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Abstract

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A New Purpose in GED Education: Towards the Empowerment and Civic Engagement of “Push Out” Youth

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This article examines two different purposes in education experienced by three marginalized students of color who have been pushed-out of high school before graduating. On the one hand, the article offers an insightful understanding of young peoples’ perception of school’s efforts to rid them from educational institutions. Paradoxically, the article demonstrates that GED education offers youth a positive educational alternative despite GED education’s negative stigma. Based on interviews and observations with three GED participants in a youth center in suburban county bordering Washington, DC, I found that when GED programs teach beyond the purpose of preparing for the GED test, programs create multiple “opportunity structures” to help empower youth in becoming civically, socially, and politically engaged. The article points to GED education as an opportunity which highlights the role of civic engagement in education, namely that it provides a more comprehensive outcome than traditional school for youth of color who are often marginalized and pushed out.

Keywords: social justice education | civic engagement education | “push out” youth | GED education

“They see it as a *good enough diploma*, that’s all,” suggested Alexander, a youth participant in a GED program, as he described his perception on the overall public opinion on the General Education Development (GED) or high school equivalency. Research suggests that for many young people, a high school equivalency diploma is a starting point toward creating a pathway to long-term stability, employability, or post-secondary education while alleviating young people’s socio-economic disconnection (Boesel, 1998; Tyler, 2003; 2005). While research has examined the potential economic benefits and personal opportunities for those who obtained a high school equivalency diploma, more research is necessary to understand “push out” youth’s GED education as a space for socio-political empowerment. This article explores the dialectical purpose of education, especially as experienced by young people who are “pushed out” of school before graduating.

On the one hand, education critics and social reproduction scholars have argued that education’s objective is to segregate and sort people into different socio-economic categories ultimately reproducing existing societal inequities (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Bowles & Gintis 1976; Willis, 1981; Zion & Blanchett, 2011). On the other hand, critical pedagogy scholars suggest that education offers an opportunity for marginalized communities to create forms of resistance and a political voice that challenge the status quo as well as their marginalization (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Freire, 1994; McLaren, 1998). The latter group of scholars are largely concerned with the civic engagement of students. Civic engagement through education aims to “ensure that citizens are prepared to participate in public life and to own the national identity or pride” (Zion & Blanchett, 2017, p. 70). These two educational purposes become realities in which youth who have been “pushed out” are entangled in, as they are exited-

out of school and empowered civically while in GED education programs that are not part of the school system.

In what follows, I turn to a description of the study and methods used to gather the data this article draws from. I introduce the participant and offer background about the organization and programs I observed. Second, I offer a background and literature review to situate my research in the scholarship on GED education. I also offer an important contextualization of the participants' experiences in becoming "push outs," which echo recent scholarship of youth of color leaving the educational pipeline. Next, drawing from the experiences of three young people enrolled in Youth Engaging Center's (YEC) GED program, the article examines the empowerment model of education that this organization employs. The specific focus on GED education highlights the way the program I observed creates "opportunity structures" (Watts & Flanagan, 2007, p. 786) for youth to become involved in socio-political issues while in the GED programs. For instance, these issues include food justice, criminal justice reform, immigration reform, and environmental issues. I conclude with potential implications of GED education as an opportunity to engage marginalized students with the educational purpose of helping students in their sociopolitical development.

Methodology

I draw on interviews with three young adults who attend a GED program in the surrounding the Washington, DC area. Participant observations of the young people in GED and work-training program were also essential to understand young people's experience in an alternative educational setting than from school. This research is part of an IRB approved doctoral dissertation research focused on Latinx youth in their attempt to find inclusion in educational spaces outside of school.

Sampling

For nearly a decade I worked in similar youth programs providing services to Black and Latino out-of-school or "drop-out" youth, which sparked my research interest. Because I knew the area and some of the staff that oversee the programs mentioned in this paper, I reached out to them to help me connect with some of their participants that met the broad, yet important following prerequisites: 1) being an undocumented Latinx between the ages of 18 and 24; and 2) having withdrawal from high school without successfully completing or "dropping-out." Due to the fact that it was such a small-scale study, I employed "purposive sampling" (Bernard, 2006, p. 95). According to Bernard, the researcher finds the best informants possible to explore the idea the researcher is trying to investigate in this kind of sampling method (p. 95). Each informant was selected by youth service worker in different youth-focused programs and referred to me.

