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ABSTRACT
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Facing the Challenges:

Student Antiracist Activists Counter Backlash and Stereotyping

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Abstract

Young activists share their experiences with the current climate of hostility toward school diversity initiatives, and toward young people in general. The author outlines a problematic lack of engagement of student activists in informing teacher education for social justice, particularly related to their undervalued role as active participants in ongoing coalitions. Excerpts from in-depth interviews with seven student participants in western Canadian schools offer new understandings on the potential of school-based activists to counter stereotypical portrayals of young people, to resist a conservative social and political climate, and to inform academic efforts around educational research and teacher education.

Facing the Challenges:
Student Antiracist Activists Counter Backlash and Stereotyping[1]

Locating and studying educational initiatives that are student-centered and respect young people as legitimate contributors has been an interesting and often frustrating venture. In the broad realm of social justice pedagogy and more specifically, teacher education for diversity, the active engagement of young people--along with those teachers with whom they work--seems vital. However, a number of problematic features emerge when charting the often-contentious field of multicultural (MC) and antiracist (AR) pedagogy around educational issues.

Lack of Student Engagement

There is limited academic interest in young people in general. Apart from standardized surveys of student attitudes on diversity issues (e.g., Griffith & Labercane, 1995), students are rarely engaged in meaningful ways in educational research on teaching for social justice. This lack of scholarly attention to students seems a significant oversight in a discourse that ostensibly places their education at its center. My research resists a growing conservative backlash toward "youth" culture in general; Giroux (1996) notes that "youth as a self and social construction has become indeterminant, alien, and sometimes hazardous in the public eye, a source of repeated moral panics and the object of social regulation" (p. 11). Student and teacher AR coalitions can help fulfill a democratizing function in schools and communities, yet there are relatively few detailed analyses of student social justice efforts in Canadian schools.

The dearth of academic attention to successful school-based activist programs suggests that the work of practitioners is either undiscovered or undervalued by the academic community (see Lund, 1998b). In either case, the present study takes steps to fill this gap in the literature and illustrate the benefits of closer engagement of education researchers with the school activist community. I base my working definition of "activist" on popular usage to describe AR advocates, and from dictionaries broadly defining activists as those who engage in direct action supporting their own point of view on contentious social or political issues. My focus here is on Canadian students who have organized coalitions to address racialized issues in their schools.

Conceptual and Social Framework for Social Justice Education

I begin with a brief discussion of one area of the larger terrain of social justice education. A broad consideration encompasses a variety of concerns about injustice and seeks to understand the complex intersections of overlapping categories of social identity, including cultural, ethnic, and racialized identities, gender, sexual orientation, class, and physical ability. Following Hall (1992), who eschews notions of identity as sets of "fixed transcultural or transcendental racial categories" (p. 254), I recognize "race" as a social construction while acknowledging the racialized context of schooling. My specific attention to AR and MC education for this study seems a necessary delimitation considering the scope of the literature in each field.

Below I offer a brief overview of the Canadian scene followed by relevant British and U.S. influences. In its relatively brief history, social justice education in Canada has evolved in the past few decades under the umbrella of MC education with significant interactions with AR and other perspectives (Fleras & Elliot, 1992; Moodley, 1995). Canada remains one of the few nations with MC ideals entrenched into national government policy (Moodley, 1995) introduced in policy statements by Prime Minister

Trudeau in 1971 and entrenched in the 1984 *Canadian Multiculturalism Act*. As well, this country's historical immigration patterns and policies, educational institutions and public responses differ in significant ways from those of other countries, affecting the singular development of Canadian educational policies and practices in this area (Fleras & Elliot, 1992; Kymlicka, 1998).

Complicating the current discourse on diversity is a pervasive notion that Canada has always been characterized by harmony and acceptance. The purported absence of racism in Canada is refuted by a long history of government-sponsored racial segregation, forced assimilation of Aboriginal Canadians, and racialized immigration restrictions (Baergen, 2000; Boyko, 1995). For various reasons, such negative aspects of Canadian history have been excluded or downplayed in current school curriculum and by many politicians and administrators.

