"Safe Places to Go and Things to Do": Political Texts from Urban Youth of Color

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This paper is the first to examine the political texts of urban youth of color. It presents their assessments of what kinds of policies and programs would improve their lives.

Urban youth of color are presented as one of our nation's major threats. Assumed "gang-related" and mythologized on "real-life" TV shows, young men and women of color are constructed as a surly, silent foe of America. Scholars have recently turned their attention to championing youth of color in a variety of ways: Jonathan Kozol [1991, 1995], Alex Kotlowitz [1991], Greg Donaldson [1993], and Darrell Dawsey [1995] have brought us rich and sympathetic ethnographies. Martín Sánchez Jankowski [1991], Joan Moore [1991], and Felix Padilla [1991] have explored and explained the political economic realities that produce and shape gang activity. Robert Coles [1986] has engaged deeply with young peoples' psyches, showing them to be brave, generous, and wise about the political events of their nations. Lisa Delpit [1995] and many others have taken us inside schools and shown us what is happening to youth of color there. Youthworkers Arturo Hernandez [1995] and Joe Marshall [1996] have provided a crucial perspective by sharing insights from their important work with youth on the street. These works make valuable points about the role of oppression in the lives of young people, about youths' struggles for good lives, and about the opportunities for institutional change that could vastly improve the lives of urban youth of color. However, since Carlos Muñoz' 1989 *Youth, Identity, and Power,* few scholars have presented American urban youth of

color as political actors. Perhaps Tricia Rose comes closest in *Black Noise* [1994], an exploration of the politics of rap as it is wielded by youth of color.

This paper presents the findings of a discourse analysis of what I call "youth political texts"—youth newspapers, political and policy statements, and youth-written votes and surveys. These materials are important because they provide youths' collective, negotiated, and dialogic representations of their political positions. I requested materials from any program that provided a medium for youth to give voice to their own views of what needs to happen to improve their lives and their communities.[1] The texts I analyzed were produced by youth between the ages of 9 and 22 working in 34 youth leadership programs in 10 cities. They included several issues each of 11 different newspapers written by youth, as well as program newsletters, press releases and other public statements written by youth, surveys conducted by youth, and articles written about youths' political actions. I call the method "discourse analysis" because this unusual data is composed of such a variety of types of documents. Rather than pursuing strict content analysis, I read the texts for discursive themes. One of the interesting findings from this discourse analysis is the degree of unanimity among urban youth of color across the country regarding policies on crime, education, and the role of adults and community organizations. I also draw on interviews with youthworkers which were conducted in fourteen cities during 1993. [Starr 1994]

Why is it necessary to write a study that shows that youth of color have something to say? Historically people of color and children have been constructed as mute and unprepared to participate in self-governance. The combination of these customs with the sensationalized fear of youth crime has produced a dangerous situation in which youth of color are both brutalized and silenced. In an effort to protect them, many of us who wish to help collaborate in their silencing. A tiny minority of youth-serving organizations have organized their programs to enable youth to produce knowledge and to give voice politically. That the following discourse exists at all is due to their visionary work.

Too much of even the most sympathetic youthwork is organized around defending youths' willingness to conform to the

system, if just given the chance. What has happened such that this is the most we hope for them? This study presents a glimpse of how well youth can analyze their own situation and how intelligently they can fashion and present solutions to their problems.

Jobs

According to youth who participated in the Mayor's Youth Development Task Force in Chicago, the second most important way to "improve the lives of young people" is to give teens "a chance to build working skills in their communities." When asked how the city should spend new funds for youth, 46% of the 5000 San Francisco high school participants in Youth Vote 1994 chose "more jobs and training". [Coleman Advocates for Youth, San Francisco] This was the top vote-getter of several options and in some neighborhoods received up to 62% of the vote. When youth from East Bay Asian Youth Center (EBAYC) asked 511 Asian and Pacific Islander Oakland youth ages 12 to 17 what three things would most help young people stay away from violence, the top answer was jobs. The second answer was safe places to get job training. Former Attorney General Janet Reno also believed that job *training* was essential to addressing youth violence, but she said nothing about the provision of living wage *jobs* to trainees. [in Children's Express 1994: 16]

