007). For instance, high stakes standardized testing policies have detrimentally impacted low-income schools through an overemphasis on tested subject areas and test-taking skills, at the expense of other important subjects, like civic development (Kahne & Middaugh, 2008). Structurally, schools serving Latinx are far more likely to be over crowded, under resourced, and racially segregated (Orfield & Lee, 2007). Consequently, Latinx are much less likely to experience the quality learning opportunities that promote academic and civic engagement to foster critical civic identity development (Conchas, 2006; Kahne & Sporte, 2008). These academic and civic opportunity gaps lead to lower Latinx educational attainment rates and civic participation when compared to Whites and African Americans (Telles & Ortiz, 2008), which perpetuate an

oppressive cycle for Latinx. Without college opportunities, many Latinx youth will struggle economically and continue to be marginalized civically. In an era of neoliberal educational policies focused on raising test scores and perpetuating the status quo (Sondel, 2015), the dearth of critical civic opportunities fails to prepare youth for the political struggle necessary to ensure quality educational and civic opportunities for marginalized communities (Oakes & Rogers, 2006).

While schools and civic organizations have the power to position individuals as marginalized, they can also provide opportunities for liberation, where Latinx youth can take on identities with the dispositions to critique and act against these injustices (Freire, 2000). While limited in number, the studies on empirical efforts to engage students with social critique and civic action through the classroom have shown increases in students' critical literacy, civic commitments, and civic agency (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Rubin, 2007; Westheimer, 2015). Similarly, out-of-school spaces, such as youth organizing groups, have been sites where youth have developed critical social analysis skills, commitment to community and political engagement, and a sense of empowerment to contribute to change efforts (Gambone, Yu, Lewis-Charp, Sipe & Lacoé, 2004; Ginwright & Cammarota, 2007; Kirshner, 2015; Larson & Hansen, 2005). While there is evidence that both classroom and youth organizing groups have been associated with positive developmental outcomes, findings are based on a small number of studies. In particular, the *processes* that influence critical civic identity development in each of these spaces need further elucidation (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Kirshner & Ginwright, 2012). In addition, there is theorizing on how situated learning contexts impact civic identity development (Flanagan et al., 2011; Nasir & Hand, 2008) but very few qualitative studies that explore these processes across classrooms and youth organizing groups, particularly amongst Latinx populations.

In this study, I examined two learning spaces—a community-based youth organizing group and a high school social studies classroom—where Latinx youth had access to quality critical civic learning opportunities to understand how participation in these spaces influenced their critical civic identity trajectories. By examining two structurally unique learning sites from a sociocultural perspective, I highlight how youth critical civic identity processes are negotiated within situated contexts over time (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner & Cain, 1998). I argue that the goals and membership expectations of the two sites positioned the study participants on different identity trajectories (Wenger, 1998), with classroom students more likely to adopt a future oriented or *aspirational* critical civic identity, while the youth in community-based organizing took on more present or *practice-linked* identities as critical civic activists. In particular, positioning youth as valuable contributors to critical civic action was a key resource for youth to take on these practice-linked identities as individuals with agency to address social injustices.

## Theory and Background

### An Initial Definition of Critical Civic Identity

The construct of critical civic identity draws from research literatures around youth civic development and critical pedagogy. A civic identity refers to an individual's sense of attachment to her community, the extent to which she is (or plans to be) civically engaged, and her sense of agency in affecting the social well-being of the community (Flanagan & Faison, 2001, Youniss, McLellan & Yates, 1997). A *critical* civic identity involves developing an awareness of structural injustices and a motivation to address them (Freire, 2000). This identity differs from a civic identity in that the attachments are not necessarily to one's proximal community but there exists solidarity

with those who are oppressed by injustice, regardless of the location (Rogers, Mediratta & Shah, 2012). Moreover, critical agency not only involves feeling effective in one's community, it entails feeling capable of addressing local and structural injustices.

### **A Situated Perspective on Critical Civic Identity**

Drawing upon the concepts of positional identities within figured worlds (Holland et al., 1998) and identity trajectories (Wenger, 1998), I use a sociocultural lens to provide insights into the processes by which youth take on various kinds of critical civic identity trajectories through participation. My conception of identity development is grounded in the sociocultural theoretical framework, which argues that identity processes are socially negotiated during co-participation in cultural practices within a situated context (Holland et al., 1998; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Rogoff, 2003). Cultural practices have been conceptualized as "figured worlds" with their own set of norms, expectations and ideas that offer individuals different resources and constraints for taking on certain kinds of identities (Holland et al., 1998; Nasir & Kirshner, 2003). I focus on the ways youth negotiated identities in relation to how they were positioned by the historical norms of each institution and the goals of the educators in each site.

In addition, I use Wenger's (1998) concept of identity trajectories that theorizes identity as a multi-layered process of becoming that is negotiated across time and space. Individuals make sense of who they are within the context of their histories, the dynamics of the practices they engage in and the futures that they imagine for themselves (Wenger, 1998). As such, identities include both a procedural component and a cognitive or self-making element (Holland et al., 1998; Urietta, 2007). I draw upon Nasir & Hand's (2008) articulation of this procedural component of identity as a "practice-linked" identity, or "the sense that there is a connection between self and the activity" (Nasir & Hand, 2008 p. 147). These practice-linked identities are the "identities that people come to take on, construct, and embrace that are linked to participation in particular social and cultural practices" (p. 147). The cognitive element of identity speaks to the process of individuals wrestling with who they are and who they want to become, which I refer to as aspirational identities in this paper.

