

JOAN WYNNE

## 2. WE WHO LOVE FREEDOM CANNOT REST

*Young People Transforming Their Worlds*

To me young people come first, they have  
The courage where we fail  
And if I can but shed some light, as they  
Carry us through the gate

The older I get the better I know that the  
Secret of my going on  
Is when the reins are in the hand of the  
Young, who dare to run against the storm

The above two stanzas from *Sweet Honey in the Rock* about the work and words of U.S. Civil Rights Leader, Ella Baker, always remind me that one of our jobs as educators is to get out of the way of the children so they can transform not only their world but also ours. This chapter will examine a national program in the United States, the Young People's Project (YPP), its roots in the Civil Rights Movement, its unique use of mathematics as a pedagogy for transformative personal and civic leadership, and the serious implications of this transformative leadership model for reshaping schools and teacher preparation.

### HISTORY OF THE ALGEBRA PROJECT AND YPP'S EMERGING FROM THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

"Without the Algebra Project and Doc, I would not be in college today. Many of us wouldn't even finish high school," said Whitney Brakefield, a student at Mississippi State University, when she spoke to an audience at the "Quality Education as a Constitutional Right" (QECR) seminar at Florida International University featuring Civil Rights icons, John Doar and Bob Moses.

I watched Moses, who seemed to wince at the reference to him, as he listened to Brakefield and a panel of Algebra Project (AP) graduates and Young People's Project (YPP) participants from Jackson, Mississippi and Miami, Florida. They were part of the QECR national movement first convened at Howard University by Moses in 2005, then passed to YPP to lead. This particular QECR event was hosted at FIU's College of Law. These students each took their turn to talk about how AP, YPP and "Doc" had changed their lives. It was their mention of "Doc" that seemed

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to make Moses uncomfortable. A grassroots leader whose humility is legendary, he prefers to take a backseat to the people he “leads by not leading” (Wynne, 2009)

Nevertheless, the students continued their stories, giving the audience a glimpse into the history of these organizations’ impact. The students insisted that they intended to continue to be part of this movement toward quality education as a constitutional right for all of the nation’s children, a seed planted years ago in the sixties.

In 1960, at the suggestion of Ella Baker, Moses travelled the south to begin a dialogue with Black leaders to discover how to support their work for liberation from the Jim Crow South. From the discussions in Mississippi came the “bottom up” campaign for voting rights for all Blacks in the south.

Over forty years after those bloody battles and ultimate voting rights’ victories and his work organizing Freedom Summer and the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, Moses returned to Mississippi to work with those sharecroppers and insurgents’ grandchildren and great grandchildren, who were still being denied a quality education in the public schools there and across the nation (Moses & Cobb).

To those children in 1991, Moses brought the Algebra Project, a project he began developing with his own children in Boston schools. And later through a “Genius” fellowship from the MacArthur Foundation, he expanded AP, designing it as a tool to teach higher level mathematics and critical thinking skills to children stuck at the bottom of the delivery of bad education. He saw access to mathematics as the next civil right. To gain political power in the south, black citizens had to win their right to vote. To win access to college and to economic security in a technology driven 21st century society, poor children will need to become proficient in mathematics. Moses insists that “The absence of math literacy in urban and rural communities is as urgent an issue today as the lack of registered voters was 40 years ago ... And I believe solving the problem requires the same kind of community organizing that changed the South then. If we can succeed in bringing all children to a level of math literacy so they can participate in today’s economy, that would be a revolution” (Mother Jones).

Moses describes AP as “a process, not an event” (Moses) It uses Dewey’s experiential learning pedagogy while at the same time being responsive to youth culture. Neither it nor YPP is afraid to integrate the music, the digital images and interests of the hip-hop culture into its curriculum and methodology to entice the young into the study of mathematics. AP’s work is a deliberate attempt to prove to the nation that all children, no matter how poor or how alienated from the society at large, can and will learn higher level mathematics, given the appropriate curriculum, pedagogy, and support (Wynne, 2010).

