

# From Life in the Gutter to a Pedagogy of Freedom: The Importance of Learning from Young People

Gretchen Brion-Meisels<sup>1</sup>

Harvard Graduate School of Education

## Note

*The following is a response to “Living in the Gutter: Conflict and Contradiction in the Neoliberal Classroom, A Call to Action” (2011, this volume). Among other critical insights, Ayers and Ayers argue that we must frame conversations about educational reform in ways that center education for democracy. Here, I build on this argument by suggesting that young people must be fully welcomed and involved in the construction of this alternative frame.*

Hekima and I are sitting on a bench that looks like a log cut in half standing on two piles of bricks, outside the front entrance of her middle school. It is hot out, but in the shade we are protected from the burning sun enough to laugh and smile and talk about her life here in this building, on this city block, in our changing country. Hekima’s school sits behind us, a short, long cinderblock with windows protected by metal grates, a bright orange mural across the front wall proudly announcing its name. We can hear the children above us talking and laughing, seemingly engaged in whatever is going on inside. In front of us, across the wide expanse of a nicely manicured field and a small park where children play, is an old, brick building. The building looks charred—as if a bomb had been dropped somewhere deep inside, its force emanating outward toward where we now sit. Most of the windows are shattered or gone, and there are pieces of scrapwood covering where the doors used to be. To an outsider, the building might suggest that we are sitting amidst a war zone, signaling danger or at least destruction. But Hekima and I know the truth: This building is simply a sign of the community changing around us, the transition from what was once a working class neighborhood to what will soon be a cluster of condominiums for wealthier families. This change means little for Hekima, whose family lives in a different part of the city, and who knows the harsh truth that still lurks behind the façade of this transitioning neighborhood. Still, it seems an appropriate backdrop for our conversation.

Hekima is one of many students I have been talking with in order to explore the kind of supports that they use to be “successful,” but Hekima has a deeper lesson to teach me, one that goes beyond my research project. She is preaching the truth to me—a thirty-

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<sup>1</sup> Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Gretchen Brion-Meisels, Harvard Graduate School of Education. Email: [gab196@mail.harvard.edu](mailto:gab196@mail.harvard.edu)

Many thanks to Bill and Rick Ayers for their continued passion and for the many ways in which they push us to act for change. Thanks also to the many friends who have helped me to shape and refine these ideas: Eliza, Hahrie, Chantal, Thomas, Carla, Santiago, Daniel, Linda, Steven, and Candice, to name just a few.

something, White, woman researcher who has come out of nowhere and asked her to share her story. She is defining success—redefining it in many ways—weaving together the lessons that she has learned from different people and crafting them into a vision of the world as she sees it. Her words float into my adult ears, a 12-year-old preaching hope:

If I want to be successful, I want other people to be successful. There is an African saying, which is called *Ubuntu*: I am because you are. I can't be successful unless you're successful. If I see you hurting, I'm hurting. So I don't want to just be successful. I don't want to leave here being positive and [having] a great outcome to my life. I want other people to have that, too. It's not just thinking about myself, it's thinking about other people, too.<sup>2</sup> (Brion-Meisels, unpublished field notes)

I do not know whether to smile or cry at this insight. So instead, I just tell Hekima what I'm really feeling. "There are a lot of adults in the world who I would like to help to understand what you just said," I tell her. "How do you think you learned that? Is that something you've always believed?"

I think that I learned it from watching, because before, I would never really believe that. When I first heard about it I was like, "What? I don't need to worry about nobody else. As long as I'm doing me, I don't need to worry about nobody else." But I see, I see that it, it is true. The saying is true. Because you don't want to go somewhere and see somebody hurting, because it makes you hurt—especially if they are people in your community . . . especially if they are people who you care about. It's not good to see people hurting.

Hekima goes on to tell me that it saddens her when her peers come to school and don't want to learn or to try to be their best. She insists that everyone has goals and dreams, but that some people just get lost along the way. "What gets in their way?" I ask her, agreeing that most people want to succeed.

People not telling them . . . I mean, you don't have to have people telling you all the time that you're beautiful but it's good to hear it sometimes. And sometimes you'll hear people telling you negative things. "You'll never amount to anything. You'll never do anything. You'll never be anything." And that, once you start taking that in and taking it in, it's only so much that the human body can take before it starts living it out. And if you get negative energy put into you, you're going to feed off negative energy.