### **Theories of Critical Civic Development**

Existing theories of the development of critical consciousness (Freire, 2000) and sociopolitical development offer insights into the relationships between a social critique, motivation for justice, civic action, and agency. Freire (2000) argues that critical consciousness develops through praxis, or a cycle of critical reflection and civic action. He proposes that consciousness mediates action and critical consciousness will promote transformative civic action. He articulates three stages of consciousness (magical, naïve, and critical), each marked by a particular lens for understanding inequality, and the presence of action or no action to address it. Watts, Williams and Jagers (2003) build on Freire's work to broaden and describe the range of stages for the development of critical consciousness, or what they call sociopolitical development. Their work accounts for more gradations, particularly between Freire's Naïve and Critical stages, to better capture the process of consciousness development. In addition, Watts et al. (2003) point out that consciousness may drive a motivation to act on injustice but a sense of agency or empowerment is necessary for sustained action. While these theorists provide important understandings into the relationships between consciousness, action and empowerment, research from a situated perspective offers more

nuanced insights into how individuals take on identity trajectories within various settings. As my data suggest, identity processes are not as linear over time as the stage models suggest, nor are these processes global across contexts.

### **Research on Critical Civic Identities in Schools & Community-organizing**

Few in-school or out-of-school learning spaces offer youth opportunities to take on critical civic identities because they rarely engage with issues of injustice (Levine & Lopez, 2004; Sherrod, 2006) or position youth as valuable contributors to important civic action (Kirshner, 2015). In particular, schools for low-income students of color too often resemble factories and operate with a hidden curriculum of preparing working class youth to be compliant workers in low-skilled jobs (Spring, 2001).

However, educational spaces that engage youth with critical content and civic action have reported shifts in student critical civic identities. For instance, teaching civics from a social justice perspective is most effective at fostering dispositions to seek out the root causes of social injustices and a motivation to address them (Westheimer, 2015). Employing critical pedagogy and sociocultural learning theory, Duncan-Andrade and Morrell (2008) implemented several successful school and community-based projects with urban students that underscored the importance of providing youth with opportunities to co-participate in critical civic practices with more experienced adult educators. Morrell's research (2004) highlights how long-term participation in a critical classroom and summer critical research program led youth to take on critical civic identities as creators of knowledge and individuals with agency.

In out-of-school spaces, youth organizing groups are potentially powerful spaces for cultivating critical civic identities because they tend to position youth as authentic collaborators in critical civic actions (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2007; Kirshner, 2007). The characteristics of youth organizing groups are by no means uniform. However, they are often typified by the collaborative efforts of youth and adults who are actively engaged in projects whose aim is to understand and address issues of concern in their communities (Kirshner, 2008). These organizing groups can provide youth with access to figured worlds where they engage with critical content, expert adult organizers, and socially relevant activities in their communities (Kirshner, 2008). Moreover, youth organizing groups have been more effective at engaging low-income youth of color and promoting critical civic identity development than traditional civic engagement opportunities (Gambone et al., 2004). Strobel, Osberg and McLaughlin (2006) argue that youth identities shifted from "at-risk youth" to "valuable civic actors" through their participation in a youth activism organization. The authors assert the importance of developmental spaces "dedicated to repositioning youth as active agents in their own lives and in their surrounding contexts" (p. 211). They propose that the developmental shifts occurred "when social criticism was connected to active and constructive problem solving" (p. 212).

While there is limited research documenting practice-based examples of critical pedagogical approaches in action, the studies that exist have documented positive outcomes for youth across classroom and youth organizing spaces (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Kirshner, 2015; Morrell, 2004). As argued by Freire (2000), when opportunities for social criticism are coupled with efforts to imagine and enact solutions, youth tend to experience an expanded consciousness of social injustices and an increased commitment and agency to address them (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Ginwright & Cammarota, 2007; Strobel et al., 2006). Others have also suggested

that agency must be coupled with guided opportunities to impact change for young people to develop a sense of power and influence (Evans, 2007) and that youth can develop a sense of collective agency when contributing to the larger efforts of youth organizing groups (Christens & Dolan, 2011; Gambone et al., 2006; Kirshner, 2009). However, limited attention has been given to how institutional characteristics of both schools and youth organizing sites influence the nature of youth participation in civic action and how that positions them to take on critical civic identities.