What I have found to be unique about AP is its demand for excellence from children at the bottom, a demand that these low-performing students grapple with higher level abstract thinking. Instead of delivering “remedial” curriculum and uninspired instruction, AP delivers accelerated content and strategies typically reserved for the “gifted” programs. Moses refuses to settle for these struggling learners to meet only minimum standards. He requires that AP students take

mathematics 90 minutes a day, five days a week for four years so that they will be ready not only to graduate from high school but to be admitted and to excel in college mathematics, or as he often suggests, get them ready so “They will land on their own two feet in college” (Center).

But the insistence on accelerated learning for “children at the bottom” is not the only radical philosophy and practice of AP. Inherent in its mission is a belief that only the students, once they are committed to actively pursue higher level mathematics and abstraction, can transform their schools and their world, a kind of “earned insurgency” (PBS 2007, Wynne 2010). Moses further insists that the only ones who can really demand the kind of education they need and the kind of changes needed to get it are the students, their parents, and their community (Moses, 18-21) – a radical idea in educational institutions in the U.S.

School reformers often use the rhetoric of parent involvement in school change, but the actual practice and policies of reform for low-performing schools are typically dominated by legislators, educators, and politicians – not parents, not students. However, AP’s philosophy puts the power in the hands of the people who are being abused by inadequate education, not in the hands of well meaning advocates, or worse, in the hands of people who are intent on maintaining a “sharecropper” education for the descendants of slaves, or other children of color (Moses, 2001; Wynne, 2010). For me as a seasoned educator whose career has been dedicated to teacher education, being exposed to this practice of student and parent demand created an epiphany; and as a consequence, I have changed every undergraduate and graduate teacher preparation course I teach to include this practice of parent and community partnering as an indicator of teacher competence.

In addition to its insistence on community involvement, is AP’s belief that “a real breakthrough would not make us happy if it did not deeply and seriously empower the target population to demand access to literacy for everyone. That is what is driving the project” (Moses, 2001, p. 19). Because of this belief, which is deeply rooted in the Movement, and the practices which evolve from it, students broaden their context to include not only personally acquiring a quality education, but also sharing it with their community. They begin to see their academic gains as an obligation to raise the achievement of others. By 1996 AP had reached some 45,000 pupils, and its instructional materials were being used by teachers in 105 schools across the country (Henry).

#### ENTER THE YOUNG PEOPLE’S PROJECT

Steeped in the traditions of the Southern Freedom Movement, Moses’ progeny, who seemed to have heard the echo of Ella Baker’s words, grabbed the reins from the Algebra Project and dared “to run against the storm.” These youngsters organized a spin-off of AP and named it the Young People’s Project (YPP). They have driven the effort to take mathematics into their communities. Founded in 1996 by two of Moses’ sons, Omo and Taba Moses, their friend who was a graduate of AP in Boston, and nine 8th grade AP students in Mississippi, YPP explains its mission to be one that:

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... develops students aged 8-22 from traditionally marginalized populations as learners, teachers, leaders, and organizers through math and media literacy, community-building, and advocacy in order to build a unique network of young people who are better equipped to navigate life's circumstances, are active in their communities, and advocate for education reform in America. (TYPP website)

YPP credits the Algebra Project for securing a space for them as young people to organically grow their own organization from the principles they learned from their experiences in AP. The YPP organizers believe that young people can and must make significant changes in their own lives and in the moral life of the nation. They use what they call "math literacy work" as the vehicle to begin that journey of individual and societal transformation.

In the 16 years of that journey, YPP has evolved from primarily organizing youth to teach math in after-school programs, during Saturday schools, and summer camps to the more daunting work of developing workshops and campaigns to grow the civic leadership and organizing skills of the young to influence public policy. They have also raised funding from foundations as prestigious as the National Science Foundation to develop the research and analysis for documentation. And from school districts, foundations, and organizations within each local site, they have raised the compensation to pay the youth as "knowledge workers." In Mississippi they have created a garden on a small plot of land where they hope to one day "create an agricultural training center to help people learn to produce their own healthy foods" (TYPP).

