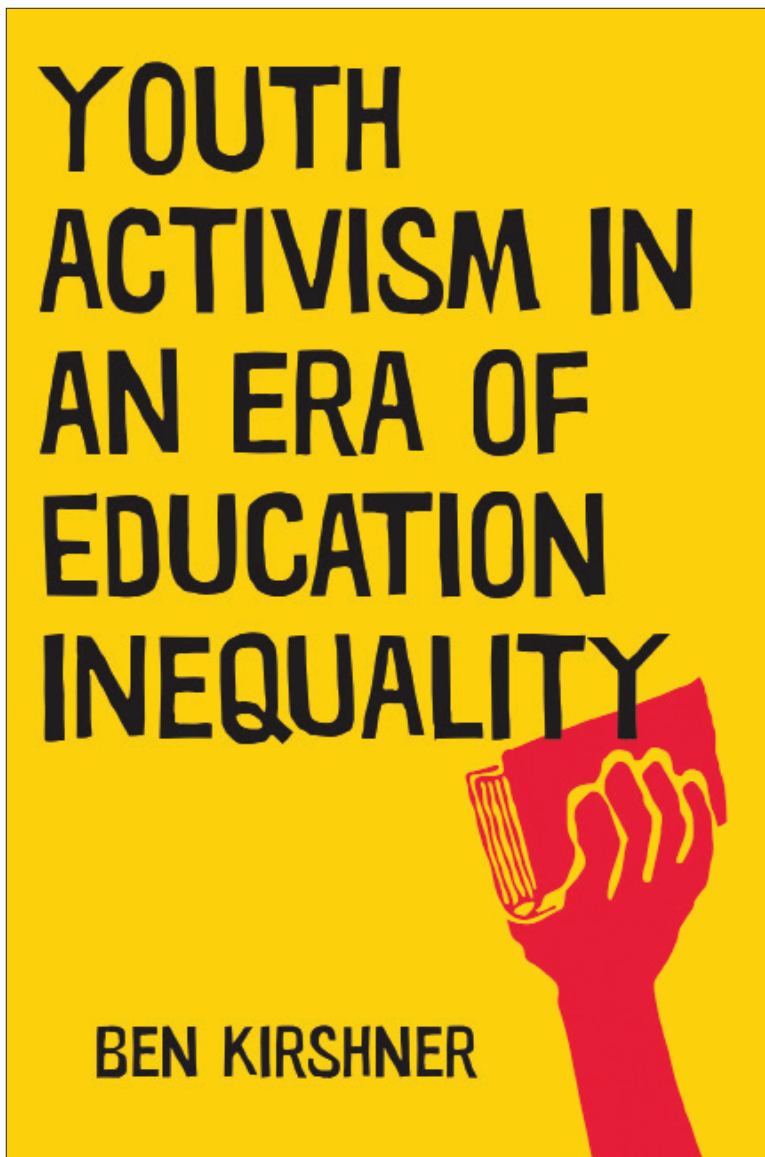# YOUTH ACTIVISM IN AN ERA OF EDUCATION INEQUALITY

INSTRUCTOR'S GUIDE

This is what democracy looks like: Youth organizers in Colorado negotiate new school discipline policies to end the school to jail track. Latino and African American students march to district headquarters to protest high school closure. Young immigration rights activists persuade state legislators to pass a bill to make in-state tuition available to undocumented state residents. Students in an ESL class collect survey data revealing the prevalence of racism and xenophobia.

These examples, based on ten years of research by youth development scholar Ben Kirshner, show young people building political power during an era of racial inequality, diminished educational opportunity, and an atrophied public square. The book's case studies analyze what these experiences mean for young people and why they are good for democracy. What is youth activism and how does it contribute to youth development? How might collective movements of young people expand educational opportunity and participatory democracy? The interdependent relationship between youths' political engagement, their personal development, and democratic renewal is the central focus of this book. Kirshner argues that youth and societal institutions are strengthened when young people, particularly those most disadvantaged by educational inequity, turn their critical gaze to education systems and participate in efforts to improve them.

