

Discovering the Possibilities: A Study of African American Youth Resistance and Activism

By Antoinette Ellis-Williams

Theoretical Framework

This article builds on the work of youth development psychologists, social movements, critical class-race theory, and group theory. Arguably, youth have historically responded to external forces in part due to their sense of self worth and value. But their internal notion of possibilities and self worth is not the primary or sole force in moving youth to action. Rather, it is the relationship to the larger systemic elements (race, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, class, nationality) that have created a climate of resistance (Ginwright, Cammarota, & Noguera, 2005).

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Historically, youth have participated in resistance movements throughout the world, from Tianmen Square, Native American Youth Movements, Anti-Apartheid Movements, and Anti-War movements, to name a few. This has been especially true for the African American community throughout time, particularly during the 1960s. Reverend Dr. Moses William Howard, Senior

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Pastor of Bethany Baptist Church in Newark, New Jersey, on Sunday, September 3, 2006, in his sermon entitled “*Race*” further asserts an example of the global impact of the African American liberation movement when in 1912 South Africa looked to the N.A.A.C.P. as a model for its own liberation movement. Additionally, “We Shall Overcome” has become the rallying song for freedom movements throughout the world. Black activism, Howard notes, was not about sit-ins or boycotts, these were the methods for the broader vision of redemption: “discovering human possibilities.” The movement was about the “courage to live free”¹ to imagine the “what ifs.” What if we had access to jobs, education, decent housing and the right to vote? The questions often asked by many participants of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements are, “*What has happened to the voice of Black youth in the democratic process? Where are today’s liberation fighters for freedom and justice?*”

There is a nostalgic, even romantic remembrance, of an era filled with youth led boycotts, sit-ins, walk outs and protests in the 1950s-1970s. The issues of poverty, racism, war, and sexism were taken up by young people. The African American community celebrated youth activism in schools, churches and civic organizations. Youth were on the forefront, fighting for social justice. However, today while the issues of poverty, racism, war, and sexism have not disappeared from the national, state, or local arenas, Black youth are seemingly silent when we compare their level of activism to their counterparts from the 1960s. Has young people’s place in the democratic process simply become obsolete? Have youth today abandoned their political rite of passage? Do resistance movements and redemption take on different forms for today’s African American youth? Have our youth stopped imagining possibilities? Or, have we overcome?

This article will attempt to answer some of these question by placing African American youth activism in its present-day context. These new forms of activism will in some ways deviate from previous strategies utilized by youth but provide a fresh approach to resistance and activism in relationship to discovering their possibilities.

James Baldwin in *Contact* (1984) said:

One thing you always have to keep in mind is how little you can take for granted. When one talks about the sixties, for example, one tends to assume that everyone knows what you’re talking about, but, in fact, many of them were hardly born yet when the sixties were going on. That means you have to rethink everything as if it happened in ancient Rome or Greece.²

Baldwin’s caution rightfully places the burden on the educators, community leaders and elders in ensuring that youth know their history and its meaning in present-day democratic struggles.

There are several factors that must be examined as we consider African American youth resistance. Shawn Ginwright in “*Toward a Politics of Relevance: Race, Resistance and African American Youth Activism*” gives a poignant picture of the operating variables for our consideration when analyzing African American youth

activism. Ginwright cautions that we have to resist majority perspectives of narrow definitions when examining activism for Black youth. Ginwright states:

Rather than drawing conclusions from narrow conceptualizations of civic behavior such as volunteering and specific knowledge of the branches of government, we need a more nuanced understanding about what constitutes civic behavior for African American youth in urban communities. We need to better understand, for example, how community conditions and social settings shape the contours of political behavior, and how factors such as racism, poverty, and violence influence political ideas.³

Arguably this “nuanced understanding” should also include the: (1) role of technology and mass media, (2) impact of integration, (3) reduction of collective action and the increased emphasis and reliance on individual rights, (4) reduced emphasis of race consciousness and/or identity, (5) disconnect from the Civil Rights generation, (6) greater impact of globalization on culture, and (7) greater influence of Hip Hop culture on activism. While this paper will not focus on all of these aspects of African American youth activism, the data will help to illustrate the complex nature of contextualizing social resistance, democracy and justice in our ever-changing society.

Connections and Disconnections From Civil Rights & Hip Hop Generations

Today there are many complexities when approaching youth issues. Civil rights resistance paradigms have relied primarily on a race-based model. This model presented youth activists with clear goals. However, emergent interdisciplinary post-Civil Rights theories pay closer attention to the intersectionality of race, gender, class, and sexuality than those during the Civil Rights movement. This complex social web of inequities has influenced resistance goals and activism in many ways. Civil rights activist Junius Williams, Director of the Abbott Leadership Institute at Rutgers University, in a recent interview argues that the current resistance models have lost their power. He states that an interdisciplinary approach minimizes the ability to mobilize and organize young people.