Youth at the Boston Children and Youth Advocacy Day in 1994 said that the way to reduce violence in communities is for the government to "supply teens with jobs that help young people to gain skills and that pay enough to support single and parenting teens (not just flipping burgers)." Youth recommended work that would benefit the community, like rehabilitating "burned-out buildings and convert[ing] them into apartments or youth centers." The jobs should also help youth "get experience in a field of interest (paid internships at hospitals for aspiring doctors)."

Empowered Youth Educating Society (EYES), a youth policy group, puts jobs as the first point in their violence-reduction policy platform: "Well paying jobs should be available to all young people. Our society must view it as a responsibility to make sure that all young people have a chance (at least) to survive in our economic system." Researchers have documented that

"gainful employment" is one of the strongest deterrents to youth criminality. [Elliott 1994, Sampson & Lamb 1993]

Safe Places to Go and Things to Do

> Open up more recreation programs 24 hours a day. . . . If it was up to me, this place would be open 24 hours a day, staffed 24 hours a day . . . with sports activities, culture activities, bands, music, and *food*.
>
> Youthworker Ray Balberan

Eighty one percent of youth who participated in Youth Vote 1994 agreed that "youth violence would be reduced if kids had 'more safe places to go and things to do' " (in some neighborhoods 89% of youth agreed with this statement). When asked in another question what would make them "feel safer after school and on weekends", the highest vote getter on a list of options was "safe places to go and things to do". According to youth who participated in the Mayor's Youth Development Task Force in Chicago, the most important "way to improve the lives of young people" is "a citywide system of centers where youth and their families can go to find safe activities." [Addae 1994] The third highest response to EBAYC's survey of what would help youth stay away from violence was "safe places to have a good time". The second point on EYES' violence-prevention policy platform is

> enough community centers so that there are community centers available to all young people at all hours. Centers should be organized and directed by young people, and adults should work with young people every step of the way in order to offer information, encouragement, and confidence in the capabilities of youth. The centers should be safe places that are free and public, and there should be funding available to have interesting programming that addresses the needs of the young people in that community. Resources should also be available to make sure that all programs are publicized well, so that young people are aware of what is happening. Schools are possible places for community centers to be housed.

The issue of hours of availability is central. Youthworkers and programs are moving toward 24 hour recreational facilities in

order to extend the availability of safe "alternatives to the streets". YMAC's Youth Vote 1993 found that expanding public library hours to Sunday so that students have a place to do homework over the weekend is more important to high school students than refurbishing the facilities or buying new books. YouthVote 1994 asked how the city should spend new funds for youth. The second highest vote getter (after jobs) was "more youth centers for fun activities", with 24% of the vote. Personal/career counseling got 13%, tutoring and other school help got 12%, and community service opportunities got 5%.

In Youth Vote, youth rated the three most important thing that would get them to go to a youth program. The quality of the facilities is as important as the activities offered within them. Youth will go somewhere where their friends go, because they want to hang out with people that they like. Other questions on the ballot confirmed that youths' most common *and* most preferred after-school activity is hanging out and talking with friends, winning easily over sports/athletic, TV and video games, and shopping or hanging out at the mall or wharf. So developing an appealing program means attracting *groups* of youth who are friends and making the program a new social center.

Another question on the ballot asked youth what facility youth would like to see the city develop in the next year. A teen entertainment center with videos, pool tables, ping-pong, bowling, etc. got 40% of the vote, a teen nightclub got 33% (up to 72% in some schools). The less popular options were a recording studio for teens interested in music industry, a theater which features plays written and performed by teens, and a teen cafe. Teen nightclubs, teen nights at adult clubs, and non-profit substance-free teen parties like "Friday Night Live" have been successful, attracting many youths and remaining safe.

