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22. POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT AS A CHILD: RETHINKING, RESEEING AND REINVESTING YOUTH IN POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

Abstract This chapter explores political involvement of youth through the perspectives of the third author, Dylan. We reflexively consider Dylan's involvement in politics to extend his perspectives on political participation and analyze the ways in which politics impact children, and in turn, how children impact politics. Pushing back on the popular notion that children are not able to be 'political' because they are too young, we weave Dylan's voice throughout a discussion of the role of young people in politics grounded in critical theoretical perspectives. We position childhood as a contested and constructed space, and we examine the historical construction of childhood to search for evidence of the child who is unable (and not enabled) to be involved in an 'adult' world. In refuting this, we turn to one young man's experiences to elaborate that many youth have a predisposition to critical political thought, and Dylan's perspectives become a lens to underscore the possibilities for encouraging youth to politics.

SOCIOPOLITICAL INVOLVEMENT AS A CHILD

It's not important to be good. It's important to be good for something.
(Miles Horton 1990, p. 35)

Spring 2012: Images of the 'Occupy' encampments being cleared away trickled down media screens. More than a year has passed since that spring and the Occupy movement camps are long gone, but the consciousness of wealth inequity that they brought into popular focus has left its mark. Social class is no longer a taboo topic for today's youth who believe that class trumps race as an explanation for inequity (Hunigan 2013). The dialogues about 'the 1%' who brutally exploit workers, the planet and political systems were full of passion and vitriol, they ignited a fire for justice in youth. Dylan Siry was one of those youth. For him the words and images of the movement were shared and re-shared on social networking sites. Although just sixteen when the movement hit its fevered pitch he was keeping track. He recalls being an active participant in disseminating and analyzing the media that had finally decided that 'Occupy' was worth noting. He was not alone. Media images reveal that children were making signs and bringing food to protestors. Beyond this, they were participating in blogs, marches and uprisings, while educating themselves on the issues that have led to brutal economic hardship and this moment of public uprising.

K. Tobin et al., (Eds.), Transforming Urban Education, 377–387.

Dylan Siry is the third author of this chapter. He is a young man who believed then, and believes now, that ***the Occupy Movements are all about fighting for our collective future***. Political engagement is not new to him. He recalls the night of November 4th 2008, when he was thirteen-years-old and glued to the presidential election results that poured in from across America. He was too wired to be sleepy, that moment meant too much. He believed that the election would change the prospects of his life. He was not alone, texting back and forth with other barely teenage (and younger) friends, he joined thousands of young people who felt, and continue to feel, the need to be politically engaged. Too young to vote, but not too young to care, these children are not the self obsessed dupes of a shallow society (as the popular media claims about youth often assert), instead they shared and continue to share an enthusiasm about the election as well as the issues that were highlighted during the election campaign. In recalling his zeal over the election, Dylan explains, ***the decisions made will effect me the most, however, I do not get to decide who gets to decide what happens to me…***

In this chapter, we reflexively consider the lived experiences of one adolescent (Dylan) and his sociopolitical involvement during a culturally turbulent time. We do this with the intent of extending his perspectives to explore the ways in which politics impact youth, and the ways in which youth impact politics, and in doing so we ground our discussion in critical theoretical perspectives. Our analysis emerges from the perspectives gained from our individual as well as shared histories. We are a team of two educators and one teenager who come together with our different perspectives on the world and its issues in order to highlight and document the political involvement of youth. We are all interested in the topic as we share the belief that "to create vital polities in the future, the challenge is to get more youth involved, which leads us to the question of how this involvement happens and how civic competence is learned" (Youniss, et al. 2002, p. 129). In order to understand "how this political involvement happens" we focus on the lived experience of such involvement. In what follows, we highlight Dylan's perspectives and extend them through theoretical analyses grounded in critical perspectives. We note "the frontier where information about the world collides with personal experience is the point where knowledge is created" (Kincheloe 1999, p. 321), and as such, Dylan's reflections are highlighted in bold font. We also believe that "the world exists as it does because of the myriad of relationships and structures constructed by human beings, to which we all contribute" (Darder 2002, p. 65). Thus, we conceptualize, analyze, and explore the complexity of the construct of 'politics' by surrounding it in meaning through the experiences of one politically involved teenager.

