Global Kids Organizing in the Global City

Generation of Social Capital in a Youth Organizing Program

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Positive youth development and youth organizing are strengths-based approaches to the lives, needs, and contributions of young people (Damon & Gregory, 2003). These approaches privilege the voices of youth as they engage with issues in their communities and challenge institutions to respond. Few studies, however, have explored the role of positive youth development and youth organizing initiatives among immigrant youth of color.

The challenging terrain of modern urban life requires these youth to navigate the political, economic, and legal demands confronted by their families; to understand the rules for success in public schools; and to steer clear of violence in their communities. Larger issues such as climate change and environmental justice understandably cannot be priorities for youth who are preoccupied with day-to-day survival. The Global Kids Greening Western Queens initiative sought to bridge the gaps between individual and collective concerns and between local and global issues by training immigrant youth of color to become community organizers.

This out-of-school time (OST) program emphasized positive youth development and youth organizing to help New York City immigrant youth of color address key issues in their lives, their communities, and their world. This article describes the initiative and provides an integrated theoretical framework that synthesizes the literature on youth organizing, civic engagement,

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and social capital to reveal the substantive processes that occur in positive youth development and youth organizing. The experiences of 12 Greening Western Queens participants, captured through in-depth interviews, highlight the transformative potential of OST programming for immigrant youth of color.

The Global Kids Green Roof Initiative

The mission of the Global Kids program Greening Western Queens was to develop a cadre of youth activists who were committed to improving environmental conditions in western Queens. Their purpose was to lead community organizing efforts and achieve at least one policy victory. Funded by the North Star Foundation, the initiative successfully developed 100 youth environmental activists during 2011–2013.

The following blog post by Lamissa, a 10th grader, about the opening Greening Western Queens summer institute brings to life the essence of a youth organizing initiative:

> The first day we started with the basics, an introduction of the institute's new project and new staff…. The second day the interns were divided into small groups and we went on a human scavenger hunt. On the streets of the community, we asked the people of Astoria and Long Island City about climate change….
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> On Thursday, we went to P.S. 41's green roof…. We learned how much people contributed to that green roof, especially their students, their teachers, and the rest of the local community. On Friday we had a guest speaker, Dr. Sharon Jay, who provided us with information dealing with New York City public schools' sustainability. After she left Global Kids, leaders [students] were given a school here in the city, and we just researched about it. (Tasmin, 2013)

The summer institute in 2013 involved 25–30 high school students in two weeks of intensive knowledge and skill-building activities focused on environmental sustainability. Designed to involve students who had participated in the afterschool program in further learning and hands-on experience as environmental activists, the institute was also open to new students interested in environmental issues. It was followed by a two-week internship at a partnering environmental organization.

Global Kids has worked for 25 years with youth from low-income, underserved communities in New York City and Washington, DC. The program helps youth develop their academic and personal skills, increase their global awareness and understanding of critical social issues, motivate them to succeed in school, and prepare them to make contributions to their local communities and beyond.

Greening Western Queens was developed as part of one of Global Kids' core programs, the Human Rights Activist Project (HRAP). HRAP prepares young people to tackle serious issues by developing and implementing public policy campaigns. It gives them skills, support, and opportunities to advocate for the human rights and social justice issues they care about. Participants have addressed complex issues such as racial profiling by police, lack of access to healthy foods in poor neighborhoods, and lack of tolerance in schools. A human rights framework engages students in linking human rights, community needs, and international issues and then connecting all of these with their own lives. HRAP uses a four-phase process:

1. Research, discussion, and analysis of related policy issues with peers
2. Creation of a human rights campaign
3. Campaign execution, including community outreach and collaboration with advocacy groups
4. Campaign evaluation and formation of a follow-up or sustainability plan

This four-phase process follows a one-year timeline. Continuing into a second year makes the process more robust and builds greater capacity in participants. Youth are trained in organizing strategies, the policymaking process, creation of campaign messages for media and public outreach, coalition building, public speaking, and other leadership skills that make them effective advocates and community educators. HRAP fosters youth decision making and leadership; the youth themselves direct and

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develop each campaign. According to the Global Kids 2012–2013 annual report, HRAP participants led human rights campaigns focused on food justice, racial profiling by the police, and climate change, to name just a few topics. Some campaigns emphasized education and outreach to increase community awareness of specific public policies, while others strategically focused on policy change.