Throughout the process of sampling, I met Alexander, Chepe, and Maria at YEC. All three participants were undocumented at the time of interviews. All three informants left school before graduating and faced many challenges outside of school. For instance, they all had faced homes insecurity and homelessness, they were all unemployed or underemployed, and two of them faced mental health challenges without proper treatment. The participants knew each other because of the programs they all attended at YEC, but attended different high schools and resided in different neighborhoods in the same county border Washington DC.

Interviews and Observations

I held unstructured interviews with the three participants that were between 1.5 to 2 hours long on two separate occasions for each informant. Informal and unstructured interviews were best way for me to connect with the informants of this study to get to know more about their life, the challenges they had overcome, and the importance YEC played in their pathway into adulthood. According to Bernard (2006), the objective behind unstructured and informal interviewing is to “get people to open up and let them express themselves in their own terms, and at their own pace” (p. 209). The interviews I held were mainly open-ended questions and the range of topics were about their educational experience in US schools, their transition into and out of schools, their experience with police and juvenile or criminal systems, their political development and civic participation, their support systems, and the ways they find a sense of inclusion. The topics I discussed with the participants were adaptable, but mainly covered issues and themes that are theoretically grounded, as suggested by qualitative scholar Sidman (2006, p. 15). All of the interviews conducted were recorded and later transcribed. Along with fieldnotes from my observations, which will be detailed below, I coded the interviews using “open” and “focused” coding, where I identified larger important themes and later more specific and particularly interesting aspects to the research project at hand (Emerson et al., 2011, p. 172). For example, I found themes and ideas that are reflected here, such as youth’s process of being kicked out or “pushed out” of school, how youth overcome the stigma of GED education, and how small socio-political activities encourage youth to become more interested in social issues and develop a political identity of their own.

I also relied on observations of the participants while in the YEC programs and classroom activities. I did two observations outside of the YEC, where participants did team building activities and I was invited to attend. The data collected during observations are based on a total of 18 hours of observations, which took place during the summer months of 2018, two weeks in October of that same year, and three weeks during July of 2019. Although I had met each informant and had interviewed them, I maintained distance from their day to day experience at YEC. All the participants knew I was observing them. Their peers were told I was observing the entire program for a research project to not single any of them out. When I thought appropriate, especially during lunch or breaks from programming, I would ask questions, connect with the informants, and ask follow up questions based on what I had observed. My observation approach was guided by the methodological work of Bettie (2014), whose ethnographic work in schools utilized “hanging out” (p.18) as an approach to observe the students she was interested in and connecting with them in order to build rapport. Like, Bettie, I “hung out” and observed youth to see how their relationships were with their peers, how they behaved in the YEC, how they interacted with program staff, and how they participated in different education and social initiatives or opportunities that created by program staff. Furthermore, I also interviewed GED instructors and program staff to understand their approach to GED education and the intention behind making it an opportunity for youth to become involved in social and political issues. However, I only interviewed program staff after I had interviewed youth and had built rapport with the main participants of the study.

I jotted notes for many of the observations that were later developed into more coherent and detailed field notes that I would use for coding and creating thematic or analytical memos to develop the ideas in this article (Emerson et al., 2011). All the data that was collected was then coded to create themes that would help in writing memos and ideas that would later become

some of the ideas fleshed-out in this article. The analytical intervention in this article is guided by grounded theory principles based from the interviews and observations I conducted. Using this analytical approach helped me understand and conceptualized the social phenomenon that I observed while at YEC and connected it to formal theories as the grounded theory approach suggest (Bernard, 2006, p. 492; Charmaz, 2001; Charmaz & Mitchell, 2001).

GED Education Context: A Literature Review

The General Education Development (GED) has a long history dating back to the 1940s postwar period. According to Quinn (2003), the GED was mainly utilized as a prerequisite test for college admissions for war veterans who had not graduated from high school before joining the military. Beyond the military-specific utilization of the GED, historians suggest it was a test that gauged the “general education competence; to enable school or college to effect an appropriate educational placement of the applicants in terms of his indicated educational maturity” (Flicker & Brown, 1945; Quinn, 2003 p. 21-22). Since its origin, the GED test or high school equivalency is considered a major component of the field of adult basic education (Rachal & Bingham, 2004, p. 34). However, in the last 35 years, there has been a large increase in high school-aged youth who have benefitted from the GED equivalency, making the GED “America’s largest high school” (Quinn, 2003, pp. 1–2; Rachal & Bingham, 2004; Tuck, 2012; Tyler, 2005).