The work of those applying situated frameworks to understand various learning contexts offers a vital lens for examining identity development across classroom and community-based youth organizing learning spaces. Studies in schools and civic organizations have highlighted how novices are positioned in relationship to the central practices of a community can impact their engagement and identity development within a given domain. The institutional context of a learning space, such as its values, belief systems and the expectations of membership, play a key role in shaping civic identity processes (Nasir & Kirshner, 2003). Flanagan et al., (2011) argue that spaces like schools and community-based organizations serve as “mediating institutions” where youth civic identities are shaped. Moreover, these institutions shape the kinds of civic involvement that youth engage in and the range of identities and actions they consider possible through the practices modeled by those within the institutions they participate in. For instance, Flanagan et al. (2011), argue “meaningful identity options are constrained by what members of a group consider possible for people ‘like them’” (p. 98). By influencing values and actions, these mediating institutions shape civic identities and the possible identities that can be adopted. Nasir and Hand’s (2008) study of identity development within a high school basketball team and a Mathematics classroom highlights how being positioned to take on integral roles within the basketball team made it more likely for the students to adopt ‘practice-linked identities’ as basketball players. Similarly, Kirshner (2008), showed that different ways of prioritizing youth development and campaign goals led to unique ways of positioning youth participation in the practices in three youth activist organizations. In turn, youth positioning with respect to the “experts” in the organizations afforded distinct youth developmental outcomes.

While we have important initial insights into identity development within school-based spaces (Nasir & Hand, 2008), international civic institutions (Flanagan et al., 2011), and across youth community-organizing sites (Kirshner, 2008), these studies do not specifically examine critical civic identity development across classroom and youth community-organizing spaces. This paper seeks to contribute to our understanding of the conditions that support youth in taking on critical civic identities within and across school and community-based learning sites.

## Methods

Through two case studies, employing qualitative methods, this study documented and analyzed the structural characteristics, cultural practices and identity processes within two learning sites. Specifically, I look at how the positioning of youth within these “figured worlds” shapes their identity trajectories, which consist of identity processes connected with cultural practices (practice-linked identity) and their cognitive self-making of their identities and who they want to become (aspirational identity). Given my interest in *how* structural and interpersonal characteristics of learning sites interact with identity development, a qualitative methodology was best suited for this study (Merriam, 1998). I chose a case study approach because it is well suited to examine in-depth, a case within its “real-life” context” (Yin, 2006, p. 111). As is customary to qualitative research, the limited number of sites and participants will prevent any broad generalizations to

larger contexts (Merriam, 1998). However, this approach is ideal for providing insights into processes within particular contexts that cannot be obtained through quantitative approaches. By using a situated lens to examine a community-based youth organizing group and a high school social studies classroom, two structurally diverse locations, this research highlights how different learning settings influence identity processes (Yin, 2006). In particular, it provided a way to explore identity processes across contexts and highlight how characteristics in institutional structures position young people to take on different identity trajectories.

As the main instrument in a qualitative and critical study, the researcher's paradigm or epistemology influences the way that social and cultural life is documented and interpreted (Carspecken, 1996). As a researcher and educator, I bring a critical perspective that situates human cultural practices within a structure that has historically marginalized individuals based on race, class, gender and sexuality. While I situate knowledge and experience within this power structure, I also recognize that postmodern insights, which question the existence of a standard "truth" are important (Carspecken, 1996).

As both a participant and a researcher in each site, I had to manage the demands of contributing to the spaces while also collecting data. Over the course of fifteen months, I interviewed youth and educators in each site while also participating in the practices of the organizing group and the two social studies classrooms of the focal teacher. As a participant, I served as a resource to each site, making myself available to meet the needs of the organization and classroom, rather than operating as a driver of the culture and practices of the space. Nevertheless, my participation, presence and relationships with students undoubtedly had an impact on each environment (Schensul, Schensul & LeCompte, 1999), particularly in the youth organizing space where I was a more active participant. While traditional research perspectives might argue this undermines "objectivity," critical research places a premium on the researcher's proximity and trustworthiness to the participants in evaluating the merits of a study (Kincheloe & McLaren, 1998; Morrell, 2006). For instance, this closeness led to the establishment of trust that made it more likely for youth participants to share their experiences and perspectives with me. Conversely, the structure of the school space allowed for fewer interactions with the student participants, which positioned me more as an "objective" observer, but with a different level of access and trust with students.

The data presented in this paper come largely from the seventy-one interviews I conducted, as well as the observational and artifact data that I collected and analyzed. Collectively, these data informed my conclusions around the local site characteristics and global structural features that influenced critical civic identity development for the youth in the study.

## **Selection of Participants**

### ***Youth***

The participants in both sites were primarily low-income Latinx youth (ages 14-18) from the same urban community in southern California. I identified a focal group of students in an attempt to document patterns of engagement and change over time amongst particular youth. However, I also collected snapshot and focus group interviews with other participants in the site to provide additional information on each space. In the youth organizing group, I selected six youth who were just beginning to participate in the leadership component of the group (less than three months) and six youth who had been in the leadership of the organization for a year or more. In the classroom site, I selected six students from the social studies teacher's 10<sup>th</sup> grade World History

class and six students from his 12<sup>th</sup> grade Government & Economics class. The youth organizing focal group consisted of nine females and three males, while the classroom group had six males and six females. I did not provide students with any monetary incentives to participate.

### ***The Youth Organizing Group***

Two main factors influenced the purposeful selection of United For Justice (UFJ)<sup>1</sup> as the youth activism site for this study: 1) the organization's reputation as an effective youth organizing group and 2) my previous experience volunteering with them as part of an initial pilot study. UFJ worked with youth and families from an urban community in southern California to fight for educational justice. The organization had successfully tackled many issues, including campaigning to build new schools in the community, championing equitable funding, and fighting to establish graduation requirements that would ensure all students eligibility to California's four-year colleges. The staff and organization were committed to addressing community issues and fostering youth and adult capacity to address these issues. UFJ sponsored youth clubs at four of the local high schools, as well as junior high school clubs and a parent organization.

