NorthStar Youth Worker Fellowship
A collection of working papers

2017
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Thank You!
VALUE OF PARENTAL RELATIONSHIP IN YOUTH ORGANIZING EFFORTS

By Jazmyn Becker

She was at a doctor’s appointment when her daughter told her, “Ma we have to go.” Toya Graham rushed down to Mondawmin Mall, where a large protest was growing in response to the murder of African American man, Freddie Gray. Many felt the killing was unjust—another police murder in the black community. When Toya arrived, she saw her only son standing in the median. He had a black mask on his face and she thought he was throwing rocks at the very police force who had killed Freddie Gray just days before. With helicopters swirling and police shields everywhere, Toya grabbed her son and began whooping him in public for being at a protest she had told him not to attend. This video was caught on camera and received over 8 million views on YouTube. People from around the world commended this “Baltimore Mom of the Year” for physically disciplining her child and taking him away from the protest. Social media messages read, “Mom of the Year #ToyaGraham smacked her son after she sees him participating in violent riots in #Baltimore” (Van Susteren, 2015, May 1, 4:33 p.m.), and “Why is America celebrating the beating of a black child?” (Patton, 2015, April 29). Though initial reactions applauded her discipline, interviews later revealed that Graham was doing what she knew best to protect her son from danger. “That’s my only son, and at the end of the day, I don’t want him to be a Freddie Gray. But to stand up there and vandalize police officers, that’s not justice” (CBS News, 2015, April 28).

When examining Graham’s statement it is evident that multiple factors are at play. Though Toya Graham was upset with the way her son was acting, she also acknowledged that police have not always been protectors of African Americans. In an interview with Fox News she said, “Well, before Freddie Gray, there was always hostility towards a lot of the residents and the police officers. They are here to protect and serve us, but we are also human beings first. And a lot of times we don’t get that respect from the police officers.” (Graham, 2015).

As unrest grows in the United States, more youth are actively involved in organizing, to speak up and speak out for their rights. There is a delicate balance for parents in this situation. Parents might support their child’s desire to advocate for their rights, but they must also consider protective factors necessary to ensure safety. Youth workers are entrusted to support youth in organizing efforts, and consider similar protective factors for overall safety and wellbeing of the youth. A violation of parental trust is detrimental to the family, the youth organization, and the youth organizing efforts at large. For youth workers to effectively support youth organizing efforts, they must build relationships with the families. This relational approach not only strengthens the developmental ties between parent and child, but can also increase the impact of youth organizing.

This paper explores the value of including parents in the youth organizing process. The term families is used in association with a young person or minor and their primary caregiver with whom they have a strong relational bond, and in most cases live together. It is understood however, that families can be composed in a variety of ways. The term parent refers to the primary caregiver of a young person and encompasses all relationships that mirror or are a reflection of a traditional parent–child relationship.
**WHAT IS YOUTH ORGANIZING?**

The type of engagement a youth organization offers can vary across a large range. As depicted in Figure 1, the framework of a youth organization can be broadly defined within five categories (Edwards, 2000).

![Figure 1. Youth Engagement Continuum](image)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Youth Services Approach</th>
<th>Youth Development</th>
<th>Youth Leadership</th>
<th>Civic Engagement</th>
<th>Youth Organizing</th>
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<tr>
<td>Defines young people as clients</td>
<td>Provides services and support, access to caring adults and safe spaces</td>
<td>Includes components of youth development approach plus:</td>
<td>Includes components of youth development and youth leadership plus:</td>
<td>Includes components of youth development and youth leadership and civic engagement plus:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provides services to address individual problems and pathologies of young people</td>
<td>Provides opportunities or growth and development of young people</td>
<td>Builds in authentic youth leadership opportunities within programming and organization</td>
<td>Engages young people in political education and awareness</td>
<td>Builds a membership base</td>
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<tr>
<td>Programming defined around treatment and prevention</td>
<td>Meets young people where they are</td>
<td>Helps young people deepen historical and cultural understanding of their experiences and community issues</td>
<td>Builds skills and capacity for power analysis and action around issues young people identify</td>
<td>Involves youth as part of core staff and governing body</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supports youth/adult partnerships</td>
<td>Builds young people’s individual competencies</td>
<td>Builds skills and capacities of young people to be decision makers and problem solvers</td>
<td>Begins to help young people build collective identity of young people as social change agents</td>
<td>Engages in direct action and mobilizing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provides age-appropriate support</td>
<td>Provides age-appropriate support</td>
<td>Youth participate in community projects</td>
<td>Engages young people in advocacy and negotiation</td>
<td>Engages in alliances and coalitions</td>
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<tr>
<td>Emphasizes positive self identity</td>
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Youth organizing is the practice of youth development partnered with strategies used by community organizers (Edwards, 2000). Youth define the community problem they want to address, and then collaborate with adults to enact change. Both youth advocacy and youth activism are categorized as youth organizing, though there are some distinct differences between the two. A youth activist is an individual that uses intentional action to bring about social change, political change, and economic justice, or
environmental wellbeing. This action is in support of, or opposition to, one side of an often-controversial argument. A youth advocate on the other hand, is one who speaks on behalf of a group often bringing the issue to light in spaces like lobbying and legislations (Grace, 2017). Both youth activists and youth advocates have overlapping roles and issues they may address, but it is important to define that both are encompassed within the framework of youth organizing.

**IMPORTANCE OF YOUTH ORGANIZING TO YOUTH ORGANIZATIONS**

Youth development refers to the overall physical, cognitive, and emotional development of youth through adolescence and into adulthood. Youth development can also be defined as the “process all young people undergo as they build the individual assets or competencies needed to participate in adolescence and adult life” (Edwards, 2000). Positively supporting development leads to stronger outcomes in adolescence through adulthood. Youth organizations should be focused on this positive development and broadly support youth in a variety of areas during these critical years. The facets of youth organizing (i.e., youth development, youth leadership, and civic engagement), provide youth a way to engage in direct impact for the community while also building critical character skills (Edwards, 2000).

![Figure 2. The YPQA Framework.](image)

Source: David P. Weikart Center for Youth Program Quality

It is important that a youth organization’s inherent structure and practice facilitate an environment that aligns with the needs of the youth engaged in the program. By including the opportunity for youth to organize, programs can meet the needs of the youth. This is also evident when examining the cohesion between the efforts of organizing and the outcomes in the Youth Program Quality (YPQA) framework. This widely used framework addresses how a youth worker could work towards program quality. The YPQA framework (as depicted in Figure 2) summates that creating a safe and supportive environment, where
Youth can interact, engage, and take safe risks, helps to foster positive youth development (Smith, 2005). Youth organizing parallels the YPQA framework: in youth organizing youth have a high level of voice and advocacy, and safe, supportive environment from adult peers is required in order for youth organizing to be effective.

The end goal for youth workers is to help young people be successful and engaged in their community. The YPQA framework also models this level of engagement by giving young people the opportunity to plan, have choices, and reflect on the choices they have made. Youth organizing aligns perfectly with goals of engagement, as leading and organizing a youth-led movement requires planning, making key choices, and reflecting on how those choices expand or lessen the impact of the movement.

Youth organizing should be important to youth organizations because it provides an often-ignored group of our community the opportunity to lead autonomously with their own ideas and voice. Supporting this large population segment in youth organizing efforts leads to the betterment of the entire community. For example, in July of 2016, four African American teenagers led a massive sit-in protest in Chicago. Through the social media platform, Twitter, these young women called for a protest against police brutality and gun violence. The event drew more than 1,000 protesters, with more than 200 of whom identified as teenagers (Chang, 2016). The protest shut down the Magnificent Mile and drew national attention. When asked how 17-year-old activist Eva Lewis prepared for the rally she responded, “They [her peers] hadn’t organized a real protest, a big thing, before. I hadn’t organized one either, except I’d been behind the scenes for some of the Chicago Public Schools protests that have happened this year, helping with press releases, inclusivity, stuff like that. So I offered to help” (Chang, 2016). Though there were many influences on Eva Lewis’s journey to activism, she notes in her bio that she was a member of an African American Girl Scout Troop for ten years; some of the empowerment and knowledge Lewis had to lead the sit-in may be attributed to this youth organization. Youth organizing was a crucial launch point to Lewis’s personal and professional passions, and now in addition to running a nonprofit, she writes for Teen Vogue on topics encompassing social justice and equality (Chicago Foundation for Women, 2017). As Lewis says best, “It was so overwhelming initially. We thought it would be big because of all the people on social media, but it hadn’t resonated. Because we’re like, small—we’re 16 and 17—it just hadn’t resonated that we could do something like that. And then we did” (Chang, 2016, para 17).

Youth organizations should be providing the space for young people to be involved in organizing. There are certain skills and areas of expertise to explore in youth organizing, which equip them to lead with their own voice in the activist arena. They also need support from adults when it comes to navigating the current environment, due to the adultist structure of the systems in power. In the Youth for Black Lives Chicago sit-in, the entire movement was organized and promoted by teens but did require partnership with police and permit issuance, requiring adult support. “We did it with no adult help. Someone from BYP100 [Black Youth Project 100] contacted us the day before and asked if we wanted help—they told us about lawyers and [provided] the medics [for the day of], but that’s it. We were able to advocate with the police, we worked together with them. There was one officer, Officer Ryan, I think? He was really nice and understanding, and wanted to make sure we had control of everything” (Chang, 2016, para 16). The adults in this situation could have denied Lewis and her peers navigational support and could have made the protest even more challenging. Instead, the adult-youth partnership created a space in which youth could share their voice and an important message without additional upheaval. Supporting youth is what youth organizations are created to do. Youth organizing provides an organic way in which to support the youth while developing key skills.
Family Involvement in Youth Organizing

Many youth worker advocates agree that supporting adult–youth partnerships in youth organizations is key to success. However, some may argue that involving parents will stifle the efforts of youth-led action and advocacy. In truth, when disseminating what parents provide developmentally in relationships, it is found that their actions actually strengthen a youth’s ability to excel in youth organizing efforts.

