Education for Liberation: A Precursor to Youth Activism for Social Justice

BY

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THESIS

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to all who struggle in this world for a greater and more transformative justice. You are my inspiration and my friend.
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SUMMARY

This paper presents a participatory research approach to the study of youth activism within a community development and movement-building program. It employs participatory ethnography theory and methods to explore an innovative model of social change for social justice. Building on community youth development and transformative social work perspectives, this study examines the relationship between youth participation in a liberatory education program and the development of an activist identity. This research utilizes a collaborative, community-centric approach to expand social workers’ knowledge of community organizing approaches to youth work in terms of (1) how education on oppression and social justice activism support youth development and (2) how youth in an activist program impact their communities.

Findings from this study articulate a model of social justice youth development founded in intergenerational collaboration, anti-oppression, community, history, wellness and socio-political development. They indicate that such programming impacts young people’s development in terms of their critical consciousness, self-reflexivity, sense of agency, relationships with adults and peers, ability to build alliances and leadership for social justice. Finally, they point to a number ways in which youth activists impact the organizations and communities in which they are engaged, including shaping the policies and practices of youth-serving institutions and the adults who work within them.
I. INTRODUCTION

It is not our purpose to impose a particular set of conclusions. Our purpose is to encourage the asking of questions, and hope that society can be improved. – Mississippi Freedom School Citizenship Curriculum

(http://www.educationanddemocracy.org/FSCfiles/A_02_Introduction.htm).

I was raised by a single mom in suburban Detroit in a predominately white, middle-class Christian community. Back then, our female-headed household was the only “broken” family in our neighborhood. Growing up, my sister and I were often ostracized by parents who, labeling my mom and dad sinners, forbade their children from playing at our house. Although far from real poverty, mom struggled to provide us with the luxuries of suburban life in Midwestern America. Her teacher’s salary wouldn’t cover the costs of gymnastics lessons, horseback riding, and trips to European countries, and dad’s wages only added a measly $84 to the monthly pot. Yet, somehow mom’s clever economic management and self-deprivation allowed us to function as a family unscathed by the burden of a single parent income.

Our family life was further compounded by the on-and-off presence of my mom’s three siblings in our home: Aunt Candy, a witty and complex woman with schizophrenia; Uncle Jim, a talented painter and singer who experienced severe obsessive compulsive tendencies and was a recovering alcoholic; and Uncle Pat, the much younger brother who lost his parents at an early age, grew up fast and grapples with his own addictions to alcohol and gambling. Without parental guidance of their own to rely on, mom functioned as her siblings’ sole source of familial support, ensuring their physical and
emotional well-being to the best of her ability. Oftentimes, when money was tight or mental illnesses escalating, this meant opening our doors to family for refuge.

I both loved and hated the times our relatives resided in our home- I loved the fun and unpredictability of my relatives’ intermittent stays. However, I simultaneously hated the ignorance and discrimination of the community around us. Neighbors, believing people with mental illnesses to be dangerous, again barred their children from visiting our home. Their prejudice frequently translated to harassment of my aunt and uncle, who faced taunting and name-calling by adults and kids alike.

Thus, as an eight-year-old, I began to recognize the oppression in my family life and, almost innately, I understood the importance of fighting against social injustice. I understood both my ability and my responsibility to defend the dignity and rights of people facing discrimination; I knew this truth inherently as I defended my family against children who judged my parents, neighbors who ridiculed my aunt’s disability, and religious zealots who chided my Uncle Pat’s sexual orientation.

Yet, it wouldn’t be until I was a teenager that I began to sense the social context of the challenges faced by my own family. When I was fourteen years old, my mother remarried, and gradually, my family began to receive more social acceptance in our community. Ironically, neighbors and friends were unaware of the dysfunction happening in our new nuclear family. My step-father was an abusive partner, a change in dynamics our long-peaceful, female triad was utterly unprepared to handle. Mom became depressed, while my younger sister turned to drugs. I blamed myself and turned inward; I had always been the peace-keeper in the family, but this was a social injustice for which
even I was unprepared. Internalizing the pain of abuse, I developed bulimia in a futile attempt to regain control in my life.

After five years of an abusive relationship, mom found the courage and strength to file a police report and initiate divorce proceedings. I started counseling services to learn to manage my anxiety, express my emotions, and regain control over my life. The healing process helped me develop deeper familial, cultural, and historical perspectives and reinforced the mandate I felt to outwardly challenge oppression. By sophomore year of college I completed forty hours of domestic violence training and volunteered weekly as a women’s advocate at Domestic Violence Project SAFE House in Ann Arbor.

By the following year, I was working at the Women’s Resource Center on campus, planning cultural events, educational workshops and support groups around women’s issues, as well as serving as student representative on the Women’s Coalition against Violence and the Washtenaw County Welfare Rights Union. Here, I would formally and informally receive my first introduction to organizing, community-building, and advocacy for social justice. At the age of 21, I had found myself, a radical humanist social worker, through my own empowerment as a young woman activist. Thirteen years later, these life experiences continue to shape my personal and professional commitments to transformative social change; in fact, they are the foundation on which this inquiry into social justice youth development is grounded.

At the heart of my own development as an activist lay a multitude of complex experiences with identity, power, privilege and political consciousness. These themes resonate throughout the stories of young activists today. They influence young people’s motivations for social change and are salient factors in their understanding of justness
and human rights. In this research I explore the ways in which education on these themes of oppression and social justice impact young people’s development within an activist framework. In doing so, I draw on theories of community youth development and transformative social work practice to assist us in understanding the intricate relationships inherent in the consciousness-raising, activism and organizational leadership of young people within progressive social movements.

I conduct this research in response to long-standing stereotypes and inadequacies in our understandings of young people, particularly young people of color, as agents of social change. In essence, this study is an exercise in problematizing the misconceptions of young people of color as criminal, deviant and indifferent. By engaging youth activists as participant researchers, the study itself serves to undermine normalized dynamics of power, privilege and oppression inherent in how we position young people in our society. Fore-fronting young people’s voices in both the research process and content allows us to expand our ways of knowing young people while also pushing the boundaries of traditional youth development models to more adequately attend to the structural oppression infringing on young people’s lives (Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Sabo Flores, 2008).

In this regard, this study is the collective story of 13 youth activists from the Chicago Freedom School’s Freedom Fellowship program. It is the story of 9 first-time fellows learning the ropes of activism. And the story of 4 former fellows learning research in service of justice. At the same time, it is a story with very particular historical, cultural, political and philosophical contexts. It is the story of a particular organization, the Chicago Freedom School (CFS), with a particular methodological orientation, popular
education, and a particular goal, intergenerational movement-building. And yet, this very particular story offers up broader implications for youth policy and programming within a social justice framework. In an adultist society such as the US, the stories emerging from this study represent a significant departure from dominant narratives of youth culture, and thus beget new interpretations of the role of young people as agents of change. Finally, this study is my story. It is not only my analysis and interpretation of research data, but also a reflection of my experience as a stakeholder within the CFS as well as my personal philosophy toward social transformation.

**Background, Rationale and Significance**

Adolescence is generally perceived as a stressful developmental time in young people’s lives, with potential consequences for their growth as healthy, contributing, connected citizens. Dominant adult beliefs about youth focus on their vulnerabilities and inherent risk for anti-social behavior, including crime and violence victimization, resistance to authority, family conflict, identity confusion and conformity to negative peer groups (Thomas, Davidson & McAdoo, 2008; Zeldin, 2004). Similarly, public opinion frequently reinforces the stereotype of young people as uncaring and incapable of impacting the larger world around them. This profound public misperception of youth continues to prevail despite recent research on adolescents’ competencies and commitment to civic engagement (O’Donoghue & Strobel, 2007; Zeldin, 2004).

In fact, numerous studies document young people’s engagement in both community work and political activities. These studies describe youth involvement in community service programs to clean public parks and tutor younger children, municipal governing and decision-making boards and social action campaigns to influence public
policy and institutional practices (Kirshner, 2007; Zeldin, 2004; Zeldin, Petrokubi & MacNeil, 2008). They also highlight that opportunities to make a meaningful contribution to community have not been equally available to all young people; specifically, youth of color from low-income neighborhoods have traditionally lacked relevant opportunities to foster their civic participation (Kirshner, 2008; Thomas et al., 2008). The recent trend toward youth activism in urban settings presents a crucial exception to the paucity of opportunities for minority youth to develop social responsibility. Programs in which young people work together to solve social problems provide a critical forum for inner-city youth to develop new cognitive, behavioral and social skills. Youth activism encourages adolescents to work together, think critically about the world, practice democratic skills and exercise self-efficacy (Kirshner, 2007; O’Donoghue & Strobel, 2007; Pearce & Larson, 2006).

The field of community youth development has spawned a new wave of exploratory research on the promise and challenge of youth activism for social justice. These studies predominately describe youth activism as a context for learning and development (Kirshner, 2007; Larson & Hansen, 2005; Rogers, Morell & Enyedy, 2007; Thomas, et al., 2008). Similarly, a few studies utilize qualitative methodology to explore the processes associated with youth participation in social action (Kirshner, 2008; O’Donoghue & Strobel, 2007; Pearce and Larson, 2006). However, narratives examining the factors that facilitate youth development through social justice programming are few and far between and limited in scope. Liberatory pedagogy – defined here as educational programming grounded in social justice and anti-oppressive praxis – represents one such approach. Research exploring the impact of liberatory pedagogy on young people’s
development and engagement in activism will expand our knowledge of this innovative approach.

As such, this study addresses the gaps in our current understanding of the impact of education for liberation on young people’s development. Specifically, it explores the relationship between youth participation in a social justice education program – the CFS’s Freedom Fellows Program – and the development of an activist-orientation. This unique program provides a ripe context for an in-depth inquiry into young people’s developmental trajectory as activists, as well as the organizational and community-level indicators associated with inter-generational movement-building. Based on the model of grassroots socio-political education employed in the Mississippi Freedom Schools of the 1960s, CFS is a community-based, non-profit organization committed to supporting progressive, youth-led social change movements. The mission of CFS is to provide “a space where young people and adult allies can study the work of past movements, deepen their understanding of current social problems, build new coalitions and develop strategies for change. We [CFS] support new generations of critical and independent thinking young people who use their unique experiences and power to create a just world” (http://www.chicagofreedomschool.org). Founded by an intergenerational group of social justice activists, CFS is envisioned as a space for Chicago’s young people to learn new skills, build alliances across identities and ideologies and design activist projects based on their unique positionality within the world.

CFS makes real the goal of intergenerational movement-building by focusing on the development of young people’s leadership and commitment to social justice activism beyond any particular campaign. Rather, CFS emphasizes an anti-oppressive framework
in which young people think critically about issues of identity, power and privilege within the context of historical forces and contemporary socio-economic and political realities. CFS employs three strategies in pursuit of this vision: (1) youth leadership, (2) education and (3) training and organizing. The youth leadership initiative is comprised of the Freedom Fellowship program, an intensive six-month immersion in activism work, and the Youth Leadership Board, a youth-led group charged with organizational development and decision-making. The education initiative – comprised of workshops, multi-week courses, film screenings and community dialogues – serves as a public forum for critical study of historical social movements and current social issues. Lastly, the training and organizing initiative reflects CFS’s work with local communities, organizations and schools to cultivate widespread and sustainable inter-generational movements for social change. CFS trainings seek to build the capacity of adults to work in genuine partnership with youth and of organizations to embrace anti-oppressive practices, and include Adultism, Anti-racism Training for White Allies and Rev UP: Professional Development for Supporting Youth Activism. Likewise, CFS is a leader in the national Education for Liberation Network, collaborating with organization across the US in the development, dissemination and advocacy of liberatory education models (http://www.chicagofreedomschool.org).

In particular, the 2010 Freedom Fellowship consisted of a one week, intensive immersion in the history and contemporary dynamics of two social issues: gender and sexism in the media and criminalization of youth. Following these week-long sessions, the Freedom Fellows continued to study activism through experiential and collaborative learning. Each cohort met, usually weekly, to further research the issue of concern,
develop strategies and tactics, recruit allies and other stakeholders and, eventually, to implement an action plan. Weekly planning meetings were sometimes supplemented by additional training on the theory and practice of organizing for social change. The Fellowship experience culminated in a presentation and celebration of the youth activists’ work in December 2010.

**Research Collaborative**

Consistent with the philosophical and programmatic priorities of the CFS, this project uses a collaborative approach to unearth the multiple discourses of personal and social change inherent in young people’s understandings of anti-oppressive education and social justice activism. Our team of researchers, comprised of myself, a former member of the Board of Directors, and four former Freedom Fellows, bring our varied perspectives to bear in our approaches to understanding the lived experience of Freedom Fellows. Similarly, by embedding the questions of individual experience and community impact within a holistic framework of transformative social work, our work draws on recent scientific advances in the understanding of our world as relationship-centric (Ramsay; 2003). This attention to the symbiotic nature of life plays out in how we approach the research process and interpret the study’s findings.

As youth activism is a recent development in the field of youth work, a grounded theory approach supports the building and extension of community youth development theories to explain how, why and to what end youth engage in social justice organizing (Corbin & Straus, 2008; Patton, 2002). Ethnography offers a system of analysis that attends to the interactions of micro-, mezzo- and macro-level factors, providing valuable insight into the complex web of human behavior, cultural norms and social institutions
(Lowery, 2010). In the context of this study, ethnography facilitates an understanding of youth activists from within their cultural realities and in their own terms. Moreover, this method is well-suited to social work research in its emphasis on use of self, awareness of biases, environmental contexts, participant voice, multiple cultural realities and self-reflexivity (Lowery, 2010).

In a similar vein, the use of participatory strategies within a community of stakeholders is my explicit attempt as an adult ally to further the empowerment and consciousness of young people as co-creators of accurate and authentic knowledge about their own development as agents of social change (Taylor, Jason, Keys, Suarez-Balcazar, Davis, Durlak & Isenberg, 2004). Consistent with transformative social work perspectives, participatory research values the capacity and right of “service users” to control the ways in which their experiences are defined. Like feminist, anti-oppressive and anti-racist praxis, these studies use the research process to enhance participants’ strengths and build new skills. They shed light on the power differentials typical of research and demand action to counter these oppressive tendencies (Blum, Heinonen, and White, 2010). With respect to this particular study, participatory action research becomes a tool in the transformation of adultist institutions – including schools, youth organizations, social service agencies, policy-making bodies and research institutions – that continue to marginalize, stereotype and disenfranchise young people. In essence, involving young people in the design and implementation of this study unsettles traditional notions of researcher as expert, adult as authority; involving young people as researchers shifts this hierarchical dynamic to one of mutual respect and partnership, and
thus, offers us “a method of understanding that transgresses the current boundaries of social scientific knowledge” (Ginwright, 2008, p. 14).

**Conceptual Framework**

The theoretical perspectives informing this research include community youth development and transformative social work practice. Community youth development, itself an outgrowth of the positive youth development framework, posits the engagement of young people in community development efforts as an effective approach to preventing risky youth behavior and fostering healthy adolescent development (Camino & Zeldin, 2002; Watts & Flanagan, 2007). Transformative perspectives represent the socialist-collectivist view of social work, as outlined by theorist Malcolm Payne, and include radical, critical, feminist and anti-oppression frameworks (Payne, 2005). My orientation toward socialist-collectivist social work stems from both personal and professional experience. Personal experience with violence and oppression has directly shaped my understanding and approaches to individual and community healing. For me, healing from violence was a process of personal empowerment that lead to social action through feminist organizing and community youth development processes. These early personal experiences in healing and growth through collective action have molded the lens through which I view efforts to remedy social problems. Below I outline the theoretical underpinning and implications of this framework on my research into education for liberation as a essential component of social justice youth development.

**Community Youth Development**

The first theory I draw on in considering youth activism for social justice, Community Youth Development (CYD), is relevant in understanding the impact of
liberatory education on young people’s cognitive, moral, psychology and spiritual growth. CYD tells us of the crucial role of social milieus in young people’s developmental sense of connection, engagement and active citizenship. It delineates probable outcomes such as improved communication and leadership skills, youth voice and self-efficacy (Zeldin, 2004b). CYD further posits young people, meaningfully engaged in institutions and neighborhood activities, develop a deep and lasting commitment to humanitarian causes (Hughes & Curnan, 2000). The value this perspective places on developmental outcomes for youth is instrumental in situating Freedom Fellows’ socio-political conscientization within extant literature on community building.

Additionally, CYD moves beyond the uni-directional trajectory of influence inherent in traditional youth development theory by postulating a more reciprocal relationship between young people and the communities they inhabit. For example, Zeldin’s (2004b) research into young people’s decision-making within formal organizations indicates positive benefits for adult stakeholders as well as programmatic innovations. My research builds on community youth development, suggesting new insights into the ways in which young people influence schools, organizations and society at large. It presents an alternate discourse of youth as organizational leaders and engaged citizens rather than social deviants or passive service recipients.

**Transformative Social Work**

In this research, I draw heavily on a constellation of theories from socialist-collectivist orientations. Socialist-collectivist theories of social work emphasize an analysis of oppression as experienced by individuals and communities. Practice
approaches are reflexive and dialogical, focusing on the contribution of structural inequities to individual and community problems. They involve “conscientization,” a term popularized by Paolo Freire to describe the process by which groups of people come to identify and take action against the consequences of oppression (Freire, 2000; Payne, 2005). Likewise, they draw on anti-oppression and feminist concepts of the structural nature of power, privilege and discrimination, as well as empowerment as individual and community self-direction.

Socialist-collectivist practice strives for social change toward a more egalitarian and emancipatory society. In such approaches, personal healing and basic needs are addressed concurrently with attention to the systemic forces that create inequity and injustice. As social work theorist, Donna Baines (2007), proclaims, transformative social work, seeks changes in social relationships through direct practices that incorporate liberatory approaches within specific interventions and interactions, as well as through larger actions aimed at macro or structural level change such as activism, scholarly work, resistance, advocacy, collective organizing, mass actions and long- and short-term mobilization of individuals, groups and societies (p. 3).

By simultaneously attending to micro- and macro-level factors, transformative social work attempts to move the field beyond false practice/activism divisions to a more holistic praxis. Furthermore, in its affirmation of the connections between personal growth and larger social change, this approach mirrors the fundamental tenets of the community youth development framework.

**Methodological Orientation**

This participatory ethnography draws on grounded theory to explore liberatory pedagogy as an approach to youth development that attends to social justice issues. The
use of this particular qualitative approach is appropriate to the proposed research topic in that it emphasizes process, meaning and holistic description (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). In other words, grounded theory will allow me to generate thick description and in-depth analysis of how education for liberation operates within the context of youth development and community change. Furthermore, collaboration within grounded theory presents a methodological parallel to the conceptual framework of this study; like transformative perspectives, grounded theory is inherently open and reflexive and the incorporation of community members as active co-investigators attends to the unequal power relations inherent in social research. These method, thus, reflect my personal and professional values of dialogical and egalitarian approaches to practice and research.

Given my personal experiences and views of youth empowerment and engagement in social change, and my prior involvement with the Chicago Freedom School (CFS), this approach requires extreme sensitivity to potential biases. As a budding activist during college, I experienced first-hand the process of developing an activist identity through consciousness-raising, skill-building and mentoring relationships. As my own knowledge and work has evolved over the years, I have put this personal experience to use implementing programs to support other young peoples’ development and engagement in community work. My involvement in the formation and governance of the CFS epitomizes my approach to community and youth development; as a volunteer and member of the Board of Directors, I helped to create intergenerational spaces for learning the history, knowledge and skills of social justice organizing. More specifically, in this work I have engaged in numerous dialogues with youth and adult leaders on the structure, dynamics and intended effects of the organization’s model of social justice youth work.
My intimate personal and professional relationship to the CFS presents a number of implications for biases and conflicts of interest within this project. As such, I employ an array of techniques to ensure genuineness, trustworthiness and authenticity of my research findings, including data triangulation, member checking, consultation with colleagues and detailed process notes on my personal thoughts, feelings and reactions to this project.

Education for liberation as an approach to youth development is a research topic well suited to a socialist-collectivist framework. Liberatory pedagogy – also referred to as social justice education, popular education or anti-oppressive education – is a theoretical orientation to education grounded in social justice and anti-oppression as both process and outcome goals. It is an overt effort to empower learners through consciousness-raising and preparation for participation in the fight against social oppression. As theorized by educational philosopher, Paulo Freire, liberatory education reframes the essence of education as a dialogical process of co-learners working together to unveil reality and re-create it in solidarity with each other. As opposed to the assumed objectivity, passivity and neutrality of the traditional “banking” education system, in liberatory education students are active participants in a political enterprise of learning (Freire, 2000).

Community youth development as a method of practice is primarily concerned with fostering adolescent growth and well-being through civic engagement. Likewise, contemporary youth activism – defined as youth engagement in community organizing for social change – is grounded in philosophies of anti-oppression and social justice. The socialist-collectivist perspective’s explicit linking of individual growth and
transformation to the process of creating community change is mirrored in the articulations of both liberatory education and youth activism. As such, this conceptual framework presents a dynamic and layered lens through which qualitative analysis of the impact of liberatory pedagogy on personal and community change can be viewed.

**Research Questions**

The research questions embedded in this study include the following:

1. What are youths’ experiences of the process of education for liberation?
2. Is participation in a liberatory education program related to young people’s development of an activist orientation? If so, how?
3. Do experiences of inequality and discrimination affect young people’s process of becoming activist? If so, how?
4. Do young people perceive a shift in themselves as a result of their participation in a liberatory education and activism program? If so, how?
5. Do young people perceive their relationships with others to have changed as a result of their participation in a liberatory education and activism program?
6. Are young people’s perceptions of collective agency related to their perceptions of individual agency? If so, in what ways?
7. To what extent are young people drawing on their social justice education in their community work?
8. To what extent do young people translate their experiences in social activism to other developmental settings, such as work or school?

These questions allow us to begin to unpack the meaning of liberatory education and social justice activism in young people’s lives. In doing so, they offer us new insight into
the knowledge, attitudes, skills and behaviors central to building an intergenerational movement for progressive social change.
II. LITERATURE REVIEW

I believe that teaching the skills and perspectives needed for real participation in a democratic society is one of the most revolutionary tasks that an educator committed to social justice can take. – Lisa Delpit (1998), as quoted in Teaching for Social Justice.

Introduction

This review synthesizes the extant literature on youth development perspectives, youth activism and liberatory pedagogy. Spanning nearly 50 years, the empirical research on adolescent development presents an extensive and evolving body of knowledge of best practices and meaningful outcomes in youth work. These studies reflect trends in youth policy and practice, ranging from the deficit-orientation of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s to the more recent emphasis on youth assets popularized in the 1990s. In its newest iteration, the youth development field is beginning to engage young people in organizing and activism for social justice; as such, scholars are beginning to conduct exploratory research on how transformative approaches to youth work foster adolescent development, as well as community well-being. Comprised primarily of qualitative methodology, these studies reflect the need to understand relevant concepts and develop initial theoretical underpinnings of youth activism as a practice approach. The literature on liberatory pedagogy reflects a similar reliance on exploratory approaches and points to the need for a theory of how to educate for social justice.

Given the broad array of evidence on adolescent development, this review focuses on seminal studies within the youth development field. Chronologically oriented, it begins with a presentation of the general trends and key findings of positive youth
development (PYD) research. It then analyzes the research on community youth
development (CYD) as an outgrowth of PYD, highlighting the similarities and
distinctions between these perspectives. Next, it examines the nascent research on youth
activism and, finally, liberatory education. As emerging areas of scientific inquiry, both
theoretical papers and empirical studies on youth activism and liberatory pedagogy are
included in this review. Finally, it highlights how these bodies of literature intersect
within the proposed study and offers a rationale for the privileging of youth activism
research.

**Youth Development**

This section presents an overview of the theoretical literature on youth
development and community youth development. It then presents a critical analysis of
seminal studies within the CYD field, highlighting significant contributions to our
understanding of youth engagement and youth-adult partnerships. Finally, it attends
specifically to criticisms of the youth development field postulated by community
advocates and identifies gaps in our knowledge of the reciprocal relationship between the
development of youth and communities.

Interest in the roles that young people play in community life has a long, rich
history in the social sciences, including sociology, psychology, political science, public
policy and social work. Regardless of disciplinary training, scholars across these distinct
fields have consistently conceptualized youth in disparaging ways. Throughout the
twentieth century, the prevailing focus of youth policy and research revolved around a
discourse of “problematic” behavior (Agee, 1979; Freidman & Beschner; 1985; Malvin,
Moskowitz, Schaeffer & Schaps, 1984; Thomas, Mitchell, Devlin, Goldsmith & Schnike,
In the 1960s, political attention sought to identify and understand youth with serious problems; the 1970s marked the onset of programs to address adolescent needs before they developed into serious problems; by the 1980s, primary prevention programs took hold and bombarded young people with “anti-” messages (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002; Pittman, 2000; Pittman, Irby, Tolman, Yohalem & Ferber, 2003). Despite these nuanced shifts in US policy and practice, an overall trend toward deficit-based interventions has plagued our nation’s young people and fostered the popular notion of youth as delinquent, criminal, menacing. The dramatic impact of this deficit-orientation is still evident in social policy that permits the judicial system to try juveniles in adult court or criminalizes groups of three or more youth gathered together.

Fortunately, scholars, advocates and youth have begun to unravel the long-standing practice of labeling young people as “deviant.” During the 1990s, the emergence of powerful new insights into healthy adolescent development prompted the notion that “problem-free is not fully prepared” (Pittman, 2000; Pittman, et al., 2003). Instead, youth development specialists advanced an asset-based approach to youth work that moved beyond problem prevention to broader outcomes that help young people learn and grow across multiple developmental domains, including cognitive, social, moral, civic, vocational, cultural and physical arenas. Based on prevention and resiliency research, innovative thinkers in the PYD field created original taxonomies of the assets young people need for healthy development.

Karen Pittman’s model, for example, identified a range of services – defined as stable places and basic care – supports – including healthy relationships, role models, resources and high expectations – and opportunities to make meaningful contributions
through skill building, creative endeavors and employment and training programs (Pittman, 2000; Pittman, et al., 2003). Peter Benson later devised the Framework of 40 Developmental Assets, outlining specific internal and external assets central to healthy adolescent development, such as support, empowerment, boundaries and expectations, constructive use of time, commitment to learning, positive values, social competencies and positive sense of identity (Benson & Saito, 2000).

An early, influential study by Scales, Benson, Leffert and Blyth (2000) examined the cumulative impact of developmental assets on adolescent well-being. Based on a sample of 6,000 youth from public schools across the nation, this quantitative survey measured the 40 developmental assets identified by Benson, as well as “thriving outcomes,” defined as school success, leadership, physical health, helping others, impulse control, valuing diversity and overcoming adversity. Overall, results showed that youth with a greater number of assets report fewer risk behaviors and higher levels of thriving behavior. In sum, this groundbreaking study lent credence to the youth development theorists’ position that to fully prepare young people for healthy, successful adulthood we must focus on nurturing their assets, as opposed to merely preventing potential problems.

In 2002, researchers conducted meta-analyses of existing evaluation studies on PYD programs (Catalano, Berglund, Ryan, Lonczak & Hawkins, 2002). Their review summarizes the findings from twenty-five empirical studies of the strategies employed in effective programs and the associated behavioral outcomes for young people. Their findings suggest common themes in successful methods for fostering positive youth development, including strengthening social, emotional, behavioral, cognitive and moral competencies; building self-efficacy; shaping family and community messages about
standards of youth behavior; increasing healthy bonds with adults and peers; expanding opportunities and recognition for youth; providing structure and consistency in program implementation; and interventions that span nine months or more. Similarly, in a majority of effective programs, interventions spanned family, community and school settings. Overall, these studies demonstrated positive changes in youth behavior, including improvements in interpersonal skills, problem solving, cognitive competencies, self-efficacy and academic achievement. They also showed significant reductions in problem behaviors, such as drug and alcohol use, violence and aggression, truancy and risky sexual behavior. An important contribution of the meta-analyses is the revelation that effective programs work across settings and domains and address at least five of the above constructs.

A more recent study by Conner and Strobel (2007) on youth leadership examines development along three dimensions: communication and interpersonal skills, analytic and critical reflection skills and the extent to which youth generalize these skills beyond the programmatic context. This qualitative case study followed the trajectory of two youth over a three-year period of involvement in a leadership development program. Their experiences illustrate that flexible and comprehensive programming that offers young people a broad range of leadership opportunities is an effective approach to fostering leadership competencies. Similarly, in drawing attention to the organizational lessons learned this research underscores the bidirectional impact of youth leadership programming. For instance, informants attributed important organizational insights – such as maintaining a long-term commitment and open-door policy, intentionally using positive reinforcement and distributing opportunities for learning equitably among
participants – directly to their ongoing feedback from youth leaders. In relation to the proposed study, these findings stimulate further questions about how youth act as agents to influence the developmental contexts, and communities, in which they are embedded.

In spite of such promising outcomes, many youth development experts believe the field can do even better in fostering healthy youth, adults and communities. Proponents of this position posit CYD as a more holistic approach to individual, interpersonal and collective well-being. The resulting movement to create communities that support and cherish all youth emphasizes the social building blocks that help young people grow into caring, resilient, productive, responsible adults. Grounded in the assumptions of PYD, CYD presents an integrated framework of youth engagement in community contexts that links healthy adolescent development to long-term societal outcomes (Camino & Zeldin, 2002; Pittman, et al., 2003; Zeldin, 2004a).

Advocates maintain that youth engagement in communities – whether schools, youth organizations or neighborhood groups – promotes youth sense of connection and encourages young people to be active agents in self and social development; they question the notion that “fully prepared” is sufficient, and instead, insist on “fully engaged” young people. In other words, this theoretical orientation broadens the bounds of youth work beyond developmental outcomes to include the meaningful and sustained engagement of young people in organizational and institutional leadership (Mohamed & Wheeler, 2001). Accordingly, the role of young people shifts from passive recipient of services to active participants in their own process of development, as well as that of their community (Curnan & Hughes, 2002). Community Youth Development: A Framework for Action presents a model of intentional social change in which youth and adults work
collaboratively as catalysts for just, safe and healthy communities. This theoretical framework outlines the assumptions, strategies, outcomes and impact of intergenerational social change. Hypothesized youth outcomes include the acquisition of a sense of belonging, independence, mastery and altruism. Theorized improvements in family and community-level outcomes include quality schools, cultural celebrations, valued community traditions and increases in tangible resources (Hughes & Curnan, 2000).

Concurrent with the articulation of a more holistic framework of adolescent development, researchers and practitioners have begun to produce and synthesize our knowledge of the ecology of community youth development initiatives. For example, Benson, Leffert, Scales and Blyth (1998) present a model of community asset-building designed specifically to increase citizens’ dedication and efforts to strengthen core developmental processes for young people. Employing data from a large-scale survey of middle- and high-school students they outline a vision of healthy community as economically viable, intergenerational spaces that provide support, boundaries, opportunities and a shared commitment to developing youth assets. The conceptual model they posit is founded in the core principles of collaboration, comprehensiveness, civic engagement, youth involvement and capacity for long-term change.

Linda Camino’s (2000) ethnographic study explores a critical aspect of this asset-building community model: youth-adult partnership. Using in-depth interviewing and field observation, Camino identifies the conceptual dimensions of youth-adult partnerships, as well as the conditions which affect this strategy of youth work. Conceptually, youth and adult informants define these partnerships as a multidimensional construct based on (1) the values of respect and equality, (2) communication, coaching
and teamwork skills and (3) interactional methods based on cooperation, youth voice and flexibility. In this study, the implementation of youth-adult partnerships was significantly influenced by contextual factors, such as established social relationships and community traditions, daily rhythms and community history. Camino’s project not only provides important insights into the possibilities and challenges of intergenerational collaborations, but also highlights the need for research methodology that attends to power differentials among participants.

Despite Camino’s preliminary evidence in support of the youth engagement stance, researchers continue to point to the isolation of adolescents from adults in general and civic life in particular. This isolation – perpetuated through age segregation, lack of opportunities, negative beliefs about adolescents, amplification of age differences and denial of age differences – reinforces low adult expectations of young people and creates a cycle of adolescent disintegration (Camino & Zeldin, 2002; Pittman, et al., 2003). On the other hand, research on adult beliefs about young people’s motivations and capabilities indicates that adults with a strong sense of community hold more positive beliefs about adolescents as community assets (Zeldin, 2002; Zeldin & Topitzes, 2002). These two quantitative studies indicate that a vast number of adults are receptive to alternative messages about youth as resources and supportive of developmental youth policies; they also suggest that efforts to improve adults’ sense of community connection may be a viable method of furthering adolescent development (Zeldin, 2002). These findings point to an important facet for consideration within the proposed project.

CYD research is just beginning to identify the important ways in which young people influence adults, organizations and communities through their active participation.
To date, Zeldin’s (2004b) groundbreaking qualitative study of youth participation in organizational decision-making offers a sole glimpse into outcomes beyond individual growth in adolescents. Findings from this study reinforce earlier research on the developmental outcomes of youth engagement, namely increased confidence and self-efficacy, as well as improved interpersonal, communication and group facilitation skills through engagement in community development. Yet, they also suggest that youth participation positively impacts adults’ sense of personal efficacy and organizational belonging; likewise, youth participation provides organizations greater access to youth culture and fosters innovation in programmatic planning and implementation. However, as this is a qualitative case study, further research within a variety of groups and organizational settings is required if we are to more accurately understand the influence of young people on organizations and communities.

Amidst this array of research on youth development, there remains a number of gaps in our current knowledge base. For instance, beyond studies on communication and interpersonal skills, experts acknowledge a dearth of research on youth leadership development and inconsistencies in the term’s conceptual definition. As Conner and Strobel (2007) summarize, some researchers promote self-awareness activities, others focus on relationship-building and mentors and still others emphasize youth voice and decisions. Regardless of the scholarly stance, this body of research overemphasizes individualized outcomes at the expense of collective experience (Watts & Flanagan, 2007).

Similarly, the research on CYD contains several gaps relevant to this proposed study. Much of the research on youth engagement examines adolescents in the context of
families or school, as opposed to larger environmental settings (Zeldin, 2004b). Although youth participation is described as a strategy for strengthening young people, organizations and communities, the literature has yet to adequately demonstrate the efficacy of this approach in terms of meaningful cultural change. Specifically, more research is needed on how diverse groups of young people are impacting communities through various settings and approaches (Pittman, et al., 2003; Zeldin, 2004b).

Overall, the limitations of the predominant youth development frameworks reflect their inability to adequately attend to the complex social, economic and political conditions impacting the lives of marginalized youth. Urban youth must contend with daily social assaults to their well-being and sense of self, including racism, sexism, heterosexism, classism, ableism and ageism (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002). Traditional youth development programs rarely address the ways in which oppression impedes healthy development (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002; Ginwright and James, 2002; Thomas, Davidson, McAdoo, 2008; Watts & Flanagan, 2007). Youth activism is posited as a viable response to the limitations of PYD and CYD in ameliorating oppression and promoting social justice for young people and communities alike.

**Youth Activism**

Youth activism and organizing is a recent evolution of thePYD and CYD perspectives that attends to the social justice needs of oppressed and marginalized youth. More specifically, youth activism work acknowledges the structural issues and social inequalities typically disregarded in more traditional civic engagement and youth development initiatives (Krishner, 2007; Thomas, Davidson & McAdoo, 2008; Watts & Flanagan, 2007). As activism is a recent trend in the youth services field, the scholarly
work on this method is largely theoretical; the small body of extant research on this emerging approach is predominately exploratory and descriptive. In fact, most inquiries into youth activism utilize qualitative methods and purposive sampling to construct case studies of youth organizing for social justice. To date, only four studies employ quantitative (Gambone, Cao Yu, Lewis-Charp, Sipe & Lacoe, 2006; Thomas, et al., 2008) or mixed methods (Innovation Center for Community and Youth Development, 2003; O’Donoghue & Strobel, 2007). Overall, these inquires generally reflect two trajectories of study: (1) the developmental youth outcomes associated with activism (Larson & Hanson, 2005; Thomas, et al., 2008) and (2) the practices and processes that support youth activism (Kirshner, 2008; McDevitt & Kiousis, 2007; O’Donoghue & Strobel, 2007; Pearce & Larson, 2006). In this review, I present the contemporary scholarly hypotheses about youth activism principles, dynamics and outcomes. I then examine the emerging body of empirical work on this topic, emphasizing the unique implications for youth and community development inherent in civic activism. Finally, I identify areas within this approach that beg further scientific exploration and offer justification for the proposed study.

As the shift to CYD gained momentum in drawing attention to youth voice and collaborative youth-adult relationships, a handful of innovative academics and practitioners began to push the field to re-consider the adequacy of these models to contend with the complex socio-political and economic issues impacting urban youth (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002; Ginwright, Cammarota & Noguera, 2005; Ginwright & James, 2002). These theorists questioned the individualist orientation of traditional youth development work, as well as the assumption within community practice of adults as the
custodians of youth engagement (Ginwright, 2003; Ginwright et al., 2005). Led by activist-scholar, Shawn Ginwright, these critics posit Social Justice Youth Development (SJYD) as an alternate model that explicitly attends to the broader systemic context in which youth and communities are embedded. More specifically, SJYD is a theoretical attempt to acknowledge the ways in which the supports, opportunities and “risks” are not universal, but rather delineated by larger social, political and economic forces that profoundly impact adolescent well-being (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002). Extending our definition of what it means to be “fully prepared,” SJYD focuses on fostering critical consciousness and sociopolitical competencies so that young people are consistently and actively engaged in the civic process (Ginwright & James, 2002).

Accordingly, youth progress through three levels of awareness, each with associated outcomes for youth and community. At the self-awareness stage, youth focus on identity development, and are expected to experience outcomes such as cultural pride, positive self-regard and positive orientation toward life. At the social awareness level, youth develop critical thinking skills and the capacity for social problematizing through political education and community organization. At the global level, youth are theorized to gain a sense of empathy, purpose and optimism for social change through connection to others’ struggles. Examples of community outcomes across levels include politically aware and actively engaged citizens, equitable institutional practices, social well-being and safe and healthy societies (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002).

Furthermore, youth engagement in community organizing strategies is expected to promote positive outcomes for youth at the interpersonal, community and socio-political levels. For example, analytical activities such as researching and strategic planning are
expected to foster critical thinking and cooperation skills among youth, strengthen youth-adult partnership, build awareness of power dynamics within systems and increase community commitment to youth issues. Action activities – recruiting members, building coalitions and conducting direct actions – are theorized to build youth leadership and problem-solving skills, generate more equitable youth policy and shift public perceptions of youth. Finally, reflective activities, such as group discussion and debriefing, are expected to facilitate healing and a sense of connection to something meaningful, develop new strategies and innovative ideas for community improvement and engender a socio-political vision for our world (Ginwright, 2003).

Similarly, Jennings, Parra-Medina, Hilfinger-Messias and McLoughlin (2006) present a six-dimensional conceptual model that delineates the inputs required for transformative change. Derived from a study of youth empowerment programs, the Critical Youth Empowerment (CYE) model integrates individual and collective level processes and outcomes. Rooted in critical social theory, CYE builds on existing youth empowerment programs to formulate a model of community development and sociopolitical change in which youth actively engage in creating a more equitable society. The key dimensions of CYE include: (1) safe, supportive environments, (2) meaningful participation, (3) shared power, (4) individual and community orientation, (5) socio-political change goals and (6) critical reflection. Although consistent with components of the PYD and CYD literature, this model stretches the critique that “fully prepared is not fully engaged” further, raising an important question about whether “fully engaged” is equivalent to “fully empowered.”

Despite these exciting and promising frameworks, our existing knowledge of the outcomes and processes of youth activism are limited by the relative infancy of the field.
In terms of youth outcomes, nascent research underscores a number of key constructs affiliated with PYD and CYD. In 2003, the Innovation Center for Community and Youth Development published results from a three-year mixed methods case study of youth activism. This project utilized site visits and document reviews with twelve community organizations to gather an in-depth understanding of the practices of civic activism organization that contribute to youth development outcomes. Researchers also surveyed youth within these programs on their experiences of supports and opportunities and levels of civic engagement, identity development and coping. The results of this study indicate that civic activism projects support youth development at rates comparable to or higher than traditional youth development projects. Similarly, these projects successfully engage older youth, a group that more conventional programs generally struggle to reach. As theorized, youth activism also has implications for intermediate community outcomes, including youth involvement in decision-making, increased attention to community issues and changes in public policies.

This study also highlights a number of practices and processes that facilitate youth development outcomes, including a philosophical commitment to popular education, “hands-on immersion” to expose youth to history and social issues in a visceral way and political education on social movements, political processes and current events. These programs drew on young peoples’ cultural expressions in art and music to provoke critical discussion and construct resistance. Finally, they assisted young people in exercising their power by engaging youth in policy advocacy and community action (Innovation Center for Community and Youth Development, 2003). This particular inquiry presents initial knowledge of a number of constructs of interest to the proposed
study and justifies my attempt to expand on and operationalize the meaning behind these concepts.

In a later case study of civic activism, Larson and Hansen (2005) delineate three modes of strategic reasoning associated with youth activism: seeking strategic information, framing communications to the target audience and sequential contingency thinking. Based on interviews with youth program participants, the authors conclude that participation in activist work expands young people’s capacity to exercise agency by furthering their strategic reasoning skills. Moreover, youth indicate that they were able to transfer these cognitive skills from the civic project to the academic and vocational contexts. This study also offers important insights into how youth learn strategic thinking; youth and adult allies describes a cycle of youth-initiated learning supported by formalized training sessions, hands-on assistance and guidance and a culture of action for social change. Although this research points to important connections between young people’s cognitive development, civic development and development of agency, its exploratory nature limits our ability to draw solid conclusions about long-term outcomes or differences among youth participants.

The process of youth engagement in activism projects has been the subject of other recent qualitative studies. Pearce and Larson (2006), for example, explore the motivational process of youth engagement in civic activism. Based on in-depth interviews of 10 youth and their adult ally, the authors develop a theory of change that moves from disengagement to personal connection with peers and adults to intrinsic motivation for participation in social justice activities. In this study, intrinsic motivation emerges as a collective experience in which youth share their skills to collaboratively
take on new challenges. However, as the authors assert, further research is needed to clarify individual differences in young people’s motives for participation in activism; specifically greater attention to the role of social and cultural factors – such as age, gender, race and sexual orientation – must be explored.

A related study of this same youth group explored the process by which youth bridged intergroup differences in their relationships with peers (Watkins, Larson & Sullivan, 2007). Based on observation and interviews, the authors postulate a three-stage process of bridging differences that involves forming cross-group relationships, developing an understanding of diverse groups and acting with awareness toward these groups. Although the case study design allows us to generate an initial theory of how activism facilitates the formation of cross-group relationships among youth; further testing is needed to confirm this theory and deepen our understanding of programmatic practices.

In their quantitative study, Gambone, Cao Yu, Lewis-Charp, Sipe and Lacoe (2006) compare the developmental outcomes of youth organizing, identity-support and traditional youth development agencies. Measures of developmental outcomes include sense of efficacy and capacity for community problem solving, exploration and affirmation of identity and coping strategies. The study also measured young people’s experience of supports and opportunities within these distinct programs. Findings indicate significant differences in youth outcomes on civic activism and identity development measures between the organizing project and the more conventional agencies. In relation to measures of supports and opportunities, youth organizing projects demonstrate higher levels of youth leadership, decision-making and community
involvement than comparison agencies. Additionally, this research illuminates important organizational characteristics of youth organizing agencies, including targeted outreach, population-specific curriculum, stable mentoring relationships and low staff-to-youth ratios. Although they direct our attention to the impact and practices associated with youth activism, as a cross-sectional study with a convenience sample, these findings must be viewed prudentially.

Social work scholar, Melanie Otis (2006) uses case study method to describe an empowerment based approach to youth-led community change in Lexington, KY. In this mixed methods study, the author describes a multi-pronged approach to youth leadership development involving education and dialogue about diversity, adult and peer mentoring, community collaboration and training in leadership skills. Qualitative data from focus groups conducted post-intervention demonstrate an increased commitment among young people to community change work, with several of the young people citing program staff and peers as impetus for their on-going commitment. Additionally, youth participants attribute their increased awareness of prejudice and discriminatory thinking and preparation to confront these problems directly to their educational training. Despite these positive preliminary findings, the actual impact of the youth-led social change projects on the broader community is unknown, as is the long-term impact of program participation on young people’s civic engagement.

Morsillo and Prilleltensky’s 2007 intervention study assessed the impact of youth participatory action research on personal, group and community wellness. Based on qualitative self-reports and ethnographic observations, the authors conclude that young people gained socio-political awareness, sense of control, participatory skills,
assertiveness and liberatory experiences. At the group level, participants developed skills for teamwork and experienced solidarity, acceptance and peer support. Community-level outcomes include greater youth involvement in community life and increased community awareness of issues impacting same-sex attracted youth. Although the authors conclude that such interventions hold promise for community youth development, they acknowledge that such projects are often unsustainable and fail to become institutionalized in community life. Further research is needed on impact and processes of building community capacity for youth-driven social change work.

Other experts examine the link between adult relationships and approaches to youth activists. O’Donoghue and Strobel (2007) utilized survey data to measure youth activism and efficacy as a function of their relationships with adults. This mixed method study describes three qualities of youth-adult relationships that positively impacted their development as activists; youth described these relationships as supportive, egalitarian and embedded in social action. Findings from this study indicate that the presence of caring and trusting adult allies who support “youth voice” is related to young people’s self-identification as activists. However, the scales employed in this project measure youth attitudes and beliefs about their efficacy and identification rather than their actual engagement in activist work.

Similarly, Kirshner’s (2008) ethnographic study explores the teaching practices adult allies use to guide youth participation in social justice work and suggests three routes to young people’s political empowerment: facilitation, apprenticeship and joint work. Adults employing facilitation approaches act as resources to youth planning and implementation of social action campaigns, remaining neutral toward youth decisions. In
the apprenticeship pattern, adults coach youth and participate in organizing activities within a youth-centric context. Adults in the joint work pattern also participated alongside youth, but did not engage in explicit coaching or draw distinctions between youth and adult roles. Based on these patterns of guided participation, Kirshner recommends four principles for promoting youth civic activism: start with an authentic social issue, provide meaningful exposure to well-developed civic practices, be responsive to the skill levels and interests of youth and address continuity issues in youth participation beyond the academic calendar.

Thomas, Davidson and McAdoo (2008) utilized a pre-/post-test survey with matched groups to evaluate the impact of a school-based intervention to promote cultural assets and liberatory activism among African American females. This survey measured ethnic identity, racism awareness, collectivism and liberatory activism; results indicate that cultural and sociopolitical awareness may facilitate youth resiliency. Some of these measures were specifically created for this study and require further testing of their reliability and validity. Furthermore, post-test data collection occurred immediately after program implementation. Additional follow-up surveys beyond the completion of the intervention would be necessary to make inferences about long-term efficacy.

Ben Kirshner’s (2009) later ethnographic study of civic identity development among youth organizers suggests two conflicting discourses: atomism and collective agency. Atomism refers to the belief that people are solely motivated by self-interest and cannot be organized to solve a common problem. Collective agency, on the other hand, refers to the notion of people power, the belief that people can and should join together to achieve common goals; collective agency is not devoid of self-interest, but rather an
effective means to achieve “interest-based political action (p. 433).” In Kirshner’s observations, young people expressed atomism during the onset of the organizing program and only in internal interactions, but expressed collective agency throughout the length of the campaign. This research illustrates the paradigm shift young people undergo as they become agents of social change and justifies future research to examine the ways in which youth organizers change over time.

Similarly, in May 2011, the Funders’ Collaborative on Youth Organizing published results of a study conducted by community-psychologist, Seema Shah, on the transformative impact of youth organizing. This comprehensive study draws on quantitative and qualitative data to examine the complex ways youth organizing impacts the young people involved in it. Shah analyzes data from 124 surveys of youth from three organizing projects, as well as 88 interviews with youth, school administrators and program staff and numerous observations of organizing activities. Findings indicate the following: (1) youth organizing projects provide a safe and nurturing context for young people of color to engage in civic and political life; (2) involvement in youth organizing promotes young people’s sense of agency; (3) youth organizing helps young people develop a critical social analysis, as well as the skills to take collective action to solve community problems; (4) engagement in civic and political activism increases young people’s long-term commitment to social change work; and (5) participation in youth organizing increases the educational motivations and aspirations of young people. Findings also identify commonalities within the programmatic structures of youth organizing groups, including attention to power and identity issues, creation of emotionally and physically safe spaces and supportive adult relationships. As in other
studies of youth organizing, this project is limited in its ability to assess mezzo- and macro-level impacts or make longitudinal inferences about youth civic engagement.

Finally, it is imperative to note that two previous study have been conducted of the Freedom Fellowship. The first study, a program evaluation implemented in 2007 by the Center for Urban Research and Learning, examined the inaugural year of the Fellowship through pre-, post- and 6 month follow up surveys with youth participants and program staff. Findings suggest that program participation could assist youth in forming stronger connections to social identity groups, building coalitions and developing socio-political beliefs and behaviors, such as discussing pressing community issues and taking action to create change. Teachers and staff describe their approach to raising awareness of social issues and activism as rooted in social justice curriculum, popular education techniques and group-based collaborative learning. Fellows, teachers and staff indicate that this experience positively impacted them personally, relationally and professionally.