### ***Social Studies Classroom***

Several factors went into the purposeful selection of the classroom under study. The choice of social studies was appropriate because it is a subject that typically includes a civics component and provides opportunities for students to examine and critique social conditions and their origins. It was also essential that the teacher express a commitment to promoting critical and civic engagement for all students because of the desire to compare sites where educators had similar youth development goals. A teacher with a prior relationship to UFJ was ideal because that allowed for exploring possible connections between the two sites (i.e. mutual students and campaigns). The selected teacher, Saul Sanchez, was recommended by two adult organizers within UFJ as an ideal candidate for the study because of his reputation as a critical educator and his collaboration with UFJ as a teacher sponsor of one of the four high school clubs.

### **Interviews & Field Notes**

Through the two case studies, I conducted seventy-one interviews with forty-four students and eight educators. I used semi-structured interviews with the 24 focal youth to obtain their perspectives on their participation in each learning site and the site's impact on their attitudes towards schooling, civic participation, and motivation for social justice. I interviewed the focal participants at least twice, once in the middle of the study and once at the end. The interviews with UFJ youth (on average sixty-five minutes) were longer than those with classroom students (initial interviews averaged forty-two minutes and follow up interviews averaged eighteen minutes). I used interviews with adult educators (one to two hours long) to obtain their perspectives on their practice and the educational site's impact on youth academic, critical, and civic development. In order to provide a deeper understanding of each site, I conducted additional snapshot and focus group interviews with students outside of the focal group: three with ten sophomores and three with twelve seniors.

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1. All names of organizations and individuals are pseudonyms.

Participant observations took place one to two times weekly at each learning site over the course of fifteen months. Traditional observation took place when the adult organizers and classroom teachers were facilitating meetings and lessons for the youth participants. However, when engaging in a meeting or working with students in a classroom, the activity took precedence over notes until a moment arrived when note taking did not disrupt the activity.

## **Data Analysis**

As appropriate for qualitative case study research, data analysis occurred during and after the completion of this study (Yin, 2006). Following each visit to the learning site, I typed up field notes and documented my own observer commentaries. When I conducted audiotaped interviews, I catalogued, transcribed, and made notes. Periodically, I wrote analytic memos to summarize and inform the direction of my observations to answer my study questions and begin identifying codes and analyzing the data. Once I collected the data in full, I began using a text-based data management system to organize and code the qualitative data to facilitate the comparison and the development of associations in the data at the factor and sub-factor level (Schensul, Schensul & LeCompte, 1999). After reading through my data, I developed grounded codes and used them to identify patterns and associations between characteristics of each learning site, student engagement, and critical civic development. The generation of codes emerged from the data and was informed by my theoretical framework.

## **Findings**

Participants took on aspects of critical civic identities across both sites, such as the cultivation of a critical consciousness and motivation for social justice. In the classroom and organizing sites, exposure to critical content and dialogue fostered students' development of a critical consciousness and a motivation to address social injustices. However, participation in the community-organizing group (UFJ) was also marked by more robust shifts in feelings of civic agency and the inclination to take action to address injustices. I argue that the goals and member expectations of each space positioned youth to take on these possible identity trajectories. In the figured world of the classroom, the goals and modeling of the teacher positioned students as critical thinkers in development and future civic participants in preparation. This afforded the development of practice-linked identities as critical thinkers and aspirational identities as critical civic activists. In the figured world of community-organizing, goals and practices positioned students to adopt practice-linked identities as critical civic activists and aspirational identities as critical civic leaders. In particular, positioning youth as valuable contributors to important critical civic action provided opportunities for developing a sense of agency and a practice-linked identity as a critical civic activist.

### **Classroom Practice-Linked Critical Thinkers: “We Become Little Hims”**

In challenging schooling's historical goal of promoting the status quo and perpetuating hegemonic ideals of meritocracy, the teacher positioned students to take on practice-linked identities as individuals who critiqued injustice. In particular, Mr. Sanchez made these practice-linked identities available in the classroom by engaging with youth in critical content and dialogues from a social justice perspective. As institutions, schools have long functioned as a means to promote



patriotism and maintain the status quo by privileging content that perpetuates hegemonic ideals (Spring, 2001, Westheimer, 2015). Mr. Sanchez shared that he experienced push back from colleagues for his social justice approach to teaching, but persisted because he saw it as crucial to progress: “I say, ‘this is my bias, here it is,’ and I’m gonna try to push it with my students because I think that our community’s improvement depends on being able to see the world from this point of view.” In addition to providing students with access to content that addressed injustices, Mr. Sanchez modeled ways of engaging with it. One of his primary goals as an educator was developing students’ capacities to be “critical consumers of information.” By helping students “develop critical filters”, he hoped to promote the tendency to look for root causes and explanations of social injustices. For instance, he was intentional about providing information and questions that encouraged his students to develop an inclination to question, a key component of critical dialogues.

