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Lessons on Citizenship and Democratic Power Literacy from Undocumented Youth

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Abstract

To create a society in which power is more equally accessible, we must teach our youth not only about civics and government, but also how to use political tools in order to effect social change. In this essay, I argue for teaching power literacy in place of traditional citizenship education on the grounds that the former has greater potential for increasing students' political efficacy and their abilities to apply knowledge of civics to the real-world issues that affect them. To illustrate the concept of power literacy, I draw on a case study of a grassroots, undocumented youth activist organization fighting for in-state tuition legislation in North Carolina. Members of this group, which was entirely youth-founded and youth-led, taught themselves lobbying, civil disobedience, and other political strategies that far surpass the knowledge and skills typically presented in school-based citizenship education. Their work exemplifies the type of power literacy that we should teach all youth if we wish them to have the skills necessary to address the social inequalities that currently undercut American democracy.



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In 2010, four high school-aged youth in North Carolina started a small, activist organization called the Youth Immigration Alliance (YIA; pseudonym). They had noticed that the community organization in which they participated was not sufficiently advocating for undocumented immigrants, so they founded their own group and decided it would consist only of youth and have no leadership hierarchy so that all members would have an equal voice. The main goals of the group were to advocate for immigrant rights such as in-state tuition for undocumented students. Some of their activities included lobbying, rallying, and staging sit-ins at local colleges, for which two were arrested. They regularly requested meetings with state representatives, and when these were denied (as they often were), the activists waited outside of their offices until they could “walk and talk” with them to their next appointment. Several of the youth were interviewed by local news media, including a program aired on NPR. Although some had received Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA)¹, the public nature of their acts nevertheless posed a risk, as their parents had no protection from deportation at that time. However, sharing personal stories, or being “out of the shadows,” is one of the central political strategies of the undocumented movement and therefore a risk these youth perceived as worth taking.

When I learned of these remarkably informed, engaged, and courageous youth in 2013, I wanted to know more about the lessons that could be learned from their actions—and what their actions teach us about social power and citizenship. How did these youth gain such a strong understanding of their own personal and political power, especially considering so much was self-taught? How did they remain critically hopeful in a xenophobic society where racist nativist discourses abound, particularly regarding undocumented individuals who are often given the dehumanizing label, “illegals” (Annand, 2008; Pérez Huber, 2010)? As a former history and civics teacher, I wondered what lessons could be learned about citizenship education from the group’s self-taught power literacy. That is the main question I explore in this essay, through drawing upon qualitative data from a case study I conducted with YIA (Parkhouse & Freeman, in press) and connecting this work to the literature on citizenship education. I first provide the contexts and work of YIA, before elaborating on the definition of power literacy I am using here as a way of conceptualizing YIA’s “knowing in action” (De Lissovoy, 2014). Finally I propose ways in which this power literacy could be developed in K-12 citizenship education.

National and Local Contexts for the Work of YIA

During the time of this study, YIA and other activists across the state were lobbying the NC General Assembly for passage of legislation that would grant in-state tuition to undocumented students who graduated from North Carolina high schools. YIA is part of a long history of activism for immigrant rights. Undocumented youth, such as DREAMers², have

¹ On June 15, 2012, President Obama issued Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), which is a temporary relief from deportation and authorization to work for young immigrants without providing a pathway to citizenship (Department of Homeland Security, 2012). On November 20, 2014, Obama expanded this action to include other groups, such as parents of U.S. citizens and legal permanent residents, with certain provisions (Department of Homeland Security, 2015). At the time of writing the latter executive order was under judicial review.

² The Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act would give states the option to provide in-state tuition to undocumented students who arrived before age 16 and allow them to apply for legal permanent resident (LPR) status, contingent on several criteria (Wheelhouse, 2008). The bill has been debated in Congress for almost a decade. A Senate vote in 2007 failed by just eight votes.

played a major role in these social movements (Gonzales, 2008; Gonzales & Chavez, 2012; Macias, 2013; Morales, Herrera, & Murry, 2011). Chicano student resistance for issues other than immigration reform, such as educational equity, has also been well-documented, for instance through highlighting historical examples (Barrera, 2004), as well as applying Latinx Critical Race Theory to understand this particular form of resistance (Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001). Participation in these collective political demonstrations also confers personal benefits on youth, for instance via positive cultural identity development and bolstered resiliency (Macias, 2013; Morales et al., 2011).