Social work scholar, Cassandra McKay (2011), offers a case study of the Fellowship as a “resilient community.” This cross-sectional research explores the impact of a community in which adults demonstrate care and concern for young people, high expectations and appropriate supports for youth and encouragement for youth participation on development outcomes. Observational and focus group data reveal Fellows experience adults at CFS as allies and develop autonomy and social responsibility, social competence and perspective taking as a result of program participation. On the other hand, despite seeing the Freedom School as a place of hope, Fellows conveyed a disbelief in their future. Based on these findings, McKay calls for increased integration of PYD in social work settings, greater emphasis on adult allyship
and additional opportunities for young people to engage in social change work. These two studies offer important insights into the theoretical constructs underlying the CFS’s Freedom Fellowship program. However, questions remain as to the nature of youth activism, socio-political development and liberatory education, as practiced as CFS.

Overall, the cross-sectional, exploratory nature of most youth activism research raises several issues for further consideration. Some scholars have identified the need for more research on the trajectory of youth development, developmental process of youth agency, differences among youth activists and interplay between individual and collective reasoning (Kirshner, 2007; Larson & Hansen, 2005). Others call for additional research on the impact of organizatonal features, role of peers and leadership strategies and impact of cultural and social factors in understanding how and why young people enter activist programs (Pearce & Larson, 2006). Thomas et al. (2008) present a parallel call for studies on the impact of culturally relevant activist programs as compared to “universal” interventions. Youniss (2005), on the other hand, asks how developmental outcomes associated with youth activism are transferable to other youth settings and domains; he highlights the need to build a taxonomy of youth activism approaches and theories (Youniss, 2005). Shah (2011) highlights the need for longitudinal data on youth organizing, as well as community and policy-level outcome evaluations; she advocates for more applied research to “strengthen the work of existing organizations and provide much-needed examples that can help others to enter the field (p.36).” This abundance of unanswered questions on the nature, process and impact of youth activism serves as justification for the proposed study on liberatory pedagogy as an approach to youth development and social change.
**Education for Liberation**

In recent years, a number of educational, political and social theorists have asserted the power of Freirian philosophy to reform our approaches to formal and informal education to more adequately address social inequities. These scholars view liberatory pedagogy as a compelling method for developing peoples’ critical consciousness and transforming their sense of moral integrity (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2007; hooks, 1994; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Mitchell, 2007). In spite of the multi-disciplinary call to critical pedagogy, much of our knowledge of this methodology remains in the theoretical and exploratory realms. In fact, very few research studies actually investigate the process or product of a critical pedagogical approach in terms of youth development and political activism. This section begins with a critical consideration of the dominant theories on liberatory education. I then analyze the few existing studies on anti-oppressive educational practices with young people.

Liberatory education, as posited by Paolo Freire (2000) and bell hooks (1994), presents a compelling method for developing students’ critical consciousness and transforming their sense of moral integrity. Liberatory education reframes the essence of education as a dialogical process of co-learners working together to unveil reality and re-create it in solidarity with each other. As opposed to the assumed objectivity, passivity and neutrality of the traditional “banking” education system, in liberatory education students are active participants in a political enterprise of learning (Freire, 2000; hooks, 1994). This context of egalitarian dialogue embraces the dialectic between objective and subjective knowledge, values “difference” as important to understanding and promotes a democratic ethos (Freire, 1993; Saleebey & Scanlon, 2005). In essence, liberatory
education creates concrete space for a thorough and intentional exploration of the roles of politics, culture, power and identity within society.

Education for liberation requires a position of “informed not-knowing,” in which teachers and learners acknowledge the partiality of knowledge and commit to lifelong learning. bell hooks describes this unique facet of liberatory education as belief in the students’ ability to use themselves and their power to contribute to a shared learning context, “The bottom-line assumption has to be that everyone in the classroom is able to act responsibly. That has to be the starting point – that we are able to act responsibly together to create a learning environment” (hooks, 1994, p. 152). Social work scholars, Dennis Saleebey and Edward Scanlon move this notion of shared responsibility out of classroom and apply it to a broader social context, “the pedagogy of hope argues that contrary ideas can be ‘counter-hegemonic’ and offer hope for resistance and change in the social order” (Saleebey & Scanlon, 2005, p. 4). In fact, a true critical pedagogy insists on moving students and teachers toward “praxis,” a term popularized by Freire to describe the recursive process of social action based on and in line with dialogue and reflection (Freire, 2000).

In recent years, a handful of researchers in community psychology have asserted a theory of sociopolitical development that forecasts how changes in awareness of the dynamics and realities of oppression lead to liberatory behavior among youth (Watts & Flanagan, 2007; Watts, Griffith & Abdul-Adil, 1999; Watts, Williams & Jager, 2003). Socio-political development is a five-stage theory founded in critical consciousness as an integral process of analyzing oppression and applying these insights to social change efforts. Watts and colleagues posit a process in which young people acquire an
ecologically-based understanding of racial and cultural identity through a developmental trajectory of acritical, adaptive, precritical, critical and liberation stages. This perspective also maintains that liberation behavior is essential to an individual’s growth in analytical sophistication and psychological empowerment (Watts et al., 2003). Although not yet empirically validated, this theory raises noteworthy questions for the field of youth development, such as: do our interventions help young people gain insight into the social and historical factors impacting our lives? Do they protect young people’s psycho-social well-being from the political and cultural stresses of the day? Do they promote collective resistance and build young people’s skills for social action? In essence, this theory of socio-political development underscores the pressing need for further research on the community and youth development outcomes associated with critical consciousness.

Isaac Prilleltensky and Dennis Fox (2007), also community psychologists, further argue for the full integration of wellness as a component of psycho-political development. These theorists define psycho-political literacy as understanding the relationship between political and psychological forces that either enhance or diminish wellness and justice. They maintain that transformative psycho-political validity, then, depends on the degree to which research and action reduce negative and strengthen positive political and psychological factors that contribute to wellness and justice. They theorize the role of professional helpers as advocates of psycho-political literacy who “emphasize power and clarify the destructive impact of inaccurate assumptions about human nature and human society” (p. 803). Their contribution to how we connect wellness to justice is of direct relevance to the CFS’s model of liberatory education and indicates an additional area of investigation for the present study.
Ladson-Billings’ (1995) case study of effective, culturally-relevant pedagogy identifies important components of teaching cultural competence and sociopolitical development as collaboration, connection, sense of social responsibility, passion for knowledge and learning and problematization of the nature of “schooling.” Based on participant observation of eight teachers of African American students, Ladson-Billings articulates culturally relevant pedagogy as academically stimulating, supportive and nurturing of cultural competence and oriented toward critical consciousness. A number of the findings from this qualitative inquiry parallel prevailing conceptualizations of liberatory education, such as valuing students as “teachers,” developing a learning community and framing knowledge as a social and historical construction. Although this study contributes to our initial understanding of the fundamental characteristics of liberatory educators, it falls short of demonstrating developmental outcomes or providing a youth perspective on the experience of such pedagogy.

Through participant-observation, teacher interviews and review of student writings, Otoya-Knapp (2004) examines the use of dialogue and critique as tools for understanding the relationship between social issues, equity and students’ lives. Based on data from a Los Angeles public high school world history class, Otoya-Knapp advocates critical inquiry as an educational method to promote personal reflection, consciousness-raising and student leadership and resistance. The author finds personal, interpersonal and social implications for disenfranchised students, including the ability to problematize social issues and articulate just responses, develop empathy and a sense of community with diverse peers and construct a self-defined identity. By highlighting student voices, Otoya-Knapp offers an important account of young people’s experiences within a
liberatory classroom. These voices offer new, contextually-based information about how young people expand their cognitive, emotional, social and moral capacities. Moreover, this study begs the question of whether non-school-based programs might also employ liberatory strategies to further young people’s socio-political development, and if so, whether young people’s critical education produces community-level outcomes.

Based on a two-year study of educational programs to promote “democracy,” Westheimer and Kahne (2004) describe three conceptualizations of citizenship. The authors situate our ideas about citizenship within the spectrum of political ideology. The personally responsible citizen is defined as someone who acts responsibly in the community; this definition is based on assumptions of good character and honesty. The participatory citizen, is a leader and active member of established community organizations or neighborhood improvement efforts. The justice oriented citizen, on the other hand, critically assesses social, political and economic systems for root causes and works to change structures and patterns that reproduce inequality. Study results of this mixed methods project indicate that developing participatory, justice-oriented citizens requires curriculum that explicitly links these democratic principles, an important consideration in my prospective theorizing of the CFS’s program model.

Diemer, Kauffman, Koenig, Trahan and Hsieh (2006) offer a mixed-methods study of the relationship between young people’s development of critical consciousness and their perceived support for challenging racism, sexism and social injustice. Implications of this research point to necessary components of psycho-educational interventions aimed at consciousness-raising, including the incorporation of informal support systems, development of goals and methods tailored to the social context of
urban youth and attention to both the action and reflection components of critical
consciousness. Although this study suggests some key aspects of young people’s socio-
political development, the results are limited by the convenience sample. Furthermore,
the study does not measure a specific intervention or include young people’s resistance to
other injustices, such as adultism, able-ism, classism or heterosexism.

Finally, Shawn Ginwright and Julio Cammarota (2007) present a groundbreaking
ethnographic analysis of the educational and organizational processes and practices that
promote youth engagement in civic praxis. Concerned with understanding the shift in
consciousness necessary for youth to initiate social change, these researchers conducted
in-depth interviews and field observations of young people in two urban, youth activism
programs. They postulate that critical civic practice among youth requires four key
components: intergenerational networks of caring adults, exposure to relevant political
ideas, a broad range of interactions with fellow youth activists and process-based,
collective learning. This study puts forth a complex matrix of experiences, actions and
educational processes that engender new forms of social capital among urban youth. In
revealing key concepts of learning in civic activism programs, this study lays the
groundwork for my own research project. Yet, in spite of the initial insights these studies
provide into the components and processes of liberatory education, in all, they raise more
questions than they answer. To truly understand the impact of education for liberation,
research must investigate how a liberatory pedagogical approach is implemented, how
youth experience liberatory pedagogy and the process of developing an activist
orientation and how their personal and collective agency translates in various
developmental settings.
Conclusion

This review synthesizes and critically analyzes the extant literature on youth development, youth activism and liberatory pedagogy. In a groundbreaking shift from the predominant deficits approach to youth research, the positive youth development literature has focused on the internal and external assets of adolescents, the developmental outcomes necessary for healthy transitions to adulthood and the supports and opportunities that foster these outcomes. Community youth development theorists have pushed researchers to move beyond developmental outcomes for young people to a more integrated framework that links adolescent development to community level outcomes. This perspective has drawn attention to the ways in which youth engagement in programs, organizations and neighborhoods benefits both adults and communities, at large. Despite these valuable contributions, youth development frameworks fail to adequately attend to the complex social, economic and political factors impacting today’s young people.

The recent trend toward research on youth activism and organizing for social justice has the potential to generate important insights for social work with youth, including new knowledge of cognitive and learning processes, civic development and social movement-building (Ginwright, 2003; Kirshner, 2007). By embracing, extending and critiquing the outcomes and processes of PYD and CYD, the youth activism literature presents a number of fundamental considerations for this study and, as such, is fore-grounded within my framework. In particular, many of the studies conducted within the positive youth development and community youth development fields are based on samples of white, middle-class, suburban youth. The resulting theoretical models fail to
give adequate attention to the impact of systemic oppression on young people’s
developmental trajectories. On the other hand, the study participants in youth activism
research – urban, low-income, youth of color – more closely reflect the young people
engaged in the Freedom Fellowship program. These conceptual models privilege issues
of social inequality in their perspective on healthy adolescent development. For me, they
raise questions as to the unique strengths that marginalized youth possess and draw on in
overcoming experiences of oppression.

Similarly, the youth activism literature is based on programmatic models that
appear to overlap with the Freedom Fellowship in significant ways. These models have
informed my understanding of the structures and processes of CFS’s approach to youth
development, and point to both common and distinctive facets. More specifically,
liberatory pedagogy as a theoretical orientation has been hypothesized as a promising
avenue for sociopolitical youth development. However, research on this approach to
fostering youth engagement in community change efforts is in its infancy. As such,
进一步 in-depth exploration for this construct is necessary to the generation of an
empirically supported theory of youth activism. Researchers must discover the skills,
knowledge, supports and opportunities young people need to transform social problems.
We must delve deeper into the question of how participation in political activism
prepares young people for productive adulthood, as well as how youth experiences of
inequality and discrimination affect the developmental process. The present study seeks
answers to these questions in an attempt to address the considerable gaps in our
knowledge of liberatory education and youth activism.
III. METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

Research Design

The goal of this critical, participatory ethnography is to describe how, why and to what end youth are engaging in social justice organizing, as well as to document the impact of youth organizing on community and youth development. To uncover a rich, contextual understanding of education for liberation and youth activism, our research team obtained in-depth data on the Freedom Fellows, their organizing projects and the Chicago Freedom School (CFS) program from multiple sources, including the young people, staff and community allies. Shaped by the research participants themselves, our interview, analysis and interpretation processes emphasized young peoples’ personal stories of partaking in a liberatory education program and organizing against social injustice. These interviews, supplemented by field observation and document reviews, yielded thick description of the transformative dynamics of social justice youth activism work. In line with the post-modernist paradigm presented in the conceptual framework, this ethnographic approach allowed the research participants and I to co-construct a relativist and subjectivist interpretation of liberatory pedagogy as it relates to youth activism (Annells, 1996a). Moreover, our reliance on participatory methodology helped counter the power imbalances that might otherwise privilege my perspectives and facilitate the articulation of a collective reality that more accurately reflects the participants’ own experiences and insights (Jason, 2004; Blum, Heinonen & White, 2010; Sohng, 1996).
As there is currently very little research on the topic of youth development through liberatory education and community organizing, qualitative research methods are an appropriate approach for this study. A handful of scholars have recently used qualitative methodology to describe and explore youth activism. Their studies have begun to delve into the essential components, principles and practices of sociopolitical development (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 1995). These groundbreaking qualitative studies provide rich, meaningful narratives and lay the foundation for the *Education for Liberation* study. In sum, this research builds upon these descriptive foundational studies in order to explore the usefulness of transformational theories in explaining individual and community change.

This ethnographic inquiry reflects a naturalistic, emergent design in which the researchers must employ reflexivity, sensitivity, creativity, inductive reasoning and a holistic perspective. It originates in an eclectic worldview that mingles feminist, anti-oppressive, critical and social constructivist paradigms. As Blum, Heinonen & White (2010) point out, this approach emphasizes the dialectic nature between the voices of the research participants and the unique knowledge and experience of the investigators. It represents an action-oriented approach to applied research that generates knowledge of social processes, structures and interactions underlying a particular practice or phenomenon (Annells, 1996b). In its attention to the roles of researcher/participants and beliefs about the nature of science, critical ethnography is congruent with the socialist-collectivist perspective framing this study.

Likewise, the participatory aspects of this study speak to the “inseparability of theory and practice and critical awareness of the personal-political dialectic” inherent in
transformative social work (Sohng, 1996). Engaging young people as consultants in the construction of research questions, sample selection, interview and analysis processes and dissemination of study results merges the theories and praxis of community youth development and participatory research. That is to say, my research partners – four alumni of the Freedom Fellowship program – played a critical role in determining what questions to ask, how to ask them, who to ask them of and how to interpret the findings; in contributing to our knowledge of community youth development, these young people gained new skills, competencies and sociopolitical understandings (Jason et al., 2004). As lead researcher, I too gained skills in managing a research project and supporting young people’s growth and development as social justice actors.

Sharing power with youth stakeholders in the design and implementation of this research project is a political, value-based decision. In particular, this decision is founded in my valuing of experiential knowledge, belief that all people have strengths to contribute, commitment to egalitarian relationships and resolve to openly acknowledge differences of opinion and work through conflict. This participatory, ethnographic approach required me to address the power differentials between myself, the youth researchers and the informants that are rooted in our personal identities. As a white, adult woman, it is critical that I recognize the privileges inherent in my role within society, reflect on the how my social location impacts the research project and actively attend to racial and age disparities. Throughout the study, the participant researchers and I explicitly attend to the multiple and complex intersections of our identities, privileging concepts of race, ethnicity, gender and age.
Some of the tactics I used to share power and build equality within this study include: being transparent about the research process, using accessible language and defining unfamiliar terms, collaboratively establishing a decision-making model, discussing roles and responsibilities at the onset and throughout the study, utilizing culturally appropriate means of communication and building space for dialogue about power issues. Likewise, in the data analysis stage, I forefront the notion of knowledge as partial and consider the possibility that answers may be a response to the interview process as much as to the actual question. These facets of the research design are described in detail in the sections that follow. By fostering a holistic analysis that attends to the interactions between personal, interpersonal, organizational and social change, this qualitative, community-oriented design fits well with the research questions posed here. Overall, it facilitates theory development that incorporates data from an interactional, temporal, processual and structural perspective.

**Building the Research Partnership**

I began the process of composing the research team though informal conversations with CFS staff about potential young people with the time, energy and consciousness to engage in research. Leah, a program staff member, recommended that I speak first with Quinton Davis, a 2008 alumni of the Fellowship, former board member and trainer (Quinton co-facilitated professional development trainings with CFS staff on topics related to social justice work with youth). Knowing Quinton from our service on the board together, my intuition told me that he could be an important partner in conducting this study, especially given his strong leadership skills, consciousness of social issues and positive relationships with other youth. As such, I approached him with
the idea and invited him to interview for the position. Quinton was immediately interested. We set up a meeting in mid-June to discuss the study. In our interview, I presented information about the research roles and responsibilities within the project, asked questions about why this project interested him and what he hoped to learn from it and answered his questions about the study; I then presented Quinton with the job description (see Appendix H), outlining the expectations and learning opportunities available to youth researchers, and asked him to take a few days to think about whether he would like to accept a position on the team. In closing, Quinton offered me the names of two other alumni with the background and experience for research; and that is how I recruited Genesis Gomez, 2007 alumni, and Cristina Rojas, 2009 alumni and Youth Leadership Board member, walking them through the interview process and allowing them time to fully consider the position before committing to the project.

As June neared an end, our research team began to come together in earnest. Ideally, we needed one more team member, but many of the alumni still involved in CFS were leaving for college in the fall or working summer jobs. We were looking for someone able to commit to the project for six months and coming up short, when Leah brought it to my attention that Julius might be a good match. Julius Claybron was a 2008 alumni, whom I remembered well from his kindness and can-do attitude and so, like the others, I called him up and invited him for an interview. We met in early July and Julius immediately accepted the position. By mid-July our research team was in place, readying us for the planning and training phase.

We spent the second half of July identifying the concepts we hoped to explore in our research, getting to know each other better, developing working agreements, refining
our interview guide, and completing an in-depth training on research methods and ethics (see Appendix J for training outline). To accomplish all of this groundwork, we met twice a week for approximately 3 hours each meeting. We opened our meetings with Icebreakers – chosen and facilitated by the young people – as a way of bonding with each and establishing a fun and active space. In our first training session, held July 20, 2010, I introduced basic research concepts, such as definitions of research, methodologies in research and the fundamentals of participatory research. For this session, I created a youth-friendly handout entitled *Methods of Gathering Information*, which provides short summaries of widely used data collection techniques and gives an example of how each technique could be used at CFS (see Appendix K). During this three-hour training, we talked at length about the purpose and specific design of the *Education for Liberation* study. We collaboratively outlined the steps in our research process, identified tasks and persons responsible and developed a tentative timeline for our work. We then established working agreements for our team, such as open, honest communication; pay attention to power and privilege; use consensus decision-making; share skills and knowledge; commit to self-reflection; and collaborate in all aspect of the research project. Finally, before closing for the night, we made a critical decision about data collection: The 2010 Fellowship year actually began July 12, but the young people had not yet completed the required training on research ethics; rather than miss out on valuable data, we agreed that I alone would continue to conduct the participant observations of the Freedom Fellowship. As a team, we acknowledged that this decision did not represent our ideal approach, but that given the limitations imposed by our timeline, it was more important to capture the data than be fully participatory.
Two days later, we reconvened for our second training session on research. According to IRB guidelines, all members of the research team are considered Key Research Personnel and must therefore complete the mandated Investigator 101 Training. Given the imperative to appropriately and sufficiently attend to ethical issues within research, we began an in-depth ethics training on July 22. To ensure that the young people fully comprehended the ethical considerations in research, I provided oversight and guidance during the computer-based training. I reserved time at CFS for our team to collectively use their computer lab and guided the team through the training modules, stopping to answer questions and explain key concepts. This process allowed us to feel confident that each person was genuinely comprehending the ethical principles and integrating them into our practice, as opposed to merely acquiring a surface understanding. As was our regular practice, we closed this session by debriefing our work to-date and establishing our next steps. None of the young people were able to complete the Investigator 101 training during this session; as such we scheduled two follow-up sessions to focus on finishing the training. Once completed, I submitted an amendment to the IRB application listing all four young people as Key Research Personnel.

Over the next month we continued our bi-weekly training and planning session. We began co-constructing the Interview Guide, using the draft guide included in the Initial IRB Application as a starting point. We practiced asking questions, identifying points of confusion or awkward wording and refining the questions until they were clear and natural to the young people on the research team. The young people really took hold of this process, making insightful suggestions for new questions or better wording.
Once we completed the Interview Guide and submitted it for approval from the IRB, we began learning the ins-and-outs of conducting key informant interviews (see Appendix B: Youth Interview Guide and Appendix L: Conducting Informant Interviews). We spent several sessions role playing, proceeding question-by-question and providing each other specific feedback on tone, pace, eye contact, active listening and non-verbal communication. We discovered, at this point, that the young people were quite adept at using the guide, but less comfortable with prompting and follow-up questions. For me, this raised a concern about the balance of power within the interview. I feared that if I asked questions off the guide and asked the majority of prompting questions that I would dominate the interview. I shared this concern with the group and they agreed that this dynamic could potentially create inequality in our roles. As such, we collectively decided that the young people would ask all of the questions on the interview guide – save question two, which I would ask to get myself involved in the interview early on – and I would ask all of the prompting and follow-up questions (suffice it to say, this arrangement served us well in our first few interviews, but quickly became unnecessary as the young people’s skills and confidence in research interviewing evolved).

The lively, open and honest discussions that emerged from our planning sessions taught us a lot about each other and deepened our sense of collaboration. We learned, for example, that Julius is very thoughtful and a great wordsmith; Genesis is a very deep thinker and able to get people to open up; Quinton is strikingly honest and uses humor to engage and disarm people; and Cristina is consistently warm and positive, organized and responsible. This lengthy preparation period also helped us identify our fears about conducting this study. I, for one, realized my fear of reinforcing adultism by dominating
the research process. Quinton admitted his own fear of making mistakes in the interview; Genesis similarly feared missing opportunities to explore a concept by not knowing what follow-up questions to ask. Julius, who had been dealing with migraines throughout the summer, conveyed his fear of missing out on scheduled research activities and letting the team down. True to form, Cristina remained positive that we would all be fine, steadfast in her belief that our team would pull together.

Learning about each other’s strengths and fears helped us develop a deeper respect, caring and commitment to each other. After one particularly arduous role play in which Cristina and Genesis conducted a full interview, Quinton confessed, “I have a tear in my eye. I’m not sure why, but I have a tear. I feel moved.” While we all tried to help him articulate what specifically moved him, he was at a loss for words to explain his feelings. These moments, interspersed throughout the research study, underscore the meaningfulness of participatory research with youth. In fact, Quinton’s expression of emotion to his team members, prompted me to write a letter to the research team expressing my own joy, pride and confidence in our work (see Appendix M). I offered this expression to the team as a way of building their self-esteem and demonstrating my gratitude for their partnership.

On August 16, 2010 we officially began interviewing key informants. Our data collection lasted from July 2011 – January 2012. During this time, we continued to meet weekly as a research team to debrief interviews, plan future activities and code transcripts. In late September, Quinton moved to a south suburb of Chicago to begin college. As such, his involvement in research activities gradually tapered off. Whenever possible, he would re-join our team to assist with data analysis; however, given the
commute and his academic responsibilities, he was unable to maintain regular involvement on the team through January. This loss impacted the team in terms of the pace at which we could complete our work, and more importantly, in terms of feeling like a full, cohesive group.

In February, at eight months into the study, we were forced to contend with the realities of maintaining a long-term project in light of the fluidity of life. In addition to Quinton’s leaving for college, Genesis was traveling frequently to North Carolina to visit her boyfriend, Julius was grieving the loss of his grandmother and Cristina was preparing for the pressures of ACTs, SATs and other high school exams. As lead researcher, I too, had my share of life circumstances that contributed to the constraints on our time and energy for this project. Given our conflicting priorities and our shifting focus to data analysis, we began meeting only bi-weekly. Although this decision slowed us down, it presented the most feasible option for maintaining the research partnership, especially considering I had originally only asked the young people to commit to six months on the project.

In July, we completed data analysis and in August, we celebrated Julius’s graduation and departure for Cornell University. We also officially stopped meeting as a research team, with the caveat that we would come together to disseminate our findings – through presentations and an organizational report – after I had completed writing the dissertation. Since that time, Genesis and I have co-facilitated the focus group member check and co-presented on our study to a Master’s of Education class on participatory evaluation with youth. Informally, the five of us keep in touch, periodically checking in with each other about life and work. In these conversations, Cristina and Julius have
expressed interest in helping develop a research report for CFS based on our findings, Cristina telling me emphatically that she’s “committed to seeing this project through to the end;” we have agreed to reconvene come June to discuss our next steps.

**Sample**

This research sought to address the gaps in our current understanding of liberatory pedagogy as an approach to youth development and social change. In line with the grounded theory approach to building knowledge, this study employed purposive and theoretical sampling to determine study participants (Annells, 1996a; Patton, 2002; Corbin & Strauss; 2008). Purposive sampling, or sampling for maximum variation to identify uniqueness and commonalities, supports the research goal of building a theory of education for liberation and youth activism. Specifically, this sample is comprised of nine young people from the CFS’s Freedom Fellowship (FF) program, three staff from the CFS and two community members involved in FF projects.

The CFS is the organizational site for this study. As a non-traditional educational program, the CFS offers year-round training and learning opportunities for youth and adults throughout Chicago who are interested in social justice issues. The mission of CFS is to “provide a space where young people and adult allies can study the work of past movements, deepen their understanding of current social problems, build new coalitions and develop strategies for change. We [CFS] support new generations of critical and independent thinking young people who use their unique experiences and power to create a just world.” By connecting youth with their histories, CFS builds on the model of civil rights education and organizing found in the original Mississippi Freedom Schools of the 1960s. The FF is a youth development program, targeted toward underserved youth, that
strives to foster socio-political consciousness through education on social issues, leadership skill building and engagement in social justice activism. As such, the nature of this program lends itself to this study’s concern with the implementation of liberatory education and its impact on youth and community development.

The nine youth informants in this study participated in the FF training initiative during the 2010 program year. These young people, ages 14-17, identify as low and middle-income youth of color who live and attend schools in the city of Chicago. Seven of them attend Chicago Public Schools, some of which are charter schools; one Fellow attends private school and one attends parochial school. Five of them racially identify as African American, three of whom identify as female and two as male. Two of the Fellows racially identify as Latino and two as Latina. Although we cannot say with any certainty how the Fellows self-identify in terms of socio-economic status, we do know that many of them attend under-resourced schools and live in neighborhoods traditionally classified as “poor” or “violent.” We also know that at least one Fellow identifies with the queer community and at least four Fellows practice a form of Christianity. We are unable to report whether any of these young people self-identify as differently abled.

All nine young people participated in initial interviews and five young people participated in follow-up interviews. Using theoretical sampling, we selected adult key informants with knowledge of the concepts emerging from interviews with Freedom Fellows (Annells, 1996a; Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Corbin & Strauss, 2008). These five adults were selected based on their familiarity with liberatory education and youth activism and ability to offer an organizational context to the youth perspectives. Sixteen of the nineteen interviews were co-conducted by myself and a young person. I conducted
three interviews alone; in each case, the young person scheduled to assist with the interview was unable to make it at the last minute and other team members were unavailable. Additionally, I engaged in participant observation of 15 Freedom Fellowship events – four trainings, five workshops and six meetings, totally 40 hours – and reviewed archival materials, including program brochures, newsletters, websites, workshop curriculum, art work and other internal documentation of the youth organizing projects.

**Data Collection**

In-depth, open-ended interviews allowed us to explore and describe the study phenomenon and facilitated cross-case analysis. Through these interviews we intended to obtain an insiders’ perspective on the structures and processes inherent in the CFS’s model of social justice youth development. As a team, we developed semi-structured interview guides, which were submitted to and approved by the University of Illinois at Chicago’s Institutional Review Board. We conducted all interviews in private and in person, at a time and location of the informants’ choice. Whenever possible, we co-conducted interviews; on three occasions I alone conducted the interview. Our team used face sheets, recording forms and interview reactions sheets to aid in consistent collection and recording of data. The IRB-approved interview guides, face sheet, reaction sheet and recording forms can be found in the appendices.

We began each interview with a review of the *Informed Consent* form and an explanation of the purpose and procedures of the study. Informants were provided an opportunity to ask questions about the study prior to giving their consent for participation. For minors, we obtained prior formal consent from their parents or guardian, in addition to obtaining their assent to participate. Data collection began in July
2010 with participant observations and document review. Initial interviews with young people were conducted August – October 2010 and follow-up interviews were conducted in December 2010 and January 2011. All interviews with adult informants were conducted in January 2011. After completing data collection and initial analysis, Genesis and I conducted a focus group with two youth informants in November 2011 as a final member check.

Given our embeddedness in the organization, our team took special care to maintain confidentiality. In addition to the Investigator 101 training, all researcher team member signed a confidentiality pledge. As lead researcher, I regularly reminded the team that participants’ disclosures of racial identity, sexual orientation or experiences of prejudice and discrimination must be held in the strictest confidence and that we must make every effort to respect participants’ privacy. As such, I collected and stored all research materials off-site, in a locked office. To ensure that research materials were not left on-site, I labeled each transcript with the coder’s initials and created a data collection log to track their status. Likewise, we thoroughly documented the data collection process including tracking of interview and transcription details, internal researcher thoughts and reactions, research decisions and coding information. Our prolonged engagement, use of multiple sources as a form of data triangulation and member checks help to reveal the voices of the research participants and facilitate trustworthiness in the data (Annells, 1996b; Patton, 2002; Jason, 2004).

**Interviews with youth**

Youth informants were asked to participate in one – two interviews over the course of several months and one focus group at the end of the data collection period.
Multiple interviews allowed us to gather thick descriptions of young people’s developmental process of becoming a social justice activist, as well as their evolving experiences within this particular socio-political educational model. In the initial interviews we explored the main concepts of interest to the study, including concepts associated with youth development, social justice and anti-oppression. In follow-up interviews we focused on clarifying ideas from the initial interviews that remain tentative or ambiguous, as well as assessing for shifts in the youths’ development over the course of their participation in the program. We used a semi-structured interview guide – developed collaboratively by the research team and approved by the IRB – to help configure initial interviews; after the initial interviews, we developed a guide for the follow-up interviews based on preliminary themes. Youth informants received a $10 gift card upon completion of the interview(s) as an incentive for their participation in this study.

**Interviews with adults**

Three CFS staff members and two contracted program instructors were asked to participate in an interview regarding their understanding of the organization’s definition and approach to critical pedagogy, as well as their roles and experiences in implementing the CFS’s model of social justice education and movement building. These interviews, which took place toward the end of the research project, serve as a comparison to the conceptual information provided by the youth informants. All adult informants received a $10 gift card as compensation for their participation in this research.

**Participant Observation and Archival Review**
As lead researcher, I conducted participant observation and archival analysis throughout the study, to supplement and guide the in-depth interviews. Undertaking 40 hours of participant observation afforded me a “lived” experience of the Freedom Fellowship program, while archival analysis offered insight into written and visual material of the organizational and youth culture at CFS. At the micro-level, I observed for evidence of adolescent identity development, youth engagement and leadership, acquisition of new skills or social consciousness and sense of self-efficacy (Catalano, et al., 2002; Conner & Strobel, 2007; Gambone, et al., 2006; Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002; Zeldin, 2004b). At the interpersonal level, I observed the youth-to-youth and youth-adult interactions with an eye to the nature of these relationships (Camino, 2000; Larson & Hansen, 2005; O’Donoghue & Strobel, 2007; Watkins, et al., 2007). At the organizational level, I observed for the impact of youth involvement on organizational structures and processes, as well as the reciprocal influence of organizational dynamics on young people (Jennings, et al., 2006; Zeldin, 2004b). Observed events included workshops and trainings for the Freedom Fellows, as well as youth activism planning meetings. Data collection forms to assist in organizing and standardizing observations and reviewed materials are included in Appendices F and G.

During participant observation, I took field notes to build a thick description of the concepts of liberatory pedagogy and youth activism as experienced within CFS. These notes include substantive, methodological and analytic accounts. The substantive notes present a sequential account of the situations, conversations and activities of the Freedom Fellows and their adult allies. Methodological notes include my personal impressions, feelings and concerns about these events. Analytical notes point to any
additional questions or initial hypotheses arising from the field (Grigsby, 2010). Content analysis of documents and archival material include the agency’s marketing products (website, brochures and annual reports), program curriculum and youth-made activist material (reflections and artwork). During the analysis stage, I drew on these reflections to formulate an analysis of the context and meaning of events, behaviors, patterns and anomalies within this organization over time (Grigsby, 2010).

**Data Analysis**

Consistent with qualitative data analysis techniques, we conducted data collection and analysis concurrently (Strauss & Corbin, 2008; Annells, 1996a). As the purpose of this research is to examine transformation on multiple levels, the units of analyses for this study are four-fold: (1) the individual, (2) the interpersonal, (3) the organizational and (4) the societal. All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim from the audio files. Each transcript was thoroughly reviewed by myself and compared to the audio files for accuracy. During this process, I also made note of non-verbal behavior, in an effort to capture pauses, crying, exasperation and exclamation.

We began within-case data analysis upon completion of the initial key informant interview and continued this process until all interviews were fully analyzed. We later engaged in cross-case analysis at the individual, interpersonal, organizational and society levels. Likewise, data from participant observations was analyzed across these level and began immediately following the observed event. I relied on Strauss and Corbin’s (1990) paradigm of conditions, interactions, emotions and consequences to assist in my analysis of jottings and explore links between contextual factors and the processes of liberatory pedagogy and youth development. Archival material focused on the development and
refinement of key concepts as articulated by the CFS program and the youth activists, attending to similarities and differences in written documents as compared to interview data. I consulted with my research partners to elicit their perspectives on the observational and archival data, as appropriate.

Although guided by the general principles of grounded theory as set forth by Strauss and Corbin (1990), this project draws most directly on Auerbach and Silverstein’s (2003) hybrid model of coding and theory building procedures. Accordingly, the data interpretation process began with the raw text and progressed toward an abstract understanding of the experiences of my key informants, proceeding through six basic steps: (1) explicit statement of research concerns and theoretical framework, (2) identification of relevant text within the raw data, (3) identification of repeating ideas within the relevant text, (4) grouping repeating ideas together around a common theme, (5) organization of the themes into broader theoretical constructs, and (6) creation of a theoretical narrative. Although we proceeded through these steps from concrete to abstract, this process is recursive, as opposed to linear. In other words, we moved back and forth between these steps as we became more familiar with the ideas contained within the data and fine-tuned our thematic groupings.

The first phase of our analysis focused on making the data more manageable. We began this process by explicitly stating our research concerns and theoretical framework. Although this step may seem superfluous given our previous work, re-stating the overarching goals of the project allowed us to check the particular piece of text against these priorities as we determined its relevance for this research. Likewise, explicitly stating the conceptual framework helped us “read” the data in a more focused manner.
With our purpose and framework in mind, we began to cut the raw text down into text that is relevant to our specific research concerns. For each transcript, two research partners and I highlighted passages that contain relevant material and created memos describing why that particular selection seemed relevant to us, as well as any thoughts provoked by the text. The three of us then discussed our initial codes, making note of similarities and differences. I then copied these passages into a separate file, adding our memos and notes about consistency within our codes.

In phase two of the data analysis, I focused on “hearing” the subjective experiences of the research participants. First I identified within-case repeating ideas. Starting with the opening passage of the relevant text file, I proceeded through the data to identify additional passages that present the same or similar idea. I grouped these related passages, and their memos, together, repeating this process until I grouped together as many of my relevant text selections as possible. As I developed the repeating ideas for each individual transcript, I added these ideas together to create a master list of repeating ideas for the project. I later examined this list for overlap and combined ideas that are exactly the same, double checking my earlier groupings for accuracy. After completing this phase of analysis, I presented the repeating ideas to my research partners for feedback about the organization of the data.

Next, I worked with my research consultants to organize these repeating ideas into broader categories that contain a common theme. Using the first repeating idea from the master list, we proceeded through the remaining list to identify related ideas. We grouped these related ideas together and created a memo of how they seem to relate to
each other. These ideas constitute the first theme. We repeated this process until all the repeating ideas have been grouped with another idea of similar conceptual basis.

In the final phase of analysis, I developed theoretical constructs by grouping the themes by their commonalities. I utilized the same method detailed above to group the themes together; again making notes about how these themes are connected. Here, I also referred to my memos to understand the central principle for each construct. I continued through my list of themes until I developed an all-inclusive list of theoretical constructs. At this point, I returned to the literature to identify theories or concepts that explain these organizing principles. Finally, I pulled together all of this information in a theoretical narrative that draws on the participant’s words and the theoretical constructs to summarize the research finding.

In disseminating the results of this study, I will prioritize two stakeholder groups: (1) the youth and adult allies directly involved in the study and (2) the broader field of youth work professionals, including practitioners, policy-makers and researchers. I will engage the youth consultants in creating a final report accessible to their peers and community constituency. This report will be provided to all research participants and additional copies will be made available to the community partners upon request. I will also seek to publish the study results in scholarly journals so as present my findings to practitioners within the CYD field.

**Ensuring Trustworthiness and Authenticity**

Rigorous qualitative research must contend with potential threats to its analytical credibility posed by reactivity, researcher’s biases and respondents’ biases. Consistent with ethnographic recommendations, our research team implemented a number of
measures to facilitate quality and trustworthiness within the data collection, analysis and interpretation. Specifically, we collected thick descriptions from a variety of sources to support the transferability of research findings. Prolonged engagement in the field and data source triangulation assisted us in establishing the trustworthiness and credibility of the analysis by reducing reactivity and biases. Likewise, we maintained an audit trail detailing the analytic thought processes throughout the study. This audit trail includes five categories of information: raw data files (interview transcripts, field notes and archival material), relevant text files with associated memos, thematic files, theoretical constructs and narratives and process notes (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). We used negative case analysis and debriefing with peers and expert consultants, through the dissertation committee, to identify and rectify biases and assumptions. We also used the second interviews as an opportunity to present research participants with tentative ideas about the data and ask for their feedback about emerging themes and theoretical connections.

Finally, we engaged two research informants in a member check in which they reviewed and provided feedback about the interpretation as a way of further reinforcing the quality and trustworthiness of the analysis (Padgett, 1998; Patton, 2002).

Although these measures establish criteria for assessing the validity, reliability and credibility of the data, they do not address the adequacy of the research process or the empirical grounding of the research findings. Thus, this project relies on the evaluative criteria for credible qualitative research postulated by Auerbach and Silverstein (2003), namely *justifiability of interpretations and transferability of theoretical constructs*. *Justifiability* refers to the use of researcher subjectivity in the analysis and interpretation of data that is grounded in data. Establishing justifiability requires transparency,
communicability and coherence. *Transferability* means that the theoretical constructs can be expanded beyond a particular sample, while still reflecting and respecting cultural nuances. In other words, the abstract patterns described by the theoretical concepts can be found in various subcultures; the specific content of those patterns will vary depending on the specific subculture (Auerback & Silverstein, 2003). Given this additional criteria, I approached the writing of the finding chapters by fore-fronting the young people’s voices and offering contextual material about the interview processes and interactions. This openness and transparency allows the readers to judge for themselves whether our interpretations are justified and transferable.

**Human Subjects Protections**

The risks posed to research participants by this project are relatively minimal and primarily involve the potential breach of privacy and confidentiality. As this research is based in a small non-profit organization, there is some potential for participants’ identities to become known and some potential risks to organization stakeholders. Participants’ comments about the program and staff, whether positive or negative, are strictly protected; we made every effort to respect respondents’ privacy and conceal their identities. Specific efforts to minimizing risks to participants are outlined below.

First, this study underwent a thorough review by the Institutional Review Board at the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC) prior to being approved for implementation. Once approval of the project was granted, I contacted the organization’s leadership and key informants. I utilized a non-coercive approach and emphasized that participation is completely voluntary and can be withdrawn at anytime in the study. As adolescents are considered a vulnerable population under the guidelines of the Belmont Report, I took
additional precautions to ensure their protection. Both parents and minors were required
to provide informed consent/assent for participation in this study. Contact information for
the UIC Institutional Review Board and the researcher was provided to study participants
and their parents.

I have kept all data collected confidential and store all hardcopies of records
pertaining to this study in a locked cabinet accessible only by the researcher. Digital
recordings and computer files are password protected. Codes and pseudonyms are used in
place of participants’ names. The master list of participants is kept separate from other
research data. Findings from this study will be disclosed to all participants, as well as the
community organization.
IV. LIBERATORY EDUCATION IN PRACTICE

The following two chapters present the findings of this exploratory study on youth development through liberatory education and social justice activism. This chapter presents the specific components of liberatory education as practiced by the Chicago Freedom School. It articulates how CFS makes real a model of social justice youth development through community, anti-oppressive practice, wellness, consciousness-raising and intergenerational movement-building. Moreover, it hones in on the question of how young people understand education for liberation and how they experience this praxis. In crafting this analysis, I draw from a variety of sources, including key informant interviews with youth and adults, participant observations and archival materials. I do, however, rely most heavily on the opinions and experiences of the Freedom Fellows, as shared in their interviews. I center these young peoples’ voices in reverence of their rights and abilities to define how liberatory education is both felt and cognized.

I approach this process through discourse analysis in which I deconstruct textual material to unveil meaningful themes within the data. I proceed in this manner through each interview with the Freedom Fellows. I then relate the Fellows’ understanding of liberatory education to supplemental data from my interviews with adult allies, observations of the Fellowship program and CFS documents. These secondary data sources serve two important functions within my analysis. At times, I use them to elaborate the Fellows’ ideas, thus lending further credence to the theorized model; in contrast, I also use these data to complicate the Fellows’ ideas, raising critical questions
about the realities of social justice praxis with young people. As such, this chapter is organized thematically. For each theme, I present how the Fellows’ define and experience that particular aspect of liberatory education. I then situate their perspectives in relation to each other and the organization as a whole, highlighting any inconsistencies or tensions which exist within their accounts.

In chapter five, I delve into the depths of Freedom Fellow’s socio-political development. There, I turn to their individual journeys to identify the ways in which liberatory education and social justice activism facilitate young people’s development of critical consciousness and personal and collective efficacy. I structure this chapter using a case study format in which I present each Fellows’ unique path as a budding youth activist. I then present a cross-case summation of their developmental trajectories that attends to the overlap, divergences and contradictions among them. I conclude by highlighting the patterns that emerge across these narratives and drawing connections between Fellows’ as individuals with unique life circumstances and in their experiences of education for liberation.

**An Intergenerational Movement for Social Change**

*The movement has to be intergenerational because it has to be counter to what already exists.* – Emilia, CFS staff member

The Chicago Freedom School is “committed to supporting social change movements by youth with support from adult allies” (CFS, Program Brochure, no date). This emphasis on social justice movement-building, as opposed to organizing for a specific campaign or issue, is a deliberate paradigm shift intended to foster broad-based
progressive change. Intergenerational movement-building, then, is a process of “individual, one-on-one work trying to change people’s attitudes and minds…for a deeper kind of change that is both structural and cultural (Leah, January 27, 2011). For CFS, this commitment to movement-building in which adults work in partnership with young people means centering community, history, anti-oppression, wellness and socio-political development within the work. These concepts are explicitly stated outcome objectives of the Freedom Fellowship. Below, I explore how these concepts come alive at CFS and discuss their centrality to the Freedom Fellows’ development as lifelong activists for social justice. I use the data from participant observation, program materials and interview with adult allies to lay the foundation for this model of social change. I rely especially heavily on the Freedom Fellows’ words to articulate the realities and common experiences within the actual practice of liberatory education and social activism. In the end, I offer a critique of the inconsistencies and tensions inherent in CFS’s efforts to build an intergenerational, progressive social movement.

The Centrality of Community

*I mean you always notice your surroundings and the people of color, the feeling, the location.* – Darrel
A bulletin board near the front door greets you as you round the final flight of stairs, officially welcoming you to the home base of the Chicago Freedom School. The walls, a sunny yellow, are dotted with Celebrate People’s History posters in simple frames—an image of Emma Goldman, for instance, chanting merrily, “If I can’t dance I don’t want to be part of your revolution!” Tables near the entrance house brochures and handbills for social justice organizations and upcoming events. Fruit, granola bars and Sunchips set out in large plastic bowls beckon those with a hankering for sustenance. Along the walls, black chairs sit in neat rows or stacked in corner piles. A large flipchart paper outlining the Agreements hangs neatly on the focal wall, declaring:

Oppression exists, but not here.

Move up, move back.

Use “and” or “also” before “but.”

W.A.I.T. (Why am I talking?)
This large front room – used frequently for meetings, trainings and strategy sessions – leads to a modest hall of three offices in the middle of the space, a tiny kitchenette and a colorful, open community room in back. The hall walls too are dotted with political art, some pieces handmade by young activists who’ve come through the ranks of the Freedom Fellowship in past years, others, posters detailing the history of social justice activism in the US. The community room – part library, part computer lab, part living room – is a virtual mecca of activism, past and present. The lending library houses 6 sizeable shelves of books, films, music and curriculum on a wide array of social justice topics: songs of the Civil Rights movement, documentaries on queer activism, anthologies by feminist theorists, hip hop activist films, workshop curriculum on the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina or on organizing to end violence, to name just a few. The modest computer station of three desktops and a standard black and white printer is available daily for use by the young people or adult allies who frequent CFS. A cozy couch, bean bag and several chairs congregate around a wooden coffee table, taking up most of the remaining floor space in the room.

The walls here, like elsewhere, are plastered with social justice messages and youth-made media. Over the computers, for example, hangs one of two identical posters, one English and one Spanish, titled “Every girl, every boy.” Through a dualistic image of a young person, the poster implores us to critically analyze the ways in which gender confines:
Next to this statement on sexist gender norms is an equally powerful image of a re-defined world map, a map that attempts to more accurately portion landmass based on reality as opposed to “first-world” self-interest. Elsewhere similar statements of social in-/justice abound- the pink triangle representing sexual orientation and gender identity Safe Zones, calls for media reform, a placard against sexual harassment and one for world peace. Common among these visual representations is the notion that “In unity there is strength” (Let’s Work Together poster). The effect is a message to young people and adults alike that liberation from oppression is only possible in community with others working together for a common cause.
The overall impact of an environment infused with activism is clear in young people’s immediate perceptions of both physical and emotional space. When asked to describe their experience upon first entering the CFS, several Freedom Fellows spoke of feelings of warmth, openness and safety. Maya says,

At first I was acting kind of scared because I didn’t know what the inside was going to look like. But once I came up and the walls were all yellow, I thought this was like a friendly place. The aura was pretty inviting, like it wants you to come in…. it’s not like a business place. If someone else was to just come in, they would think that someone stays here.

Daniel draws a connection between the constructed space of the CFS and his emotional experience of being there,

I pictured like a school ‘cuz of the name and I pictured classrooms and a teacher. The vibe in the in the room, it like it was happy and got me happy… it looked more like a close relationship than like a work relationship.

Gabriela likewise finds the space emotionally inviting,

It was open to everyone and anyone who is willing to fight for what they believe is good….This is like a very friendly place…You can stay as long as you want. They always accept you. It’s basically like a big family here.

Michelle, too, finds acceptance, “In the Freedom School you can just be yourself fully, however you want to be fully and they accept you…it’s no limitations.” Simeon is immediately drawn to the openness at CFS and finds in it inclusion and trust:

The sense of community that I felt when I walked in here like there was some people who were new like me and there were some people who had been here for a long time, but it seemed like everyone was kind of ah connecting and clicking and I could see with those who already been here they had they were like really connected to everyone else around them and to the environment. I felt like the expectations were that everyone would be a part of the environment and be inclusive and give ideas and uhm that we would have a trusting environment.
The Freedom Fellows are profoundly affected by the perception of CFS as home, as family. They experience this environment as an intentionally and collaboratively constructed space, a space built on principles of justice and intergenerational leadership. In this “home,” they feel welcomed, loved, accepted. Gabriela, who spoke at length in her interviews about feeling silenced by adults, feels free to speak her truth at CFS,

Like, I can email them and I can call them whenever I like…They make it feel like you shouldn’t shush anything. Don’t not talk about anything bad that’s happened to you. Anyone’s comfortable right here. You shouldn’t be shy.

Hector affirms Gabriela’s sense of the primacy of their personal wellness and relationships with each,

We always start with “How was your day? How was school?” We always hear what happens, what goes on. If there’s anything we think is unfair, we kind of take note of it…I mean we feel comfortable because we trust, we have trust in them and we know stuff like this [young people being pushed out of school] happens all the time in a lot of different high schools…We like know each other pretty well now. We kind of sense each other and we’re family.

In Hector’s view, relating to each other as family and situating personal struggles within their systemic context are the essence of organizing work that bridges boundaries of school, neighborhood, age and race. The group unity that emerges from this process of checking in with each other reinforces Fellows’ sense of community and shared purpose.

This space develops and evolves as people share of their time and energy, their ideas and their hearts. At the onset of the program, many of the young people describe themselves as tentative, shy, guarded. However, the built environment draws these young people into the space, allowing them to open up to themselves and each other. Hector
speaks to how being authentically yourself helps the Fellows open up emotionally with each other and deepen relationships,

In the beginning, most of us were really shy. We didn’t really say much. Towards the end of the first week, we had our opinions. We would speak and say what we thought about the topic. We would show what we thought. Some people were really emotional about it.