A range of scholarship pays close attention to specific short-term and long-term outcomes of GED education, especially highlighting the potential economic gain and upward socio-economic mobility. For instance, studies suggest that male GED recipients earn 3% to 5% more in their mid-twenties than those who do not complete high school (Cameron & Heckman, 1993). Cao et al. (1996) compared and examined the GED and drop-out rates in women labor outcomes and find that there is no difference in work rate, as measured by the number of hours both groups work. However, the authors did find wages earned are favorable for those who complete high school and GED than those that do not (Cao et al., 1996, p. 217).

Post-secondary educational outcomes have also been examined in the GED education literature a great deal (Tyler & Lofstrom, 2010). Murnane et al. (2000), for instance, argued that credentials like the GED for young adults who had not completed high school increased their likelihood of gaining post-secondary education experience or technical training. Research has found that GED holders are entering college and other post-secondary education opportunities at a similar rate as high school graduates (Rossi & Bower, 2018). Furthermore, Hamilton (1998) suggested that GED recipients who go on to college had slightly lower completion rates and grade point averages compared to those who graduated high school. Similarly, Boesel (1998) found that GED recipients averaged similar grades in a four-year college than high school recipients, but added that GED holders were less likely to complete college programs versus high school graduates (p. 66).

More recent research on GED education highlights the GED test as an alternative high school or secondary education. Despite being the “largest high school” as suggested by Quinn (2003), many education scholars pushed back the alternative discourse suggesting that GED incites high school students to drop out of school (Greene, 2002; Heckman et al., 2008). Although there have been vocal critics of the GED because it supposedly fuels the drop out crisis since the 1970s (Rumberger, 2011; Tuck 2012a; 2012b) there is evidence of the benefits of GED education as an alternative to secondary education, especially for people “living on the fringe of society: caught up in street life, violent or addicted or both, not infrequently coming out of

prison” (Rose, 2013, p. 48). Scholars have suggested that GED education for young adults and adults who are in prison pays off as they re-enter society, bringing economic returns mainly for the first three years out of prison (Tyler & Kling, 2006).

Along the lines of the alternative education scholarship, Tuck (2012a; 2012b) added that GED education is often stigmatized as inferior to high school education, but it is the only avenue for some young people to have educational access. Tuck (2012a; 2012b) found that students challenged the popularly recognized idea that the GED is a “good enough diploma” by reclaiming their education, their right to be educated, their right to succeed academically through the “repatriation” of the GED test. Similarly, Schwartz (2014) demonstrated that GED education can help marginalized youth of color create “counter-spaces” that rejects the continued oppression that youth of color experienced while in school: “as a counter-space, the GED stands in opposition to previously public toxic spaces” (Schwartz, 2014, p. 113). Despite Tuck’s (2012a; 2012b) and Schwartz’s (2014) major contribution, the focus on GED education’s role in civic engagement and social justice needs further exploration. While civic education has a long history and has been offered in many educational (Lerner 2004), there is little research that presents the importance of GED education as a space in which young adults who have been pushed out of school can become civically engaged in the process of attain their GED.

Before detailing what I consider a civically engaged GED educational approach based on my research, I turn to detail the experiences of research informants their process as they were pushed out from the high schools they attended.

Education and School “Push Outs”

I argue in this article that schools recreate existing inequalities and sort students into different socio-economic categories that have implications in young people’s socio-economic mobility. Schools are sites that produce large numbers of drop-outs that, in turn, find themselves without many educational options or future pathways. Instead of focusing of the “risk factors” that are often attributed to young people who drop out of school, education scholars Brown and Rodríguez (2008) examined the educational neglect and intentional disregard for students’ intellectual curiosity while in school as major contributing factors to youth’s disengagement form school and ultimately drop-out initiation. Similarly, Tuck (2012b) suggested that students who ultimately dropped out of school were those who experienced “humiliating ironies” where they felt “unwelcomed” by “institutional rules and policies [that] are enforced by teachers in ways that target specific students with specificity to their bodies, behavior, and thinking” (p. 70).