Greening Western Queens, an HRAP initiative, was an afterschool youth organizing program focused on community out-

Figure 1. Participants in the Greening Western Queens initiative

reach, education, and mobilization. Participants (see Figure 1) sought to address pressing environmental concerns, including poor air quality, water pollution, and lack of green spaces, that contributed to high asthma rates and other health problems in western Queens. Program activities were conducted after school once a week at each of two high schools during 2011–2013. Reflecting the ethnic diversity of western Queens, participants came from varied racial and ethnic backgrounds. Many were immigrants or children of immigrants.

During the program, youth researched environmental issues affecting their communities, educated their peers on environmental issues, and mobilized with other community groups. They also participated in retreats, meetings with elected officials, field trips to environmental organizations, and community organizing events. The initiative centered on student-led public policy campaigns. In the first year, students led efforts aimed at improving the air quality in western Queens by calling on residential building and commercial business owners to

change the type of oil used in boilers.

In the second year, students launched a campaign to persuade New York City school officials to install green roofs on one school in each borough, specifically in communities with high environmental burdens. The students' efforts resulted in a major policy victory: School officials agreed to the installation of a green roof on William C. Bryant High School in western Queens. This result shows that engaging young people in promoting the health and well-being of their communities can not only develop young activists committed to advancing social change but also lead to real community improvements.

Youth Organizing, Civic Engagement, and Social Capital

Reflecting a positive youth development framework, Global Kids grounds young people in a solid understanding of local and global issues while developing their leadership skills and giving them opportunities to engage as active citizens in their communities and beyond. Such youth organizing initiatives foster civic participation and youth leadership through direct engagement with pressing community problems, action research, and advocacy (Fox et al., 2010; Ginwright & James, 2002; Kirshner, Strobel, & Fernandez, 2003).

Positive youth development and youth organizing models emerged in a shift away from deficit-oriented approaches to youth work. These strengths-based approaches focus on understanding how children influence and are influenced by their contexts and on

creating pathways for youth civic action (Alexander, 2001, as cited in Camino & Zeldin, 2002; Benson et al., 2006; Lerner, Almerigi, Theokas, & Lerner, 2005). They emphasize what Watts and Flanagan (2007) call the *sociopolitical development* of youth:

> …the evolving, critical understanding of the political, economic, cultural and other systemic forces that shape society and one's status in it, and the associated process of growth in relevant knowledge, analytic skills and emotional faculties. (p. 784)

Youth organizing OST programming fosters networks of relationships among participants, program staff, and community leaders and stakeholders. These social processes relate directly to the concept of *civic engagement:* individuals demonstrating an interest in issues beyond their private concerns by participating in local or national politics, cultural associations, neighborhood groups, and the like (Janmaat, 2008; Triandafyllidou & Vogel, 2006).

Civic engagement in youth organizing is related to the concept of *social capital,* which is broadly defined as a set of resources individuals derive from social networks (Bourdieu; 1986; Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 1995). As Weller (2006) observes, social capital "is not an 'object' but rather a set of interactions and relationships based on trust and reciprocity that have the potential to be transformative" (p. 562). Participation in youth organizing provides young people opportunities to develop organizational and critical thinking skills as they gain access to people and processes that enable change. They may activate these resources on their own behalf or on behalf of others. Of the six domains of social capital articulated by the World Bank Institute (Dudwick, Kuehnast, Nyhan Jones, & Woolcock, 2006), three are especially relevant to environmental justice youth organizing: trust and solidarity, collective action and cooperation, and empowerment and political action. These domains reflect social capital as it is activated through the youths' participation in Greening Western Queens.

Putnam's (1995) definitions of bonding and bridging forms of social capital has also been applied to afterschool programming for immigrant youth (Camras, 2004). *Bonding* social capital reinforces trust and reciprocity within homogenous groups, whereas *bridging* social capital reflects relationships of trust and reciprocity across heterogeneous groups (Putnam, 1995, 2000; Reynolds, 2010). As Camras (2004) observes, "While bonding social capital fosters connections to one's own community, bridging social capital fosters connections to diverse others and to the society at large" (p. 22). The concepts of bonding and bridging social capital are useful in understanding how youth organizing helps immigrant youth engage with the broader society, exposing them to resources and opportunities outside their neighborhoods and ethnic communities.