At the end of our conversation, Hekima mentions that she hopes to be a peer counselor one day, like her father, so that she can talk to other young women who are struggling. I tell her that I'm sure she will be wonderful at that, and I mean it. I can see

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<sup>2</sup> All names have been changed to protect the identity of students. The text from this conversation with Hekima comes, throughout, from interview transcripts that the author collected (Brion-Meisels, unpublished fieldnotes).

her spreading positive energy around her classroom, the school, this city block, our changing country.

Hekima gives me hope. Today, her voice is one in a sea of thousands of young people who sit in public schools in classrooms across our country, imagining a future better than the world they can see.

### **From Life in the Gutter to A Pedagogy of Freedom<sup>3</sup>**

In their article entitled, “Living in the Gutter: Conflict and Contradiction in the Neo-Liberal Classroom. A Call to Action,” Rick and Bill Ayers (2011) assert that

A free and fair society built for a humane future is geared toward and inspired by the radical notion that the fullest development of all human beings is the necessary condition for the full and free development of each person, and, conversely, that the fullest development of each is necessary for the full and free development of all. (p. 104)

Their words echo Hekima’s words when they call for the formation of communities of learning where individuals nurture each other’s growth and, in so doing, they draw upon a deep history of liberatory pedagogy that demands education support the development of critical consciousness (e.g., Freire, 1998, 2006). While I share the vision put forth in this piece, I challenge readers to expand upon it by acknowledging the *emancipatory agency*<sup>4</sup> (De Lissovoy, 2010, p. 210) inherent in their students and explicitly calling for educational reforms that center young people<sup>5</sup> as powerful agents in their own development.

In their article, Ayers and Ayers suggest that teaching and learning are reciprocal acts that require an acknowledgment of the humanity inherent in every human being. Here, I will argue that these reciprocal acts require a type of solidarity that spans generations, as well as boundaries of identity. This call echoes the words of many other scholars and practitioners (see, for example, Fletcher, 2010; Soundout, 2006, 2010). In order to realize the vision of education put forth by Ayers and Ayers, we must begin by acknowledging and drawing upon the local knowledge of teachers and students, their individual strengths, and their capacities for nurturing understanding through dialogue; *and*, we must remember that “there is no teaching without learning” (Freire, 1998, p. 31). We must commit to a type of collaboration that values students’ voices and experiences as

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<sup>3</sup> See Freire’s (1998) *Pedagogy of Freedom*.

<sup>4</sup> In his 2010 article, *Rethinking education and emancipation: Being, teaching and power*, Noah De Lissovoy argued that we must recognize an essential equality between students and teachers. He wrote, “the human is present as the ontological minimum that confronts and absorbs the force of domination—even if this presence only becomes evident to us through struggle. For instance, in whatever ways students of color are hurt by the systematic racism of schooling, their integrity in being remains; the recognition of that integrity is the starting point for a human teaching” (p. 215). For a more detailed explanation of this argument, I encourage others to read his piece.

<sup>5</sup> In this article, I include both children and young adults in the category of “young people.” While the type of involvement and activism may look different, dependent upon the youth, youth of any age can participate in the transformation of their worlds.

equally important to our own<sup>6</sup> and that expects both teacher and student to engage in a process of continual re-formation (Freire, 1998). Already-existing examples of youth-led social justice projects can provide us with concrete references to a type of education that radically shifts our cultural understandings of teaching and learning in pursuit of spaces where critical consciousness can emerge.