Daniel concurs,

At first I just stayed close to the only friend that I had there. But then I started asking questions and like started to open up more because I know I have a hard time opening up. She [his friend] started asking questions to other people and I sort of tried to break away from her, and started going with the other people.

Although Darrel described himself as feeling confident and comfortable at CFS from the very beginning of the program, he too witnesses a shift in openness among his peers. When asked what he first noticed about the Freedom Fellows, he states, “[They were] worried, like uhm the feeling of not being accepted was a big expression I seen on everyone’s faces…a lot of people was being selective and keeping to themselves.” He continues,

Not anymore, though. I think that everybody got real close to each other, real cool because we all touch bases on the things that we’re trying to do. I mean I opened up more because I understand what these people are here for you know. I understood that there’s more people out here like me so it was easy for me to open up, you know.

In a similar vein, Michelle emphasizes the deepening sense of commitment to her peers and allies that the Freedom Fellowship inspires,

Like in the beginning, you just kind of like or I was just kind of like, “Ok, I’m here for myself. I’m gonna get what I need to get done and move on through.” But being here, no, it’s not like that. You’re not here by yourself. You got to work with other people, work in groups, get to know them, ya
know. Everybody, it’s [activism] a team effort.

A key aspect of this experience of opening up lays in the composition of the Fellowship class. According to the staff, the Freedom School intentionally strives for both diversity and balance among the Freedom Fellows. Leah, a program staff member, explains,

we do try really consciously to have a mix of young people… a mix of genders, a mix of races, a mix of schools and parts of the city and things like that, but also a mix of young people that seem really outspoken and loud and like they are going to have something to say all the time and young people that are really quiet and shy… so people really are faced with a lot of kinds of people and a lot of uhm kinds of personalities that they might not be used to.

Diversity in demographics, personalities and experiences is key to the Freedom Fellows’ socio-political development. In Michelle’s eyes, the opportunity to interact with young people of other racial and ethnic backgrounds is noteworthy in and of itself:

When I first came here I noticed that I wasn’t just in a room with black kids. It was different race, different kids and everything. That was my first thing because I’ve always grown up in an all black environment….So, when I came to the Freedom School, I was able to interact with different people outside of my race. I think that’s really helpful because I don’t outside of the Freedom School hang out with different kids outside of my race.

On the other hand, that the Freedom School specifically recruits all young people of color is not lost on the Fellows. Hector, for one, sees the shared minority status of his black and brown peers as a foundation for building alliances across identities, “Since we’re all considered minorities we know how other people make us feel and how things are in our daily lives…Just having somebody that you have that much in common with, it’s really relatable.”
The Freedom School is also intentional about creating balanced dynamics based on the Fellows’ personal characteristics. This means engaging young people with a wide range of personalities, as well as targeting specific traits deemed necessary for anti-oppressive work. Leah again elaborates,

I think there is something like more fundamental too that we look for that is you know a curiosity about these things and sort of a passion and a drive for things. There does have to be a certain amount of screening for tolerance… as much as we want to help young people work through some of those issues, we don’t have that long with people and if on the first day someone attacks someone else for their sexual orientation or their citizenship status or things like that, it’s going really harm the dynamic of the group for a long time and we just don’t have long enough in the summer unfortunately to deal with all those issues…we only let the youth in I think that show that they’re willing to at least question it or think about it or respectfully disagree at the very least.

Given the time constraints and limited resources of the program, building a non-oppressive community, then, requires tolerance, inquisitiveness, open minds and passion for justice. Yet, it also means bringing together people with very distinct personalities that can both compliment and challenge each other.

For example, Daniel and Maya self-describe as shy around new people, while Darrel and Lashona sees themselves as outgoing. When asked about how he felt coming into a space where he only knew a couple of people, Darrel replied, “it was fairly easy and I’m fairly confident in myself as a person, you know and uhm, like I said, Saul told me just be myself and that’s the thing I’m good at, being myself.” Lashona adds,

I’m like an outgoing person. That’s how I see myself. I love to learn new stuff and I know that I’m pretty sure I’m gonna’ have a good time with it. Just to know that I’m in a room with youth that’s my age…but all of us feel the same way so I know we gonna’ have that connection.
For Lashona, learning in this way allows her to be herself, have fun and connect with young people around important issues. She continues,

The youth, it was like we have all different types of personalities even though everybody in reality all of us is on the same page with the deep deep discussion but…we have somebody who’s like determined for this and then we have somebody who is more on the laid back chill lets crack a joke or two, ya know. Then you have some people that’s just like I don’t understand like I just want to get to the bottom of this.

As described elsewhere, Daniel and Maya take cues from their more outgoing peers, like Darrel and Lashona, gradually risking vulnerability and opening up to new people.

This deliberate mix in personalities challenges young people to learn tolerance for different ways of being and to develop skills that foster inclusivity within social justice work. As Lashona summarizes,

I was thinking that everybody was gonna get picked based on like having the same sort of personalities, but then I looked at ‘em and I’m like is that this way ‘cuz now we can see like from the different views about how everybody else feel ‘cuz everybody got they own opinion and I’m like the different personalities will bring it all out. I actually thought it helped out a lot because you know like some people just say some stuff out out the blue and you’ll be like wow I never thought of it that way and you know that’ll bring up a whole new discussion or a whole big point of view in your head and just to know wow this person only a freshman in high school or this is they first time here and like they not even the same color as you but they feel the same way.

Lashona clearly finds solace in the varied experiences and shared passions young people bring to the Freedom Fellowship. She concludes, “it’s basically gonna be youth who on the same level as you are and like who wants to know the same things that you want to know. They might have the same questions you have.” Gabriela too finds inspiration and validation in her peers. When asked what helps her relate to other Fellows, she simply
replies, “‘Cuz the other young people had the same views as I did and they weren’t the only one that also experienced sexism.”

An additional consideration in building an open, loving community at CFS is the role of alumni in the program. Alumni are young people from previous Fellowship years who return to the program as participants or group coordinators. For Fellows, the alumni play a crucial role in modeling anti-oppression and social justice leadership. For shy youth like Maya, alumni are the “warm and inviting” presence that help her feel comfortable in a new space. For Daniel, they help bridge the engrained barriers between youth and adults,

I think they broke the ice a little more because then they already had that relationship with the mentor or the coordinator. It really helped us ‘cuz we got to, if we didn’t know the coordinator, we could just talk to the alumni that was there and get answers since we were shy at first.

Fellows experience the peer leaders as supportive and accessible. Hector, for example, notes how the alumni help bring Fellows into the discussion by sharing their own opinions and then asking, “‘What do you think?’ and let others talk.” As group coordinators, the alumni challenge adultism by demonstrating how young people can play leadership roles in social justice work. Here, Lashona reflects on how one of the youth leaders in the Criminalization of Youth group impacted her learning experience:

We had somebody above us who was actually our age. He was our youth leader and I was like another thing I was thinking is like man I thought it was supposed to be all adults above us but I didn’t know what to think like was he ready for this or did he know what he was talking about? He was actually a good leader he showed a lot of positive a lot of a big positive image on like a lot of us as far as then like how we should look at things and like giving us facts about different things … he wasn’t there to tell us what to do or how we should do these things it’s like he was telling like
giving us like ideas and he was still a friend at the end.

This alumnus helped Lashona think critically about how educational inequities contribute to youth criminalization, while also modeling how to promote dialogue. Lashona is similarly inspired by another alumni leader’s ability to effectively express her opinion about social justice activism,

She’s just so open and like she spoke her mind, but she spoke it the correct way. She wasn’t like disrespectful, you know, but she was like calm, cool and collected…She was like ‘yeah, you know you guys know what activism is?’ Then she started breaking it down. It kinda’ opened my eyes to realize like if you really want to do this you have to be down to it like you have to make a commitment. This is a commitment you can’t just give up.

The alumni, then, are key players in constructing a liberatory learning environment in which Fellows can have fun, be themselves, build caring relationships and try out new skills. This built environment in which young people take on leadership within activism projects, as well as in organizational development, reflects CFS’s commitment to inter-generational work and on-going learning. For Emilia, who’s primary role is coordinating the Fellowship program, engaging alumni as invaluable members of the CFS family is a reaffirmation of the organization’s foundational principles,

We are recognizing that a year wasn’t enough and a lot of the young people were committed to continuing to learn and continuing to grow as activist uhm and we felt like it was our obligation to respond to that. It was like ok you had these young people who who in the end they wanted to be activists for life…They still need learning. So then that pushed us to think about what is the next step. So once you learn what oppression is and you do an action, what’s the next step for an activist? What is the next step of consciousness? What is the next step for action? Uhm, so that pushed us as adults and just organizers to think about that theoretically and then putting it into practice.
All in all, the sense of community that permeates the Freedom School speaks to young peoples’ developmental needs for belonging and fosters their commitment to social justice work. In Maya’s words,

I really have a big love for CFS and I just like I don’t get tired of coming here…’cuz like being here it gets me really energetic. They really are like personally like not just activists but friends…being here’s one of my favorite places.

The predominance of relationships to anti-oppression work rings true to Erika as well, “I just felt real like a group together, really close. The whole group….we all went through the same thing at the same time so we all bonded while in the process of learning and working.” For Maya, Erika and their peers, developing deep friendships based on shared commitments is absolutely essential to building a solid social justice movement.

Moreover, for the young people who remained actively engaged in CFS over time these relationships and affinities seem to naturally deepen. We learn from Hector, Daniel, Maya and Gabriela how active involvement in the Fellowship for six months or longer strengthens young people’s bonds with peers and adult allies, even in the face of challenges to their organizing work. Hector, for example, describes the sense of cohesion and shared responsibility that his group developed through their collective work,

We like know each other pretty well now. We kind of sense each other and we’re family. We all knew we were here for a reason: we’re trying to change, make change. We all kind of have you know the same way of seeing things and we took that from just meeting, we did work separately at home, researching and we went to separate meetings with other people.

He adds,

I feel really comfortable. This is my organization. We’ve been here for months. We have the same way of seeing things, pretty much…the
Directors are really welcoming, I mean. The building’s comfortable. We feel safe. It like an environment where we can be ourselves and speak.

Daniel too experiences a deepening sense of community at CFS, in spite of the loss of several group members:

Then only some of us started coming. It dropped down from a bunch of us to only a few of us. Then you saw the people that really were committed. I guess I grew more with the people that were consistently coming…since we did come on most meeting days, I grew a connection, it was almost a one-on-one connection where we got to grow from our relationships with adults. I feel more connected to my group.

Maya similarly points out how her group developed greater cohesion over time by coming together to solve problems in a fun and positive environment:

I love my group. They’re awesome. Every time we come there’s like a positive energy and we all get along. We’ve never really got into a fight where I don’t like that person and let it affect us as a group, but we’ve always just ya’ know come together and we ya’ know we have fun. We joke about everything, but when it’s time to get down, we get down to being serious. I wouldn’t ask for anyone else to be in our group…I guess because our group is currently smaller now, I feel closer. I can share a memory with everyone, each one of these people.

The intimacy of a small work group appears to help Fellows develop comraderie and points to important structural elements of movement-building. Finally, Gabriela, says simply and assertively that long-term engagement in the Freedom Fellowship motivates her continued activism because “I’m always welcome here. I can always come here…I love this place more.”

**The Centrality of History**

*Born, out of this legacy.* – Leah, adult ally

We also learned about a lot of people who stood up and changed things.
We kind of are seeing them as role models. We want to make change so we’re doing the same thing. We want to get as much down as we can. We have someone to look up to because we know people who changed the system. It’s really good to have that kind of thing. To know it is possible and that you can do it. – Hector

Here, Hector speaks to the important praxis of looking back to look forward. For Hector and his peers, looking to history to understand the present provides a more contextualized knowledge of social problems, informs our strategic planning and inspires our collective efforts. This emphasis on history is a deliberate approach to framing community youth development as movement-building work. In fact, CFS insists that movement-building for social justice requires us to know our histories, of both oppression and of resistance, and to use that history as context for contemporary activism. CFS as an organization is itself rooted in the liberatory education and community organizing approach of the Mississippi Freedom Schools of the 1960s. This is the legacy of which CFS is born. Leah, a staff member at CFS, describes the connection between the organization’s legacy and its approach to youth activism:

basing our organization off that ’64 freedom school model sort of uhm really motivates the desire to have it be social movement building and not just campaign or action building…a lot of understanding injustice and oppression right now involves understanding what came before us, both that legacy of oppression and that legacy of activism that puts us where we are right now and that understanding that is not only you know inspiration and you can learn from it, but it also makes you a stronger activist because you really have a better understanding of the forces that you’re dealing with.

Nina concurs,

We felt like it wasn’t an option for us to exist without a historical context and because there’s so many great examples of young people being critical pieces to movement building that it was important to us to teach folks about history so that they could see why we still need to make sure that young
people are equipped to be effective social change leaders…. I think there’s a real emotional connection that people make to history when they see a really good documentary or they hear from someone who was a part of something before them because I feel like they’re connected in a larger spectrum of social change and so this understanding that we’re not the first and we’re not the last I think is really critical.

That the CFS is actively working to plant young people within the legacy of social change work serves two purposes: it counters adultist assumptions of community leadership, while also stirring young people’s imaginations of what is in their realm of power and possibility. Hector’s re-telling of two historic events in the Civil Rights Movement demonstrates the ways in which legacies of social change inform contemporary youth activism:

We learned some stuff that, you know, we’re not the only ones who are facing this. There are people that faced it back then and that the same pre-judice and racism goes on for generations. We looked at the Brown vs. Board of Education court case. The court case said that children where kept out of school because of racism. We learned about that they could make the schools un-segregated and that the children themselves could do it.

In this first example, Hector finds hope in the idea that young people could change the long-standing racial segregation of the US educational system. Similarly, he contemplates the strategic preparations taken by Rosa Parks and her fellow activists in executing the Montgomery Bus Boycott,

We looked at, of course, Rosa Parks. What I found really interesting was that like it was planned for her not to give up her seat. There was so much thought behind it. It just shows that with planning, and you know, if you really devote yourself to it, then it’s going to happen. They worked hard for it, you know. Then they won.

The lesson Hector draws from this history is that movements for social change require planning, commitment and hard work. They are collaborative and strategic and based on
the calculated actions of everyday people working in concert with each other toward a shared purpose: the full enactment of human rights.

For many of the Freedom Fellows, the history of activism of people of color is particularly powerful. In particular, Fellows in the *Criminalization of Youth* group learned of how legacies of slavery, Jim Crow laws and educational segregation contribute to modern day educational inequities and disparities in the treatment of youth of color by the legal system. They learned too of the histories of organized resistance to racial exploitation, including slave rebellions and the underground railroad, abolitionism and radical Civil Rights activism. Darrel, for instance, spoke at length in his interview about the impact of slavery on African Americans’ experiences today:

Willie Lynch was a slave-owner back in the day who spoke to other slave owners and told them how to control their slaves and his methods have carried from generation to generation, you know. Willie Lynch had an idea to put a lock on the human mind and hide the key within your own possession and a lot of people still don’t recognize that they have a lock on their mind so they I mean they’re completely not aware of the key that unlocks their mind is education, you know. And like I said his ideas have carried from generation to generation you know. It happens in mostly minority neighborhoods and minority communities because we’re easier to get to, we’re easier to manipulate because people have applied these you know stereotypes and statistics to us for generations. It has become first nature, so it’s like people live their lives based on you know what someone else thinks. In the prison system you have complete control over a human being. In the education system you basically you know I mean you have control over what a person learns in the education system, but not as much control as you have over them in the prison system. It’s [prison] just a place that’s like a testing ground, it’s a lab where we can like work on these individuals because we can hold you in this jail for five years and release you back into society. We did this to you this five years in this prison and we can dictate how you live in this society.
Darrel’s historical knowledge of his people’s enslavement informs his consciousness of the damaging realities of today’s educational and criminal systems on youth of color. It also informs how he thinks about organizing to interrupt the school to prison pipeline; describing the targets and allies within this work, he says,

[Some people] they’re like so stuck between the stereotypes and the statistics that they don’t know how to live their own life. You know, they don’t know what makes them happy. And it kind of connects with the “can’t people.” They want, they want to change but they can’t. The people that won’t change because they’re not aware at all, they have no ability you know to stand up. You know, the other people that can see, they recognize but they’re too scared to say anything about it. And you have the people who stands up for what they believe in and go against. Those people are very strong minded.

Darrel sees how histories of oppression undermine people’s personal and collective agency even after generations. Yet, he also recognizes the power of resistance cultures that exist even when “there’s a very select amount of people that will stand up for what they believe in.”

Similarly, Fellows in the Killing Us Softly group learned of women’s exploitation and abuse in both public and private spheres, such as voting disenfranchisement, property rights favoring men, pay inequity and domestic and sexual violence; and they learned, of course, of the innumerable examples of resistance in the women’s rights and queer liberation movements of the 1960s and 1970s. Gabriela, for instance, connects gender-based oppression to biblical times. She discusses how the portrayal of women in the bible relegates them to secondary roles to men, stating “I learned that it’s [sexism] existed ever since the beginning of time. Because even in biblical times, the woman had to stay home and cook and clean and normally have kids and men can do anything.” Gabriela’s
awareness of the long-standing history of sexism sheds light on the insidious nature of contemporary cultural norms and social structures. Daniel, too situates modern-day cultural traditions within an eons-long legacy of normalized gender roles:

Well my mom was raised that her mother would always want her to know these things like cook and clean because she doesn’t want her to be a lazy mother. Then my dad was raised with being “you are the one that has to go hunt for the food.” They would literally go hunt and bring crops home. So it was like more of a story of the hunter and the woman I don’t know stayed at home I guess…

Daniel goes on to explain how these gender norms created tension in his family. Reflecting on when his mom first began to work outside the home, he insightfully acknowledges that “it was like hard for my dad because he thought that she wanted to like be more independent.” Daniel’s and Gabriela’s understandings of the historical roots of sexism help them deconstruct oppressive social patterns within their own lives.

When asked of whom they draw inspiration for their commitment to social justice, Fellows from both groups named leaders such as Martin Luther King Jr., Rosa Parks, Malcolm X, Fred Hampton, Huey Newton, Sojourner Truth, Frederick Douglas, and Patsy Mink. Many also paid tribute to the organizations that guided and supported this activism, such as the Black Panthers and, more recently, Grassroots Collaborative and Gender Just, two contemporary groups working at the intersections of economic, gender, racial, age-based exploitation. As intended, these young activists openly claim stories from this rich history of resistance as motivation for their own work for a more just world. Erika poignantly asserts, “There has always been people working on this problem. I’m glad that we’re still trying to help!”
This important history comes alive at CFS even beyond the Freedom Fellowship courses. Public programming and special events – such as a documentary film screening on genocide in the Congo, a youth-led interview with Civil Rights singer/song-writer Mavis Staples or a facilitated conversation with Illinois Coalition for Adolescent Health – make real the histories of peoples’ struggle over time and place. It is in these critical ways that history becomes infused in contemporary activism, placing today’s rebel-rousers within a momentous legacy of social change work. Or, as Emilia – youth organizer and adult ally – proclaims,

We are founded in history. Our legacy is history-based, but everything that we do we do it with the knowledge and the uhm just making sure that the young people understand and know that there were other people who have done this and there are people that still do this…So there is always a connection from the past and the present.

The Centrality of Anti-Oppression

_What drew me here is that they don’t only help with one thing. They help in a bunch of things and try to fix it._ – Gabriela, 2010 Freedom Fellow

Gabriela’s comment is a reflection of the Freedom School’s philosophical underpinning in anti-oppression. This model differs significantly from other activism and organizing approaches that tend to focus on specific issues or public policies. Leah explains the rationale for this broader framework, stating,

We approach youth organizing, youth development through an anti-oppressive lens in a historical context…what that means is really trying to engage young people that come here as whole people, you know, and to acknowledge that they might be coming here for a specific aspect of their development uhm to learn about social issues, to get involved in activism work, but to never forget that they are, everyone that comes in here is more than that. That they are complex persons with a lot of different identities.
This recognition of the whole of who we are provides a theoretical jumping off point for building broad-based alliances between people of different social locations. It allows us to bring all of ourselves and all of our experiences to our collective work, while also pushing us to embrace our power as agents of change. Leah further elaborates how an anti-oppressive framing contributes to movement-building,

We always talk about this triangle that it’s the oppressed, one corner of the triangle is oppressed, one corner is oppressor and one corner is liberator… we have everyone give one way in which they’re oppressed, give one way in which they’re an oppressor and give one way in which they’re a liberator. We talk about how uhm really the important thing in these kinds of struggles is to really focus on being a liberator and that we can get really bogged down in being oppressed or being an oppressor, but that we’re all both and we’re all complicated and what really matters is being a liberator … We intentionally do it on the first day so it’s set up that this is the expectation. When you’re at the Freedom School, you’re going to focus on being a liberator and we’re all going to make that commitment together to focus on being a liberator.

For Leah, thinking about yourself complexly, about the ways in which you’re both oppressed and an oppressor, “gives you more compassion for others” and “sets you up for being an ally,” both vital aspects of social movement building. Research team member and FF alum, Quinton Davis relates this explanation to his own evolving consciousness of oppression. Quinton, as he tells it, came to the CFS with a very keen awareness of what it means to be a young black man in our society. At the time, however, he was unaware of the privileges afforded him as a man or of the harm he enacted by demeaning and objectifying women. Engaging in this exercise opened Quinton’s eyes to the ways in which structures of power and privilege become ingrained in us and to our obligation as conscious people to fight for all people’s liberation from oppression.
Emilia embodies this orientation toward compassion and allyship in her gentle reminders to the Fellows that “oppression exists, but not here.” In this avowal, Emilia prompts the Freedom Fellows to consider how activists must embody anti-oppression in their thoughts and deeds. Providing space for critical praxis of social justice, Emilia and her fellow activists at CFS invite young people to question, “How can you personally begin to change something that is systematic that is affecting you right? And how does that contribute to really changing the system?” Thus, a simple proclamation is theorized as the impetus for “getting them to see the consistency that really needs to happen between a person’s life choices and the work that they do and the systems they wish to change….consistency of their activism and their consciousness and their everyday life.”

According to Fellows, the deeper understanding of this straight-forward, yet powerful statement is that we must live and breathe justice in our attitudes and behaviors and hold each other accountable when we fall short of this lofty principle. Saul, an adult ally and instructor in the **Criminalization of Youth LIA**, underscores the absolute necessity for opportunities to develop and practice these alternative attitudes, behaviors and ways of interacting,

> If you’re gonna’ create a culture and a family here that doesn’t do that [oppress]…then you have to be very, I don’t know, like clear and specific about what it is that we don’t do and and what role we would do in certain situations. It’s one thing to say we don’t do certain things and it’s another to do what you’re saying, to provide an alternative response.

Saul, like Emilia, sees consistency as imperative to building a culture of resistance; in his statement, though, we hear also a call for cultural and organizational structures that facilitate anti-oppressive practice. Of particular relevance to CFS’s
movement-building efforts is the dismantling of cultural and institutional norms that privilege adults and disparage young people. Although everyone has work to do as a “liberator,” adults within the Freedom School family play an uniquely important role in confronting the adultism that plagues so many of our social structures and cultural practices. The reshaping of the youth-adult relationships that takes place at CFS is described in detail below.

Oh my gosh, young people would hate that, ughhh. – Nina, CFS staff

I was asked to get on the microphone to just give some gifts that we had brought to everybody. But he [tour guide] said “Well, we want to know a little more about the Freedom School” and they were really bad about putting everybody on the spot all the time and the young people were really very frustrated with the tour leader because he would say things like, “Ok, we had a great guest speaker today. We want someone under 19 to thank the speaker.” We were the only group of young people there…When it was time for us to talk about what the work of the Freedom School…he was like “Well, we want the young people to come speak.” I was like “Actually, you know, let me check in with them to see if they want to speak because I volunteered to speak. I did not volunteer them to speak.” – Nina

Nina’s re-telling of the CFS’s Freedom Ride tour of the US south dramatically illustrates both the engrained nature of our adultist culture, as well as the imperative of adult allies to interrupt these norms. The young people on this trip innately understood their socially constructed role within a hierarchy of age-based privilege, and as Nina kindly puts it, were frustrated by this assumption and enactment of authority. Below, I draw on Freedom Fellows’ stories of adult privilege to illustrate the powerful impact of this oppression on their lives. I then juxtapose these narratives of disempowerment with a re-constructed image of youth-adult relationships based on respect, support, commitment, intentionality, understanding and reciprocity. Here, I explore how young people and
adults push the boundaries of “partnership,” working as allies to dismantling relationships and systems based on adultism. I conclude by highlighting the impact of youth-adult allyship on young people’s development as social justice activists.

“Adultism, a form of oppression that privileges adults over youth, is a method of thinking and acting...Ultimately, adultism is the deeply rooted disrespect of young people” (CFS, Addressing Adultism, no date). Adultism plays out in our devaluing of young people’s opinions and experiences, our exertion of power over young people’s lives and decisions and our denial of young people’s active participation in their own development. Young people experience this oppression as stereotyping, pathologizing and invalidating who they are and what they stand for. Hector states, “Some places, the adults look down on the kids as annoying, loud, rude. They think that their stereotype of a kid is that they’re going to be annoying, loud. They’re going to be, you know, bad. They look down on us.”

The devaluing and stereotyping Hector describes takes place in schools, neighborhoods and families. Gabriela, Daniel, Erika and Maya share how these institutions reinforce adult power. Gabriela, for example, describes the disempowerment that comes from being silenced at home, “Cause in different places, like in my family, I don’t really feel like my opinions are taken seriously…. whenever I say something that’s in my mind my mom tells me that I should just keep that to myself and not say that to anyone.” Erika echoes this sentiment of isolation from adults, “With my family, the adults I don’t speak to that much. I would speak to the young people in my family more
than adults. With my teachers and staff members I guess I don’t talk to them a lot personally.” Maya confirms,

Like at school, the teachers always interact with each other and the children they interact with each other, but you rarely see a child and adult talk to each other. If you do, it’s mostly about school. It’s nothing personal… They try to keep a boundary.

Adultism also manifests as the unequal distribution and access to resources between young people and adults. Hector feels this inattention to his needs as a young person in the absence of safe, fun places to hang out, “They [adults] have more resources ‘cuz I know that U-Media at the library is the only one [for young people]. There’s not many places for us kids. Everything else is for adults.” Even within the social justice arena, young people experience a lack of opportunities and open spaces. Gabriela, for example, is shocked to learn of a program intended to help young people develop as activists, “I’d never even knew that there was activism training in this state…I don’t see a lot, many activists right now.” The invisibility and inaccessibility of activism to young people reinforces the assumption that community organizing and leadership for social change are solely the province of adulthood. Gabriela, again, speaks to the challenges young people face when attempting to address social problems without adult support, “No one supports you. No one’s there to encourage you along the way.” Saul, a program instructor and self-described adult ally, pushes the conversation further, questioning how adults withhold information as a way of denying young people opportunities for success,

I think that there are unspoken truths, secrets or it’s not hints, but unspoken pieces that adults could be telling youth about follow through, about communication, about uhm tasks and format and formulaic stuff and like style. We’re just not sharing. If we have some more honest conversations
about how to do some things…, then young people will be more equipped and prepared to be consistent leaders.

In Saul’s analysis, adultism is also the expectation that youth will play a leadership role without the necessary attention to whether they have the skills, knowledge or support to do so successfully.

Finally, tokenism – the tendency of adults to engage with young people in solely perfunctory or symbolic ways – is an especially insidious form of age-based hegemony, often engaged in by well-intentioned adults. Daniel offers the following story of the tokenism enacted upon him as part of a school campaign for healthier lunch options:

There’s this one meeting that we got into for our campaign that we did and it was mostly an adult room and they were mostly like piggybacking on our ideas and taking like they were making it seem like they had founded all these solutions…it felt like they wanted to run the whole thing ‘cuz it was mostly adults and it was like 8 students from like school. So it felt like overpowered and like almost like we were lower than them.

As Daniel tells it, several of the young people at the table severed their involvement with this project after this co-optive meeting. The moral being: treating young people as tokens is profoundly damaging to their sense of equity and efficacy and renders intergenerational partnerships impossible. In the context of activism, the dangers of adultist tokenization has very real implications for the base building and revolutionary cultural work inherent in building a movement for social justice. It follows, then, that to be genuinely transformative a movement for social change must re-invent conventional youth-adult relationships.

_They weren’t like adult-adult._ –Maya, 2010 Freedom Fellow
The CFS envisions “communities filled with youth and adults who engage with one another about ideas that matter the most to them and who learn and grow from this engagement” (http://www.chicagofreedschool.org). This vision of a world that supports, respects and values young people stands in opposition to the rampant adultism young people experience in our society. At the heart of this vision is genuine partnership, reciprocity and mutual growth. These principles form the CFS’s foundation for building an intergenerational movement for social change. And, although they mirror the tenets inscribed in the community youth development literature, they push us to think beyond “partnerships” to the social justice possibilities of “allyship.”

The notion of adults as allies to young people emerges from the Freedom School’s recognition of adult privilege as a form of oppression and, thus, of our obligation to confront it within ourselves, our communities and society at large. If adultism manifests as silencing young people, overlooking their needs and trivializing their contributions, allyship takes shape through the encouraging of youth voice, attention to youth needs and support for youth leadership. Nina, a staff person at CFS, describes allyship as “always kind of trying to see things through the eyes of young people, just the world.” For Nina, a commitment to being an adult ally means “recognizing that young people are oppressed in this world and that young people’s voices are suppressed and as adults we would be actively fighting for the voice of young people and the work of young people to be valued in the world.” In addition to advocating for the full and active inclusion of young people in organizational and community life, Nina states that
recognizing “that young people have social-emotional needs,” and “just being available to talk to young people about whatever” is central to being an adult ally.

Emilia, like Nina, defines an adult ally as someone who validates and facilitates youth leadership within social movements,

I think that seeing young people as partners and really engaging them to develop their own ideas and put them into action is something that just doesn’t happen and it is because of this system of oppression that is adultist. We fear this idea of what it means to be an adult uh and you are only there based on a certain criteria so young people are definitely excluded from leadership. I think that we [CFS] were founded on this idea that so much of change has happened in the world has been led by young people.

This validation of young peoples’ efforts to confront oppression, in the past as well as in the present, is a direct challenge to the exclusion of adultist systems. Citing the social tendency to exclude young people, Alyse views her role as an ally as providing opportunities for young people to “step up” into leadership roles. Additionally, Leah describes an adult ally as someone who listens deeply to young people and takes cues for action from this deep listening; she credits the Fellows with having taught her “what it means to be a young person in our society,” “all the ways in which young people are disenfranchised,” and “the places where I can speak up [against injustice].” In sum, adult allies must see young people for who they are, encourage young people to speak their own truths – and listen intently when they do so – and uphold young people’s independent actions.

In practice, this emphasis on youth voice takes many forms. As Michelle notes, it’s sometimes as direct as “helping us to speak out more, say how we feel, get to know each other” or in Hector’s words, “letting us come out of our shell.” Other times, youth
voice is grounded within the group norms, such as the agreement to “move up, move back,” based on your level of participation within the learning space. Many times, youth voice is encouraged through the creation of original art work, poetry and skits (participant observations).

In some cases, encouraging youth voice means letting go of our power as adults to influence the direction of the work. Saul’s various approaches to “staying back” as the group’s adult ally reflect this tension,

Sometimes I actually leave the space and make sure that they had certain things to do and then telling them I’ll be back. There’d be sometimes that I’d be in the space, but just not be present in the conversation…there were times when before you prep someone so that they can facilitate the conversation so that you don’t have to be there…it can backfire too and you can basically open the space up for conversations that might divert you or take you off where you’re trying to go.

Freedom Fellows perceive this willingness to share power within the organizing process, even at the risk of mistakes and diversions, as empowering. Darrel, for example, understands this act of solidarity as a genuine belief in the abilities of young people as leaders,

They just sit back and let us be youth. Let us be activists. Today Saul just stepped out and let one of the youth facilitate the meeting you know because he trusts the youth enough to do these things. It’s ultimately our action that we’re trying to do, us as youth.

Lashona concurs:

Here like it’s actually about us youth like we bring up the questions. We bring up all of the other stuff, ya know. We have you, Christian, and everybody else who may say a small comment to get us rolling’, but we actually do everything like on our own…I had my doubts, like I don’t think that it’s going to be possible for us to do something big, but I decided it’s worth the try.
Nina, too, whole-heartedly believes in young people’s leadership within social justice movements,

I think everybody can do everything I’ve done in the past four years, which is really a good place to be, I think. When we went on the Freedom Ride trip it was so obvious that the young people really own the work of the Freedom School and they can speak to it as well or better than I ever could.

Nina’s affirmation that young people can and are doing the work of social justice organizing demands, in her words, a commitment to “expose young people to as many opportunities to try out or put what they’ve learned to the test.” The role of the adult ally then is to model anti-oppressive activism and facilitate opportunities to learn by doing. This often takes the form of trainings and workshops, one-on-one skill development and informal coaching.

Saul’s approach as the instructor/adult coordinator of the Criminalization of Youth Leadership in Action group serves as a telling example of an adult ally in action. This story chronicles how Saul worked with the youth coordinator (a 2009 alumni of the Freedom Fellowship) to support and encourage her as a leader within the cohort:

[At the beginning] we had a one-on-one, which I think was really helpful… in that talk I think she began to see me as a friend or something…that was like our shift in our relationship. I think she understood that if we’re going to if this is going to happen it’s going to happen because both of us are making it happen...We also communicated before every meeting. She reached out to me for support uhm before she presented on the panel at at Roosevelt uhm for the criminalization of youth piece there…Uhm, and we just had conversations on the phone where I was just saying “Look, you know, uhm you have to be confident and understand that they’re [2010 Freedom Fellows] you know they look up to you as someone who has done this before, knows this work and uhm you know you have to trust yourself.” And she took that, she it was almost to the point that she felt like people weren’t listening to her and so we had a conversation about that. She went to the next meeting and addressed people and uhm you know I mean
they’ve been taking her seriously ever since.

Saul is present for the youth coordinator when she needs his advice and feedback. He is responsive to her calls and provides regular, on-going support through weekly meetings. He views their working relationship as one of equal partners sharing responsibility for “making it happen.” During program activities, Saul and the youth coordinator divide up facilitation tasks evenly or, at times, co-facilitate; in doing so, they model a healthy youth-adult partnership (participant observation).

According to the young people and adults interviewed in this study, adult allies value reciprocity within their relationships with young people. They understand young people as “the present,” rather than solely as “the future.” In other words, they see young people as already possessing important qualities and perspectives that can contribute to bettering our world today. As such, adult allies construct their relationships with young people based on mutual sharing, learning, participation and responsibility. Mutual sharing requires adults to re-think professionalized boundaries that strictly prohibit telling young people about their lives, their hopes and dreams, their struggles. Rather, as Nina avows, adults at CFS “often share parts of our lives too. I think we approach it, we approach work with young people with a lot of transparency.”

From the vantage of Freedom Fellows, this mutual sharing fosters trust and deeper relationships. Lashona, who’s consciousness about the socio-political and cultural aspects of diet began to emerge during the fellowship, offered this story about how she came to know and understand an adult’s personal food choices,

We was talkin’ about ahhh food and uhm someone had brung some chicken
and everybody was eatin’ it and we was like “Saul, you know you don’t want any?” and he was like “Nope.” I’m like “Why you steady turnin’ down all the food, you know? This isn’t right.” And he was like “you know because I’m fastin’” and you know like I kinda’ related that to my boyfriend because he was fastin’ also and we actually started talkin’ about it and Saul had kind of related it to us and started tellin’ us like more of like his personal reasons of why he was fastin’.

In this narrative, LaShona begins to relate to the adult ally on a deeper level, which allows her to draw parallels between her own life experiences and that of someone quite different from herself. Similarly, when asked what helped her feel comfortable talking with the adults at CFS, Gabriela replies,

> When they were teenagers they were talking about how they were, how their relationships with their parents were and it reminds of how I am right now with my parents….Their parents don’t necessarily agree with what they’re doing and don’t really support them in what they’re doing.

In this telling we again see how the sharing of life experiences opens the relationship to a more personal connection and facilitates a sense of togetherness in the same struggle. Darrel expresses a similar sentiment about the importance of adult role models who are true to themselves in their relationships with young people,

> They’re theyselves. They don’t get caught up too much in trying to impress, you know. They’re basically here for the same reasons we are as youth. I think that’s what us as youth need. We need people that can you know touch bases with us verses the dictators…. it’s very different because some adults get caught up in trying to run things you know, trying to dictate.

In Darrel’s assessment young people gain a sense of empowerment when adults can move past our inclination to control and take over work and instead relax in the comfort of who we are and allow the collective work to unfold. That adult allies at CFS value
mutual participation and responsibility is particularly noteworthy to Freedom Fellows.

Michelle, for instance, sees adult who “do with” young people as more helpful:

Well, one thing that I think helped a lot is that they [instructor and youth coordinator] participated as well. Like sometimes you’ve got people that will say, “Do this or do that and I want this at a certain time, such and such.” But they don’t help you. They don’t participate...But every time that we did something or anything, even you, you not one of us, but you was still just like participating, ya' know, do stuff with us. And I liked that.

Hector experiences adult allies as actively working to build trust, respect and equity in their relationships with young people. He explains,

I didn’t feel that they were above us. They were coordinators, but it felt like we were all friends. We could talk to them about our opinions and not be judged...I saw them as somebody to respect, but I also as my friend and somebody I could trust...They trusted us. They knew that we would do the right thing. They would respect our ideas, respect us like a friend.

In essence, adult allies know young people, listen to young people, and genuinely believe in young people. Adult allies value youth voice and youth ownership within social change projects, recognizing the important ways young people’s contributions benefit adults, communities and movements for social justice. Adult allies are friends to young people in the shared pursuit of justice.

The Centrality of Wellness

*I know myself. I love myself. I know what I need. I know how to get it.* – Nina

I was one of those people who was like this healthy stuff is not gonna’ work. Like I will eat it ya' know, but I’m extremely picky eater. Extremely picky… And then for them to tell me like the rules are you can’t bring anything unhealthy into the environment. At first, I was like that’s stupid. Like why would they tell us what we can’t bring up here to eat? But then as I start thinking about it, as a couple of days start going on, I start thinking of it as like that was kinda’ a good idea because eventually you gonna’ start thinking like “Ok, uhm this unhealthy stuff, first of all, is spending my money when
I could be eatin’ free up here. Plus it’s like I’m putting dead food inside my body when I could be eatin’ healthy just like everybody else…” Eventually I started eatin’ the stuff. I actually did like like an apple. I maybe ate like 4 apples a day, you know. Then like I started eatin’ the sandwiches and everybody else was eatin’ ‘em and I’m like it ain’t so bad. It isn’t like they are telling us “Don’t eat anything unhealthy at all.” They just asking us one simple task: if you come here just eat healthy at least one time of the day. So you know, I kinda’ got with it. You know, I got used to it.

In this passage, Lashona details how the organizational culture of health and wellness influenced her consciousness of nutrition and her willingness to change her eating habits.

Through formal conversations about *Food Rules: An Eater’s Manual* (a handbook by Michael Pollen on simple eating) and informal conversations with peers at CFS, we see Lashona’s understanding of the relevance of food to sustained activism evolve. For Lashona, food becomes more than what tastes good; food becomes a source of political and economic meaning, ripe with opportunity for personal and social justice. In this manner, wellness becomes of central importance to transformative justice work.

Wellness at CFS is a holistic concept embedded in the framing of the FF as an initial step in the journey of lifelong activism. Wellness – defined here as self-knowledge, self-love and self-efficacy – is understood as intrinsic to personal and social transformation. It is an on-going, cyclical process of feeding ourselves to feed our work and feeding our work to feed ourselves. According to Nina, wellness is also much more than self-care,

The key question that we always look at with wellness is how can we make healthy decisions about ourselves and our lives in order to be more effective activists…you can’t truly be an effective activist if you’re not really taking care of yourself. And it’s not just self-care, right. It’s also checking yourself when you make poor decisions (laughs) or trying not to make poor decisions… Self-care is like a buzz word, something that everyone is into.
Maybe you go to a meeting and incense is burning and everyone is giving each other massages and you address self-care, you know (laughter). But we’re not really addressing if that person is in an abusive relationship. Even after that meeting they are still going to be in an abusive relationship. Uhm, and how are they really able to uhm make decisions that will change that.

Nina, like Lashona, emphasizes that wellness is, in part, having the information you need to make healthy decisions and, in part, the ability to exercise those decisions. In her words, wellness is:

kind of an umbrella term for a lot of different things. Self-care, yes, but also looking at relationships. How do we treat ourselves? How do we treat each other? What kind of language do we use?...It’s about personal decision-making, as well as having the supports in place to be able to move out of maybe some unhealthy places.

When asked of the relevance of wellness to Freedom Fellows, Nina replies “if we’re not addressing our own well-being than it’s almost impossible to sustain any kind of activism or any kind of work toward something outside of who we are.” She continues,

I think it’s irresponsible actually to not address wellness and to ask young people or anybody else to do what could be very high risk behavior or high risk activities… without paying attention to what the person is dealing with as far as how they walk through the world and how they survive.

The significance of caring for ourselves as fundamental to caring for community is not lost on the Freedom Fellows. Hector, for example, sees taking care of mind, spirit and body as integral to a healthy future:

The one thing that I really liked is that they really cared about our health. They didn’t want us eating junk food. They had fresh fruit and granola bars. They asked us if we were ok. You know, like if we needed anything. They gave us this binder full of information and sorts of stuff and a notebook so we can take down notes, so we don’t just leave the information here. We can take it home with us… The food part is really good because it’s getting us ready for the future. So, we won’t make health mistakes and our body is used to the food.
As Hector notes, attention to wellness permeates the physical and educational space at CFS. Wellness is built into the Fellowship program through daily workshops, nutritional options, reading material and an annual summer retreat. Similarly, it is present throughout the building as bathroom bulletin boards on interpersonal violence and sexual health, as free condoms, as pamphlets on gender identity and sexual orientation, as magazines, library books, movies and posters. These very visible markers of the centrality of wellness underscore the assumption of transformative justice that personal and community health are deeply intertwined (Prilleltensky & Fox, 2007).

Similarly, at CFS wellness is expressed as a cultural reality, lived out by young people and adults as a normative, albeit imperfect, aspiration. Wellness, then, is an ongoing practice, as opposed to an achievable goal. Nina again explains,

So you don’t think “Oh, I’ve done five wellness seminars. I don’t need to do any more wellness ever.” You know? (laughs). Wellness, check. It’s not that at all. It’s absolutely trying to develop, all of us, the desire to constantly do those check-ins with ourselves and what it is that may be happening with us personally that may keep us from being able to do the bigger things that we really want to do.

Embedding wellness within the organizational culture requires modeling, transparency and accountability among adults and youth leaders. It requires honesty about how our everyday decision-making is consistent with our social justice values and humility in our short-comings as we attempt to live in truth – a concept popularized by Václav Havel to describe personal resistance to systemic oppression (Havel, 1978). Leah shares her personal struggle with balancing work and personal life, highlighting the conflictual role CFS’s organizational structure has played in her effort to live well over the past year:
A lot of my spirit and a lot of my energy was sort of taken up by the Freedom School. I really did struggle with having a life outside of work and going home from work and having any energy to do anything and not just collapse, especially because we stay late a lot of nights...which is really hard on my partner...it takes up my whole world...We all work more hours than we’re supposed to work...we try our best to support each other and to sort of discourage each other from doing that...but we all also really like it...we could do a better job like holding each other accountable on that...of just letting each other rest and like be away and be disconnected from each other, you know.

As Leah’s story shows, wellness requires navigating the tensions between meaning work and prioritizing other aspect of life that matter deeply. It sometimes requires questioning the interplay between external systems, such as funders, and internal organizational praxis and re-thinking these dynamics in a way that promotes both personal *and* organizational sustainability. Admittedly, wellness broadly defined and holistically practiced is difficult to measure in terms of outcomes and impact; likewise, it is also generally overlooked as a priority for foundations that support community organizing work. Prioritizing wellness within social justice work begets the question: how might we reframe our approaches to progressive change to better attend to the whole of who we are as activists, students, workers, parents, son/daughters, partners and friends?

**The Centrality of Socio-political Development**

*You constantly want to be learning, teaching and learning, with each other.* – Alyse, adult ally and instructor in the *Killing Us Softly LIA*

A primary component of intergenerational movement-building, and thus of the Freedom Fellowship program model, is socio-political development. Socio-political development is the process of developing a critical consciousness of the world in which
we live and using that consciousness to move toward collective action for justice. Socio-political development lies at the heart of education as liberation. Alyse and Saul, both activists, adult allies and instructors for the *Leadership in Action* cohorts, provide valuable insight into how CFS conceptualizes socio-political development through popular education. Drawing on feminist and Freirian theory, Alyse describes popular education as politicizing the personal:

[In popular education] there’s no one right answer because it’s coming from people’s experience and people’s experience is going to change while things while conditions get better, they get worse or the story changes… There’s also a certain amount of self-determination in that people it’s supposed to come from the community, by the community.

She further juxtaposes popular education with more traditional community organizing, presenting it as an alternative to the disempowerment associated with “expert-led” approaches,

Putting the emphasis on your story as important and your story as political, as opposed to in like typical kind of like capitalist modes of production, even because we apply that sometimes to our ways of organizing too, that there’s like there is an expert and the expert knows what’s best for the community and you should follow suit.

Finally, she adds that in popular education there’s “an element of participatory action research.” She explains,

You start off looking at your own life and…creating an analysis of what oppression looks like in your world you know and then looking at the larger world and like looking at how different oppressions intersect, but all based on your personal experience. The idea is that you get so infuriated and have this really deep understanding uhm that you move to action…but then, you’re always researching again so you take action and then you figure out what you learned from that and taking it back and creating and then moving it back into your own life experience. The action that you took is part of your life experience and then starting over with the research.
Saul’s description of popular education, though less theoretically framed, also emphasizes the politicalization of personal experience, and vice versa,

Since it was a topic that has kind of world significance and there’s this huge kind of diaspora of imprisonment and prison populations, the week that we, the first week, I tried to give them that perspective and talk about things that were mainly uhm encompassing the prison industrial complex. We talked about other people’s prison populations and watched slide shows on Zero Tolerance. So, I tried to give them a holistic perspective, kind of like a zooming out from Chicago in order to zoom into Chicago. So the week was more of them trying to understand how this kind of issue is operating, this oppression operates on the larger context and then moving into how we affect it here in Chicago. So, the approach allowed me to uhm find ways to make it personal and make them talk about their own experiences while addressing this other stuff that’s going on.

According to both Alyse and Saul, education for liberation involves making the invisibility of oppression and privilege visible. As Saul puts it,

There are things that are passed down that are almost assumed or like taught in certain cultures and families that I didn’t learn or that people don’t learn. So, unless we get serious about it and say “This is how we do things here” or “This is how we do things in this community or this family that we’re building,” uhm it’s hard to hold people accountable for not doing certain things.

In Saul’s eyes, this process of enlightenment is integral if people are to come together for collective action. Leah, a program staff member at CFS, reiterates Saul’s point in her articulation of the centrality of consciousness-raising to the Fellowship:

The first thing that everyone does here, young people and adults and staff members and board members, everyone is forced to think about their own identities and to sort of examine the way that informs who they are in the world, the kind of bias and uhm oppressive attitudes that they hold and the kinds of oppressive things that they face in the world…to never forget that there’s a lot of layers to who they are and that at it’s best youth activism and youth organizing is really a tool to develop that whole person and not just one aspect of that person. And so it might you know it might result
in a campaign victory you know or you know some workshops being done and those things are really important, but I I think it is actually almost secondary to the development of the person that happens while they’re doing that work.

Nina, another staff person, confirms that the identity development piece of the Freedom Fellowship is “particularly effective” in “teaching young people about oppression and anti-oppression.”

In addition to understanding the self in relation to the social world, popular education involves co-learning and co-teaching. Referring to this as “mutual learning,” Alyse explains, “[On] the facilitator and student spectrum, which in popular education should be fluid anyways, teachers should always be teaching students and students should always be teaching teachers” [emphasis mine]. For the adults at the Freedom School, mutual learning means engaging young people in teaching roles within the organization at large, as well as within the Leadership in Action cohorts. Alyse offers an example of how she and the youth coordinator for the Killing Us Softly cohort, herself a 2009 alumni of the Fellowship, co-taught:

I worked with the youth coordinator on creating curriculum exploring the topics of gender oppression and sexism…that started with political education, defining terms and exposing young people to what the issues are by using their own experiences in life and then moving towards actions. So, an introduction to like critical theory around organizing and what has been done in the past and then how you use those tools to create your own campaign uhmm to address the issues of oppression that you know communities of color in Chicago and the world face. Basically, we would sit down and talk about what each day was going to look like and then we would divide up who was going to do what…I would create a framework uhmm and say…here’s what I was thinking and then she would look at it and add information or uhmm ideas for different ways to present the information or uhmm like facilitating specific activities…there was also some stuff that I
don’t think she knew as much about so she would be like “I don’t feel com-
fortable, you know, doing that,” and I’d say “Ok, I’ll do that,” so she could be there for the process and learn how to do it. But, it was actually pretty mutual in terms of the what we actually came up with.