The following excerpt highlights how engaging students in critical dialogues positioned them to take on practice-linked identities as critical thinkers. In a focus group interview, five seniors were discussing an assignment around the documentary *Food Inc.*, which takes a critical look at the ways corporations exploit workers, deplete the environment, and put consumers at risk in order to make profits. One of the film’s segments presented the story of a young child, Kevin, who died from eating a hamburger contaminated with E. Coli. The students were asked to write a page-long response to explain who was responsible for Kevin’s death. The students talked about how they were adopting the kind of critical analysis that Mr. Sanchez modeled in his teaching. The excerpt begins with Sabrina asserting that they were becoming “little hims,” indicating that they were assuming the identity of a critical thinker, like Mr. Sanchez. Then the students discussed how they would answer the question, exploring multiple perspectives. First they stated the immediate cause of the child’s death and then sought out root causes, like Mr. Sanchez encouraged them to do.

Rafael: It’s like, “he died because he ate the hamburger.”

Sabrina: and “that hamburger was eaten by the boy and it’s the farmer’s fault.”

Rafael: But then, “it’s not the farmer’s fault because they are sort of forced to raise the animal in that way.”

Sabrina: It’s a chain reaction.

Ernie: Because there’s laws, and you blame the government.

Rafael: Not really the government, it’s the companies.

Then multiple students reiterate that they feel like they are becoming more like their teacher, indicating an identity trajectory as a critical thinker and problem poser. Sabrina: “Yeah, we’re little Sanchezes.” Yolanda: “Little Sanchezes.” Ernie: “Sanchezes.” Finally, Rafael concluded the discussion by connecting corporate greed to the exploitation of farmers and nature. This discussion provides an example of how the classroom space, through the teacher’s modeling of critique, provided a model for interrogating injustice. As the students participated in the practices of the site, they took on the identity of someone who examines social issues with a critical lens. In addition, several students reported that they applied this critical lens outside of the classroom by sharing critical perspectives with friends and family or through the way they now interpreted information in the media. The practice of critique was becoming part of who they were and what they did, or a practice-linked identity (Nasir & Hand, 2008).

## Positioning Youth for Aspirational Identities in the Classroom

In multiple ways, the classroom world challenged the development of practice-linked civic identities and positioned students as citizens-in-the-making. Mr. Sanchez's goals and discourse made aspirational critical civic identities available, but the institutional expectation of schooling as a place for acquiring knowledge and preparing youth for the future challenged these identities from forming in practice.

### *Teacher Goals Position Youth for Future Civic Participation*

The discourse of Mr. Sanchez's goals around civic engagement positioned youth as aspiring critical civic participants. For instance, he encouraged youth to have a commitment to improving conditions in their communities by telling students they "have to pay it forward." Many of his seniors indicated being aware of Mr. Sanchez's goal. Marc said, "He wants us to be those students that are out there, the leaders of *tomorrow*." And Diana shared, "he's one of the teachers that gets you thinking, 'what can you do to change the *future*'" [emphases added]. Sabrina added, "He tells us that we're the ones, that *we're the ones* that have to solve the problems." Rafael recounted how learning about social injustices "outraged" him and drove him to ask Mr. Sanchez for his opinion on addressing these issues. Mr. Sanchez's answer underscores his belief that education and consciousness are keys to social justice. Rafael shared:

We'll be outraged by things we learn and we'll be like, "what can we do?" And he'll just tell us, "like education, keep going in school, and you'll learn so much more and then you'll know what to do." So basically, just go to college and that's all, "well, you'll figure out what you need to do to improve society or this country."

Fostering this motivation to seek knowledge through education and to be change agents illustrates how the classroom goals and discourse around it positioned youth to take on aspirational identities as critical civic activists. For instance, Rafael noted that watching the documentary, "Capitalism: A love story" and talking about it in Mr. Sanchez's class made him aspire to start up a cooperative business one day to address the exploitation of workers. The combination of exposure to critical content and Mr. Sanchez explicitly making future identities available to students through his discourse influenced who they wanted to become in the future (aspirational identity) but not their present practice-linked identity.

### *Civic Action as a Means for Individual Preparation for the Future*

The expectations of the figured world of school influenced how students approached civic action through their classroom and presented challenges to using it as a means to promote practice-linked identities as critical civic activists. The complimentary goals of schooling as a site for future preparation and for sorting students through evaluation served as barriers to framing the classroom as a space where individuals participate in civic action and ultimately see this as part of their identity. For instance, the outcomes of the senior year Civic Action Project (CAP) highlighted how the purpose of schooling was seen as a means to develop the student for the future rather than a space for addressing present social injustices in communities. The CAP encouraged students to address a community issue actively by devising a policy reform and then seeking to implement it. When

asked about the project, Mercedes indicated that the CAP helped her build civic knowledge: “Just like going out and doing research and being more independent, like looking for laws and things that affect the way the community looks like.” Ernie said the project “made us aware of the issues in our community and we came up with solutions, well *possible* solutions.” Ernie’s distinction that they came up with “possible” solutions highlights that the projects were more theoretical than action oriented. In fact, Mercedes pointed out, “I think we did more learning than action.” While this project did help to build students’ knowledge of community concerns, it did not lead them to take action to address these issues. Moreover, the interviewed seniors admitted to discontinuing their Civic Action Projects once they received grades even though the projects had not yet been implemented. This suggests that they did not see the project and the classroom as spaces where action and community change were central expectations of membership. Instead, the grade and the evaluative purpose of schooling was their central motivator for participation in the project.