Some may argue that African American youth resistance in the post-Civil Right era reflects the greater political climate of consumption and conservative social politics and values. The idea that African Americans “have arrived” has reduced the need to organize or mobilize the community against a clear enemy. The growing African American middle class has further complicated the race-based resistance movement of previous generations. Race is no longer the only variable to consider when developing resistance goals. Integration has created a false notion of inclusion with the perception that black youth are reaping economic advantages from this new found access to opportunity, more importantly from sports and entertainment industries. Williams also states that “There is less urgency and less risk-taking in this new era of individual rights and consumption.

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Today youth are too afraid to take on the system and instead turn their frustration and anger out on one another.”⁴

The Civil Rights era did not secure economic power for most in the community. Subsequently a class divide was created by those with less education and political capital. On closer examination we see a sub-culture of economically disadvantaged urban African American youth more focused on access to capital and isolated from other well-to-do African Americans. Poverty forced a generation of young men to respond to poverty, violence and isolation through music. This was most evident in the early development of hip-hop culture and rap music in late seventies and early eighties. Cornel West, in his book *Democracy Matters: Winning the Fight Against Imperialism*, states that “The first stages of hip-hop were hot.”⁵ West further asserts that “prophetic hip-hop⁶ remains true to the righteous indignation and political resistance of deep democratic energies.”⁷ West’s view that African American youth from this period did recognize the inequities and actively fought against imbedded power structures, underscores the shift from generation to generation in what it means to resist. Resistance scholars who have devoted attention to resistance and activism (e.g. Michael Eric Dyson, Angela Ards, Craig Watkins, Kyra Gaunt, Marcyliena Morgan, Jeff Chang, Tricia Rose, Robin Kelley, Kofi-Charu Nat Turner, Cornel West, to name a few) recognize the significant role of hip-hop culture in youth activism. For today’s youth resistance can be defined as lyrics and music that empower others and define one’s truth.

In Michael Eric Dyson’s article on “The Culture of Hip-Hop” also notes that groups like Grandmaster Flash and Furious Five challenged the structural inequities of race and class. In their song “The Message” they argue:

You’ll grow up in a ghetto living second rate/And your eyes will sing a song of deep hate/ The places you play and where you stay/ Looks like one great big alleyway/You’ll admire all the number book takers/Thugs, pimps, and pushers, and the big money makers/Drivin’ big cars, spendin’ twenties and tens, And you want to grow up to be just like them/...It’s like a jungle sometimes/ It makes me wonder how I keep from goin’ under.⁸

Poverty and the lack of resources remain fixtures in many urban neighborhoods. Oftentimes these youth are disproportionately impacted by the inequities. Hip-Hop culture’s ability to galvanize youth energy around poverty was an important factor in the youth resistance voice.

Moreover, the rise of the media and growing dependency on technology has further shifted the resistance strategies utilized by African American youth. Protest music from the sixties evolved into prophetic hip-hop lyrics then shifted in a negative direction to gansta rap in the late 1980s and 1990, and to more recently watered-down mainstream “pop” rap. Progressive youth voices are now found in underground clubs and cafes. However, there are few hip-hop activists like Russell Simmons who have sought to mobilize youth around issues such as voter registration. Very few, if any from this generation are willing to take chances and fight the power structure of oppression when compared with their counterparts from

Birmingham during the Civil Rights movement. So the question for us to consider is have our youth lost their voice and desire to resist?

Research Design

Methodology

A qualitative research design (ethnographic approach) was utilized in this study to measure youth definitions of justice, capacity for activism, ability to resist, and ability to imagine the possibilities or take risk. Also measured was the role school community plays in educating youth about activism. Interviews, surveys and focus groups were utilized to gather data.

For the purposes of this study, youth is defined as 8-26 years of age or K-16. The youth include two disparate developmental groups, elementary-age students and college students. Elementary students (2nd and 4th graders) were selected based on three assumptions:

1. They are able to understand the concepts of justice, democracy, equality and activism.
2. They are young enough to remain honest.
3. They still have strong connection to parents, teachers, and community leaders.

There were two major underlying assumptions about the role college students would play in the research:

1. They had some personal experience with justice, democracy, equality and activism.
2. They could provide a developmental timeline in youth activism (e.g., growth as youth mature).