In the words of these adult allies, engaging with young people as co-teachers cannot be strictly limited to the youth coordinators; rather, all young people within the programs must have opportunities to teach, as well as learn. Here, Alyse, describes her approach to fostering mutual learning:

As the week progressed I started to see that there are some people who also had a deep analysis and leadership…I don’t want to pull any kind of adultist shit and…I could feel that people wanted to have more participation. So, we would ask people to step up and say “Do you want to do this? Do you want to do ice breakers?...Trying from the very day one to the end to make people feel comfortable to know that it’s their space and that they could step up and bring stuff and facilitate.

Saul, too, describes how he facilitated mutual learning by taking a “step back” to allow the Fellows to step up:

I was able to step back and they were able to still get things done or to have some conflict and have that resolved or see that you know uhm that it was necessary or people grew and learned from that, that it was a discussion where people shared their frustrations…They had that moment, they reflected on it and they continued to come back understanding that they don’t have to do it that way.

In this way, liberatory learning happens not just through content, but through process. We need only look to the numerous examples offered by the Freedom Fellows to see the impact of “mutual learning” on their socio-political development. Hector, for instance, recalled with pride this collaborative experience of learning to interview,

There’s this girl in our group who said she’s really shy. She had not had the chance to try any of this. I was proud of her that she was interviewing people and reciting the poem. We were all doing it together as the group,
doing it. She was doing it confidently. It was really good. She told me she was really shy and that she’s usually quiet. So, I had that connection because sometimes I’m like that too. She didn’t want to interview, so we kind of took turns and helped each other out.

Darrel, likewise, discussed how he learned conflict resolution skills through the dialogical process inherent in the Fellowship. Referring to the frequent disagreements he had with a cohort-member, Darrel exclaims, “Towards the end me and her developed a very strong relationship because of our ability to disagree with each other, you know. I think that’s amazing that people can come together and disagree and keep it civil.” Daniel characterizes the process in which “students are learning from teachers and teachers are learning from students” as “balanced,” a “give and take.”

Finally, of utmost importance to Fellows’ socio-political development is the wide variety of educational methods used to promote dialogue, action and reflection. Fellows discuss the use of documentary films, non-fiction readings, issue-based debates, games and role plays, poetry and art-based activities and talks with allied activist organizations, such as Gender Just and the YWCA. The outcomes of such educational approaches include new consciousness, skill development and alliance-building. Erika, for one, found the film discussions particularly helpful in understanding multiple perspective on the social issue,

When we watched the different documentaries, I got a personal feeling about how people felt that actually went through the problem. Learning or trying to understand how different people felt when they’d gone through the problem helped me have a mindset to actually help different people and actually try to work together to help other people…Then we would discuss it. I guess I liked that the most because we got to hear different ideas or how people understood it. There would be times that someone would be explaining what they thought about it and you would
be like “Oh wow, I really didn’t think of it like that.” Then you can learn more and have different ways to understand one thing than just your own.

Gabriela and Michelle also mention how the film discussions provided a contextual understanding of the media’s role in perpetuating oppressive gender norms. In addition, Daniel and Gabriela both found the readings and role plays most useful in making real the conceptual learning involved in critical consciousness.

In the *School-to-Prison Pipeline* cohort, Maya and Lashona both found the team building games, such as the Human Knot, key to helping the group learn about each other and bond. Both young women attribute these activities to helping themselves and their peers “loosen up,” and show their personalities. For Hector, on the other hand, the interviews were a great way to develop “social skills” and bond with peers. Hector, Maya and Simeon all mentioned arts-based activities as especially compelling approaches to teaching about the dynamics of privilege and oppression. As an example, Simeon offered the following anecdote:

> We did an activity where we had to make a picture frame, but then there were three groups and our group had like the most resources and we were getting a lot of help from Saul and then the second group had a moderate amount of resources and you know little you know like an average amount of help from Saul and the last group they were getting almost no resources and basically no help from Saul because he actually took resources from them and gave them to us sometimes. But we didn’t actually know. In my group see we had the most resources, but at least for me personally I didn’t know that other people were like losing. At first, I didn’t notice that people had less than we did and second I didn’t notice that people were that Saul was taking stuff from other people and giving it to us. I assumed that everyone was getting the same treatment that we got. And I think the purpose of that activity was to show how uh to demonstrate classism and to maybe demonstrate how sometimes people who have more privilege don’t even recognize that there are other people out there who are struggling.
Maya also mentioned the group’s debate on Zero Tolerance as a meaningful way of learning multiple perspectives on an issue. Like Erika, she finds learning alternative ways of thinking about a social justice important to articulating her own position as an activist. She says,

It was great because you got to learn both sides of the story. You should always get to know their [opposition] side of the story to know what they think and why they do what they do. Then we know our side of the story, why we think it shouldn’t be that way. So that way we can see both sides and see if we can compromise or something like that.

Simeon, Darrel and Michelle believe that a popular education approach, on a whole, is an effective tool of social justice youth development. For Simeon, “the whole experience helped me understand activism more;” understand that “activism can be simply not doing what people expect you to do. And it can be things that are smaller than planning a protest.” Likewise, for Darrel, “every exercise helped us become stronger activists…the group just helped me blossom more.” Michelle asserts that being at the Freedom School “makes you think about so many different things, life, social issues, just everything.” She adds,

You constantly thinking. There’s not a moment when you just like “Am I learning? I don’t know nothing” or you just like blazing out. You’re mind is constantly going and uhm it’s always working hard and you learning about something. You gonna’ learn something each time you come, learn something different.

Not surprisingly, the Freedom Fellows experience popular education as notably different from the educational approaches they encounter each day in school. Hector says,

He wouldn’t just say this and that, but he would explain it to us. We had fun while doing it too. We opened up to each other…He gave us a different experience than we’re used to. Instead of schooling where you’re told this, he explained to us what was behind it…he gives us the full
information. He makes things easier. He makes things easier for us because he can relate to us.

Maya agrees,

I actually learned more than I thought I would...it was one of the best experiences I’ve actually ever had learning. Usually when you learn, you really don’t. Saul, being our teacher, he was like the person that you want to be a teacher at school. He’s fun and he does want to get serious. He listens...he wasn’t just doing it for the check. He was doing it for us. He wants to actually help us learn.

Michelle asserts that learning at CFS is multi-dimensional, “When you was just talking verbally all the time, sometimes that you may not get it that way. So, we would act out a lot of different things. Sometimes you need to see it visually to understand.” She sees an added benefit of this interactive approach as “helping everybody to get to know each other” and “help[ing] you as a person open up more, as well.” This very personal, relationship-based learning environment stands in sharp contrast to Fellows’ descriptions of their school-based experiences as uncaring, hostile even.

Education rooted in liberation from oppression makes possible young people’s socio-political development across several interrelated domains, including: (1) sense of identity; (2) contextualized understanding of social issues; (3) knowledge of the personal, interpersonal and systemic dynamics of oppression; (4) commitment to community; (5) personal and collective agency; and (6) development of skills for progressive social change. These development outcomes are elaborated in detail in chapter 5, which presents a case-by-case analysis of the Freedom Fellows’ socio-political consciousness. However, before we turn to the nuances of their evolving identities as activists, we must acknowledge the reciprocal, transformative affect of liberatory education on the adults...
who practice within the Freedom School model. Nina, first and foremost, credits the
Freedom Fellowship with her growth as an activist and youth development professional:

It’s changed the way uhm I engage with everybody uhm because I do
identify, I never before I came to the freedom school identified as a ally
to young people. I liked young people, you know. I helped them do what-
ever they wanted me to help them do, but I didn’t see myself as someone
who had to actually speak up and say something or make a decision about
whether or not I would be part of something based on how young people
were treated and respected in the space and I absolutely am that person
now…it’s also changed what kinds of places that I’ll commit myself to out-
side of the work depending on how they uhm look at race and class too…
I’m just less tolerant…they’ve humbled me…helped me be a better
professional. I feel like they are great at holding us accountable for what
we say we are supposed to be out there doing.

Leah, too, learns the true meaning of being an adult ally from the Fellows:

Freedom Fellows have taught me a lot about adultism. I had never talked
about adultism or thought about it at all when I came to this organization…
and I was really interested in freedom schools' theory and all this,…but I
I’d never heard of adultism. Now, I think it’s like one one
of the most
important components of what we do here…the Freedom Fellows have
really taught me a lot about you know what it means to be a young person
in our society and how like all the ways in which young people are like
disenfranchised… the Freedom Fellows being so willing to share about the
things that they face in their lives – from their families and from the police
and from their schools – has really helped me to understand. I’ve gained
such a better understanding of oppression and of injustice and of the places
where I can speak up and the places where I can act uhm as an adult ally.

And, interestingly, she attributes her growing awareness of her own racial privilege to her
work with the young people of color in the Fellowship:

I have learned a lot about uhm being a white person from the Freedom
Fellows…when I came here I was still really uncomfortable about it and I
really I really worried about my presence here making young people more
uncomfortable…Freedom Fellows have taught me a lot about being a white
ally and that you know all of those things are true and that I do need to be
very conscious of those things and how I exist in the world as a white
person, but that it’s not sort of that’s not where it ends. The Freedom
Fellows are very open to like learning from me and getting to know me and have been very generous with me and very forgiving with me and uhm you know in letting me figure those things out and you know and learning you know what my place is in this organization…Freedom Fellows have taught me that there can be a middle ground where I can be very conscious of that and open about it but uhm and aware that my whiteness plays, but not have it be like the deciding factor in what my relationship is with them.

These adults, like the youth they support, believe whole-heartedly that liberatory education helps them “live in truth.” Nina states,

A lot of things we say are not youth-friendly are really not people friendly, but adults have a higher tolerance…it almost like causes me to be a little bit more true to myself…young people are very more sensitive, and rightfully so, to the dehumanization of us, in public spaces oftentimes, and they just don’t have any tolerance for it and they don’t have to, right? But, later on we’re taught that we kind of have to and so we deal with that kind of stuff…Youth-friendly means something different to me now.

Alyse, similarly, perceives her own involvement in liberatory education as helping her remain committed to her principles and to lifelong learning in the service of justice,

I think it’s important that they know that I am very open to like honest dialogue and open to change, uhm so and that they know that I’m passionate about this stuff and that it’s important and why like where I’m coming from. I think sometimes I don’t always share that and looking back I would’ve liked to share more about myself…I think it’s important that they know uhm where I’m coming from cause otherwise I’ll just they’ll just look at me as another teacher, like not all teachers are bad, but like another person telling them what to do, right. You know and I want them to know that I’m exploring this stuff as well, you know. Like it’s a life long, I’m a life long learner. I’m never gonna’ stop pushing myself and so I’m asking you all to push yourselves a little bit beyond your comfort level and talk about things that are hard.

Saul admits that the Fellowship experience taught him to push himself outside of his comfort zone in his work with youth:

I just really appreciate working with youth…They keep me thinking about new ways to engage them…I think also me feeling like I have to be in this
space even if I’m not facilitating it, but I have to be there making sure everything is ok. I think when you’re in a space like this you kind of have to lose a little of that. You don’t have to be on top of it.

For Emilia, the learning lies in translating organizing paradigms to a larger social movement framework,

I think that being an organizer first has prepared me to create a paradigm of teaching that is social justice teaching. That is what I’ve personally gained from the Freedom School, is really learning how to be a social justice teacher in not just performance but also in a theoretical framework.

She elaborates by offering a comparison between learning in an intergenerational movement-building space and learning in an institute of higher education:

I’m learning from various perspectives, various degrees of social consciousness... what does it mean to teach activism and what does it mean to teach to be an organizer? How do you become a critical person? Those theories I think uhm became very evident to me in the process of actually teaching and practicing it and working with young people and watching them develop into being part of it. It really helped me grow as an intellectual and when I went into a graduate intellectual space I wasn’t challenged by some of the things that the people were saying, by some of the things that I was reading because the work the work wasn’t rooted in action and it wasn’t rooted in things that were personal...all of my entire job is about thinking about how oppression exists, how people view it, how people have taught it, how young people perceive it, how they will do it within their action...when I get into a space that is academic it doesn’t feel hard enough because the Freedom School is not just intellectual. It is emotional, it’s economical, it’s everything. It’s just like oppression, it’s everything.

The mutuality that occurs in a model based on teaching and learning is clearly evident for adults within the CFS family. In combination with community, history, wellness and anti-oppression, social-political development forms a solid basis for an intergenerational movement for transformative social change.

**Inconsistencies and Tensions in Praxis**
Imperfections exist within this work. Tensions in living out the high ideals of a social justice praxis come glaringly to light in the realities of a world plagued with injustice. These contradictions and inconsistencies are evidence of a collective process ripe with transformative potential, rather than evidence by which to disparage this ground-breaking work. They point us to further re-thinking that needs to be done and present us with unique opportunities to create and re-create our work. Below I discuss the points where theory and practice diverge at CFS in messy, albeit meaningful ways.

One of the most notable tensions in the Freedom Fellowship’s model of popular education lies in its framing as movement-building rather than community organizing. This framework presented challenges to the instructors and Fellows alike, in terms of how to situate the cohorts’ activism efforts within a larger social movement context and how to teach organizing within a time limited program. Saul, for example, recognizes that the Freedom School “sits in a unique position to focus on movement-building in Chicago uhm with young people in particular, but also with adult allies…that they can do that work in terms of educational work.” At the same time, he experiences a disconnect in teaching for transformation within the confines of the program. This disconnect takes shape in the programmatic expectation of implementing an action within a six-month timeframe. Saul confesses,

I got overwhelmed with the idea of trying to do too much and then had to try to scale back and say ok well, what can be done and not even necessarily what’s winnable, but what can just be done. So, I feel like that’s why that complementary piece needs to be there…in the design of the Fellowship. The Fellowship itself needs to talk about both movement-building and actions and activism, campaign-making and they need to be simultaneous and they need to talk about, maybe at the end or at certain
times, how they’re different…That dual strand approach I think is really important for the holistic development of a Freedom Fellow and it’s hard for a part-time person, a contracted person to do, especially without the really contextual information about the Freedom School.

He explains further the theoretical gulf inherent in the framing of the Fellowship,

In general, the way I’ve thought about organizing and done it before you know you move to build a larger campaign or movement and then you have these action pieces that are underneath it or within it. This job was asking me to do build toward the action uhm with this knowledge of the larger movement.

Alyse is similarly struck by this divide,

I just wish there was more connecting around that kind of thing uhm in the curriculum that we taught and I didn’t know that that was gonna’ to be an issue… I’ve done lots of different kinds of organizing and I’ve been doing this really deep uhm like political education. I would like to figure out how to, for a place like the Freedom School, which is just like a training camp for young people, exposing them to stuff, if you are going to take action like how does your action fit into a larger movement.

The instructors’ worries, in essence, are rooted in the risk of misinforming young people about the realities of activism and organizing when situated within a formal organizational structure. Saul, again, laments,

To put so much emphasis on getting an action done in four months really takes away from the emphasis on movement-building. So if what you’re going to end up doing in the long run is unlearning some things that you’ve learned to be an activist or to be an organizer…if you’re going to continue to go up the ladder in this organization…at some point you’re going to have to say, “Oh, well the action stuff you all were doing well, that’s not what we really do. That was just something we had you do. We’re actually movement-builders.” So that is the risk.

Alyse agrees with Saul’s analysis that “when you’re doing movement stuff, it may not happen when you say it, the way you said it was going to happen.” She too experiences the programmatic time constraints as counter to teaching movement-building:
I wouldn’t have had it be longer because of there wasn’t enough time I think to uhm really really explore the concrete skills, like we did a lot of consciousness raising, but then to explore some of the concrete skills you need to organize and then give ourselves time to really do an analysis and figure out a campaign….I think sometimes that stuff is organic.

Saul asserts that additional time would’ve allowed the program to delve deeper into the young people’s holistic growth. He says,

I was really trying and was interested in how are they growing as people. What skills are they trying to gain personally uhm and I just remember trying to bring that up and there was some confusion around it and Nina was also at the meeting and was looking for some very specific goals and so that kind of got pushed to the side…I wasn’t able to spend as much one-on-one and…I wanna have more like more personal healing and growth and development work happening before we begin, like on the front end.

In fact, some of the Fellows – Gabriela, Erika and Daniel – also mention wanting more time to explore identities, develop their social analysis and strategize for action.

Gabriela, for one, believes that with more time the Killing Us Softly cohort could better “strategize what we need to do…in order to really get heard.” Erika shares her perspective,

I think maybe a little more time would make our action better, the solution…you would need more time to learn more and research more about the problem. Some people might not learn at the same pace or understand things. I thought that if we would have more time, it would be better for the solution.

As does Daniel,

Not to say that the blog isn’t anything, but I sort of felt like we could do something way better than just a blog, like workshops at least and start discussions in our community. But, since the time was running out, we had to do a blog.
He adds that more time learning about identity would help the Fellows deepen their understanding of how personal issues are also political:

I think we should know a little more. Like certain things we didn’t cover, like what does it mean being such and such. What could we do to not be as oppressive as before? Like oppression training mixed in with the sexism training. Like first could we start with ourselves and then we can start with the world. Like we analyze ourselves for being people that we are oppressive in our own ways but we don’t know…I think we could’ve gotten more personal. ‘Cuz if we haven’t broken the ice to have gotten really personal on it,…like we could be doing this but really not having that connection to what we really think, compared to having a personal relationship like you understand one another, you understanding each other’s ideology. I think that would’ve helped us even more, unpack even more and question more and gotten each other more motivated. Us bouncing off each other, motivating each other.

Of course, in its four year history, CFS has tweaked the structure of this program in response to young people’s engagement and evaluative feedback. Such changes have included shortening the program length and revising the course structure. Additionally, CFS now offers educational and leadership development opportunities for program alumni, such as service on the Youth Leadership Board, an annual alumni retreat, periodic workshops, co-leadership of organizing trainings, internships and summer employment. Emilia, a program staff person at CFS, explains the current iteration of the Fellowship, acknowledging both it’s structural strengths and drawbacks:

I definitely like the short-term because…it if you really want them to do something then you have to do it when they are ready and for a lot of them at the end of the summer they are ready…Social justice work in general isn’t always restrained to a timeline and I think that’s the struggle that we’ve had as an organization is this timeline because you an have an action that can be more than a year or it can be an action that happens in a week….that inconsistency in the work is something that we struggle with…it’s the problem of institutionalizing the movement.
As CFS staff members, Nina, Emilia and Leah all grapple with the impositions of mainstream non-profit and foundation arrangements on social change work. Emilia explains,

> When you institutionalize the movement you create bureaucracy. You make social action become part of a system. It’s limiting. It’s very limiting to how quickly and how much change can happen in our society…the danger of institutionalizing is becoming static…and having uhm this hierarchy of power.

In practice, this tension plays out in funders’ expectations for concrete outcomes within the fiscal year or misunderstandings of the co-directed organizational management (as opposed to the traditional Executive Director or Chief Executive Officer arrangement). It also impacts the organization’s ability to sustain its wellness work, which lays outside the boundaries of traditional community organization and, therefore, outside the scope of funding priorities for many progressive foundations. Nina speaks to this particular tension in her juxtaposition of CFS in relation to the more dominant narrowly-focused organizational models:

> It’s really hard and challenging work to be able to talk about that [wellness] and still be taken seriously, right (laughs) because of the culture that’s been supported. And I see organizations that try to address them through a social-emotional, social services blend. It’s like “Well, we don’t know if our young people are going to have a place to sleep tonight and we don’t know if our young people are on the street” and that’s all factual and true and it certainly shows everybody how challenging the population is that you’re working with, (laughs) right. But it becomes this whole thing that that’s life and when you come here you don’t have to deal with life necessarily in that moment so we’re not going to deal with as a part of, we’re not going to deal with healing, we’re not going to deal with all of the things that have created this world for you. We’re just going to make sure that you have we’re going to get you a place to sleep tonight…it’s saying well you have to have X, Y and Z before you talk about healing (laughs). You know, it’s problematic in that way uhm, because you don’t know if you had some conversations
around what’s going on a person could actually change the situation or get the support they need to change the situation that they’re in right now simply by looking at it as bigger than the immediate needs.

Wellness is not a cultural value, and therefore, is not easily incorporated into the program model at either the individual or organization levels. We see this in Saul’s admonition of the lack of time to attend to healing, as well as Leah’s confession of the very real difficulty of modeling healthy living. In fact, this particular year, CFS was unable to take the Freedom Fellows on the week-long wellness retreat due to budgetary constraints. Regardless of these inconsistencies, CFS remains committed to addressing wellness within intergenerational movement-building work. Nina professes,

I think it’s irresponsible actually to not address wellness and to ask young people or anybody else to do what could be very high-risk behavior or high-risk activities...without paying attention to what the person is dealing with as far as how they walk through the world and how they survive.

Emilia, in fact, is already planning changes to the 2011 Fellowship based on the Fellows’ needs for wellness; she says,

I think in general they were missing the social-emotional aspect of the Freedom Fellowship program that all the other Freedom Fellows were able to gain. That’s the reason why next summer we’re allowing them to enroll as regular participants not as alumni.

Another important tension within CFS as an intergenerational movement-building organization is evident in the power differentials between young people and adults. Although young people play important roles within the Fellowship and the organization as a whole – as cohort coordinators, interns, trainers and Youth Leadership Board members – adults maintain much of the decision-making power for financial and programmatic concerns. Here, Nina breaks down the ways in which young people are
involved in organizational decision-making, as well as the ways in which improvements are needed:

Young people being at the table in decision-making and being an integral part of community organizing is absolutely necessary for movement-building or social movements to be successful…not just helping young people do something in a summer or in a year, you know for a short period of time, but really saying that the work we do with young people is about changing the way people do community organizing, right…So, we do approach the work with young people as partners in the building of the Freedom School. So, that’s really critical, like there’ll be relatively large decisions that need to be made,…it’s just we always have to run it by YLB … we wouldn’t even think of planning a summer program without talking to young people. It’s just absolutely part of the way we do things now.

She offers the following examples of young people’s roles as decision-makers:

Every summer, we’re trying something new and we are applying what we’ve learned previously…from the young people. We really do cultivate an environment where folks feel like they can tell us what’s on their mind whenever…We’ve made changes mid-program because of what young people have indicated works for them, what doesn’t work for them. They obviously impact who we choose as people who work here. They impact what we decide to order in the library. They impact what we decide the course will be, what they’ll be learning.

She continues, highlighting now, the areas of potential growth and change:

We have a certain staffing structure but we’re revisiting that because the organization is growing and different types of roles need to be filled…an organization that’s committed to uh developing young leaders, right (laughs), is it our responsibility to teach them how to do quick book?…we are always kind of thinking about what is it that we’re doing, how do we tease those things out and of the of the justice work that we’re doing how do we make sure the young people have more and more opportunities to do that kind of work.

Leah offers a similar analysis of how CFS can improve upon their partnerships with young people, at the organizational level:

Adults really hold the huge majority of the decision-making power at the
Freedom School…All the staff positions are held by adults who uhm were never youth in the program. Our hope is someday Freedom Fellow alumni would be in all of these positions, but it’s just we haven’t been open long enough for that to be the case. The Board of Directors really holds the huge majority of the financial and just basic programming decision-making power and but, importantly I think, we do have the youth leadership board…one of the most important things the YLB brings is making staffing choices you know, helping us.

In spite of these tensions, the young people and adult allies involved in the Freedom Fellowship overwhelmingly find this program a powerful tool for social justice.

Saul, for one, see these tensions themselves as important learning opportunities:

Everyone who was involved in this experience should walk away having learned or gained something and you know through the activities or through the frustration of the challenges that arose…it should be about the knowledge that was gained and the wisdom that gained because this was something that was tried…if that happens then there’s beautiful learning coming out of this.

In his assessment, the learning is a collective learning, shared by individuals and the organization alike,

I think the freedom school is learning as they go, which is a good thing…So, I think that the responsibility for uhm not just the successes and the firsts that happen, but also some of the challenges that happen, I think it’s a shared responsibility. It’s a collective responsibility, everyone, and I appreciate that kind of space.

Alyse, too, is optimistic about the trajectory of the Freedom School:

The cool thing about this work is you can be creative and like reinvent…you can like really push the boundaries and I think it would be cool to see some of the radical stuff that young people who were a part of the Freedom School…take what they learned and go forth.

Gabriela, Hector, Daniel, Simeon and Maya all adamantly avow that they will remain involved in CFS beyond the Fellowship, remain involved in activism over the long haul.
For these young people, the transformative change they underwent in the Fellowship is powerful and meaningful enough to supercede the inconsistencies, tensions and divergences within the Freedom School model.
V. FREEDOM FELLOWS’ SOCIO-POLITICAL DEVELOPMENT

“When we break that [rules of conformity] is when we become truly liberated.” – Darrel, October 27, 2011

Darrel, like his peers in the Freedom Fellowship, believes that working for freedom and justice, working as an activist, means going against the grain of an oppressive social order. Developing the values, consciousness, skills and agency to “live in truth” lies at the heart of the Fellowship experience. In this chapter, we plunge into the profound, multidimensional impact of the Freedom Fellowship on nine young people’s socio-political development. Drawing on their unique personal narratives, we explore the myriad ways participation in liberatory education and social justice activism facilitates their development of critical consciousness and personal and collective efficacy. As such, this chapter is structured as a collection of short stories built around the theme of social justice youth activism. The overlap, divergences and contradictions within these individual stories create a complicated picture of how life circumstance, personal traits and experiences of power and powerlessness play out in the developmental trajectories of youth activists.

The nine Freedom Fellows we spoke with embody an array of identities. All nine are young people between the ages of 14-17. Seven of them attend Chicago Public Schools, some of which are charter schools; one Fellow attends private school and one attends parochial school. Five of them racially identify as African American, three of whom identify as female and two as male. Two of the Fellows racially identify as Latino
and two as Latina. Although we cannot say with any certainty how the Fellows self-identify in terms of socio-economic status, we do know that many of them attend under-resourced schools and live in neighborhoods traditionally classified as “poor” or “violent.” We also know that at least one Fellow identifies with the queer community and at least four Fellows practice a form of Christianity. We are unable to report whether any of these young people self-identify as differently abled.

Given their complex identities, Freedom Fellows understand the ways in which they and their communities, however defined, are boxed in by negative social perceptions. The Fellowship experience has opened their eyes to how racism, classism, sexism, homophobia and adultism constrain their lives and the lives of those around them. At the same time, their learning allows them to see beyond these artificial shells to the more palatable humanity within these stereotypical images. For many, this humanistic vision is the impetus for activism. In their stories, narrated below, we observe their complex socio-political understandings, witness their efforts at organizing for justice and imagine the world as they do, peaceful and free.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fellow</th>
<th>Identities</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hector</td>
<td>Latino of Mexican descent, 16 years old, attends charter school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michelle</td>
<td>African American female, 17 years old, attends public school, Christian religion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Darrel</td>
<td>African American male, 18 years old, attends public school</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gabriela</td>
<td>Latina of Mexican descent, 16 years old, attends parochial school, family practices Catholicism</td>
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<tr>
<td>Erika</td>
<td>Latina, 15 years old, attends public school</td>
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<tr>
<td>Simeon</td>
<td>African American male, 16 years old, attends private school</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lashona</td>
<td>African American female, 17 years old, attends public school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daniel</td>
<td>Latino of Mexican descent, 17 years old, attends public school, family practices Catholicism, identifies with Queer community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maya</td>
<td>African American female, 16 years old, attends public school, Christian religion</td>
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Hector

“Some people still can’t get it through their heads that we’re all equal. Those people are prejudiced, racist.” – Hector

Hector, a 16 year old Mexican immigrant living on the southwest side, believes in the innate rights and equality of all people. In fact, his motivation to be a Freedom Fellow stems from a deep commitment to a world in which “we’re all treated equal, not treated by race; we’re all happy and there’s no hate.” Describing himself as a “born” humanitarian, Hector actively seeks out ways to live his life in line with the calling to “know and teach others” about justice. He is not only a 2010 Freedom Fellow, but also a volunteer with the American Friends Service Committee program Peace Here, There, Everywhere, where he mentors other young people in a summer educational institute on social justice. As an activist in the Criminalization of Youth Leadership in Action cohort, Hector is particularly dedicated to undoing the racial prejudice black and brown youth face in the education and criminal systems. We first sat down with Hector one month post-summer institute to hear his story of becoming a freedom fighter. This story, told to us over six months during two in-depth interviews and numerous observations, is shared here as an example of one young man’s development as an agent of social change.

“Young people are always, not always, but mostly Hispanic and black people are like put in jail and prejudiced.” – Hector, August 23, 2010

Hector’s education during the Freedom Fellowship reflects a profound understanding of the very personal, specific and devastating ways oppression operates to constrain the lives of youth of color. In his nuanced telling of the school-to-prison
pipeline we hear an inter-sectional, situated analysis of institutionalized racism. He begins:

People want to target blacks and Hispanics [more] than white people. It’s really challenging because we found out that only 6% of people in prison are white and there are so many black, Hispanic and Latino people and most of them aren’t even there for violent crimes. Some people still can’t get it through their heads that we’re all equal. Those people are prejudiced, racist. They think that because one person is bad that everybody else is bad too. If one person is a drug addict, everybody in the whole neighborhood is a drug addict. Since there are some people, some black and Hispanic people who don’t care, people see them and think that other black and Hispanic people won’t study, that they’ll fall into drugs or gangs. It’s kind of like, I’m not sure how to say this, profiling. They don’t give us a chance. They don’t give us an opportunity to show ourselves. It’s like, “We know you’re going to fail and end up on the streets, so why even try.”

“Hector, you talked about how a lot of people are in prison for non-violent crimes. Can you say more about that?”, I ask.

Well, what I learned was that there’s the police and they know what drugs we’re into. When I say “we,” I mean mostly Hispanic people, minorities. They’re usually on crack and weed and that stuff. So, they make it like even if you have just a little of any of those drugs, you’re going to go to jail for a long time, 5 years minimum. For, you know, upper class people that buy cocaine and really expensive drugs, well if you have 10 lbs it’s fine… You can see from there that they target us because they already know us. They know what we’re into. Even just a little bit is going to get you in a lot of trouble. They have so much more chances of not getting in trouble, those in power. Since they have a lot of resources, they can get away with it. People who can afford really good lawyers, they have all this information that we don’t have and it gives them a better chance to get away with it.

“So, how is this connected to the education system?” I ask and to which Hector replies:

If you get [pushed] out of school, you’re not going to have a good job. You’re going to be on the streets. I mean where else are you going to make money without at least a high school degree? So, most people are just going to go to crime, drugs. So, it’s kind of like at school you get pushed out and you’re set in a trap. The police already know “Ok, he’s getting pushed out, so he’s going to end up resorting to crime and drugs. So, we’re going to make those sentences extreme. So, once you make a mistake, you’re thrown in jail. Without a proper education, where you going to end up? What are
you going to end up doing to live?

He tells me then how the trap set by school push-out reinforces the disenfranchisement young people of color experience in our society:

They don’t even get a chance to actually see us, they just, because of our ethnicity and race, they just target us because of that. It’s like if you’re getting in trouble so much, why bother going to school if you’re just going to be sent to detention? It kind of like makes you feel like you’re not important. That what you’re doing is not important, so why even do it.

And, then of how these internalized and institutionalized dynamics of racism have roots in the unique historical context of US slavery and Jim Crow laws. He recounts:

We learned some stuff that, you know, we’re not the only ones who are facing this. There are people that faced it back then and that the same prejudice and racism goes on for generations. We also looked at the Brown vs. Board of Education court case. The court case said that children were kept out of school because of racism…We learned about that they could make the schools un-segregated and that the children themselves could do it…We have someone to look up to because we know people who changed the system. It’s really good to have that kind of thing, to know it is possible and that you can do it.

“Are there any people from history that you learned about?,” I ask.

We looked at, of course, Rosa Parks. What I found really interesting was that like it was planned for her not to give up her seat. There was so much thought behind it. It just shows that with planning, and you know, if you really devote yourself to it, then it’s going to happen. They worked hard for it, you know. Then they won.

“Anyone else?,” I prompt.

Mumia, we learned that he’s still in jail right now. That he’s still in prison. That he’s really, really smart…That he’s not a bad person. That it’s just because what he stands up for. They saw him as someone who was getting powerful and who could make change. So, you know, they stopped him. Even right now he’s in prison and he still writes books. He hasn’t given up…He’s still making change.
In these histories, Hector finds the importance of strategy to civil rights organizing, and in these histories, he glimpses too the risks of questioning the status quo. *Hector,* I think to myself, *has been changed by his week in the intensive summer institute.* He *has new knowledge of the ways in which oppression operates and new insights into the realities of resistance movements.* As I’m thinking this he tells me how he sees himself in relation to these storied activists,

> It feels like really good to be here making some small change, like our awareness day. You are the change. What you’re doing is going to help other people in the future. It’s just this good feeling that you get. It just makes you a different person. It makes you see things differently.

“It’s definitely a life-changing experience,” he confirms.

At CFS, Hector experiences agency, self-fulfillment. This experience stands in sharp contrast to the ways in which he is excluded, vilified and made invisible in other social context. School push-out, he explains is just one example of a larger system of 

**adultism:**

> Youth are always, you know, looked at bad. We’re always told that adults come first…Well, adults just see youth as rebellious or wild. They see us as kids that are intentionally bad. A few weeks ago, I was coming here and I stopped by a Walgreen’s around here. I always carry my book bag with me. I see people with suits and briefcases coming in and they go by. The guard just stops me. I get it. But, why are you stopping [me]? Just because I’m a teen I’m going to steal something? It just kind of shows how people see us. I’m in jeans and a shirt and get searched. People come in with a business suit and tie and they don’t get searched. They think I’m going to do something, but if you’re all business dressed, then you won’t.

Hector even sees this inequality between young people and adults within access to social justice work. He laments:

> When I got into freedom school, I found out because I was volunteering. I had to go through a lot to find this out. We don’t have a lot of information. They [adults] get their information first. It’s like how did I not hear of this? It’s like somebody that’s really into peace work and freedom, they could
miss out on this opportunity because they haven’t heard about it. Their information comes first.

“So, adults have more access to information,” I state.

“They have more resources cause I know that U-Media at the library is the only one. There’s not that many places for us kids. Everything else is for adults,” he replies, emphatically. “There’s not a lot of places for kids to go to get information and resources,” I parrot back. “Yeah, or even just places to chill or something. It’s like if you don’t have anywhere to go, you’re going to end up, not necessarily…,” his voice trails off, a mingling of dismay and anger, I think.

Perhaps he notices my reaction, notices that I too feel disheartened by the bad rap imposed upon young people. He smiles then and adds with an upbeat tone,

You have to understand that there are a lot of people out to get you, but there’s also a lot of good people. You can’t always think that the whole world’s against you. You have to realize that there’s somebody out there that could help you.

And I do; I realize this and I feel hope, pride and relief. I reply:

We’ve been talking a lot about a social problem, or multiple social problems, really. Things that really reflect or create injustice. So, I want to know, when you think about justice, when you think about a just world, how do you picture that world being? What is your vision?

His answer seems to come with ease. He tells me:

Equality and that we’re all treated equal, not treated by race. That we’re all happy and there’s no hate, pretty much. Pretty much the chances you’re given, there’s not any prejudice or racism. One thing I really like that our coordinator said is that there are no races, like black, white, Latino or whatever, just a human race. So, we should learn to accept that.
I continue, “When you think about that world, what it would look like if everyone was treated equally and had equal opportunities, what do you think your role is in creating a world like that?” To which Hector responds,

Well, first it would be to inform people because I know a few years ago before I got involved in doing all this peace work, I didn’t even know all this stuff, like that we’re set up to fail. First, we want to start by telling people things that they don’t know. Then we would want to start making change. You would do something that would show that you’re really fighting for what you believe in… in our group we want to recruit other people. So it’s you kind of look for them, but they’ll kind of find you too when you give off the energy that you want to change society. You’ll meet people that also are interested in that same thing. I mean, it’s probably going to be hard right now because we’re barely starting. We’re going to work hard to recruit more people, but it’s worth it.

*Hmm, I think, he’s not off-base, tying education to activism to alliance-building. That seems consistent and yet I can’t help but feel this is somewhat incomplete, vague. A topic for further discussion, perhaps…*

You really need to have courage, willingness to stand up. You need to be educated about what’s going on, of course. But, also have that kind of not how do I say inside of you you know what’s wrong and what’s right. Knowing what’s the correct thing to happen…you like never need to give up. You have to continue and learn from the mistakes that you’ve made and try to improve on that and now to try to take the action much more further.

– Hector, further discussion, January 21, 2011.

We met again with Hector six-months after the CFS summer institute. In this second interview we revisit Hector’s development as an activist, probing for evidence of deeper and more nuanced socio-political understandings and sustained social justice commitments. Initiating our conversation amidst a series of karate kias from the dojo below, Cristina asks Hector to “describe how your group developed an action plan.” Hector begins by painting us a picture of the group’s decision-making:

We originally started with thinking of having an awareness day and just
making like kind of like in a public place…But since we had more meetings we kind of figured out it would be a little difficult and we didn’t think it would reach enough people. So, since we are doing school-to-prison pipeline we decided to kind of make it kind of like a school assembly sort of thing. And we went beyond that too. Every meeting we had more and more ideas of like how to improve it, how to get more people to know about what we’re doing and so we not only have the kind of assembly sort of thing, we have the awareness days on three different days… And we also have uhmm we’re trying to establish a peer jury in the school, so like we want to help as much as possible.

“So how did you all as a group decide on that you were going to do the awareness day and peer jury instead of something else?,” I ask. The decision, as Hector explains it, is an effort to foster young people’s agency within the educational setting:

Well we originally since the beginning wanted to have some sort of way to reach out to the youth and tell them what’s going on. Awareness Day was pretty much the first thing that came up. The more and more we got into it the more we thought well it would be better, best if we added more ways for the students to have their voices heard. We had some different ideas and then we came to peer jury and we thought that would be best.

*Their approach is consistent with the Freedom School’s commitment to youth ownership and participation in decision-making,* I’m thinking when Cristina chimes in, “You mention a peer jury. How is that working?” To which Hector elaborates,

We’re going to Gage Park and that’s where we have the Awareness Action Day and we’re also establishing a peer jury there. It [the assembly] will be right after school so the students can go there and we will tell them all the information like everything we learned about our topic. We’re also talking with the Director of Gage Park to establish a peer jury. What a peer jury is like it’s made up from the students so like we all have a voice and we get to choose what like actions were wrong or right and we get to choose the consequences for them. And considering Gage Park has some Zero Tolerance rules and some really harsh punishments, we thought that establishing a peer jury would be something very beneficial for the school.
Wanting to know more about how a peer jury will interrupt the school-to-prison pipeline,

Cristina inquires, “So right now who takes care of what’s going to happen to them
[students]?” Hector explains,

Well, pretty much since they have it’s just kind of like in the book since it’s like Zero Tolerance you know like really harsh punishment. Just kind of like if you did this there’s no way of getting around it you’re going to serve this punishment this way. You know we think some of this stuff is just really unfair or it wasn’t really thought out so for like that kind of stuff we think that we would have a better kind of way to judge it. With the peer jury they get to have a voice and they get to you know say “Stop, we’re being treated unfairly. We’re doing something about it.”

Cristina probes further, asking Hector to articulate the theory underlying this action. “So how is it addressing the root cause of a social problem?,” she asks. Hector sits quietly for a moment, unclear about her question. “I’m sorry?,” he replies quizzically. “How is it addressing the root cause of a social problem?,” she repeats, giving pause to his further confusion. I hesitate briefly, leaving space for Cristina to rephrase or clarify, then add:

Your group is trying to address a particular oppression that young people are not treated right in schools sometimes and when young people aren’t treated right in schools they often ended up dropping out or getting pushed out or getting kicked out and then end up getting caught up in the criminal justice system or the juvenile justice system. So that’s sort of the social problem that your group was trying to address, right?

“Uh huh,” he nods. I continue on, “And uhm what Cristina is asking is uhm how does the action that you’re doing try to address that problem? Like how do you see it as trying to like fix the problem?” His face shows new clarity as he breaks down how this action disrupts the school-to-prison pipeline:

Well since well we’re taking it one step at a time. Since a lot of people a lot of the students like at the beginning I wasn’t aware of some of the stuff that was happening either. And I think that to inform them is like the first step and the best way to get to them because if they don’t know what’s going on how can they be able to stop it. Through not only the information but like even small steps like peer jury like it will hopefully inspire other people to
continue to do this, so like we pass this on and it keeps on passing.

Ok, I’m thinking, he’s talking about consciousness-raising here as a first step to creating social change. And base-building, bringing new people into the movement. But what of other action?, I wonder to myself. The answer emerges later, as we re-visit the topic of adultism in our interview. Hector waxes philosophically,

I know that I’ve experienced adultism. I know it’s happening where people adults treat me bad like I’m nothing. It happens at stores or on the bus or anything. If they mouth off to me I’ll tell them “You’re an adult. You should know better. I’m not someone to be treating with disrespect.”

“In general how do you find people react when you say that and you kind of call them on their behavior?,” I ask.

A few times like they’re like “What!,” like kind of shocked like they didn’t think I’d talk back to them or uhm I kind of feel like you know it kind of got to them, but sometimes they just like completely ignore it and I feel frustrated and mad, but I just kind of like I don’t know like after the feeling goes by I try to take a deep breath and you know count down.

Cristina probes further, “So like besides speaking your mind and trying to stop what’s going on, what other actions have you taken in situations like that?”

I know uh one time, actually not that far back, I was with my friend, she’s African American, black, there was this lady at the store who was treating her really bad. She had a really bad attitude. We didn’t think much about it at first but it continued. We actually talked to the manager and told her that she was being treated very disrespectfully and that she should look into it.

Ok, so being an activist, to Hector, means speaking out against unfair treatment and also supporting others in their attempts to speak truth to power, I gather. Cristina follows up,

“So, what has motivated you to do these things?” Hector, again:

Well pretty much besides just the feeling of knowing what’s right and knowing what people go through ‘cuz I have many friends that experience the same things and all types of pressure and knowing that it’s out there
and it’s strong just kind of makes me wanna’ be the change…I wanna’ like do more, not just one thing ‘cuz I know there was another group about sexism. I’m pretty sure that there we could make more groups about anything we find as a sort of oppression.

At this I pipe up, “So, you mentioned that you’re interested in this issue and you’re going to keep on with this group at least for a while longer, but that you’re interested in just getting involved in fighting oppression in other ways too. Do you have any ideas about how you might do that or other opportunities or things you want to try?” Social justice commitment strongly intact, Hector concludes,

Well, I’m definitely going to stay at Freedom School and you know help establish other programs or I mean I have no idea what I can do but with the whole organization we can definitely make some things happen… it’s one of the best experiences that like I’ve really ever had ‘cuz I feel like really proud that we’re actually making change. And not only that we’re going to stop after the program but we’re going to continue doing this. We’re going to continue this sort of work where we fight for what’s right and fight against oppression. So, I mean I’m really proud that not only I but the other youth, we learned so much and we’ve become really close and we know what’s right and what’s wrong. We grew to make changes and actions.

“That’s beautiful,” I say as our interview wraps up. “Did I answer everything?,” he asks.

“Yeah, you did a great job. Thank you, Hector.”
Michelle

In the beginning, I was just kind of like, “Ok, I’m here for myself. I’m gonna’ get what I need to get done and move on through.” But being here, no, it’s not like that. You’re not here by yourself. You got to work with other people, work in groups, get to know them. Everybody, it’s a team effort. – Michelle, October 19, 2010

Michelle is a driven 17-year-old from the West side. She works part-time in the service industry and is a Posse scholar, a highly competitive college access program for urban students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Her motivation to make a positive impact on the world stems from her deep spiritual conviction and religious practice. As a Christian, she believes that “with God anything is possible. You can just get to where you want to be and make happen what you want to happen as long as it’s right and honest.”

Michelle lives by these words, lives by faith in a higher power, believes in the necessity of righteousness. These fundamental spiritual principles, along with inspiring historical figures such as Sojourner Truth and Frederick Douglas, drew Michelle to the activism opportunities inherent in the Freedom Fellowship. Like the African American leaders before her, Michelle intends to use her strengths to fight for what she believes in and change the world for the better. In this interview, Michelle explains to Genesis and I how she has come to understand oppression and cultivate a sincere resolve to fight for justice.

We begin our interview talking about how Michelle came to be a Freedom Fellow and how she first experienced the Chicago Freedom School. She tells us, early on, that being accepted as “yourself fully, however you want to be fully,” is critical to her growth as an activist. Curious, I ask, “What is happening here in this space that really lets you be yourself?” Michelle attributes this validation to the socio-political learning and anti-oppressive framework:
Well, for one, with the week we being here we learned about sexism and adultism and like different things and like the quote-unquote the norm, ya’ know. So, like, a lot of people outside of the Freedom School, they don’t know all those things. They don’t know that stereotypes are really major and that the media really has a ya’ know strong effect. So, since they don’t know that you know that’s why they not so quick to accept or so quick to just accept you for who you are or just to understand where you’re coming from when you doing things or when you saying stuff. So, I think that since people and adults and stuff in the Freedom School, since we understand the difference and we know, we’re able to accept people better.

“Do you have an example from your own experience of like how someone of like a stereotype that’s affected you?,” I ask. Michelle is quick to respond:

Ok, like at home, my aunt, if I like put on something or something I might wear, she’ll say, “Whoa, why are you wearing that? Young ladies are supposed to wear dresses or skirts and are supposed to be classy all the time. You don’t see me wearing a lot of pants…” I was just like ok, ya’ know, you can wear skirts and dresses every now and then, but if you don’t want to, you don’t have to. You may not feel comfortable in a skirt or a dress. Some people may not want to show they legs or that’s just not something that’s ya’ know a part of them. At the freedom school you can wear what you want to wear. They’re not looking at you like “why does she always wear pants” or “that’s not what a girl should do.”

*Gender norms are restrictive*, I write in my notes.

Genesis chimes in then, asking Michelle more broadly for her personal definition of oppression. Michelle defines it thus:

Oppression, it’s basically like being hindered by something that somebody else thinks is like bad and you’re like being like pressured about it because it’s what you do, but it’s like people are like uhm, how do you say it, it’s like the other person is making you feel bad or like kind of like pressuring you because they think it’s wrong. But you think it’s right. It’s like they got all this negative energy and stuff going at you.

*Oppression is experienced as pressure, being held down, negativity*, note Genesis and I, before requesting an example. “Sexual harassment,” Michelle offers, tentatively, “is that a form of oppression?” “What do you think?” I counter. “I think yeah,” Michelle begins,
you being pressured and somebody hindering you and they forcing they
self on you and stuff like that. So, sexual harassment like especially like
how men degrade women all the time in videos…sexual harassment isn’t
just if a man just grabs you and probably like rapes you and something; it’s
verbally, mentally, everything. It’s everything.

She pauses, then, exasperated and Genesis asks if there’s another example she’d like to
share. Michelle nods. “The media,” she says flatly, elaborating, “it makes young girls feel
like they just have to be this picture-perfect and like a lot of girls sometimes feel
oppressed by that because it’s like no matter how hard you try, you’ll never fit the
picture-perfect.” *Media as a powerful tool of conformity*, I reflect.

Next Genesis asks, “Thinking about the forms of oppression you just mentioned,
uhm, what do you think are some of the root causes?” For Michelle, it boils down to
power and money:

With uhm the media and stuff like that I just think the root cause of that is
just like just like evil, power, ya’ know. I guess money, it’s a money-maker
to do stuff like that…If you see something just so perfect, you gonna’ want
to buy it.

She pauses a moment, then adds, “Ya’ know, it’s like it messes with your mind and stuff
like that. That’s why they like in the Freedom School you learn the difference, you learn
like behind-the-scene.” As for other root causes of sexism, Michelle references crime and
poverty:

A lot of times when you going through poverty and stuff you can kind of
lose your mind too because you have no money and stuff. So people will
do crazy stuff for money or you just lose it. So, you might see a girl or
something and you grab her and you rape her. Like your mind just be off,
ya’ know. They think about the crime, but they not thinking about the end
result of what they doing and how it can like hurt somebody.

*I’m a bit perplexed, unsure of how to interpret her analysis*; I ask for feedback:

Ok, so, I’m just going to summarize what I hear and tell me if I have it
right. So, poverty in this example it’s related to like sexual violence because you’re saying you see it like poverty makes you kind of go out of your mind and act in ways that you wouldn’t necessarily act like that otherwise. But, it’s like if you’re really broke then it affects how you feel and how you’re going to act and so you might become violent and sexually harass or rape a woman.

“It does. Right,” she confirms. As I’m pondering this explanation [Oppression theory?]

Michelle adds that she sees the media, money and power as deeply intertwined:

The media is a big huge money maker...Like if you got low self-esteem and stuff like that, you might feel like your skin isn’t together and it’s like “Ok, we’ve got something to fix that. You can be blemish free, picture-perfect.” They’re going to exploit that in the media. If you’ve got short hair and you want your hair to be long, well they’ve got all this fine, silky weave and perfect stuff you can get, ya’ know. And it’s like nothing is perfect. There’s defaults in all of this. Nothing lasts forever. So, it’s just about money and power. They don’t care about you know the real things.

And race too, she confirms when asked:

In the media you always see like mostly like it’s gonna’ be a pretty white girl with long hair and blue eyes and stuff like that, but because black people, our original race, we don’t have nice long silky hair…So, you’re not going to see them flashing dark-skinned girls a lot across the screen, saying “This is beautiful” because it’s put out there like it isn’t a lot.

She’s describing how standards of beauty reflect and reinforce white privilege, I observe.

For Michelle, realizing the destructive maneuverings of the media is transformative:

[Before] You didn’t know that they’re Photo-shopping and doing all that stuff in the media. If you don’t know it that really stood out a lot. You’re watching this stuff everyday. I’m not gonna’ lie, I did think “Oh, people are really like this and their skin really is ya’ know smooth and stuff.” But, once I found out the history of it and that this is what the media is doing, this is the real thing…I look at all that stuff totally different.