Youth Vote 1994 also asked youth what kind of equipment is most important to have at a youth center. 21% said computers (up to 28% in some neighborhoods), table games like ping pong and pool also got 21%, weight training got 16% (ranging from 9% to 29%), swimming pool got 14%. The least popular types of equipment were video/filmmaking, art studio, lounge with comfortable chairs, and video games.

Sixty-eight percent of youth are "willing to help develop the program" for the new youth center. And finally, Youth Vote found some exciting news which could help with youth programs' funding dilemmas. Even though 60% of youth have *never* been to an after-school program, 68% of youth are willing to pay "a small fee (like $5/month) for quality recreational, educational, or other after-school programs". In some neighborhoods 79% of youth are willing to pay.

AIDS Education, Sex Education, and Condoms in Schools

According to Youth Vote 1993 high school students had "more unanimity" on sex-related issues than any other issue: 92% said that AIDS education should be mandatory. 89% said condoms should be distributed in schools. 66% said that counseling should be mandatory for each student the first time they are given condoms.

According to Planned Parenthood, 85% of Americans agree that sex education should be taught in public schools. Planned Parenthood also found that teens who have had a comprehensive sex education course at school are more likely to use birth control regularly. Youth conclusions at the Children's and Youth Advocacy Day in Boston stressed that sex education be taught well and made interesting "so teens will listen and understand what to be careful about." Youth at this forum also proposed that condom distribution become a new community norm. Not only schools should distribute condoms to youth, but also outreach groups and parents.

According to a *Youth Outlook! (YO!)* survey, 63% of "teens"[2] use condoms. According to important studies of young gay men's safe sex behavior, accurate knowledge about AIDS transmission and safe sex practices aren't enough to cause young men to change their behavior. These studies find that the education approach must *eroticize* safe sex in order to increase condom use rates. [Kegeles, Coates & Hays 1991] The same approach is probably necessary to get young people to use condoms consistently.

Youth Victory on Issues Concerning Empowerment (VOICE) of Washington D.C.[3] and many other advocates assert that "abstinence is an unrealistic option for many young people. So as many

adults choose to make this a moral issue, young people are not listening, and more and more teens are dying." They agree that condoms should be handed out in schools "in conjunction with information via video, pamphlet, and guest speakers." They also endorse daycare in schools to support teen mothers.

School and Education Issues

Another issue on which youth political texts showed unanimity was the need for more teachers of color and teachers from the community. This is the highest priority for educational change. Schools that serve urban youth need teachers of color, teachers with bilingual abilities, and "teachers with a love for teaching, with love for the job."

A second main area of concern is seriousness and respect for youth. In explaining why youth are "not interested in education", Youth VOICE listed the very first factor as "facilities are dilapidated, damp, drafty, and dark." Youthworker John Nauer says "a nice school, it made you wanna come to school. But when you come to a school . . . it's dirty . . . most kids get turned off." Youth VOICE recommends refurbishing all schools with designs and ideas from students.

Youth feel disrespected by school administrators' unwillingness to clean up filthy, inoperative, and unsafe bathrooms. Schools blame youth for the conditions of bathrooms. Students can't understand why they are different from users of any other bathrooms, which are allocated resources for cleaning and repair. In an article in *YO!*, youth described how young entrepreneurs are making money by providing shuttle services back and forth to the nearest McDonald's so students can use the restrooms there.

Youth also feel extremely disrespected by the unavailability of books and the use of outdated books. The lack of books is often listed as a sign of injustice in the school system.

Youth propose that schools be reorganized. Some propose that schools should be smaller and should be modeled on the "community schools" or "Beacon schools" idea, in which schools are centers for community services, provide adult as well as youth education, house community meetings, and are open for recreational and club activities until late at night. [see Day 1994]

Staffed by AmeriCorps youth, the Morton McMichael School in Mantua, West Philadelphia now "stays open until 9:00 p.m. four nights a week and all day on Saturdays. [Goldsmith 1995] Youth VOICE explains that schools should be community centers, which would mean that "*every* person in the school must be trained on how to be effective counselors, and not just lecturers." YouthVote asked youth "if a school in your neighborhood was open every night (including weekends) and had all kinds of fun activities for teens, would you go?" 71% of students said "yes", and in some neighborhoods over 90% said "yes".