### ***Classroom Consciousness, Action and Civic Agency***

In the classroom, exposure to critical content was associated with students’ increased awareness of current injustice, but few opportunities to engage in important civic action limited students’ opportunities to adopt identities as individuals with the agency to address these social injustices. Within the context of a discussion on unions and capitalist worker exploitation, Filiberto admitted “I was so ignorant, in the work area, like about how much power you can have.” He further confessed, “and it makes me think what else I am ignorant about? Like the school system, I don’t know my rights. I would want to know.” His quote suggests that participation in Mr. Sanchez’s class fostered his awareness of injustice and it drove him to “want” to know more, but not necessarily to participate in civic action. Similarly, Sabrina shared, “when we talked about the exploitation [of domestic and international workers]. It gets me mad.” She asserted, “I want to do something about it” but she exasperatedly stated, “[we are not] able to do nothing.” Sabrina’s motivation for justice was not tied to action through school, so it remained more theoretical than applied. The absence of opportunities to address issues of injustice through this classroom limited possibilities for supporting student agency to believe that they could do something about oppression.

The lack of experience in critical civic action coupled with the lack of support for those endeavors was associated with lower feelings of civic agency amongst the students in the classroom (as compared to students in the community-organizing group). The following quotes are responses to the question: “Do you feel you can make a change in your community?” The classroom students’ answers were characterized by feelings of fear (“why are we so afraid of saying, ‘oh, let’s do something about it,’” Filiberto), powerlessness (“I don’t think they would listen to me, a teenager telling them what to do,” Valerie) and being unprepared (“I wouldn’t know how to deal with it,” Luci). In addition, the classroom students’ motivation for civic action tended to be more theoretical, and not coupled with concrete critical civic action or feelings of civic agency. For instance, Luci said she “would want to” make a change in her community and Filiberto admitted, “[we] are inspired,” but “we never do anything.”

Exposure to critical content and observing critical dialogues can influence a young person to take on a practice-linked identity as a critical thinker and motivate them to want to become someone who acts against injustice, but access to a fuller range of practices may be needed for students to adopt critical civic activist identities. The classroom offered few opportunities for students to take on practice-linked identities as critical civic participants, but it did position some to

take on aspirational critical civic identities. While lacking an active engagement with addressing social injustices, students articulated an aspiration to do so in the future. Having a future expectation for agency should be considered a nascent stage of becoming a critical civic activist that would likely be activated if afforded opportunities to participate in civic action and positioned as critical civic activists in the present. This highlights a nuance under theorized in previous explanations of critical civic development that tend to focus on binary categories of critique and social action that imply little middle ground and overlooking incremental markers of development such as aspirations to address injustice (Freire, 2000, Watts et al., 2003).

### **UFJ: Youth as Agents of Change Today and Tomorrow**

In contrast to the figured world of the classroom, UFJ goals and member expectations positioned youth to take on practice-linked identities as agents of change in the present and aspirational identities as critical civic leaders as part of a cycle of leadership. Ruben, an adult organizer, wanted youth to address injustice proactively whenever they saw it, work for the collective good, and begin to see themselves as leaders in the community: “I want people to be well organized and take initiative on their own when they see injustice and not wait for someone else to tell them to do something...for students to become, feel like they’re leaders and organizers and influential.” By using words like “become” and “feel like,” Ruben conveyed his desire for students to take on particular identities as part of their participation in UFJ. In the organization, the purpose of civic action was to address injustice and not necessarily to promote learning or serve as a tool for evaluation, as in the classroom. In regards to critical civic action, addressing injustice was merely what people in this figured world were expected to do. When I asked Elvira what was expected of students like her in UFJ, her response echoed Ruben’s goals for students.

I think their expectations are for us to turn us into leaders and then be able to turn others into leaders. I think our job is definitely to come back. Maybe not the same community, but go back to a community that is struggling like ours is.

Elvira’s comments indicate that she internalized UFJ’s emphasis on a cycle of leadership wherein youth become agents of change and help others become leaders for the improvement of marginalized communities everywhere (Moya, 2012). From these comments, we see that UFJ goals positioned youth to take on practice-linked identities as proactive leaders in their communities in the present *and* in the future. In UFJ, membership was expected to evolve into leadership.

The organizational structure of UFJ offered identity-shaping opportunities for youth to take on roles voluntarily within the group and the values associated with it. First of all, youth *chose* to be in UFJ, whereas school is compulsory. Moreover, the material reality of low-income Latinx youth too often means that they are compelled to go to under resourced schools that are inclined to see them from deficit perspectives (Valenzuela, 1999). As Mr. Sanchez noted, attending a school like this can lead students to resist identifying with the figured world of schooling. Alternatively, choosing membership in a group can be an important identity shaping opportunity for adolescents, setting them up to take on the values and practices within the space (Youniss, McLellan & Yates, 1997). The initial choice to join UFJ often was not because of a strong sense of purpose and agreement in the mission, but youth were continuously making the choice to remain in the group. For instance, Cristina initially attended her first UFJ meeting because she wanted to add an extracurricular activity to her college applications. After joining the leadership group, she asserted that she

took on the shared purpose of the organization and would continue coming even if it did not improve her resume for college. She said, "If they were to tell me, 'you're not getting college credit.' Or not credit, just it won't look good, I'll be, 'okay, that's fine, I'll still be here. I'll still come.'" For Cristina, the purpose of contributing to social change became more important to her than an external future reward; it was now a part of who she was becoming and a part of her practice-linked identity. When I asked her what her role in UFJ was, she said, "like any other student. Come, learn, and then make change." As an organization, UFJ positioned individuals as powerful change agents. The fact that Christina chose to stay in that space made it an even more meaningful identity shaping experience for her.