Attempting to unearth Michelle’s first-hand experience of sexism, Genesis chimes in “Could you maybe tell us about a form of oppression that you could relate to in your own life?” Michelle candidly explains how her family reinforces traditional social norms:
I’m always feeling oppressed about something because your family they they really can oppress you…she’s [grandma] all into like you have to wear a dress or you have to wear a skirt when you go to church…I’m like dang, you know, if I’m going to church, I’m going for myself. I’m gonna’ get whatever I’m gonna’ get from God. At the end of the day, it’s not gonna’ matter what I got on because that really don’t matter.

She sounds righteously indignant at the implication that even her religious practice must conform to gender norms, I think before asking, “Why do you think your grandma and, your aunt it sounds like, have these ideas about what should be normal for a young woman?” At this, Michelle hones in on the ways in which gendered assumptions are passed on over time:

Maybe because of their upbringing and maybe because they’re dumb-founded to actually know the stuff we know about, stereotypes and how the media paints this picture of how you should be and certain things that women should do. They don’t know about outside the box that’s why they’re so strong to fit in it. Nobody probably talked to them and gave them a different side of it of like how we were taught here at the Freedom School.

She adds,

I think if you know both both sides to it, like the behind the scenes and then what’s going on in front of you, I think you would look at it totally different and take a different approach. It’s a new generation; now is different. They still be stuck in their time zone.

I smile at this last statement, remember how, in my own upbringing, I often felt constrained by the idiosyncrasies of tradition.

Flipping the script, Genesis asks, “Do you feel you have your own oppressive behaviors?” Michelle wants clarification, “Uhm, like do I feel like I feed into that? Ok, explain what you saying.” Genesis complies, “Like, uhm, during the LIA week one of the things was ‘do not oppress others.’ So, do you feel like in a way you…” “Oppress others?,” Michelle cuts in. “Ok, before I came, yeah,” she admits, explaining, “Before I
came to that week, I used to look at other people differently and be like ‘Why is she like that? That’s not the normal way’ or this or that. But now I don’t do that.” Intrigued about this change in her behavior I ask for a specific example. Michelle shares this story about how the Freedom School helped her understand heterosexism and become an ally to people who identify as queer or gender non-conforming:

Ok, well, I be on the train a lot and on the train you see a lot of different stuff. One day I was just sitting there with my friends or whatever and this like guy came back and he be he had a lot of feminine ways and stuff like that. So, all I could think, my first thought was like “Look at him. Don’t he look gay? Why he got that on? Why do he even walk that way?” And I was just saying all this different stuff. So like the week we came here and we was learning all this different stuff, I thought back on that moment and I’m like “Well, maybe he had a condition. Maybe there’s a reason why he’s like that. It probably didn’t necessarily mean he’s gay and if it he is, so what.” You know, that’s just how he is, but I don’t think it makes him less of a person or bad because he acts that way or because he was gay.

I follow-up, “Now, having been in the Freedom School, would you do it differently if you were in that situation again?” “Yeah, of course,” she begins,

maybe now a thought like that wouldn’t even cross my mind. Like if I see him, I wouldn’t even think like to say nothing bad or anything or even think like that because I know what I’m doing. I’m oppressing somebody and I always try to like do right and go about things in the right way.

*Personal transformation through lib ed*, I jot as Michelle continues:

I don’t just uhm think that you should only be this way or only be that way. I think it’s ok to be outside of the box and you know have your own insight into whatever you feel. Like now I don’t just think straight, “This is how you gotta’ be.” No, I’m open to everything now. It’s just changed me overall. When you just like got the norm stuck in your head, it kind of makes you to be a negative person. And now, it’s just like I’m more pleasant towards things. It’s not so much negativity…I just I feel more calm now.

*Change in thinking and behavior*, I note, prompting Michelle for another example:

I went skating like Saturday and ok, these people this time, they actually were gay, but when I saw them, I had no kind of negativity…when a
couple of my friends was saying like “look at them” and stuff like that, I kind of was able to tell them, “So what? You know, that’s who they are or whatever. You don’t know their situation or why they are the way they are, so don’t say stuff. If that was you, you’d want somebody to accept you for whatever it is you do. So, don’t do that to them.”

Michelle has become an ally, willing to speak up and confront others about oppression.

This is power, agency, I reflect. We talk a bit more about how the Freedom Fellowship helps young people step out of normalized roles, step into new identities.

Then we explore how Michelle envisions justice; she tells us:

A just world would be perfect because nobody is hurting anybody for how they look or for what they’re wearing or anything. Everybody is just you know accept everybody for who they are and you know everybody is just I guess be happy because there’s no negativity and nobody’s talking about you and criticizing you and stuff. So, it would be like a little Heaven. You would have less oppression, probably no oppression actually. More happiness, more uhm just able to accept what you’re doing as far as life better…a peace within yourself, to be content and not have to worry about if I do this somebody gonna’ look at me bad or strange or something. 

Justice = acceptance = freedom from harm = heaven, I jot. “Ok, so, Michelle, what do you think your role is in creating this more just world?,” I ask. To which she declares:

I’m not going to try to create a perfect world because I don’t feel like it could ever happen. Uhm, but my role would be just changing one, ok I’m not even going to say change, but just to do something positive throughout the world and maybe to just like now try to educate people on sexism and oppression and…let them know like this is really what’s going on. Then maybe like me helping spread that more people will come to the realization of it and then little by little you know some change could happen.

This idea of doing something positive as an alternative to injustice reminds me of

constructive non-cooperation, I think, silently, as Genesis asks, “So, who are your allies when you create a just world?” Michelle returns then to her spiritual roots,

God. People here at the Freedom School and just people who just understand the difference. And then, myself. Sometimes you might not have nobody but yourself…Even when you don’t have nobody, no friends, no
family or nothing, you always got God there with you to protect or to help you do anything.

*Her conviction in a just and righteous world is palpable,* I think to myself as we conclude our interview.
Darrel

“I would love to be the one to graduate from Gage Park and uhm become a success and give back.” – Darrel, October 27, 2011

Darrel, a Senior at a south-side Chicago Public high school, describes himself as “connected,” “committed,” and “self-confident.” Connected, as he sees it, to his peers struggling in school, his allies in school reform work and, in a larger sense, to all of humanity. Committed, to reversing the trends of high rates of school push out, low rates of graduation and high rates of incarceration for youth of color. Confident, in his skills, belief system and ability to make a difference in the lives of others. These traits are evidenced in his motivation to be a Fellow in the Criminalization of Youth project, as well as his involvement in Voices of Youth in Chicago Education (VOYCE), a youth organizing collaborative for educational reform. Julius and I spoke with Darrel in October, three months into the 2010 Freedom Fellowship project. Here is what he had to tell us about becoming a social justice activist.

“So what appealed to you about this program?” I begin.

I was very interested in this program because it brought out a lot of things that I was very aware of and I uhm a lot of things that I wanted to interact with or get involved with rather. Meeting new people, that’s always interesting, so I was already you know ready for that. New experiences. That’s about it,

Darrel replies. Later, however, he tells me his motivation was “really personal,” adding

I attend Gage Park. Gage Park is not a good school within the CPS system. The four years I’ve been at Gage Park, I’ve realized that something is wrong at Gage Park. When Saul introduced me to this group, to this organization uhm it gave me the knowledge you know and I applied all those [ideas] into Gage Park. So, I was able to understand a lot of things and a lot of things flowed and a lot of things moved, you know.
I probe further, asking for explanation of what is wrong at his school and why he’s so dedicated to rectify this wrong. His answer:

At Gage Park, I’ve seen the school, you know the title, there’s a lot comes along with a title. You know, Gage Park, the so and so. Gage Park the pilot school, Gage Park the mentally messed up school. And I’ve seen that title mentally mess up people because I’ve seen people go to Gage Park the sweetest people get so corrupt by the school, not necessarily the people, the school in general. They’re scared to change the title that comes along with Gage Park. You know, the close friends, I’ve seen people lose their lives and at school, I’ve seen them physically and mentally lose it. That’s as personal as it gets.

He continues, movingly declaring:

The, the people in Gage Park is basically the reason why I’m so invested in Gage Park. Because I’ve seen, like I said, the most beautiful people in Gage Park. I didn’t so much fall in love with the school, but I fell in love with the people at the school which is why I never left. You know, I graduated grammar school with the best resume. I could’ve gotten accepted to any high school in Chicago, but I went to Gage Park and uhmm and I could’ve left but the people in Gage Park, you know the love that was given to me and the love that I gave back to Gage Park is the reason I stayed. It’s the reason that I’ve been there for four years. The people in general, like the people that are smart, but life is taking them down, you know and it’s just it’s just that one specific thing, the beautiful minded people that have in reality a life being held back.

I reflect,

It’s interesting to hear you say that the school is often described as a really violent place, but that the thing that most attracts you to it is the love that you feel there. Most of the time if you think of something as violent, it’s hard to also think of it as loving, but you’re saying your school’s both of those things.

To which Darrel emphatically replies,

See that’s how diverse Gage Park is. Gage Park is like an M & M basically. Ok, on the outside of the M & M you have the color. Inside you have the chocolate or whatever’s in that M & M. That’s how it is at Gage Park. The outside is the stereotypes. The inside is the real flavor.
So, the problem is, he explains, “that schools intentionally kick children out; that prisons are more important than uhm schools…; that kids are just wrote off as dumb.”

And I think to myself, *This young man has a deep love and respect for his community that stands in sharp contrast to dominant stereotypes of and behaviors toward young people of color. He sees individuals in relation to the systems constraining their lives. His love is like Che’s* [reference to Che Ernesto Guavara]. I ask, “When you think about the education system and how that’s related to the criminal justice system in your opinion like what are the problems? Why are those two things so connected?” Darrel schools us then on the business of oppression:

The two things are so connected because a lot of people are so caught up in believing this bull from businesses. They don’t really consider the uhm the people that they’re affecting. The people is the key word in that statement. Oppression is something that you know we go through everyday, especially me as a minority you know. Like I said before, uhm, it’s business. School is unfortunately a business; it’s above education now, you know. It’s sad that we live in this time period because education is a business. And because these people in power became, I mean these people in power are able to manipulate people and dictate people…We all need to break that trend that we have to you know abide by these rules you know. Or abide by what that person says or what that person does. When we break that is when we become truly liberated.

*I’m struggling now to process all he’s saying, but my gut reaction is that it sounds like he offering a critique of education as reinforcing social hierarchies based on race and class. I’m still not clear though: how does he connect school failure to criminalization of youth? I ask then about root causes, thinking perhaps his answer will shed more light on the problem analysis. In response, he talks of the long-engrained history of racial dominance and exploitation in the US:*

Willie Lynch was a slave owner back in the day who spoke to other slave owners and told them how to control their slaves and his methods have
carried from generation to generation you know. Willie Lynch had an idea
to put a lock on the human mind and hide the key within your own
possession and a lot of people still don’t recognize that they have a lock on
their mind so they I mean they’re completely not aware of the key that un-
locks their mind is education, you know. And like I said his ideas have
carried from generation to generation you know. These people have locks
on these other peoples’ minds...It happens in mostly minority neighbor-
hoods and minority communities because we’re easier to get to, we’re
easier to manipulate because people have applied these you know stereo-
types and statistics to us for generations. It has become first nature, so it’s
like people live their lives based on you know what someone else thinks.

*Ok, I think, we’re getting closer.* I try again, “So, this idea of uhmm like the human minds
being on lock down, how do you see that being related to the prison system being more
important than the school system?” Darrel elaborates:

Because uhmm in the prison system you have complete control over a human
being. In the education system you basically you know I mean you have
control over what a person learns in the education system, but not as much
control as you have over them in the prison system. It’s just a place that’s
like a testing ground, it’s a lab where we can like work on these individuals
because we can hold you in this jail for five years and release you back into
society. We did this to you this five years in this prison and we can dictate
how you live in this society.

He tells us then that there’s three types of people: “The people who can’t see the
problem because they’re like so stuck between the stereotypes and the statistics that they
don’t know how to live their own life. You know, they don’t know what makes them
happy.” The people who “won’t change;” they see the problem, but won’t do anything
about it. The won’t people “have no ability you know to stand up.” The won’t people, in
Darrel’s assessment, are driven by fear. Finally, he says, “you have the people who stand
up for what they believe in and go against [oppression]. Those people are very strong
minded...there are a very select amount of people that will stand up for what they believe
in.” I reflect silently, *He’s talking about the impact of oppressive systems on people’s*
psychology and behavior. He understands oppression as both internalized and institutionalized.

I jot this in my notes, as Julius asks, “Did you learn of any examples of people from history who fought for justice? People who inspire you?” Darrel replies, nonchalantly, “Black leaders. The Black Panthers before they went corrupt; MLK, Malcolm X, Fred Hampton. There’s a lot more, you know, Huey Newton. There’s a bunch.” He explains that these people stand out to him because of “the affect they had with the justice system.” We shift gears then, at my lead, and return to the idea that people experience and react to oppression in different ways. I ask, “Do you think that there’s a difference between how you experience oppression and how another person experiences it?” “Definitely,” Darrel answers unequivocally, then adds,

No two people are the same in life. My situation is clearly you know different from your situation. My experience is clearly different from your situation. That goes beyond the immediate things you think about. Physically, mentally, emotionally, spiritually, we’re different you know in all kinds of ways. But that shouldn’t mean that we look at each other any different from being a human being.

I ask, “Do you feel like that there’s things that you also do to contribute to oppression?” To which Darrel replies flatly, “No, I don’t contribute to oppression.” I try again, attempting to uncover any examples of social privilege hidden within Darrel’s life experiences. Using myself as an example, I share,

I’m a white person and so I try actively not to be racist. That’s my personal decision. I always try to like be conscious of how I’m acting and not to have stereotypes about people. I try to check myself or be open to making mistakes. But, I also know that at same time just because of the fact that I am white that I benefit from a system from all the systems in society that are set up to help white people more than they help people of color. So even though like as an individual I try to live my life in a way that’s anti-racist, I still have privilege. I still have racial privilege. And so that’s why
I was asking that question, like is there a place in your life where you know something is wrong and you’re trying to work against it, but like you also know that there’s ways in which you’re benefiting because of it?

Darrel stands steadfast in his conviction,

I don’t think that there’s a benefit from oppression at all. There’s no benefit from oppression, regardless of how you, you know, sugar coat something, if something’s wrong, it’s wrong. There’s no way you can say that you know in any situation that it can be right or that’s right because of this, this one little thing. But ultimately it’s a horrible situation. I just don’t see any good in being oppressed or you know the oppressors or the oppressed.

I find myself wondering, at first, whether his adamant denial of privilege might stem from a lack of knowledge about other forms of oppression. But this doesn’t seem to fit with the whole of who he is. Perhaps, in reality, he genuinely sees oppression and its corollary in social privilege as fundamental harmful to all people and communities? I ask, “Do you think oppression is harmful to people who are in the oppressor category as well?” He says in no uncertain terms, “Their minds are being entrapped.”

So, we’re different people, with different experiences, but we’re all harmed by oppression, trapped in by it in various ways. The basis of alliance-building?, I wonder. Julius must be wondering something similar because he asks then: “What is your role in teaching other people the things that you’ve learned about oppression?” This time Darrel talks at length, detailing the multiple ways in which he contributes to a more just society:

My way of teaching is being as open and truthful as possible you know. Being smooth, real cool about it. I mean that’s just me as a person, real smooth and cool. And uhm make sure you know that we are able to couple opinions with facts. That’s why I was coming to this organization, coupling opinions with facts…We need a lot more leaders in this generation because we’re the youth right now and we’re very powerful because we are the the, ah I forgot the slogan for this generation, it’s like we’re the “fearless generation” and we’re basically ready for anything. The people like me who are ready to step up and be leaders, positive leaders, you know can influence a lot more, can influence you know a lot of people. It’s like you
know that’s what we need, leaders, the right kind of leaders.

I’m curious. “So, let me ask you about that the concept of the right kind of leaders because we have leaders now, right? We have some leaders today. But, what is the right kind of leaders?,” I inquire. Darrel spells it out for us then, “The right kind of leaders will consider the world as a whole versus singling things out you know, opens things up versus keeping things real boxed in. Yeah, they just consider everything before pursuing one thing.” Continuing on this train of thought, I ask, “So, uhm, more specifically, when you think of yourself as a leader in creating this world, what do you think your role is going to be? Where are you going to plug in?” Darrel smiles, declaring, “My role is bringing the crowds together. Being a bridge for these two different uh generations, characters, you know, personalities, just every different crowd you can think of.”

This I believe, absolutely. Julius chimes in, readying our interview to come to a close, “Is there anything else you want to tell us about your experience as a Freedom Fellow?”

Just be on the look out for me, basically. This is my life and I’ve been living it for a while, you know. Standing up for what I believe in, you know. I’m thankful that I live my life the way that I live my life. When I seen something and I wanted it, I got it, you know. I fall forward you know. Nobody, no one taught me to do that you know but myself. It was like I taught myself to be a human being. I taught myself how I want to act and what makes me happy.

He says this last part proudly, and then, more subdued, he asks something of us, “Just keep me in your mind and in your prayers.” I will, I know. I don’t know how I couldn’t.
Gabriela

*I want to be more of myself to everybody and I don’t want to hide who I am. Like I am right now. Wearing what I want to wear. Not taking anybody’s criticism. Saying that I’m pretty the way that I am.* – Gabriela, on activism

Gabriela wears all black, funky tights, heavy eye makeup. Her appearance is her trademark, a reflection of her beliefs about self-expression, her personal resistance to normative gender expectations, her outright denial of sexual stereotypes. Gabriela is 16. She is the daughter of Mexican immigrants and the only Freedom Fellow to attend parochial school. In her look, many people might see the modern epitome of the “punk,” the young social non-conformer. In her attitude, she defies even this categorization. She is unconventional, yes, an outsider in some respects, political, anti-authoritarian, a proponent of the DIY mentality. At the same time, Gabriela is genuinely sweet. She is kind, loving, smart, creative and, by no means, “hard-edged.” She’s unafraid of confrontation, and yet, not aggressive in her demeanor or interactions with others. She is authentically, self-assuredly unique. These traits and principles we gleaned in the dynamic stories she shared with us during two in-depth interviews. We begin here with Gabriela’s initial interview, conducted just weeks after the start of the 2010 Fellowship year.

“A just world? Like everybody wearing what they would like to wear and not being ashamed of it. Just being who they’d like to be.” – Gabriela’s Vision, August 18, 2010

“Gabriela,” Cristina begins, “what first interested you in the Freedom Fellowship?”

What interested me about this job is that I’d never even heard that, I’d never even knew that there was activism training in this state. I’ve only seen it in probably movies or anything like that. I don’t see a lot, many activists right
now. They’re not really doing anything.

“Uh hmm,” I say encouragingly and she continues,

Well, like the whole idea that I’d be kind of trying to help stop sexism and I would be learning more on how really the media is, instead of trying to push it away.

This sounds familiar, I think to myself, this idea that activism isn’t accessible to young people. Hector comes to mind and Daniel as well, their experiences of alienation and tokenism within social justice work ringing in my ears. Cristina chimes in then, “Like what was interesting about it beside just the trainings and learning about sexism?”

Gabriela replies:

Well, what drew me here is that um they don’t only help in one thing. They help in a bunch of things and they try to fix it. They promote wellness and I didn’t even know that they did that. And also the walkouts that they did for the schools. That really drew me into it, that it was open to everyone and anyone who is willing to fight for what they believe is good.

CFS is open to everyone, I ponder this idea, juxtaposing it with what I know about the organization’s priorities and service constraints. But that’s the feeling she has, anyhow, if not the absolute reality of a small non-profit program, and it’s consistent with other young people’s perceptions. Intrigued, I ask, “So, um, when you got the sense that it was open to everyone, what things made you think that?” Alluding now to young people’s need for spaces that respect them as they are, she explains:

This is a very friendly place. Like, um, you don’t have to be dressed so nicely. You don’t have to have like a criteria or anything like that to be in it. You can stay as long as you want. They always accept you. It’s basically like a big family here. They make it feel like you shouldn’t shush anything. Don’t not talk about anything bad that’s happened to you. Anyone’s comfortable right here….They don’t criticize us.
It seems she’s experiencing this respect and acceptance and sense of community as counter-cultural. Just being able to be herself fully in a world that often disparages young people feels important, validating, empowering. Gabriela, I think, see actions that go against the oppressive status quo as a way of promoting justice.

We shift gears then, Cristina and I asking various questions about her relationships with her peers in the Freedom Fellowship. Yet, this question of adults validating young people as an act of justice and empowerment is still on my mind. Eventually, returning to it, I ask, “Do you think that the fact that youth’s opinions are taken seriously is that different than in other places?” “Mostly, yeah,” Gabriela affirms, ‘cuz in different places, like in my family, I don’t really feel like my opinions are taken seriously. In my family, I can’t leave the house until I’m married. And, um, whenever I say something that’s in my mind my mom tells me that I should just keep that to myself and not say that to anyone. School, I really don’t talk because there’s not many girls that also see my views. I’m very isolated at school.

Isolation, negation of voice, I jot down, taking the opportunity then to ask more of her understanding of oppression. “How would I describe oppression?” she repeats back to me, and at my nod, continues, “Bringing someone or a culture or ethnicity, anything, bringing it down and making them feel bad about themselves, like they shouldn’t be alive or anything like that. Like they shouldn’t exist.” Prompting for more details, Cristina asks, “What different forms of oppression did you learn about in your Leadership in Action week?” Gabriela responds,

I learned about verbal oppression and also physical oppression. An example would probably would be in Hotel Rwanda when they would call the Tutsi cockroaches and everything and [say] that they should just kill them all because they are worthless.
“When you first answered when you were describing oppression, you said ‘it’s bringing a person or culture or ethnicity down.’ What do you mean by ‘bringing them down?’,” I ask. To which Gabriela clarifies by drawing on her personal experience,

Making them feel bad about themselves and that they shouldn’t exist. Like in my family, they will basically judge anybody or everybody that is different than them. They would say like that Colombians are very out there and very flirty. My mom would say that they are probably whores or sluts and that they would just go out with anybody. Stereotyping.

In my head I try to sum up what she’s told us so far: oppression has multiple forms and includes physical, verbal and attitudinal aspects; oppression makes people feel judged, like they don’t deserve to live. I start to realize I’m caught up in my thoughts when Cristina interjects, “So, thinking about one of these forms of oppression, what do you think are the root causes of the issue?

I have to say probably the land that they live in, like how it looks. And, probably the way they dress as well. Like, third world countries, I have to say. They are poor. No one really helps them. No one actually tries to give them money or food or aids anything.

“Okay. And about how people dress. Can you give an example of how you see that as related?,” I ask, more present now. “For example, if you wear bright colored clothes, it means you’re a happy person, but you really might not be so happy. You could be a very angry person,” she replies simply. I’m a bit confused. It feels fuzzy. I think maybe she means that your land of origin impacts how people will view you and what economic opportunities you have in relation to other countries. Stereotyping based on appearance is clearly a theme. Perhaps sensing my tentativeness, Gabriela continues,

I remember this one time, I dressed in all black because I feel very comfortable wearing just black. There was this [Latino] guy that came up to me and said, ‘Why don’t you dress more happy and proud?’ I feel more happy this way. He grew up with girls wearing bright colors and being
girly and stuff. He was raised that way, I guess…whenever my mom would see like a girl wearing like really revealing clothes, she would call them this or that, like ‘slut’ or ‘whore.’ And my sister would do it too, my older sister. I think it’s [stereotyping someone by their clothing] very common for women to do.

*She seems to be saying oppression is learned, passed on through cultural and familial practices*, I surmise. Cristina, again, “What did you learn about the history of this social issue?” “I learned that it’s existed ever since the beginning of time,” Gabriela asserts, “because even in biblical times, the woman had to stay home and cook and clean and normally have kids and men can do anything.” *And that gender oppression has roots in centuries-old institutional – including religious – practices*, I reflect.

Later, she adds that sexism is also connected to economics and gives an example from mass media,

Magazines, they have these I think sponsors, so they have to use this type of girl. They have to use the skinny type of girl and not what they call fat girls. In order to sponsor and make people drink the type of drink they have like Monster or Coca Cola or anything like that…What stood out to me the most was *Killing Us Softly*, the movie that we were watching. That stood out to me the most because I did not know that they used like four different types of girls just to make that one girl look pretty. I did not know that like they would take a model and they would Photoshop the picture that she took. They would change her eye color probably and her body type.

Intrigued by her impassioned analysis of the marketing industry, I ask, “What do you think about this idea that in advertising they kind of create someone who’s not even real?” In response, Gabriela poses her own critical questions: “Why do they even use a model that’s skinny then? Why do you even use a model that’s tall and skinny when you can use probably other types of girls that are just as pretty?” For Gabriela, the images of idealized beauty propagated in commercial media is psychologically confining, as well as physically destructive:
I see that they’re [women] not comfortable. I see that they feel like they’re in pain. When I see it, I see most of the people are dressing, if they want to fit that image, it’s mostly just the same as everybody. Then I think to myself, “Do you really want to be the same as everybody?”

She continues with an example from her family life,

I don’t like tans. They’re bad for your skin. I see a lot of Caucasian girls get tans because they don’t like how pale their skin looks. I think that their pale skin is pretty and also their freckles as well. But, like my brother-in-law’s aunt, she had a lot of tans and now she has pre-cancer.

Her reference to the pressure on white women to darken our skin prompts me to ask her about the intersections of race and gender; she replies,

I do see them as connected because if you’re a different type of ethnicity they probably stereotype the girls different. Like African Americans, they stereotype them as loud and that they don’t want to care. Also, when I was in my Spanish class, they would stereotype and call these peoples “razors” or “beaners” or anything like that. And, it’s very derogatory. I hate being called that.

Cristina chimes in then, “So do you see any differences in the way that people oppress us?” Gabriela is adamant, “No, it’s just all the same, in how I see it. It’s just bad and it’s just wrong.” Sounds to me like she’s saying the nuances of gender oppression may differ based on racial identity, but that the overarching dynamics are common across racial and ethnic groups.

I’m processing this complexity when Cristina asks, “What is your vision of a just world then?” Gabriela pauses to ask, “A just world?,” then continues:

Like everybody wearing what they would like to wear and not being ashamed of it. Just being who they’d like to be. Not criticize someone for who they are. If you think you look pretty in whatever you wear, then wear it.

*For Gabriela, clothing and appearance are a form of self-expression, a way to define yourself on your own terms rather than society’s expectations for gender expression, I*
think. Following this up, I ask, “What is your role in creating this world?” Gabriela
smiles, readily responding:

> Wearing whatever I want to wear and making speeches that it’s not wrong
to; it’s not illegal... I would say that it’s alright to wear what you want to
wear. Go ahead. I think everybody is gorgeous. Don’t be shy.

I feel the interview winding down and ask, “Do you see activism as something you’ll be
working on for a long time?” Gabriela:

> Hopefully, I will. I was actually thinking I would probably be a chef, but
also try to be a radio broadcaster. I would ask people what they think about
issues and not just *Eric & Cathy* who ask what you think dating should be
like. If anybody has a domestic violence problem or anything like that I
would probably try to help them myself if no one else wants to help them.

*Gabriela, like many punks before her, believes whole-heartedly in the do-it-yourself
mentality; For her, DIY means defining yourself on your own terms, as well as taking
action to confront social problems,* I think. Impressed by her spunk and drive, I smile
broadly and thank her for talking with us.

> “My definition of beauty is the way you are and that’s perfect for me. It doesn’t matter
how you look. I think you’re perfect.” – Gabriela, January 16, 2011

In our second interview with Gabriela, conducted in January 2011, we returned to
the topic of socio-political conscious and delved into the collective actions of the *Killing
Us Softly Leadership in Action* group to confront sexism in the media. This follow up
interview allowed us to explore shifts in Gabriela’s thinking about oppression and social
activism. We begin by discussing the group’s action plan and how it came to be, which
according to Gabriela went something like this:

> The basic thing we did was a blog. We really wanted to do something else,
like the sticker thing [on advertisements], like “This isn’t my body, but I’m
ok with it.” But, we didn’t want to have a bad name for the Freedom
School, so we didn’t do that because uh you know how the police always and in the news always it always puts the bad perspective of things, never the good side. Well, I didn’t really like changing it because I thought uh in order to get really heard you have to do something drastic. The blog’s not really so drastic as I thought it would be because uh we could put ads about it but would people really listen to that?

Curious about their collective strategizing, Julius asks, “So, like as a group have you all tried to discuss alternative ways that you can make an impact or might be able to reach a wider audience other than the blog?” “We’re trying but due to the time we couldn’t,” Gabriela explains, drawing attention to how programmatic time constraints impacted their activism efforts.

Julius pushes, then, for more information about how the blog is being used to raise awareness of sexism in the media: “Ok you have the blog right? Do you all promote it on your Facebook pages? Do you constantly update it?” Gabriela is downhearted now as she admits, “Well, I don’t know who’s supposed to update it because I don’t know exactly who’s the administrator for the blog. Umm, but it should be updated I think. Is Daniel the one who updates it?”

Thinking back now to Gabriela’s participation over the group’s six months together, I see her frustration with the action plan reflected in her level of program involvement. She was there, active in the conversations, but not always consistently. She missed meetings, important tactical sessions and that shows in her lack of passion for the group’s action, if not for the topic of sexism itself. Her strength though is in raising critical questions about whether this compromised action is effective in raising consciousness of sexism.

Shifting gears now, we ask Gabriela to explain what she sees as the root causes of oppression? Quizzically, she replies, “Uhm, can you explain it to me differently?” Not
missing a beat, Julius briefly elaborates our question, providing specific context to guide her:

Just being like participating in the summer program and learning about different forms of oppression like adultism and sexism, what do you think cause these things? Let’s take sexism for example. What do you think causes like people to look down on somebody based on their gender?

His approach is effective and Gabriela quickly picks up our intent. She avows,

Well, mostly ‘cuz the way people are raised, like their parents. And also the Bible, sometimes; when they say you can’t marry the same sex. Supposedly it says that. And also the media, as well. You have the perfect blonde, the perfect girl over there and that’s how she should look and that’s how she should act. And people want to be like that ‘cuz they’re like this perfect woman and when they have a problem it turns out to be perfect in the end.

*Family, religion and media are root causes of sexism,* I note quickly, then ask: “So, I heard you say family, religion and media are some of the root causes of oppression. Do you think uhm like your group’s action, do you think that it addressed a root cause of oppression?”

Despite her earlier despondency, Gabriela admits that the blog has some potential to address the root causes of sexism, “It says what you don’t see generally. It opens your eyes more because we don’t realize…how we wish to be like them [people in magazine] sometimes. We don’t realize that and we think it’s ok.” *Blog → consciousness,* I surmise.

Julius, meanwhile, hones in on the internal dynamics inherent in Gabriela response and keenly asks: “Did anybody have a personal connection to this topic? Like were you personally affected by no diversity in the media?” Gabriela shares then,

Well, it was all of our idea. We all came up with it. Yeah, we’re all personally affected by the media. Me, generally, uhm I try not to be cookie-cut perfect. I like the way I am right now so I try to rebel against all of that. My definition of beauty is the way you are and that’s perfect for
me. It doesn’t matter how you look. I think you’re perfect.

*Media reinforces strict gender norms; she rejects these norms in her attitude and appearance,* I jot in my notes. Julius, again, asks: “Have you noticed any personal change as you’ve been going through CFS?” To which Gabriela responds that the FF has exposed her to new learning, “Well, like always I don’t really care what people say about how I look, but uhm I’m actually reading more articles about activists now and uhm education and community, uhm how to improve the community.” She confesses though that confronting oppression in her personal life is still quite challenging, especially when you’re on your own:

> What I do is I ignore it because it’s hard to try to change people’s minds sometime. When I do [try to change their minds], they just talk back and put me down. There’s a certain point where I’m not able to ignore it. In those cases, I just write it down or just scream at them. It makes me keep going.

*She is fully committed to the struggle for justice, and is still developing the necessary skills to engage in this fight,* I reflect. *Identity development and skill development are on-going,* I write; then ask: “Going back to Julius’ question, you said that media oppression is the main thing you’re interested in fighting. If you think about your life in the next year or next few years or even further down the road like how do you see yourself fighting that? What sort of things do you see yourself doing?” Response-ready, Gabriela proclaims,

> Most likely probably a program like this for kids, but also if I ever have kids or know teenagers, I probably will give them pamphlets or I’ll probably make a club for high school to open their eyes to this. Probably, hopefully, be talking on the radio station that teenagers will listen to and try to get other people’s opinion on how they would change it.
Intrigued, I inquire, “Why would you focus on young…” “Because that’s where it starts,” she insists. “Where the change starts,” she emphasizes. *I find this clarification hugely interesting. She’s not saying youth is where the problems start, like many adults allege. She saying youth is where our hope for justice lays,* I think, excited and inspired by her passionate declaration. “As a young person you’re a part of that change,” I comment. Julius, quick to pick up this lead, chimes in with a question of vision, “So, when Gabriela envisions a perfect world, what does she envision?” Her response, simple and pure, is of a world where “everybody [is] being who they want to be. People being happy…. and having friends who are comfortable and parents who are comfortable being themselves as well.” The Freedom School, she explains, is a place where this vision can flourish,

I always loved that in this place everybody is so comfortable with themselves. There is a lot of love in here. I feel like I belonged over here ‘cuz I was with a group of people who did actually feel the same as I did and want to stop this [injustice]. I feel like I’m always welcome here. I can always come here.

In the end, Gabriela confides to us a most-personal motivation for her commitment to building a more just world:

I want to be an activist because there are women, there are young girls and boys who aren’t how people today or some people in our society think they’re not perfect and think they shouldn’t be accepted in our society. Also, my sister. She motivates me because when we were when she was in eighth grade she used to think she was fat. I kept telling her that she wasn’t until it got to the point that she was bulimic…It was very sad because she would starve herself and she would be very cranky sometimes. I told her “No, you’re not fat” and she believes me now.

Sensing the relative importance of this experience, Julius intuitively asks, “What helped you not give up on your sister? To which Gabriela openly shares,
When I could see her throwing up, I would say ‘No, this isn’t her.’ I remember when she was always happy with herself, when she was little. Why can’t she be like this again? I made her eat, and even though she had the urge to vomit she would make it stay inside her stomach. She is back at a normal weight, but she’s anemic because of her bulimia. She really regrets it.

In this disclosure we hear the devastating personal impact of sexism, Gabriela’s internal motivation for taking action, her analysis of a collective experience of oppression and her allegiance to those most impacted by the confines of gender norms. Moved by her passionate refusal of traditional beauty norms, I empathize, and offer validation, It sounds like a really powerful experience to go through that and that she had a sister that stood by her and helped her through it and even uhm wasn’t willing to give up on her and even when she finally did start to recover was still there to help. You know that must mean a lot to her, I think. I mean, in a way, that’s like being an ally, in a different way. It’s not a public action but it’s an action of solidarity.

Julius insightfully adds,

Sounds like this can be this is one of the reasons that you unconsciously picked media because like your sister was probably fed this certain image of how she’s should be. So, since she was fed this image she started to hurt herself. That’s your sister, you love her. You don’t want to see her hurt herself so you try to get to the main cause of the problem so that she and other girls like her won’t hurt themselves. So, this can be addressing a root cause of oppression in your own life and maybe why you picked media inequality. “That’s why,” she confirms, matter-of-factually.

We laugh then, joking about how good Julius is with words, how he captures complex ideas so beautifully. Gabriela pauses and adds, in all seriousness, “That is one of the main causes. I always thought she was pretty and she still is to me.” It’s getting late now and our conversation seems to be drawing to an end. We all seem to be deeply affected by these revelatory dialogues, I reflect to myself. Pensively, I ask one final question, “Do you see yourself staying involved in the Freedom School and in what
ways?” “Yes I do,” Gabriela affirms, “probably an internship or as like Julius is doing interviews or anyway possible.” “Ok, great,” I say as we wrap-up, thanking Gabriela for talking with us and sharing her story; inside I’m feeling grateful that the research experience is a positive one for her, one she’d even like to continue in the future.
Erika

I didn’t really know that I was oppressive until I came here and we actually started talking about it. I guess people don’t really think about it, like how they do different things that could be oppressive or sexist. – Erika, August 27, 2010

Erika is a quietly smart 15-year-old who respects her elders, values listening and is readily able to admit mistakes. She is curious, self-reflective and a committed student. Being action-oriented, she is critical of approaches that focus solely on “finding out what’s wrong with the world.” Her preference: “find a problem and then research it to find solution and then we actually make like an intervention and stuff.” Genesis and I spoke with Erika about her experiences as a Freedom Fellow in late summer, approximately one month after the start of the program. Here is what we discovered about Erika’s development of critical consciousness and an activist-identity.

It’s twenty minutes into the interview. We’ve established trust. Dialogue is flowing easily between the three of us. Perhaps this helps Erika admit her confusion when Genesis asks, “Based on what you learned here, how would you describe oppression?,” “I’m not sure,” she confesses, then explains:

I was going to ask. I was looking through my notes to remember exactly what oppression was because I never really understood that term from the program. I guess, I don’t know. Can I ask a question? What exactly does oppression mean? I was always confused with the specific definition. I know CFS had a definition and how they spun it…

She trails off. Preferring not to lead her, I respond:

Well, yeah, I think that’s a really important and fair question. But, I don’t want to steer you in a particular direction. You don’t have to give us a dictionary definition. Try to tell us what you think it might mean just using your own words, what you understand about oppression. It doesn’t have to be an exact definition, but just how do you think about it so far?
This approach seems to spark Erika’s memory. She begins, tentatively, to work through her own thoughts about this complex idea:

Well, from here, the thing I really remember was one time we were talking about it and I was like “Man, I can be really oppressive.” I remember saying that to myself, but I didn’t really understand how. I guess it was the example that they gave us. I was like “if I do that, I guess I’m oppressive.” I guess that when I got here, we didn’t really go over exactly what oppression is because most people already knew what it was. I didn’t really understand it in the beginning. I guess I always thought it was when you would, I guess based on, I always thought it was based on different characteristics, and you would use it against them. I don’t know. I guess that’s what I always thought it meant at first. I know we had like Alyse didn’t want to give us a dictionary definition, but wanted us to have our own definitions of it. I always thought it was if you knew something about someone that you could use it against them, I guess. More like racism and stuff like that. Sexism, that’s what I thought. I think we learned about ageism too. I think.

*She’s scratching the surface in her understanding of oppression; she has general ideas and terms, but lacks some specifics*, I think to myself.

Genesis jumps in, nonchalantly, “So, thinking about one of the forms of oppression that you just mentioned, what do you think are the root causes?” Gaining confidence, Erika replies:

I would say that I guess what leads to that would be that people don’t have that much knowledge about how they can be oppressive or how they are oppressive. I didn’t really know that I was oppressive until I came here and we actually started talking about it. I guess people don’t really think about it, like how they do different things that could be oppressive or sexist. Also, because of society because I guess society says it’s ok to do this, it’s ok to do something because it’s been done over the years.

*Ignorance; social norms*, I jot, intrigued. Wanting to know more, I prompt: “So society might tell you that it’s ok to act a certain way just because that’s the way things have always been. Can you say a little more about that idea?” To which Erika answers:

Well, what I meant by society, I guess it could also be your surrounding as
well. How you grow up is usually what you do when you’re older, what
they teach you when you’re younger. So if when you’re younger you learn
how to do something and so you think that’s always going to be the right
way to do it. And you’re taught to do something, but it’s not the best way.
Then when you’re older you’re going to always think it’s the right way and
still keep doing it that way…the media has a lot to do with it because you,
I know a lot of little kids they try to teach them different things on pro-
grams on tv. So, they might think that what they see on tv is the right way
when they’re younger and not know that you’re oppressive if you do that.

“Can you give me an example?,” I ask. She continues:

I remember how we were talking about how in different music videos,
women are seen as an object. That would be one thing I remember the
most from when we were watching a documentary. There’s sexism in the
media through music video and through songs and different things that
have to do with the media and also, in advertisement…when kids see
music videos or magazines or different advertisements, they might think
it’s alright based on different lyrics or stuff, that it’s alright to see women
as objects.

*Sexism is perpetuated through mass media*, I note, then press for further thoughts:

“Ok, that’s a really good example. Are there any other root causes that you want to add?”

“No, that’s it off the top of my head,” she states simply. I try another approach, “So in
that week that you were learning about sexism, did you learn anything about the history
of sexism? To this Erika replies,

Well, I remember when we were going through a timeline on sexism. I
remember we were talking about Gender Just [an intergenerational, grass-
roots organization working for racial, economic and gender justice]and
then this other women’s program. I don’t remember specific dates or any-
thing, but we did go through different things that people did in the past to
prevent sexism and also other problems like racism and stuff…we watched
this documentary, I think it had to do with rape. I guess the main thing that
I can remember is that there has always been people working on this
problem and that I’m glad that we’re still trying to help. That’s the main
thing that I remember.
Her recollection of specific definitions, dates and historical trends is a bit vague, cursory. Yet, she seems to understand that what we see in the world around us impacts what we believe and how we act, I reflect.

Still hoping to gain more insight into her socio-political development, I ask, “So, one of the other forms of oppression that you mentioned was ageism. Could you just say more about what you think ageism is?” Erika answers, this time with more specifics:

What I understand was that like people were like judged based on their age. I remember that in my community I guess that ageism is like really used because a lot of people seem to like not, if they were like young, really young, they wouldn’t be able to rent somewhere in my neighborhood. I remember my dad was telling me about how he was talking to someone on the block and that he was trying to rent to someone but that they were like older because he didn’t want someone that was young. He was scared that they wouldn’t be able to pay because if they’re young they might have more problems than someone who’s older. So, it was just like being deprived of different things just because of your age…I think stereotypes would be a root cause because some people think that because you’re a certain age you can’t do different things. Like that man thought because people were young they wouldn’t be able to pay the bills and, I guess, be mature enough to rent.

Conscietização, pops into my head (the Freirian terms for personalizing and politicizing knowledge), as Genesis chimes in, asking Erika to describe how she relates to ageism and sexism in her own life. At this Erika opens up about her family life:

All the females from my family are seen like they’re not mature until they’re like twenty-something or out of college. In my family, the guys have more freedom than the girls…since I was young, I knew that when I’m older I wouldn’t have much independence like my guy cousins. All the girls in my family, all my cousins that are older, they’ve dealt with this and they’ve told me how our family was. Then, I guess ageism falls under how we’re seen as not mature because we’re young and that they won’t give us responsibilities until we’re older because they think we can’t handle it.

An intersection of age and gender, I write, then prompt her to say more about why boys and girls, men and women are treated differently in her family.
I guess the guys have more power than the girls in our family because the men are the ones that like make all the rules. There’s more at stake for a girl, I guess, getting pregnant. But, like I don’t think it’s fair because if guys are given the chance to have freedom when they’re young, they’ll technically learn from their mistakes when they’re younger. They would know when they’re older more of what’s right and wrong. When they don’t give the girl the opportunity to do that then when they’re older they won’t be as mature to know something. So, um, I guess it’s based on the men’s rules that girls have more at stake when they’re younger than guys.

When I ask then why men get to make the rules, Erika explains that “it’s always been like that,” then adds:

All my friends say that in the traditional Hispanic family the men will always have power over the woman in the family. With my family, I guess they see sexism as ok because I was saying earlier the men are always more dominant than the women... When I was explaining it to my mom or my dad, they were just saying “Well, that’s how it’s always been in the family.” Even from before, my grandma and great-great-grandma. It was just normal to the family.

*Oppression is connected to culture, tradition, family norms, I scribe.*

At that moment, Erika hones in on a critical contradiction within her own experience as a young Latina,

Our parents are telling us we have to learn from our mistakes and learn to mature, but then they don’t give us opportunity to do that. They’re always saying that guys aren’t that mature when they are young, but then they’re given freedom to actually do different things. It just seems like you’re telling us something, but then you’re letting us do something that doesn’t even have to do with what you’re saying. You’re not really doing something that supports what you’re saying. I’m confused by that.

*She’s exasperated, understandably, with these double standards and inconsistent expectations. She’s struggling internally to find consistency between her personal values and the realities of oppressive systems.* Genesis keenly asks then, “Do you feel you have your own oppressive behaviors?”

Well, when I came here I noticed that I was oppressive in some ways. I
guess since I’ve been here, I think differently. I used to be like into the media and like how what’s seen on tv is the best way or like seen in the media is the best way…That if they say that’s the best way, it must be the best way. But now since I’ve learned different things about oppression and like how it has to do with the media, I don’t think the same.

The Freedom Fellowship has opened her eyes to the dynamics of oppression; she’s developing self-reflexivity of her own role within this structure. Wanting to know more I ask Erika for an example. She begins:

How I was oppressive would be well me and all the girls in my family would always think that being tall and skinny was beautiful. We all thought like that. All the women in my family, they still think like that, that’s what beautiful is. Since I’ve been here and we learned about the super-models or models in the media, there’s like 7 different models to make one photo that’s not even them. I don’t really think that’s beautiful.

For Erika, one dynamic of oppression is the internalization of narrowly-defined images of beauty; part of developing as an activist involves unlearning these restrictive standards.

As I’m thinking about this shift, Genesis comments, “I had a question, but I totally lost it.” I encourage her to take her time and let the question come back. After a moment she says, “I have it, I just can’t word it.” We pause, giving space for her to let it form. She seems to be stuck, I think and so offer,

Sometimes I find that if I just start saying something, like just start talking about it, then eventually it will form itself into a question. I’m sure you’ve noticed that sometimes my questions are very wordy. It’s because I’m trying to find the word or the way to say it.

Genesis gives it a go,

Ok, you said that when you came into this you didn’t think you had oppressive behaviors, but in the end of the week, you felt like you had oppressive behaviors. Umm, that’s didn’t work. Umm. Yeah, I think we should just go on until I figure out how to word it.
“Ok,” I say, reassuringly, “Just keep working on it. It’ll come to you.” I ask Erika then to describe how learning about sexism in the media has impacted how she responds to oppression. She shares with us this story of educating a friend about the objectification of women in hip hop videos:

Well, when I was here, I started talking to my friends about it and a lot, I guess, more of my guy friends are into rapping and like hip hop. Then, one day I was on the phone talking to my friend and he was like, “oh, you should look at this video.” I guess I noticed that in the video the girls were being objectified, like just in the video…and I explained to him how the women were objectified. Then, I guess he was like “that’s normal in the music industry.” I thought it was really wrong to do that and then he was saying that I thought it was wrong because I’m a girl. I was like “today in my class we were talking about how in songs women are being called different names and it’s not right to do that.” He was saying that it’s not bad to do that because they have the freedom to explain, whoever’s singing, they have the freedom to say whatever they want. It’s usually how they feel. They’re expressing how they’re feeling through their songs. I just tried to understand that ok they might be expressing in their own way, but if they have to do it in a negative way, I don’t think it’s the best way… My friends, they just see it as “well, it’s ok because everyone does it. It’s not bad to do it.” I see it like even if everyone still does it, people can do different things instead of being like in the norm.

*Developing socio-political consciousness is helping Erika push back on social norms and challenge others’ oppressive attitudes and behaviors,* I reflect to myself. She tells us then how she’s grown more comfortable stepping outside of her comfort zone:

I guess because of what I learned here that I actually started talking more to my friends. I was more comfortable to talk about it with my friends because some of my friends I didn’t even know that they’d dealt with a problem like this…But, now I feel more comfortable to talk with people about it because I actually have more knowledge on the problem.

And how this new confidence will help her at school and in her work with others:

Out of all the discussion groups [at school], I like never talked at all. I don’t know, I guess I was scared to give my opinion on something…I think since I’ve been here I just think that it’s not wrong to give your opinion.
It’s ok to think differently than someone else. It’s also good if people think differently because they can have different ideas and if they work together they might have an even better idea together. So, I think that when I go back to school, I’ll discuss more than I did before.

*Transference of skills to another setting,* I note. Finally, she tells us how the fellowship helped her understand that activism involves working together to confront injustice:

> When we started talking about and learning about different ways that we could help, I guess that’s when I understood that activists help with problems. They try to find the best way to solve it because they want to help. I understood that when we actually started working on the problem… I understood that activists try to help with the problem, not on their own but with different people that have the same problem.

“So the fellowship helped you understand different ways of viewing things and different ways of intervening,” I reflect back to her.

“That sounds powerful,” I conclude, nodding to Genesis to pose the next question.

“What is your vision of a just world?,” she asks, smiling. Erika is direct:

> What I would want would be for not to be judged based on different characteristics or ideas or beliefs. For everyone to work together on everything and not compete against different parts of the world…When you’re trying to understand and knowing that it’s ok to have more than one opinion or having more than one belief or race. People are trying to understand or listen to others and not be judgmental about something or against different things that aren’t the way they see it. Then, to not a have a norm, I guess. That everybody can be whoever they want to be. Things always happen in the world when they see something outside of the norm, they just think it’s wrong. People always just jump to the conclusion that if they’re not doing it the way it’s always been, then it’s wrong. So, I would technically not want a norm, anywhere. That would just be the best way instead of every place having a specific way to do something.

*A framework of cooperation, as opposed to competition; an openness to difference and the ability to be yourself,* I think, hearing remnants of Gabriela and Darrel in her statement. *But, no norms? This idea is confounding.* I reply:
Again, that’s a really powerful idea. But, then I think about that and what that means, like if you think about our culture and we have norms for everything. We have these beauty norms and norms for how we expect kids to act. Then we have norms for how we expect kids to act when they’re in school. We have norms for how people are supposed to act when they’re at work. It would require really changing all of these aspects of our society.