There are many studies done within both the school and after-school setting that conclude that family engagement can improve program outcomes, retention, and community, but few look at this engagement in relation to youth organizing. In order to investigate the outcomes of family involvement and youth organizing, it is necessary to explore the importance of the parent–child relationship. Though not all youth have the same relationship with their families, the family dynamic has an extraordinary impact on an individual’s overall development, autonomy, and much more. The interactions between parent and child cannot be ignored if a youth worker’s goal is to support the whole child.

Researchers found that many family engagement efforts are often focused on getting families to support the youth organizations and “overlook the one thing about which parents care deeply and that can powerfully benefit their children’s development: relationships in the home” (Pekel, Roehlkepartain, Syvertsen, & Scales, 2015, p. 3). In 2015 a Search Institute study surveyed over 1000 parent–child relationships, and concluded that the quality of this relationship was 10 times more powerful than demographics (race, family composition, and family income) in predicting whether a young person would develop critical character strengths needed for school and adult life (Pekel et al., 2015). Five essential actions were identified from the perspective of youth, which aid in the overall healthy development and wellbeing of the young person in relationships:

1. Express care: Show that you like me and want the best for me.
2. Challenge Growth: Insist that I try to continuously improve.
3. Provide Support: Help me complete tasks and achieve goals.
4. Share Power: Hear my voice and let me share in making decisions.
5. Expand Possibility: Expand my horizons and connect me to opportunities.

(Pekel et al., 2015)

When reviewing these facets of developmental relationships, it is evident that they are complementary to the YPQA framework. Families and youth workers have similar action items that improve relationships and the positive development for youth. Developmental relationships are the cornerstone to youth success and support youth organizing efforts, and families are often the best at fostering them over an enduring period. Youth workers and families have mutually reinforcing actions they can take to support youth, and youth organizing provides the means by which to do it. Figure 3 depicts an alignment or balance between the YPQA domains and the five essential actions identified in the Search Institute study.

By collaborating more with families, we are supporting our youth because this relationship is so powerful and dynamic to the overall wellbeing of the child. Youth workers can make a difference, but if they want to make a lasting impact, they have to expand their thinking beyond one-hour programming sessions, and analyze the relationships and structures that affect a young person’s overall development. One interesting finding from the Search Institute study was that parents are taking the actions needed to form these strong developmental relationships. However, as shown in Figure 4, the actions of sharing power and expanding possibility are evident less frequently in the parent–child relationship (Pekel et al., 2015). This makes sense in regards to sharing power, because often the parent–child relationship is hierarchical and does not prioritize sharing equitable space and power.
Figure 3. Domains of the YPQA framework align with Search Institute’s five essential actions.

![Diagram showing alignment between YPQA and the five essential actions: Engagement, Interactive, Supportive, Safe, Familial Developmental Relationships: Share Power and Challenge Growth, Expand Possibility, Provide Support, Express Care.]

Figure 4 Developmental Relationships in Families

Percentages of the parenting adults surveyed whose responses yielded a score of 75% or higher (proposed as an optimal level) for the five essential actions in developmental relationships.

- Express Care: 83%
- Challenge Growth: 72%
- Provide Support: 75%
- Share Power: 41%
- Expand Possibilities: 36%

Source: Pekel et al. (2015)
Youth organizing can serve as the bridge between youth organizations and families within these two facets. Within the youth organizing framework, sharing power is innate because it cannot be a youth-led movement if youth do not have a voice and the ability to share in the decision making. Giving parents the safe and supportive space to interact with and support their children within a youth organizing model helps create a place where youth can share power with their parents. In addition, youth organizing expands a new world of opportunities for youth and families because they are able to support their children in their passions and hopes. Once youth organizations realize that families are partners in organizing efforts, they will be even more impactful, with a strong foundation for youth to share power and expand leadership opportunities.

**CASE STUDY: POWER OF FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS IN THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT**

Families have been the cornerstone of many young activist efforts, and can help or hinder young people’s efforts to make radical change. Parents are credited for engaging and expanding the possibilities for their children by supporting organizing efforts that took place the 1960s Civil Rights Movement. Several people were involved in the Civil Rights Movement at a young age and with the support of parents or adults in their life. President Freeman Hrabowski of the University of Maryland, Baltimore County joined the Civil Rights Movement at just 12 years of age, marching in the Birmingham Children’s Crusade of 1963. He was jailed for five days with other young children and experienced harassment from white men, who spat in his face. While in prison, Dr. King came to visit and told him, “What you do this day will have an impact on children yet unborn” (“Freeman A Hrabowski III,” 2017, “Early life and education,” para 2). This support from an adult had a profound impact on Hrabowski. Because of his start in youth organizing, Hrabowski made fighting for African American rights his life mission. He has written books, taught, and now leads a university that champions for black students. Reflecting on the moment with Dr. King, Hrabowski says, “I’ll never forget that. I didn’t even understand it, but I knew it was powerful, very powerful” (Youth in the Civil Rights Movement, n.d.). One must not forget that in order for Hrabowski to be a part of the Birmingham Children’s Crusade, he first had to get parental support. Though little is written about this interaction, one source mentions that Hrabowski had to convince his parents to let him join the march with his friends. His parents were both schoolteachers at some point, to which a social justice influence in the home may be attributed. He also comes from a generational line which fought for freedom; he is the third “Freeman” in his family line, the first being his grandfather, who was born a free man (“Freeman A Hrabowski III,” 2017). It is clear that without parental support, Hrabowski’s impact as both a young person and on future generations would have been very different, if his parents had not supported his youth organizing efforts in the 1960s.

Parents’ political involvement, their ability to provide access and resources surrounding political activity, and their educational attainment all can have an impact on the child at a very young age. For example, one survey found that if a young person’s parent had protested the Vietnam War, the youth was more likely to protest the Gulf War in 1991 (Donnelly, 2006). Parents’ experience in activism can be an asset to youth organizations and provide even greater awareness and grounding for young people involved in such movements. As stated in Parental Influences on Youth Activism, “Parents also shape the type and depth in which their youth involve themselves in organizing efforts. Parents encourage their youth to join certain organizations, hold certain political values, and model how to engage in this rhetoric. Though young people don’t always mimic their family values, often the influence from decades of rearing as well as influence during very influential times during development, result in some level of affect”(Donnelly, 2006).
Parents can also hinder youth organizing efforts and, as guardians, may limit their child’s involvement. For example, during the 1964 Freedom School recruitment a study was done on the number of “no-shows” to see what was inhibiting young people from attending. Freedom Schools were the massive effort to support voter registration for African Americans during the 1960s. Parental opposition was the number one reason why young people did not show, accounting for 25% of absent registrants (Donnelly, 2006). Imagine how Freedom Schools may have ignited, if those parents were instead seen as viable stakeholders in the recruitment and involvement in the movement. Obviously, there were additional factors at play during the Civil Rights Movement, including racism, classism, and parenting approaches, but it is clear that historical context continually shows that when the family is a part of the organizing process, engagement in organizing efforts are often expanded.

**PARTNERSHIP IN YOUTH ORGANIZING**

Too few families are asked be active partners in youth organizing efforts. This can result in negative outcomes including miscommunication and sometimes removal of youth from the organization. Youth organizing is where parents and youth workers can build developmental relationship with youth and share a diversity of thought to enrich the process.

**THE RELATIONSHIP WITH THE PARENT IS EQUALLY IMPORTANT TO THE YOUTH ORGANIZATION**

In community organizing, one would never say that certain community members were more important than others, because it is known that collective impact and diversity of thought is what provides a foundation for the movement. The most effective grassroots movements engage people of varying background and age (Sherrod, 2006). If a youth organization has a poor relationship with the family, it will not be able to support the youth in the best means possible. Parents just like any human being, have different ways in which they like to engage and interact with the youth worker. Accepting the relationship they want with the youth program as well as with the youth needs to be understood. Building a relationship with the parent also models to the youth the importance of sharing power and expanding possibilities. This reinforces actionable steps youth need to take in relationships as well.

**SUCCESSFUL YOUTH ADVOCACY REQUIRES ADULT PARTNERSHIP IN SPECIFIC WAYS**

Sherrod (2006) noted that youth organizing efforts are most successful when adults foster motivation, build capacity, and create learning opportunities. It is not that youth cannot perform these roles themselves, but when operating in an adultist system, access as minors is often limited. When adults are able to use their networks and access to support youth in these roles it can lead to greater success. The youth worker does not have to do this work alone! Parents have key skills and abilities within this arena as well. By collaborating, it increases social capital and access, expanding possibilities for the youth involved.

**THE YOUTH MUST BE AT THE CENTER OF THE WORK**

Young people are amazing individuals with a unique lens on how to solve the issues in present day society. Valuing their input, ability to strategize and take on roles will create an environment where youth can exhibit that they oftentimes have much higher competencies in areas than their adult peers. However, youth workers should not be asking and working in partnership alone. Parents should be involved in these varying processes so that they too can dismantle adultism while supporting and keeping youth safe. Asking the youth to identify their needs in order for them to fulfill their goals and intended outcomes helps to unpack how and where the parent—youth worker relationship fits within the youth organizing framework. In an interview following the Youth for Black Lives Chicago Sit-In, Eva Lewis observed, “I’m 17 years old.
Although I have a lot of ideas, and I’m an activist, I’m aware constantly that I’m a minor, and that I don’t want to put myself in a dangerous situation” (Chang, 2016, para. 8).