### **Schools Reflect Society: Looking Beyond the Mirror**

As Ayers and Ayers suggest in their article, “the schoolhouse is a mini-society, both an open window and a shining mirror into any given social order” (p. 97). In the United States today, this window and mirror reveal a society not only segregated across lines of race, class, gender, language, and sexuality, but also a society deeply wounded. By wounded, I mean both injured and offended, but also broken and raw. On every level of the hierarchy people in schools suffer from being measured, labeled, confined, undermined, and blamed. The damage begins on top, with a president who (despite the hope for a renewed humanity that his election engendered) has been convinced to publicly support a “race to the top” where school leaders are encouraged to compete for cash prizes that will fund their reform efforts (Fuhrman, Resnick, & Shepard, 2009; Wall Street Journal, 2009). From there, it negatively affects state departments of education, many of which have recently recommitted to standardize learning in an effort to ensure that their “communities will be best positioned to compete successfully in the global economy” (Common Core State Standard Initiative, 2010). At the next level down the hierarchy, districts feel pressured to close down, reconstitute, “turn around,” and charter their schools so as to avoid the shame of failure. By the time the damage reaches individual schools, it has become so pervasive that many teachers and students choose to deny it, resist it, or succumb to its fatality.<sup>7</sup> Imagine, for a minute, what it feels like to teach at a school that has been labeled a failure, under the threat of losing your job, in competition with your colleagues, sharing the frustration of your students . . . all under the guise of providing young people with an “equal opportunity” to succeed. Then, imagine being a student in that school, asked to suspend your disbelief in a system that is oppressing you. The pain is palpable.

And yet, when we look just beyond the window—behind the test scores and dilapidated buildings, behind the inequality and institutionalized racism, behind the standards that define what is valued in our society—a bit deeper into the classroom itself, we often see a humanity that continues to push up against the neoliberal walls. This humanity<sup>8</sup> lives in both the individual (student and teacher) and in the collective (the

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<sup>6</sup> By equally important, I mean that students deserve to have a place at the table and a voice in conversations that affect their lives. This does not mean that students will get to make every decision: different contexts will always require different decision-making processes. Still, we must work “with” students rather than “for” or “at” them. Adults must be expected to learn and grow along with young people, as we engage in collaborative decision-making processes.

<sup>7</sup> Here, it is worth mentioning that Solorzano and Delgado Bernal (2001) described a type of student resistance to school that can be transformative (rather than destructive) in nature. Their nuanced discussion can contribute significantly to our understanding of school resistance and deserves further attention.

<sup>8</sup> Humanity, in this sense, involves the explicit recognition of each other’s “unfinishedness” (Freire, 1998), of our inherent capacity to be growing, ethical beings, and of the ways in which we learn through relationships and dialogue.

relationships between and among them). Sometimes, it takes the form of a smile, a kind word, a question that seeks to understand. Other times, it emerges from a “pedagogy of questioning” or a moment of “democratic teaching” in which students are encouraged to “develop the capacity to name the world for themselves, to identify the obstacles to their full humanity, and to act courageously on whatever the known demands” (Ayers, 2009, p. 32). We have seen this humanity in relationships where adult and child learn in dialogue with each other, both growing in new directions (e.g., Wright, 2007); we have seen it in classrooms where adults choose to love young people, rather than simply to “teach” them (e.g., Jervis, 1986); we have seen it in pedagogies of audacious hope, where adults and youth collaborate to create change (Duncan-Andrade, 2009, pp. 189-191); and, we have seen it on campuses where students come together to demand their right to learn a curriculum of their own choosing (e.g., Hernandez, 2010; Ormiston, 1996). What is powerful about these examples is that they push against traditional models of schooling (as imparting knowledge) and create spaces where individuals and groups can actively seek to create change in the dominant structures of society. In many schools across this nation, young people and adults continue to support each other in developing a more critical consciousness.

As a mirror, schools as institutions reflect the society in which they are embedded, not just in the ways that they oppress and harm, but also in the ways that individuals resist and persist. Today, young people in public schools across this country are fighting to keep their teachers employed, their buildings open, and their friends nurtured. Their energy spills out of the school doors onto the streets and into the long hallways of legislative buildings, as they demand a type of respect for humanity that many adults have long ago given up on. In so doing, young people draw upon a deep history of youth activism in this country (for examples of different types of activism, see Ginwright, Noguera, & Cammamorta, 2006; Hoose, 2001). During the civil rights movement, high school and college students stepped up time and time again when others could not, or would not; they rode busses, sat in restaurants, marched down streets, and registered voters (Lewis, 1998), all under threat of physical or emotional harm. Young people of multiple racial and socioeconomic backgrounds stood together, facing adult violence with a determined restraint. It is tragic to think that today young people are being forced to make similar demands for equal rights despite the passing of fifty years (and countless legislative acts). It is equally tragic that classrooms continue to be the focus of these fights for equality.<sup>9</sup>

One of the most powerful examples of youth activism today is the youth immigration movement, where young people in every state have gathered their voices to demand rights for undocumented and recently documented American citizens. The actions of youth to support recent immigrants include (but are not limited to): the 2006 school walkouts, which accompanied the national “day without immigrants” (Barnett, 2006; Highlander Research and Education Center, 2006); annual Labor Day demonstrations (e.g., McShane, 2010); the formation of local organizations, such as the Student

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<sup>9</sup> Today, as multiple studies highlight, schools are more segregated than they have been since the 1954 Supreme Court decision to desegregate schools, with more than 90% of many urban classrooms populated by Black and Latina/o students (Kozol, 2005; Orfield, 2001; Orfield, Bachmeier, James, & Eitle, 1997).