To be such a young organization and to be run only by the young for the young, their successes might surprise us. Annually over 400 High School and College students are trained and employed to do math literacy work. At least 5000 elementary students, family and community members participate in math literacy workshops, events and initiatives each year. YPP employs 20 full and 35 part-time staff. Their median age is 26 and 85% are African-American and Latino. Local sites exist in major cities across the nation from Los Angeles to Miami. They have instituted 3 Local Advisory Boards (Boston, Chicago, and Mississippi) and a National Board of Directors with representation throughout the country. The simple majority of both boards are young people who have been part of the organization (TYPP).

#### FLAGWAY GAME BUILDS COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT WITH MATHEMATICS

One of their major vehicles for teaching math to the young as well as their attempts to reach out to the community is a game they call Flagway, a game patented by Bob Moses in 1996. The game is a vehicle to encourage students to see mathematics as fun and as part of their everyday realities, and has been used effectively in several cities to engage students and their parents in math in the same way they enthusiastically engage in sports.

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The intent is that, ultimately, through Flagway, students will form Leagues that create opportunities for teams, coached by high school and college students, to compete locally, regionally and nationally. Schools, churches, community-based organizations are invited to enter teams in designated leagues. The underlying purpose of these events is to encourage disenfranchised communities to take ownership of mathematics as an accessible academic discipline and to counter, what Lisa Delpit indicates, is the notion in some Black and poor communities that mathematics is for White people (Delpit, 2012).

The Flagway Game can be played with students as early as 1st grade and has been enjoyed by adults. In general, the game is played with 3rd–6th graders. During game play students navigate a Flagway or course of radial “paths” based on the Flagway rules (derived from the “Möbius” Function). Speed counts, so as students develop into skilled players several may be running through the course simultaneously, creating dynamics similar to that of a sporting event. Part of the beauty of Flagway is that students can play the game without knowing the rules, allowing all students access to the game and the underlying mathematical principles (TYPP website). YPP in collaboration with TIZ media has created an On-line Flagway Challenge Game so that young people can enter into the world of mathematics no matter their skill level or age. The fundamental structure of the game changes as higher level abstraction is demanded (TYPP).

#### CAMPAIGN ORGANIZED BY YPP

Another quality of YPP that lends itself to transformative action is its capacity to respond quickly to current realities. Because it is rooted in the Southern Freedom Movement, its MO seems to be one that looks at the realities affecting those at the bottom rung of society’s economic ladder, raises the voices of those people, ignores old paradigms that resist change, and organizes to create a new response to the present exigency. It doesn’t get stuck in rigid traditions that often cripple large bureaucracies when facing sudden calamities.

One example is YPP’s response to the devastation of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans and the governmental debacle of neglect for its citizens. Over 300,000 survivors had been dispersed across the nation, living in armed camps, housed in churches, auditoriums, living with relatives, etc. Researcher, Elizabeth Fussell, suggests in her report that “Virtually the entire population of the city was displaced and forced to resettle, which some did temporarily and others permanently” (Fussell et al., 2010, p. 1).

Within weeks after Katrina, YPP began organizing students and young adults from across the south, to “Find our Folks.” Along with the New Orleans Hot 8 Brass Band, they went, to Atlanta, Baton Rouge, Jackson, Mobile, New Orleans, and Houston to find the hurricane’s dispossessed. They networked with community agencies, churches, schools, colleges, volunteers, friends in each city who might support the tour and its work with dispersed populations. YPP organized local meetings and workshops, performing arts events, concerts, media blitzes to find America’s citizens exiled to other locations. And through this effort they educated

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many of us about resistance to hegemony, celebration of cultural histories, music, art and movements, as well as self reflection for healing and growth.