**CONCLUSIONS**

Youth organizing is a dynamic way to contribute to the positive development of youth while making a positive impact on the community. Parents care about their child as well as the community, and often have limited touchpoints with youth organizations. Youth organizing provides the essential connection needed between youth organization and parent. Families have generational influence on the youth that are changing this world. If the parent–youth worker relationship is ignored the chasm hinders community impact. As youth activist Eva Lewis said, “Oh yeah. I learned everything I know from them [my parents]. And my grandfather, too—he just passed away. He was the first person to teach me that my gender didn’t matter, that I shouldn’t be ashamed of my gender at all. He empowered me. He taught me about the system young, about racism. [My family] taught me that I should never think I am less than, I just have to work harder to be recognized for my work” (Chang, 2016, para. 10). Valuing the parent–youth worker relationship creates an environment that fosters developmental relationships for all involved. When young people like Toya Graham’s son feel the need to “do something” in response to this world’s issues, there should be a welcome and open space that both mother and son can go to, to make change together. With the current unrest in the 21st century, the next large civil rights movement may be upon us soon. Youth will be taking a stand for what they believe is right. Youth organizations must value the youth worker–parent relationship to ensure this effort is expanded and continually keeps the youth at the center of the work.
REFERENCES


ABOUT THE AUTHOR

JAZMYN BECKER is the Girls Inc. Program Coordinator at YWCA Minneapolis where she oversees the Out of School Time Program, serving over 200 girls ages 4th-12th grade. She also co-supervises staff, recruits and trains Girls Inc. volunteers, and manages school and community based partnerships in relation to after school programming. She also leads the Girls Inc. Eureka! Internship Program during the summer. Prior to the YWCA Minneapolis, she was a Challenge Detroit Fellow and a Teach for America Corps Member. Jazmyn is an alumnae of Illinois Wesleyan University and enjoys volunteering at her church and traveling.
DEAR STUDENTS: YOU CAN RUN YOUR SCHOOLS

A letter from a youth worker to students in positions of educational leadership

By Grayson Carr

Over the past five years a few opportunities have been created locally that allow students to give input on education policies: Minneapolis Public School Board now has a high school appointee, Richfield School Board created four high school appointee positions, and Saint Paul Public Schools created the 13-member Student Engagement and Advancement Board. The Student Advisory Committee (SAC) has been advising the Minnesota Department of Education since 2012 as a committee of the Minnesota Youth Council (MYC), a group of 36 eighth through 12th graders from around Minnesota and the only legislatively mandated “voice of youth” to a state legislature in the country. The SAC weighs in on laws that affect schools and students in Minnesota.

Each of these groups and student appointees are doing powerful work despite being in environments that are not used to working with young people. Additionally, student appointees are allowed to hold only positions that do not have teeth; students on public school boards, for example, do not have a vote, are limited to one-year terms, and are chosen by adults rather than young people. When MYC votes on whether or not to go on record as supporting or not supporting a bill, the final vote does not force lawmakers to make changes to the bill or have much impact on whether or not it passes in the legislature. As of now, these student positions are toothless; any impact they have on educational policies is due to adults who chose to listen to students’ requests. As it stands, some young people in formal positions of leadership in Minnesota’s education system have the channels to give their say on some issues, but the power to make decisions about young people continues to rest with adults.

In this reality, how can you build authentic student power that does not rely on adult goodwill? There is no example that people in power benignly and spontaneously bequeath equal power upon people least represented in government to a lasting extent (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2009). And you do not need to be content with being relegated to an advisory position only, hoping that your actions and work one day convince adults to grant young people equal power. This is not surprising; the only times in our country when people underrepresented in government have gained society-wide rights was when they disrupted business as usual. Therefore, to turn the position you occupy as a student advisor in Minnesota’s education system into actual power, it is necessary to organize other students in your schools until you build enough power to make demands, disrupt, and make change. In other words: youth radical organizing.

DEFINITIONS AND ASSUMPTIONS

Before opening the doors unique to radical organizing, let us get on the same page for a few definitions and assumptions.

WHAT IS YOUTH?

What makes you a youth? Or more precisely, when do you stop being a youth and become an adult? Policies around the world mark the changing from being a youth to an adult at 16, 18, 26 (Altschuler, Stangler, Berkley, & Burton, 2009) or 35 (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2009) years old. Not exactly a clear answer.

Maybe being a youth is based on rights granted at a certain age. But which age? You can vote at age 18, at 21 you can buy alcohol and run for school board. You can’t run for a seat in the U.S. House of Representatives
until the age of 25. Under the Affordable Care Act you are no longer allowed to be on your parent or
guardian’s health insurance after you turn 27. Yet if you’re convicted of a felony when you’re still a teenager,
you may be sentenced as an adult. Age-based rights do not give a clear answer either.

Some argue that youth is the stage when a young person’s brain develops quickly and cite that
developmental stage as a reason why you should not be able to vote at 17 or 16 in the United States, but you
are able to vote at 18. Brain development continues well into one’s 20s, or even the early 30s (Wallis, 2013)
and yet adults are not required to prove brain function or development to vote.

What about the idea of maturity? Maturity seems about as hard to define as youth! Yet, we have all met
some immature adults just as we have met friends and classmates who not only behave maturely but also do
mature things like work two jobs or take care of siblings and/or their own children.

So if youth cannot be defined by age, behavior, law, or development, what is it? Youth is a social construct.
Like race or gender, it is a term and set of prejudices that are attached to people. These prejudices have real
effects, but once you start digging deeper into the differences that supposedly set one socially constructed
group apart from another, the distinctions that treatment and rights are based upon become fuzzy and
eventually disappear entirely.

I spend time on this because if youth is defined socially, there is no real way you are supposed to act! As a
young person you are not a youth. Instead, you do youth. In fact, what we now think of as youth has not
been around forever, its foundation comes from child labor and compulsory school laws passed in the first
half of the 1900s (Schuman, 2017). Schissel (2008) states, “to restrict youth from the labor market...Their
restriction from productive society accompanied a shift in the way we thought about children and youth
from economic assets to economic liabilities” (p.24). Youth became something that needed to be controlled,
kept in place, and protected. The way we think of youth is the result of economic policies and political
maneuvers, not something intrinsic to one’s age. While it is a social construct, societal shifts translate into
real effects, similar to how race or gender have effects that are often discriminatory. This is often called
adultism, or when adults are more privileged than young people. Like all –isms, one way adultism’s power
comes out is through language. How many of these adultist behaviors have you observed?

- An adult thinking that you owe them because they gave you the basics of life.
- Young people have fewer rights than adults.
- Mandatory attendance and no-phone policies.
- Being paid in pizza, but not cash.

If you feel that in your experience adults would not be held to one or more of these standards, that is
adultism.

While I do not reference the construct of youth from here on out, the belief in young people leveraging
power and the belief that you can run your schools is built entirely on the understanding that there is
nothing intrinsic to youth that prevents you from taking power and running your schools or invalidates your
desire to have power in decisions that affect you.

A note about language. I use “young people” when talking about people in the eighth through 12th grade age
range and “youth” when referring to a wider range of young people and social class who are subject to
similar prejudices and political disenfranchisement.
Dear Students: You Can Run Your Schools

**WHAT IS RADICAL ORGANIZING?**

Many people have mixed feelings about anything called “radical,” but by radical organizing I simply mean **two or more people, coming together democratically, to change systemic power dynamics in their workplace or society.** This definition contains some deep implications, so let us unpack it. Components are intentionally out of order to allow them to build on each other.

**Two or more...** Organizing happens when people come together to help each other accomplish what they would not otherwise have been able to accomplish by themselves.

**Change...power dynamics...** Everyone has been organized in some way or another. If you have ever been asked to carry groceries, move furniture, dress a sibling, or talk to someone for a friend, you have been organized. However, these examples do not change power dynamics so they are not radical organizing.

By contrast, a North Carolina student with whom I worked changed power dynamics in her classroom by building enough support with her classmates until they were able to apply pressure on their teacher to make change. This student was bored in her U.S. History class and felt disconnected from the material so she asked her teacher whether she could co-teach a lesson about Native history in North Carolina. After the teacher declined, the student talked first with her friends, who were also bored, and then with other classmates. These students decided, completely outside of class time, that they would get more out of the class if they could co-teach on parts they felt passionate about. A couple of weeks later they presented their request to the teacher along with a schedule of the upcoming lesson plans with which students wanted to be involved. In this case the victory was easy and the teacher agreed to the students’ requests. If she had not agreed, however, the students were prepared to simply stop being students. No work. No listening. No following directions. Just a sit-in during class. They reasoned that it would be too difficult for the teacher and administration to suspend an entire class, and the teacher would not want to hurt her reputation. This was an example where power dynamics were shifted due to radical organizing.

**Systemic...** Is all direct action radical organizing? Around 1,300 Forest Lake students walked out to protest the city’s decision to disband the police force. During the middle of a Tuesday, students from the high school, both junior high schools, and a charter school left class and walked half a mile to the city center. This was a demonstration that was organized by students and which generated a huge march from four different schools in a short amount of time (Devine, 2017). Was it radical organizing though? As I define it, no. It was two or more students, and it changed power dynamics, but it did not shift _systemic_ power dynamics. Police are a powerful force in the United States, protected by a legal system that rarely convicts criminal officers. As an institution, police forces were created as strong arms of factory owners or white slaveholders (Kappeler, n.d.; Potter, n.d.), and since then they have consistently used their power to arrest, imprison or kill people of color, immigrants, and youth (Alexander, 2016; Hahn & Jeffries, 2003). Young people are more likely to be charged with a felony than adults (Bureau of Justice Statistics, n.d.) and feel the effects of imprisonment more acutely (Campaign for Youth Justice, 2016). They also have the highest rates of poverty and homelessness (Bassuk, DeCandia, Beach, & Berman, 2014). Young people are the center of the school-to-prison pipeline. Youth have been disempowered for at least as long as police have been empowered in some of the worst ways. Young people marching in favor of police officers, even if the officers are “good people” and “good community members,” do not shift systemic power. In the case of the Forest Lake walkout, the students’ direct action reinforced components of a racist, sexist, and ageist system.

Since the political and capitalist economic systems in the United States are not only built on exploitation of humans but actually require it in the form of a permanent and racialized underclass (Gilens & Page, 2014; Isenberg, 2017), I consider radical organizing to be inherently and necessarily democratic and leftist. Using
the tools of organizing to build power in support of populations already systemically empowered (i.e. white males for the most part) is not radical organizing.