Youth also speak out against rules that exclude students from activities if their grades aren't good; this policy alienates some youth from school even more because they feel it's impossible to make it. Grade floors may exclude youth from the only parts of school that keep them there at all (extracurriculars and sports). Grade punishments become a burden when youth try to apply for jobs and when they start applying for drivers licenses and insurance.

The third main area of concern to youth and youthworkers is the need for the curriculum to be responsive to different racial and ethnic groups. High school students are walking out to protest lack of ethnically responsive curriculum. [Sanchez 1994] Along with the necessity of a multi-cultural curriculum, youth see that schools have the responsibility to do broader public education work on issues of race/ethnic diversity, sexuality, and gender. In discussing "diversity" issues in their schools, students tend to agree that they see interracial relations and relationships as a way to "learn". But they believe the schools have a responsibility to provide events and educational sessions to help students understand each other and get to know each other.

The other major curricular issue youth raise is the issue of practical "relevance". Youth VOICE says "Students do not feel they are learning anything of value . . . there seems to be minimal, if any, relevance in the student's life." It's not enough for teachers and other adults to say that a subject is important, they have to show why and how it's important. This is also expressed as a pedagogic issue. Youth VOICE says "Students feel that teachers are out-of-touch with reality. Many teachers are tenured and/or older and are not familiar with the 'new youth order', where

lectures are no go and students like to see, rather than hear." In an article called "What Can Be Done to Make School Interesting?" in *New Youth Connections*, students commented on pedagogy, critiquing teachers who don't provide hands on activities and opportunities for students to answer questions. They say teachers shouldn't be surprised when students "fall asleep, daydream, or just simply get annoyed" when faced with a lecture. Alexie Torres of El Puente says "Teens learn best in the streets, not in traditional classrooms." A student at the extremely successful Community-as-School Program says "A lot of grown-ups seem to think we aren't learning if we aren't strapped to a desk!" [Checkoway 1992] At New Visions school in New York, students will be included in curricula design. "We're gonna be the leaders", says Jessica Burgos.

Youth VOICE says that current programs for training and re-certification of teachers are inadequate because "it is unclear what new things they are learning". Teachers need to be learning about technology, discussion groups, peer counseling methods, and experiential curricula. Finally, students say that schools should "demand more" of their corporate "partners".

Youths' views on schools are probably not surprising to most educators. What is useful about reviewing youths' statements is how they clarify that students can be political allies in the struggles for funding, facilities, and teacher training.

Violence Prevention

Youths' top two proposals for violence prevention, jobs and safe places with safe activities at all hours, have already been discussed here. This section now turns to the other ideas that have been put forth for violence prevention.

What's important to look at on the youth surveys is not only the top three answers, but what didn't win out. In the EBAYC survey, more jobs, safe places to get education or job training, and safe places to have a good time won out over former Attorney General Janet Reno's "adults to talk to" about personal & family problems [in Children's Express 1994: 16] and also over the fol-lowing: Better understanding between racial and ethnic groups; better understanding between males and females; teenagers help-ing younger children with their schoolwork and teaching them

not to get in trouble; eliminating guns; more cultural and sports activities; more police to patrol schools and neighborhoods; not having as many liquor stores around; and keeping people who commit crimes in jail longer. EBAYC survey designers also had the brilliance to ask youth which three things would have the *least* effect in helping young people stay away from violence. The answers: eliminate guns, hire more police to patrol schools and neighborhoods, not have as many liquor stores around. In Youth Vote 1994 on the question asking youth what would make them feel safer, "more police" received low scores (between 19% and 31%, depending on the neighborhood).