Overview of the Sample

This project compares the attitudes and behaviors of African American elementary school students and college-level students on their definitions of justice, capacity for activism, their ability to resist, the role school/community play in educating youth about activism and their ability to imagine the possibilities. Second graders, fourth graders and college students were purposefully selected for this study. The sample size included seventeen 2nd graders (ages 7-8), fifteen 4th graders (ages 9-10) and seven college-level students (ages 19-26) for a total number of thirty-nine respondents. All of the elementary school students attend a private independent school. Elementary school children were not asked their social class or ethnicity. All of the students were of African descent. They all received signed parental approval prior to their participation in this project. All 39

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respondents attend a school located in an urban New Jersey community (Newark and Jersey City).

The seven college students, five men and two women, who were interviewed for this study were all defined as student leaders. Six of the students came from a poor, working-class background. One from an upper middle class background. They all held the position of president or vice president in a campus Black organization; Black Freedom Society, Caribbean Student Association, African Student Organization, and Haitian Student Association. Some also held dual positions in the university Student Government Organization. Their majors included accounting, political science, business, journalism, fine art, and English. All of the students had taken at least one course in African American history. Ethnicity is an important variable to consider when examining justice, equality and democracy. Only two of the respondents were African American. The others were Nigerian, Jamaican, and Haitian.

Defining Justice and Fairness

Eleven or almost sixty-five percent of the second grade respondents believed that fairness or justice was associated with “equality” or “sharing.” Another four or almost twenty-four percent thought justice or fairness with being good or nice to others. Two students claimed it was about being “truthful” or “true.” Only one student felt that justice was about “getting what you want to do.” The most interesting statement made by two students in the second grade focus group who equated fairness or justice with personal choice. For these students individuals had the power to acquire freedom. Students were asked, “Is it fair to give cupcakes to those children who behave well?” Two students responded as follows:

A: “No. Because everyone is not perfect.”

A: “Yes, because fairness is about choices.”

If students had limited privileges it was a result of their own bad or good behavior. As one student put it, “*If you don’t get privileges it’s because you acted bad.*” One student passionately countered the personal responsibility argument offered by his classmate by saying that, “*Sometimes the teacher doesn’t see that you are doing good things and you always get blamed when it’s not your fault!*” This raises the questions, is inequality about structured oppression? Or is it about choices? Second graders are genuinely debating these paradigms of power and access.

All the fourth graders defined justice and fairness around actions such as “*act equal/equal rights,*” “*share or help other people,*” “*ending something bad,*” “*treat people the way you want to be treated,*” “*not to harm anyone if you have justice,*” “*... no matter of race, culture of background,*” “*kind,*” “*truthful,*” “*good sportsmanship,*” “*everyone has an equal chance,*” “*to not cheat,*” “*give respect.*” Two students equated these terms with “freedom.” While these responses were better formulated than the second graders they were very similar in nature.

Interestingly college students seemed perplexed when asked to define justice.

Most respondents reflected on historical disenfranchisement due to race, class, ethnicity, or how gender impacted their ideas on justice. One student remarked that *“The term today appears abstract because the so called justice system is selective towards finding justice.”* Selectivity implies a condition of inherent inequities. *“I believe justice depends on one’s values and perspective. Justice is defined by equality and morality.”* But they also stated that *“Justice is about creating a society where people can fight for their rights and voice their opinions.”* *“... having a chance.”* Creating an environment where change is possible is essential for youth in their consideration of freedom and justice.

Resolving Injustice

Elementary school student responses fell into two categories, (1) *Active resolutions* and (2) *Inactive resolutions*. These categories were developed on the basis of the respondents’ comments. Active resolutions are defined as those methods of intervention based on direct action or empowered solution. For instance, eleven second grader students or sixty-five percent claimed they would personally step in to resolve an unfair situation. Respondents said they would; *“Help them.”* *“I would say treat that person fair.”* *“Stand up for them.”* Another five students or thirty percent would seek out the assistance of an adult (e.g., teacher, parent). This is best summed up by one respondent, *“If someone is being treated unfairly I’ll tell the teacher.”* While this technique was not a personal strategy the students were engaged and active in finding a solution. Only one person provided an “Inactive Resolution” (e.g., passive response) to injustice. This student said they would be “sad.” While sadness is a valid emotion the student felt somewhat powerless in the face of injustice, internalizing their reaction to inequality.

In comparison, the majority of the fourth grade responses or eighty-seven percent fell into the Active Resolutions category. Respondents’ comments were generally, *“I would tell the person to stop.”* Some said, *“I would help the person.”* Thirteen percent provided Inactive Resolutions. This was more than their second grade counterparts. One student said, *“I don’t do anything.”* Another thought by giving the oppressed person *“... anything they want”* was a resolution to injustice; getting your way.

While the college students who participated in this study were leaders on campus they were able to make a distinction between their campus and community lives. Data collected would suggest that activism is directly correlated to a sense of power, i.e. control. In the community most felt disempowered, isolated and helpless when examining conditions of injustice and inequities. However, when they have a sense of control and are supported by other like-minded individuals their ability to engage in problem solving, activism, i.e., tended to increase.