Immigration Movement (SIM) in Massachusetts to organize for immigrant rights (SIM, 2010); organized support of DREAM Act legislation in multiple U.S. states (see, for example, DreamAct, 2010); and recent protests against legislation in Arizona that threatens the civil liberties of all immigrants (Fernández, 2010; Lal, 2010). Adult allies have joined with youth in many of these actions. In a political climate where many educators and legislators struggle to protect the civil rights of all Americans, students and their allies continue to work for equality.

Thus, while schools in the United States waver under neoliberal policies that deny the humanity of students and teachers—pushing an agenda of “authoritarianism and irrelevance, passivity and fatalism” (Ayers & Ayers, 2011, p. 103)—many teachers and students continue to acknowledge and demand their *complex personhood*<sup>10</sup> (Gordon, 1997, pp. 4-5), providing each other with the motivation to hope and work for a world that is often difficult to see out the window, in the mirror. If those of us outside the classroom (taxpayers, researchers, academics, policymakers) seek to work for a world “more loving, peaceful, and fair than the one we inherited” (Ayers & Ayers, 2011, p. 105), we can begin by calling for educational spaces that center relationships and critical consciousness. To do this, we must collectively re-envision schools in which young peoples’ “complexity, contradiction, and self-determination” (Tuck, 2009, p. 416) are seen as critical assets to our communal progress.<sup>11</sup>

### **(Re)Framing School Reform: Why We Should Listen to Young People**

The site of school is a contested space in part because the power to frame our current debates on education is synonymous with the power to shape and define the future of our society (Ayers & Ayers, 2011). In their article, Ayers and Ayers argue that society’s dominant discourse posits education as a “commodity” and “schools as little factories cranking out products” (p. 98). Neoliberal and conservative school reform efforts draw from this discourse of school as factory, suggesting various ways to improve the value of education. Policymakers echo this discourse as well in their “Race to the Top” language, in the common core standards, and in some of their articulated 21st century skills. As Lakoff (2004) suggested, those who have the power to frame the dialogue often have the power to control it. In their essay, Ayers and Ayers call upon us—“students and parents, educators and theorists”—to “set the terms and limits of our discussion about schools and reform” (p. 99). I want to highlight the presence of students in this list as critical for any movement that wishes to radically reform schooling.

Ignoring youth perspectives fundamentally hampers the success of reform movements by silencing the voices of these critical stakeholders. Most educators—no

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<sup>10</sup> For Gordon (1997), complex personhood emerges from the notion that “even those who live in the most dire circumstances possess a complex and oftentimes contradictory humanity and subjectivity that is never adequately glimpsed by viewing them as victims or, on the other hand, as superhuman agents” (p. 4). Among other characteristics, “complex personhood means that people suffer graciously and selfishly too, get stuck in the symptoms of their troubles, and also transform themselves” (p. 4). Gordon called upon us all to confer “the respect on others that comes from presuming that life and people’s lives are simultaneously straightforward and full of enormously subtle meaning” (p. 5).

<sup>11</sup> See Freire (1998) for a powerful discussion about the pedagogies that support these types of educational spaces. In addition, see Tuck (2009) who spoke about the need for a “desire-based framework” (p. 416).