Erika elaborates for me:

I guess it would just be like changing, it’s like their mindset, I guess. How they think about something or how different people think about something that kind of makes the norms; how people don’t try to think. A lot of people try to stay in the norms so that just keeps it going…They think, “I don’t want to be the odd one so I’ll just follow along”…They’re afraid of not fitting in and they’re afraid of how people might think of them because they’re not doing what everybody else thinks is the normal way.

“Do you ever feel that way?” I ask.

I fit into certain norms, but I try to also be myself…I also have my own opinions. I don’t just listen. If someone tells me this is the right way, I still try to question it and think if that’s really the best way. Can you do something else? Can there be different ways to deal with that? So I’m normal, but not normal, I guess.

I really appreciate her honesty about her struggle for justice. It certainly can be an internal conflict to both be yourself and challenge yourself to go against the grain. I relate to this inner fight. This is the call to living in truth, I decide, as we conclude our interview.
Simeon

*I think that anyone who feels the need for justice same way that I do is an ally in anyway. Maybe I’m focusing on criminal justice but someone else is focusing on gay rights, but we are still an ally because as Martin Luther King said “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.” *— Simeon, October 28, 2011

At his heart, Simeon knows allyship, knows what it means to be a bridge in building the beloved community. Simeon knows, innately, the truth to Ernesto Che Guevara’s proclamation that “if you tremble with indignation at injustice, then you are a comrade of mine.” This 15-year-old from the Southside of Chicago travels over an hour each way to attend a high school founded in progressive educational values, a school purposely dedicated to community and citizenship. At school, Simeon serves on Student Government, is adept at soliciting multiple perspectives on an issue and finding a common ground. Simeon is a democrat in the truest sense of the word. As he describes it, his commitment to social justice is unwavering: “any time that I see something that is not fair or is unjust it feels like I should do something or I’m compelled to try and help those who are who are being treated wrong or who are treated unjustly.” In this interview, Quinton and I speak with Simeon about how the Freedom Fellowship has impacted his notions of in-/justice, his understanding of activism and his motivation for transformative social change. In this interview, we come to know Simeon as a Freedom Fellow in word and deed.

Quinton begins, “How did you learn about this program?” Simeon is candid from the get,

The first time I heard about it was through my mom. She told me about it and she told me like uhm that she heard about the Chicago Freedom School
and they were doin' all this great stuff. At the time I was too young to get involved, so I kept hearing about it for the next few years and then they did a presentation at my school which was this year.

*This is a bit unique; this referral from his mom. We haven’t heard that from other fellows, I think.* Quinton asks more specifically, “So what drew you to this Freedom Fellowship, this LIA week? Simeon explains:

Well I was drawn to that program because it kind of I am interested in how uhm in how uhm youth are being criminalized in society and feel like it’s something that really affects me. So I wanted to find out more about it, learn about this issue, get facts and stuff and actually do something to help change it. The main thing that drew me was basically like a social justice organization that was for youth like myself.

_He’s intrigued by the organization as a space for youth activism and relates personally to the criminalization of youth in society._ We talk a bit more about the organization, the physical environment, sense of community, shared expectations.

Then Quinton asks, “So based on what you learned here how would you describe oppression?” To which Simeon replies, “Oppression is is when you’re someone with more uhm (pause) oppression is when someone with higher privilege uses it to take away someone someone else’s privilege.” Wanting to hear more, I ask “Can you give an example?” Simeon offers:

For example, uhm it’s oppressive for ah for Chicago Public Schools to deprive certain neighborhoods from their right to education; that the Chicago Public School system is a privilege because they control all the city’s public schools and they use that sometimes to keep people who can’t afford to go to private school or other schools from getting a good education...The juvenile justice system could be oppressive if like if a kid from the city commits a crime if he’s a black or brown youth from the city like I don’t know stealing from the grocery store, uhm then he could be uhm punished to the full extent of the law, but then if a white kid from the suburb does the same crime, he might just get smacked on the hand or not in trouble at all.
“Ok, so sounds like you’re saying that like the juvenile justice system will treat people
differently based on their race and uhm like where they live,” I summarize. “Right, yeah
race, class, where they live and level of education,” he adds. “What do you mean by level
of education?,” asks Quinton. To which Simeon responds,

Like sometimes uhm I well I think that like if a police or if the govern-
ment perceives someone as not knowing their rights or not knowing what
they can do if they get into a situation, they will take advantage of that. If
they wouldn’t harass, they might harass like a black kid on the south side
of Chicago for no reason because they don’t know their rights but they
wouldn’t arrest a white adult on the north side.

Quinton, again, “Thinking about one of these forms of oppression, what do you
think are some of the roots causes of them? On this, Simeon has much to say:

One of the root causes of oppression is like not understanding people and
not understanding their differences and not respecting people and not
respecting their differences. I have a great example. In some schools uhm
uh some many public schools in Chicago especially they teach to the test
and they don’t try and teach to things that actually happen in real life. They
don’t try to teach concepts. They try to teach the questions and the answers
basically and and so if uh a kid is having trouble learning then they might
just not teach that kid or they will put him in a special class and also if a
kid already if there’s a kid who might be a little more advanced they won’t
try and teach him further. They’ll just not teach him either. They won’t
push that kid further so they they don’t in many schools and many public
schools they don’t understand how kids sometimes learn differently and
when a child is on like a lower level of understanding or when they learn
differently they don’t try to shift the curriculum to help them a little bit and
when a kid knows a lot already they don’t try and push that child further
they just basically sustain them and keep them where they are.

This reminds me of what Darrel says about oppression being rooted in a lack of
understanding and acceptance of people’s humanity; it’s very Freirian, I think. “Ok,
what about the juvenile justice system? Think of a way you see it there, see this idea that
you are not understanding people’s differences?,” I ask, hoping to explore his socio-
political analysis in more depth. “Well, I think that anytime a child is sentenced to life for
any crime, they are not really understanding that child,” Simeon passionately declares, adding,

if you understood that person as a human being then you would understand that that person would make a mistake…they don’t understand the actual person. That he made a mistake. That it was wrong. Maybe he should be punished. He should be helped, but to throw him in jail for the rest of his life is not something that like shows that they understand that person.

“Is there anything else you see as a root cause of these forms of oppression,” I ask. “No,” he concludes, “I think no because everything really goes down to just respect and understanding because everything else comes out of that if you don’t respect you have racism, classism and every other -ism.”

In the abstract, he understands oppression as stemming from an inherent disrespect and misunderstanding of people. What of the systemic factors? Or the lived experience?, I wonder. Quinton asks then, “Tell us about a form of oppression that you relate to in your own life.” Simeon explains, “I don’t face that much oppression on a daily basis, but I definitely face a lot of oppression in my life.” Hoping to encourage a more specific response, I prompt:

I certainly don’t want to make assumptions, but I know that like in my experiences from working with youth that a lot of young people uhm have experiences of ageism, adultism or also ya’ know young people of color have experiences of racism whether that’s in their neighborhoods or in their schools. So, are those things that you like think about in your own life?

Simeon declares, “I uhm sometimes face like adultism… I never personally experienced any racism or classism at my school, but I’ve uhm heard it being addressed before so I am assuming that it has happened.”

I’m thinking about how to better frame this question when Quinton asks, “Do you feel you have your own oppressive behaviors?” To which Simeon admits,
Yeah. I’m not like an oppressive kind of person, but I can see where I have been oppressive before. I think the biggest way I’ve basically ever been oppressive is with my sister. Sometimes I take the remote from her and well it is oppressive since I am bigger than her. She can’t really take it back if I don’t want to give it back to her. She’s six.

Then he adds, “Usually I try to be conscience about the way I treat others.” Ok, we’re getting a sense of how he understands individuals’ actions as sometimes rooted in oppression, but I’m still wondering whether he has developed a systemic analysis of power and privilege. Moving the conversation in that direction, Quinton asks, “What differences do you notice between how you experience oppression and how another person will experience oppression?”

Simeon is perplexed. “Can you say that again?,” he implores. Quinton breaks it down then, drawing deliberately on a concrete example, “Ok, so I have to reword. Ok, so do you feel like everybody experiences oppression?,” he asks. “Ah yeah,” confirms Simeon, granting Quinton license to continue. “Ok, so let’s take racism. How would you, a black male, be treated differently than a Latino male or a white male or Chinese male. How would your experience be different than theirs?,” he prompts. To this, Simeon has an extensive, eloquent response:

I think everyone’s experiences are different because it depends on like the intention. Sometimes people are oppressed on purpose and sometimes it’s accidental and it depends on the reaction. Sometimes it just rolls off and sometimes it actually makes an impact on that person…there’s certain things I do take to heart and certain things I don’t. Like if it’s a kid messing with you or something like that, I don’t let that affect me so much. But if I see something bigger, like if I see my school is doing something that it’s not supposed to do or if I see that my uhm government officials are doing something that they aren’t supposed to do or something that directly impacts me and my community, and mostly it’s when it not only impacts me but it impacts the people around me, that’s when I would be
impacted by that more and more compelled to do something. But if it’s on a smaller level, like you know something small, then usually I just let it roll off…When the oppression is coming from an institution it’s a different kind of oppression. Like, so to speak, if a person called you a name that’s oppressive, but you don’t have to let that you don’t have to protest that person or anything, but if an institution is oppressive then that institution might make a restrictive or prejudice laws and that impacts you and the people around you and so for me personally that’s what compels me to become involved or to act and to say it’s wrong.

He’s interpreted this question – meant to unpack intersectionality – in a significantly different way. Yet, his response provides important insights into how he distinguishes institutional oppression from intra-personal prejudice, as well as how he views differences within peoples’ reactions to injustice, I think to myself, still unclear whether he is actually unaware of intersectionality as an aspect of oppression or if this is just an ambiguously-worded question.

We pause, momentarily, as I try to formulate a follow-up question: “Uhm, I had a question about uhm something you said early on in your response to this. You said that sometimes oppression is on purpose and sometimes it’s accidental and I wanted to know if you could explain that?” At this request, Simeon spells out the ways in which oppression could be accidental:

Well, there’s lots of different ways for oppression to be accidental. One way is when people are just ignorant and they don’t uhm know that like they have no idea they are being oppressive at all, like uhm like when you have these stereotypes in your mind about certain people uhm that you don’t even know they are stereotypes and you are being oppressive to those people because of that but you aren’t even aware of it. And there are other times when you just slip up and are accidentally oppressive and uhm there’s times when you say something that might be might seem to be oppressive to one person that you didn’t intend to be that way at all… sometimes oppression is is something that you do subconsciously and aren’t even aware of it.
On the other hand, in Simeon’s analysis, “The Jim Crow laws are purposely oppressive.”

I write: *Individuals sometimes act out of unconscious prejudice and stereotypes, but systemic oppression is absolutely intentional.* Oppression theory comes to mind.

We talk a bit then about the programmatic approach of the Freedom Fellowship, interactions with peers and adults, teaching methods and activities. Eventually I ask,

“When you think about what you learned in the *LIA* week, what stood out to you?”

Simeon speaks at length about the knowledge he gained of the school-to-prison pipeline:

There’s a lot of stuff I kind of knew on the surface level, like I knew the criminal justice system wasn’t just and I knew there was something wrong with our schools, but what I learned this week was it kind of made it bolder and deeper. It kind of connected the schools to the justice system and it magnified the extent to which the like jail system was injust. And one thing I remember in particular was when we compared America to China because America has the most people in jail. We have like out of I forget how many people 300 million people in our country and we have I think they said 3 million people in jail, but China has the second most amount of people in jail, but they have like two billion people in their country and they only have 500 thousand people in jail. So it shows so we’re far disproportionate in the inmates to citizens ratio compared to other countries. It shows that basically it is just us and uhm that we really have something wrong with our criminal justice system.

“What do you think that is? What do you think is wrong?,” I ask. “What I think is wrong, well there’s a lot of things that’s wrong with it,” Simeon asserts,

I mean there’s no respect for for people and for their struggles and uhm and you know for their mistakes and I think there’s a problem with our drug laws. I think there’s a problem with discrimination in our jail system. There’s a heavier presence of police and there’s definitely more arrests in like urban neighborhoods or African American neighborhoods.

Wanting to untangle the complexities of these issues, I prompt Simeon to break it down for us, issue by issue. He begins with a critique of how drug laws are disconnected from the economic realities of urban communities:
I think that our government it throws more people’s lives away than actually drugs themselves because by locking people up for just trying to make money I mean some people are out here….just tryin’ to make money. In my neighborhood, for example, there’s no stores for people to go and get a job at or a restaurant or anything like that. So, I mean what else are people supposed to do to feed their kids, to take care of their family?

Lack of sanctioned economic opportunity leads to increased participation in street economies and increased likelihood of arrest. I jot before asking, “Do you see that as also connecting to the education issue?” “Definitely,” Simeon declares, explaining:

the way that connects to education is well basically kids are not being educated in the schools uhm which leads them to drop out. Not only are they not being educated, but the next step after education I mean where we want to be ideally is we want children to be educated about you know the actual facts like how to read and write and how to count and how to do all that stuff, but we also want to teach them values. So, since they are missing out on values from the school and they’re missing out, they’re loosing out on the actual like intellectual education and they’re not getting it anywhere else because like their parents can’t teach those sometimes because they weren’t taught the values…it’s like a cycle. So, when people can’t uhm be educated then it leads them to do to drop out of the school. Sometimes they don’t value, they don’t understand how getting a diploma or going to college could could help them like could help the people around them… school is not keeping them busy so it might lead them to try and get another job like drug dealing or something or stealing, which is a job uhm and then you know the police come and since there is a heavier police presence I think in those neighborhoods the police come, scoop ‘em up , throw ‘em in jail. Then they really can’t get a job. Then they really have a situation.

“Let’s talk about that a little more, the idea that there’s a heavier police presence in like African American neighborhoods, urban neighborhoods. Why do you think that is?,” I ask. Referring back to the lack of educational resources and economic opportunities, Simeon says, frankly, “There probably is more crime in the urban neighborhoods, but I think I think the crime that goes on in the urban neighborhoods is not something that is totally the fault of people who committed the crime.”
He clarifies for us then that the criminal justice system, writ large, is discriminatory on many levels:

I think that people are discriminated upon because of race and gender many times and age uhm and that’s what gets them in jail a lot of times. My dad told me that uhm one of the people at his job said that if you wear your pants hanging down that means you’re in a gang…and so I mean thank God that person’s not a police officer because if that was a police officer you see any guy walking down the street with a white T on or with his pants hanging down you are just going to assume he is a criminal or a gang banger or something.

He pauses, “I don’t think it’s all police officers…What I do know is that it’s way too many.” It’s judges too, Simeon explains,

I think that judges can also discriminate some and sometimes that’s the fault of the judge and sometimes it’s not I mean if you have uhm if there’s like a case and like you had this wealthy white person who could afford a great lawyer uhm who’s suing a black person who can’t afford a lawyer at all or something like that then I mean the judge probably would discriminate on the black person but it’s hard for the judge not to because the white person has a great lawyer and brings in all this evidence the black person doesn’t know how to dress for court, he doesn’t know how to speak in court and he doesn’t have a lawyer so it’s hard not to discriminate.

Ok, I think, now we’re hearing his analysis of how complex identities of race and class intersect in experience of in-/justice. I reply, “When I hear you say that it makes me think of uhm that video Juvies. Some of the young people in that like committed the same or similar crimes as others, but they got really really different sentences.” Simeon is animated in his response:

And I think that is because you know what some kids the police I mean some of that the teachers, the principals, the police whatever they see the humanity in that kid and that’s why they don’t punish him to the full extent of the law…they understand uhm mistakes… there are things that people got a lot of trouble for in my old school that people don’t get in trouble for at all in my school now and it’s I think that’s because there’s more respect at my high school and people actually see the humanity. They see the person for the person, not always suspicious of that person and they under-
stand uhm where they are coming from and who they are as a human being.

Darrel, I jot in my notes, reminded of his entreaties to our common humanity.

Neither Quinton nor I can think of anything more to ask about the school-to-prison pipeline, so instead we ask Simeon to share his vision of a just world. Returning to his initial analysis of oppression, Simeon hones in on a world rooted in respect,

My vision of a just world is uhm really everything that I say it it goes back to respect because you can’t have a just world without respect. If countries respected other countries we probably wouldn’t have wars. If people respected other people we wouldn’t have fights or we wouldn’t have racism or classism. If adults respected children, we wouldn’t have adultism or some of the stereotypes that uhm youth uhm are oppressed by. If companies respected consumers then we wouldn’t have some of the kind of ridiculous marketing that we have now...At every level, it’s just respect.

Respect as core social value, I scribble and out of pure curiosity ask, “As a society, what is our core value right now? If it’s not respect, what is it? To which Simeon says, simply, “The first thing that comes to mind is money. That’s probably it– money.” Bringing us back to our original line of inquiry, Quinton ask, “What is your role in creating this just world?” On this question, Simeon is clear:

I have a lot of roles in creating this world, but just the simplest thing that I can do and that I do do is I lead by example. I respect other people, and hoping that they’ll respect other people too. And to educate people and let them know that you know that there are injustices that are going on in the world period and by telling them how they can help and uhm basically by educating people and leading by example.

Upon further thought, he adds:

Sometimes I think you have to go to the very things that create the in-
justice and turn that around to fight to fight it. I mean, for example, I mean people might get uhm might receive injustice from media from like the television or the radio. Well, in order to fight that injustice you might have to make your own commercials on the television that are advocating for justice; make your own songs on the radio that are advocating for justice.
If a politician is creating injustice, well then you have to have your own representatives who are creating that justice.

*Constructing parallel institutions and cultures of resistance,* I note. Wrapping things up, I ask, “Is there anything else you want to tell us about your experience in the Freedom Fellowship?” Simeon concludes that the fellowship helped him understand activism as more than a protest or letter-writing campaign. “Activism,” he says, “can be simply not doing what people expect you to do.”
Lashona

The youth leader was talkin’ about what activism is. She started breaking it down like “if you are here to do this you are automatically one of us” and it kinda’ opened my eyes to realize like if you really want to do this you have to be down to it like you have to make a commitment. This is a commitment you can’t just give up...I’m an activist now. I’m dedicated. I really have the strength and the will to change something. – Lashona, October 20, 2010

Lashona lives in the infamous Cabrini Green housing projects, attends school in an equally poverty-stricken neighborhood on the West Side. At 17, she is intimately familiar with how economic blight creates an environment ripe for drugs, violence and other criminal elements; she has seen many family and friends fall prey to the allure of quick money in the absence of legitimate economic opportunities. At 17, Lashona is adamantly committed to her own education, to graduating high school and pursuing college. And she desires the same for her peers. She genuinely roots for others’ success, understands people in their struggles, pushes them to defy expectations. She is honest and quick to give her opinion. At the same time, she is willing and able to reassess her beliefs and revise her position as she learns and grows in activism. Lashona is laid-back, fun, charismatic; observing her I am reminded of the declaration, widely attributed to Emma Goldman, “If I can’t dance to it, it’s not my revolution.” Three months into the Freedom Fellowship, Cristina and I have the pleasure of interviewing this dynamic young, African American woman about her journey as a social activist. Here is her story.

“How did you first learn about the Freedom Fellowship?,” begins Cristina.

Lashona smiles, explains with clarity how CFS stood out at the job fair she attended,

I went for the stuff that caught my eye and CFS really did catch my eye… They had the only like colorful papers, orange and green. Plus when I looked at a picture it has like kids and stuff on it, a picture of some of the uhm uh oh CFS students. Plus when I read it like the two different
categories of which ones you can do they kinda’ caught me eye cuz’ it was interesting because you know like that’s something that I know for a fact I want to learn about and I was like “Ok, this might be something for me.”

*She’s intrigued by the prominence of youth within the program; the topics are relevant, I jot. Lashona continues,*

> I was like “But I don’t know which one I want to do!” So, you know, when I wrote up the essay and stuff like that I would say I would chose the criminalization one because I kind of relate to that more than the sex part.

*Youth criminalization is particularly salient,* I think to myself. Picking up the significance of this topic to Lashona, Cristina asks, “Why do you think you relate to it more?” Lashona is candid:

> Maybe because it’s like my neighborhood, how I grew up, my family. Just my surroundings, my every day surroundings…Even when I had my interview she was giving me brief about what it was about and I was like “Man, this is gonna’ be really interesting to learn cuz’ all I know is what I see.” Just to know that I can come here and learn about the things that’s like behind closed doors it’s like it’s gonna’ give me a bigger picture like to understand more.

*I think of Freire again; his concept of conscientização, of learning the socio-political influences on our experiential realities.* She re-affirms, then, the unequivocal draw of being among other youth committed to progressive social change,

> To know that when I get here I wasn’t gonna’ be around all the Macs and like it was gonna’ be a different variety of students or as they say, as we say, youth. It’s basically gonna’ be youth who on the same level as you are and like who wants to know the same things that you want to know. They might have the same questions you have…by the end of the whole program like we will do something that’s big, that affects us, that we as the youth made up with our own minds.

*Motivated to create collective change,* I write.

We talk at length about the atmosphere at CFS, the relationships between youth and adults, the leadership roles young people play within the organization. Lashona tells...
us that CFS is “just one of those places where you can feel like you are at home.” It is “laid back, chill lets, crack a joke;” her examples: you can dress comfortable, fix your own food, relax on the couches, talk openly with adults. This comfortable environment, Lashona tells us, is key to transformative personal change. She shared with us this story from her own life as an example:

I was one of those people who was like “This healthy stuff is not gonna’ work.” Like I will eat it ya’ know, but I’m extremely picky eater, extremely picky. So, with like for me to come in there and be like “Ok, so this is the snack. So where’s the food?” and everybody’s like “No, that’s the food” and I was like “What?” And then for them to tell me like the rules are you can’t bring anything unhealthy into the environment and I was like, at first, I was like “That’s stupid! Why would they tell us what we can’t bring up here to eat?”

But, then as I start thinking about it, as a couple of days start going on, I start thinking of it as like that was kinda’ a good idea because eventually you gonna’ start thinking like “Ok, uhm this unhealthy stuff first of all is spending my money when I could be eatin’ free up here. And plus it’s like I’m putting dead food inside my body when I could be eatin’ healthy just like everybody else.” I’m like you gotta’ get with it or just don’t do it at all.

So eventually I started eatin’ the stuff. I actually did like like an apple. I maybe ate like 4 apples a day you know and then like I started eatin’ the sandwiches and everybody else was eatin’ ‘em and I was like “It must be good. I’m gonna try it,” you know and I tried ‘em. I was like “Ok, it’s ok,” you know. I just gotta’ add my own stuff to it, but it’s okay” and I’m like “It ain’t so bad it.” It isn’t like they are telling us don’t eat anything un- healthy at all. They just asking us one simple task like if you come here, just eat healthy at least one time of the day. So, you know I kinda’ got with it. You know, I got used to it.

*Lashona was not pressured to change her habits or beliefs, I reflect. Lashona was provided with information, support and options [to either eat the food available at CFS or to go out to eat on your own] and encouraged to make her own decisions based on the question: will this support my life and work as an activist?*
We shift gears then, moving from an experiential investigation of the Freedom Fellowship to a more specific exploration of her socio-political development. Transitioning us to this new theme, Cristina asks, “So based on what you learned here, uhm how would describe oppression?” “Oppression?,” Lashona responds, quizzically, “I forgot what that is. Can you tell me what oppression is again?” Again, I think, this question is really challenging for some of the Fellows. Cristina attempts to jog her memory, “Oppression, so we came up with a lot of definitions when I was a Freedom Fellow. We just said to put someone down based on their race, culture, for example.” “Yeah, ok, I remember. Yeah, we did the same thing. Uhm, so the question again?” “How would you describe oppression?,” Cristina repeats. “It can be your own words,” I add hastily.

Lashona launches into a explanation of oppression, using classism as an example:

I believe oppression is to pretty much classify. When I say classify like put somebody in a different class of like how much money they are making or how much education they have or uhm how popular they is. Just like classify the person that’s like next ta’ you from yourself and uhm it basically is just kinda’ I believe it’s a horrible way and a nice word to put someone down

\[ \text{Oppression} = \text{classification} = \text{putting others down}, \] I scribe. Othering?, I suppose, tentatively. I note on my guide to come back to this idea of oppression as classification.

As I’m writing, Lashona mentions that she learned about racism and classism in her LIA. “What did you learn about different racial groups?,” I ask.

I learned that Blacks and Hispanics are actually like considered the low the lowest of the low. They get treated the worst in any sort of situation and that’s basically all around the country of the United Sates. They get treated the worst, absolutely worst and they they uhm have the highest uhm prison rate. Also, they have like the highest like STD rate. Uhm, they they’re willing like to die faster than like the whites.
Hoping to continue this line of inquiry, I reply:

So, thinking about those things that you just told me that like black and Hispanic people uhm are in prison more and suffer from more disease and higher rates of death uhm why is it that way? What is the cause of that?

Lashona speaks then of the power of community traditions and norms:

Me, personally, I believe that the cause is they everyday lives. Like from their generations, from growing up you know: like their community, their friends, their school, like the person that they around the most and then if they do step out of it, it’s the way people treat them. So, it’s like they they just go off of what they know best and that’s basically…how to be bad, how to be the toughest person on the block or how how to make the most money, the most illegal way, the most fast way.

What stands out to me most here is the idea that even if you step out of expected norms people may still treat you according to stereotypical cultural expectations. Also, this is how relationships of oppression are reinforced, but not necessarily how they are originated. I wonder what she see as the root causes of racism and classism? I attempt to probe deeper then, asking: “Where do you think that all started from, that idea that like people need to make money quickly so they turn to illegal stuff?” “They mom and dad,”

Lashona begins before reframing her perspective:

I take that back. It don’t even have to start from mom and dad. I think it start from the outside world, they community and like just the generations above that and it’s like everything is following a trail and it’s like everybody is doing basically the same thing that their big cousin or big brother or their friend did you know just just to keep it going but they think that it’s cool because everybody else around them are doin’ it.

It still feels like a superficial analysis, I think, racking my brain for a better way to unearth her analysis of root causes. I opt for a most direct route: “Are there other things that cause that?” “TV, radio, the music business,” she replies. “What they see on TV you
know like the rappers and they inspiration artists an stuff like that; even sometimes books saying that stuff like that [glamorize this lifestyle].”

“Ok, so let’s talk then about the next oppression. You mentioned class differences like low-class, middle-class, high-class. What did you learn about class differences?”

Lashona offers a lengthy breakdown:

I believe that you can be class based on your money like ya’ income and the way you act as a person, like your personality… you can’t just say that a person is high-class, low-class, middle-class because there is no specific umm way of putting a person in a different category like money-wise, but then it comes like to the way they act …the way you make your money is by working or you know going to school or takin’ like the money from public aid to to survive, but you’re highly educated like you know what you talking about, you know what’s going on in today’s world. So, it’s like if you go outside your community and your neighborhood and you go downtown or something and you put on just the right clothing it’s like people gonna’ look at you like “Oh, she’s middle-class” or the way you may talk, “Ah, she must be high-class. She must be from the suburbs or something like that.” So, it’s like when could you classify someone?

*She’s pushing back against definitions of “class” as merely income-based; she’s saying people make assumptions based on social markers, not reality. But what of structural factors that create these false classifications?*, I wonder. “So, why do you think that there are like these different class categories in our society?,” I inquire.

Hmm, to be better than the next; to bring up your self-esteem. I would think like to make you seem like you actually have something to live for like specially like the people whose from the ghetto and from the projects you know ‘cuz I know like I was born and raised in Cabrini Green and you know that’s like one of Chicago’s baddest projects, but as we was children you know for us to know that my father my father was a drug dealer you know and I can tell anybody that to this day, but back then the money was comin’ in so easy. We was young. We was getting basically whatever we wanted… but for our friends’ who mother was workin’ hard, didn’t have nobody there for them you know and to know that if they go outside and mess the things that they got up it’s like “Man,” it’s like “well I’m going to get talked about. Then I’m going to be considered dirty. I’m going to make my mothah’ look bad. I’m gonna’ make my family look bad. So, I gotta’
Her early experiences with economic stratification taught her that money = status = how you live your life, I reflect. Lashona tells us then that classism also impacts people’s educational opportunities in terms of access to quality schools. As she sees it, the deeply intertwined nature of race, class and education dehumanizes young people of color:

They can look at your race and then they see like uhm Latino or black and then seein’ somebody who’s just white…they may start trying to compare…[They assume] this person is probably gonna’ go to a lower-class school…this person is from the projects…they don’t even try to realize like what you went through or see like the the reality of it all you know. They just look at like you know their past and background.

Lashona believes this dehumanization is easy to enact when power and powerlessness are entrenched, concentrated:

The state, like the government as far as in the mayor and judges and anybody that have power over areas of Chicago-land, they have the power to get you to a better place or to let you stay where you are. They have power to give you money or take from you… more [officials] are like white. It’s it’s more whites and it’s crazy ‘cuz it’s like they they have so much power.

At last, her understanding of the structural context of oppression is emerging. Excitedly, I ask: “Why do you think that whites have more power?”

It’s a generation thing. By them taking over way way back in the slavery days and stuff. It’s like people, well generations now, put they self in that same category, as in if you have curly hair you supposed to be low-class and if you have that pretty straight hair oh you automatically supposed to be high-class and you supposed to be treated right like royalty you know and the curly hair people or the dark skin people should always be treated like dirt. They always should be like together and disrespect each other because that’s how the white man wrote it out to be.

The racialized and class-based nature of education is historically situated in social, political and cultural systems of domination, I note. Lashona adds, “They tryin’ to keep
us brown and black people like down. They don’t want us to get above. They don’t want
us to succeed. They don’t want us to do anything that’s big that can help out the world.”

Lashona points out that the status quo is reinforced in society by stratifying and
pitting people of color against each other:

If I’m like a lighter skin than a person next to me whose dark skinned and
my hair is more like the straighter maybe still curly but straighter and this
person hair is coarse like very nappy, I’m gonna’ get treated with more
respect than this person is you know because I look more like the whites…
It’s like blacks are against blacks and why? We fightin’ each other when
we should be stickin’ together to make everything better you know. Show
them that we aren’t as dumb as you know low-down as they think we are.

Cristina chimes in then, “Do you feel you have any oppressive behaviors?” Lashona
admits openly that racist and classist currents run throughout her day-to-day interactions
with the people around her, both in terms of how she is treated, as well as how she treats
others:

Yeah I do. I can say I do. I wanna’ say that I think everybody they have it
every blue moon…I kinda’ was aware of you know like how I have how I
can be or how I can act or you know how I can classify the next person, but
it really did open up my eyes to see like that’s not cool…it opened up my
eyes a lot a whole lot like you you can’t be doin’ that because it’s just not
something that you normally do. Treat others like you want to be treated.

*Development of self-reflexivity,* I jot as Lashona adds, proudly, that since becoming a
Freedom Fellow she speaks out more against oppression and tries to open her friends’
eyes to the realities of the educational and legal systems. In fact, the injustice of racial
and class-based hierarchies is the impetus for Lashona’s vision of another world:

Everyone is comin’ together like on a regular to help each other out. It
would be it would be activities for all kids, like I mean Blacks, Indians,
Puerto Ricans, Hispanics, all. All kids comin’ together and you can go
wherever you like and not worry about “Oh, I can’t go over there because
you know this gang over there or these people over there or these girls
don’t like me over there.” So yeah, everything would be cool. You’d be
you’d have all the freedom in the world.

*Justice = racial unity and the freedom to live/go/move wherever we want,* I write.

Ringing of a Gandhian philosophy, Lashona concludes, “My role is to show justice. To actually be like what I would want it to be, like showin’ it.” For Lashona, “showing justice” means spreading awareness of social inequities, avoiding stereotypes and put downs and teaching others about social action. For Lashona, being an activist means living like “every minute counts; every single minute.” *I contemplate this simple imperative as we say our goodbyes, grateful for the reminder to live with purpose.*
Daniel

*It’s sorta’ like we ourselves are scared of each other when we’re practically the same. We’re just different in skin color...if we work together and, instead of seeing the differences we see ourselves as people, I guess we’ll work more hand-in-hand.* – Daniel, August 16, 2010

Daniel is a founding member of the Gay-Straight Alliance at his school in west Chicago. He is a second-generation Mexican immigrant. He attends school in a predominately Latino neighborhood; lives in a nearby African American community set apart from La Villita by a simple, yet potently divisive viaduct. Daniel is a 17 year old with an inquisitive mind, open heart and courageous spirit. He loves learning about psychology and dreams of being a teacher someday. Consistent with cultural tradition, Daniel is a baptized Catholic, attends church with his family every Sunday. Yet, his relationship with religion is full of complexity; it is, in fact, a source of great scrutiny and critical questioning for Daniel. In these two interviews – conducted respectively at one month and six months into the Freedom Fellowship – we explore Daniel’s emerging critique of the cultural, religious and familial dynamics that create and maintain gender inequities. We begin, below, with a brief discussion of Daniel’s motivation for becoming a freedom fighter.

*All I hear is “Oh, the problem is this and if we solve this, we are done with these problems. It sorta’ is hard to believe that they have the solutions if they don’t do anything about it. If you have the ideas, why don’t you just share them out with the community, open people’s eyes?” – Daniel*

I begin, “What was it that interested you about the Freedom Fellowship when you first heard about it?” Daniel indicates, “Well, the topic gender is one thing that I just like have an interest for and well I’ve been reading a lot about Psychology and stuff like that.” He adds, “My friend did a PowerPoint for our class like and she showed pictures…it
looked like a family. I thought it was going to be fun; it was going to be different.” *Topic of interest; appealing environment*, I jot hastily, hoping to learn more. Later in our interview my hope is fulfilled when Daniel reveals a more personal motivation for pursuing the Fellowship, one based on a desire to improve cross-cultural relationships within his school:

Before we even applied I already had a plan: almost a student-led youth forum that is almost like opening each other up and it being uhm people that we’re similar to, so it’d be like [all] Latina girls and then they would speak on these problem and then at the end come together [with Latino boys and African American girls and boys] and see how their ideas are similar to each others…break those little the things that keep us away.

His school, he explains, founded by Latino activists and situated in a Mexican neighborhood, also serves the predominately African American North Lawndale community. This integrated context, although constructive in some ways, remains subject to both the historical and contemporary factors constraining race relationships throughout Chicago. Daniel offers me this example of the negative stereotypes that permeate his school-home environment:

I live in an African American community and like my friends don’t want to come over to my house. They are scared. They would talk to my neighbors as “they” and “them” and it sorta’ gets to me and it’s like, “What do you mean they? What do you mean them?”

In Daniel’s assessment, the division is more than cognitive, “The viaduct by my house, it’s like a separation. It separates the African American community and Mexican…the line where you can’t pass this side because then you’re in the other community, the *scary community*.”

*Daniel has come to the Freedom Fellowship with an instinctual understanding of oppression and an inclination to challenge the injustice in this world*, I note. Wanting to
explore his conceptualization further, I ask, “Based on your experience in that [LIA] class could you just like describe how you think about oppression?” “Oh,” Daniel exclaims with gusto. I laugh for a moment, reassure him that he can take his time, think it through.

He tells me that oppression boils down to disrespect; sexism, for example, operates within religion to disrespect women:

[Religion is] mostly a guy thing. Like the God is a guy and the priest is always a guy and the nuns are the girls…There’s not that many like women pastors I guess because it’s not really taken seriously as the guy pastors. In my church in Pilsen when they always change the pastors it’s always an older man and it took me back to like the video like how they were showing women are these sex objects.

Acknowledging that oppression is internalized, Daniel asserts,

We get ourselves as growing up to follow these norms. Even though we deconstructed it [the media], it was still embedded in us. We grew up like knowing these concepts already at a young age but not really taking into effect what it does to us.

Consciousness is only one aspect of un-learning oppression. I ask Daniel then for a personal example of this embeddedness. He explains:

The man is supposed to know like how to work, how to do all this stuff. My dad forces us to like learn these things…like to paint…everything, plumbing, air conditioning, mechanic. I try to like learn new things. I’ll do the paperwork in the house but he’ll still want us to learn these things…That and beer, like this um this sign of being masculine and drinking and smoking…when you are a man you are supposed to know how to drink and handle your drink and smoke and look like it’s this certain image. I want to stay away from that cuz I know the facts afterwards like cirrhosis and everything. So I just don’t want to be a part of that.

Wow, he’s already mentioned sexism in the media, in religion and in family systems. But we need to delve deeper, I think to myself, decided to summarize and allow him to direct the flow of conversation:

Ok, so far I’ve heard you talk about uhm a couple of different forms of
oppression. I want to talk about each of them in more depth. You talked a little bit about the gender norms and how media plays into that and then you also talked a little bit about religion. So let’s just pick one for now and then tell me what you think is like the root cause of that problem. Like why do you think that problem exists?

“I want to do religion,” he replies, explaining,

it’s like really big in our family because like it’s been generation upon generations of having this cross around your neck and like um getting your first communion and confirmation and being baptized. It’s become the norm…[even though] people were forced into these religions like Christianity.

Daniel confides, then, that he doesn’t agree with religion because it’s a tool of colonization and that practicing Catholicism is an internalized expression of oppression, a hypocrisy.

He explains, too, that religion directly contributes to women’s oppression, offering us this example:

When we’ve been to this other church, it was a lady priest but like she wasn’t really being listened to ‘cuz like she had a helper and the helper was getting more attention than the lady. It felt different hearing it from a girl… It’s not everyday that you’ll see a woman priest, so it was like almost like skepticism, like you’re not really sure to really follow like that’s the word of God.

“Hmm. That’s interesting,” I reply. “So, why is it harder to hear or to take it seriously, do you think, from a woman priest?” Daniel hones in on a gender-based double-standard, “The guy priests can be joking around and when the women the priest does it, it’s not really funny.”

Reflecting back I remember another potential connection and say, “I heard you say earlier on that when priests came in to your church that they tended to be older priests, older men. Seems like it relates to the idea of adulthood too?” Daniel concurs,
We had a younger priest but he only stayed for a little bit. He was more like a visitor. He always had like an older priest and he had his helpers and the helper was old like, an older mature man. People would listen but not take his word for it and like outside of like when church ends you get to shake hands with the priests and stuff like that but they would always go for the older guy.

“Hmmm, so it definitely seems like there is a bias there for older men….,” I observe.

“Being more knowledgeable,” Daniel chimes in. “The older the wiser,” he shrugs, reiterating the familiar adage with a hint of disdain. *These intersections of age, gender and religion reveal the deeply engrained biases within our primary institutions, as well as the basis of his personal ambivalence toward religion,* I reflect.

Fascinated, I ask Daniel to draw on his learning from the fellowship to elaborate on other root causes of sexism. He tells me sexism is ingrained in our families and how we are raised, using his parents as an example:

My father’s word goes. So he’s the one with the final word. [My mom] she would say that her mother would always want her to know these things like cook and clean because she doesn’t want her to be a lazy mother and then my dad was raised with being you are the one that has to go hunt for the food. They would literally go hunt and bring crops home…when my mom started working it was like hard for my dad because he thought that she wanted to like be more independent.

*He’s spoken now about a breadth of injustices. Sexism, of course, but he’s also mentioned adultism and racism. I know from my observations and other interviews that CFS takes a broad, holistic approach to framing oppression. I wonder what issues are pertinent to Daniel.*

I ask, “Are there other forms of oppression that you relate to personally?”

“Xenophobia,” Daniel replies, explaining that some people are “afraid of like other people, like outsiders;” that “coming from different background like I don’t know, you’re
seen differently, as like your won’t understand.” To Daniel, xenophobia is irrational.

“We’re all outsiders,” he proclaims, philosophically, “We’re all different.” He adds that although oppression may be experienced differently by different people “it sort of replays itself in certain areas.” *There are commonalities in the lived experience of oppression,* I interpret in my notes before eliciting an example. At this request, Daniel provides a litany of ways in which oppression is replayed, including “jealousy,” “competition,” “bringing them [other people] down instead of helping them come up,” “violence,” and “stereotypes.” *I’m brought back to an earlier proclamation: there’s more power in coming together for common cause than staying divided by assumptions and stereotypes.*

I decide to follow this tangent and ask Daniel to describe his role in changing the world for the better. “I guess uhm like help them [other people] like get their ideas started. But, then also help myself and really push myself and get my ideas out there,”

When I ask him how he’ll push his own ideas, Daniel tells me that at school “if it’s something for a good cause they’ll be on board.” He elaborates, “I’m in GSA, Gay-Straight Alliance, and we had this uhm proud open-mic and it was just about being proud of your heritage and being a boy, a girl, of being like whatever that you identify yourself with.” *The mention of the GSA, toward the end of the interview, seems particularly significant,* I think to myself. I prompt Daniel to continue, “That’s the first time that you’ve mentioned being involved with uhm in a gay-straight alliance. Homophobia, is that something like you’ve been I get the impression that you’ve been actively working against?” Daniel begins to open up about his queer activism, “Yeah I stated freshman year and this is my 3rd year now and there’s only like five of us but it’s getting there.”
I ask, again, about root causes. Like sexism, Daniel sees homophobia and heterosexism as founded in religious, cultural and familial norms:

Being different and not following what’s there to be followed, I guess. My culture that’s really bad thing to do being atheist and then like atheism and then having to like the same sex is really bad. And it’s like a stigma almost that if you’re this then you’re gonna be this this and this. They already have their own stereotypes…and then my family is like when those shows come on like they’ll have like an openly gay-like person they’ll automatically change the channel like they don’t want to watch it.

_Heteronormativity is strictly enforced_, I jot. Daniel continues, describing how his family’s prejudices impact him:

It gets me angry ‘cuz they take it as a joke like “Oh, it’s gay, ha ha ha.” Ya’ know how nowadays they say everything is gay and that’s okay…my brother, he’s the one started it. Uhm, he brought it home one day, like “That’s so gay!” I’m like, “Well, why is it happy?”

As Daniel tells it, when his family found out he was in the GSA, his parents allowed him to continue, but advised him to limit his involvement “because like if you’re too involved in it then you’ll turn gay.” I empathize with Daniel, my heart goes out to him. Aware of how much pressure young people feel to conform to dominant expectations of gender identity and sexual orientation, I feel compelled to validate his anger:

That’s a really difficult thing ‘cuz now you’re in a situation where it’s like something that’s really important to you and you are seeing these things in your own life and in your family that you don’t necessarily agree with and you want to do things a little differently for yourself and you have to come up with ways ya’ know to talk about it with your family and you have to deal with their resistance and their fears. It can be really challenging.

I offer this small piece of validation, hoping he understands my allegiance. I ask, “Daniel, when you visualize the world that you want to live in what is that like?” His answer is consistent with that of his peers in the Freedom Fellowship:

Well, I think you can’t really have like a certain picture of how it’s
supposed to look because then you’ll be making your own norms and then you’ll start a new problem. So, I like don’t have a specific scene, but like lessen the hate and the segregation in our city, diversify our like parks and stuff like that, uhm change demographics, uhm the statistics in jail, increase the education funding.

*I’m impressed by his sincerity, his concern for other people, his understanding that to be authentically just we must be holistic in our work to eliminate oppression.*

“Sometimes it makes me happy just thinking that I’m disapproved…I think of it as I’m being happy and if you’re not happy then we’re not in the same boat.” – Daniel, on being called “gay” or “faggot,” December 15, 2010.

In our second interview with Daniel, Julius and I seek evidence of greater depth, breadth and complexity in this young man’s socio-political analysis and commitment to activism for progressive social change. We begin with an inquiry of his group’s action plan, focusing on the nuances of how Daniel articulates a sexism awareness blog as activism. To begin, Daniel explains that the group choose to create a blog “so we can connect our group’s goal of informing people about sexism in the media with other groups that are already doing something about it.” As he sees it, the blog draws attention to this issue and is simple and feasible to implement within the programmatic time constraints. He admits, though, that his initial aspirations were bigger:

What we really wanted to do was do something with the billboards and get people to be aware that there is something like there that you just don’t see it, but it’s hurting us. Not to say that the blog isn’t anything, but I sort of felt like we could do something way better than just a blog, like workshops at least and start discussions in our community. But, since the time was running out, we had to do a blog.

*Highly motivated to create change, I write, but limited by the realities of doing so within a six month timeframe; raises questions about teaching something as unpredictable as*
community organizing within the conventions of youth programming. I add in my post-interview reflections, thinking back to the struggles mentioned by the adult allies.

Despite what he sees as limitations in scope, Daniel acknowledges then that the blog is a way of using technology to start dialogues about sexism because “anyone can comment” and “start asking themselves questions.” He sees dialogue as powerful because “to address the root cause you have to start talking about it…deeply thinking about it.”

The blog, he says, exposes people to new ideas and resources, such as the Killing Us Softly, Tough Guise and Hip Hop: Beyond Beats and Rhymes videos or the page in which Fellows recreate media with positive messages and original images of gender. Activism is providing alternative perspectives with the aim of changing attitudes and behaviors, I note. For Daniel, developing a blog is an initial foray into the fight against sexism:

Gender roles is something like that I’m really interested in it. Sexism in the media is something that is a step forward. It’s my first step toward helping with sexism. I found it I guess it was really interesting getting to know more and more. I already I had my own information on it, but I didn’t necessarily know like a thorough view of everything.

This mirrors Darrel’s stance that gaining new knowledge about a social injustice provides important context to a topic of intrigue and builds confidence for taking action, I reflect.

Intuitively, Julius asks “Did you or anybody in your group personally struggle with gender roles or have any personal connection to the topic of sexism?” Daniel discloses that although they discussed their personal experiences with sexism during the summer institute on-going dialogue about their experiential understandings of this oppression would have enhanced their blog by “allowing people to put their own stories and their own input into it.” Personalizing the political, I jot before asking a last question
about the action plan: “Daniel, what kind of impact do you think the blog is having on the community?” His answer is simultaneously insightful and evasive:

I think we need to step outside the blog because I think workshops would do good… for me personally, I would want workshop discussing gender because we don’t get to talk about being a boy or being a girl in school or outside of school. People need to start that discussion because some of us are being silenced and told you have to be this way.

*What is unspoken – gendered expectations – is confining.* I scribe.

We switch gears then, move from action planning to critical consciousness, ask Daniel to discuss root causes of sexism. He replies:

It starts in the beginning like the caveman is the hunter and the women is the gatherer. I guess since we started like women are seen weaker and I guess since the views in soap operas and media outlets we’re portrayed like guys aren’t supposed to have no emotion and women with emotion and they have to be weak. And I guess that alone causes people to start seeing each other as one is higher than the other.

Julius prompts then, “I remember you saying earlier about how we’re provided with a template to follow as a boy or a girl. Do you remember any specific times when somebody told you you’re not supposed to do something because you’re a boy?” Daniel draws on his family life as an example of gender forming:

A time when they have told me “you can’t do this because you’re a boy?” Oh, piercing, that’s one. They would be like “Oh, that’s feminine.” Like if you have a piercing that means you’re a girl or you’re in this gang or that gang. But it mostly to my family it means that you’re a girl. Well, they say, “you might as well put on a pink dress and chop your balls off.”

He elaborates:

I think it comes down back to my dad cause like my dad is really the template guy, like “you have to do this.” An engineer, he wants me to be an engineer. I don’t like that. I want to be a teacher. In his eyes that’s something someone like a person with education shouldn’t do. He wants us to go into a vocation, engineering, plumbing, a handy man.
Julius pushes for more information, “Talk a little bit about how you overcome like if they say something is feminine and you don’t care and want to do it anyway.” Daniel is candid about his struggle to overcome oppressive gender norms:

When it comes down to gender, because you’re a boy, it’s hard. I like stop listening because I want to separate myself from that thinking and be more open to new ideas because that comes down to also sexuality. how we’re supposed to be heterosexual. And then my mom sees like either if you’re gay or lesbian or bi-, one of those three, then oh you’re breaking a sin. You’re not a boy anymore. You’re something else. You’re an it, practically.

As Daniel sees it, the Freedom Fellowship helped him develop a critical awareness about his own thinking:

I just opened up more. I became more conscious about how I thought. I can’t even watch cartoons very much. I get angry sometimes because like black face in like in Dragon Ball Z and you don’t see it…. And some of the commercials; there was a dollhouse one and there was a girl cleaning and then the mom’s like “Great job!” and I was like “Really?!” (laughs). I never thought of it before as certain things being there for a reason.

I summarize, “So sometimes you see that image and you kind of question it. And you feel like it’s silly maybe even because it’s so obvious to you?” Daniel confirms, “Sometimes it’s so blatant I start just laughing because like ‘for real, you didn’t see this before?’ It’s sort of I guess it’s like making fun of myself for or like laughing at myself for not seeing it before.” Lib ed makes the invisible, visible, I write.

He confides then that sometimes he uses humor to help others understand and deal with oppression, sharing this example of how he relates to his sister:

I call Forever 21 like bulimic fashion, like almost making fun of them because their better clothes are smaller clothes than the bigger clothes. The bigger clothes are the ugly outfits…It’s like they’re forcing you to go down to zero-zero… we call it “5 years of anorexia” because like literally that’s what you have to go through just to be that perfect thin body…So, I’d rather distract her by almost making fun of bulimia and anorexia, by being
like it’s so bad. Trying to distract her from going into that path.

His new-found consciousness of sexism also prompts him to challenge his friends to accept themselves as they are:

In a way I feel bad for them because like they’ve internalized these ideals of beauty and they haven’t been exposed to the health risks of anorexia and bulimia. If you’re this size, well, be happy your that size. Don’t try to like stick your finger down your throat or stop eating just because of that.