An example of their sense of futility was provided by one respondent, who said,

I want to say I’d do something other than watch, but I see crimes being committed and am aware of the plethora of injustices that occur on a daily basis . . . but I

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have sadly gotten used to them. Sometimes ranting and raving about progressive positive change seems asinine. It's a difficult question to answer, honestly.

Violence is an issue that youth have to face on a daily basis (robbery, homicide, burglary, car theft, etc). Urban neighborhoods are oftentimes places of hopelessness and despair. One college age young man said, *"I pass by the crack addicts all the time—it's sad to say but I don't even see them anymore, and I don't care."* Another student said, *"I do nothing. It's too hard."* One young woman commented on her own fear. *"Even if I want to do something I am a woman and we have to find other ways. Things are rough out there."* Young men also commented on their fear of getting involved. *"You don't know if they will shoot you. So you have to just mind your own business. It's about surviving."* One student understood that inequality is relative and situational and America is still the richest country when compared to developing countries, *"Back home [Haiti] you see it [poverty] all over. It's bad, that's why I'm in school so I can help my family."*

One student indicated his willingness to directly step in and take action. An important note to his willingness to get involved could be attributed to the fact that he was the oldest participant in the study and he has been arrested on several occasions. He has a different level of understanding about issues of social inequities. This young man was involved in regularly feeding the community and giving out clothes to single mothers. Through his music and art he also found ways to highlight social inequities. Two others stated they would look for some assistance, *"I'd call for help if I couldn't do anything."*

When addressing unfair treatment on campus almost all the students stepped up and took action. An African American student said:

I did a couple of times. In Rutgers Upward Bound I was the Student Government Organization President, and we marched and didn't listen to any authorities as we demanded a party. I convinced the student population that we deserved a party because of the many recreational activities that were taken. I called Upward Bound Auschwitz and in the end we were rewarded with a party, but I sat in detention for planning the revolt. It was unfair that our summer was spent with nothing but academics and we needed to have some social activities. I know that's minimal, but it's a form of protest.

Another time was my freshman year in college when a professor called me a slave. She said in response to me asking a question, "Stop asking questions! In this class I am the master and you are my slave! In the days of slavery they didn't talk back!" I immediately talked to her superiors and was told she would be dealt with, but nothing happened. In the end, she was retiring and had tenure so to the student body's complaints she was untouchable. I complained and complained to no avail.

Students are better able to navigate the bureaucracy on a college campus. They have many resources and support systems to advocate on their behalf (e.g., deans, faculty, and coaches). However, even with this support they are not guaranteed their desired outcome. But these students were willing to voice their concerns. One young

woman said, *"I'm not going to put up with mess. I don't care if they get tired of me. I have a goal and I cannot let them stop me from doing what I need to do."*

Experience with Collective Action (Protest)

The majority of second grader respondents, eighty-eight percent, had no personal experience with collective action such as a protest, petition or demonstration. Only one student said they have personally participated in a protest, "Because people should be treated fairly." The details of this student's political involvement are unknown.

The data revealed that the fourth graders were very engaged in collective action. This class was an unusual group of students. In the focus group on justice and activism fourth-grade students revealed they participated in a "recess protest." Several students in the class wanted more free time and choices during recess. They decided they would protest like the children during the Civil Rights Movement. Three students organized several other classmates. The "recess protest" occurred during the same time in the marking period students were learning about the 1960s resistance movements in the south.

It is important to note that this class also had a new, young, and enthusiastic African-American teacher. They were clearly taken by her lessons and level of engagement in the course material. The teacher commented on the how engaged the students were with the material on the events of the Civil Rights Movement. She stated, *"The class pushed me to do more. I had to adjust my curriculum. They were so hungry for information, so I had to respond."*

It was this passion and engagement that led to a climate ripe for the two day "recess protest." Students had role models (youth from the 1960s), they had a cause (no freedom at recess), and they had an action plan (change recess). They made demonstration signs, created a recess proposal (which included a new schedule of events and alternative play/game activities). For two days during recess they marched around the nearby park, sang freedom songs from the sixties (e.g., *"Ain't Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me Around"*) and engaged in a "recess slow down." The slow down involved running slow during recess races when the recess staff instructed the students to run faster. The students were described by one staff member as "defiant and disrespectful." Students said, "We wanted more free time and choices, not just kickball. We wanted time for ourselves." Another said, "We should get a say, too!—We want to do what we want to do!"

The "recess protest" drew the attention and outrage of some staff, and administrators. Administrators stopped the protest. Students were lectured about school rules and appropriate behavior. The class along with the second, third, and other fourth graders received silent lunch. Parents of the student leaders were called about their "rebellious" children.