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Introduction

SUMMARY

This introductory chapter contextualizes contemporary youth activism in terms of three broad trends defining life in the United States for youth of color: increasing economic and educational inequality, age-based segregation, and persistent structural racism. These conditions fuel activism among youth of color. They are exhorted, for example, to follow the American Dream and go to college, but are offered worse public schools than their more affluent peers and, in the case of undocumented youth, are excluded from higher education in most states. Age-based segregation refers to a longstanding practice of treating youth more as dependent recipients of services rather than partners in decision-making. Inequality and age segregation are compounded by ongoing structural racism reflected in damaging policies ranging from police in schools to the war on drugs.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

➥ What, according to the author, are the conditions that give rise to activism among youth of color in the United States?

➥ What kinds of values and evidence inform the claims made in this book?

➥ What is meant when the author cites Bonilla-Silva's phrase, "racism without racists?"

➥ Do you think young people between the ages of 14-18 have adequate opportunities to give input into policies and practices that affect their lives? If you were going to craft a "youth bill of rights," what would you include?

Critique and Collective Agency in Youth Development

SUMMARY

This chapter argues that we need to expand current assumptions about positive youth development to include greater attention to sociopolitical development, which refers to the capacity to think critically about systems and exercise political agency to change systems. The author supports this argument with a case study of a sheltered high school English class where emerging bilingual students developed an action research project to raise awareness about racism and xenophobia at their school. Their research, carried out as part of their coursework, uncovered racist attitudes held by White students and led to suggestions for how to bridge differences at the school. The case study focuses on the experience of two Latino/a students, Luis and Gabriela, as they engaged with the project and applied insights from it to other aspects of their lives. The chapter uses quotations and examples to show how these two youth developed as sociopolitical actors.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

➥ What is sociopolitical development? How is distinct from positive youth development? On what basis does the author argue that educators need to facilitate sociopolitical development among youth?

➥ What is Participatory Action Research? How is it different from other kinds of research you have carried out or read about?

➥ Assess the evidence provided by the author about Luis and Gabriela's learning. What do you think they learned through their participation in this project?

➥ Was the project either successful or unsuccessful? On what grounds? What does this say about the possibilities for critical Participatory Action Research inside of schools?

Millenial Youth and the Fight for Opportunity

SUMMARY

This chapter shifts from a focus on individual people's development to the role of young people in societal change. The author presents two cases, based primarily on analysis of newspaper articles and other secondary sources, where millennial youth defied the steady consolidation of political power in the hands of the few and developed successful campaigns for human rights and education opportunity. The first case focuses on DREAM Activism, an intergenerational movement for immigrant rights and opportunity. The second focuses on a statewide campaign to end the school to jail track in Colorado led by Padres & Jóvenes Unidos. Both cases show how organizing in response to issues that affect everyday lives and future aspirations can mobilize young people from marginalized backgrounds to exercise political power.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

➥ What assumptions did you have, prior to reading this chapter, about the level of apathy or engagement among today's "youth"?

➥ What does the author argue about the quality of civic engagement among members of the "millennial generation" and do you find it persuasive?

➥ The author discusses two cases of activism—DREAM Activism and Padres & Jóvenes Unidos. How are these examples different from more other types of civic engagement you may have experienced, such as "community service" or "service learning"?

➥ What are the features of organizations that engage young people of color in social justice activism?

"'Not Down with the Shutdown': Student Activism against School Closure"

SUMMARY

Chapter 3 is based on a participatory action research (PAR) project carried out with African American and Latino/a high school students whose school was closed by the district citing low performance on test scores and declining enrollment. The chapter describes the process of forming the intergenerational and multiracial PAR team and chronicles why students objected to the decision to close the school. The chapter offers an object lesson in why stronger opportunities for student voice and participation are needed in the struggle for educational equity.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

➥ Think back to when you were a high school student – how might you have reacted if you heard your school was being closed and you needed to transfer to a rival school in your city or region?

➥ On what grounds did the Jefferson High School students object to the closure of the school?

➥ What rationale does the author offer for having greater student participation in school reform decisions?

➥ What structures would you design or facilitate so that students could participate in meaningful ways in decisions about their school?