Growing Backlash and Resistance

Currently, there is vigorous public debate and backlash in Canada about the value of any form of AR or MC education. Some critics identify this nation's famous MC policies as a significant *cause* of ethnic tensions (e.g., Bibby, 1990; Bissoondath, 1994). A comprehensive rebuttal and critique of these and other anti-MC writers appears in Puttagunta (1998). Such calls for assimilation to a mainstream culture and restricting immigration to uphold "traditional values" reveal a desire to entrench the status quo and deny concerns around diversity issues. The province of Alberta is especially notorious for supporting politicians and social movements that oppose immigration and foster hostility toward diversity (see Baergen, 2000; Kinsella, 2001). The Alberta government's adamant refusal until 1997 to include sexual orientation among the grounds for discrimination in its human rights laws is one example, but emblematic of a narrow mindset among the general public in this region. Recent conservative reforms to public policy have already led to the elimination or downsizing of several programs related to social justice.

Studies also reveal significant resistance to AR initiatives from within Canadian schools and teacher education programs (i.e., Fleras, 1996; Lund, 1998a; Solomon, 1995). Likewise, Santoro et al. (2001) observe that some Australian teacher education institutions "cover up, or 'white-out' any possibility of thinking about the teaching profession itself as racialised and perhaps discriminatory towards those who are marked by racial difference" (p. 191). Recent research in Canadian universities suggests that a more critical attitude in teacher candidates toward social justice issues may be surfacing in faculties of education (e.g., Britzman et al., 1997; Young & Buchanan, 1996). Respecting the potential for critical engagement with students will mean optimizing fruitful pedagogical moments as they occur throughout the respective education programs.

Academic Literature on MC and AR Education in Canada

Within the academic discourse there seems to be widespread consensus on the historical basis of racism in Canada and the benefits of cultural pluralism toward building a strong democracy. Much of the contention in this field focuses on the recurrent disputes between supporters of MC and AR education. Some Canadian researchers have depicted social justice education as a highly divisive field of study, describing conflicts in dichotomous, oppositional terms (e.g., Kehoe, 1994; McGregor & Ungerleider, 1993). I wish to avoid simplified bipolar positions that deny the complexity of school-based activism. Nevertheless, tracing the development of these two apparently contradictory

strands of social justice education seems worthwhile in understanding the work of school activists.

Briefly, traditional MC education in Canada has been linked to notions of original federal MC policy that promoted ethnocultural retention. It is most often characterized as consisting of short-term programs and supplemental curricular material designed to cause attitudinal changes in individuals. Such models of MC education have been criticized as disregarding hidden forms of oppression (Dei, 2000). AR education in Canada has emerged to explore more directly the embedded biases in learning materials and existing inequitable power sharing in schools. Some Canadian AR educators complain that traditional MC programs fail to address racism and other discrimination, implicitly support assimilation to a mainstream, and may actually foster ethnic stereotyping by treating cultures as static and foreign (Dei, 1996; Lee, 1994). At the same time, some Canadian MC education proponents have begun adopting a more critical stance (e.g., Moodley, 1995; Ghosh, 1996).

Brief Notes on MC and AR Education in Britain and the U.S.

It is useful to understand how MC and AR education are framed differently in other countries, and how these competing conceptions influence Canadian theorizing and activism in these areas. For example, the work by AR educators in Britain has been highly influential in shaping notions of ethnic identity and racism in the ongoing redefining of MC policies in Canada for the past several years (Bonnett & Carrington, 1996; Troyna, 1993). In contrast to the Canadian context, Britain's recent political history has included more restrictive immigration policies, a stronger national identity based on an assumed mono-cultural homogeneity, and no official national policies on multiculturalism. For decades, to be British meant to be white and Christian, and other ethnic groups were constructed as a threat to national cohesiveness. From this milieu have emerged AR educational initiatives that have typically been oppositional to white racism and focused on Black resistance (Short & Carrington, 1996).

Conservatives have attacked AR initiatives as encouraging Black hatred of a white society, and any social justice efforts in the schools were dismissed as programs from the "loony left" (Bonnett & Carrington, 1996). The similarities to conservative reforms currently taking place in Canada supports the establishment of links between social justice practitioners and scholars across both countries. Bonnett and Carrington (1996) note that scholars and school activists in Canada have imported some key aspects of British AR activism into the MC education discourse. This broader vision for the future of social justice pedagogy shares a great deal with critical formulations of MC education that have developed recently in Canada, and over the past several decades in the U.S.

Educators concerned with social justice issues in the U.S. have used the term MC education to address a variety of social concerns regarding ethnic, class, gender, sexuality, and cultural issues, emerging from a history of ongoing civil rights struggles. Many avow a "critical multicultural" stance toward education, specifically to allow for the interrogation of existing systemic inequities in curriculum, teaching, hiring, and policies (e.g., Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1997; McCarthy, 1993). In this regard, the American use of the term MC automatically implies a uniting of cultural harmony concerns with AR educational goals. Free from the backdrop of governmental policies on

multiculturalism--and the resultant decades of debate and backlash--the term does not carry the same ideological baggage it does in Canada.