Several students, sixty percent, commented on their participation in the "recess protest": *"I protested in my school. I protested because of unfair treatment of*

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games kids want to play. "Yes, I have protested in my school about recess issues. The conclusion was a little better games.... The protest did not really work." "Yes. We protested against recess. We felt that we needed more time and more things we wanted to play." "Yes, we protested about recess. The process did not work." "My class protested unfair treatment at recess. The protest didn't really work. We were all in trouble for quite sometime." "I have protested at school. The reason why I did it because we wanted a good recess." "The protest did not work. I got in trouble."

Three students stated they did not get involved in the protest. One student summed it up as follows, *"No, I have not gotten involved in any of that."* Another student said, *"It was not worth it. I didn't care about that. It didn't even work!"* These students felt the actions of their classmates were excessive, unnecessary and ineffective.

The outcome of the protest was mixed. The majority of the students thought the protest failed because change was not immediate or evident and they were "in trouble." One even said they would never participate in a protest again in their life. This was disappointing to hear. Still some thought their efforts proved beneficial. *"It was effective because more people noticed the issue." "We gained a little and lost a little." "We have a little more time now." "We did get a few more choices." "The recess staff is nicer now." "We have more options."* Most hands in the class went up when asked if the recess protest helped them learn about social movements. School administrators and staff did implement some of the proposed recess strategies presented by the protesters. While this group of protesters may not see many fruits from their efforts, some change had occurred.

There are several questions raised by the "Recess Protest." Is this comparable to the resistance strategies demonstrated by youth in the south during the Civil Rights era? Are these activist skill sets transferable to other situations? Will these students be willing to take bigger risks as the stakes grow in their lives? Was this protest a function of youth rebellion or a real protest? Many of these questions will remain unanswered at this time. What we can conclude is that the data indicate a direct correlation between formal curriculum and teacher motivation in African American youth's capacity to become activists. Support by those in authority makes a difference.

Even fourth graders who did not participate in the recess protest stated they were involved with other resistance movements or had a parent participate in various protests in their community. One student said, *"Well my mom has protested in schools and the community. They are still working on it. The outcome is about racism—where some schools treat whites better than blacks."* Another student stated, *"Yes, I have protested how Bush is an unfair president, and it did not work."* Again clearly parental involvement can play a significant role in developing young activists.

One college student leader took action by forming the African Diaspora Collective (ADC). All leaders of African descent at the university were invited to join the group. He argued that we [Black] people needed more power on campus. *"The administration will listen if there are more of us together."* Power was defined as

increasing individual organization budgets, creating a joint schedule of activities and developing a collaborative Black agenda. The students and faculty involved with ADC generally believed that it was a valuable mechanism; collective planning helped increase attendance at programs, enhanced leadership skills, and strengthened bonds among Black people. On the other hand, at times one member tried to use the collective to manipulate his own agenda creating division and dissensions among its members.

One student said, “*He thinks this is about him it’s about us.*” Other times the group had to come to a consensus on what were the community’s priorities—fashion shows, parties, or political consciousness. Conversations were passionate around finding ways for Black students to socially engage versus their developing a better understanding about their cultural identity. Many found themselves planning parties and fashion shows after they criticized others for doing the same type of programming. A few of the student leaders used the social events to fight injustice. For instance, money raised at fashion shows was donated towards book scholarships. Parties and step shows included voter registration tables. These students became creative activists. The ADC was effective to the degree the key leaders remained constant. Shift in the charismatic leader created problems for the larger community.

According to a college-age young man, “*Collective activism is good—to share values, to reach out to other people, gets different opinions and ideas. You learn to compromise; to come to a mutual goal.*” Collective activism is a give-and-take process. One student best summed up the college students’ notion on collective activism:

I believe it [collective action] is the only way. A movement cannot be one person. The most famous and effective leaders for social movements were able to assemble the masses. Collective activism is important because different organizations or groups can have special interests, but together they can join to stop the platform that creates these problems. For instance, in Ted Kaczynski’s “Ship of Fools” he displays how there are different movements for freeing political prisoners, gay rights, women’s rights, and so on, but these groups focus on their own interest and not the machine that creates the circumstances for these groups to be necessary. I think a united front is necessary in making some serious changes.

Knowledge of Local Politics

If we consider involvement as linked to local action then we have to examine youth knowledge of local politics. This past year Newark, New Jersey residents experienced a hotly contested mayoral election that even received some national media attention. Students were asked about their knowledge about the candidates and level of participation in local politics.

Data from second graders seem to indicate that while peer influence was important in shaping their perceptions and understanding of social justice; youth are primarily influenced by authority figures. Most respondents (82 percent) stated that their teachers were their primary source of learning about justice followed by parents

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(76 percent), religious leaders or institutions (65 percent), school administrators (41 percent), friends (35 percent), and last television (29 percent).