EBAYC's results on gun control are very interesting. They contradict the findings of LH Research, which found that 57% of young people support immediate banning of handguns for young people. [Lou Harris in Children's Express 1994: 31] Youth VOICE recommends reducing gun availability, increasing waiting periods, requiring frequent recertification, and holding manufacturers and stores liable for some killings. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends banning civilian ownership of handguns, and is working to "help families and communities choose safer means of self-protection." Their "message is that it is possible to protect children or guns, but not both." [Dr. Katherine Christoffel in Children's Express 1994: 37] Some people are concerned about the implications of banning guns. We are witnessing the development of police-state conditions in urban neighborhoods where people of color live. Certain populations are becoming policed and jailed populations. Banning private ownership of weapons would increase the imbalance of power in those conditions. People would have no defense against a growing police/military state. While youth may not see gun control as the solution, this does not mean they are arming themselves to create a sense of safety. Only 12% of Youth Vote 1994 respondents said that having a gun or weapon to defend themselves would make them feel safer.

Only 14% of Youth Vote 1994 respondents said more conflict resolution would help. This low rating for conflict resolution in YouthVote is interesting in light of the fact that conflict resolution has been so widely touted as a solution to youth problems by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [Satcher in Children's

Express 1994: 41] and others. EYES supports conflict resolution in schools because it is a way to provide *jobs* for teens, which is a top priority. But they explain that conflict resolution doesn't address the root causes of violence. They insist that money for "drug free zones" and the police departments' DARE program in the schools should be spent instead to hire youth to do this work.

EYES worked with Teens on Target, Youth of Oakland United, Children of War, and the Youth Empowerment Project in bi-weekly coalition meetings to develop a proposal for school safety by and for Oakland students that was presented to the Oakland School Board. They identified the usual cause of violence at school as disputes carried onto campus by non-students. So the motivation behind their plan is to provide safety without treating students as criminals. Police should only be used on campus if they are "trained to mediate in a non-confrontational way." Generally, having police on campus "creates tension and an atmosphere of oppression." [Apter & Goldstein 1986] Campus supervisors should be trained in conflict resolution strategies because they "actually cause more conflict than they prevent". Parent patrols should be avoided because "people end up fighting to defend a parent who has been disrespected by another student."

The coalition also says that dress codes may be appropriate "for dealing with issues of economic inequality and theft" but do not address "the root causes of violence". EYES demands that "ALL students should have a say in the decision to restrict freedom of expression" and a role in defining exactly what will be restricted. Apparently the dress code that the District developed "include[d] items that have nothing to do with violence and robbery."

EBAYC youth also came up with a violence-prevention proposal. They asked the City of Oakland to devote one percent of the general fund budget to programs for youth, which would raise the total spent on youth programs by a factor of ten. EYES' violence-prevention proposal includes "drastic decrease" of media violence and elimination of stereotypes of youth because "Youth will not stop committing violence if violence is what is expected from them." To *end* violence oppression must be addressed, which means "giving every human being good support . . . and the possibility of having a good life." It also means including young

people in making rules and laws and full participation in the
political system.

Youth and youthworkers agree that youth should have a
much greater role in developing the violence-prevention strate-
gies. Sherman Spears of Youth Alive!/Teens on Target says "I
really wish that kids were given more opportunity to be involved
in the solution for violence because they are the ones that are most
at risk and they genuinely know what needs to be done to reduce
the violence that affects their lives." [in Children's Express 1994:
38] Domico Curry of Seattle Youth Involvement says "you need an
understanding from youth that they can make a difference." [23]
Spears and Curry were both involved in violence before becoming
youthworkers.

Dealing with violence will require a complex set of policies
that address youths' many legitimate needs, their communities'
disempowerment, and the U.S.' relationships with its own citi-
zens and with those of other countries, particularly as an increas-
ing proportion of urban youth are refugees from drug wars and
other U.S. military operations in Latin America.

Police & Courts

Youth propose that police, like teachers, need to be from
the community. Some just say "We need more cops of color!"
[Children's and Youth Advocacy Day]. Others say that police
must be required to live in the community. A youthworker says
"Local police. They have to live in the neighborhood. That would
help us because we get a lot of police brutality where the kids get
beat up a lot by the police here."