Nonetheless, progressive educational reform activists and MC scholars in the U.S., like their Canadian and British counterparts, have faced a great deal of public criticism in recent years (e.g., Bernstein, 1994). As elsewhere, much of it emerges from assimilatory conservative political positions by critics who wield phrases such as "educational standards" and "national pride" while dismissing MC education as divisive or anti-American. There is a growing recognition by many scholars and activists alike of the politicized nature of their work around ethnocultural pluralism, and of the pressing need for coalition building to influence educational policy and structural concerns (Banks, 1995; Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1997).

Engaging Young People in Educational Research

As a longtime activist and educator in this field, I recognize that I hold several assumptions regarding school-based activism. I shaped my initial questions using a selected team of long-time social justice activist colleagues from various settings around the province. By e-mail, fax, and telephone, we shared ideas about specific areas of concern for this study, and generated a set of "guiding hypotheses" that Marshall and Rossman (1995) describe as "merely tools used to generate questions and to search for patterns" (p. 37). For example, I posited that the conservative political climate and anti-diversity backlash, as outlined above, inhibits school activism, and that negative attitudes toward young people limit the efficacy of school-based action groups. I tested this and other hypotheses against the ideas and understandings of my research participants, including seven activist students from various Alberta schools.

My in-depth interviews produced rich data that allowed me to better understand the views of young people who choose to engage in social justice work in actual school settings. Through guided critical self-reflection and collaborative inquiry, fellow activists and I shared our experiences with the current climate of hostility toward diversity and young people in general. Interviews began with my gathering information about each participant; they were asked to describe their own role in their school's particular project, and share aspects of its formation, procedures, and activities. Further exploration included talk of administrative support, political climate, and challenges.

I spent two and a half years gathering data, observing group meetings and presentations, recording social routines in the school and community, and collecting supporting documentation from each group. A series of two-hour long interviews with participants took place at mutually agreeable times in a variety of settings. I sought to discover the meanings these students attach to their activism using guiding questions on issues as outlined above. Our mutual interests often led to our offering each other suggestions for activities, funding information, upcoming events, and networking with fellow activists.

Each participant allowed me to record the interviews on audiotapes that I transcribed at regular intervals. My data analysis acknowledged the impossibility of a "neutral" interpretation; accepting language as a social code implicated each participant in the meaning making process. I considered my role in the research account with careful attention to power differences between adult and student participants, and leaving the interviews open to multiple interpretations (Fine & Weis, 1996; Knupfer, 1996). The emergent meanings and ideas generated through the interviews inevitably shaped

subsequent interviews. In each case I shared emerging accounts and analyses with participants for their feedback and clarification.

In interviewing these seven student activists, I came to realize that we have much to learn about the creative responses that can be generated by collaborative school coalitions in overcoming seemingly insurmountable barriers to their ongoing work. Of course, this interpreted and edited account of our interviews is really a constructed story in which I represent their views. This limited window into their experiences deserves further analysis, to be sure, and greater attention to aspects such as the participants' academic and socio-cultural backgrounds, for example.

Students Resisting a Conservative Climate for Activism

The conservative political landscape and media coverage of current events often entails sensationalistic, negative coverage of issues regarding young people. Youth crime and violent behavior are typically provided front-page treatment, even though reliable statistical indicators show that the Canadian youth crime rate has actually been declining each year for over a decade. However, the false perception the public may have about our "dangerous youth" has not, among my research participants anyway, prevented their successful activism in the face of this negativity. In some cases, their altruistic behaviors have actually seemed all the more remarkable in contrast to public expectations for them.

Lisa[2] is a junior at a large Catholic high school in a small urban setting. She had not yet been active with an organized student club, but planned to form a program to address diversity issues in her school. She and other friends sought permission from their principal to promote a community awareness project on diversity. Lisa is white, Catholic, and 16 years old at the time of our interview. She shared that when one of her parents became a paraplegic about five years ago, she became more aware of discrimination. We spoke in the center of a cavernous school cafeteria after school hours.