matter what their political stance—agree that the purpose of school has something to do with the development of youth. While some of us assume that youth arrive at the school doors as fully developed human beings,<sup>12</sup> others believe that education is meant to help young people develop into their full selves. Unfortunately, many traditional schools continue to see students as vessels to be filled or characters to be shaped. Thus, it is rare for administrators or legislators to place the perspectives of youth at the center of their pedagogical, legislative, or relational decision-making. In fact, the United States is one of two countries (Somalia being the other<sup>13</sup>) that belong to the United Nations (U.N.) and have yet to ratify the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (U.N., 1989). This U.N. supported document guarantees young people the right to have a voice in decisions that affect their lives, including those made in educational, judicial, and medical institutions. In many countries, such as the United Kingdom, Canada, and Australia, legislation has begun to outline concrete steps that allow young people to participate in their own decision-making (e.g., DoH, 1989, 2002). For example, in the United Kingdom psychologists and educators have begun to incorporate youth voices into the mental health system, providing youth with opportunities to be consulted about both their own treatment and larger systemic reforms (Aubrey & Dahl, 2006; Cavet & Sloper, 2004). Yet, the U.S. government has failed to ratify this document and many of our practices continue to ignore the important ideas contained within it.

Truly incorporating the wisdom and imagination of young people into our educational system requires a fundamental shift in our thinking: We must insist that, “to teach is not *to transfer knowledge* but to create the possibilities for the production or construction of knowledge” (Freire, 1998, p. 30). Accepting this principle calls into question most of the major tenets of educational “reform” today, including the movements toward standards, accountability, and quality. Because traditional understandings of youth center on processes of change and development, valuing the knowledge of young people forces us to recognize the complex and shifting nature of understanding, writ large. We must become comfortable with the power of context to impact interpretation and with the ever-unfinished nature of being human. We must accept that education is not a means to an end, but rather a never-ending process inherent to our very existence. As Freire (1998) suggested:

When we live our lives with the authenticity demanded by the practice of teaching that is also learning and learning that is also teaching, we are participating in a total experience that is simultaneously directive, political, ideological, gnostic, pedagogical, aesthetic, and ethical. (p. 32)

This type of education scares many people, since it fundamentally challenges the inequality inherent in our culture. But it also seeks to nurture a type of collective liberation in which each of us may become more fully developed because all of us are

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<sup>12</sup> Again, see De Lissovoy (2010) who argued for, “a sense of humanism in education that pushes the familiar perspective of the critical traditions by conceptualizing the human as a fact to be verified rather than a capacity to be constructed” (p. 204).

<sup>13</sup> In 2009, Somalia announced that it had plans to ratify the document.

fully free to develop (Ayers & Ayers, this volume). Young people push us toward freedom.

It is worth noting that, even for those who hesitate to work outside current paradigms of schooling, listening to the perspectives of youth is beneficial. Incorporating youth voices benefits both institutional processes (e.g., Joselowsky, 2007) and the development of youth themselves (e.g., Mitra, 2008), even when measured in traditional standards. Young people who are involved in organizing, researching, and making decisions about their schools are often more motivated, engaged, and attached to their school communities (Cook-Sather, 2002; Mitra, 2008). Examples of this include young people being engaged in designing and planning curricula (e.g., Berger, 2003), restorative justice circles (e.g., Karp & Breslin, 2001), and organizational reforms (Mitra, 2001, 2008). Perhaps more convincing for those who drive school reform efforts, involving young people in organizational reform seems to yield more successful, longer lasting change (Mitra, 2008).

Increasingly, educators are calling for pedagogies that actively involve young people in making decisions about classroom practices and curricula, as well as school and community processes (e.g., Duncan-Andrade & Morell, 2008; for additional examples see Fletcher, 2010). This trend toward youth empowerment has also begun to affect academia (albeit slowly), where youth participatory action research has produced important new knowledge (e.g., Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Restorative Justice Online, n.d.). There is little doubt that supporting young people to be involved in making decisions about their own lives yields positive results. Perhaps more compelling, involving young people in decision-making often reminds us to challenge traditional notions of teaching and learning that confine our collective development. Yet, in debates about the future of education in the United States, adults from most dominant camps tend to ignore the perspectives of young people and shape a discourse that silences their voices.

During the civil rights movement, White Americans who wanted to support the fight for racial equality had to first confront their own role in institutions of racial oppression. In part, this meant reflecting on their own privilege. But it also meant consciously giving up power and acknowledging that their role was not to lead but to act as allies (see, for example, Thompson, 2001). Perhaps it is time for adults to reflect in similar ways about our own power and privilege, and the role that we play in institutions that continually silence young people in this country. As Ayers and Ayers (2011) so eloquently argue, “It is time to invent curriculum and teaching that seeks to empower rather than to crush the young. It is time to build an education no one has to recover from” (p. 106). Young people will not always know what is best for this new world, but true cross-generational collaboration will be necessary to reframe our ever-evolving understandings. How might young people frame the current debates on education in this country? Surely, they would not all agree!