Youth at Children's and Youth Advocacy Day presented two
police problems that need to be addressed. First the police "as-
sume that everyone with a beeper is a drug dealer" and second,
people "have to wait hours for police to answer our calls." It seems
that the police have their own priorities and interpretations of
public safety that do not match the expectations of the people in
the communities they "serve".

Youth Vote 1994 asked youth what the mission of the Youth
Guidance Center (the local facility for detention of youth who
have committed crimes) should be. Sixty nine percent of youth

said it should be rehabilitation rather than punishment. At some schools 93% of students voted for rehabilitation. Youthworkers are also interested in the development of alternatives to incarceration, particularly education programs.[4]

Youth themselves are providing a solution to gangs through the truce movement. Youth say "We started this mess, now we got to clean it up." Some of the truce organizations are involved in entrepreneurship development programs. Unfortunately, many adults are not in support. Police officers take credit for reductions in violence achieved by gang truces. Chicago's "major media, municipal officials and the police department have all criticized the gang peace summit as a scam designed to give credibility to what is essentially a criminal enterprise." [Muwakkil 1993] Youthworkers, policymakers, social service agencies, adults, and youth need to support the gang truces in every possible way.

Conclusion

The policy implications of this research support the conclusions of many other researchers. Racism is an incredibly destructive force that looms large in youths' lives, institutionalized and condoned by schools, police forces, courts, and our national and local economies. Dignified employment opportunities may be the single most powerful policy that could be brought to bear on the situation of youth of color. AIDS education in schools is essential. Schools must teach the histories of people of color and hire teachers of color. Youth need safe places and activities in their communities at all hours. Police must live in the communities they patrol. Criminal justice must be focused on developing the people in its care. Gang prevention should follow the lead of gang members' own approach to peace. This study of youth political texts shows that young people of color can make and present policy analyses and proposals to address the urgent issues in their lives and communities.

The federal 1994 AmeriCorps funding gave no grants to organizations "to organize politically, or assault more intractable social ills." Applicants had to argue that the service would produce "direct and demonstrable results." Even staff of AmeriCorps are torn between solving individual problems and working for

institutional change. A staff member tells the parable of saving babies from the river and eventually going upstream to find out why there are babies in the river. Nobody would want to let the babies drown in favor of searching out the cause. But it's one thing to catch the babies while wading upstream to the source. It's another thing for youth-serving organizations to put an incredible amount of energy into competing with one another for funding for their baby-catching technology while leaving the political challenges unmade. "It's not just the deaths that we need to be concerned about, it's the loss of outrage." [John Calhoun, Exec Dir of Youth as Resources, in Children's Express 1994: 34]

Yakini Ajanaku, a Boston youthworker, explains that programs must understand their challenge as more than just enabling youth to survive the environment and resist the temptation of the streets: "Making it . . . only means that they got into the system. The tragedy about the [ones who do is] they aren't equipped to come back out and help the other[s]." Ajanaku's idea is that individual development must be defined as developing the ability to contribute to the community's struggle for transformative change.

The Black Panthers and the Young Lords spent the morning providing breakfast for children and the rest of the day in militant activities confronting racist and classist structures. Meeting needs and struggling for political change were seen as equally urgent by these community development organizations. Organizations that support youth in producing political texts provide meaningful activity in a safe place that develops their political skills, attempting to prepare young people to change the things that need to be changed.

Notes

1. This approach was developed in response to the insightful criticism of Michael James and the suggestions of Christina Valdez.
2. The term 'teen' is frequently used by youth policy organizations. We will use it when referring to statements made specifically about this group. Otherwise, we will continue to use 'youth'.
3. Youth VOICE is a youth policy leadership group associated with The Entrepreneurial Development Institute. Their policy proposals were developed from a series of speak outs (at which no one over the age of 30 could speak) and planning meetings.

4. The following organizations are advocating for alternative sentencing: National Center on Institutions and Alternatives, Alexandria VA, Campaign for an Effective Crime Policy, Washington DC.

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