The three young people that I studied shared similar reasons on why they left school before graduating. In my interview with Alexander, for example, he shared that he left school his sophomore year because of multiple negative interactions with School Resource Officers (SRO) for not complying with their requests to stop skateboarding outside of the school during lunch hours or school hours. Alexander explained that he was expelled from the school after multiple suspensions for the skateboarding incidents he was involved in. In his case, Alexander was expelled from the place that supposedly was meant to engage him and allow him the space for intellectual stimulation. Instead, as a result of disciplinary and behavioral policies that criminalize youth, especially youth of color, Alexander was pushed out of school. Chepe, a 21-year-old young man from El Salvador, expressed that school was just not for him, but he needed a diploma or equivalency in order to find some stable employment. Chepe’s expression of “school not being for him” intrigued me, and I asked him why he thought school was not for

him. He did not find what he was learning to be useful for him outside of the school setting. That is, education was disengaging to Chepe, and teachers did not encourage or stimulate his intellectual curiosity based on his lived experiences. Instead, teachers saw him as unwilling to learn what was being taught in classes. By the end of his sophomore year, when he was 16 years old, Chepe stopped attending school after long periods of absenteeism. The school withdrew him before the start of the following academic year. Maria shared a similar account. She left school her senior year as a result of feeling unwelcomed in school because several school personnel called her a pothead on multiple occasions. Maria, in her view, was “kicked out of school for looking like a pothead.” However, she did not consume any illicit drugs but was going through a lot of emotional and psychological stress in her life. The physical presentation of her stress, anxiety, and depression combined with a lack of sleep were perceived as a “drug problem” by the school official. She faced many challenges and judgement on the days when she attended school and decided to stop attending all together. As result of her absenteeism, she was withdrawn from the school. Being “kicked out” for too many missed days of schools is the official reason she was withdrawn by school official. However, in her view, she was kicked-out because she “looked like a pot head” as a result of her disheveled look and the depression she was battling.

The experiences of Alexander, Chepe, and Maria coincide with Tuck’s (2012b) description of “humiliating ironies” where instead of finding inclusion in schools, youth are pushed out of academic settings. Their experiences also match Brown and Rodríguez’s suggestion that school “co-constructs” a drop out crisis by promoting educational disengagement and alienation from students labeled “at risk” of dropping out (Brown & Rodríguez, 2008). Alexander, Chepe, and Maria also experienced criminalization while in school. Their interaction with school personnel and teachers echo what many urban education scholars have found to be intentionally criminalizing for youth of color that ultimately accelerates their pathways out-of-school and made more vulnerable to involvement with the juvenile or criminal system (Heitzeg, 2016; Mallett, 2016; Nolan, 2011; Porter, 2015; Rios, 2011; 2017; Seroczynski & Jobst, 2016; Shedd, 2015).

In this context, we can capture one of the school’s purposes: that of exclusion of students of color often labeled “at risk.” Schools, or at least the three schools Alexander, Chepe, and Maria attended, work as a factory that pushes young people deemed unteachable or unwilling to be educated out of its space. In other words, schools find students that are deemed disposable and categorize them as such, making their pathway towards adulthood more challenging than other students. Tuck (2012b) used the most poignant language to describe the purpose of education for many young people who withdraw from school without graduating: “For many former students, schools were sites of anxiety, depression, and humiliation. Their stories are not stories of mere pushout, but squeezed, kicked, punched, sliced out. Cast out. Stamped out. Erased” (p. 61).

Nonetheless, being out-of-school or pushed out, I argue, becomes an opportunity for young people who did not complete high school. Adult education scholar Schwatz (2014) argued that for many young people who experience the traumatic process of being pushed out of school, it is a “smart decision” to leave school because, “healthy and smart people do not stay in toxic spaces that cause them harm” (p. 111). In what follows, I detail how GED education can serve the purpose of civically engaged education for youth who are pushed out.

Towards a Civically Engaged GED Education

Based on my experience at YEC, I found that GED education can become a space where young people can explore and develop their socio-political identities, learn about social issues that impact their lives and communities, and ultimately become civically engaged in their communities. The civic engagement, nonetheless, is only one aspect of the education the students I observed gained from participating in GED education. They also meet their initial objective of obtaining a high school equivalency while working on developing workforce skills to aid in their future employability.

In what follows, I briefly describe the setting, the youth center that hosts the GED program that I suggest is a positive model for marginalized youth. I also describe the educational approach where youth are engaged educationally, but also socially, civically, and politically.

The Youth Engaging Center (YEC)

The YEC is located in a suburban county bordering Washington, DC. It serves about 350 youth per year in five youth-centered programs like GED, workforce development, mentoring, gang preventions, and wrap-around services. The population served range in ages from 17-24 years old. Ethno-racially, it is divided almost in half: 47% Latino youth and 43% Black youth. YEC is located in an accessible location where students from multiple geographical surrounding neighborhoods of the county can access it using public transportation.