REFUSING THE NOTION OF POLITICS ELSEWHERE

"Life is elsewhere." (Milan Kundera 1973/2000)

As we look to the future through the eyes and words of Dylan, let us return for a moment to the past. The word politics comes from Greek polītikos, from

polītēs, citizen (the American Heritage Dictionary 2009). Politics, as a term and as a concept, is interrelated with being a citizen. The history of the word that encompasses a dialogical relationship between the State and its denizens is relevant to our analysis of youth and politics. We see youth as members of a political class as well as the recipients of politics. In short, politics matters *for* children and we contend that very often it also matters *to* children.

> A young person like me can have many perspectives on politics and his role in the system. Politics is about more than just political campaigns, and it is important for kids to be involved and understand who is making the decisions that affect them… Remembering that politics is about power, kids need to be aware of how they are placed in society and they need to keep an eye out for moments when others may try to manipulate them or recruit them into doing things that they do not want to do, or that they do not believe in.

As Dylan defines politics, he presents a living and complex understanding of it. Politics is simply not something that happens 'elsewhere,' it is about understanding and fighting for 'what you believe in' because it impacts your life and the lives of others in your community. Dylan's definition of politics differs sharply from the definition generally found in schools. Schools infamously compartmentalize meaning and reduce the term 'politics' to its lowest common denominator in which 'politics' in the classroom is reduced to pictures of the white house, checks and balances, and a blurb about the glory of Greek democracy. Politics is what happens in impressive architecture with men in suits. Politics is the business of others. Joe Kincheloe (2008) critiques schooling that ignores the political. He argues instead for education that embraces encouraging young people toward understanding and engaging in the political in order to create a humane and just society. Our experiences as educators have however found such classrooms to be rare. We also find it somewhat absurd that children who are structurally removed from conceptualizing themselves as being able to be involved in politics are expected to magically become political animals at the age of eighteen[1].

As a term, *political* does not fare much better in popular culture where it is most often used with reference to the institutionalized relationships between states and countries, and their citizens, as well as the activities within an organization or a company. Against this context we define politics broadly. Certainly institutional structures are central to considering the role of politics in the lived experiences of youth, but we see it as paramount to also shed light on the day-to-day ways in which politics emerges in human relationships. Thus, in our conceptualization of politics, we mean it as a construct that is concerned with how people make decisions, in the context of relationships that involve struggles over resources and collective needs. We situate this perspective of power as the control over the distribution of knowledge, goods, and the ability to influence or affect lives. Inherent in this view is an understanding of the activities and purposes of institutions and the ways in which these structure human experiences.

POLITICS IMPACT YOUTH; YOUTH IMPACT POLITICS

Politics are in the 'big picture' politics, like elections and policy decisions, as well as the day-to-day, 'on the ground' politics that affect youth. Youth like Dylan are aware that political decisions can have strong influences on children's lives and that children in the world are involved in, and affected by, politics in a wide variety of ways. They are cognizant that some of the larger social issues facing youth today are impacted by political decisions, and decisions are made every day around the globe over issues of poverty, homelessness, war, children's health, and the environment, all of which affects young people. Dylan explains,

> Youth like me are impacted by policies, like those on the environment, because as global warming and pollution increase, they lead to a deterioration of the world's environmental conditions. Kids like me will grow up in this world and will be left with a world that is not as safe and clean as when the adults making the decisions were young.
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> Political decisions about poverty policies can have serious consequences on kids and their families. Decisions about funding for low-income housing, food stamps, and programs that support families are all connected to political decisions. The percentage of poor children living in poverty has risen a lot and so, poverty policies are extremely relevant to children's lives and development. Children's health programs, like insurance for those whose families do not have health insurance, are political issues that effect their lives and health as well.

Dylan's schooling has emphasized 'citizenship' or 'civics' in his social studies courses, yet implicit in framing what it means to be a 'good citizen' often is the notion of patriotism, love of country, and allegiance to government. The complexities of the responsibilities between a citizen and a community and between countries and their governments are reduced to 'good' and 'bad'; following rules and breaking them, allies and enemies, crime and punishment.

> Political decisions and relationships between countries and governments can lead to war. Boys are particularly vulnerable to wartime politics, as military recruiters often target them.