Their vision for this tour speaks to their comprehensive view of the multiple layers of innovation and cultural traditions needed for personal and societal transformation:

We seek to raise the voices of Katrina's survivors and connect them with the voices of America's survivors, the brothers and sisters in all corners of the country who remain on the margins of citizenship. We seek to use the tools of education, documentation, healing, and organizing to explore and discuss the conditions that led to the devastating impact of Katrina; to join the voices of resistance, the veterans of past and continuing movements, with the voices of Hip-Hop, Blues and Jazz; to celebrate African and indigenous cultures as they have been expressed in New Orleans and throughout the world; to find our folk, to reconnect the individuals, families and communities that are scattered across the country, living in exile. In finding our folk, we hope to find ourselves (TYPP).

One of the products resulting from the Finding Our Folks tour was a DVD produced by the young people showcasing specific workshops and events from the cities visited, including a visual tour of the devastated neighborhoods in New Orleans. I have used that video as a tool for my pre-service and in-service teachers to explore the power and creativity that young people in and outside their classrooms can bring to the table to democratize us all. Too often my university students feel powerless and are unconscious of their social agency as students and teachers. I have found that this DVD elicits from them serious conversations. During those conversations, they often, from the experiences of the FOF young people, extrapolate a sense of their capacity as teachers to change their professional world.

The kind of reality-based curriculum and Movement pedagogy, reflected in Ella Baker's vision and used by YPP in developing this tour is a content and strategy that can revolutionize our classrooms and schools. If creative young people grappling with daunting realities, grounded in the wisdom of their elders are given space and time in their local schools and colleges to instruct and inform, might our halls of education breathe new life and become more innovative in meeting the academic needs of their students? In this regard, the legacy of Ella Baker is clear. Giving space, support, and advice when needed, she, like Moses with YPP, stayed in the background as she protected the young in the Student Non Violent Committee (SNCC) from being subsumed by the adults in the Southern Christian Leadership Council. She was committed to a methodology that would allow youth to develop their own leadership. She made it possible for SNCC to organize and educate itself, and grapple amongst themselves with the philosophies and methods they would need as they confronted the dangers of the Jim Crow South. Moses elaborates, "What Ella Baker did for us, we did for Mississippi" (Ransby, 2003, p. 331) and I would add, what he has done for YPP.

In her biography of Ella Baker, Barbara Ransby describes Baker as a "Freirian teacher, a Gramscian intellectual, and a radical humanist" (p. 357). Those qualities seem manifested in the work of the Algebra Project and the Young People's

Project whose history also seems inextricably bound to the vision and practices of Baker. Like Freire's philosophy in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, AP and YPP are more concerned with creating an educational space that allows the young to look critically at their own lives and surroundings and creatively participate in the transformation of those worlds. And like Freire, they, too, foster resistance to hegemonic systems of thought. In the tradition of Baker, they want the young to think radically. Baker insisted that "For us as oppressed people to become a part of a society that is meaningful, the system under which we now exist has to be radically changed" (Moses, p. 2). For large populations of disenfranchised students condemned to low-performing schools, radical, transformative thinking seems "the only way out of no way out." For decades, rescue programs that target only the top 10% of the students attending low-performing institutions have never addressed the curriculum nor the pedagogy, as Moses explains, needed to "raise the floor" of academic achievement for students stuck at the bottom, thus sustaining a "sharecropper" education for most black and brown students in urban public schools (PBS).

#### FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY PARTNERS WITH AP AND YPP

For five years, from 2004-2009, FIU and AP collaborated in the first pilot in the nation of a school-based/university affiliated school reform grounded in accelerated mathematics for low-performing students. While Moses and AP were partnered with the university, the Young People's Project received local funding and started a site housed in FIU's College of Education. The Research & Development work done in Miami by AP, YPP, & FIU in those five years propelled the National Science Foundation to explore the efficacy of this mathematics cohort model in five other cities with African-American, Latino, and White Appalachian populations.