Similarly, the prerequisite of working for equitable shifts in systemic power means that radical organizing requires people to apply pressure on decision makers and other leverage points through direct action. The large scale societal shifts seen in modern times have come about through direct action: boycotts, slowdowns, marches, blockades, sit-ins, and shutdowns, to name a few (Direct Action Everywhere, n.d.). Court cases, legal decisions, and laws benefitting populations not part of the capitalist elite took place only after direct action applied pressure to decision makers to force their decision in favor of workers, people of color, and youth.

**Coming together democratically...** The direction and frame of radical organizing as working for the empowerment of people systemically kept from formal power also gives direction to how organizers can structure their group, committee, or organization to be most empowering. Radical organizers cannot have exclusive or concentrated power amongst themselves, and democratic decision making, in my experience, allows the most potential for inclusivity, individual commitment, and group ownership. This does not mean that radical organizing structures need be undefined. Max Hoiland, a power theorist and longtime organizer with the radical union, Industrial Workers of the World, concludes that successful organizing requires a structure that is defined and mixes both formal and informal organizing, along with essential features like recruitment and skills development and social cohesion (Hoiland, 2017).

**WHAT IS YOUTH RADICAL ORGANIZING?**

Predictably, youth radical organizing occurs when two or more young people come together democratically to confront and shift systemic power dynamics, but with a couple added twists. The first is that youth radical organizing confronts and shifts systemic power *as it relates to youth and the interdependent identity of student*. All over the world, young people are involved in all sorts of organizing, radical and otherwise, on issues in which they have a stake by virtue of being people. These issues inevitably have ties to power dynamics around youth. Take for instance the Women’s March on Washington, which, if anything, was a march against patriarchy. Wait, how does patriarchy relate to age-based discrimination? Around the world, patriarchy and authoritarianism go hand in hand and feed each other (Brandt, 2012; Fink, 1995; Reich, 1946). The same reasoning that creates and supports patriarchy feeds into authoritarianism, and both power structures are extremely age-based. By contrast, youth radical organizing positions itself with age-based power dynamics at the center. This is not a binary either/or, but rather a spectrum. For example, Sierra Club’s Student Coalition and Summer Grassroots Training (SPROG1) is run by young people for young people and is all about building organizing skills for young people in an environmental justice context. Does training involve re-orienting your identity as a social construct? No, but also yes. When I participated we did not spend time on youth as a social construct, but by not doing so and instead learning how to plan escalation timelines, send press releases, meet one-to-one with everyone from peers to legislators, and disrupt business as usual, we were empowered to just do.

One of the most powerful takeaways from SPROG was that young people *can* do the organizing. High school students planned the entire weeklong training and facilitated sessions more than eight hours a day, along with daily preparation and reflection time. Additionally, every meal was made by people who could easily fit inside the broad ‘youth’ age range. There were adult allies present but youth were clearly the ones with power. Adult allies never facilitated nor did they set themselves up as experts in any way. For the most part their presence was forgettable, a radical and jarring shift from what most of us experience day to day.

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1 Cool fact, in Danish “sprog” means language.
Here are some additional examples of youth radical organizing. Links to more information are included in the post script to this letter.

- Chile’s Penguin Revolutions of 2006 (Council on Hemispheric Affairs) and 2011 to 2013, as well as more recent protests (Radwin, 2016; Telesur, 2016a), all of which were and are coordinated by thousands of high school students across the country in support of educational equity (Cummings, 2017).
- Over the past year, high school students across Brazil have organized and occupied hundreds of schools in protest of austerity cuts (Prengaman & Dilorenzo, 2016; Telesur, 2016b).
- Youth Empowered in the Struggle (YES), the youth political arm of Voces de la Frontera, the Latinx rights organization based in Wisconsin, organizes school-based direct actions in support of immigrant and Latinx youth rights (Cersonsky, 2013; Voces de la Frontera, n.d.).
- The Philadelphia Student Union has been a group of high school students working for education equity over the past 20 years (Philly Student Union, n.d.).

Additionally, Minnesota students have conducted mass opt-outs of standardized testing and walked out of high schools in favor of Black Lives Matter (Collins & Olson, 2015). On top of all these, the Civil Rights Movement and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, Labor, Immigrant Rights, Women’s Rights, Native Rights Movement have all happened because of youth involvement.

I do not consider myself an expert on radical organizing so I hope you form your own conclusions, but from my limited experience, it seems like there are some areas to which (youth) radical organizing is adapting. First, organizing requires people power, an inherently easier task in urban areas where there are more people. Like technological developments and infrastructure, statewide decisions are often made in urban centers, leaving rural residents feeling out of the loop. Rural areas present different challenges for radical organizing since people and leverage points are so spread out (Armstead, Haines, Baker, Glandon, & Cook, 2008; Santiago, Gutierrez, & Soska, 2016; Stephens, 2016; Zucker, 2012).

Another difficulty some people have with radical organizing can be summed up by a high school student with whom I work. After talking about direct action in schools and the organizing required to make it happen the student said, “It just seems exhausting.” I laughed and replied, “Absolutely!” A major problem with organizers is burnout. Balance and self-care are vital in order to maintain energy and interest to keep working for victories. Organizers often seem motivated by anger, which is galvanizing and often appropriate given the discrimination they organize against, but which can also feel alienating to newcomers. However, organizing cultures are varied and students in MYC, school board appointments, and other adult-created advisory positions are in an advisory position within which radical organizing has not historically organized. As a student in an advisory position in Minnesota’s education system, you can apply pressure that other people cannot.

**YOU CAN ONLY GO UP**

Students occupying educational leadership positions do powerful and provocative work that makes Minnesota a more equitable place to live. This year alone SAC has written a white paper advocating for a user-driven education system, begun creating student bills of rights in a middle school and high school, and advocated for the SAC to be written into the budget of the Minnesota Department of Education to provide stipends for members. MYC has heard from lawmakers on bills about issues as varied as gender-neutral bathrooms, millions of dollars for Somali community development, funding for civic opportunities, supports for homeless students, voter registration, and affirmative consent to reduce sexual violence. Saint Paul’s
Student Engagement and Advancement Board (SEAB) has recommended a culturally relevant curriculum and increased school inclusivity; they have also surveyed students to find out what is important to them. These actions have resulted in some policy creation and I wholeheartedly believe this work creates a more diverse education system. However, adults retain exclusive power to make decisions, whether to act or not act on your recommendations, and the number of student positions, like the SAC or school board positions, has stagnated. This dynamic comes out in the opening and closing remarks of SEAB’s December 2016 presentation to the Saint Paul Public School Board:

**Adult staff member:** The role of SEAB is to amplify student voice in decision making at the Board and administrative level, not to abdicate the Board or the administration’s role.

**Student member:** SEAB has used a lot of nice words in this presentation, like “equity,” and “inclusivity.” But really what we are talking about is dismantling institutional racism, and ending institutional oppression. You ask what you can do to help us: listen to our recommendations. Look past the fact that we are students and we can advocate for ourselves, and really think about why we are making these specific recommendations. It is time for a shift in the way we do things. This is a perfect way to start. We look forward to working with the Board in the future on these things (Saint Paul Public Schools, n.d.).

Imagine for a moment a different setup wherein SEAB was a women’s rights organization presenting to a board that not only had sole decision making power over women’s rights but was also composed entirely of males (it should not be that difficult (Pence, 2017)). How can that amplify voice? The opening statement from the staff member quoted above essentially declares that we all agree that we should be hearing from students more, but let’s not get carried away and have them be equals. With that opening line, an adult turned everything that came afterwards into a dog and pony show.

The closing comment by the student member then sums up the disempowerment that student advisory members face: you can pour inordinate hours of work into a project that is vital to student well-being, you can work yourself ragged, you can have a world of evidence that shows your recommendation is good for everyone of any age, but you do not (yet) actually have decision-making power or leverage over the decision-maker. This imbalance of systemic power inherent to government is likely the outcome of the biosocial occurrence called “attention structures.” Primatologist J. B. Lancaster described the phenomenon of attention structures in 1975, observing that subordinate animals in a group seem to be going about their business but are very aware of what the dominant members of the group are doing. The dominant animals, however, usually pay little attention to the subordinates, unless their activity intrudes on them (Lancaster, 1975). Attention structures have since been observed in classrooms, when teachers give extra attention to students who come from social classes similar to their own. The concept of attention structures helps explain the fact that survivors of violence or people coming from generational trauma are hyperaware of social and power dynamics.

So what can you do? Where can you go from here to grow your own power for yourself? Organize! Disrupt! Form a concerted student organizing committee to build the actual, authentic student power that so many groups talk about. Are you an appointee to a school board without voting power or other student representatives that support you? Are you an SAC member who wants to leverage power over decision makers? There are around 427,000 eighth through 12th graders in Minnesota, far more than teachers, principals, and other school staff and the entire system runs only with your cooperation. Students are required to be in school. Imagine if students refused?
NEXt STEPS
There are people who are much more experienced in radical organizing than I am. Additionally, organizing
is a social endeavor and social endeavors are learned socially. In my experience, trainings, workshops, and
simulations build confidence and make seemingly overwhelming, big actions seem manageable and easy. It
makes sense that you might not know what to think about organizing at this point. It is not common to learn
about youth rights and adulthood. We learn about the product of democracy instead of learning by
participating in the process. Organizing is a skill just like learning how to navigate public transit systems,
swim, play video games, or switching how you talk with your friends versus your teacher. And like all skills
practicing makes it better. With that said, here are some basic steps and things to watch out for:

1. Find a buddy. Talking with other students, setting up meetings, sending reminders, and facilitating
meetings, all part of organizing, can create a big work load. Additionally, it is easy to feel alone at the
beginning when you are not sure which steps to take. Having a trusted friend with whom to split up
tasks, shoot around ideas, and provide mutual support makes organizing more effective all around.

2. Create an organizing group of other students. Radical organizing is all about getting groups of
people together to tip the scales of power in your favor. The goal should be to keep growing by
inviting and asking friends and classmates to bring their power into the group. Invite people into the
group with whom you feel trust and have had one-to-one meetings.