Rather than setting up binaries between good and bad, we see possibilities in supporting students in the process of conscientization, which "permits one to respond to the sociocultural realities that shape one's circumstance by developing, in concert with others, interventions that interrupt forms of oppression" (Britzman 1991, p. 25).

Notoriously children ask 'why?' Dylan notes, "Asking why challenges what is, and can help other people to see that there are other views." By asking 'why' political kids challenge everyone to think twice about that which may be, "purposefully organized when (it is) merely purposefully implemented" (Slater 2002, p. 69). In asking why, youth can have a key role in redefining 'what is' as Dylan stresses,

as they push back on structures with the ultimate result of having greater agency. Diane Milstein (2010) has stressed the consistently undervalued agency of children as 'political subjects' as she examines how children's collective actions can change the structures of authority. There are a multitude of ways that youth can and do become involved in challenging 'what is'.

> We can try to bring about change by advocating for things we believe in; we can do this by ourselves, and we can also organize others to try to bring out changes in things that we believe are unjust or unfair. Being politically engaged can involve writing letters, sharing information, talking to other children and adults, informing ourselves, participating in blogs.

Dylan's words stand in sharp opposition to the messages in popular culture that often assert that youth today are increasingly isolated and individualistic as they waste their lives in online trivia. Although we do not wish to position Dylan as a savior, counter-story example of 'the new youth who will save the world,' we do note that his views (and the concerns and energy of youth like him) represent the face of a generation who are concerned with connecting to collective goals. There is a solidarity that comes from working together towards common goals, and having shared political viewpoints can lead to feelings of belonging to a group. Randall Collins' (2004) theory of interaction rituals presents a framework that positions the role of group assembly, mutual focus of attention, and a shared mood as ingredients that work together to generate group solidarity and emotional energy. Feeling connected to others, as a part of a group that shares your viewpoints, is important to many young people, and Dylan argues for solidarity as essential.

> When people belong to a political party, or group, they feel like they are connected to other people who share their views on certain issues.
>
> Politics and social justice are connected, and politically engaged kids work against injustices in their communities. The community of a young person can be large, like a country, or small, like a school or a neighborhood.

Politics are at play in all these places, and it is important for youth, like all members of society, to speak up for things that are unfair or unjust.

> We can take initiative by writing letters to politicians, to lawmakers, to newspaper editors, to company owners. We can be involved in our schools, by joining clubs, joining organizations, and running for school office. Kids who are a part of the politics of a school can work to have official say in changes that schools might start, such as recycling programs or supporting school lunch programs with local foods.

Within the social structure of a school, politics extends to relationships, and the everyday relationships and practices of youth become important political considerations of the processes of social participation.

> We can reach out to people who are different from them, and fight discrimination in their schools and communities. By doing so, kids can speak out against things that are unfair, unjust, and wrong.

AGENCY AND HOPE

A central tenet of the sociocultural frameworks we adopt is the dialectical relationship between agency and structure (Sewell 1992). Dialectical relationships acknowledge that there are parts to social existence that constitute the whole, and they cannot be separated. Thus, the dialectical relationship between agency and structure implies that the two constructs presuppose each other. "When we look at human actions, they cannot be understood without simultaneously considering *agency* and *structure*, which therefore are like two sides of a coin" (Roth 2005, p. xxi). In considering Dylan's political experiences as a young person, we reflexively consider the ways in which structures (as the schema and resources available to him) afford agency (the power to enact social life) and in turn, how these agencies produce structures. This framework enables us to identify structures that may create or hinder opportunities for young people to gain agency, and to consider how their agency can impact the structures in their lives. Roger Hart (1992) has noted that children's participation in society begins in infancy, when they "discover the extent to which their own voices influence the course of events in their lives" (p. 4). He continues by mentioning that the nature of the influence that an infant brings to their society varies depending upon the particular situation in which the child is living. Nonetheless, it is interesting to note that with politics and participation defined broadly, we can consider children's involvement and agency beginning quite early. Herein we focus on youth, and in our use of the term, we refer to adolescents of pre-voting age.