When I interviewed Lisa, she had been struggling unsuccessfully to set up a social action movement in her high school and expressed to me a growing pressure to avoid certain issues. She said she feels resistance, especially against addressing "the one issue, homosexuality. Alberta is passing laws to make sure that they're not able to marry and things like that. Of course we have the stereotype that we're all rednecks but in a way it's sort of true. The public seems to support the politicians on this issue." She added that in her particular school, the religious focus exacerbates this anti-gay climate, speculating that, "even most Catholics think homosexuality is bad." She admitted that it can be discouraging when the political and administrative leadership in our province are always opposing fairness along certain controversial issues, saying, "you're always just resisting something. You've got to wonder about that."

Even so, Lisa relishes the thought of confronting these very leaders about their narrow views. When I shared what another group had suggested doing, Lisa reacted to the prospect of inviting a notoriously outspoken anti-gay politician from Alberta to debate his views with students: "It would be quite a challenge. That would actually be fun. I'd really like for us to do that." Her genuine enthusiasm for taking on a seemingly impossible challenge reminds me that, even in the face of daunting conservatism, young activists can rise to the challenge of fighting for social justice.

Lisa says she feels frustrated by the apparent apathy of her adult counterparts when issues of inequity arise. A recent example indicated to Lisa that her parents' generation often seems not to care about the injustices faced by others:

> There was this one article in *Chatelaine* magazine about honor killings and
> women in a country in the East, and I was just appalled by this article and I
> showed my parents and they were like, "Oh that's terrible, I can't believe it, but
> oh well, that's life." …I think people just don't know what to do. It's just a
> mindset or attitude of people. And how do you change that?

She sees her own activism as having the potential to educate a new generation to reject
the apathy of the adult world. In this way, conservatism is treated as simply another
obstacle like racism or sexism. Her view of the advantage of her youth is that older
people may "look around but most don't care" about social justice issues, whereas many
young people express a more passionate interest in creating a just society for the future.

In another, larger city with a more culturally diverse demographic, I interviewed
Sabrina and Ramona, sisters in tenth and eleventh grade who are both active in their high
school. They are both involved in an enriched academic program and have taken on
leadership roles in their school. Of Asian ancestry, they are fluently bilingual and expect
to attend university after graduation from high school. Ramona has coordinated the
school's Amnesty International chapter for two years. Sabrina is the student leader of
another school club that also addresses social justice concerns. Both have also been
actively involved in other local organizations that address poverty, human rights, and
other social issues. I had met Ramona previously at a human rights conference. I
interviewed them separately at a common area on the campus at a local university.

Sabrina admitted to feeling frustration with the widespread apathy among adults
on social justice issues. She shared that "we've had some experience trying to organize
something and seen the apathy out there. For instance when my sister went to the
Amnesty International's university meeting, there were just seven people there from the
entire university." For Sabrina, her personal commitment to their activism emerges out of
a growing awareness of the life and death struggles for social justice faced by political
prisoners. She says: "Once you see this sort of thing happening you can't really stop and
close your eyes and say 'I don't know about that sort of thing' anymore." She is angry
that violations of people's basic human rights do not get more coverage by mainstream
media, even within our own country. Her efforts with organizing an AR club at her high
school seek to remedy that by raising awareness, at least among her peers.

Her sister Ramona concurs, when asked, that social justice issues enjoy very little
exposure in their community and within their school. She finds that teachers teach their
classes as if the current curriculum completely ignores human rights issues. Ramona
wishes for more discussion of issues that have meaning for her:

> It would be nice if we could have some more discussion about human rights
> within our school. Because all of our teachers are so academic, like in English we
> don't really have time to read anything about prejudice or human rights. It's all
> the stuff on the curriculum, and we barely have enough time to finish that. And
> it's the same with Social Studies. All we're doing is all this past stuff that's
> happened and we don't even get a chance to talk about what's happening right
> now, and any of the issues we should be discussing right now, because there just
> isn't time.

From her perspective, many teachers may simply find it more comfortable to avoid
potentially contentious issues.

The topic of homophobia is especially taboo in most high school classes, and she notes wryly that, "one of the most interesting conversations we've had about this sort of thing was with this janitor. We were staying after school and we were just sitting around talking and we just had this good conversation." In her quest for raising awareness around social justice issues, Ramona finds it disappointing that young people have to lead the way, and most often without the support of many adults around them.