We talk for bit longer about how Daniel acts as an ally to people struggling with body image issues when finally I ask ,“So when you see oppression or you experience it in your own life, what do you as Daniel do?,” I ask. Daniel describes a mix of emotional and psychological responses:

Sometimes I don’t care if they say, “you’re acting silly” or “you’re not acting in order.” Like sometimes I could be with my friends, we could be all goofy and people could yell out things like “gay” or “faggot” or other words like that and I would just be like, “It’s just me.” I leave it alone. I try not to internalize the words, saying that I’m “Oh this and this.” Like not taking it personally. Before I would take it personally. I would feel really bad for being me. Now I try not to think about it at all. It’s hard sometimes. It’s harder when it comes from your family than when it comes from strangers. From strangers like I can say like “Oh, I don’t care.” But when it comes from your family, like that I internalize more than from strangers.

*Socio-political consciousness gives Daniel the self-confidence to resist oppression, at least in some circumstances,* I reflect. Sensing that he’s taken a risk in disclosing these feelings, I empathize, “I appreciate you sharing that. I think it is hurtful when your family says things that like are disapproving of who you are.” Daniel admits,

Right, sometimes it makes me happy just thinking that I’m disapproved because then I just starting smiling and I just start laughing. Then I think of it as I’m being happy and if you’re not happy then we’re not in the same boat...I just stop listening and just like tune them out. It’s hard. I try my best not to let their words get me down because we only have this one life. I’d rather live it the way that I want to live it than how you tell me to live it.
He’s is resilient, strong and self-loving, I write.

I validate Daniel’s experience of resistance and ask then whether there are any other ways he deals with oppression. He tells us this story of working against racism within his school:

Our school only has like 8 African American kids total. It’s gone from like 20. It’s decreased over time. They’ve all like dropped out or moved away to another school because of safety concerns because it’s almost all Latinos, like 95%. Yeah, they cross the boundaries. When they’re not there, I feel like most people attack them, like “oh, it’s not our fault that they’re gone.” They call them “them” and never people. And they’re like “oh, you’re just defending them because you live with them.” I defend them because I call them my people because we’re all people and we have to come together sooner or later and if we need that push, well, I’ll push.

Like Darrel, he sees people’s humanity before their racial identity, I scribe. “Uhm hmm,”

I murmur, prompting him to go on:

They’re like “They’re here because they just want to mess around and be loud and everything like that.” And I say “no.” I use the same thing because I’m Latino, I say I’m like “We don’t behave. We’re loud. We’re more loud than them.” And then that’s how I try to balance it and then they’re like “Why are you defending them” and I’m like “Well, why are you attacking them?”

He adds:

They call them Mites, which means “people who eat shit.” That’s a word that gets me really angry…and I’m like “first of all don’t ever call African American people that.” When I get rides home from my friends’ families, they would ask “Aren’t you scared of them?” No, it’s just people. I guess I’m more comfortable outside of my race than in my race because in my race, I used to live in Pilsner and it’s used to be all Latino, there’s more racism because you’re separated from other people. It’s like “Oh, they’re different. They’re this and this.” I guess moving into a completely different atmosphere changes everything. You understand why there’s no integration.

He tells us, frustration in his voice, how he’s lost Latino friends for defending his African American ones. Despite these consequences, he insists on being an ally because “helping
out the people that are there, having them feel more at home will get more people to integrate their relationships.” Connecting his anti-racism and anti-sexism work, Daniel concludes,

I don’t want to have that boy privilege that oh I’m higher than a female or that a girl she’s not, she can’t be as smart as a guy. I want to get that notion that someone is better….like take it away from our mind from thinking that oh we’re never going to be as good as this…I want to give back to my community because at school we’re taught that you’re given a lot of skills to make life better for the human beings and the people you love. So, I sort of take that to heart. I want to be a teacher…like giving tools to students to understand how the world is complex and we can start breaking down these little walls, little-by-little.

*I think of Che, of how liberation is a collective endeavor, built on just such alliances.*
Maya

It’s like they don’t care about the kids...They don’t really try to help them get back on their feet. They just lock them up. – Maya, on youth criminalization, September 1, 2010

Maya is a warm, cheery young woman from the South side. She attends a vocational high school, where she is a junior. At 16, she is poised and affectionate, always quick to give a hug and a smile. Maya is actively involved in her church community- sings in choir and participates in youth activities. To Maya, family is of utmost importance. She talks often of caring for her sister, helping her mom or dad and spending time with her cousins and other extended family. She talks too of how CFS appealed to her because of the warmth, friendliness and family-like environment. We come to know this young African American woman through two interviews, the first one just a month and a half into the Freedom Fellowship, the second, six months later.

When I actually learned what it [LIA Institute] was about, it was something different. I wanted that. I never even thought about it [the School-to-Prison Pipeline]. Once I started looking it up and asking about it, I thought it would be cool to help and figure out what’s going on. – Maya

We start our initial interview with Maya, September 1, 2010, discussing how she came to be a Freedom Fellow. Maya, as she tells it, was drawn to this opportunity by two distinct factors: first of all, she found the School-to-Prison pipeline an intriguing topic of study and one in which she could contribute to finding solutions; secondly, she was drawn to CFS by the “welcoming aura” portrayed by both the people and the place. According to Maya,

At first, I was acting kind of scared because I didn’t know what the inside was going to look like. But once I came up and the walls were all yellow, I thought this was like a friendly place. The aura was pretty inviting, like it wants you to come in…it’s not like a business place. If someone else was
to just come in, they would think that someone stays here. The back is more comfortable and the front is more business.

_The mullet-equivalent_, I think, distractedly and laugh. I share the joke with Cristina and Maya then and we all get a good chuckle, before we move on to more serious discussion.

For a while, Cristina and I take turns asking about her relationships with her peers, with alumni and with the adult allies at CFS, until, eventually, we come to the topic of her socio-political development. Cristina asks, “Based on what you’ve learned here, how would you describe oppression?” Maya, like some of her peers, finds this question challenging, asks for clarification. I explain:

So, the first questions were more like just about your experience coming into the program. The next series of questions that we’re going to ask you are about the types of things you learned. Don’t try to think about giving us perfect definitions of things. That’s not what we’re looking for. Just tell us about the things that you remember learning about in your class, like what stood out to you when you were learning about how youth are criminalized?

Maya seems relieved, begins with an example of how oppression plays out within the education system:

I think that the education system could be a little better. For the whole Zero Tolerance thing, as soon as you do something bad, you are kicked out of school. Personally, that’s how I feel like at my school ‘cuz at my school if you do anything you will have in-school suspension or out of school. If you have a certain amount of in-school suspension, you’ll have an out-of-school. A certain amount of out-of-schools, you’re going be expelled. But, I think that, um, like, you know, it’s just not fair because some of the teachers that are there actually want us to learn and want to help us and some teachers don’t. It’s the teachers that don’t, they want to keep us out. If we’re not smart enough to know everything in their class then they just kick us out. They expect us to not make it in life.

_She perceives some teachers and schools as uncaring, unsupportive_, I jot. Post-interview, Cristina confirms that schools are very strict and that some teachers do have this negative mentality toward students.
“Why do you think teachers think like that?,” I prompt. Maya sees money as a motivating factor:

Most of the teachers there just say “Well, if you don’t learn, I don’t have to teach because I still get paid until my two weeks is up.” I think the whole thing is money. If teachers actually worked and didn’t get paid, like it was a side job for them, then most of them wouldn’t even work because they don’t get paid. The teachers that actually want us to succeed would work and not be mad about getting paid.

I’m a bit perplexed, I think to myself. I’ll need to come back and think further about this explanation.

I ask then for an example of how oppression plays out in the juvenile justice system. Maya begins with a passionate critique of the all-to-common practice of trying children as adults:

I don’t think it’s fair. At the age of being treated as an adult, I think it should be 18 because then you’re legal. They said that they’re actually starting to, you know, put 13 year olds in the adult system. At 13, I just became a teenager, I’m like nowhere near being an adult yet. How do you try me as an adult when I’m 5,6,7 years away from being an adult?

“How is this social problem connected to education?,” I ask. Response ready, Maya explains that it all comes back to the concept of the School-to-Prison Pipeline:

It [School-to-Prison Pipeline] is basically just like saying that the people that don’t go to school, get kicked out of school, they go to prison. They have nothing to do with their lives and they just wind up in prison one day. Period. That’s what the pipeline is basically saying.

“How do you think all youth experience the system the same?,” I inquire. Maya tells us there are distinctions in how young people are treated within the criminal legal and educational systems based on their class and racial backgrounds:

Some youth, they parents have the money and they can be like, “Oh, my child has this problem, and we’re going to get them a therapist” or something like that. But, if another child has the same problem, but doesn’t
have the money to get it fixed then they just send them to jail. As long as you have money, you’re ok. Unless you have a racist judge…there is some judges that are probably racist.

“So, thinking about either the education system or the juvenile justice system and the problems that you told me that you see, what do you think are the root causes of those problems?,” I prompt.

I would think the root cause of the kids being dropped out of school would be the teachers who have, not the zero tolerance, but a low tolerance for anything. Then it goes back to money, you know. They can say “I still get paid.” Kids feel like “Well, they don’t want me to be here. I’m just going to leave.” Then the whole thing starts. I think if you have teachers that actually cared and that wanted to do something, they would actually, you know, keep the kids there and do after-school with them or different things like that to make sure that they stay in school…If you were helped when you were younger, you feel that you want to help people. If everybody disused you and put you on the back burner than you’re just going to do that to other people.

To Maya, the problem is cyclical, a repetition by adults of the very treatment they received as kids, I think. Later, I add in my notes, Our failure as adults to allocate sufficient resources, such as after-school programming, is felt by young people as uncaring, hostile even. Cristina chimes in then, asking Maya if she’s personally experienced such problems in the educational or juvenile legal systems. Maya shares this story of her cousin, a teenager involved in drug dealing, and how his incarceration has impacted her family:

My cousin he was a big time drug dealer and we won’t see him out for another four years. It kind of affects the whole family because when we have family reunions he’s not there. It kind of makes it look sad, but we try to not think about it. It kind of makes his mama act different. She still tries to be the same person, but now she acts different.

I ask Maya to describe what was going on in her cousin’s life that may have led to his involvement in street economies. She surmises:
His mama and his father had just gotten divorced. I think it might have been that and then we usually don’t have a lot of men in our family. It’s mostly girls. He was probably one of ten men out of all these females. None of the men actually really talked him, so he doesn’t really have anybody in his life to tell him what’s right and wrong… One of the main problems is not having a positive influence for men or women. Then just getting caught up in the wrong thing.

Lack of resources + lack of role models → to high-risk youth behaviors, I jot. As I’m writing, Cristina asks, “What difference do you notice between how you might experience oppression and how another person might experience it?” Maya is candid:

Well, that might depend on race or something like that. As an African American I might experience it more than like a Caucasian or a Hispanic or something like that… they [the Caucasian race] try to put us down. I wouldn’t say all of them because most of them are pretty cool…it’s just like some people have parents or grandparents who were part of the Martin Luther King era… They wanted black people to be down and once they having children, they’re telling their children this. That’s probably the reason why it’s still going around.

Maya is unpacking the ways in which cultural and familial beliefs systems about racial privilege are reinforced across generations, I think to myself. In retrospect, I note that I must ask more about her view on the differences between African American and Hispanic experiences of racism. Hoping to gain a deeper understanding of her socio-political analysis, I ask, “Why do you think there’s this social idea that white people are better?” For Maya, the hierarchical nature of race relations is confounding:

I’m really not sure why some people think Caucasians are better. I feel like we are all the same. I mean, other than the color. If you want to get technical about it, they say the reason we’re so dark is because of the sun. When it first started, when they came over to Africa and got us, if people switched places, I think it still wouldn’t be any different. Everything is just the same. I’m not sure why they think some races are better than others. Some people just have a small thinking, you know.

Maya adds then, that racism is often internalized and perpetuated within racial groups:
Sometimes inside your own race you can experience it too. Most of the time when I’m with my friends it’s like we do that, we do the whole racism thing, but we do it as a joke. We try not to be too serious. We’ll just sometimes play around and say stupid things, but we’ll say we’re sorry. We’ll apologize because we really don’t mean it. I’m not sure but my sister she’s gotten into that whole thing and I’m not sure where it came from or anything because no one in my family is racist. She’ll just be like, “No one likes you because you’re black, Maya.” And I’ll just be like, “What are you talking about?” She’s just talking and I’m like “That’s not right. If someone hears you say that you could get in trouble or something like that.” But, she do it like she’s so small you think it’s cute, but it’s really not. I’m not sure where it comes from. It might be like on TV or something at her school.

Thinking back on earlier questions, I note, *Much of Maya’s discussion of oppression is based on how individual attitudes and behaviors confirm the system.* I think of Freire, again, of his insistence that “individuals make the system” (Freire, 2000). I think too of humor and the ways in which it can both serve and undermine anti-oppression work; humor can, after all be an outlet for strong emotions, a self-protective shield; humor can disarm resistance to a new idea. But humor can also hurt, demean, negate and mislead; humor can teach intolerance. *I want to ask her more about the use of humor, but I’m not sure of what my question is.* I pause, struggling to form a question, and instead our interview moves in a new direction.

Cristina inquires, “What is your vision of a just world?” Maya returns to the issue at hand, the under-education and over-incarceration of young people:

Well, I was going to say everything is good, but like if somebody does do like something bad then they should actually be in trouble for what they did...Then the children will be prosecuted as kids, not as adults, unless you’re 18...like the whole thing with restorative justice, it’s like a movement or method of learning that gives you a second chance.

*Maya is motivated by a sense of fairness – people must be held accountable for our actions, but must also be given opportunities to repent, relearn and restore. Maya, at her*
core, is a believer in transformation, I think, feeling moved by her passionate faith in people’s redemption.

“If it was a just world I really wouldn’t be scared to go out in to the world as much.” – Maya, December 15, 2010

As the 2010 Freedom Fellowship neared its end, Genesis and I had the pleasure to meet up with Maya for a second in-depth interview. This second meeting gave us the opportunity to delve deeper into the developmental shifts in Maya’s socio-political consciousness, understandings of activism and skills for leadership and social change. As in our other follow-up interviews, we begin by exploring her perspective on the group’s action plan. Genesis implores, “The first question is to describe your group’s action plan.” Maya begins:

The group’s action plan was basically to go to Gage Park and to change most of their policies to restorative justice instead of punitive…we kind of set up a peer jury so instead of getting suspended you can go through a peer jury and depending on like your what you did, you can go through a peer jury and probably ask for justice instead of just getting into trouble.

I chime in, “How did your group come up with this action plan?” Maya explains that the process was collaborative and strategic,

We all came up with it together…we actually went through a series of elimination of each school we wanted to go…and then we ended up picking Gage Park because it’s more diverse…the next step was basically figuring’ out how we are gonna’ change the policies…then once we figured what we were gonna’ do we had to figure out how we were gonna’ get into the school to ya’ know talk to the principal and tell him what our ideas were.

“Ok good,” I reply, “And um how do you see restorative justice connected to all of the things that you studied in the week that you were here this summer?” Maya is adamant,
Well they did connected very, very strongly because everything that we learned about like the different little things that people did ya’ know all over, it’s almost the same here… but ya’ know just trying to change that so they wouldn’t be always just in trouble. So we can fix ya’ know the incarceration rates ‘cuz they always figure that if you ya’ know kick someone out of school all they gonna’ do is either go to jail or be shot or somethin’ like that.

I summarize, “Ok so the idea is like a restorative policy like having them a peer jury would help keep kids in school and so then they are less likely to be incarcerated.”

“Well, from what I’ve learned, the root cause of oppression you can say Black people are put at the bottom of everything. I kinda’, a while I go, I kind of divided into 4 groups. It was according to how they are, the white male and then you can say it’s between the white female and the black male, ‘cuz I guess you can depending on who you are referring to, white people are still over blacks, or the males over females. So, I can go either way, and then black women at the bottom. So, either way it goes everybody looks down on the black people, I guess you can say, and we are oppressed because yeah we are black and we are female and we can’t do I guess they say we can’t do a lot of things that everybody else can.
She’s beginning to unpack how our identities and oppressions intersect, using a ranking framework, I reflect. “Ok, so let’s talk more about that so um that idea that people or society says that black women for example can’t do a lot of things. What do you think about that?,” I ask. Maya is defiant,

I think it’s a lie. I think we can do just about anything anybody else wanna’ do and that like if we were all the same person I mean the same ya’ know race and the same gender ya’ know everybody be able to do everything. It wouldn’t really be a difference

“Why do you think like our society would keep telling this lie?,” I prompt. “I really want to find out the answer to that,” Maya admits, then adds, “but in my head it’s like white supremacy.” Intrigued, I ask, “What does white supremacy mean to you?” Maya explains:

Well, basically it’s like the fact that that whites are basically are above everything. Whites are just better than the next person, like they just the top of the food chain and we just sit there and most of us just take it and we let the white man be on top. Sometimes subconsciously we do it. We don’t do it on purpose, but it happens.

As individuals, we may reinforce systemic oppression without even being aware of it, I note.

In addition to the racial and class implications of the school-to-prison pipeline, Maya sees adultism as an insidious factor in maintaining this particular system of oppression. She explains that interrupting the pipeline requires us to counter adultism:

What we are doing ya’ know um we are trying to really I guess change peoples’ minds about the youth. Most people, adults, they think that ya’ know we can’t do anything. We are just children, we always getting’ into it, but ya’ know not being responsible or anything like that. We get suspended when some of the time, it’s not really all our fault. So we get put under a bad eye because of someone else, because of someone’s else wrong doin’. But, I guess with us we can shed some light on that and probably try to change people’s minds about us so that us so that us as
young people won’t be oppressed by adults.

*Adultism, as a system of oppression, ignores the social and institutional factors that contribute to young people’s problems.* I think. And we talk then about her experiences with adults at CFS, exploring how these relationships differ from those of adults at large, how at CFS she is comfortable in the space and with the people. For Maya, this encouraging environment is key to personal growth:

I’ve actually changed I think a lot because when I first came here it really was ya’ know just … financial. Once I got here then I liked learning…and then after we got back came the question of will I stay and as I reflected over the couple days ‘til our next meeting, I reflected over the week and ya’ know and I was like “Well, ya’ know, I like the people. I like the space. Everybody is ya’ know pretty cool.” And I thought, “I’m doing something different.” So I started coming to the meetings and…I felt like even if I didn’t get paid at all, I would still do ya’ know what I’m doing, how I’m doing it and everything, not based on money.

*Her motivations for activism have deepened beyond the financial incentives of the program,* I write. Later, during analysis, I’m reminded of the parallel between Maya’s deepened dedication and her desire for teachers who care about more than a paycheck. In the moment, though, I prompt for other examples of how she’s changed as a result of the Freedom Fellowship. As Maya tells it, she is more aware of privilege, more collaborative and a stronger leader:

A couple of weeks ago we were reading an article…about the unknown privileges that you have and the privileges that you don’t acknowledge. Yeah, then we had to write down that the privilege that adults have over us that they don’t know. So, I’m like learning about that too…now I’m more of a team person and I’m becoming more like my leadership skills are getting better…just being able to like take control like because in a group if we get rowdy I can say “Ok, it’s time for us to calm down. We have to finish this and we only have a certain amount of time left.”
She’s also more likely to speak out and act out when she experiences oppression, more likely to try and “fix this oppression” rather than just “feeling sad for myself.” *Maya is embracing her power to impact the world,* I note.

With that we begin to wrap up the interview, Genesis asking once more for Maya’s vision of justice. Maya describes a just world as a world based on happiness and peace. In a just world, she says, “I really wouldn’t be scared to go out in to the world as much. Like leaving the house, you always wonder what’s around the corner, could be a drive by or you know anything and that makes it scary.” Something in what she’s said prompts Genesis to reflect aloud, “If it was a just world, we probably wouldn’t have jobs.” We share a light-hearted laugh and I add, reassuringly, “We’d find something else to do, like make art” Maya, however, is more philosophical, “Everything is the way it is for a reason… like the different people that you meet to the different things that you get to do.” “That’s a good attitude to have,” I reply, smiling. *Maya has found a new passion in this experience,* I think, a sentiment she confirms in her final thoughts to us:

I don’t like people to be oppressed and I’ve always wanted to like ya’ know change something, but I didn’t know where to start or who to start with…I really have a really strong passion for it. I really have a really big love for CFS…and I just like I don’t get tired of coming here…’cuz like being here it gets me really energetic…being here’s one of my favorite places.

Genesis laughs to herself, adds, “Yeah, I live here.” I relate too, confess that “when I’m here I feel like my energy, even if I’m still tired, my energy goes up just a little bit and when I leave I feel glad I came.” We all feel at-home in this place, connected to it’s activist history and the powerful people who make of it a foundation for justice.
Two of the most fundamental questions embedded in this study are “Who are the Freedom Fellows? ” and “How do their identities as urban, youth of color influence their process of becoming activists? ” Throughout the interviews we conducted, Fellows repeatedly intimated how their familiarity with dynamics of power, privilege and oppression readied them for a liberatory learning environment rooted in collective resistance. For Fellows, these social and cultural inequalities represent powerful, albeit partial motivations for their development as social justice activists. At the same time, we would be remiss to undervalue to role of personal characteristics in the Fellows’ process of developing an activist orientation. When asked of their initial interest in the Freedom Fellowship, the nine young people we spoke with conveyed a number of noteworthy personal traits, such as a humanism, compassion, commitment, hopefulness, zeal, open mindedness and unconventionality. Below, I detail how Freedom Fellows see their experiences of inequality and discrimination as affecting their development of an activist orientation. I simultaneous temper this description with attention to the internal factors influencing their processes, thus complicating the relationships between external, environmental stimuli and personal character.

Each of the Freedom Fellows in our study relay specific experiences of oppression in action in their lives or the lives of those they love. Hector, for example, spoke of the racism and ageism he and his friends face each time they enter a store and are followed by security guards. Darrel and Simeon see racism and classism plaguing their schools, contributing to an unequal distribution of resources and a largely disenfranchised student body. Darrel describes in candid detail the disinvestment students
feel within Gage Park; Simeon offers a comparison between poorly and richly-resourced schools, pointing out the ways in which structural constraints within schools make it virtually impossible to fully attend to the unique needs of each student. Maya and Lashona, similarly hone in on the lack of adult role models and developmental opportunities for young people of color, attributing the high rates of school push-out and involvement in street economies to inadequate adult support and guidance.

For these five young people, the Criminalization of Youth LIA meshed with their intuitive reading of the socio-political world and offered them a window into a deeper understanding of the stark complexities of oppression. Lashona, for instance, had a very clear vision of how black and brown people are kept down through economic inequities coming into the Fellowship. This vision pushed her to learn “the things that’s like behind closed doors” so that she may develop a “bigger picture like to understand more.” Darrel offers similar justification for his interest in learning about activism, underscoring his need, as a emerging social justice leader, to “couple opinions with facts.” Also referencing the racism she sees around her, Maya proclaims, “I don’t like people to be oppressed and I’ve always wanted to like ya’ know change something, but I didn’t know where to start or who to start with” Hector, too, admits that “knowing it’s [oppression] out there and it’s strong just kinda’ makes me wanna’ be the change.” To Maya, Hector and their peers, the Fellowship provided validation of their worldview, as well as a space to delve into and unpack these experiences of oppression.

The four young people in the Killing Us Softly LIA – Michelle, Gabriela, Erika and Daniel – were equally motivated to become activists based, in part, on early experiences with racism, sexism and heterosexism: Daniel’s story of racial segregation at
school and homophobia at home; Gabriela’s solidarity with her sister’s struggle to overcome bulimia; Michelle and Erika’s awareness of differential treatment between men and women are significant factors in their proclivity for activism. For these four young people, knowing oppression intimately is motivation to know resistance. Finding a space in the world to “be yourself fully, however you want to be fully,” is a first step in countering the negative stereotypes and constraining social norms imposed upon them. CFS is this space.

These stories illustrate the myriad ways that Freedom Fellows’ experiences of racism and sexism make visible the structural oppression within everyday life and motivate them to take action. Yet, of utmost importance in these cases is the degree to which these nine young people are motivated by a profound love, caring and compassion for others. It is not simply their own personal experiences with injustice that motivate their activism, but rather the suffering they witness in their friends, families and communities. Darrel spoke at length of his dedication to the “beautiful minded people” at Gage Park “who have in reality a life being held back.” Simeon declared that he is compelled to act whenever he sees oppression and that this compulsion is strongest when the oppression is systemic. Daniel, Maya and Lashona worry about their peers at school and in their neighborhoods and make concerted efforts to build alliances and treat everyone fairly, respectfully. Gabriela, too, sees the ways in which men and women struggle to live up to dominant social norms of beauty and sexuality, is motivated to encourage and uplift others from repressive norms.

Yes, the microcosm of inhumanity they face as urban youth of color is a fundamental motivation for their activism. Yet, clearly evident within their personal
refusals to be swayed by the disparaging of their very beings is an abundance of love and dedication to other people. In the panoramic of “life being held back” that emerges from their stories, these young people find inspiration to work for a greater good. This sentiment of care and concern for others’ well-being permeates the Fellows’ explanations for their initial interest in activism. In essence, these nine young people brim with compassion and fire for change; the Freedom Fellowship offers an worthy outlet for their righteous indignation, a space for them to develop as “leaders,” “bridges,” and “allies.”

In addition to this humanist inclination, the Freedom Fellows we interviewed conveyed strong motivation to take action. All nine of the Fellows mention their desire to make positive changes in the world by getting involved in social justice work. Erika, for one, sees this imperative for action as undeniable appealing:

> I liked that they were talking about making it into a program trying to actually make something. Because we’re just not like learning about it and finding out what’s wrong with the world. We’re actually going out there and trying to do something about it. Trying to not just talk about it, but take action.

Simeon concurs, “I wanted to find out more about it, learn about this issue, get facts and stuff and actually do something to help change it [emphasis mine].”

Michelle, Maya, Simeon, Hector, Gabriela and Daniel recognize young people’s engagement in activism work as a critical, albeit under-utilized approach; these Fellows are particularly drawn to CFS as a space where they can partner with other youth as leaders for social justice. As Michelle so simply declares, “what drew me to it was the fact that it like helps young people become young activists and I thought that was really cool because it was something that I wanted to do anyway, something to change the world positively.” In their initial interviews, Hector and Gabriela also speak of the pull
CFS had on them as a space for youth activism, especially given their perceptions of social change work as adult-dominated and generally inaccessible to young people.

Another stand-out trait among these nine Fellows is their courageousness. Hector situates his courage in his sense of justice, in “knowing what is right and what people go through.” Michelle, on the other hand, finds her courage in the inspiring work of African American activists, such as Sojourner Truth and Frederick Douglas, and in the religious mandate to live honestly and truthfully. Darrel, like Michelle, finds inspiration in historical black leaders; he, however, acknowledges an inner-confidence that has come from living life according to his own values and principles. In his words, young people of today are, after all, “the fearless generation.” Daniel and Gabriela similarly demonstrate an internal confidence that allows them to accept themselves fully, even when society judges and negates their individuality.

Although young people today, and young people of color in particular, have much to fear in a society that devalues, disempowers and criminalizes them, the Freedom Fellows we spoke with do indeed demonstrate a remarkable courageousness in the face of injustice. Redefining risk-taking in constructive terms, these nine young people express a willingness to challenge and be challenged in line with an anti-oppressive agenda. And, in their leadership, they demonstrate their desire and willingness to live in truth even though such living requires going against the conventional grain. This inclination for acting against oppression is evident in their stories, pre-Fellowship; evident in Hector’s role as a Peace Recruiter, for example; in Darrel’s ties to VOYCE and Daniel’s leadership in the Gay-Straight Alliance; and in Erika, Maya, Michelle and Gabriela’s stories of speaking out against the unjust attitudes and behaviors of their friends and families. The
Fellowship, then, provided these nine young people with new opportunities to deepen their repertoire of individual responses to oppression and move toward prolonged, meaningful collective action. In effect, this experience enhanced their natural leadership qualities and pushed them to try on new roles and responsibilities previously outside their comfort zones. In their leadership for social justice, the Fellows display passion, open mindedness, hope for the future, commitment and unconventionality.

Social Justice Youth Development

Regardless how people come to the Freedom School they will come out conscious, conscious, conscious and more resilient and able to own just a little bit more of their destiny. – Nina, February 2011

Throughout the interviews, these nine young people shared with us the myriad ways in which they have come to identify as activists through their Fellowship at CFS. Time and again, they describe new learning and consciousness of the social world, unlearning of oppressive attitudes and behaviors, an abiding commitment to community and the strategic use of collective action for social change. Their journeys reveal an awakening to the realities of an oppressive social order and ensuing deepening or re-orientating of their values in line with social justice. For the Fellows, this transformative personal change is embedded within a cultural experience of resistance; in essence, their development as conscious, political actors cannot be divorced from the unorthodox context of the Freedom School as a base for intergenerational movement building. We hear, in their words, the powerful resonance of self-confidence, agency and healing that, as Friere theorizes, comes out of conscientização. In this section, we see the commonalities and differences in their development as activists and attend to the ways in which they perceive shifts in themselves as a result of the Fellowship experience.
Through these narratives we weave a complex pattern of learning and unlearning through dialogue, action and reflection.

**Socio-Political Consciousness: Understanding Contemporary Social Issues**

According to Fellows, the development of an activist identity occurs in four interrelated domains: socio-political development, anti-oppression, alliance-building and action. The first, socio-political consciousness, refers to a contextualized understanding of the historical background, root causes and contemporary manifestation of social issues. It is an essential ingredient in education for liberation as both practice and movement.

Freedom Fellows from both *LIA* cohorts acknowledge new and more nuanced understandings of social problems and attribute this emergent critical consciousness to their program participation.

The young people from the *Killing Us Softly LIA* spoke at length about their burgeoning consciousness of gender oppression. Michelle, Gabriela, Erika and Daniel, each describe in detail the ways in which gender socialization contributes to sexual harassment, heteronormativity, unhealthy body image and eating disorders. Furthermore, they situate these contemporary expressions of sexism within historical, biological, cultural, economic and familial systems. All four of these young people spoke about the role of mass media in propagating sexist notions of women and of the damaging impact of these images on us. They spoke of the connections between sexism in videos and music, magazines ads and fashion billboards and the unhealthy ways people express these internalized norms in our eating habits [bulimia and anorexia], beauty regimes [tanning; ill-fitting clothing], language [use of “gay” as an insult; use of N-word or B-word] and
thought-patterns [taking the word of a male priest as the word of God, but questioning the validity of a female minister’s sermon; idealization of blonde hair and blue eyes].

All four also spoke of the long history of sexism and of the ways in which families reinforce narrow definitions of gender and sexuality. For example, Michelle discussed how older family members pass down gender role expectations to the younger generations, who may experience these norms as confining and irrelevant. Gabriela, Erika and Daniel also spoke of the role of families in perpetuating oppressive gender norms, such as how families may dictate appropriate clothing choices, dating partners and career options. Their explanations of the “traditional” roles for men and women differed slightly from Michelle’s in that they talked extensively of men’s dominance within Latino culture, in family decision-making, workplaces and religious leadership. For Daniel and Gabriela, religion plays an especially insidious role in the continuation of gender-based hierarchies and heteronormativity. Daniel points out how, in Catholicism, only men are valued as religious authority. Both young people criticized the religious prescript that sexual relationships must only be between men and women, that people engaging in same-sex relationships are doomed to hell.

Although the issue under investigation differed between these cohorts, similar socio-political consciousness is evident in the developmental trajectories of the Fellows in the Criminalization of Youth LIA. For Hector, Darrel, Lashona, Maya and Simeon, this consciousness-raising revolves around the racialized and class-based disparities in education that lay at the heart of the School-to-Prison Pipeline. These Fellows perceive interpersonal and systemic racial discrimination and economic inequities as creating barriers to young people’s academic success. At the interpersonal level, adults within
these systems view youth through a stereotypically deviant and disparaging lens. Hector, for instance, laments the racial profiling within schools:

They don’t even get a chance to actually see us, they just, because of our ethnicity and race, they just target us because of that. It’s like if you’re getting in trouble so much, why bother going to school if you’re just going to be sent to detention?

Like Hector, Lashona testifies to the negative effects of racial profiling on young people’s experiences in school; she sees the phenomena of mis-education and under-education of young people of color as a way of maintaining the socially entrenched power and privilege of white people.

Simeon and Darrel conceptualize imprisonment as a cultural norm in contemporary US society and argue that the psychological impact of both physical and cultural lock up devastates already vulnerable people and communities. Darrel, for example, sees schools as modeled off prison mentality, as a way of keeping a “lock on the human mind.” He criticizes the “business” of schooling as counter-productive to transformative education and points out the over-resourcing of the prison industry relative to education. Simeon highlights the disproportionate number of US citizens in prison relative to China. He also denounces the unequal treatment youth of color receive in the juvenile/criminal court system as a symptom of racism, a critique akin to Lashona’s analysis of entrenched power.

At the institutional level, the Fellows identify barriers such as lack of appropriate in-school learning opportunities, harsh disciplinary codes, few economic options and a lack of community-based supports as creating a pipeline to prison. Simeon suggests that many schools – schools in communities that are under-resourced – are ill-equipped to
meet the disparate learning needs of today’s young people. Maya and Hector point out that students are suspended or expelled for very minor infractions. Hector, Simeon and Lashona disparage the lack of community-based jobs and developmental supports many youth contend with when pushed out of school; they theorize a direct connection between these social deficits and young people’s participation in street economies and resulting vulnerability to criminal system involvement. Overall, to these five Fellows, the message is clear: youth of color, poor youth, immigrant youth, youth with learning disabilities, are not important to our society.

**Socio-Political Consciousness: Understanding the Historical Context of Social Issues**

In addition to developing a critical consciousness of a contemporary social problem and its root causes in political, economic, cultural and familial systems, the Freedom Fellows convey new understandings of the historical significance of sexism, racism, classism and heterosexism and find new inspiration in the individual and collective resistance of historical activists. All five of the Fellows in the *Criminalization of Youth* LIA stated that the School-to-Prison Pipeline is an outgrowth of deep-rooted racial exploitation, including slavery and Jim Crow Laws. Four of the five Fellows found motivation for their activism in the work of Civil Rights leaders, such as Martin Luther King, Jr., Rosa Parks, Fred Hampton, Malcolm X and Huey Newton. One Fellow, Michelle, traced her inspiration for this work to abolitionists such as Sojourner Truth and Frederick Douglas. Likewise, all four of the Fellows in the *Killing Us Softly* LIA attribute sexism to the eons of gender socialization humans have endured under the guise of biological imperative or religious scripture. Like their peers, these four young people find
inspiration for their own activism in the resistance of women’s liberation movements, queer rights movements and leaders such as Patsy Mink.

**Anti-Oppression in Thought and Action: Self-reflexivity**

Another aspect of social justice youth development is unlearning oppression and learning to think and act in line with anti-oppressive principles. The Freedom Fellows appear to vary in their understandings of how we, even as social justice advocates, internalize our power and privilege. Two of the Fellows, Darrel and Gabriela, do not see themselves as ever acting as oppressors. They are adamant in their commitment to anti-oppression and do not identify ways in which they may have or use power over others. Daniel, on the other hand, is steadfast in his commitment to anti-oppression, but also acknowledges how he receives male privilege from cultural and institutional systems. For other young people, though, the Fellowship helped them see, for the first time, ways in which they had been perpetuating oppression in their relationships with people who differ from them. Simeon’s confession of internalizing adultism and enacting power over his sister, Erika’s honesty about internalized beauty norms and Michelle’s moving story of coming to recognize her own heterosexism serve as prime examples of learning to think and act in line with anti-oppression.

**Anti-Oppression in Thought and Action: An Intersectional Analysis**

The Fellowship’s anti-oppression framework allows young people to begin to unpack the multilayered experiences of power, privilege and oppression inherent in our complex social identities. For example, Maya, Simeon, Lashona and Hector all note the distinct differences in treatment white youth receive in the educational and juvenile justice systems as compared to youth of color. Similarly, Michelle, Gabriela, Daniel and
Erika allude to the differential representations of women in the media in terms of (1) standards of beauty that favor white racial features, (2) numbers of images of white women compared to women of color and (3) types of messages conveyed about women of color in the media; these Fellows perceive women’s experiences of sexism as inseparable from and profoundly influenced by their racial and cultural identities. Daniel, perhaps because of his personal identification with the queer community, is the only Fellow to connect gender oppression with heteronormativity. On the other hand, eight of the nine Freedom Fellows – Lashona being the exception – speak of the various ways in which young people experience adultism, as well as how adult power and privilege is intertwined with their experiences of racism, sexism and heterosexism.

**Anti-Oppression in Thought and Action: Envisioning Justice, Building Bridges, Taking Action**

The anti-oppression framework inherent in the Fellowship encourages young people to move from thought to action. For Fellows, this process involves articulating a shared vision of justice, building bridges with allies and taking strategic action. Hector, Darrel, Simeon and Maya describe a collective process of identifying potential solutions to the problem of school push-out and of deciding on a course of action through a consensus process. They tell of sharing roles and responsibility for the work, such as researching restorative justice practices, educating other youth and meeting with school administrators. In the *Killing Us Softly LIA*, Daniel and Gabriela foretell of a similar negotiation process and division of responsibilities for the collective work.

Moreover, these six Fellows see themselves as bridges to other youth and allies to other movements. Gabriela, Darrel, Hector, Maya and Simeon believe a crucial aspect of
their activism work is to educate other young people about social issues and help them connect to social resources and movements. Mirroring King’s position that injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere, Simeon commits himself to allyship across issues as an imperative to progressive social change. Daniel, too, is unwavering in his allegiance to African American students at his mostly-Latino school.

Unfortunately, we cannot ascertain Michelle, Lashona and Erika’s perspectives on moving from anti-oppressive thought to anti-oppressive action as their participation in the program waned over time. We know that at the time of their initial interviews these three Fellows had developed clear visions of social justice and that the themes embedded in these visions coincide with those of their peers. We also know from these interviews that each young woman is taking personal steps to live in truth, such as Michelle’s efforts to interrupt her friends’ homophobia and Erika’s willingness to educate her friends on media objectification. We are unable, though, to assess their capacity for building with others within a larger movement for justice.

**Freedom Fellows’ Perceptions of Youth Development**

**Self-Reflexivity**

The Freedom Fellows in this study perceive shifts in themselves as a result of participating in this liberatory education and activism program. These developmental changes center around four domains: self-reflexivity, sense of agency, relationships with others and leadership for social justice. As detailed in the section on anti-oppression, several Fellows describe gaining new insights into their own thought processes and behaviors. For example, self-reflexivity as a developmental outcome of the Fellowship is clearly evident in Lashona’s admission:
I was kind of aware of how I can be or how I can act or how I can classify the next person, but it [Freedom Fellowship] really did open my eyes to see that’s not cool…you can’t be doing that. Treat others like you want to be treated.

Erika, Simeon, Daniel and Michelle convey similar gains in self-knowledge through their program participation. Erika acknowledges internalized beauty norms and gender-based expectations. Simeon expresses new insights into how he perpetuates adultism in his relationship with his younger sister. Daniel demonstrates a genuine understanding of male privilege and a desire to transcend gender hierarchies; his experience at CFS helped Daniel become “more conscious about how I thought,” to the extent that he can no longer watch tv shows or commercials without seeing the underlying racial and gender stereotypes, no longer hang out with friends who discriminate and no longer conform to the gendered expectations of his family. In a similar vein, Michelle admits to past judgmental attitudes toward people who do not conform to social assumptions of heteronormative and commits to a more open, accepting stance toward sexual orientation. Comparing her stance to that of her friends, Michelle remarks,

Nobody probably talked to them and gave them a different side of it, of like how we were taught here at the freedom school. I think if you know both sides of it, like the behind the scenes and then what’s going on in front of you, I think you would look at it totally different.

These poignant examples of Freedom Fellows’ sense of self-awareness demonstrate the powerful role of reflexivity in becoming a social justice activist. For Erika, Simeon, Lashona, Daniel and Michelle self-reflectivity is understanding their multiple and sometimes contradictory identities, understanding the social construction of these identities and understanding how who they are impacts their power and privilege within
society. This understanding of the ways in which we live out oppression in our everyday lives helps young people develop alternative ways of thinking and acting in the world in line with justice. In essence, developing an understanding and acceptance of yourself is fundamental to understanding and acting with compassion and solidarity toward others.

**Sense of Agency**

As mentioned above, the Freedom Fellows share common visions of justice. All nine of them also relay a powerful sense of agency in bringing about these visions of a more peaceful, happy, fair world. In other words, they believe in their own individual and collective abilities to take action against oppression. These nine young people describe this sense of agency as knowing what needs to happen (Hector), standing up (Hector; Darrel), and never giving up (Hector; Gabriela). At the micro-level, they situate their agency in their ability to live their personal lives according to just principles. Lashona says, for instance, “I believe my role would be to uhm show justice to actually to actually be like what I would want it to be…I would actually try my hardest to you know not stereotype and try to put the next person down.” For Fellows, modeling social justice in how you live your life involves a wide range of actions. For Gabriela and Michelle, it’s dressing how you want despite gender norms; for Daniel and Darrel it’s speaking your mind and being proud or your heritage; for Simeon, it’s speaking out when others are suffering; and for Lashona, Daniel and Hector, it’s making decisions that are “healthy” for your mind, body and soul.

Living in truth as individuals, however, is only the first step to how Fellows’ envision creating a more just world. Educating others’ about injustice, bring folks together across traditional divides and taking collective action are integral aspects of their
belief in their ability to foster change. Hector, Michelle, Daniel, Simeon and Gabriela believe that the Fellowship experience has prepared them well to expose others to the realities of social injustice. Their ability to educate others is, in Hector’s words, a crucial first step in showing people that “you’re really fighting for what you believe in.” For Michelle, helping to raise people’s consciousness of oppression means “more people will come to the realization of it and then little-by-little some change could happen.” Daniel agrees that teaching others is a way of “breaking down these little walls, little-by-little.”

In a similar vein to “activist as educator,” Fellows see themselves as bridges to justice. Darrel, for instance, says “My role is bringing the crowds together, being a bridge for these different generations, characters, you know, personalities.” Maya, too, sees her ability to create change as a reflection of her success in identifying and recruiting allies. Daniel, Hector, Gabriela each situate their agency in bringing people together to dialogue about social problems and build a culture of resistance. They perceive this act as a way of breaking down the barriers that reinforce oppression. In building alliances, the Fellows are, as Hector says, taking “little steps, one at a time…to establish something. So not only will we be doing, but like passing it on to other people and they would do the same.”

**Relationships with Others**

Another important shift in Freedom Fellows’ development as activists pertains to the relationships with others. Fellows convey the importance of learning to work with people who differ from themselves in identity and personality, the necessity of seeing themselves as connected to a larger movement. Michelle and Maya both admit to some selfish motivations at the onset of the program; yet, both young women come to see
themselves as deeply connected to a broader community of people working for a common good. Michelle, in particular, finds the unique opportunity to work with youth of a different racial background, to work with immigrant youth and youth who identify with the queer community, as formative to her identity as an ally. Hector, Darrel, Lashona and Maya also underscore the appeal of working with other young people of color toward a shared cause. These Fellows come to value these deep connections with their peers as sources of support and encouragement for their activism. For instance Maya’s sense of feeling “more connected to my group” over time gives her the confidence to contribute new ideas and opinions. Likewise, for Gabriela, connection to other activists is motivation to continue fighting for justice.

Freedom Fellows also note important shifts in their relationships with adults. Their new insights into adultism as a form of oppression, coupled with the opportunities offered by CFS to partner adult allies, creates fissures in their subjugation to adult authority. Hector, Michelle, Gabriela and Daniel each present compelling examples of pushing back on adult power and privilege. At the same time, working with adults in genuine partnerships provides these young people the chance to re-invent the ways in which they relate to adults. Maya, Michelle, Darrel, Gabriela and Daniel all acknowledge the unique characteristics of these youth-adult partnerships, including honesty and open communication, adult self-disclosure, reciprocity and shared leadership, to name a few.

**Leadership for Social Justice**

The Freedom Fellows describe, and I observed, a myriad of ways in which their leadership skills have grown and developed through their activism work. These skills are evident in both their internal group processes, as well as their efforts to facilitate change
in the broader environment. Hector, Darrel, Maya, Simeon and Daniel played especially active roles within their action groups. Hector, Darrel and Simeon took responsibility for conducting outside research to support their groups’ work and bringing resources back to the collective table. Simeon and Darrel were especially adept at resolving conflicts between group members and negotiating compromises. Simeon, in particular, showed impressive growth in his consensus-building skills; an experience leader in student government, his tendency at the start of the Fellowship was to rush group decisions. Over time, however, I observed his ability to pull back, ask for additional opinions and summarize and clarify statements prior to suggesting a course of action.

During interviews, Simeon, Darrel and Maya each describing taking the lead on reaching out to allies. For example, on one occasion Simeon brought young people from another organization working on educational reform to an action planning meeting to discuss resources and opportunities for collaboration. Darrel helped identify and recruit allies within Gage Park who were supportive of restorative justice and open to instituting such policies at the school. He also helped broker the relationship with the Principal and secured a meeting at which he, Maya and Hector presented their ideas for a peer jury. Additionally, Maya served as the group’s scribe during weekly meeting and often called, texted and emailed her peers reminders of their upcoming gatherings. Within the *Killing Us Softly LIA*, Daniel assisted with research and action planning and was the lead designer of the group’s blog. When present, Gabriela actively participated in action team meetings by offering ideas and collaborating on tasks; she was, however, less engaged in group maintenance activities. Again, we cannot fully assess the leadership development experiences of Lashona, Michelle or Erika given their withdrawal from the program prior
to the completion of the action plans. Through their initial interviews, we do know that these three young women express a willingness and ability to speak out against oppression and to teach others about social injustice. However, their acquirement or refinement of concrete leadership skills – such as strategic planning, public speaking or alliance building – remain unknown.

**Conclusion**

This chapter offers us new and important insights into how young people develop critical consciousness and personal and collective agency. It distinguishes the numerous ways in which liberatory education and youth activism contribute to social justice youth development, highlighting both similarities and divergences within the Freedom Fellows’ experiences and perspectives. In the chapter that follows I discuss how these key findings building on and contribute to our emerging understanding of youth activism as a vehicle of healthy community and youth development.
VI. DISCUSSION

“My role is to show justice. To actually be like what I would want it to be, like showin’ it.” – Lashona, 2010 Freedom Fellow

Nascent theory and research on youth activism highlights the unique experiences of inequality, discrimination and marginalization young people of color in urban communities face in their daily lives. In addition to the normative developmental challenges of adolescence, these young people must also navigate the very serious obstacles posed by structural risk-factors such as racism, poverty and community violence. Compounded by sexism, ableism, homophobia, religious intolerance and adultism, these oppressive conditions hinder young people’s chances for healthful growth and successful transition to adulthood (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002; Ginwright, et al., 2005; Ginwright & James, 2002; Innovation Center for Community & Youth Development, 2003). Coming together to take collective action against social injustice is theorized as a viable and powerful response to the widespread marginalization black and brown youth experience in our society; initial research in this budding field shows promising results. Young people are developing personal and collective efficacy (Kirshner, 2007; Watkins et al., 2002; Shah, 2011), strategic thinking (Larson & Hansen, 2005) and critical consciousness (Thomas, 2008). Youth and adults are working together in innovative ways, building intergenerational spaces and, thus, challenging the age segregation inherent in society (Innovation Center for Community & Youth Development, 2003; Kirshner, 2008; O’Donoghue & Strobel, 2007) and making
significant contributions to community health and capacity (Innovation Center for Community & Youth Development, 2003).

Despite these promising findings, there remains a vast chasm in our knowledge of youth activism. As Kishner (2007) points out, we need additional research on the impact of youth activism on young people’s development, in terms of their socio-political identities, sense of agency and transference of activism skills to other developmental settings. This study attempts to build on emergent knowledge of youth activism by answering the question of how participation in a youth activism and social justice education program impacts young people’s developmental trajectories. In this chapter, I highlight the key findings of liberatory education as practiced at CFS, the young people’s perceptions of this work and the developmental outcomes of their engagement in activism, situating these findings in relation to the extant literature on social justice youth development.

**Liberatory Education: The CFS Model**

The CFS’s model of social justice youth development infuses socio-political consciousness with attention to identity, anti-oppression, historical context and wellness. Young people who participate in the Freedom Fellowship learn about contemporary social issues and movement within this multi-dimensional framework. Furthermore, this learning takes place in an intergenerational environment in which anti-oppression is modeled and practiced by youth and adults alike. This unique community, ripe with social justice praxis, creates a culture in which personal and social resistance is sincerely valued. Below I discuss the salient programmatic and organizational features of CFS as a social justice youth development context.
An Anti-oppressive Community

Freedom Fellows repeatedly cite the importance of community to the liberatory learning and youth activism process. Fellows highlight the significance of both their peers and the program alumni as teachers, leaders and mentors. Likewise, they attach profound meaning to the role of adults at CFS as partners and allies in activism work. This community, however, is more than shared identity or shared purpose; rather, it is a deliberately built space in which anti-oppressive principles and practices are foregrounded as integral to building a movement for progressive social change. The infusion of social justice in the organization in terms of operating norms and agreements, posters and art work, books and videos, event flyers, zines and complementary programming creates a culture in which political resistance is acknowledged, affirmed, celebrated.

