Reflections on the Youth Dreamers

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When nine of my Baltimore City middle school students decided to create a freestanding youth-run youth center, I actually encouraged them to pick a smaller project. Although I had done successful community projects with other students and had attended several training sessions with the Centre for Social Action, I did not see how students were going to be able to mobilize to raise the money and garner the support to do what no other youth group had done on their own. Having taught many of these students and having seen how easily frustrated they were at having to revise a paper, I doubted that they had the staying power to stick it out for the years that it would take to accomplish this task. It took little time for me to realize that they were going to do exactly that. Through their own efforts, the Youth Dreamers are on the road to seeing their dream become a reality.

In the beginning, I could never have predicted how enormous this project would become or how much I would struggle with my role as teacher-facilitator. When I announced Community Action as my elective course, I noted a low collective groan among the students. Only nine courageous souls signed up for the course, choosing to give up the chance to play basketball, football, or African drums. We began by really talking about the issues in their community that bothered them. The students clearly enjoyed being given the opportunity not only to
talk in class but also to talk about their interests, not the interests of the curricu-

um writers in their district. When asked to focus on one issue, the students unan-
imously agreed on the issue of teenagers being on the streets and involved in
violent activities after school hours. From that point, I guided the students into
thinking about why this problem exists. Using the But Why? activity (see Part
Three) and additional discussion, the students decided to tackle “teenagers on the
street after school is a problem because they have nowhere safe to go and they are
bored.” The idea of a youth-run youth center was born, and although I did my best
to encourage them to take on a smaller project, they were now united and deter-
mamed. We signed a pledge to commit to the project, and I felt like I had signed my
life away.

If you have an idea, even if you think it’s stupid,
voice your opinion! Be bold! That’s what
Youth Dreamers is all about!
— Astarte

During my elective course, I created instant mini-lessons based on needs that
arose during class. As time progressed, I couldn’t help but notice the tremendous
number of skills the students were learning and applying. Students were enthusi-
astically writing business proposals, grants, budgets, and letters of inquiry to foun-
dations. They were planning and executing presentations, making site visits to
interview directors of other youth centers, and organizing meetings of adults and
youths. They were planning fundraisers, evaluating them, and calculating their
profit. It was a thrill to see the real-world connections and application of skills
from other classes that these students were demonstrating every day. But there was
never enough time at the end of the day, and I was tired of always meeting after
school. This was real learning that should be given more of a place in the daily
schedule. I had to speak to the staff. This had to be more than an elective class. But
would they agree? And how would we do it?

Fortunately, I work in a New School Initiative school, a Baltimore City public
school run by teachers, parents, community members, and students. While we are
constrained by the city budget and city and state testing mandates, we are able to
write our own curriculum, create our own schedules, determine our own class sizes, and so on. Because of my participation in numerous Social Action training sessions through the collaboration of the National Writing Project and the Centre for Social Action, I felt qualified to continue with Social Action in my classroom on a much larger scale. I decided to approach the staff in order to share my knowledge of Social Action and my experiences with it in the classroom. When I spoke to them about what I had observed in my Community Action elective course, they were enthusiastic about taking that class to a different level and taking other projects in the school to that level, too. Together we decided to create more class time bydevoting a full day each week to “Project Day.” In addition, each teacher created a “project class” with activities linked directly to the community, such as organizing events, creating a community gardening project, or bringing in community artists to work with students. Once we'd made these decisions, we set to work writing curricula for the classes.