Teaching without Teaching

SUMMARY

This chapter begins Part II of the book, which transitions away from discussing the impact of youth participation toward analysis of the kinds of learning ecologies that foster it. Chapter 4 is based on ethnographic research about youth activism in three out-of-school youth organizations. Early in his fieldwork Kirshner was intrigued by a puzzling observation: youth participants, most of whom were novice activists, played key roles implementing complex social action campaigns. But the author did not see any teaching taking place. How did youth learn to carry out campaigns? The chapter describes the kinds of guidance provided by young adults in youth organizing groups, which different considerably from typical school teaching, and critiques naïve conceptions of youth voice.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

➥ Think of a learning experience you've had where you experienced a great deal of choice, ownership, or decision-making power. In that experience, was there anyone else providing guidance or giving you feedback to support your learning? What did that support or guidance look like? How was it similar or different from typical experiences with school teaching?

➥ How does the author define key differences between three types of guided participation: facilitation, apprenticeship, and joint work?

➥ How did these vary in terms of the kinds of learning opportunities that they created for youth?

➥ If you were going to take on a position as educator, which of the three guidance strategies would appeal most to you? Why?

Schools as Sites of Struggle

CHAPTER 5

SUMMARY

Unlike Chapter 4, which looked at community organizations, this chapter focuses on schools and school classrooms as contexts for sociopolitical development. Can the kinds of learning environments common in youth organizing and participatory action research take root inside school classrooms? This question is important for developing new forms of democratic education in schools and theorizing sociopolitical learning processes. The chapter draws on research from the Critical Civic Inquiry project to highlight the challenges that middle and high school teachers identified in their work, which in most cases was counter-normative in their schools. The conclusion identifies strategies to address those challenges.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

➥ What is Critical Civic Inquiry (CCI)? How does it relate to educational topics discussed in this book such as sociopolitical development, educational equity, and participatory action research?

➥ In what ways did teachers view CCI as counter-normative in their schools?

➥ How did the teachers' social identities – as White teachers mostly from middle or upper-middle class backgrounds – shape their experiences working on issues of race and equity? What strategies helped them to gain greater awareness of their own positionality?

➥ If you were a schoolteacher, how might you integrate CCI into your subject area? What might be the greatest challenges and rewards for you of doing this?

"Activism, Dignity, and Human Development"

SUMMARY

The conclusion summarizes main arguments of the book and draws implications for the fields of youth development and education reform. The author articulates specific examples of how community programs and schools can develop a part-nership approach, recognizing the dignity of youth of color, which contributes to democratic education and human development. Just as important, the author concludes by arguing that in a society governed by structural racism and inequal-ity, human development demands critical perspective-taking and social action. In that sense, he argues, activism is human development.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

➥ What does the author mean by the term, "deficit-based" in his critique of typical youth programs for youth of color? What, in his view, ought to be the alternative to "deficit-based" approaches?

➥ Do you agree, "Activism is human development?" Why or why not?

➥ What lessons do you draw from this book for the practice of working with youth – either in or out of school?

OVERALL REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

➥ How do these case studies challenge deficit-based perspectives about youth of color?

➥ Do you think, in reading these various case studies, that the youth activists in them are "exceptional" or "typical"? Why or why not?

➥ What are the top changes that you would recommend for institutions – such as schools, youth organizations, and local government – in their approach to decision-making about policies that affect youth of color? Be specific.

➥ Name one lesson or insight you would take from this book into future work with young people – as a mentor, teacher, coach, etc.?

➥ What is one claim in this book that you most disagree with? Why?

ADDITIONAL ACTIVITIES

➥ Do independent research about youth movements outside of the United States—such as Chile, South Africa, or Egypt—and compare them to the ones described in this book.

➥ Compare and contrast the guiding curricular principles in Critical Civic Inquiry to an example of curriculum in your subject area, or to the Common Core State

Standards. What is similar and what is different?

➥ Find a current example of youth activism or youth organizing in your town or city. What is its agenda? What are the issues youth care about? Do these support or call into question the author's claims about the conditions that fuel activism (inequality, racism, and age-segregation)?

➥ Go to a local high school and ask what opportunities students have for decision-making at the school. Ask a range of stakeholders: students, teachers, parents, and administrators. Compare their responses to each other and see where there are differences. Compare those opportunities to the kinds called for in this book.

➥ Do an "audit" of discourses about youth in the culture at large. Take one week and find three examples—either from movies, news, radio, or peer conversation—where "youth" "teen" or "adolescent" is mentioned. What was the context and what was the message about this social category? Compare notes in class to unearth and identify the broader discourses revealed by the statements.