Eighty-two percent of the second-grade students claimed that they did not follow the elections. However, most of the students knew at least one of the candidates running for public office. Nine students correctly identified Cory Booker as a mayoral candidate; three thought James was running for office; one knew Rice was a mayoral candidate; surprisingly six students knew of a minor South Ward City Council candidate, Mr. Arnold; another two students correctly identified David Blount Sr. and one noted Charles Bell. Two students incorrectly stated that “Bush” was a candidate.

It is worth noting that the second graders were the most engaged in the local political election when compared to the fourth graders and college students. This is directly related to fact that two second grade students had family members running for office. Students took a personal interest in the election because of their connection with their classmates. They also had more ongoing chatter about the election at free time, lunch and recess. When asked who their “favorite” candidate was students reported, *“My uncle.” “I like Taraja’s dad.” “Mr. Arnold. The reason why I like him is because Taraja’s is my best friend.” “I was happy because of Taraja’s daddy.” “Mr. Arnold because he is a very young gentleman.”* One student was directly influenced by a parent, *“I like Booker, because my mom told me.”* Only one student seemed to express independent thinking and stated he liked Ron Rice for reasons he could not articulate.

This high level of engagement in the local democratic process clearly underscores the influence and impact of peers and family members. The more students are able to directly associate with the political process the more likely they are to become involved in that process.

Given the level of political activism in the fourth grade class it was surprising how many children did not follow the local mayoral elections. Sixty percent did not follow the elections; fifty-four percent could not identify one of the candidates. For those who followed the election said they were influenced by their pastors and parents. When asked if they liked any of the candidates they responded: *“Yes, my mom.”* This student’s mother was a candidate. *“Yes, Booker and Mildred Crump because we need a mayor and two because Mildred Crump came to my church.”* One student commented that, *“I like Booker because he believes in economic development.”* Another said, *“I followed the elections because I knew one of the candidates and because he is nice.”*

Data revealed that most of the fourth graders were informed about local politics from the media, seventy-three percent from newspapers and sixty percent from television. Twenty-six percent attended debates.

Three of the college respondents stated they paid attention to local politics. But they were not as knowledgeable as one might expect of college students. Their level of interest was very weak which would suggest a low commitment or interest in local politics. As one student said, *“I am not that involved at all. I am an observer.”* This

could be explained by the fact that there is little direct connection in their minds to the formal political process and their own lives. Another commented that, “*the whole thing is bull s**t. Why even get involved? I don’t even vote.*” Distrust and skepticism in the government impacted this student’s willingness to participate in the American democratic process.

Although college students of African descent are not voting or directly fighting for justice in their neighborhoods they are talking about issues of justice and freedom with friends, peers, and family members. They are talking about issues in their community and at school. There was a belief that speaking up, even in small numbers, was a form of resistance. A student remarked,

I engage in many conversations with peers, friends, and family members about justice and equality because I believe certain things can’t be kept to us. If we see something and know it is not right, it might be more comfortable to not confront that issue, but getting uncomfortable and speaking up is progressive.

Is talk enough for a movement? Can this talk lead to any real action or resistance? On the one hand it was surprising to see students as they get older become more disengaged. However, we have to consider this finding in combination with youth connectedness to parents, teacher, and community leaders.

Do Youth Learn about Justice in School? (Formal)

The data seemed unclear when students were directly asked if they learned about justice in school. Most second grade students, fifty-eight percent said they did not learn about justice in school. However, another seven students or forty-one percent said they did learn about justice in school. Students indicated that they learned about the Civil Rights movement. Respondents indicated when and what they learned: “*Yes, about black history.*” “*Yes, at black history month.*” “*Yes in class with Che’s dad.*” “*I talked about how people get their own freedom.*” “*Yes, Che’s daddy came in and talked to the class.*” “*I hear people talk about Martin Luther King.*” These results seem to suggest that the curriculum at this stage narrowly limits the discussion of history and social activism to Black History Month.

The data indicated that seven fourth grade students or forty-six percent said school did not teach them about justice or they did not remember. This data seems to conflict with their “recess protest.” One student seemed to suggest that there is a difference between justice and fairness. When asked if they learn about justice he commented: “*Not really. We talk about fairness.*”

However, the majority of those surveyed responded affirmatively to learning about justice in school: “*I talk about justice in school because everyone needs equal rights.*” “*Yes, because kids need to be free during recess not play what adults play.*” “*Yes, I talk about justice in school because that is part of the reason we are free today!*” “*Yes, when other parents came to our class.*” “*Yes, if I do not think something is fair of right, I speak up for myself.*” “*Yes because we were learning about it.*” “*Sometimes we talk about justice during social studies.*” “*Yes, we think*

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that it is very interesting to discuss justice in class and it's important for us to tell our beliefs and thoughts." "Yes, because we all should have justice."