A large colorful youth-themed mural welcomes visitors, staff, and participants when stepping off the elevator on the 5th floor in the office building where the center is located. The mural in the windowless room is poorly lit, but it does not stop young people from gathering, chatting, and socializing in the area. The small office is loud and alive at any time one walks in; youth voices, song lyrics, and laughter is heard throughout the space. The environment only feels less hectic when the students in five different youth programs are in classes or program session.

A walk through the hallway highlights youth's activities and involvement in tree-planting campaigns, team building activities, and educational accomplishments. Staff office doors are decorated with welcoming signs, and wrap-around service providers such as case managers, educators, and youth developers are eager to sit, engage, and meet students with compassion. The atmosphere is a combination of school and park filled with many youth of color, all between 17 and 24 years old.

Two different classrooms that fit 15 students comfortably and 20 students uncomfortably are decorated with inspirational quotes, social justice figures such as Malcom X, and signs in support of Black Lives Matter. There are also signs about environmental justice and pictures of students in marches and protests. "This is a school, but not a school," said a GED educator. "We try to make this their space, and they can help by decorating with things they find are helpful in reminding them why they're here." Young people, along with program staff, share and create a community at YEC. GED and peer mentoring programs that take place from this site blend critical education, positive youth development, workforce initiatives, and social justice in order to give students a nuanced and more critical approach to education than experienced while in high school. And unlike other GED programs that I have observed in the past, YEC does not follow a curriculum or a book guide that trains students to pass the GED test. Instead, the program staff created an approach that blends social justice and education and modifies the skills necessary for each of the four sections of the GED test in order to coincide with the social justice content and approach they employ. An important aspect of this approach is the safe space that is

created in the classroom in order for students to feel they belong in it as participants in their learning objectives.

In her study with Black youth in GED educational settings, Schwartz (2014) found that GED classrooms have the potential of becoming safe spaces that are paradoxical to the school settings that push students out of school. GED educational spaces that are safe allow for participants to feel engaged while creating “Counter-spaces” of healing, hope, and community between the students and staff (Schwartz, 2014, p. 113). Similarly, I found that YEC fosters a culture that allows youth in their programs to feel welcomed and safe. It is an atmosphere that youth enjoy, mainly because it is highly produced by young people and reciprocated by the program staff. In my interview with Chepe, who was a GED student and a peer mentor to middle school-aged youth in one of the YEC programs, he shared the difference between the climate in the school he attended from that of the YEC:

School didn't support me. I see youth now and I know what's up, they just don't want to be told what to do when they're in school. We don't want to hear orders. I want to hear encouragement. School don't do that. If school is telling me, 'do that, you have to do that,' makes me not want to do it, to be honest. Here's different. I walk in and I feel like I know nobody is going to start something [with me]. I know I can talk to anyone here and they got my back. I mean, if I mess up and do something really bad, they're going to check me, but they don't yell at me. They care about me, all of us here.

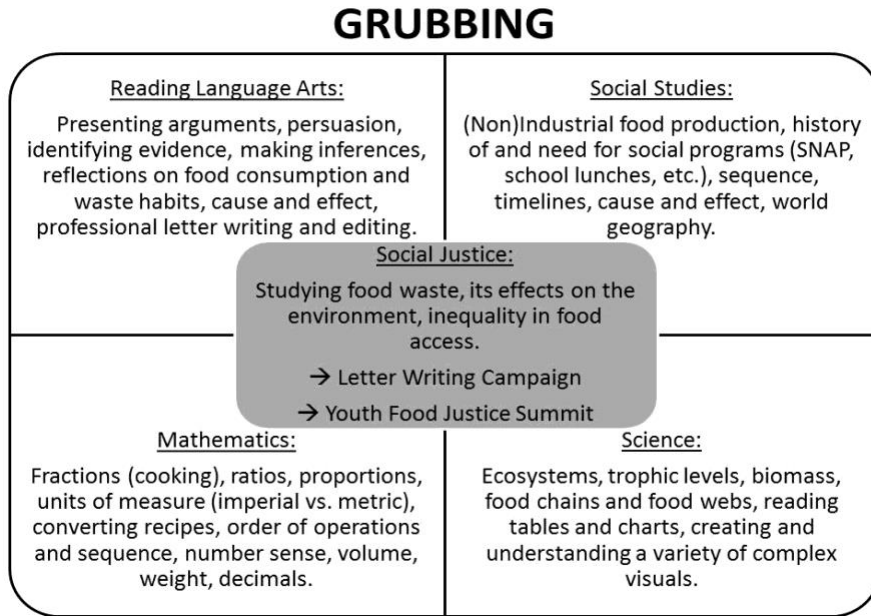
Chepe's words describe the approach I observed. The staff at YEC shared with me that they want to meet students “where they're at,” which, according to several of staff, is a cornerstone of Positive Youth Development (PYD) model. In many aspects that I witnessed, the staff at YEC do what Chepe said, “they got student's back.” Furthermore, the classrooms I observed have a similar approach, meeting students' academic needs while having a friendly, relaxing, nurturing, and academically stimulating approach. A lot of the students work together on educational objectives, and the mutual support between peers is easily captured. The safe space that is created in the classroom allows youth to feel comfortable and included in a way that allows them to express themselves freely. This safe space in the classroom and in the YEC in general, enables the students to have a sense of a communal approach to learning, which significantly contrasts the “humiliating ironies” that Tuck (2012b) explained happens as school official push young people out of the institutions.