3. One-to-ones. A time-tested method of building an organizing group is meeting with people one-to-
one. A good rule of thumb is to listen and ask questions 80% of the time and talk 20% of the time.
Get to know them. What are they having issues with? How does that fit into the organizing group?

4. Gather contacts. Walkouts at South High School in Minneapolis and Forest Lake happened when
friends texted each other and news of the walkout spread over Snapchat and Facebook. Organizing
needs ways to spread the news. Telephone numbers, email addresses, handles, and even home
addresses all come into play when organizing. Keeping a list in a place where multiple organizers can
have access is also important. It not only lets you communicate, it is also a great backup if someone
drops their phone in the toilet or has it taken away.

5. Map and chart. Map out the physical and social/hierarchical structures of your school. Where do
students and teachers congregate? Where are the surveillance cameras? Who are the student
leaders? By student leaders I do not mean president of the student government. I mean people
whom others look up to. Which students are joined by family, by after-school activities, and by
cliques? Do this first with your organizing partner and then repeatedly once your group expands. By
mapping the physical and social space you can start to see who to try bringing into your organizing
circle.

6. Who are the targets and what are the goals? What identifiable goal are you trying to accomplish?
Who has decision-making power to reach that goal and what leverage points would influence them?

7. If staff want to help, they should organize staff first. Staff can certainly be supporters, but if they
want to get involved with organizing they should be focusing on other staff.

8. Be aware of how you are defining yourself and where those narratives come from. As an adult
youth worker I have noticed that other adults use language of praise when talking about students
with whom they work. For example, adults working with the nonprofit that manages MYC often talk
about its members being representatives, which is true to an extent; they are members of a legislative
committee that weighs in on bills. It would be one thing for students to organize student power
groups in their school and then elect representatives to the MYC, but it is another for young people
to apply to MYC and automatically become representatives to constituents that had no say in the
matter. When coupled with little skill development around organizing or representing, this flattering
language can actually be disempowering, particularly if it means the charismatic folks are taking more and more leadership (Stephen & Snyder, 2017).

9. **Know that you are powerful!** In many ways you are in potentially more powerful positions than school staff. Tapping into that power only requires some focus and direction. Schools are hierarchical and authoritarian. For example, principals rarely need to give a reason for reassigning a teacher to different grades or require that they teach in many different classrooms which sets them up for failure. There is a danger of being fired and losing income and health insurance. As students however, you do not have that limitation.

There are more components of organizing but for the sake of space I will stop. As students, in some ways you are in the perfect position to force school staff to start working with you rather than you working for them. You do not deserve to be toothless and you do not deserve to receive messages like “wait until you’re older,” or “respect the people with experience.” It is an improvement that student advisory positions exist, and in that regard I believe Minnesota is more student-friendly than other states, but adults advocated for the creation of these positions and since their creation there have not been significant advances in student power. You do tremendous work but as it stands now, there is no institutional, cultural, economic, or political pressure placed upon decision makers to listen to students. In a historical sense this is predictable. No group has gained power without fighting for it, and government entities have never preemptively made policies benefiting labor, women, trans and queer people, and people of color without being pressured from these groups (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2009). A government’s purpose is to control and stabilize its constituency, and a common tactic when underrepresented populations start getting loud is to put them on a committee. It makes noisemakers feel powerful but decision making power continues to rest with government. We cannot and should not expect this behavior to magically and spontaneously change. So, let’s disrupt, support each other, and build power.

In Solidarity and Love,

**GRAYSON CARR**

P.S. Some additional resources and groups to check out that could help you on your organizing path include:

- Industrial Workers of the World
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**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

**Grayson Carr** is the Education Partnerships Americorps Promise Fellow at Minnesota Alliance With Youth and the Minnesota Department of Education (MDE), in which he coordinates MDE's Student Advisory Committee to increase young student voice and power across Minnesota. When not working with young folks or thinking about civic cultures in Minnesota's education systems, you can safely assume he is likely hanging out with his partner or playing music.
ALIGNING YOUTH ORGANIZATIONS AND SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING

By Misha Evertz

INTRODUCTION

There is a wide range of approaches by which educators strive to support youth in developing the skills they need to exist as successful adults. The field of youth development contains a multitude of frameworks, strategies, and philosophies through which adults attempt to co-create with youth opportunities to develop these skills. Youth organizing and social-emotional learning (SEL) are two approaches within youth development that have seen increased prominence over the past 20 years. However, despite their prominence in a variety of youth programs and schools, they are typically treated as separate approaches to youth development.

In this paper I argue that these two sectors of youth work not only overlap, but complement each other in ways that benefit the healthy development of youth and that by viewing them as separate entities, both SEL programs and youth organizing programs are missing out on key aspects of holistic programming. If youth organizing programs intentionally incorporated aspects of SEL and similarly SEL programming incorporated aspects of civic youth work and organizing, both would benefit.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The field of youth development, focused on the development of competencies and skills needed to succeed in both adolescent and adult life, began to materialize in the United States in the 1980s (HoSang, 2003). A community-based mindset began to be applied in lieu of prevention models that were less holistic in nature and frequently revolved around pathologizing youth. Youth development took on the ideals of the arts, education, and cultural and community identity-forming experiences to provide a well-rounded approach to working with young people. Youth organizing and social-emotional learning, two approaches to youth work, have distinctly different histories.

COMMUNITY AND YOUTH ORGANIZING

Saul Alinsky is championed as the inventor of community organizing, with his work dating back to the 1930s (von Hoffman, 2011). His early work was in Chicago where he organized the Back of the Yards neighborhood and created the Industrial Areas Foundation that focused on training community organizers. He went on to write several books, the most well-known, Rules for Radicals, was published in 1971. This book opens with the phrase “What follows is for those who want to change the world from what it is to what they believe it should be. The Prince was written by Machiavelli for the Haves on how to hold power. Rules for Radicals is written for the Have-Not on how to take it away” (Alinsky, 1971, p. 4). This statement highlights Alinsky’s wholehearted confidence that community organizing was a way to influence and shift power dynamics and empower people to create change.

In the 1960s and 1970s, communities of color began adapting and modifying Alinsky’s community organizing model, giving way to the civil rights movement, the anti-war movements, the Chicano movement, the Black Power movement, and many more (Edwards, Johnson, & McGillicuddy, 2000). These movements stemmed from the principle that organizers were deeply rooted in the communities they were organizing.
However, within these movements young people were not given the same agency as other organizers; rather, young people were viewed as the people that would lead tomorrow’s movements, but were not yet fit to make decisions that concerned the tasks at hand.

From this reality sprang the idea that young people needed to have voice in the creation and implementation of the youth development programs in which they participated. Similar to the notion that spurred movements in the 1960s—that organizers are more effective in the communities where they are constituents—the shift to include youth voice and input in the design of youth programs gives agency and power to the people it affects. As Jason Warwin states in An Emerging Model for Working with Youth (Edwards et al., 2000),

If you had a problem in the black community, and you brought together a group of white people to discuss how to solve it, almost nobody would take that panel seriously...There’d probably be a public outcry. It would be the same thing for women’s issues or gay issues. Can you imagine a bunch of men sitting on the Mayor’s Advisory Committee on Women? But every day, in local arenas all the way to the White House, adults sit around and decide what problems youth have and what youth need, without ever consulting us (p. 6).

Beginning in the mid-1990s, organizations and programs specific to youth activism and organizing began springing up throughout the nation’s large urban centers, signifying the staying power of a movement for increased youth voice and involvement in communities (HoSang, 2003). In today’s society that values experience and age, youth are frequently viewed as the “have-nots” when it comes to agency, decision-making, and power. Applying Alinsky’s principles of community organizing to youth movements and youth organizing programs and campaigns today, it becomes clear that the organizing principles that he outlines are still relevant to the work. Civic youth work and youth organizing programs work to address this power dynamic by giving youth agency and decision-making power to create the change that they want to see in their communities. While the design of programs varies greatly, as do the foci of the organizing efforts, a common set of principles has emerged, focusing on multi-faceted approaches to change, civic education, and a reliance on staff/mentor organizers (HoSang, 2003).

**SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING**

Social-emotional learning is an area that has gained prominence in schools and youth programs in recent years, though roots of this concept go back much further. The concept began gaining traction in the modern era in New Haven, Connecticut through research at Yale University (Edutopia, 2011). The term “social and emotional learning” was coined in 1994 in a positive youth development meeting with researchers, educators, and youth advocates that later formalized to create the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) (Edutopia, 2011).

SEL is defined by Elias et al. (1997) as “the process through which children and adults develop the skills, attitudes, and values necessary to acquire social and emotional competence” (p. 2). In 2005, CASEL outlined five major goal areas for SEL-focused programs to work towards to foster development of these competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making. Figure 1 illustrates the short-term and behavioral and academic goals of SEL programs.
Practices to support social-emotional learning can vary, but frequently include a prescribed set of elements to foster acquisition and practice of SEL skills, represented by the acronym SAFE:

- **Sequenced**: Connected and coordinated activities to foster skill development.
- **Active**: Active forms of learning to help students master new skills and attitudes.
- **Focused**: A component that emphasized developing personal and social skills.
- **Explicit**: Targeting specific social and emotional skills.

Currently, SEL is a growing strategy being adopted into more school districts and institutions based on emerging research that reveals the importance of social-emotional skills for both academic and personal success. Studies show that students who build social-emotional skills such as perseverance and goal-setting are more likely to succeed in college and career (e.g., Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011). When students have growth mindset and confidence, they are more likely to persist through challenging academic situations and master critical skills.