In February 2011, when the Colleges of Education and Law hosted the previously mentioned QECR forum with Doar and Moses, community and university responses to this dialogue fostered a renewed partnership between FIU and the Algebra Project with the local community. Compelled by a joint vision of Bob Moses and the Senior Associate Dean of the College of Law, Michelle Mason, the university initiated a 2011 summer institute on mathematics, civics and rhetorical structures to capitalize on the earlier R&D work with the Algebra Project and YPP.

"The intent of the partnership with AP and the institute," Michelle Mason suggested, "is to build a new national model for transforming disenfranchised young people into educational change agents in their communities" (mtg. 2011). The summer institute was designed also to demonstrate the Flagway game as a tool to get elementary students excited about learning mathematics, while at the same time, to create a space where FIU law students could teach youngsters' rhetorical and civic skills.



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#### MIAMI ALGEBRA PROJECT GRADUATES AND YPP LITERACY WORKERS

Six of the Miami Algebra Project cohort graduates who were still engaged with YPP work were selected to teach the math to 3rd, 4th, 5th grade students. One of those YPP math literacy workers (MLW), Wilkens Desire, passionately testified in a planning meeting that his cohort is committed “to doing whatever it takes to make sure that all the children in my community receive the kind of quality education that we received from the Algebra Project.”

These six MLW’s agreed to meet for 12 weeks before the summer with a renowned mathematics researcher, Dr. Ed Dubinsky, for 4 hours a day, 4 days a week to prepare the instruction necessary to teach the elementary school students from Liberty City at the institute. During that period, two FIU professors, a former local director of the Miami YPP site, and a professor/grant writer from the local community college met also once or twice a week to work with the students on presentation and leadership skills. As testament to their commitment, these students showed up day after day without knowing if enough money would be raised to support them in their professional development or to support the institute. Only one of these students had a part-time job. The other five had no employment. The professors, the director, and the math researcher also met with no compensation.

With budget adjustments and funding from the College of Law and a few patrons, ultimately, the program ran for four weeks in the summer in the law school. Though there was not enough funding in 2011 to hire a researcher, funding has been currently pledged from the FIU Office of Global Learning Initiative to support research for the 2012 math and civics summer institute.

Education undergraduate and graduate students, professors, law interns and professors (even a courtroom judge), university student affairs staff, Miami Dade College students and professors, and Miami Dade County Public School teachers and administrators, joined this effort to use Movement philosophy and pedagogy to transform the way we educate in universities and public spheres.

#### INFLUENCE OF THE YOUNG ON PRE-SERVICE AND IN-SERVICE TEACHERS

Each year for six years, high school students from the Miami Algebra Project and Young People’s Project made presentations to university students enrolled in education courses, both undergraduate and graduate level. These courses were selected by the professors who engaged with and researched the program. Twice some of these same students also presented at the Annual Research Conference of the College of Education. Several students, who were both AP and YPP participants, presented at National Educational conferences with the intent of sharing their knowledge of mathematics, what it takes to commit to learning mathematics, and what they believe are the qualities that make a good teacher.

In the summer of 2010, six of the YPP students presented their stories and a math lesson to one of my classes. A cohort of teachers, engaged in an Urban Education Master’s Degree Program, were enrolled in this class. When the YPP



students told their stories of being transfixed by their experiences as math literacy workers, the graduate students asked them to come to their classrooms to tutor and mentor their students. Yet when the YPP students moved to the next piece of their presentation, asking the cohort to participate in a mathematics lesson, the cohort resisted saying they weren't really good at mathematics. The YPP students told them not to worry that they would make it easy for them in the way that AP and YPP had made math easy to learn. Reducing the cohort's anxiety, the newly graduated high schoolers taught the lesson. The graduate students responded with comments like, "I wish I had learned math that way. I might have done better in college algebra."