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This class is different because in Youth Dreamers,
we are making change in the community.
— Chekana

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I noticed a phenomenal transformation in my project class in comparison with my seventh-grade English class. In my English class, students refused to write a short story, but the Youth Dreamers would write ten-page grants. In my English class, I would come up with creative, interactive ways to teach students how to address an envelope and notice that whenever they needed to do so, they were unable to do it correctly. Switch to the Youth Dreamers class, in which a student pulled me aside to ask how to address an envelope. I showed her once; she filled out the envelope that held the grant that went to the foundation, and I never had to show her again. In my English class, asking a student to revise a paper became an emotional disaster. In Youth Dreamers, students would come to me to ask if they had left out any important information in their letter of inquiry to a foundation. When rejection letters rolled in, I would prepare myself with Winston Churchill quotes (“Success is nothing but failure after failure with undiminished enthusiasm”), but the students would look at me and then ask, “So who should we
write to next?” This was an aberration from the English classroom, where the students would fall apart if they did not receive the grade they expected on a paper.

In my English class, students constantly bickered over trivial matters, fought for attention, and rarely respected the contributions of others. In the Youth Dreamers class, students would democratically decide who would get to be the one student who was interviewed on the morning news. On one occasion, I had stayed up the previous night, desperately trying to think of a democratic way to choose the representative. The students responded to the situation with comments such as “I’m not really comfortable being on the news; I am way too nervous”; “I don’t think I am the best representative because I have only been with the Youth Dreamers a few months”; “I’m not sure I would be able to answer all the questions confidently”; and “Well, I really think that since Chantel has been involved since the beginning and is really good at public speaking, she should do it.” As a class, they decided to each write down their top three choices for a representative, and they tallied the votes to come up with one representative and a runner-up. These two students worked together to prepare for questions that might come their way. In addition, the students would recognize the strengths and contributions of others when deciding on mini-project groups.

At one point, I had students begging to be part of the Youth Dreamers, particularly students who did not typically work very hard in regular classes. One of my English/language arts students who did very little work in class asked whether he could join. I responded with, “It’s a lot of hard work, and you don’t do very much work in class.” He surprised me when he said, “But Youth Dreamers is important. They’re really doing something.” I didn’t know whether to be upset at the notion that he thought we weren’t really doing “something” in English class or thrilled at the realization that he saw the Youth Dreamers as a group of students taking responsibility for making positive change in their world.

Individual students in the Youth Dreamers were baffling me. LaTanya was failing all of her other classes but was the leader in the Youth Dreamers, organizing and running fundraisers, starting a group to plan and run the talent show, and writing a five-page grant to have a block party in the community. Students were choosing to stay after school in order to plan a presentation. Instead of bemoaning the schoolwide Halloween party that only raised $5 for the Youth Dreamers, we decided during our reflections that it showed what good planners we were and that we could organize and control a whole student body on a holiday. We moved
it from the fundraising part of our budget and included it in reports for funders to show these strengths. Again, negative attitudes seemed to evaporate, and enthusiasm took their place. I stayed up nights, wondering, What is happening here? Why is it happening here? Why isn’t it happening in my English/language arts class? Is it going to go away? Should I not talk about it for fear of it going away? Should I ask them about it? Is it just a case of luck or magic? I was constantly pondering these questions, to help me better understand both the effects of Social Action and what I was doing wrong in my regular classroom.

What I came to realize was that students come to my Community Action elective course by choice, which is very different from how students come to my English class. Students are in my English class because they are forced to be there. They are learning what is prescribed by the city, not necessarily what they want to learn. For the most part, I am teaching what I am told to teach, not what I can see they need to learn.

With the Youth Dreamers, I am a Social Action worker using the skills I have as a teacher to help facilitate a student-chosen goal. The students have identified the issues, brainstormed why the problems exist, decided how they are going to address them, taken action, and reflected on almost every step along the way. Unlike my traditional classroom, in which students have little control of their own learning, the Youth Dreamers have total ownership of what they are doing and why they are doing it. Every Wednesday, they decide what needs to be done and they do it. I provide the structure, but they are given the choice and most of the control.

I believe that I am no longer seen as their teacher, but more as a resource. This can be an uncomfortable role for me as a teacher to be in because I never know what will happen next, which direction the students will choose to go, or how they will handle the next challenge. Although I have given up the element of control that a traditional teacher holds, the structure of our days, the goals we have in common, and the desire to see a dream become a reality bring self-control to the classroom.