### **Examples of Youth-Adult Collaboration**

Toward the end of their article, Ayers and Ayers (2011) suggest that, “In a just and free society, teachers want students, collectively and individually, to be able to think for themselves, to make judgments based on evidence and argument, and to develop minds

of their own” (p. 104). I agree. And, I believe that the relationship between teacher and student is one that involves two human beings, each with agency, wisdom, and love to give, and each with room to grow. Among other powerful insights, Freire (2006) once noted that:

Only through communication can human life hold meaning. The teacher's thinking is authenticated only by the authenticity of the students' thinking. The teacher cannot think for her students, nor can she impose her thought on them. Authentic thinking, thinking that is concerned about reality, does not take place in ivory tower isolation, but only in communication. If it is true that thought has meaning only when generated by action upon the world, the subordination of students to teachers becomes impossible. (p. 77)

While many educators may agree with this notion, it can often be difficult to imagine how true collaboration looks, in practice. Fears about safety, legal issues, and moral protections can feel particularly daunting. How can the institution of school, and the adults within it, allow room for students' voices to participate in decision-making about issues of consequence—choices about institutional policies, curricula, and structures that are fundamental to the organization itself? How might this happen at a district or state level? I want to end by providing a few examples so that readers can begin to imagine cross-generational collaboration, on the ground. These examples include projects that exist at multiple ecological levels and in a diverse range of racial and socio-economic communities.

One interesting example of cross-generational collaboration emerged during the U.S. election of 2008, where young people played a critical role in organizing for the Obama campaign (Cave, 2008; Stelter, 2008). This is a useful example of collaboration because the adult allies working from within the campaign explicitly set up structures that allowed youth to become agents of change. Rather than trying to dictate systems that would enact their goals, these adults invested in helping young people develop the skills, motivations, and capacities necessary to make tough strategic choices about how to make change happen.<sup>14</sup> Thus, young people were not only included in the campaign but were given the agency to actively shape campaign strategies; one visible result of this was the emerging importance of social networking and media tools. Obama himself consistently addressed young people with a stance of respect and collaboration, saying for example, “I’m asking you to believe. Not just in my ability to bring about real change in Washington, I’m asking you to believe in yours” (ABC News, n.d.). Regardless of the specific policy decisions made after Obama entered into office, his campaign for presidency benefited from the power of cross-generational collaboration.

In addition to this national example, there have been many smaller political acts, often led by young people themselves. Here, again, the Internet has played a major role, as youth have continued to organize for change via cell phone, email, and social networking sites. The Youth Immigration Movement (discussed above) has consistently

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<sup>14</sup> One important premise in organizing is that systemic change is not about creating a one-size-fits-all solution, but instead about developing capacity in leaders (in this case, young people) who have the motivational, relational, and strategic capacities necessary to support change in their communities.

used the Internet to organize. In New Jersey, in 2010, a young college student organized a large-scale walkout in response to state educational budget cuts using Facebook (Ehrlich, 2010). Similar acts of protest and resistance can be found around the world, for example in Moldova, where young people used Twitter and other social networking sites to organize a protest against their government leadership (Barry, 2009). The Internet provides young people not only with an effective organizing tool but also with a space for dialogue that can sometimes be unsafe to have publicly. Adult allies have supported many of these youth-led protests, though not all of them.<sup>15</sup> Our generation must decide whether we want to collaborate and engage in this dialogue—respecting that it is not ours to control—or allow it to occur in a world about which we know little.

Youth and adults are also collaborating to create change in communities through local organizations. One example of this is Southern Echo, a leadership development, education, and training organization that seeks to support community members in holding “the political, economic, educational, and environmental systems *accountable* to the needs and interests of the African-American community” (Southern Echo, n.d.). As a part of their mission, Southern Echo has committed to “the active inclusion of *young people*, in an *inter-generational model* of community organizing, on the same basis as adults.” Similarly, the Seattle Young Peoples’ Project is a “youth-led, adult supported organization that empowers youth (ages 13-18) to express themselves and to take action on the issues that affect their lives” (Seattle Young Peoples’ Project [SYPP], n.d.). As one of their initiatives, many of which are aimed at school reform, the SYPP launched a two-year campaign against a standardized state-test (2006-2008). There are many examples of community-based organizations where youth are given leadership positions and decision-making rights while consistently supported by adult allies (for examples, see Soundout, 2006, 2010). Many of these groups are organizing school reform initiatives.