Seven fourth-grade students noted that they learned that youth played a significant role in social movements. These same students were participants in the "recess protest." They learned that they were just as capable of changing an unfair situation as the students in the sixties. One student argued that, *"I have learned that in the Civil Rights movement children stood up for their rights."* Some recalled the importance of the Civil Rights movement. *"The kids did a lot in the Civil Rights movement."* One remarked on the kids put to death during the Holocaust. Another noted the lesson on racial inequity in American society, *"I have learned that black people were treated unfairly by white people."* Three reported not learning much or could not recall their social studies lessons.

Every fourth grader in this study (100%) stated that their parents were the most influential in teaching them about justice, eighty-seven percent reported their teachers were their source of information, followed by television with seventy-three percent, pastors or religious leaders with sixty-six percent, friends and school administrators tied with forty percent.

College students stated that they learned about activism from either parents or the streets. One remarked, *"My dad is very political. I have seen this all my life, him and my mom fighting for everything."* Another said *"My father was really strong. He talked about issues at home and at the dinner table."* Another young man said, *"My mom is a single mother, she never marched or anything like that but she didn't want us to have to struggle has hard as her. She wanted the best for me so when I was very young she made me volunteer in my church, school and community. I was doing everything like helping with craft fairs, Earth Day, whatever. I got this activism from her. She taught me right from wrong."* Only one student said he learned about activism from the streets, *"I had to survive. You have to know how to fight if you come from where I come from. You don't learn about this in books."*

Youth Recommendations on Increasing Their Voice

Second and fourth graders were asked to provide recommendations for how youth can increase their political capacity and voice in our society. Second graders did not fully understand the question but one said, *"I think teachers have to be more fair...just because someone was bad one day doesn't mean they are bad."* Another said, *"Kids can listen to their teachers and parents."*

Fourth graders were hard pressed to move far from the strategies employed in the sixties. Sixty percent of these students stuck to strategies of "protests," "sit-ins," and "boycotts." The students who were more likely to identify activist strategies were more willing to organize and develop collective action. These students revealed in an open discussion their role in organizing and mobilizing their peers. They saw a clear connection to outcomes in the community—there is power in numbers. One student said, *"They can get in a group and start to be leaders and help people."*

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Yet, the majority of responses could be categorized as “Redemption Strategies,” strategies that recognize the broader human possibilities.⁹ These students said:

- ◆ Youth can help us love one another and treat each other the way you want to be.
- ◆ Youth can help us discover how we have power and it doesn’t matter what race you are, you can always be able to have youth on your side.
- ◆ Speak up for themselves, so people will not think because you are a kid you let anyone treat you unjust.
- ◆ They can stand up and think on their own, and tell what they feel.
- ◆ Youth can make us have courage.
- ◆ Also tell people to spread their beliefs.
- ◆ Keep on learning.
- ◆ Do good things.

This “nuanced understanding” of their capacity for change and freedom cannot be under emphasized or minimized. These African American youth already know that it takes courage to make a change. They have to remain committed to the learning process and have their voice heard.

College students cited ignorance as a major issue affecting the Black community; ignorance about history and cultural identity. One student commented that:

I think a relevant issue for the black youth is finding one’s self because I noticed with my development, numerous problems that I encountered stemmed from me not knowing who I was. If we teach the black youth knowledge of self and how to love one’s self many other problems will be easier to deal with.

Yet even the strongest student leader realized that they could not force other students to learn about the importance of history in their lives.

For those college students born in other counties they noted adapting to the new culture and finding your identity. *“At times you have to be black and that means something different for me than say someone born in America.”* Another student also stated, *“A lot of youth are ignorant. They lack family values because parents are not present ... they have to reach to the streets ... Society tried to keep us in boxes; they try to keep us from knowing what the truth is...”*

George Washington Carver said “Education is the key to unlock the golden door of freedom.”¹⁰ Several students noted the lack of education as problematic. According to one student, *“Lots of youth think they don’t have to go to school. They want the easy life. We have to let them know that education is important ... Our generation is afraid compared to those from the sixties because today many black youth don’t want an education.”* Education and freedom were linked for many of the students. Education provides access to opportunity and possibilities. One student knew that he was one of the privileged young men from his community by having

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the chance to attend college. *“I know lots of cats out there who are just as smart or smarter but for whatever reason I am here. I could be in jail but I’m here and I’m free. .. I tell brothers who have been locked up, ‘don’t take freedom lightly, it’s better to be out than locked up.’”*

Some other issues cited were fear, crime, poverty, capitalism, immigrant rights, and sexism. The women felt that Black men are unwilling to deal with strong women and are intimidated by their strength. *“I know they don’t like us in these roles but they will just have to get us to it.”* Another young man stated that,

We have too many distractions—media, politics, technology—they don’t feel like they have power to do anything. But I’m involved as a student. I need to excel and develop my leadership potential.