This integrated understanding of positive youth development, youth organizing, civic engagement, and social capital provides a useful framework for analyzing the experiences of participants in Greening Western Queens.

Research Design

In order to gain insight into the experiences of participants in Greening Western Queens, we used a qualitative case study design (Stake, 1994; Yin, 2003). We conducted in-depth interviews with 12 youth participants using a semi-structured protocol that focused on the World Bank Institute's key domains of social capital (Dudwick et al., 2006). Data collection was conducted during the second year of the initiative, in the late spring and summer of 2013. After obtaining human subject approval from the Hunter College Human Research Protection Program, we conducted six interviews with participants in the school-year program and another six with participants in the Greening Western Queens summer institute.

Of the 12 interviewees, nine had been engaged in the initiative during the academic year, and three had participated only in the summer programming. The youth ranged in age from 15 to 17 and were enrolled in grades 9–11 in one of two western Queens high schools. The sample was evenly distributed in terms of gender, with six males and six females. The interviewees reflected a diverse range of racial and ethnic backgrounds: Four students identified as Hispanic, three as Asian, two as South Asian, and one each as African, African American, and Middle Eastern.

The guiding question for this inquiry was "To what extent does an OST youth organizing initiative serve to increase the civic engagement of immigrant youth and connectedness to community issues as interpreted through the lens of social capital?"

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How Greening Western Queens Built Social Capital

Interview participants provided rich descriptions of how Greening Western Queens fostered their leadership, civic engagement, and connection to community issues. They described the processes by which they learned about critical environmental issues affecting their communities, worked together to identify policy solutions, and collaborated to educate and mobilize community residents as they worked for their proposed policy change, "greening" school building roofs. Their voices reveal how they developed social capital in three of the World Bank Institute's domains: trust and solidarity, collective action and cooperation, and empowerment and political action (Dudwick et al., 2006).

Trust and Solidarity

Dudwick and colleagues (2006) define trust and solidarity as "the extent to which people feel they can rely on relatives, neighbors, colleagues, acquaintances, key service providers, and even strangers, either to assist them or (at least) do them no harm" (p. 16). Although it is difficult to define, *trust* in a given context may be a choice, or it may reflect a dependency born out of interaction in familiar networks (Dudwick et al., 2006). Distinguishing between these two levels of trust is important for understanding how trust can influence people's social relationships (Dudwick et al., 2006).

Participants in Greening Western Queens said that they valued the opportunity to work in groups with diverse peers and staff, all of whom had different perspectives. Although we did not specifically ask participants if they "trusted" their peers, participants spoke about how they relied on one another to research their issue and devise a campaign to achieve their policy goal. Dudwick and colleagues (2006) define this aspect of trust as a learned dependency. Participants developed trust as they shared responsibility, learned leadership, and addressed challenges together.

In the process, participants expanded their network of resources. Some interviewees, for example, said that they connected not only with other participants but also with people in other groups who shared their passion for environmental justice. For example, Jenny, a 15-year-old girl from Egypt, said:

> I actually really liked working in groups or teams, because if I work alone it's only my ideas, my point of view towards things, but working as a group, you don't only receive one point of view, but you receive many points of view…. So it's actually been very

beneficial because I don't only see things or view things from my view, but actually from other people's views.

Jenny's observation suggests that she developed bridging social capital by being exposed to new ideas and ways to solve problems. She learned to apprehend the point of view of individuals who were different.

Other participants described gaining access to new knowledge through contact with Global Kids staff and with other environmental groups and activists. David, a 17-year-old from China, observed, "We [went] to different schools and different gardens, and worked with their workers. In my opinion, we got more power and more knowledge." Linda, a Latina 10th grader, described the new organizations she had visited:

> I have been introduced to … Build-it Green. They save up scrap and all that and then they make new things out of it. And then, the Brooklyn Grange—it's an actual green roof.