### **UFJ Trajectories of Civic Leadership: "I Want to be a Leader Like Her"**

Through integral participation in a community of critical civic leaders the focal youth in UFJ were motivated to take on the identity of the experts in the learning space. As Wenger (1998) argues, the expert participants within a learning space provide models for possible identity trajectories within the practice. For instance, the UFJ educators modeled civic leadership, which encouraged youth to take on identities as civic leaders. Maria (student) talked about a time when she was listening in on a conference call with a national organizing group that Elvira (student) participated in with Ruben (adult organizer). Maria shared how Ruben's behavior in the conference call modeled exceptional leadership by taking on the responsibility to inform the public about an initiative.

Ruben was saying things and they were asking him if he could spread the word around California and he said, "of course, that's what I'm here for." And that's part of being a leader. What kind of leader would he be if he said, "oh, I'm sorry, I can't." That's not part of being a leader.

Several students talked about being inspired by the example that the adult organizers set. For Arlene, she was awed by the important contribution of the organizers but she also felt that she could do the same. She said, "They inspire me. Sometimes, I see them doing all this stuff. 'Whoa, if they're doing it, why can't I?'" Cristina envisioned the role of organizers as consciousness raisers in the community to make the world a better place. She said, "They just shake it up, be like 'hey, you know, come to your senses. This is happening, you can't just sit there.' They just want a better community, a better world, where everybody has a good education." Cristina pinpointed one of the organizers, Sara, as a leader whom she wanted to emulate, "you see her and you're like, 'I want to be like her. I want to be a leader like her.'"

In addition to being models of civic leadership, UFJ educators also provided youth with opportunities to engage in civic action that positioned students as leaders-in-the-making. A considerable amount of the action in organizing was around consciousness-raising. In UFJ, educators both modeled the practice of informing others and provided opportunities for youth to do the same, reflecting the youths' positioning as valued contributors to that figured world. David felt that the role of the adult organizers was to provide the students with information about community issues and campaigns so that they could pass on the information to their peers at school: "The role of the organizers would be, in my opinion, to teach us, to help us understand what they are talking about. And then to allow us to try and do our best to pass that on as well." While this could be considered a hierarchical relationship, the students did not perceive themselves as having a less important role

in the group. Vero felt that everyone in UFJ was a leader, contributing his or her part in the organization:

I think all of us [are leaders]. They [the organizers] had to get it from somewhere too; they had to get the information from someone. So, we're like them. Because they got it from someone, we got it from them, and then we all become leaders.

From the quote, one can see that Vero feels like she is becoming a leader, like the adult organizers in UFJ. By participating in the cycle of leadership, learning from organizers, and then passing the knowledge on to others, Vero and other UFJ focal youth were provided opportunities to take on practice-linked identities as aspiring community leaders through their participation in the organization.

### **UFJ Consciousness, Action and Civic Agency**

Youth in UFJ articulated how the critical content they learned in that space prepared and motivated them to participate in civic action and begin to see the world and themselves from a critical perspective. For instance, Maria and Vero shared how learning about unjust social conditions made them want to do something about them. When learning about budget cuts to education and UFJ's efforts to stop them, Maria remembered thinking, "if this is going on, then we have to fight for it." Then she immediately reflected, "it's just really powerful how we could do all that stuff," demonstrating how Maria saw herself as someone who acted on injustice and had the power and agency to contribute to important civic actions. Reflecting on a discussion around the unjust treatment of undocumented students in the U.S., Vero shared that participation in UFJ changed the way she thought about the world. She said, "Like that's what UFJ does, to my brain (laughs). Not go with the norm, cause if you go with the norm, you're not going to make a change." This willingness to go against the norm to make a change highlights her critical consciousness, motivation for social justice and inclination to take action. It also points to her shift in identity within the figured world of youth organizing. As people produce identities in figured worlds, they reorganize their subjectivities and begin to see themselves and the world in new ways (Holland et al; 1998; Urrieta, 2007)