As important as the lesson was the conversation with the graduate students after the YPP students left. Many of them talked about how they had assumed that students from that particular high school in the district would not be as articulate, confident, and knowledgeable as these YPP students demonstrated. The breaking down of stereotypes about the capacity of disenfranchised urban children to academically excel is crucial to the instruction of pre-service and in-service teachers. No theory, no pedagogy seems to assault those stereotypes as powerfully as the presence of the young in these classrooms exposing their knowledge and their power to learn and change their realities.

In sync with the Movement philosophy of inviting the wisdom of the elders into the work, YPP networks, both nationally and locally, with professional and community adults to share the expertise that can develop the skills youth need to change their lives and their world. In Miami a COE professor, expert in teaching videography as action research, tutored YPP students to use visual media to examine their concerns in their schools and communities. During this process students learn to critically examine the media's "mis-representation" of disenfranchised youth, to learn research methodology of data collection and analysis, and to disseminate their findings in communities and at professional conferences. The video productions of the Miami contingent were shown to an audience of COE faculty, graduate students, and some local district principals and administrators.

## CONCLUSION

If we are to transform our educational institutions, maybe we need to look toward the youth, align with their visions and digital world, raise their voices. In doing that, there will still be time and space for us to share our knowledge which can help build the scaffolds that will support them as they learn to teach themselves and their communities. But to do this, we must disengage ourselves from dominating their learning. As Kahlil Gibran suggests in *The Prophet*, when speaking about the young, "You may strive to be like them, but seek not to make them like you" (p 17).

Gibran insists that the teacher "If he is indeed wise he does not bid you enter the house of his wisdom, but rather leads you to the threshold of your own mind" (p. 56). The vision and practices of Ella Baker, Bob Moses, The Young People's

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Project seem to embody Gibran's ideal of teaching. They seem to sense that the "houses of wisdom" in this country, the educational institutions, have often become rigid walls of hegemonic, top-down structures that leave most students "to freeze and crystallize and be bound in a mould" (p. 4). Yet AP and YPP, operating in integrity with Baker's legacy, consistently turn the reigns over to the young, whether students are grappling with mathematical abstraction, organizing an event, meeting with the community, or learning research and documentation – always there to guide, but never there to dominate.

The organic, fluid nature of these organizations is often misunderstood and undervalued in the context of a Western Eurocentric model of education that dominates U.S. American schooling. The organic takes time. Like food and plants, it cannot be mass produced and retain its whole nutrients, nor can it be quickly assimilated and turned into "scaled up" prescriptive magic bullets. Yet because it is fluid, it can and does respond quickly to sudden shifts in reality. YPP demonstrates all of these organic qualities by its insistence on growing its organization from the bottom via local control. Young people in communities take it, get allies to fund it, and begin to shape it to suit their neighborhoods, their needs, their dreams. In contrast, the Western model traditionally and presently operates from a hierarchal mode of assimilating the young into the culture of the status quo. When changes are made, they are typically driven by the top for the benefit of the top or driven by marketing rhetoric of the corporatocracy. Russell Berman, President of the Modern Language Association (MLA), in his address at the annual conference remarked:

In this past year, we have seen threats to education at all levels: in many individual institutions, in state capitals, and in Washington, D.C. We have seen a public denigration of humanistic learning, and a culture of shrill hostility toward teachers and teacher organizations. ... I call on all members to participate in the defense of education under assault. (Berman, 2012, p. 3)

Only last week, I sat as an observer/facilitator in a room of faculty where the dominant theme of the conversation was how to more effectively teach students so that their skills are marketable. No one was discussing education for transformation or liberation, only education for the best job. Two weeks ago I was on a conference call with university educators and administrators from diverse urban sites, who were discussing themes for panels in an upcoming conference. Two of the themes discussed were "Building a 21st Century Workforce" and "Building Job Skills through Service Learning." The corporate agenda seems to have become the "new norm" for too many public universities.