The participants said that these visits not only helped them make new connections but also gave them confidence to reach out and speak about their work.

Youth participants also discussed how these new connections could benefit their future academic and career goals. For example, Linda observed that she met "important people from the government" through Greening Western Queens. She commented that she has kept these individuals' contact information with the intent of applying for internships in the near future. Work on the green initiative gave participants opportunities to extend outward, to develop a sense of fitting in, and to connect with communities and resources they would not otherwise have been able to access. As they made these connections, they were developing political power to influence policy change.

Collective Action and Cooperation

Collective action and cooperation is closely related to trust and solidarity. This dimension of social capital examines the extent to which people feel they can come together to address community problems (Dudwick et al., 2006). To understand how Greening Western Queens participants experienced collective action and cooperation in their communities, we asked interviewees to define the term *community* and to describe the community in which they lived.

Interview responses suggest that participants' notions of community were complex, transcending geography. Important concepts included not only bridging and

bonding social capital but also issues of safety, trust, and diversity. Definitions of *community* varied widely, for example:

- "Where there is a diverse group of people, they can all come together even despite different cultures … and help out where they live."
- "Neighbors around my community… people with … stores; neighbors, friends, and family around me."
- "Everyone uniting … if they want to solve a problem … or helping each other."

Some participants said they felt safe in their home communities, while others did not. Many valued the friendliness of community members and their willingness to help one another, a notable finding in light of the fact that all the youth described their communities as ethnically diverse. One girl observed that residents in her community "get along.… If there's any kind of problem … they talk to each other; they come up with the solutions."

Respondents strongly suggested that where one lives does not define one's community. Community, they said, is defined not by geography but by safety and comfort—where they felt they could be themselves. Anna, a Latina 11th grader, stated, "I believe community is where there is safe space and where [people] can really come together. Safe space is just being able to express yourself without being judged." Anna did not consider the community where she lived to be a safe space because of neighborhood violence and drug use. She observed that residents in her neighborhood "stay in their own lane." She thought they would not "mix in" or come together to help solve community problems.

This sense of distance or apathy on the part of community residents was shared by many study participants. Abby, an African-American 11th grader who identified gang violence and high asthma rates as her community's most pressing problems, said that existing mechanisms for addressing community issues were underutilized:

> We do have monthly meetings with our community board, but not a lot of people show up. So … I guess

> people don't care. But the community board … they're trying to reach people, but no one wants to take the time, and, you know, solve these problems so— I don't think it's our community board's fault or the officials. It's pretty much the community, 'cause they're not taking the time to go to the meetings and listen to what everybody has to say.

Abby holds residents responsible for the low level of civic engagement she describes. She may not recognize that community officials sometimes operate in ways that diminish community participation because they realize benefits from low participation levels. In her study of Hispanic immigrant communities, Cheong (2006) stresses the importance of contextual dimensions that pose major challenges to the development of social capital. These social, cultural, and political contexts, Cheong finds, "may limit the operation of cooperative norms, participation in voluntary associations and activation of shared values that are currently promoted as good social capital" (p. 383). The unwillingness to participate in community building that Abby observed may be related to structural constraints that hinder the development of social cohesion and civic engagement, especially in immigrant communities. Still, her statement reveals that this Greening Western Queens participant had become politically engaged and understood the value of collective action.

Youth participants identified a variety of problems in their communities, including noise pollution, drug abuse, domestic violence, high rents and poor living conditions, truancy, health problems, and high rates of violence. One said, "I just wish that we could do community services there and help clean the streets." Respondents cited a lack of awareness among community residents of the impact of environmental conditions on their quality of life. Larry, a 16-year-old boy from Ghana, said:

> Nobody [in the community] actually has more knowledge about the environment and what causes pollution.… I don't think [anybody] actually is more aware of [the] environment, because you got a lot of things which you have to think about. So the environment is the last thing which is on people's minds.

Work on the green initiative gave participants opportunities to extend outward, to develop a sense of fitting in, and to connect with communities and resources they would not otherwise have been able to access. As they made these connections, they were developing political power to influence policy change.