Sina is a Muslim of Indo-Canadian background in twelfth grade in a diverse high school in a large urban center. She shared with me that she often faces discrimination based on religious stereotyping, explaining that, "When I tell people that I'm Muslim they automatically think that I'm from Arabia and that I'm a terrorist." She has been active in the school's annual participation in a regional student diversity leadership camp. She is President of the school's Student Council, and also tutors non-English speaking students. When I interviewed Sina she was organizing a new AR program in her school.

Sina shared with me that one specific issue that has not received much attention from the adults in her community is cultural diversity. She says that she's "always been interested in it, just because I've always seen the variety and diversity around me, but I've never seen anybody do anything to make it more peaceful. Instead, in the news I'd hear about high schools having their 'ethnic conflicts' and stuff, but nobody would really try to stop it." So along with a small group of friends on her school's Student Council, she undertook to learn more about the forms and causes of racism. Their decision to attend a leadership camp on cultural diversity was an important catalyst for her group:

> When we went to camp last year... we all learned about it, and at the camp it was also integrated with prejudice and discrimination in society, so we learned more about that. Then we decided that we would try to bring [an AR program] to our school and raise awareness.

Sina had not yet maintained an ongoing AR program in her school, but made specific efforts at raising awareness through posters, talks to classes, and school assemblies. Her altruism and idealistic desire for social harmony in her school counter the popular media stereotypes of violent youth as a threat to communities.

Sina offers that social justice efforts aimed at young people are far more successful when students organize them. Her own initial efforts illustrate the challenge of being taken seriously by adults: "We didn't have a teacher [advisor] when school started, so then I had to take care of all of that and I didn't know how to do it. So I'd be in talking to the principal and asking him to do it, and he's like, 'Let's find this girl a teacher!'" She admits that the prospect of organizing events to raise awareness on social justice issues can be daunting for young people, noting that "a lot of kids get shy on the phone because they don't know what to talk about or they think that the person's not going to respect them because they're a kid."

Jason is a senior at a smaller urban high school in another large city. He describes himself as a fairly average, mainstream guy. He and a small group of his friends organized a program to challenge racism and other discrimination. Their group has received favorable recognition from the adult community and organizes presentations at schools in their city and vicinity. Steve is another high school senior at the same school. I interviewed him and Jason separately after an educational conference at which they had presented a session together on taking action against racism. Both are white males of

Anglo-Saxon origins, 17 years old at the time of the interviews, and both are in an academic program with expectations of university attendance following graduation.

Steve and Jason observe that many adults in our province, including political leaders, target young people as scapegoats for many social ills. This situation often reveals itself, they suggest, in the limited attention paid to educational initiatives to address social justice issues that may highlight embarrassing inadequacies in existing institutions. They see their AR activism as fulfilling an educational need for students who may have not been encouraged to confront racism in their classes. As Steve points out, young AR educators may be more successful than some adults in planning effective activities in this area:

> We try to proactively educate them against racism by getting them thinking open-mindedly, mainly through games, because we work with younger kids, elementary school. Certainly, when you have interaction between the students, that's where the real AR education occurs. Lecturing is good and it's educational, but essentially when you're lecturing there's a hierarchy involved there, but when you're having games and interaction there's no hierarchy at all between peers, and that's how it works best for us.

Jason emphasizes that, in their interactive presentations, they like "to get the students to think for themselves, not just listen to someone else's thought, because the point of our presentation is to try to encourage a more broad pattern of thought and critical thinking."

When I ask them about dealing with a conservative provincial government that has eliminated cultural programming funding, Jason seems nonchalant. His goal has not been to win over reluctant adult leaders, he tells me, but to find pockets of support within the system that may assist the group in achieving its goals. In fact, Jason says that his group specifically "wants to stay away from any political affiliation or alliance," but that they have nonetheless "received a lot of support from the federal government." Steve insists that one strength of their group is their relative frugality with educational efforts, and asserts: "If we don't need money, we're not going to go out and seek it. So I think that's what we're proud of; we've done a lot with very little, and continue to have good support and good solidarity without needing to have funds." He cites specific grants and awards they have won in the past, and other sources of support they may seek in the future.

However, even with all of the backing from external sources, Jason remains hesitant to rely too heavily on their adult sponsors; he explains their reticence:

> We want to keep our project at an essentially community oriented level, so that if the government for some reason no longer wants to support us it doesn't really matter. Their money is not in charge of us, and we're not dependent on the government. So while the current government happens to be willing to help, we'll certainly accept that, but we don't want to be dependent on it. We want independence so that it's not seen as a government tie. We're doing something at a community level as community partners in this.