Finally, there are important examples of cross-generational collaboration in classrooms and schools. Students can be involved in the process of structuring schools from the initial steps of school design (Borden, 2004), providing input into the structural features of school buildings from the perspectives of learners. They can also be involved in the design of curricula, the choice of materials, and decisions about daily activities (see, for example, Berger, 2003). There are several models of including students in school disciplinary structures, including restorative justice circles in which students and adults together determine the best way to ‘heal’ a community after a harmful act is committed (see, for example, Restorative Justice online, 1996-2010). I have been in schools where students have been included in staff hiring processes or in the review of school policies. There are also examples of schools that use democratic processes to choose curricula and govern school policies, often providing students and adults with a vote (for two different types of examples, see Institute for Democratic Education in America [IDEA, n.d.] and The League of Professional Schools, n.d.). As a final example, the Sudbury Valley Schools (which have existed since 1968) operate using a fully democratic system where students have complete control over their own curriculum,

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<sup>15</sup> For two powerful examples which provide information on many issues that youth face, see *The Freechild Project*, a website put together by adults and youth in collaboration, and Y-Press, a youth-driven organization that develops leadership, civic engagement, and critical thinking through journalism.

participate in decisions about school policies, and decide how to measure their own progress (Sudbury Valley School, n.d.).

Whether at the national, community, school, or classroom level, examples of cross-generational collaboration provide students with some decision-making power in school organizations. This power is not always equal to that of adults; however, these schools and organizations have clear structures through which to incorporate youth perspectives and they explicitly invest in developing youth leadership. They provide examples of the types of educational spaces in which authentic communication (Freire, 2006) supports processes of critical consciousness.

### **Reaching Toward Freedom**

Ayers and Ayers (2011) end their piece by calling for a new type of school reform, one that privileges the humanity of individuals, the power of the collective, and the notion that education is, at best, a space for liberation. We leave their article, as we often leave their words, with a deep sense of both hope and fear, understanding that each of us will play a role in the changes to come. Whether or not we choose to actively shape the educational policies of the next ten years, we will be a part of them—both in allowing their existence and in experiencing their consequences. Now is the time to engage the possibility of a more just world and “whatever we take up and organize around, let us remember to reframe the debates, connect the dots, recognize the links, and unite the issues” (Ayers & Ayers, 2011, p. 108).

Just as cross-racial acts of resistance were not often recorded in the history of U.S. slavery (for example, few Americans know about the slaves and White indentured servants who joined forces to fight the inhumane conditions of their servitude in the early 1700s), so too are cross-generational acts of resistance seldom recorded in our current debates about education. The notion that young people can (or should) be given the agency to fully participate in adult decision-making often generates fear. In a country where the majority of young people neither pay taxes nor vote—and where popular media outlets consistently portray adolescents as deviant, irresponsible, or violent—there is little reason for many adults to trust or care. Still, as we have seen, there are many examples, in communities across this country and countries across the world, of places where cross-generational collaboration is occurring. These educational spaces often can provide us with concrete examples of authentic teaching and learning that is reciprocal and that allows for the ever-evolving development of individuals and communities.

Those of us who hope for educational spaces that nurture pedagogies of freedom (Freire, 1998) must call for a fundamental shift in current practices that ignore or silence youth voices. We must actively involve young people in decision-making, both about their own lives and about the institutional structures that shape their daily experiences. We must invest in young people—providing them with opportunities to develop their understandings of self and world, their own leadership skills, and their relationships—while simultaneously learning from their ever-evolving interpretations of the world (Nakkula & Ravitch, 1998). And, as Hekima reminds us, we must call on educators to center (and re-center) the notion of Ubuntu, which encourages each of us to be “open and available to others, affirming of others” and to remember that we belong “in a greater whole [that] is diminished when others are humiliated or diminished, when others are

tortured or oppressed, or treated as if they were less than who they are” (Tutu, 2000, Chapter 31-32).

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