Young people are bombarded with noise and confusion (e.g., I-Pods, television, bill boards, cultural expectations, responsibilities, etc.). Moreover, they are expected to do more than previous generations. One student discussed this pressure and fear, *“Today’s youth feel like they cannot meet the expectations from their elders, we don’t think we are strong enough to use the tactics from the sixties, we are fearful of death, we want to live.”* Conversely some thought many young don’t fear death that is why we have problems, *“We don’t value life because we don’t see any future. In the past they believed there was going to be a future or a least a legacy.”* Both of these powerful statements speak to the failure of previous generations to connect with young people and the breath of despair and hopelessness that many are experiencing in urban communities. Prisons are filled with young African American youth, most families are headed by single mothers and higher education is becoming less accessible.

But most of the respondents had some hope. One commented that, *“It’s bad that’s why I am trying to stay in school. I want to make a difference.”* Another student said:

The youth were the main executors of many of the social movements because of their drive, energy, and outlook on their future. The youth are also not as set in their ways as elders are. Youth have to make some noise! The youth must get the attention of the people.

The Making of Young Black Activists

The data illustrated that activists are “made” one of three ways: (1) family/teachers, (2) crisis, or (3) awakening. The majority of the respondents said that they were involved with social justice action because of their family influence. Youth seem more likely to become socially engaged if they have family or teachers to support this activity. Important to note that at the college level these were all foreign-born people. These students cited parents, grandparents, uncles and teachers who taught them about their history and encouraged them to fight for their rights.

Others pointed to a crisis (e.g., arrest, police brutality, harassment) as a major factor in their willingness to resist. When individuals experienced injustice or had a close family member impacted by social injustice they were also more likely to

participate in resistance activities (e.g., recess protest). They want to make sure the injustice does not happen again. Three college students indicated that social activism was more a deeper understanding of their life's purpose. They connected activism to an awakening or calling. One stated, "I joined the Black Freedom Society because I believed there was a need within myself to feel a part of something. I wanted to be in something positive and progressive." Another commented that, "I think this is what I am supposed to do. God has blessed me." These students believed that they were connected to others and/or something more powerful; it was their responsibility.

Conclusion

The data revealed that African American youth have a large capacity for activism and ability to resist. Early engagement on issues of social justice, equality and freedom by family, teachers, pastors and community leaders can help to shape political character and willingness to participate as an activist. Moreover, youth are more likely to become involved if they perceive issues as directly impacting their lives. As youth grow up they tend to become more jaded about their ability to make a change but they are still willing to work on fighting for justice if they find other like-minded individuals. While young people today are not involved with local electoral politics they demonstrate a highly sophisticated understanding of social organization, bureaucracies, and politics. Finally, when schools provide information and role models students are more likely to take risks and want to improve their surroundings.

Ain't no way to keep us down on no ground. We just jump up, again and again
and again.

—Ntozake Shange, poet¹¹

Notes

¹ Rev. Howard, "Race" sermon delivered at Bethany Baptist Church, Newark, NJ, September 3, 2006.

² James Baldwin and Sol Stein, *Native Sons: A Friendship That Created One of the Greatest Works of the Twentieth Century: Notes of Native Son*. New York: One World, Ballantine Books, 2004, p. 3.

³ <http://ya.ssrc.org/african/Ginwright/>

⁴ Junius Williams, Interview, Feb. 7, 2007.

⁵ Cornel West, *Democracy Matters: Winning the Fight Against Imperialism*. New York: The Penguin Press, 2004 p. 180.

⁶ Prophetic Hip-Hop is created by those on the margins of society (e.g., Grandmaster Flash and Furious Five, Kool Herc, Rakim, Paris, Afrikaa Bambaataa, KRS-ONE and Public Enemy).

⁷ *Ibid*, p. 182.

⁸ Michael Eric Dyson, *The Michael Eric Dyson Reader*. New York: Basic Civitas Books, The Perseus Books Group, 2004, p. 402.

⁹ Rev. Howard., "Race" sermon, Sept 3, 2006.

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¹⁰ Stephen Patter and S.M. Wu, *Lift Every Voice: Words of Black Wisdom and Celebration*. New York: Barnes and Noble Books, 2000, p. 64.

¹¹ Stephen Patterson and S. M. Wu (Eds.), *Lift Every Voice: Words of Black Wisdom and Celebration*. New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 2000, p. 31.

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