Other models and frameworks are laying the groundwork for further SEL work in youth programs that operate outside of the school day, a more natural fit for SEL-focused initiatives. Youth work and out-of-school time programs frequently focus on holistic programming, as opposed to traditional school programs, which lends itself to greater focus on skills outlined in various SEL frameworks. These frameworks frequently focus on adult practitioners and how to best foster SEL in youth programs, versus in a school setting the where the CASEL framework focuses. Intentionality in this practice is key. Increasing the intentionality of SEL in programs has been shown to increase SEL outcomes and long-term impact for youth in the program (Blyth, Olson & Walker, 2017). By using the aforementioned SAFE framework, practitioners can intentionally facilitate social-emotional learning.
ALIGNING SEL & YOUTH ORGANIZING

As described, SEL and youth organizing can both fall under the wide-sweeping umbrella of youth work, but the manner in which they come to fruition is a point of tension. Social-emotional learning is seen as a process with “teaching” that comes from adult-created and sustained systems unto youth; youth organizing goes in the opposite direction, with youth leading and creating change that influences adult-led systems and communities.

I argue that these two sectors of youth work not only overlap, but complement each other in ways that benefit the healthy development of youth, and by viewing them as separate entities, both SEL programs and youth organizing programs miss out on key aspects of holistic programming. If youth organizing programs intentionally incorporated aspects of social-emotional learning and similarly SEL programming incorporated aspects of civic youth work and organizing, both would benefit.

CASE STUDIES

In order to better illustrate these two approaches, I analyzed two case studies: one focused on a youth organizing effort in Tucson, Arizona and one on a school with an integrated SEL focus in New York City to highlight the overlap between the two fields. I will use cross-analysis to analyze each case through the lens of the alternate approach. It should be noted that both of these accounts are taken from existing literature. I was not there to observe and collect information, nor were these firsthand accounts that I gathered from people involved.

CASE STUDY #1: YOUTH ORGANIZING TO PROTECT ETHNIC STUDIES IN THE TUCSON UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT

Source
From the Annenberg Institute for Education Reform’s Voices in Urban Education: Youth Organizing for Education Reform, this account by Shawn Ginwright and Julio Cammarota, titled Youth Organizing in the Wild West: Mobilizing for Educational Justice in Arizona!, focuses on the fight for ethnic studies classes in the Tucson Unified School District (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2011).

Youth Organizing in Practice
In 2005, the Tucson Unified School district was one of few in the nation to offer specific ethnic studies programs that addressed the cultural experiences of Mexican American, African American, Asian American, and Native American students through specialized curriculum programs (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2011). After state Republicans witnessed a commencement address calling out the hostile political climate for Mexican Americans, these programs came under fire from local politicians who proposed a series of legislative bills aimed to ban the ethnic studies program in its entirety.

Youth members of the Mexican American Studies (MAS) program in the Tucson Unified School district took a stand against these motions through an array of student-led organizing efforts. A MAS English teacher took the lead and assisted the formation of a cross-ethnic public event focused on the importance of diversity of both culture and opinion for learning that garnered enough media attention and support to deny the passage of the legislative bill. The second effort took a stand against a new bill that proposed that courses should be banned that “treat students as members of a particular ethnic group rather than as individuals” (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2011, p. 17) and was organized by students in concert with a University of Arizona professor to plan a 100-mile run from Tucson to Phoenix. Once arriving in Phoenix, students and organizers performed a traditional Aztec dance, again harvesting enough buzz and attention to
defeat the successful passage of the bill in the legislature. The third and final proposed bill that students organized against resulted in the planning and execution of a 24-hour vigil; however, despite these efforts the bill passed and was signed into law. Students further led organizing efforts to protest the signing of this legislation, spreading the word until over 500 people participated, eventually moving the mass to the Arizona State building to conduct a sit-in, ending in the arrest of several organizers. To this day, the MAS program is still offered to students in the Tucson Unified School District.

Case Study 1 Cross-Analysis: Youth Organizing through an SEL Lens

I analyzed this series of events from an outside view with a focus on social-emotional learning, thinking specifically about the SEL skills that were likely built upon and also the practices of the adults involved in the organizing efforts. It is apparent that youth involved in these efforts were building and enhancing skills throughout; however, it is also apparent that the focus on these skills was not intentional and did not follow the SAFE framework for social-emotional learning in practice.

The first organizing effort was supported by the high school English teacher that was part of the MAS ethnic studies program and assisted students in the formation of an event that intentionally focused on highlighting the importance of diversity. Based on the account in the article, youth involved in this effort were building and using skills associated with the development of self-identity such as self-confidence, connection, and sense of belonging, all SEL skills identified in the CASEL framework. It is also clear that the youth involved possessed the motivation, drive, and focus to carry out these efforts. The account does not state whether or not this group of youth was primed with an intentional focus on the development of these skills or whether or not there was a reflective practice utilized after the events occurred in which youth discussed their own growth in these areas. However, the presence of an adult facilitator would have allowed for these intentional practices to be utilized to bring personal skill development to the forefront.

The third action, in contrast to the first two, had no adults specifically identified as playing integral roles in the actual planning and coordination of the protest and assembly of people. One explanation for this is that as the youth grew and developed integral skills for organizing, they no longer needed the extra support from an adult. Furthermore, the community backing the opposition to the bill had grown to the point where there was enough community-based support that a single identified facilitator was no longer necessary. Additionally, this last series of events differs from the previous two acts because at first it was unsuccessful and the legislation was signed into law. Specific SEL skills—grit, perseverance, resilience, and determination—are focused on the ability of individuals to overcome setbacks. It is unclear—and given the order of events unlikely—that there was time spent focusing on the setback at hand but that the organizers had already firmly grasped the SEL skills that they needed to carry on with their efforts to reach their intended goal. While youth developed agency through the first two events and drew on that knowledge to organize the third, without intentional SEL in the earlier events, they did not have to tools to facilitate an SEL learning experience for themselves. Had they gone through a reflection process with their facilitator from the start, they may have been able to successfully facilitate that process for themselves as part of this independent action.

As evidenced in this analysis, social-emotional learning and skill development are common in youth organizing efforts and initiatives, but the focus on these skills is not at the forefront. This study also clearly delineates the idea that skills aren’t always being “taught,” but that they can be acquired and honed through practice and application. However, the intentionality of the adult facilitators recognizing and reflecting on the fact that these skills are being learned, practiced, and refined through these experiences is an integral part of reinforcing and building on this growth for youth.
CASE STUDY #2: SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING TO INSPIRE COMMUNITY AND AGENCY IN NEW YORK CITY

Source
Developing Agency from Community, by Kathleen Cushman of What Kids Can Do (WKCD), focuses on the work of a school on the Lower East Side of Manhattan in New York City. The study is part of “Learning by Heart: Five American High Schools Where Social and Emotional Learning Are Core, Case Studies of Practice.”

SEL in Practice
East Side Community School on the Lower East Side of Manhattan is a school that is committed not only to rigorous academics, but also to the development of personal relationships among teachers and students. Cushman (2014) states, “East Side regards community as the prime mover of education in a democracy, and builds the habits of citizenship on mutually respectful relationships between family, staff, students, and community. It has kept its eyes on the core values it prizes: knowing all its diverse students well, and developing their agency equally in the social, emotional, and academic spheres” (p. 1).

Three distinct practices at this school help to drive the SEL focus and culture. The first practice is to illuminate and highlight connections in learning social-emotional skills. Through this, teachers build strong relationships with students and explore the actions and reactions of students through a social-emotional lens. The second practice is the student-teacher advisory structure that has been implemented with the goal of building trust and deepening relationships with students. One East Side Community school teacher recalls a project completed at the beginning of the year with her group of advisees to explore self-identity:

_They made two boxes: what you think about yourself, and what you think other people think about you. When we discussed it, they realized that a lot of what they think about themselves is totally different than what other kids think about them. And it’s actually positive. Like kids were writing, “I think other people think I’m shy” or “Other people think I don’t have a lot to say.” And other students were like, “What?! You talk all the time!” So it’s just for them to think about perception. And a good exercise, too, for teachers—’cause we do that with them, too (Cushman, 2014, p. 15)._

The final practice is participation in a curriculum called Facing History and Ourselves, which focuses on ethical dilemmas in history, how those scenarios can be applied to students’ lives, and reflection on decisions made and their implications. The mission of the curriculum is to engage students of diverse backgrounds in an examination of racism, prejudice, and anti-Semitism in order to promote the development of a more humane and informed citizenry. Through the use of this curriculum, students are able to explore questions of belonging, identity, and agency in others’ lives and then work to apply the meaning to their own lives. Other SEL skills are intentionally developed and practiced throughout, including communication, active listening, and understanding others’ feelings via discussions that facilitate the application of skills to their own lives.

Specifically focusing on the use of a curriculum that aims to facilitate discussions about historical oppression, East Side Community School is intentionally incorporating explicit SEL instruction, teacher instructional practices, and integrating it with academic curriculum areas. This approach aligns with the SAFE framework laid out by CASEL.
Activities are sequenced so that content is scaffolded throughout all four years of participation in the curriculum. Students are encouraged to practice and apply the skills they are learning outside of the classroom, a form of active learning. One specific anecdote from the text exemplifies active learning:

In one assignment ‘we had to break a norm,’ a student named Edwin said. ‘You know how on public transportation, if it’s empty you don’t sit next to somebody? Well, I tried to sit next to somebody, and you could definitely tell that they were frustrated. But we also looked at why people don’t get frustrated if the bus is packed and you sit next to them’ (Cushman, 2014, p. 6).

This illustrates the application of SEL. After learning about what constitutes social norms, how they are constructed, and how they are upheld, Edwin used that information to challenge those norms. The focused and explicit aspects of the SAFE framework are being addressed by using this targeted curriculum in addition to curriculum that focuses on common core standards and core subject learning.

Case Study 2 Cross-Analysis: Social-Emotional Learning through a Youth Organizing Lens
While East Side Community School infuses SEL into several aspects of the school day, the students’ social-emotional learning experience could be enriched by the inclusion of youth organizing. A seemingly natural fit with the agency and community-building on which the school focuses, this would allow youth to practice and hone SEL skills gained through active application. Youth organizing principles are youth-centric by nature, highlighting the ideals of youth voice and choice as a means of engaging youth.