In contrast to students from the classroom space, youth in the community organization felt a stronger sense of civic agency, which was associated with direct participation in critical civic action within the figured world of community organizing. When asked if she could make a change in her community, Vero's response indicated that her strong sense of civic agency was tied to collective efforts to address injustice: "Yes, but everything has to be done with the whole entire community, 'cause everybody has to come together [to] organize and prepare and all that stuff." Other youth also talked about the importance of opportunities to participate in relevant civic action as vital to their feelings of civic agency. Maria and Elvira, both very shy students upon entering UFJ, talked about how authentic participation in important campaigns helped them develop a sense of power and agency. Like Valerie (the classroom sophomore quoted above with a low sense of agency), Maria initially felt intimidated and powerless as a young person trying to address issues in her community. The first time she presented to the school board she "had never talked to people with that type of power." She shared her thoughts before the presentation, "it's going to be so intimidating, a tenth grader going up there and telling them, this is how I feel." However, after speaking to the board, she realized "it's not that bad. Once you actually do it, it's like, 'okay, well

you can do it again,” and she was no longer afraid to engage in these high-profile civic tasks, suggesting a shift in civic identity. Elvira also reflected on how contributing to important campaigns gave her a sense of agency: “So, it’s like, being involved and being able to just influence decisions at the school board level made me realize, ‘yeah, I could go to [college] and make a difference in the national level.’” Her experiences through UFJ made her realize she had the agency to contribute to campaigns addressing larger national issues. These quotes suggest that support from a community of activists and the opportunity to take on practice-linked identities as contributors in important civic campaigns were key components of developing a critical civic identity marked by a critical consciousness, motivation for social justice, and feelings of agency to impact one’s community.

### Conclusion

Comparing these two cases highlights how, and under what conditions, individuals take up the identities available to them within figured worlds. The goals and expectations of a figured world shape the range of identities available within it. Positioning youth as integral participants in the key practices of a site mediates whether individuals assume those identities. These findings build on the civic identity theorizing of Flanagan et al. (2011) by showing how the goals and membership expectations of schools and youth organizing groups influence the types of identities available to young people within each space. For instance, UFJ youth were positioned as emerging critical civic leaders, which led youth to take on practice-linked identities as critical civic activists in the present. In the classroom, the goals of the space positioned youth to adopt practice-linked identities as critical thinkers and aspirational identities as future agents of change.

While this study confirms previous research underscoring the importance of coupling opportunities for critique and civic action to foster critical civic identities marked by a robust sense of agency (Christens & Dolan, 2011; Evans, 2007), I also argue that the goals of figured worlds mediate how opportunities for civic action influence these identity processes. I found that amongst two similar groups of low-income Latinx students, exposure to critical content and dialogue fostered a critical consciousness and generated a motivation for action across the sites. Moreover, my investigation of the two sites from a situated perspective allowed me to document how institutional level factors influenced access and engagement with civic action across contexts. For instance, the traditional goal of schooling as a place for preparing future adults rather than a place for youth to contribute to their communities limited identity-shaping opportunities for civic action. Even when class assignments directed students to take action in their communities, students experienced schoolwork as preparation for future roles rather than an opportunity to impact their communities in the present. This positioning made it much less likely for students to develop a practice-linked identity as a critical civic activist and the sense of civic agency that was associated with it. Similarly, UFJ practices also suggest that fostering a critical civic identity requires more than just offering opportunities for civic action. Namely, youth were more likely to participate in those opportunities because UFJ organizers expected them to *be* leaders. Thus, the expectation that participation would evolve into leadership in UFJ likely mediated students’ adoption of practice-linked identities as critical civic activists.

Through my use of a situated lens, I highlight some important insights into processes of critical civic identity development across learning contexts and over time. First, it suggests that critical civic identity processes are more complex than most stage-focused models have documented, with present procedural aspects as well as cognitive or aspirational elements. For instance,

it is important to consider both how students see themselves in the present and their aspirations for the future when studying how learning spaces influence critical civic identities processes. Spaces like Mr. Sanchez's classes, which lead youth to aspire to critical civic identities are likely crucial catalysts for adopting these subjectivities in the future when provided with opportunities for critical civic action. Follow-up studies with students who have articulated these aspirational identities can explore how and if these identities ever develop into practice-based identities. Additional comparative studies across school and organizing spaces with the same students could yield important insights into how youth take on or perform different identities across spaces. In addition, comparing critical classrooms with different goals for civic action could provide greater clarity into the role of the educators' goals versus schooling expectations in mediating the influences of civic action through the classroom.

This study highlights some important implications for educators across spaces. While classroom levels of civic agency were lower, this study shows that despite all of the challenges to critical civic identity development within marginalized schooling spaces, a teacher committed to engaging youth around problem posing and critical content *can* promote critical awareness and foster aspirations to participate in future critical civic actions. In fact, many of the students who participated in UFJ had experienced at least one teacher who exposed them to critical content and encouraged them to be civically involved. Given that nearly all youth participate in schooling, it is also necessary to understand how educators, administrators, and policy makers can support critical civic development in classrooms. These experiences have been offered through schools before and have been essential to critical civic development in schools (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Westheimer, 2015). Moreover, this study shows how educator goals position youth to develop particular relationships to civic action. To be most effective, educators will need to consider ways to integrate civic action into their learning spaces in ways that position youth as important contributors to their community and not just citizens-in-waiting or students to be evaluated. For educators in youth organizing, they should consider adopting discourse and practices that promote the idea of a cycle of leadership amongst their members.

Learning spaces that promote critical civic identity development have been found to foster greater civic engagement, future commitment to activism, as well as academic engagement amongst youth (Mediratta, Shah & McAlister, 2008) and particularly youth of color (Kirshner & Ginwright, 2012). For Latinx youth, who are more likely to experience inferior civic and academic opportunities, learning sites dedicated to fostering critical civic identities can help to empower them to disrupt these oppressive inequalities.

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