The students in the GED classes at YEC learn about the four subjects of the GED: Social studies, mathematics, science, and language arts. However, instead of just focusing on the skills necessary to pass each section of the test individually, the YEC programs teaches each subject using different educational units based on social justice issues. For example, I observed a few of the classes in their “Food Waste” unit. Each lesson incorporates a component of social justice, specific GED content for all four subject areas, and activities that unite them all together. Not only are class times based on conversations, they also involve fun, engaging activities that help capture the attention of different style learners to try to meaningfully incorporate and, in a sense, reconnect all of the students in the class. Figure 1 shows one example of the social justice and education combination.

GED educators at YEC employ the classical approach of Gradual Release of Responsibility (GRR) developed by education and literacy scholars Pearson and Gallagher (1983) and later popularized by Archer and Hughes (2010) with an educational scaffolding model of “I do, we do, you do.” In academic settings, this model occurs when a teacher exemplifies a concept by teaching it with direct instruction (I do).

Figure 1

Youth Engagement Center- GED Social justice education model sample chart.



Note. The chart describes how GED specific content is combined with social justice themes in YEC GED classrooms.

Direct instruction is followed by guided instruction in more interactive and group-based education model (we do). The approach concludes with students working independently to master the content at hand on their own (you do). A variation of this model is used at the YEC to deliver content based on social justice topics and GED education, while providing hands-on activities, and creating an “opportunity structure” for youth to become engaged in micro-level social actions (Watts & Flanagan, 2007, p. 786). The educators and staff that apply this model, however, did not specifically mention that their “educational approach” is based on the GRR model. I will offer the example using the “food waste” lessons in connection to the figure above to exemplify the approach utilized at YEC.

Employing the GRR model, educators use the first step, “I do,” to introduce social issues at hand, providing a brief overview of what food waste is and how some people deal with this issue. Many students I observed felt that they are not involved in food waste. To allow students to understand their connection or involvement in the social issue being explored, educators ask students to reflect and think about their daily lives and habits, which in turn sparks the second step in the GRR approach: “you do.” Educators provided students with a chart for them to fill out, utilizing data analysis and other math skills, in order to measure how much food they waste daily and weekly. This process allows students to understand that many people waste food and that it is common, and at times unconscious, act we all take part in. While many students were surprised with how much food they waste, the exercise allowed instructors to move on to the following step: “we do.” In this step, the educator provides students with a list of different local restaurants that have created positive policies about food waste by offering their leftover food to the community at a reduced or no cost at all, for example. As a class, and with some guidance

from the educators, students organized a letter campaign to send to local restaurants or grocery stores for students to pick up leftover food and offer it to their peers at YEC or to others in the community that students identify as in need of food resources.

The “we do” steps allows students to have agency. It also empowers them to feel part of a social change and that they, too, can have a positive impact on their community. Students may not be able to stop food waste or help create policies to heavily reduce food waste, but they can participate in activities that allow them to feel involved in something they care about while simultaneously gaining skills necessary that help them improve the educational needs in order to successfully attain the GED test. The last part of the “we do” step that I witnessed is a celebration. No matter how “little” the accomplishment was, staff celebrated students and their activities to show highlight their success in achieving their goal. They also celebrated their victory for students to continue to feel motivated to do something similar during the next educational unit, which may be on the theme of music or sports.