In line with existing youth organizing literature, this purposefully constructed community contributes to Fellows’ sense of belonging, safety, support and ownership (Gambone, et al., 2006; Pearce & Larson, 2006; Shah, 2011). As in Pearce and Larsen’s study of youth engagement in civic activism, for Freedom Fellows both peers and adults play a critical role in their on-going commitment to social change work; peers provide a friendly, warm environment that makes activism fun; adults help foster a welcoming atmosphere, provide support and encouragement of youth leadership and challenge young people to take on new roles and responsibilities (Pearce & Larsen, 2006). Moreover, the small program size and consistency of adult allies leads to high quality youth-adult relationships (Innovation Center for Community & Youth Development, 2003) and close, stable mentoring relationships (Gambone, et al., 2006).
These features facilitate youth voice and ownership (Reed & Hansen, 2005) and lend themselves to genuine intergenerational partnerships (O’Donoghue & Strobel, 2007). In fostering a community characterized by relatively egalitarian relationships between youth and adults, CFS is directly intervening in a system of adultism and offering us a vision of a culture free from age-based oppression. Young people within this context become friends, mentors and leaders. Adults become allies, “conscious of the ways that race, class, gender, and culture can shape their relationship with youth…[taking] into account both our formal, institutional relationship with youth, as well as the perceptions that youth have of adults based on this relationship” (Nygreen, et al., 2008). As theorized, filling young people’s critical need for voice and power increases their sense of community; youth activists and adult allies play an undeniable part in fostering Freedom Fellows’ agency (Evans, 2007).

**Wellness**

Healing from the emotional, spiritual, psychological and physical assaults of oppression is theorized by CFS, as well as by scholars, as an important outcome of social justice youth development. According to Ginwright and Cammarota (2002),

> Young people heal from the impact of racial and economic suffering when they comprehend and address the complex, hidden social and economic forces fomenting their everyday challenges. Creating a space where young people have the opportunity to share, listen, and learn from each other is a central strategy for engaging young people in the healing process (p. 92).

Prilleltensky and Fox (2007) add, “…wellness depends on the just allocation of resources, opportunities, and burdens at the personal, relational, and collective levels. Yet, very few educational and youth interventions attempt to show the connections between wellness and justice (p.794).” These community psychologists hypothesize
psychopolitical literacy – or “people’s ability to understand the relationship between political and psychological factors that enhance or diminish wellness and justice” – as an anecdote to the social distortions perpetuated by the media, authority figures and even professional helpers (Prilleltensky & Fox, 2007, p. 799). Transformative personal and social change is posited as an outcome of interventions that reduce negative political and psychological forces and strengthen positive ones that contribute to wellness and justice.

At CFS, Freedom Fellows develop emotional stability, positive self-image, healthy decision-making, hope and resilience through individual and group dialogues on nutrition, poverty, violence, relationship abuse, sexual health, racism and sexism. They express a meaningful sense of purpose in life and a willingness to make choices based on their personal values, even when those choices ostracize them from friends and family. By connecting personal actions to social change, wellness at CFS becomes a praxis of social transformation. Tentative assertions and preliminary findings aside, wellness as a central component of social justice activism remains an under-utilized, under-explored and under-theorized phenomenon. Further research on the relevance and impact of healing and healthy living on youth development within a social justice framework is needed if we are to effectively engage in and expand resources for holistic, transformative work.

**Raising Young People’s Critical Consciousness**

The process of consciousness-raising at CFS begins with young people’s identity exploration within the context of an anti-oppressive framework. Young people are invited to think about the multiplicity and fluidity of identity, the impact of social structures on
identity and the complex ways in which they experience power, oppression and privilege as a reflection of their social positions. Through the Freedom Fellowship, they begin to unpack the historical trends and root causes of social injustice in the modern world and to name the internal, interpersonal and systemic manifestations of racism, classism, sexism, heterosexism and adultism. They also study the history of social justice movements and explore a wide variety of organizing and activism tactics. These learnings emerge through a liberatory praxis of dialogue, action and reflection; Fellows speak candidly with each other about their life circumstances, develop socio-political analysis through these dialogues, and eventually, formulate strategic action plans to address an injustice.

Teaching and learning at CFS is mutual, experiential and bridges the personal/political divide.

This approach to critical consciousness is reminiscent of several other documented approaches to youth organizing. In a study of twelve youth organizing projects funded by the Ford Foundation as part of a learning collaborative, researchers with the Innovation Center for Community & Youth Development (2003) found that several organizations embraced popular education philosophy and methods. Shah’s (2011) study also highlighted the necessity of young people undergoing a critical thinking process to develop a social critique of how systemic oppression is deeply connected to identity and culture. Thomas, Davidson and McAdoo (2008) found that a targeted critical pedagogy intervention for African American girls contributed to a stronger sense of ethnic identity and communalism, greater awareness of racism and increased participation in youth activism. Finally, Watkins, Larsen and Sullivan (2007) found that (1) interacting with people from diverse backgrounds, (2) learning about other groups and
their experiences with injustice and (3) discovering the humanity in others facilitated young people’s consciousness of prejudices, awareness of their own discriminatory behavior, willingness to change their attitudes and behaviors and commitment to challenging others. These interventions contain elements of consciousness-raising similar to those inherent in the Freedom Fellowship and, not surprisingly, demonstrate findings consistent with our study.

**Social Justice Youth Development**

As our research demonstrates, the Chicago Freedom School’s Freedom Fellowship program offers young people an indispensable space for developing the skills, knowledge, attitudes and relationships to undertake social justice activism. It does so through a popular education framework that centers community, history, wellness, anti-oppression and socio-political consciousness. In this study, we sought to understand how young people develop as activists, what shifts in themselves they perceive as a result of their activism, how they connect personal agency to collective agency, in what ways they draw on social justice education in their activism work and whether their developmental gains translate to other settings. Our findings indicate that young people involved in the Freedom Fellowship do, in fact, develop an activist identity as evidenced by their commitment to anti-oppressive attitudes and behaviors, dedication to community and a culture of resistance and engagement in personal and social action to end oppression. They do, in fact, perceive shifts in themselves, in terms of their leadership skills, relationships, sense of agency, attitudes and behaviors, wellness practices and self-reflexivity. They do perceive their personal power to make change as deeply connected to collective power and rooted in their social justice education. And, finally, they do, in fact,
transfer this learning to other important development settings, such as school or home. These findings, broken down by research question, are discussed in detail below.

**Activist-identity**

Freedom Fellows develop a distinct identity as activists through their participation in this program. This identity is characterized by their commitment to anti-oppression in attitude and behavior. Social change theorist and dissident, Václav Havel (1978), names this orientation *living in truth*. According to Havel, *living in truth* is an individual’s attempt to resist systemic oppression by taking simple actions to live as if oppression did not exist. Freedom Fellows live in truth by embracing their own socially marginalized identities, challenging the prejudices of their family and friends and redefining social relationships based on respect, equality and shared power. Their commitment to living in truth is the impetus for both personal and collective action for social justice. It is consistent with earlier findings that to foster civic identity young people must develop values and ideologies that connect them to historical and contemporary socio-cultural contexts; experiences in which young people engage with socio-political realities allow them to view themselves as actors within society (Youniss, 2005). As Flores-Gonzales and colleagues (2006) found this socio-political framing is significant to identity development in that it contributes to Fellows’ feelings of empowerment and collective self-determination.

Additionally, Freedom Fellows display a deep commitment to community. This community includes CFS and extends beyond CFS to the schools and neighborhoods in which they are embedded. Fellows are determined to lift up their friends, families and community members, to ease their suffering by working to eradicate social injustices
such as poverty, racism, ageism, sexism and heterosexism. By bringing young people of various backgrounds together, building youth-adults partnerships and exposing young people to socio-political issues, CFS provides Fellows with an environment in which resistance to oppression is learned and practiced. Fellows, alumni and adult allies are engaged in a culture of resistance, a self-organized association or community that attempts to lessen dependence on oppressive social structures by increasing and enhancing indigenous resources (Mattaini & Atkinson, 2011). Freedom Fellows’ active engagement in a culture of resistance that bridges social issues and identities allows them to challenge their own prejudices and embrace the anti-oppressive principles associated with progressive social movements. This developmental process mirrors Watkins, Larson and Sullivan’s (2007) theory of “bridging intergroup difference” and is consistent with findings that activism organizations provide marginalized youth with a forum for engagement in community life (Innovation Center for Community & Youth Development, 2003).

Finally, Freedom Fellows develop an activist orientation through their participation in personal and collective action. Taking action to address oppression – whether that action is confronting a friend’s sexist beliefs or organizing for school reforms – contributes to young people’s sense of themselves as social actors. Fellows’ sense of agency, or power to impact the world around them, takes shape in work that is explicitly political; it is evident in Fellows’ research into social problems, strategic planning efforts and alliance-building. Freedom Fellows’ perceptions of themselves as agents of social change holds true to youth organizing theory (Ginwright, 2003; Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002; Ginwright et al., 2005; Ginwright & James, 2002), as
As Ginwright & Cammarota (2002) posit, Freedom Fellows develop a social justice praxis by progressing through three levels of awareness: (1) self-awareness of identity issues and how identity is connected to power, privilege and oppression; (2) social awareness, including knowledge of social issues and cognitive skills for investigation, analysis and problem solving; and (3) global awareness, or empathizing with the struggles of others and acting in accordance with humanistic values.

**Shifts in Self**

Young people perceive several important shifts in themselves as a result of their participation in the Freedom Fellowship program. These shifts include new skill acquisition, relationship building, wellness practices, self-insights and changes in oppressive attitudes and behaviors. Freedom Fellows express a willingness to try new things, to step out of their comfort zones by taking on new roles and responsibilities within their groups. They recognize issues of power, privilege and oppression at play in their lives and claim ownership of their responses to it. These insights come from an increase in self-reflexivity and motivate the Fellows to confront oppression in themselves, their relationships and the institutions in which they’re embedded. They see themselves as stronger leaders, more able to dialogue across differences, build relationships across identities and stand up for social justice.

These shifts are similar to those observed by Otis’ in a 2006 study of a youth activism project in Kentucky in which participants reported an increased commitment to community change and preparation to address social problems more directly as a result of the program. They mirror Shah’s (2011) findings that involvement in activism improves
young people’s confidence in their leadership and organizing skills, such as researching problems, expressing opinions, creating action plans and identifying and reaching allies. Finally, these shifts are consistent with findings from Gambone et al. (2006) that young people involved in community organizing report higher rates of leadership, decision-making and community engagement than their peers in traditional youth development programs; like young people in other youth organizing projects, Fellows perceive themselves as belonging and meaningfully engaged in community.

**Personal and Collective Agency**

Youth development scholars theorize personal and collective efficacy as a significant developmental outcome of youth activism for social justice. In *Youth Organizing: Expanding Possibilities for Youth Development*, Ginwright (2003) argues that young people’s collective work to address community issues builds their personal capacity, as well as community capacity. Building on this theory in a recent study on youth organizing as a context for exploring civic identity, adolescent development expert, Ben Kirshner (2009) describes a continuum of civic efficacy ranging from passive on the low end to active and organizing on the high end. This chart of developmental stages of political awareness and engagement reflects movement from an uninformed, uncritical position to seeing the world as unjust, to believing change is possible and taking risks to lead, educate and empower others about social issues (Kirshner, 2009, p. 423).

Kirshner’s description of youth organizers as believers in the power of people to join together to solve common problems resonates with our findings. As theorized, the Fellows in this study develop new skills and understandings as a result of their activism that promote a strong sense of personal power. These skills, detailed elsewhere, include
critical thinking, relationship building, strategic planning, cooperation, communication, problem solving, facilitating meetings and speaking truth to power. Additionally, working together to remedy a social ill contributes to Fellows’ belief in young people’s power to impact the world around them; Fellows’ repeatedly convey a deep conviction in their groups’ ability to raise awareness of sexism or alter a school’s punitive disciplinary codes. They also express the belief that if they can make a difference in oppressive conditions, so can their peers who’ve yet to find activism as an outlet for social justice. In this way, their collective agency contributes to the broader community capacity for progressive social change (Ginwright, 2003). Moreover, as Kirshner emphasizes, Fellows’ collective agency is more than pragmatic; it is, in effect, “an alternative vision of the relationship between individual and society- one in which people recognize their shared experiences and work together rather than in competition” (Kirshner, 2009, p. 431).

**Employing Liberatory Education in Activism Work**

Freedom Fellows draw on their liberatory education in their activism efforts. They employ this learning in the content and process of their work. In terms of the content, Fellows use the Fellowship experience to understand the root causes of social problems, citing historical examples of oppression and linking these historical realities to contemporary manifestations of the problem. They rely on knowledge of past social movements to help construct their own strategic actions to these problems. Furthermore, they understanding social identity as multiple, complex and fluid, and thus, embrace the holistic approach of anti-oppression by acting in alliance with other people and communities. Freedom Fellows’ reliance on liberatory education to inform their sense of
self, analysis of the social world and action for social justice is reflected in the theoretical 
(Ayers, et. al, 1998; Freire, 2000; Ginwright & James, 2002; Payne & Strickland, 2008) 
and empirical literature on youth activism (Innovation Center for Community & Youth 
Development, 2003; Otis, 2006; Thomas, et al., 2008; Watkins, et al., 2007).

Fellows, likewise, draw on liberatory learning in terms of how they organize for justice. Their approach is collectivist, characterized by consensus decision-making, 
shared responsibility and collaboration. They emphasize their duty as activists to inform 
others about social issues, foster dialogue among groups and lead by example; investing 
in themselves and their peers is a direct response to the widespread powerlessness of low-
income youth of color, as well as an integral aspect of movement-building.

**Transference to Other Developmental Settings**

A key component of healthy youth development is the ability to generalize 
knowledge and skills learned in one setting – in this case the CFS – to other areas of life, 
such as school, work and family. In the Freedom Fellows, we find evidence of such 
generalization in how young people understand, experience and relate to their schools, 
friends and family. Fellows express, for example, a greater willingness to speak up in 
school discussions, confront friends and family on their oppressive behaviors and develop 
new, empowering programs at their schools. Although this study did not ask explicitly 
about educational attainment, our findings do demonstrate that Fellows are more willing 
to take a stand on important issues at their schools, implying a level of commitment to 
their own and their peers’ educational success consistent with Shah’s (2011) assertion 
that youth are more academically engaged as a result of their involvement in activism. As 
of yet, there is no other literature on young people’s transference of activism skills to
their relationships with friends and family members. This study offers us an preliminary glimpse into the ways in young people attempt to transform these relationships, either by educating others, building alliances across groups or engaging in frank dialogue with those perpetuating oppression. This is an important distinction in Fellows’ identification as social justice activists, rather than organizers concerned with a specific issue or policy.

Taken in whole, the impact of the Freedom Fellowship on young people, adult allies, the Freedom School as an organization and the communities in which these Fellows are embedded is indicative of movement-building. In these stories, we hear evidence of liberatory learning as a facilitative factor of Fellows’ empowerment. In turn, we observe the myriad ways in which these young activists seek to invest in themselves, their communities and other young people. Fellows’ continued involvement in CFS initiatives, leadership in school-based projects with social justice implications and vows to continue activism over the long haul demonstrate this commitment to social justice as a movement. Of course, longitudinal or retrospective research is needed to more fully assess the extent to which Freedom Fellows actually maintain their activism beyond the high school years.

**Programmatic Limitations**

As indicated in chapter four, the Freedom School’s model contains imperfections which we would be remiss to acknowledge. Adult instructors, in particular, found the tension between long-term movement building and implementing a short-term activism project challenging to navigate. Similarly, instructors and full-time staff alike admit to the difficulty of this year’s truncated program in terms of attending to Fellows’ healing and wellness needs. Several youth felt the Fellowship could be improved by extending the
program time frame to allow for greater attention to unpacking personal experiences of identity and oppression, studying community organizing methods and implementing effective strategic actions. Ironically, other young people drop out of the program over time; unfortunately, based on our research, we are unable to speculate as to cause of this attrition. Finally, despite substantial efforts, power differentials between young people and adults still exist within the organization’s decision-making and staffing structures.

These findings suggest areas to which CFS might focus greater attention. Addressing the tension inherent in implementing an action within the prescribed time constraints could take shape in several ways: as a revised program time frame; as a more in-depth education around how actions, campaigns and movements are intertwined; as advocacy with funders for more flexible outcome expectations. Similarly, as CFS matures as an organization, further institutionalizing roles for young people within decision-making and staffing structures could enhance both their youth leadership development and movement-building efforts. In addition to re-thinking internal practices, such work is likely to involve advocacy with policy makers and funders to better align external forces which organizational priorities.

**Implications**

In *Youth Empowerment and Human Service Institutions*, Constance Yowell and Edmund Gordan (1996) argue for the reformation of youth services in line with empowerment or “defiant adaptation.” They critique contemporary youth work as culturally dissonant and overly concerned with the control, containment and co-optation of urban youth of color. Their call for empowerment-based youth services re-conceptualizes professional practice as emphasizing strengths and resiliency, attending to
power difference and social inequities and building social capital. Positioning political socialization as a prerequisite of the movement from human service agencies to institutions of human empowerment, they underscore young people’s need for “the skills and knowledge necessary to access the resources of these institutions while defying and avoiding any harm these institutions might cause” (Yowell & Gordon, 1996, pp. 27-28).

As a social change program, the Freedom Fellowship resides within the intricate relationship between young people’s cultural identities, the broader social institutions which shape their experiences and social justice praxis. It offers us a model of movement-building based on intergenerational relationships and anti-oppressive principles. It speaks to young people’s power to know the world, and in knowing the world, to re-create the world in line with social justice (Freire, 2000). It requires us to re-imagine our work with young people in ways that acknowledge their oppression, embrace their agency and act as allies in their efforts to disrupt the systems and policies that constrain their lives. The implications of this approach – broken down by research questions – are outlined below.

**Reflections on Research Questions**

**What are youths’ experiences of the process of education for liberation?**

The Freedom Fellows’ we interviewed experienced liberatory education as an empowering process of personal, interpersonal and socio-political growth. This process is crucial to young people’s development as activists, in terms of their personal growth, relationships with others and sense of agency. Building an inter-generational movement for social justice means recognizing young people’s strengths and resiliency, attending to
power differences and social inequities and building young people’s social capital. The empowering process of liberatory education offers youth advocates a model by which we might accomplish the individual, organizational and community-level outcomes associated with community youth development.

**Is participation in a liberatory education program related to young people’s development of an activist orientation? If so, how?**

Participation in a liberatory education program is, in fact, related to young people’s development of an activist orientation in terms of commitment to anti-oppression, dedication to community and cultures of resistance and engagement in social action. Engaging in this type of work provides young people with the connection to a socio-cultural context necessary to become a “social actor.” Such socio-political framing not only facilitates youth identity development, but also fosters young people’s empowerment and collective self-determination. Prioritizing socio-political consciousness within the youth policy and programming arena could effectively redress societal concern over low levels of civic engagement among low-income, youth of color.

**Do experiences of inequality and discrimination affect young people’s process of becoming activists? If so, how?**

For the young people we interviewed, personal experiences of inequality and discrimination, in part, motivated them to become activists. Moreover, their observations of the inequalities enacted against other people further stimulated their desires to fight for social justice through activism. This finding indicates that young people with first-hand experience of oppression are able to empathize with the plight of others and recognize connections between themselves and people of different social locations, including
different racial and ethnic groups, sexual orientations, gender identities, abilities, class, age groups and immigrant status. Given this finding, empathy appears to be a key aspect of building alliances for social justice. This raises the questions: What motivates young people who have not directly experienced oppression to become activists? Is empathy a key factor in their motivation? If so, where does their empathy stem from?

**Do young people perceive a shift in themselves as a result of their participation in a liberatory education program? If so, how?**

Young people articulate important shifts in their cognition, moral reasoning, self-reflexivity, sense of agency and leadership skills. They report positive changes in self-image and resilience as a result of this program. These findings are consistent with extant research on youth organizing and establish activism and liberatory education programs as efficacious approaches to youth development for poor, urban, youth of color.

**Do young people perceive their relationships with others to have changed as a result of their participation in a liberatory education and activism program?**

As mentioned above, young people are more able to empathize and build alliances with both youth and adults as a result of this participation in the Freedom Fellowship. This shift has direct implications for how youth relate to people who differ from them in terms of personality, life style and identity. Such youth are able to openly embrace difference and act as allies to others. Deepening relationships among people of various social backgrounds implies a cultural shift toward genuine humanism; a shift which could, in theory, begin to undermine the dominant system of political, social and economic interests favoring specific power groups. In this way, liberatory education and
youth activism programs such as the Freedom Fellowship have the potential to contribute to a movement for a more humane world.

**Are young people’s perceptions of collective agency related to their perceptions of individual agency? If so, in what ways?**

The Freedom Fellows we interviewed connect their personal sense of agency with collective agency. They recognize the world as unjust and yet, believe in the possibility of changing themselves, their communities and the structural inequities that create injustice. Knowing that they have peers, adults, organizations and history to back them up, these young people are willing to take the necessary risks to lead, educate and empower others about social issues. This finding points to two important implications for youth programs seeking to promote collective agency; first, such programs must help young people to envision another world; and second, they must provide supports and opportunities for young people to connect with other activists, past and present.

**To what extent are young people drawing on their social justice education in their community work?**

Based on our interviews, it appears that young people are drawing on their social justice education in terms of understanding contemporary social issues and developing strategic responses to these issues within their community work. These high school-aged students have the intellectual and moral wherewithal to employ their political education in crafting campaigns to raise awareness of social problems, form alliances and advocate for solutions. Youth programs geared toward community-youth engagement could consider employing social justice education as an effective and meaningful approach.
To what extent do young people translate their experiences in social activism to other developmental settings, such as work or school?

Freedom Fellows report an increased willingness to speak their opinions at school or with other adults, a willingness and ability to confront others about their oppressive behavior and interest in developing new socially conscious programs in their schools and communities. Although tentative, these findings suggest that young people transfer the positive developmental gains made through activism programs to other important developmental setting. The impact of activism programming on young people’s ability and confidence to meaningfully engage in schools, youth organizations and communities could be profound. At this time, more knowledge of the context and processes of such transference is needed.

Conclusion

In practice, these findings indicate that liberatory education and youth activism programs hold enormous potential as avenues of young people’s development as engaged citizens. Such interventions require a community in which resistance is modeled and practiced by youth and adults alike. Building this culture of resistance involves two interrelated components: (1) establishing multiple and varied opportunities for young people to engage in activist work as leaders and organizers and (2) developing attitudes and behaviors of allyship, including adult allyship. Attending to issues of identity – allowing young people to explore their histories, cultural norms and personal stories – is a key aspect of both allyship and activism. Leadership opportunities within social justice work provide an important outlet for young people’s anger and disappointment at injustice (Innovation Center for Community & Youth Development, 2003).
In social work, the reality of working with young people as partners calls into question many of our standard modes of operation in which adults dictate the conditions, policies and practices of youth service organizations, schools, communities and even movements. As Ginwright and James (2002) assert, “[Social justice youth development] requires that adults take seriously their own development and that youth workers shift how they conceptualize youth development.” This shift means creating formal roles and structures that support youth decision-making and transform power imbalances between youth and adults (Innovation Center for Community & Youth Development, 2003). Adults must learn to step back and slow down to provide adequate space, time and support for genuine youth leadership within organizations and movements.

At the organizational level, social workers must be targeted in their program development, ensuring adequate staffing to develop close, mentoring relationship with young people (Gambone, et al., 2006; Innovation Center for Community & Youth Development, 2003). Young people should be actively engaged in organizational development – through boards, advisory programs, internships and program implementation – and paid for their contributions. Long-term planning should consider the role of former program participants as future leaders, directors and staff members. At the policy level, these findings justify further investment in resources, opportunities and supports that facilitate young people’s civic engagement.

These findings also point to new directions in social work education and research. Social work educators, for example, could benefit from a more in-depth understanding of how people develop socio-political consciousness and a commitment to movement-building for social justice. Such knowledge will enhance our classroom instruction of
theoretical constructs such as oppression theory, critical race theory, feminism, queer theory, community-building and social movement theory; greater knowledge of intergenerational movements for social change will improve our practice skills for transformative personal and social change. At a most basic level, understanding youth activism will refine what we teach new practitioners about the risks, resiliency and protective factors of being a young person of color in today’s world.

As James Youniss (2005) points out, “Apart from evaluation studies that have focused mainly on outcomes of programs that are seen as interventions, little is known about them, what their theoretical foundations are, and which psychological-developmental processes they help to stimulate (p. 357).” This study contributes to our understanding of liberatory education as a theoretical underpinning of youth activism, its associated developmental outcomes and youth activists’ perceptions of agency. It also adds valuable insights into the dynamics and challenges of intergenerational organizing. Moreover, this research confronts the many unknowns of youth activism through a unique process of participatory investigation. Integrating youth activists into the design, implementation and data analysis lends further credence to the practice of youth-adult partnerships for social change. This study is, in essence, evidence of young people’s interest and ability to generate new knowledge and understandings of the lives they live.

**Limitations**

Despite these gains, research on this topic is in its infancy and many questions remain for those of us committed to youth empowerment. This study, small in sample size and limited by a six-month data collection phase, cannot offer generalizable findings about the population of youth at large or assess long-term programmatic impact. It is, as
all qualitative research is by nature, situated within a specific time and place. As such, we attempt to offer enough details about the Freedom Fellows and the organizational context of the Freedom School to permit comparisons with other samples and assess transferability to other settings. Moreover, we rely heavily on the extant literature to generate connections and explore congruence with emerging theories of social justice youth development, thus lending theoretical validity to our findings (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

In terms of reliability and authenticity, we have explicitly described our respective roles as researchers, used standardized data collection tools, conducted member checks and peer reviews and specified the basic paradigms and analytical constructs underlying this study. We rely on multiple data collection methods (interviews, follow-up interviews, observations and archival review) and sources (youth and adult informants, curriculum and program materials), making note of meaningful parallels across the data and inductively from data to theory. In chapter four we also explore inconsistencies and contradictions within the data as a means of identifying areas of ambiguity within our findings. And although we openly admit to the difficulty some Freedom Fellows’ had with our question asking them to define oppression, we believe this difficulty likely stemmed from the questions’ wording as opposed to a failure of the program to educate young people on oppression; nonetheless, throughout chapter five we provide a thick description of each youth interview so that readers may decide for themselves the nature of this sometimes problematic question. We must further acknowledge the general tendency within interviews for informants to respond with what they perceive as “socially desirable” answers (Padgett, 1998). Again, we refer readers to the thoroughly
detailed interview process outlined in chapter 5 as evidence on which the presence of social desirability may be independently assessed.

As indicated previously, our study explored the experiences of nine fellows, in one fellowship year; as these nine young people represent just under half of the total Fellowship cohort (20 youth), we must acknowledge to potential inconsistencies in our theoretical premise with regard to the eleven young people who declined to participate in this study. Similarly, we are unable to explore issues such as (1) how changes to the program impact Fellows’ developmental outcomes; (2) whether longer involvement in CFS impacts developmental outcomes and commitment to social justice activism; and (3) the degree to which liberatory learning is maintained over time and generalized to other developmental settings. Nor were we able to accurately assess the extent of young people’s influence on the broader community, as originally intended.

Throughout the conduct and analysis of this study, the research team openly grappled with our personal biases during debriefing sessions and reflexive journaling. In these reflections we discussed how our personal experiences as social justice activists have influenced our understanding of these particular nine young people’s experiences within liberatory education and activism work. Our collaborative analysis process and weekly meetings created an on-going space to think about our biases and discuss alternative explanations. Furthermore, we have incorporated a number of qualitative measures to make visible our biases to readers, such as situating ourselves within the research process and detailing our specific procedures for data collection and analysis. Nonetheless, it is without a doubt that our personal experiences and paradigms – not to
mention our prior involvement with CFS – have shaped our conduct and analysis of this research in significant ways.

Given these limitations, further research is needed on the wide variance of youth activism around the globe (Kirshner, 2009), the long-term developmental trajectories of youth activists (Kirshner, 2009; Larson & Hansen, 2005; Shah, 2011) and the processes and outcomes of specific organizing models (Pearce & Larson, 2006; Shah, 2011). Likewise, a more nuanced understanding of the impact of youth activism on the communities and policies impacting young people’s lives is warranted. Overall, the field still wants for more widespread dissemination of the tools, curricula, strategies and benefits of engaging young people in progressive social change work (Shah, 2011). As Shah’s conclusion suggests, only by connecting research to applied practice can we dually “strengthen the work of existing organizations and provide much-needed examples that can help others to enter the field.” Our hope is that this piece contributes to empirical knowledge of youth activism and, thus, plays a small role in the process of elevating justice-oriented youth work as an effective tool of community youth development.
APPENDIX A

Face Sheet

Informant Name(s):

Demographic Information (age, race, ethnicity, gender, socio-economics, sexual orientation):

Date and Time:

Setting:

Additional Information:
APPENDIX B

Youth Interview Guide

1. How did you learn about this program?
   What drew you to the FF?
   What other things drew you to CFS?

2. What did you first notice about CFS?
   What else stood out to you about this organization?

3. When you first started the program, how did you interact with the other youth at CFS?
   Did this change as the week went? How?
   How did you interact with the adults at CFS?
   Did this change as the week went on? How
   What is different about these interactions?

4. Based on what you learned here, how would you describe oppression?
   What different forms of oppression did you learn about in the LIA week?
   Thinking about one of these forms of oppression, what do you think are some of the roots causes of this issue?
   What did you learn about the history of this social issue?
APPENDIX B (continued)

Youth Interview Guide

5. Tell us about a form of oppression that you relate to in your own life

   Do you feel you have your own oppressive behavior? Describe them for us.

   What differences do you notice between how you experience oppression and how another person experiences it?

6. Since starting the FF, in what ways have you stepped out of your comfort zone?

   Have you seen others’ step out of their comfort zone? In what ways?

7. What methods and activities helped you understand activism?

   What methods and activities will you use to teach others?

8. What is your vision of a just world? GET DETAILS!

   What is your role in creating a just world?

   Who are your allies (individuals and organizations) in creating a just world?

9. What else would you like to tell us about your experience at CFS so far?
APPENDIX C

Second Youth Interview Guide

1. Describe your group’s Action Plan.

   What impact is this action plan having on the community?

2. Based on what you’ve learned at CFS, what do you see as the root causes of oppression?

   How is it addressing the root cause of the social problem?

3. Now that you’ve been involved in this program for several months, how do you feel within your group?

   In general, how do you feel within the CFS?

4. Describe your current relationship with the people at the CFS.

   Prompts: Adult staff?  Group Coordinator (Adult)?  Youth Coordinator?

5. How have you changed personally through your involvement in this program?
APPENDIX C (continued)

Second Youth Interview Guide

6. How do you react when you experience oppression in your life?
   What individual actions do you take?

   What collective actions do you take?

7. What is your vision of a just world? GET DETAILS!

8. What motivates you to be an activist?

9. What else would you like to tell us about your experience at CFS?
APPENDIX D

Revised Staff Interview Guide

1. The CFS focuses on history, youth leadership development and movement-building. In your opinion, why focus on these three program areas?

2. Describe the CFS’ approach to youth work.
   Why is this approach important?
   How is this approach related to building a movement for social justice?

3. How are the Freedom Fellows chosen for this program?
   What do you look for in the youth who apply to this program?

4. Describe the roles of young people and the roles of adults at the CFS.

5. How are young people changed through participation in this program?
   How has the organization changed as a result of youth participation?
   How have you personally changed by the Freedom Fellows?

6. Discuss any differences in how the program is implemented now verses in the past.

7. How does CFS center social justice in its operations?
APPENDIX E

Interviewer Reaction Sheet

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Thoughts, Feelings &amp; Reactions</th>
<th>Further questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX F

Participant Observation Recording Form

Date: Time:

Setting:

Type of Activity (workshop or event) and description:

Participants:

Observations:
APPENDIX G

Document Review Recording Form

Title:

Document Type:

Produced by (organization or youth):

Description of Key Concepts:

Images:

Other Relevant Information:
APPENDIX H

Youth Researcher Job Description

The Youth Researcher will assist the Lead Researcher in carrying out a research project at the Chicago Freedom School. The Youth Research will help plan the research project, develop the research questions, conduct research interviews and analyze research data. The Youth Researcher will be a part of a Research Team that includes the Lead Researcher and other Youth Researchers. The Youth Researcher should have an open-mind, be hard-working and be willing to learn new things.

Responsibilities:
• Attend all research training sessions to learn the skills for conducting research, such as how to ask questions, interview people and interpret their responses.
• Participate in weekly Research Team meetings to plan the research project, review our progress and discuss how things are working.
• Assist the Lead Researcher with conducting and analyzing the interviews.
• Be able to work approximately 12 hours/week in July and August and approximately 6 hours/week in September – December 17, 2010.

Skills:
• Comfortable working with other youth and adults
• Comfortable talking with diverse people
• Strong listening skills
• Able to share your opinion in a small group setting

Learning Opportunities:
• The Youth Researcher will learn how to develop research questions, conduct interviews and analyze research data.
• The Youth Researcher will learn how to write about research and present research findings to the public.
• The Youth Researcher will learn how to work with a team in a collaborative approach.
• The Youth Researcher will learn critical thinking skills.

Compensation:
The Youth Researcher will receive a total stipend of $1200. The stipend will be paid out every other week, based on the number of hours worked in that time period. The rate of pay is $8.00/hour.

To Apply:
Contact Kristen Atkinson, Lead Researcher, at knatkinson@gmail.com or (773) 517-4533.
APPENDIX I

Research Team Privacy and Confidentiality Pledge

I understand that the information shared with me by research participants is private and confidential. I agree to respect the privacy and confidentiality of each individual in this research study. I will not share the information that I learn from interviews with anyone outside of the research team. I will not even discuss who is participating in the research project outside of the research team. I will give all written information from the interviews to the Lead Research so that these papers can be kept in a locked cabinet. I will inform the Research Team if I think that this pledge has been broken by me or another member of the team.

Signed,

__________________________________________
Signature

________________________________________________________________________
Date

________________________________________________________________________
Print Name
APPENDIX J

Youth Researcher Training Outline

Planning Session (2 hours): 7/20
I. Defining Research
   What is research? Brainstorm
   Qualitative vs. quantitative
   Interviews, observations, documents, focus groups, surveys & debriefings

II. Overview of this Research Project
   Purpose
   Methods
   Tasks
   Timeline
   Teamwork- working agreements

III. Logistics
   Scheduling our team meetings/interviews
   Communication
   Stipends
   Incentives for interviewees
   Appendix P

Session 1 (3 hours): 7/22
IV. Ethical Principles in Research
   A. Respect
   B. Beneficence
   C. Justice

V. Applying Ethical Principles
   A. Informed Consent
      1. Information
      2. Comprehension
      3. Voluntary
   B. Assessing Risks and Benefits
   C. Selecting Participants

* This session will include completing the online ethics training, Investigator 101, as well as signing the Confidentiality Pledges.
Youth Researcher Training Outline

Session 2 (2 hours)

I. Formulating Research Questions

II. Planning and Conducting Informant Interviews
   A. Developing an Interview Guide
   B. Asking Lead Questions
   C. Using Prompts
   D. Asking Follow-up or Clarification Questions

III. Interpreting and Analyzing Data
## APPENDIX K

### Methods of Gathering Data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Method</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Activities</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Documents</td>
<td>Written or visual sources of information, such as brochures, fliers, books, newspaper articles, movies, songs and handouts.</td>
<td>Reading and reviewing the documents. Analyzing the themes in the document.</td>
<td>Analyzing the curriculum that the instructor uses in a workshop to teach youth about sexism.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observations</td>
<td>Using your own eyes to assess what is going on in a program or organization. Each person may observe different things depending on their point of view. Discussing your observations with others helps you understand the differences/similarities in what you see.</td>
<td>Watching the interactions around you and taking note of things that stand out. Writing down your observations and what you think about them.</td>
<td>If you wanted to know if a program was adultist, you would observe how the youth and adults interact? Who talks and how much? How do youth and adults treat each other?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviews</td>
<td>Asking someone to answer questions about experiences, activities and outcomes. Questions may be decided ahead of time or may be spontaneous.</td>
<td>Developing and asking questions. Taking notes about what you’re learning and analyzing what the informant tells you.</td>
<td>Asking a Freedom Fellow to describe how they’ve changed because of their participation in the CFS.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus Groups</td>
<td>A small group of people are asked to answer questions and discuss ideas that arise from the group. The energy in focus groups tends to generate more ideas than an individual interview.</td>
<td>Preparing questions about key topics and guiding the discussion. Encouraging all to participate. Record and summarize key points.</td>
<td>Asking a small group of youth to reflect on their experiences of adulthood in their schools.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Surveys</td>
<td>Asking a lot of people to respond to a set of written questions. Many surveys have scales or multiple choice questions.</td>
<td>Developing your survey questions, testing it with a small group, handing it out and tabulating the results.</td>
<td>An evaluation that asks you to rate how much you liked the workshop you attended.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Debriefings</td>
<td>Informal discussion that take place after an event or activity.</td>
<td>Asking questions about how things went and how things could be improved.</td>
<td>At the end of a team meeting, checking in about the progress the group made together.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Planning and Conducting Informant Interviews

Steps to Key Informant Interviews:
1. Decide on research questions
2. Develop an approach to your interview (guide, roles, problem-solving)
3. Conduct your interview
4. Debrief with your co-interviewer
5. Write up your notes immediately following your interview (including any thoughts, feelings or additional questions that you have)

Conducting the Interview

Introduce Yourself
Before you begin, introduce yourself and review the purpose of the interview. Go over the Youth Assent Form.

If you have never done interviews like this before, don’t let it frighten you. Be yourself! If you are genuinely interested in what this person has to say, that interest and commitment will come through. Most people overlook little mistakes if the person is genuine. Besides, the whole purpose of this is not to impress people, it’s to learn what this person has to say. Their knowledge should be the focus of the interview. When in doubt, be quiet and listen!

Ask Questions
1. Build Rapport
   Start the interview with some basic “ice-breaking” questions.

   Many interviewers find it helpful to start with general questions and then become more specific as the interview progresses. It’s a good idea to have questions ready ahead of time, but sometimes what the informant tells you will change things, so that you have to ask different questions.

2. Use Active Listening Skills
   Use active listening techniques, such as nodding your head, saying “uh-huh,” or “Can you tell me more about that?” If the informant knows you are really listening they will talk more. Never let something you don’t understand pass without asking for clarification. You can do this by saying something similar to, “I’m sorry, I don’t understand how that would work,” or “If I understand you correctly, you’re saying….” Your role is to be a facilitator so you can get all the information you can from this person. It is not to impose your own interpretations or perspectives.

3. Summarize
   If you’ve been really good at establishing rapport and listening, you may find it difficult to break off the interview. Beginning your summary of what they have said will help the
informant know things are winding down. This summary is important because it gives you a chance to verify that you have understood them.

Put what they have said into your own words and ask them if you have said it correctly, “Now let me see if I have understood you correctly. You’re saying that…” If you have misunderstood this gives them a chance to correct you and clarify their position.

4. Take Notes
Take brief notes during the interview. Your notes should include the interviewee’s name, description of the setting, jottings from the discussion (direct quotes if possible), body language and non-verbals and your thoughts, feelings and reactions.

5. Debrief
Immediately following your interview, spend some time debriefing with your partner. At this time, you will also want to fill in notes with as much as you can remember from the interview and clarify any points of confusion or contention.

Open-Ended Questions
1. Use open-ended questions
   What did you think of the program?
   How did you feel about the conference?
   Where do you get new information?
   What do you like best about the proposed program?
   Be cautious of phrases such as “how satisfied” or “to what extent.”

2. Avoid closed questions
   These are questions that can be answered with a yes or no.

3. Focus the questions
   Start with general and move to specific.

4. Ask uncued questions first, cued questions second.
   Uncued: What is needed?
   Cued: Here is a list. Are there additional things needed?

   Be careful using cued questions because they may limit your interviewee’s range of answers.

Probing Questions
A probe is used to encourage conversation without influencing the answer. Two kinds of probes are used for open ended questions. One is probing for clarity. The second is probing

---

1 This section is adapted from “Introduction to Interviewing: University of Illinois Survey Research Laboratory mimeograph”. 1982.
for additional information.

1. **Probing for clarity.**

   Because open ended questions tend to be very general (what do you think, why do you feel that way, etc.) respondents tend to answer in a general way, and to use general adjectives to describe situations and opinions. Thus, probing for clarity is often a matter of asking for a more specific response, or an explanation of a term.

   **For example:**
   - Why did you choose this place to live?
   - a. I like the water (which water?)
   - b. I like the location (why?)
   - c. I like the size (of what?)
   - d. It’s convenient (to what? for whom?)

   The best probes for clarity are the ones which tell the respondent exactly what you need to know, or what you want him/her to do.

   **For example:**
   - What do you mean about…
   - Could you be more specific about…
   - Could you tell me a little more about…

2. **Probing for completeness (additional information).**

   Once a clear answer has been obtained, the interviewer should probe for additional responses to the question. The best way to do this is to repeat the substance of the question as part of a request for further information.

   **For example:**
   - What else do you like…
   - What other reason did you have…

   Note that “Is there anything else?” is considered a leading probe because it can easily be answered by a “No”. It may also tend to make the respondent feel as though he/she is not really expected to provide further information because it could give the impression that the interviewer is interested in concluding the response.

   Each additional response should be probed for clarity as necessary. Only when a clear response has been obtained should the interviewer probe for additional responses. It is important to note that these are two very different kinds of probing.

   The interviewer should continue probing for additional responses until the person indicates that he/she has nothing else to say on the subject.
3. **Some Kinds of Probes**: Uses pauses and probes.
   - Five second pause
   - Say more about that.
   - Would you give me an example?
   - I don’t understand. Can you explain it to me?
APPENDIX M

Letter to Research Team

August 15, 2010

Dear Cristina, Genesis, Julius and Quinton,

We’ve been working as a research team for a month now. So, I thought I’d take a minute to share with you my thoughts and experiences so far. I can honestly say that I’ve learned a ton from each of you in the past month. And, I’ve had a lot of fun in the process!

In a few short weeks, you all have taught me about how to collaborate on a research project in a way that supports and encourages others. You’ve taught me that it’s necessary to be flexible and open-minded and to figure out ways to build on the unique strengths that we each bring to the team. Basically, you’ve taught me how to be a better adult ally. So, thank you for that!

In the past four weeks, I’ve also got to know each of you a little better. Here’s just a taste of the interesting things I’ve learned about y’all:

Cristina is a sweet and genuine person with a good sense of humor. Cristina, you have a great gift for making people feel comfortable around you- this is a skill that will really help us as we start our interviews. You’re also super responsible and thoughtful.

Genesis is great at thinking analytically. You really make connections between topics and ideas easily, which will help in asking prompting questions and also when we start to analyze the interviews. Genesis, you’re very down-to-earth and easy-going, which makes working with you really fun.

Julius is great with words! You also have strong listening skills and really get how to summarize what you hear. Julius, you’re a quick learner and really good at keeping an open-mind about things.

Quinton, you’re smart, insightful and a powerful leader. You’re a great role model for other people, including me. You’re really entertaining and, like Christina, you have a great sense of humor. Plus, you’re comfortable expressing your feelings, whether happy, sad, moved or anxious.

All of these traits and skills are going to help us come together as a strong and talented research team. So, if you’re feeling at all worried about doing something so new and different, just trust in yourself and each other. I, for one, feel confident that we can continue to build on these individuals gifts to create a really great research project!!!!

Your Friend, Kristen
May 20, 2012

Dear Mr. Morales,

I hope this letter finds you well. I am writing to request permission to use an image of your poster, *Study History*, in my dissertation thesis. This material will appear as originally published. Unless you request otherwise, I will use the conventional style of the Graduate College of the University of Illinois at Chicago as acknowledgement.

Should you approve of this request, please sign and date the letter below and return it to me.

Sincerely,

Kristen Atkinson

The above request is approved by Ricardo Levins Morales (print name)

Signed: Ricardo Levins Morales Date 5/24/12
APPENDIX O

RELEASw FOR PERMISSION TO USE ARTWORK/TEXT

Date: 5.31.12
To: Kristen Atkinson
1040 W. Harrison St.
Chicago, IL 60610

Attn: Kristen
Phone: 773-519-4833
Fax: 
Email: kristen@atkinson.com

The following credit must appear immediately next to the artwork/text in 7pt. type or larger:
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www.syracuseculturalworkers.com

The copy below must appear in 7pt. type or larger on the same page as the artwork/text or the facing page:

Syracuse Cultural Workers “Tools for Change” catalog is 40 color pages of feminist, progressive, multicultural resources to help change the world and sustain activism. The Peace Calendar, Women Artists Datebook, over 100 posters on social, cultural and political themes, holiday cards for Solstice, Christmas, Chanukah, plus buttons, stickers, T-shirts, notecards, postcards, and books. Great fundraising products.

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Visit/MC email: scw@syracuseculturalworkers.com

If it does not appear on these two pages, then there must be a notation on the artwork/text page indicating where the copy is. For example:

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Please review, sign and return to SCW with payment, Visa, MC, check or money order.
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Thank you!

Our mission is to help create a culture that honors diversity and celebrates community; that inspires and nurtures justice, equality and freedom; that respects our fragile Earth and all its beings; that encourages and supports all forms of creative expression.
APPENDIX P

Univereity of Illinois
At Chicago

Office for the Protection of Research Subjects (OPRS)
Office of the Vice Chancellor for Research (OVC) #272
318 Administrative Building
1733 West Polk Street
Chicago, Illinois 60612-7207

Approval Notice
Initial Review (Response To Modifications)

June 21, 2010

Kristen Atkinson, MSW
Jane Addams School of Social Work
4232 N Leavitt St #2
Chicago, IL 60657
Phone: (773) 517-4333

RE: Protocol # 2010-0483
“Education for Liberation: A Precursor to Youth Activism for Social Justice”

Dear Ms. Atkinson:

Your Initial Review (Response To Modifications) was reviewed and approved by Members of IRB #2 by the Expedited review process on June 14, 2010. You may now begin your research.

Please note the following information about your approved research protocol:

Protocol Approval Period: June 14, 2010 - June 13, 2011
Approved Subject Enrollment #: 20
Additional Determinations for Research Involving Minors: The Board determined that this research satisfies 45CFR46.404, research not involving greater than minimal risk. Therefore, in accordance with 45CFR46.408, the IRB determined that only one parent's/legal guardian's permission/signature is needed. Wards of the State may not be enrolled unless the IRB grants specific approval and assures inclusion of additional protections in the research required under 45CFR46.409. If you wish to enroll Wards of the State contact OPRS and refer to the tip sheet.
Performance Sites: UIC
Sponsor: None
Research Protocol(s):
  a) Education for Liberation: A Precursor to Youth Activism for Social Justice, 2010
Recruitment Material(s):
  a) Youth Recruitment Script, 6.7.10, Version 1
  b) Recruitment Script for Staff and Community Members, 6.7.10, Version 1
  c) Informational Letter for Parents and Guardians, 6.7.10, Version 2
Informed Consent(s):
  a) Informed Consent Form Youth ages 18-19, 6.7.10, Version 2
  b) Adult Informed Consent Form, 6.7.10, Version 2
Assent(s):
Phone: 312-996-1711  http://www.uic.edu/depts/oerc/cprs/  FAX: 312-413-2929
APPENDIX P (continued)

2010-0483  Page 2 of 3  June 2, 2010

a) Youth Assent, 6.7.10, Version 2
Parental Permission(s):

b) Parent/Guardian Permission Form, 6.7.10, Version 2

Your research meets the criteria for expedited review as defined in 45 CFR 46.101(b)(1) under the following specific categories:

(6) Collection of data from voice, video, digital, or image recordings made for research purposes.

(7) Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including but not limited to research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.

Please note the Review History of this submission:

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<th>Receipt Date</th>
<th>Submittion Type</th>
<th>Review Process</th>
<th>Review Date</th>
<th>Review Action</th>
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<td>Initial Review</td>
<td>Expedited</td>
<td>05/28/2010</td>
<td>Modifications Required</td>
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<td>06/09/2010</td>
<td>Response To Modifications</td>
<td>Expedited</td>
<td>06/14/2010</td>
<td>Approved</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Please remember to:

→ Use your research protocol number (2010-0483) on any documents or correspondence with the IRB concerning your research protocol.

→ Review and comply with all requirements on this enclosure.

“UIC Investigator Responsibilities, Protection of Human Research Subjects”

Please note that the UIC IRB has the prerogative and authority to ask further questions, seek additional information, require further modifications, or monitor the conduct of your research and the consent process.

Please be aware that if the scope of work in the grant/project changes, the protocol must be amended and approved by the UIC IRB before the initiation of the change.

We wish you the best as you conduct your research. If you have any questions or need further help, please contact OPRS at (312) 996-1711 or visit (312) 355-2959. Please send any correspondence about this protocol to OPRS at 293 AOB, M/C 672.

Sincerely,

[Signature]

Jovelle Hamilton, MSW
IRB Coordinator, IRB #2
Office for the Protection of Research Subjects

Enclosure(s):
1. UIC Investigator Responsibilities, Protection of Human Research Subjects
2. Informed Consent Document(s):
   a) Informed Consent Form Youth ages 18-19, 6.7.10, Version 2
   b) Adult Informed Consent Form, 6.7.10, Version 2
3. Assent Document(s):
   a) Youth Assent, 6.7.10, Version 2
4. Parental Permission(s):
   a) Parent/Guardian Permission Form, 6.7.10, Version 2
5. Recruiting Material(s):
   a) Youth Recruitment Script, 6.7.10, Version 1
   b) Recruitment Script for Staff and Community Members, 6.7.10, Version 1
   c) Informational Letter for Parents and Guardians, 6.7.10, Version 2

cc: Creasie Finney Hairston, Jane Addams School of Social Work, M/C 309
    Mark A. Mattaini, Faculty Sponsor, Jane Addams School of Social Work, M/C 309
CITED LITERATURE


VITA

NAME: Kristen N. Atkinson


HONORS: Jefferson Award for Public Service, 2010.

Chancellor’s Student Leadership and Service Award, 2010.