Steve puts it this way: "We're still very young and we're still trying to find our way, and this whole government funding thing--you know--we're cautious." Developing a healthy cynicism towards strategic partnerships with ever-changing government and community agencies seems to me a shrewd survival tactic, and very likely related to their white male privilege. It reveals both of these young activists to be savvy consumers of programming

and resources that can assist them in reaching their goals, while avoiding the pitfall of becoming too reliant on unreliable sources.

Daria attends twelfth grade at a large high school of about 2000 students in the same diverse urban center as Steve and Jason, and identifies herself as a Latina of South American origin. She was born outside Canada and feels her immigrant status has shaped her experiences in the area of addressing diversity issues. Together with Steve and Jason, she helped form the student action group that they continue to sustain. They meet weekly and organize a variety of activities to educate other young on the dangers of discrimination. I met her after school and the only available space was in her principal's office. She eagerly took his seat and I interviewed her from a small chair in front of the large desk, creating a symbolic rearrangement of the traditional researcher role.

For Daria, the very existence of her AR action group sends an important message to adults in her community; she explains that their diverse membership models the cooperation they promote:

> It just shows that there are a lot of youth who are concerned about the issue. It's not just me; it's 20 other youth within the organization, and I'm sure there are many others throughout [our city] that are concerned about the issue. Second, our group is very MC; we have students who are from Africa, Iran, Iraq, Chile, so we work from all over the place and it shows that we are creating this united front against racism. And we have a lot of individuals who are maybe third generation Canadian and that in itself proves that it's an issue, that racism is an issue for all Canadians. Just because you may not have experienced it personally it doesn't mean that you can turn your head and walk away.

She and her group have enjoyed some financial and moral support from government agencies, including a national award. Still, she finds her community more likely to ignore issues of racism, or to attribute relevant incidents to other factors.

Daria also emphasizes the importance of the fact that her group is made up entirely of persons under the age of 18 years. For her it signals a new empowerment among young activists, that they are able to take on an issue of limited interest to the adults around them and work together to improve the political climate. At the same time they have undertaken self-directed education on diversity issues. She asserts:

> The work that our group does is very valuable, not only because it educates others--it helps us educate ourselves. It helps us to become empowered within our communities, which is a really big thing now with youth. We're finally being able to be taken seriously by politicians or people organizing workshops. I would have never imagined being invited to a national educators' conference.

While the conservatism of adults and institutions around them has downplayed contentious discourse, particularly with young people, Daria and her colleagues have opted to open the dialogue. Their efforts have met with mostly positive results from their peers and recognition by human rights agencies. For Daria these small successes show their group "is beating the stereotypes that society has against youth. It proves to us that we are succeeding, that we are on the right track."

Conclusion

Each of these young activists is keenly aware of the current negative attitudes some people hold against them as young people. They also show varying degrees of awareness of the stultifying conservative climate that can fuel backlash against some

social justice activism. None of the young people I interviewed cited these barriers as insurmountable, but rather, seem to view them as an exciting challenge. Some even relish the thought of countering the pervasive stereotypes of misguided youth, in part through joining diverse coalitions to raise awareness on controversial issues involving racism, sexism, and homophobia, among others.

Popular media sources and some political leaders often devalue the contributions of young people, but the young activists I interviewed have begun to develop programs that are models of independent activism. Whether working within traditional institutional structures or drawing their own original blueprints for establishing viable programs, these young people can inform educators wishing to work collaboratively for progressive social change. They all appeared eager to rise to the significant challenges before them to overcome diminished expectations for their success in this area.

The conservative political climate and devaluation of youth that I hypothesized would inhibit their activism actually provides incentive for some to step up their efforts, including a closer scrutiny of politicians, curriculum, and school policies. I hope these brief excerpts of their views might stimulate a more inclusive conversation on educational reform for social justice. Hargreaves (1996) insists, "perhaps the time has come to bring together the different voices surrounding schooling--students with teacher; teachers with parents--and risk cacophony in our struggle to build authentic community" (p. 16).

I am convinced we have underestimated the critical agency and tenaciousness of student activists in taking leadership roles within social justice movements. Countering public portrayals of young people as either demonized perpetrators of violence or apathetic consumers of adult-driven culture, these students show themselves to be remarkable role models for other students and adults alike. Their insightful reflections on working critically from within politicized environments offer evidence of students' previously undervalued role as crucial participants in education research and reform efforts toward social justice.

Notes

2. All of the names of participants mentioned here are pseudonyms.

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