Another important point that we seek to stress here is our critique of the popular classroom notion of apolitical and/or neutral perspectives as being inherently 'just' and 'fair.' We contend that implicit in some 'neutrality' is an assertion that equates justice with a bystander's lack of involvement in the world. As teachers (the adult authors) have all too often seen 'neutral' classrooms that as they attempt to 'balance opinions' send the message that fairness means not taking sides, essentially the corollary of this is that injustice is nothing to get upset about and the veneer of contentment is to be upheld at all costs. We contrast this with the words of Paulo Freire, "The struggle for hope means the denunciation, in no uncertain terms, of all abuses, schemes, and omissions. As we denounce them, we awaken in others and ourselves the need, and also the taste, for hope" (Freire 1998, p. 106). As young people like Dylan denounce neutrality and situate politics in their own lives and demand to be heard in keeping with Freire, they define politics as hope and the political as something not far removed from them, but firmly placed in the here and now.

OLD ENOUGH TO FIGHT

We argue that there is a need to push back on the popular notion that children are not able to be 'political' because they are too young to have perspectives on political issues. In order to critique this idea we present a very brief glimpse into the historical construction of childhood to search for evidence of the child who is unable (and not enabled) to be involved in an 'adult' world. In essence arguing against the notion that youth are not/should not be entitled to political ontologies, we ask 'why not?' and look to history to guide us.

Anne Higonnet (1998) powerfully argues that the Enlightenment created the idea/ideal of the Romantic innocent child, and that this representation was reinforced by art that supplied a 'visual fiction' of childhood as innocence. Thus the meta-narrative of the Enlightenment aided by technology fore-grounded one definition of childhood and firmly placed it literally in the public eye. Prior to this childhood was (in the West) simply an imperfect adulthood, and adulthood was embraced when it was economically and biologically viable, which was between the ages of 7–12 (Heywood 2002). Stephanie Coontz (1992) notes that at the 'age of consent' in many states in nineteenth century America was nine or ten for girls (p. 184), and that while the nineteenth century middle class family was nurturing its young with violin lessons, poor urban children were collected by 'child savers' and sent to work in Midwestern farms (p. 132).

Clearly childhood is a contested and constructed space. Henry Giroux (1996) notes, "As a concept, youth represents an inescapable intersection of the personal, social, political, and pedagogical. Beneath the abstract codifying of youth around the discourses of law, medicine, psychology, employment, education, and marketing statistics, there is the lived experience of being young" (p. 3). No one was more adept and influential at defining, codifying and limiting the perimeters of youth in America than G. Stanley Hall in the early 1900s. Hall was influenced by the dominant theories of his time, namely the spill-over from evolution to other linear chronological models of human development. Early models of adolescence (including Hall's) relied on anthropologically-borrowed notions, from Margaret Mead and others, of natural formal transitions from childhood to adulthood (Kett 2003). Originating in zoology, *recapitulation theory* connected early anthropology, biology, evolutionary and eventually childhood theories, and gave credence to the creation of a 'scientific' model of human growth and development. The idea was that human races developed from animal to civilization and human children followed this chronology. Adolescence by this discourse was understood as 'less than' in the same ways that the colonized childlike racial 'other' was less than.

Several theorists have critiqued this discourse and argue for rethinking childhood. Joe Kincheloe (2004) notes how children are often caught between overextended families and a media-saturated culture that leaves them truly alone and bored, powerless (in very real ways as the protections for children are constantly eroded)

and hopeless. At the same time children who have been informed by the media are considered overly worldly, negatively precocious and a threat to the social and moral order. Nancy Lesko (2001) places the notion of adolescences as 'less than' adulthood in an historical context by doing so argues against its veracity. Shirley Steinberg and Joe Kincheloe (2004) also argue that the context of childhood has changed, and this change must lead to a re-visioning of the child.

The traditional or 'natural childhood' is an idea predicated on developmental notions that exclude children from political involvement by deeming them incapable of understanding adult concerns. But we join those who argue that childhood is not static, rather it is as an ideological construct, that is rooted in multiple social, economic, global, cultural contexts. The meanings of childhood can and do change. Likewise 'youth,' has not been a unifying concept (race, class, gender and urban/rural and historical positionings having greatly influenced its conception). We argue that the experiences and perspectives of youth such as Dylan can help us reformulate ideas about youth and childhood in general. As young men and women like Dylan use the information available to them in the age of hyper-reality, they are able to be informed on politics in ways that have been inaccessible to previous generations. We argue that their voices demand not only serious consideration in the political sphere but also that as they politicize, they force us to rethink 'childhood' itself.