By incorporating youth organizing into the Facing History and Ourselves curriculum, not only would youth learn about civic engagement from a historic perspective, but they could apply their historical knowledge to practice. The real-world application of classroom learning facilitates and strengthens the transfer of knowledge and allows youth to explore topics of their own accord. Again, intentional practice and reflection is essential for success.

Creating an opportunity for students to explore youth organizing around an issue they care about, in a supportive environment, would strengthen both the social-emotional skill development and the academic learning in the Facing History and Ourselves curriculum. By using the historic accounts of discrimination and prejudice as a foundation, teachers could facilitate opportunities for students to engage in activism around current issues. With the existing SEL framework built into the curriculum, it would be relatively easy for teachers or facilitators to coach students through both activism and social-emotional learning simultaneously. Furthermore, engaging in activism in the present day will bring new meaning to lessons about related topics in the classroom.

**DISCUSSION**
These case studies provide rationale for my argument that youth organizing and social-emotional learning are intertwined and complementary, each with the ability to enhance youth development and learning in a high quality program. While youth organizing and SEL are frequently approached as separate entities, in this discussion there is room for each to grow to intentionally incorporate elements of the other. I lay out the benefits of incorporating elements of one approach into the other, while recognizing that not all youth-organizing programs are viable spaces to include SEL, just as not all programs with an SEL focus are viable opportunities to incorporate youth organizing.
BENEFITS OF SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL AND YOUTH ORGANIZING ALIGNMENT

Social-emotional learning is already happening in most youth-organizing programs due to the nature of the work, but it is treated as an unintended positive side effect of the work rather than an intentionally incorporated learning opportunity. The first case study shows that youth participating in organizing were drawing on the concepts of self-identity, self-confidence, and sense of belonging. They continued to build on these skills and grow throughout, eventually organizing without the direct leadership of an adult. Becoming an effective activist and organizer requires the use of social-emotional skills. Time spent building these skills will lead to better organizing outcomes. Ben Kirshner describes the existence of SEL in youth organizing, stating that if you “dig beneath ethno-graphic studies of youth organizing, you will find many of the practices called for by SEL researchers, even though they are not always designed as the primary purpose of the organization” (Kirshner, 2014, p. 2).

However, research shows that the intentional integration of reflection allows youth to evaluate experiences and make deeper connections to their own lives (Blyth et al., 2017). This in turn helps to internalize the SEL skills that youth have learned and affords youth the ability to apply those skills to other situations. Without intentional reflection, youth don’t make the connection to the skills being built, but focus on the community outcomes. Explicitly reflecting and talking about skills that are used to achieve those outcomes allows youth to understand how their work benefits both their own growth and their communities. Emphasizing and building upon the learning that is already taking place as youth participate in organizing can only enhance outcomes, both for individual growth and the success of the organizing efforts. Because social-emotional skill building is often already happening in youth organizing, the incorporation of simple intentional SEL practices can provide lasting impact for youth without drastic programmatic changes.

Just as youth-organizing programs benefit from SEL, SEL programs can benefit from the inclusion of elements of youth organizing. Generally, youth who seek out organizing programs are confident in their ability to speak up. By incorporating elements of youth organizing into SEL programs that aren’t solely focused on youth civic engagement and organizing, youth who are less prone to stand up and fight for what they believe in will have the ability to experiment and learn to use their voices through active participation. Youth organizing is a clear next step in a social-emotional learning experience. It provides students an opportunity to use their skills in a safe and supportive environment while engaging in active learning with real-world applications and impact.

Konopka articulates the idea that experimentation and application are key components to youth development:

Since experimentation is essential to learning, adolescents should have the opportunity to discover their own strengths and weaknesses in a host of different situations, to experience success and also learn how to cope with adversity and defeat. These skills are usually acquired through active participation. Therefore, adolescents should have a genuine chance to participate as citizens, as members of households, as workers—in general, as responsible members of society (Konopka, 1973, “Conditions For Healthy Development of Youth,” para. 8).

These ideas can be applied when considering the incorporation of youth organizing into SEL. Programs that incorporate SEL can grow by including organizing as way to actively apply the skills being learned and youth
organizing programs can enhance the growth of participants by talking intentionally about skills being acquired through the process.

Kirshner discusses the importance of political and social context as a lever for engagement in youth organizing programs, stating that “the emerging SEL movement misses out on critical insights from the youth organizing held about the importance of sociopolitical context and young people’s collective agency” (Kirshner, 2014, p. 2). While the second case study focuses on a school that intentionally incorporates the sociopolitical context that contributes to the agency of young people, they lack the opportunities for youth to apply those skills in the real world.

A successful incorporation of youth organizing into social-emotional learning would extend youth experiences in the classroom out into the real world, where they would have the opportunity to engage in activism or advocacy around a cause about which they feel passionate. The combination of those experiences within an SEL program helps to create a safe environment, with support of adult facilitators, for youth to practice new skills, build on existing skills, and grow both individually and collectively.

Together, SEL and youth organizing have the ability to not only coexist, but complement each other and lead to increased positive experiences for youth. The combination of these two approaches to youth work can create a cycle in which youth learn SEL skills, bring those to youth organizing, reflect on their experiences bringing it back to social-emotional learning, and vice versa. By treating these as complementary parts of a learning cycle, we enrich youths’ SEL and youth organizing experiences, and foster a collaborative learning environment for youth.

**CONCLUSION**

Through historical context, case studies, and discussion, this paper illustrates the rationale for the intentional combination of social-emotional learning and youth organizing. Case Study 1 exemplifies a strong youth organizing initiative without the intentional incorporation of social-emotional learning. Case Study 2 exemplifies a strong social-emotional learning program without intentional incorporation of youth organizing. Analysis provides avenues by which the two approaches can be aligned and combined in a cycle that encourages youth to develop social-emotional skills and engage in youth organizing simultaneously. While each field individually provides ample opportunities for youth to gain skills and agency, the two can be easily combined to further enhance the youths’ experiences. Social-emotional learning and youth organizing are two youth development fields that both overlap and complement one another in promoting youth development but are often kept separate in schools and youth programming. Incorporating elements of youth organizing into social-emotional learning and elements of social-emotional learning into youth organizing strengthens, enriches, and improves youth programs within both fields.
REFERENCES


ABOUT THE AUTHOR

MISHA EVERTZ grew up through the Saint Paul Public School District before heading west to Whitman College, where she graduated in 2013 with a degree in biology and geology. She returned to Minnesota to serve a term as an AmeriCorps VISTA with the Saint Paul Public Schools Foundation, and joined ACES shortly thereafter. She has grown within the organization and is now the Evaluation and Grants Manager, working to develop and revise curriculum, train and coach staff, write grants, and evaluate program impact for the students ACES serves across Minneapolis and Saint Paul. Misha is an avid sports fan, soccer player, and geology nerd.
By Therese Genis

As staff and youth started to come into the community center for their after-school youth program, everyone felt the somber mood throughout the building. Through hushed tones one could make out some occasional soft sobs and some bouts of enraged discord. One 8-year-old youth was overheard saying she was scared. Some other youth didn’t really understand what this all meant but they could sense the shift and had many questions such as, “What will happen to me and my family?” Staff members were intentional about making the space a safe area to discuss all these concerns for their youth. Some staff did their best to fight back tears as they answered the young people’s questions; “Do other people hate me because I wasn’t born here?” It was the day that Donald Trump was voted into office, and the youth center I coordinate that serves majority immigrant families, was doing its best to walk the youth through all their concerns. As I watched all of this unfold I felt very inept in my role. I felt like I didn’t know how to best comfort my staff or the youth they served. I didn’t know how to keep them safe even though I desperately wanted to. And I realized that many other adults that work with immigrant youth probably felt the same way. So I set off to find out what we as youth workers, could do to advocate for undocumented youth. Through some research and informant interviews I was able to educate myself about the issue and hope to share that knowledge with other youth workers through this paper.

THE ISSUE OF UNDOCUMENTED YOUTH

Immigration and the politics around it is a broad and significant topic, especially in current times when news headlines around immigration appear almost daily. And for good reason. The United States is a nation that has been made up of many groups of immigrants over the years since it was first invaded by Europeans in the 1400s. Now Native Americans make up only 1.5% of the nation’s population (Ogunwole, 2002), the rest are all immigrated populations. As our population grows, minority, non-European-descended groups grow, and more people from other countries seek lives here, immigration continues to develop into a top point of discussion. It is also often a divisive issue, especially in relation to undocumented immigrants in the United States.

The term undocumented immigrants refers to “foreign nationals residing in the U.S. without legal immigration status. It includes persons who entered the U.S. without inspection and proper permission from the U.S. government, and those who entered with a legal visa that is no longer valid. Undocumented immigrants are also known as unauthorized or illegal immigrants” (“Undocumented Immigrant Law and Legal Definition,” n.d., para. 1). This is a unique population that is made up of many different nationals, races, and ages. It is hard to find reliable statistics on undocumented immigrants because they are often purposely living “under the radar.” According to the Migration Policy Institute, an estimated 11 million undocumented immigrants lived in the United States in 2014 (Zong & Batalova, 2017); about 1.1 million of these were children under the age of 18, who mostly migrated with their parents (Gleeson & Gonzales, 2012). The majority of undocumented immigrants (54%), reside in four states: California, Texas, New York and Florida, and an estimated 71% come from Mexico and Central America (Zong & Batalova, 2017). A third of undocumented immigrants who are 15 years of age or older live with at least one child who is a United States citizen by birth (Yee, Davis, & Patel, 2017). Every year, an estimated 80,000 undocumented youth turn 18 and approximately 65,000 graduate from high school (U.S. Department of Education, 2015).
MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT UNDOCUMENTED IMMIGRANTS
As the above data shows, immigrants are a large population, and it looks as though those numbers will only increase if immigration trends continue. Therefore, their issues are our country’s issues as a whole, which affect everyone. Some argue that undocumented immigrants wreak havoc on our country and need to be sent back to their countries. However, this is not true. In fact, they contribute positively to our society in a number of ways. Some common misconceptions about undocumented immigrants follow.