Participation in Greening Western Queens inspired most of the youth to be more active in educating their family members, peers, and community residents about environmental problems. Interviewees directly linked their experience in the program to actions they could take to make changes in their communities. For example, Connie, a 16-year-old South Asian girl, said that she was "really thankful" that she was involved in the Global Kids program. She went on to say, "So, for my community, if I know more about this, I could spread the news around and they would be more engaged." Participants reported that being part of the initiative made them feel involved with their community, helped build friendships with their peers, and gave them a broader cultural perspective because the group was so diverse. Jenny observed:

> I've met people from different ethnicities, from different religions, and from different communities. It's actually benefitted me a lot, because I got to know more about the place they lived in or what has happened to them. And [that experience] actually made me aware of … other things I didn't even know existed before.

Youth participants identified as an important outcome of their learning experience a recognition that all community members need to cooperate in order to improve living conditions for all.

Empowerment and Political Action

Dudwick and colleagues (2006) observe that the social capital dimension of empowerment and political action involves "a sense of satisfaction, personal efficacy, and the capacity of network and group members to influence both local events and broader political outcomes" (p. 25).

The campaign planned and implemented by participants in Greening Western Queens, in which they advocated for green roofs on NYC public schools, centered on obtaining signatures on a petition to be presented to the chancellor of the NYC Department of Education. One theme that emerged as the youth spoke about this campaign was their commitment to improving the quality of life in their communities. Linda keenly felt how the initiative addressed problems in her community:

> When it comes to employment and financial problems, it would help a lot. Greening Western Queens would help them a lot because … right now we're thinking about green roofs and that would help because … to maintain green roofs, to even construct them would be a whole different area of employment, which would help a lot the people in my com-

munity to get some kind of employment. And … I know a lot of times, when you have financial problems, when you don't know what to do, you get under a lot of stress. Having a greener area—that actually helps the mind relax.

The participants' responses also promoted the value of advocacy, education, and the need for cooperation to effect change. Larry said:

> The more people know about certain things, the more curiosity it brings. The more curiosity, the more people will research. More research, more planning. More planning, more action.

All of the interviewees expressed a desire to educate family members, classmates, neighbors, and community leaders about the green roof initiative. Jenny, for example, said:

> The whole concept of green roofs, it actually made … other people mostly aware of what was happening.… I actually saw how much of a difference the idea and the concept [made], with not only me but many other people.

Study participants also demonstrated a common understanding of government and the process for policy change. The majority demonstrated an understanding of civics in discussions of their meetings with politicians, lobbyists, and government employees. They appreciated the interest and encouragement they received from these representatives. They also learned that implementing policy change is a difficult process that requires persistence and patience.

Getting signatures on the petition opened up opportunities for youth to reach out beyond their own communities and groups with which they regularly associated. Jenny also shared:

> If you actually get enough signatures, you could make a change. So the idea of a petition was good in both ways, that not only are you getting someone to sign … but you're actually informing them about what you're talking about…. So you're basically not only getting a school or a club or an organization to participate in this act, but anyone else who would like to.

Another valuable lesson youth learned was the power of using their voice to advocate for change. Fanny, a 15-year-old Puerto Rican girl, stated:

> Your voice can make a difference. 'Cause you

wouldn't think that some people are interested, but sometimes, when you would walk around your community, people feel really passionate about it: "Oh, my goodness, yes, someone is finally talking about this."

Youth Organizing Makes a Difference

Greening Western Queens showcases the power youth can have when engaged in meaningful and well-planned activities that support civic engagement and the development of social capital. Our interviews strongly suggest that youth participants developed both knowledge of the effects of environmental degradation on their communities and skills that enabled them to persuade community stakeholders to support the development of green roofs on city schools. More importantly, the initiative helped the youth to feel connected to community concerns and to believe that their involvement could make a difference in the well-being of their schools and communities.

Youth described how they built both bonding and bridging social capital in relationships with other youth participants, program staff, and community stakeholders and other residents. They directly linked their program experience to actions they could take to make changes in their local communities, even as they demonstrated how these changes affected the "global city" and the rest of the world. While our findings are not generalizable to other youth organizing programs, they offer useful insight into the activities and processes that enable immigrant youth of color to claim their communities and empower them to shape their destiny.

Acknowledgements

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