In this approach, the students are given an “opportunity structure” where they are participating in an educational process that leads to them attaining a high school equivalency diploma. Roderick Watts and Constance Flanagan (2007) contend that “a young person’s potential for societal involvement is strongly influenced by the availability of meaningful and desirable opportunities for actions in their community” (p. 786). The educational approach, along with mentoring and community building, offered young people the “opportunities for actions in their community,” as Watts and Flanagan (2007, p. 786) suggest. That is, students learned about social issues and gained tools to change some of the challenges they as well as many people face in this country. The way the Gradual Release of Responsibility approach in this social justice and civic engagement education model is coupled with the weaving of subjects and skills for the GED test and it provided practical ways for students to have agency in their academic development and in larger process of social change. The educational approach used at YEC is not one that aims to develop subversive mass political movement against an oppressive system. Instead, I found there is a model of educational, civic engagement aligned with Checkoway and Aldana’s (2013) understanding of “sociopolitical development” as a “form of civic engagement in which urban youth of color strengthen their social and political development in ways in which contribute to their collective action” (p. 1897).

I found that YEC participants find the educational purpose and approach welcoming, even though some may have at first hesitated about it. Alexander, for example, reflected on the process and said, “I now enjoy it and I know it is very helpful, but at first I didn’t want to do all that because I just wanted to study for the GED. I didn’t care, I just asked, ‘Is this going to be on the test?’” Alexander’s hesitancy, however, shifted with time:

The program made me more aware and more political. They brought light to issue I guess I didn’t know or cared about but they were all having impact on me. It helped me to also get understanding from my peers, they were impacted by injustices too.

Similarly, Maria enjoyed knowing she was part of doing something positive and giving back to her community. Maria reflected on the tree-planting campaign YEC collaborated on with the County government in which students learned about deforestation and participated in tree-planting activities in different parks in the county. “I mean, I know I’m doing something good for people. When I return to this site [a park where she did tree planting work] in 10 years, I’ll know that I planted all these trees.” Like Maria and Alexander, Chepe found it rewarding because of the potential benefits that may have not only in his life, but also in potential employment opportunities. According to Chepe:

You know there's people that do this type of social justice for a living? I heard of AmeriCorps and they do the same thing on education and social justice, so I might do that after I get this thing [the GED test].

Chepe's reflection focused more on the potential economic return that the skills learned through YEC educational purpose and approach may provide. He was not aware, at least not during our conversations, that AmeriCorps is a stipend-based voluntary position and that it is temporary. However, we can read his reflection as an additional outcome of this civically engaged education approach: the skills learned and practice are not just for advocacy, but they are job readiness focused as well.

Students were not the only members of this community organization to highlight the positive aspect of the educational approach used at YEC. Program staff also expressed the positive outcomes of the educational approach that empowers young people into civic action. For example, Chris, a program manager believes that programs like the ones offers at YEC have the "opportunity to provide a holistic, hands-on, empowering education that youth never received while they were in school." A GED educator who stated the challenges is getting students to approve of the approach from the beginning, also mentioned the importance of youth becoming more political in order for them to advocate for issues that impact them:

There are many things we discuss that are critical for them [the students] because they don't have many people to advocate for them. We are trying to help them recognize that they can advocate against [the] injustices and issues that impact them and their community.

While a large portion of civics education emphasizes civic-related content, including history, political figures and leaders, and ideas of electoral democracy (Checkoway et al., 2005; Lutkus et al., 1998; Patterson, 2002), at YEC a different approach is applied to promote youth's civic engagement. Instead of relying heavily on content that is memorized, such as learning the names of civil rights leaders or important historic dates, for instance, YEC engages young people in promoting an idea of civic engagement that allows them to experience their own involvement in a social or political issue like food waste. Rubin (2007) argued that young people's "daily experiences and social position inform their understanding of civics in powerful ways, and that particular school settings further shape this understanding, creating complex and varied contexts for students' developing civic identities" (p. 451). Civic education comes at a cost, especially for marginalized students, because despite gaining a content knowledge about civic-related issues, many have first handily experienced the inequality and injustices that many endure in the United States. As a result, many marginalized students of color develop a civic identity of "discouraged" citizens (Rubin, 2007, p. 473), essentially feeling hopeless about positive changes ever coming their way. To avoid the "discouraged" civic identity, I suggest that it is imperative for students from marginalized communities, which is a large majority of the youth in YEC programs, to engage in an educational setting that surpasses civic content alone but gradually scaffold youth into actual civic participation, not just a civics test or grade in a civics class.