On Wednesdays, I am a Social Action worker working in the confines of the classroom. I use my skills as a teacher to provide mini-lessons and guidance, and grading is included. I am working with a group of students with a shared goal. The rest of the week, I am an English/language arts teacher, guided by the principles of Social Action and good teaching, incorporating these theories into my practice. I am working with a group of students with very different needs, no common goal, and a required curriculum.
If we can’t go through trials, we can’t move forward and be strong.
— Astarte

Working with Social Action in the classroom has provided me with a new set of challenges. Often, I lack credibility among my colleagues because of my role as facilitator and guide rather than traditional teacher. I also face adults who refuse to believe that this is a youth-led project; thus, they expect me to provide information or to do work that the youths typically do. The teacher in me often wants to jump in and fix things, even though I know full well that the most valuable lessons come from the youths doing the fixing, not to mention that they are the experts and the ones running the project. Finally, this project has taken on a life of its own and has taken over my life as I knew it. I was unprepared for any of these challenges, but trusting the process, the youths, what I know as a teacher, and what other Social Action colleagues can share has made it easier to deal with them.

We want our voice to be heard and to make change in the community. Sometimes adults underestimate us. But once they find out, they change their minds.
— Tiffani

The students face their own set of challenges and struggles. They have been discouraged by the attitude of adults who don’t take them seriously because they are youths. They are frustrated by the media’s portrayal of youths: “The newspapers and TV... talk about bad stuff too much. [The public needs to] see the positive sides of Baltimore.” The students often have trouble staying on task, and they get irritated when students don’t do their part: “The most frustrating thing is people not doing their job as a Youth Dreamer.” Although they respond by writing more letters, students are frustrated “when we write letters to people and they don’t write
back.” They, too, feel the effects of how much time this project has taken: “The thing that frustrated me was that things didn’t happen right away. It took some time in school and after school. It seemed like we were going nowhere.” Many have had trouble staying committed to the goal, while others have never strayed: “I have learned the importance of commitment and that all of us working together is better than doing it yourself.” The lessons learned seem to overpower the frustrations. Seasoned Youth Dreamer Chekana says, “If you really want to do it, then do it. Don’t give up. You may come across rejections, but keep going, never stop.” And Fresh Youth Dreamer Zakiyah says, “We have to work hard for what we want. Everything is not easy. Things are not gonna land in our lap.”

_It is a privilege and an honor to be a member of the Youth Dreamers, Inc. Being a Youth Dreamer takes a lot of dedication, concentration, commitment, open-mindedness, and consideration._

— Zakiyah

Being so immersed in this project has made it difficult for me to step back and view what is happening in an objective way. Although I am overwhelmed by my own questions about this work and the struggles I see the students grappling with, what I do see is very clear.

I see the smile on Cierra’s face when she finds out that she secured $20,240 worth of funding from a grant she wrote. I also see her mother bragging to a community member at our festival about how hard her daughter is working toward this dream. I see LaTanya walking around the classroom, wearing a huge grin after faxing her four-page grant, taunting, “What did you do today? Anything? I wrote an entire grant.” I see Astarte running into the room, breathless after a call to the senator, exclaiming, “The bill is on the president’s desk. He is going to sign it!” I see Shani sitting on a different board of adults and youths, helping to decide which after-school programs should get funding in the city.

I see adults and youths sitting around a table, adjusting bylaws so that they read not “President” and “Chairperson” but “President” and “Youth President” instead.
I see the amazement on Nathan’s face when we get to Wal-Mart and are presented with an overflowing shopping cart of toys and craft supplies because of a letter he wrote to five corporate officials. I see Chris, Mildred, Chantel, and me on the other side of the table, now serving as Youth as Resources board members, not youth coming to ask for money. I see Jade smiling and sighing with relief after presenting her first workshop to middle school students in the Turn the Corner Achievement Program. I see the look of shock on Chekana’s face when the Youth Dreamers are presented with a resolution from the Baltimore City Council after their presentation. I see sixteen students showing up for a meeting in the middle of the summer, enthusiastic about setting goals for the new year.