THEY ARE TAKING OUR JOBS AND ARE BAD FOR THE ECONOMY.
This statement is unfounded. In reality most of the jobs they take are not wanted by American citizens as they are the lowest paying jobs in sectors such as cleaning, food business, and agriculture. These industries are very dependent on undocumented immigrants. Furthermore, these workers contribute to our economy through taxes, consumerism and even create lower consumer prices. Harvard economist Jorge Borjas found that the average American’s wealth has actually increased by 1% because of illegal immigration (Goodman, 2014).

THEY ARE DANGEROUS CRIMINALS AND MAKE OUR STREETS UNSAFE.
This is untrue. Immigrants, both documented and undocumented are less likely to be incarcerated or commit crimes than citizens born in the United States (Landgrave & Nowrasteh, 2017). Less than 3% of undocumented immigrants have committed felonies, compared to 6% of the total population (Yee, Davis, & Patel, 2017).

THEY ARE CREATING A LARGE BURDEN ON OUR SOCIAL SERVICES AND OUR TAXES SUPPORT THEM.
In fact, through property taxes, personal income taxes, sales and excise taxes, unauthorized immigrants have contributed more than 11 billion dollars per year. From 2000 to 2011, unauthorized immigrants contributed 35.1 billion dollars more into Medicare than they withdrew. In 2010 alone their net contribution to Social Security was 12 billion dollars (paying $13 billion into Social Security and receiving $1 billion in services). They are not able to use many of the social services they pay into (Nicholson, 2017).

These are some of the ways that the benefits of unauthorized immigrants actually outweigh the detriments from a numbers and data perspective. It also bears mentioning from a standpoint of empathy and compassion, that undocumented immigrants frequently come from dire circumstances in another country, which is why they come here, often risking their lives in the process. For these reasons, immigrants deserve to be treated with dignity and respect and to feel safe, especially as vulnerable young people.

UNDOCUMENTED YOUTH AND YOUTH WORK
The issue of immigration and how it relates to youth work is a complicated one. The younger generation is more diverse than any previous generation in the United States (Pew Reserach Center, 2014). Many young people that youth workers currently work with are immigrants, some of whom are undocumented or have family members that are undocumented. Advocacy in the context of youth work, can mean many things, but in my own words it represents youth working towards change in the context of positive youth development. Youth work has often been an arena ripe for advocacy. Youth were at the forefront of many social movements, especially some of the largest ones that took place in the 1960s such as the antiwar, feminist, gay rights, and free speech social movements (HoSang, 2003). As adults that work with youth, it is our responsibility to empower youth and encourage active citizenship. However, in the circumstance of undocumented youth, youth advocacy has to look different. It would usually be our role as adults to stand back and let youth take the lead and be the faces and leaders of social change. But in the context of this
issue, and with the current political climate, it is instead our role to play a more protective role and stand at the forefront in order to safeguard our youth who are in a vulnerable situation. Being at the lead for these youth could put them at risk.

PERSONAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THIS TOPIC
I have worked with the Latino community professionally in some context for about 10 years. It has always been my desire to support this community and positively impact it. I have worked with immigrant families in clinical, educational, and research settings. As a Mexican American woman who is the daughter of a Mexican immigrant, I have many personal experiences as well that have helped shape my interest in supporting the Latino community. I have been able to get to know many immigrant Latinos, many of whom are undocumented or have someone in their household who is, whether it’s a parent, sibling, cousin or neighbor. All of them know someone close by in their community that is undocumented. I have observed and learned how deeply legal status can affect the emotional and physical health of these families. The issue is often forefront in their minds, however it is frequently not talked about. They don’t know whom they can trust and they live in constant fear for themselves and for their family members. Many live with severe anxiety that they will be separated from their families. One undocumented youth I spoke with told me through tears, “I’m just tired. I am tired of living in fear, feeling like I have to defend myself, and not have opportunities even though I have never done anything wrong.” She was brought here as a small child by her parents. The United States is the only home she has ever known. She is a kind, responsible and strong young women. She has big dreams of what she wants to accomplish in her career and education, but her legal status keeps creating roadblocks for her. Youth like her don’t deserve to have this stress put on them as young children. This is why I feel strongly that we should have tools to help undocumented youth and be advocates for them.

HOW TO ADVOCATE FOR UNDOCUMENTED YOUTH
There are some things that those working with undocumented immigrant youth can do to advocate for them. Below is a list of some things that my research has surfaced as being effective ways to help them.

KNOW THEIR RIGHTS
The number one thing that I have learned from interviews with immigrant youth and through reading about this issue is to help immigrants to know their rights, and so, as their support network, we also need to understand their rights. This is a short list of rights that are most important to know for people working with immigrant youth:

- All youth have a right to public education regardless of their legal status.
- Schools cannot ask about immigration status of the children or their families and/or require documentation to enroll a youth.
- Immigration Control Enforcement (ICE) cannot take enforcement action on school grounds.
- In private settings, ICE can be refused entry, unless they have an official arrest warrant signed by a judge.

Table 1 lists resources where one can learn about the legal rights of undocumented immigrants in more detail.
**Table 1. Resources For Those Working with Undocumented Youth**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Resource</th>
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<th>Description</th>
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<tr>
<td>Resource Guide: Supporting Undocumented Youth</td>
<td><a href="https://www2.ed.gov/about/overview/focus/supporting-undocumented-youth.pdf">https://www2.ed.gov/about/overview/focus/supporting-undocumented-youth.pdf</a></td>
<td>Comprehensive guide from Department of Education for adults that work with Undocumented youth, focused on post-secondary options</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minnesota Dream Act Fact Sheet</td>
<td><a href="http://www.ohe.state.mn.us/pdf/MNDreamActFactSheet.pdf">http://www.ohe.state.mn.us/pdf/MNDreamActFactSheet.pdf</a></td>
<td>Information and resources for the Minnesota Dream Act Law</td>
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**SEE THEM AS INDIVIDUALS**

It can be tempting to just lump all immigrants together, thinking they all behave a certain way or they are all Mexican. Realize that they are each unique individuals, and that just because you have had a certain experience with one, doesn’t mean experiences with others will be the same. Just like any population there are all types and kinds, but they are all human and deserve a chance for you to get to know them and hear their stories before judging them. See beyond legal status. Doing this and encouraging others to do this humanizes undocumented immigrants.

**GIVE THEM A VOICE**

Immigrant populations feel they can’t speak up for themselves or others or advocate without putting themselves or their loved ones in danger of being deported. If they draw attention to themselves it could mean law enforcement becoming more aware of them and threatening their situation. Therefore, it falls on our shoulders to give them a voice and speak up for them. We can advocate for them in some of the following ways:

- If someone is being harassed speak up.
- Reach out to your government officials to support or create policies that are immigrant friendly.
- Be vocal about what rights you demand for them. Talk to friends, neighbors and coworkers about it, especially those that are unfamiliar with the issue.
- Go into fields that can help make changes for them such as law enforcement, government, policy and law.
LET THEM KNOW THEY HAVE YOUR SUPPORT

In 2015 the U.S. Department of Education published a resource guide for supporting undocumented youth which states:

Case studies and testimonials from undocumented youth suggest that one crucial factor in their academic success has been support from family, educators, and other caring adults in their lives. And research has shown certain environmental factors—such as access to extracurricular activities, advanced coursework, and engaged parents—can boost resiliency among undocumented youth, and are correlated with greater educational attainment.

These findings show that caring adults can make an impact—that educators, counselors, principals, and specialized instructional support personnel can be the linchpin of success for undocumented students (2015, p. 3).

Even little encounters that include encouraging words or compassionate actions can make an impact on a youth for the rest of their lives. Tell them that you are there for them and going to fight for their rights and do everything you can to keep them safe. Tell them and that they can talk to you about anything they need to without fear. Show them often that you care by being a consistent, positive presence in their lives.

LET THEM KNOW THERE ARE OPTIONS

For undocumented immigrants, especially minors, there are options related to employment, continuing their education beyond high school, and creating a life they want. Help them research resources and find options they are interested in. Encourage them to not feel hopeless and to utilize options such as:

- Financial aid and scholarships for undocumented immigrants to pursue post-secondary education and training.
- DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals); the policy that allows certain youth that were brought to the United States as children to apply for the opportunity to not be removed from the country and get work authorization.
- The Dream Act. In Minnesota, the Minnesota Dream Act law allows certain eligible undocumented youth the opportunity to receive in-state tuition rates at colleges and universities and be eligible for state financial aid as well as other scholarships.

CONCLUSION

In summary, a large immigrant population is a reality of the country that we live in. As youth workers that work with immigrant youth or those directly affected by immigration, it is our duty to be informed about the issue and vigilant about being advocates for them whether they can be for themselves or not. The main ways to do this are:
1. Know their rights.
2. See them as individuals.
3. Give them a voice.
4. Let them know they have your support.
5. Help them know their options.

Youth workers working with undocumented youth can also find additional information to support their youth in Table 1.

A youth worker recently told me that after the presidential elections one of her very young boys, speaking of the community program center they were in, said “I feel afraid, but I feel safe here.” My hope is that all youth can have a place where they feel this way whether they are undocumented or not. As youth workers, advocating for undocumented youth is our responsibility and how we can best serve our youth and support them as they continue to grow into amazing adults and positively contributing members of society.
REFERENCES


ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Therese Genis coordinates the YWCA Midtown Learning Center which encompasses the Strong Fast Fit Latino and Strong Fast Fit Native American programs, and the Center for Learning and Academic Support. Therese has her master’s degree in Environmental Public Health and a graduate certificate in Complementary and Alternative Healing Practices. Before working at the YWCA she worked at the Minnesota Department of Health in the Health Risk Assessment unit and for the University of Minnesota School of Nursing on Latino and adolescent health research. She loves to travel in her free time and as part of her studies or work. She has been to Honduras with Engineers Without Borders, studied abroad in India and Mexico, and vacationed in Greece, Turkey and Nicaragua.