The food waste example above is a case and point for this. Students learned about a social issue and were giving gradual tools to increase their participation in the issue and provided an action and deliverable that had a positive impact in the students and their community. Rubin (2007) indicated that "empowered" civic identities for youth are shaped by teacher's "encouragement of critical thought and mastery of key civic knowledge" (p. 472). However, I found that it is not the content or mastery of civic knowledge, but the gradual "opportunity structure" that empowers youth to experience civic, social, and political engagement in a positive way. Similar to what Watts and Flanagan (2007) found about youth involvement in civic

engagement, the opportunity for young people to feel involved and empowered civically comes from the holistic approach of critical consciousness that is catalyzed through education and the opportunities that are provided by the community in order for young people in GED educational programs to feel included as agents willing to bring change to their communities.

Implications and Conclusion

This article has exemplified the dialectical relationship in two different purposes of education in which push-out youth are involved in. On the one hand, the young people I interviewed experienced an education system that failed them pushing them out. This punitive education system continues to segregate schools and communities while simultaneously reproducing existing inequalities by not providing marginalized and impoverished youth of color an opportunity for education to lift them out of those circumstances. Scholars have long addressed this issue by suggesting that education in the United States serves the capital and the need to sort labors from wealthy (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990; Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Willis, 1981). On the other hand, the GED education described here has given youth who were pushed out of school an opportunity beyond what was provided to them in schools: an education that engages them civically, socially, and politically.

Young people I interviewed were entangled within these two educational realities and found the second as the better fitting of the two. Chepe, Alexander, and Maria found hopefulness in the GED and didn't perceive the outcome of it as a "good enough diploma." Instead, they uncovered a purpose in an educational approach based on social justice that is inclusive, holistic, hands-on, and political. Zion and Blanchett (2017) reminded us there is a sense of urgency in modeling and exemplifying inclusive and equitable model of education that has in mind students that have been kept at the margins of education access; an education model that could offer youth the potential of being equipped to participate as active members of society in the 21st century.

The educational approach highlighted in this article is unique to GED education because it is designed with the young people's goals and lives in mind, and it takes students past feelings of hopelessness, leading them instead toward action. This educational approach aligns with "new civics" approach that highlights youth agency and values young people as active members capable of providing social solutions instead of being perceived as a societal burden or problem (Checkoway & Aldana, 2013, p. 1898). What is notable about the educational approach at YEC is that it results in four positive outcomes. First, it focuses on students feeling optimistic about their social situations and actions, which is captured by their motivation or excitement in their involvement in social issues like food justice, environmental justice, or more. Second, it empowers students that have largely been excluded from other forms of education in order for them to become involved in social issues that impact their lives and communities. Third, it allows them an opportunity to advocate for themselves instead of having adults advocate for them and without them. Finally, it provides young people educational advancement that helps them reach and surpass their goal of GED attainment.

There are several implications for GED education in connection with needed conversation around the purpose of education in the United States. First, I found that it is necessary to treat GED beyond a preparation course in order to attain certification. In its place, GED education should make space for a student to learn a more holistic and hands-on approach. Education's objective strives to meet students where they are emotionally as well as academically and lifts them into action in social and political realms.

Additionally, GED education cannot be just preparation for a test. In preparing active citizens, education's aim is that of helping shape critical thinkers that help develop equitable societies. Learning how to successfully pass a test to attain a high school equivalency does not catalyze critical thinking, but relies on what Freire (1994) considered "the banking concept of education" (p. 53) where students are empty bins stuffed with skills by teachers. Instead, education that focuses on inclusion, social justice and empowerment of marginalized people is a positive way to challenge the purpose of education in creating "push outs." An educational approach that goes beyond the test preparation also creates passion for learning and encourages youth who are often perceived as less-smart or careless about education to challenge those negative stigmas and labels that have followed them for years.

Lastly, creating opportunities structures that allow students to scaffold into civic participation should be a priority of education in general, not just GED education. Schools, teachers, and education systems, in general, need to address their complacency in the reproduction of inequalities and exclusion of many young people, especially young people of color. YEC offers a model that can serve as an example on how to engage youth in social issues in small steps and help empower them in creating self-advocacy and self-efficacy.

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