As a counter to those kinds of experiences, studying and engaging with youth from YPP, an educational experiment that is profoundly rooted in a tradition of radical transformation, keeps me grounded in the democratic ideals that Moses and Baker espoused. It also helps lessen the desperation that wells up after participating in university dialogue driven by corporate interests.

While thinking and writing about the roots of YPP in the revolution of the Southern Freedom Movement (Harding), I happened to hear an interview with Wael Ghonim, a major participant and instigator in the Egyptian revolution

sparked in Tahrir Square on January 25, 2012. He created anonymous Facebook pages and Twitter messages to advertise meetings and plans for the largest protest in modern Egyptian history. During that “Fresh Air” interview, Ghonim told Terry Gross that the revolution was about the people who risked their lives, “not about google, or facebook.” These were just the tools, he said, used to communicate quickly and widely to the brave young who found the courage to act heroically in the face of tyranny. He passionately explained to Gross that he did not want to be the face of the revolution, that he was against “personalizing a cause ... definitely against personalizing a revolution ... this was leaderless and it should continue leaderless, and no one should be taking the lead after all these people sacrificed their lives.” His words harkened back to the same transformational, “leaderless,” model of Baker and Moses, practiced also in YPP.

Moses in Mississippi, in spite of beatings, death threats, arrests and jail time, pushed against the limits imposed by those who thwarted democratic, constitutional law, yet he continued to create a space where youth could challenge those who stood in the way of a nation’s dream for a real democracy. That space still remains for YPP to occupy and “pay it forward.”

In his keynote, Berman, too, seems concerned about the present usurping of democratic space for students. He insisted that through his contacts in D.C., he believes “A purposeful standardization of education is under way, driven less by a concern with students than with product placement for testing agencies” (p. 8). So I wonder if we might oppose those forces by learning something new about schooling from these serious young people in YPP – these young adults who use every creative tool possible to teach mathematics to children who no one believes have the capacity to learn. I wonder if, like the youth in the FOF tour, all professors in colleges of education and teachers in public schools flung open their doors and invited the young and community elders into their classrooms to tell their stories, teach their knowledge, share their art, music, theories, might then institutions come alive? With this kind of agenda, might those 50% of college freshmen, who typically drop out of college (Miller), find something in classrooms relevant to their lives, invigorate their interest in learning other wisdom traditions, and get ready to participate in a diverse global society? Might those students condemned to low-performing public schools find a reason to come to school and stay because school no longer would be an alien place that negates their home culture? Do we have the courage to ignore the drill and kill experts, the test mongers building their great fortunes, and the corporate moguls who want public schools to train “worker bees” who will continue to flip their burgers, pick up their trash, and fill their prisons (Alexander)? Can we be honest with one another and suspend our ego’s as experts, especially in these times when education is under siege, and learn what Ella Baker knew, to turn over the reins to the “young who dare to run against the storm”?

Marcelo Suarez-Orozco, in a keynote address (FIU, 2011), said that from a survey used in his research about global immigration patterns, the number one complaint cited about schooling by students across the planet was “boredom.” Given that indictment, can we use the experiences and documentation of the Young

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People's Project – with its history rooted in Movement pedagogy, its mutual respect for the wisdom of its elders as well as hip-hop culture, its facility with mathematics and the digital world, its capacity to respond quickly to the immediate, and its faith in democratic ideals – to counter the hum drum, mind numbing, low quality, uncreative teaching that is being demanded by phony assessment tools and legislative bodies tied to corporate hierarchy who want to maintain a class of worker who must work for peanuts in order to survive.

Since 2005 as a seasoned educator observing, interviewing, and working with YPP participants, I have seen in their founders what Ella Baker may have seen in Bob Moses and SNCC – a group of new intellectuals ready to jump off the page of history into the present world and reshape American democracy.

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