I see Chris, now two years into high school, at our monthly board meeting, responding to “Well, maybe some of the old board members will step down to make room for new ones” with “What? We started this, and we want to finish it!” I see Chantel presenting an amazing speech to the board in her bid to become their youth president, and I see Astarte following with an equally impressive speech and a copy of her résumé for all. I see e-mails like this one from Zakiyah: “This is sooooooooooo great that we are now officially called the Stadium School Youth Dreamers, Inc. I couldn’t be more proud to say that I am a part of this outstanding, goal setting, accomplishment making group, the Youth Dreamers.” That e-mail was followed by one from Tiffani after being elected to the board: “THANK YOU SO MUCH EVERYONE FOR LETTING ME HAVE A CHANCE TO BE ON THE BOARD. THANK YOU.”

I see youths who have accomplished more at age thirteen than many people will accomplish in a lifetime. I see youths who, having written letters and grants, have written their ticket to college; youths who have been interviewed on television and on the radio; youths who have given presentations at major universities and in front of numerous groups of adults; youths who have researched and started their own nonprofit organization; and youths who have planned and run their own community block party. I see youths who are stakeholders in their community and who, I hope, will come back to serve their community in the future. I see youths who believe in their project and its lasting effects: “We would like to see less young people on the corner and more going to college and being successful because of our project.” I see youths who truly believe that hard work and dedication make a difference: “We didn’t get this far by giving up.”

Ultimately, I see a group of students who embody the principles of Social Action, because they believe that they
• Have the skills, experience, and understanding to draw on to tackle problems they face
• Have the right to be heard, to define the issues facing them, and to take action on their own behalf
• Can work collectively and have power
• Can make decisions for themselves and take ownership of whatever outcome ensues

Before I joined the Youth Dreamers, I didn’t think kids could do this stuff. But now I know that we can.
— Domonique

How does this fit into the curriculum? Following is a list of skills and knowledge that my classes have developed through the use of Social Action.

English and Language Arts
• Writing business letters
• Creating and filling out order forms
• Grant writing
• Writing proposals
• Writing thank-you notes
• Creating invitations
• Addressing envelopes
• Writing articles
• Writing press releases
• Keeping logs and journals
• Note taking
• Reading grant guidelines
• Reading newspapers
• Using the phone book
• Reading and comparing real estate listings
• Conducting research
• Writing reports for funders

Math
• Fundraising (tracking costs, calculating profit)
• Selling items (making change)
• Calculating yearly bills
• Creating a budget
• Calculating square footage of properties
• Calculating stipends and salaries for one year
• Estimating event costs
• Balancing a checkbook

Social Studies
• Government
  • Identifying representatives at the local, state, and federal levels
  • Studying how a bill becomes a law
  • Determining how to file a zoning appeal and proceed through the process of obtaining a zoning appeal
  • Obtaining permits for neighborhood events
  • Studying historical examples of Social Action

Technology
• Searching for foundations and grants on the Web
• Researching housing listings online
• Creating mailing labels
• Creating business cards
• WordPerfect word processing
• Using Excel spreadsheets
• Designing and updating websites
• Working alongside an architect to design a house by revising electronic blueprints

Real-World Skills
• Conducting site visits and interviews
• Conducting telephone research
• Becoming a nonprofit organization
• Making presentations and speaking in public
• Making TV and radio appearances
• Working with community groups
• Networking at community events
• Soliciting donations for annual silent auction
• Interviewing and hiring staff for after-school programs
• Training employees for after-school programs
• Planning, running, and evaluating after-school programs

Character
• Persistence
• Patience
• Positive attitudes in the face of obstacles
• Communication skills