REFUSING A WORLD ALWAYS ALREADY THERE

We contend that a conception of children as 'unable to be involved' in society at large, and in politics in particular, silences the contributions that they can and do make, and relegates them to passive recipients of a world that has always already been there. This is dangerous mythology. We contend that it is important for all youth growing up in a society to understand how politics affects them. As youth are bombarded with advertising and seen simply as markets (Shor 2005), as they tangle in record numbers with drugs, crime, homelessness, pregnancy, AIDS, violence, fear, abuse, hopelessness, neglect, we contend that political involvement can support them in recognizing how politics shapes the way that people are able to live. When children are able to be politically involved, they can have an understanding of politics that goes beyond knowing what candidates are running for office, and in this understanding they can be supported to take agency and feel connected to others. Dylan argues,

> sometimes when adults elect politicians, the children don't have a say, but the issues facing a government are issues that will directly impact the next generation. The officials who run a country and have influence in a society sometimes do not take youth into account when making their decisions, or if they do, the decisions still might not be in children's best interests. Although youth like me cannot vote yet, we can mobilize others to vote. We can educate ourselves, our friends, and our families, and we can attend protest rallies and let

> our voices be heard with other like-minded people. We can boycott companies that are harming the environment or treating workers badly and be involved in local, national, and international political and human rights movements.

We bring critical perspectives to our work with children and adolescents, and these theoretical perspectives explore the ways in which political power works, and emphasize this as something that is both agreed to and resisted, and as something that can constrain as well as empower. The institution of school embodies a mechanism of social control, one that extends from the disciplinary power structure of the school itself, to the wider societal control over opportunities that are offered as available to young people. The increasing technicizing of public education is a form of power (McNeil 2009). We see becoming politically aware as a way for youth to resist these oppressive structures; a way for young people to become aware of their own positionings, as well as a possibility to perceive greater opportunities for themselves and others – in interpreting their own lived worlds, they can begin to see their interactions with others as agentic. As Dylan notes, political youth can boycott, organize and mobilize others, his actions challenge the idea that crossing into the official world of adulthood will magically confer agency on him and in the meantime he will have to simply be a recipient of the power wielded by others.

STEPPING IN AND STEPPING UP

Every generation hopes that the next generation coming up will solve the problems that the current generation has either created, or been unable to solve. As the world of young people today is increasingly connected in cyberspace, the significance of Dylan's texting on the night of the US presidential election becomes increasingly important. Youth like Dylan who are connected to information sources on formal and informal levels have the power to be politically informed and engaged in a multitude of societal issues. Their political engagement can begin in their homes, and extend to their schools, their communities, and even the nation.

Politically engaged youth can speak out against, and work together to change, things that are unfair, unjust, and wrong. We believe that youth who are joining their families to protest on Wall Street and across America and who are visibly standing up for justice are not passive bystanders roped into action by manipulative parents. They are able to articulate injustice and understand the need for action. As these children speak out and mobilize others, they can work to explore creative solutions to difficult problems. Our experiences have led us to believe that many youth have a predisposition to critical political thought. They appear absolutely sure that they would run the world (and school) so much better! To encourage youth to politics is to encourage an awareness that things don't just happen to them or us, they have reasons, they have logic, and this logic can be challenged, fought and altered. The world is not immutable, it can be otherwise. Although schools constantly tell young people this, often through the use of inspirational platitudes (ad nauseam), we believe

that it is only when youth themselves are politically active that they can begin to envision how the world we share could be better. We know this is possible, we know this is happening. We are excited by the prospect of a future that acknowledges youth as full participants in a democracy that is inclusive.

NOTE

[1] We note here that while the voting age in many countries is 18, there was an initiative presented to the Council of Europe in 2009 to change the voting age in all European elections to 16. Resolution 1826 was passed in 2011, which focuses on examining a voting age of 16 in European countries, and following which some countries permit 16 year olds to vote in local elections. For more information: ssembly.coe.int/Mainf.asp?link=/Documents/AdoptedText/ta11/ERES1826.htm

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Dylan Siry is a teenager whose interest in politics began in his early adolescence. He has attended anti-war protests and rallies, and campaigned for various political movements. In his last year of high school in Luxembourg, he analyzes world politics, and reads about political history. He hopes to one day be involved in government affairs.