Despite the extensive research base on immigrant activism, the literature contains few studies of grassroots organizations founded and directed entirely by youth. Nor does it examine the implications of such political organizing for citizenship theory and education. In addition, there are few if any studies on how political organizing among undocumented youth may differ in “new gateway states”³ (Rong, Dávila & Hilburn, 2011). The majority of studies have been conducted in states with a longer history of immigration such as California, New York, and Texas (e.g., Abrego, 2006; Gonzales, 2011; Gonzales & Chavez, 2012). Because North Carolina has less of a history of large-scale immigration, the YIA youth had fewer local resources and no well-established immigrant rights movements to collaborate with or learn from. Most had moved into communities with predominantly US-born residents, who may perceive their new community members as threats (Murillo, 2002) or as undeserving of resources (Lopez, 2010; Pérez Huber, 2010). This presented an additional barrier to garnering local support for their activism.

Tuition Policies

One resource denied to many undocumented students, in part due to this perception that they do not deserve it, is access to affordable higher education. At the time of the study, 32 states required undocumented students to pay out-of-state tuition rates for public universities and colleges, regardless of how long the student has been living in the state (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2014). Reasons for this include the misinformed beliefs that offering in-state tuition requires additional state funding (Flores, 2010) and that restricting social services to undocumented immigrants might encourage their departure (Rong, Dávila, & Hilburn, 2011). In fact, in-state policies increase college-enrollment rates of Latinx foreign-born noncitizens (Flores, 2010), in turn boosting tax revenue and other social returns for the state (Lopez, 2010). Despite the research supporting in-state policies for these students, some states have laws barring institutions from even admitting undocumented students at all (Behnke, Gonzalez & Cox, 2010). Each year in the US at least 50,000 undocumented high school graduates are denied admission to college due their immigration status (Ortega, 2011).

The Youth Immigration Alliance

I began working with YIA in the spring of 2013, when I contacted them through their social media page to ask if any members might be interested in guest speaking in a class I taught at a free college access program for 6th - 12th grade students. They responded with interest and

³ The term “new gateway” has been critiqued because many so-called “newcomers” may be descended from indigenous groups present long before Europeans arrived. However, I use the term in this paper to be consistent with the literature in denoting states experiencing recent demographic shifts.

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invited me to their weekly meetings to learn more about what they do. At my first meeting I met Leroy, Andres, and Oliver, and I later met a fourth member—Carla (self-selected pseudonyms). That summer, Oliver, Leroy, and another youth activist from a different organization came to my class and shared their experiences of lobbying and performing acts of civil disobedience for in-state tuition. A month later I asked if they would be interested in participating in a study on immigrant youth activism in new gateway states (Parkhouse & Freeman, in press).

In this section, I will provide some details about the four youth, as context for examining their activism and power literacy. All four were born in Mexico and immigrated to the US before the age of seven. As a result they had attended U.S. schools almost exclusively, and had been socialized into the mindset that college was the logical next step after high school graduation. Like many other undocumented students, they did not learn that college would cost them three or four times the amount their peers would pay until they began applying in their final years of high school (Gonzales, 2011). Even though their high academic achievements would easily earn them admission to the top universities in the state, none were able to afford the out-of-state tuition rates they would be charged nor were able to qualify for subsidized student loans. In the following sections, I offer a brief portrait of each of the four members to establish context for their quotes, which are woven throughout the remainder of the essay.

Leroy. At the time of his interview, Leroy was in 11th grade at an alternative school. The cheerful, round-faced young man explained that he had chosen to transfer to this school because, “I did not like the environment of my last school. I was not able to get enough help with subjects there that I really needed help on and it was causing me to fall back in school.” He went on to describe how much he enjoyed the alternative school and proudly shared that he was running for class president. He had become involved in YIA in middle school, after being encouraged by one of the co-founders.

Oliver. Oliver was one of the four co-founders of YIA. He explained that they decided to start their own group when the immigrant advocacy group they were already working with noticed their focus on undocumented immigrant issues and told them “not to talk about that stuff.” Oliver had a serious disposition, but would also joke and laugh with peers. At nineteen, his demeanor, determination, and knowledge of political structures gave him the appearance of someone much older. Despite his high grades, Oliver had chosen not to enroll in college until tuition policies changed so that he could attend a competitive four-year university. He explained, “Everyone else was just like ‘Go to community college. It's cheaper.’ Which it is, but still, I just wanted to save that money for a better time to go.” In the meantime he was working and auditing classes at a prestigious local university.

Andres. Andres had a similar maturity and depth of knowledge beyond his years. His dry sense of humor surfaced even in his email signatures, one of which substituted “Robbin’ Hood” for his actual name. Andres joined YIA after seeing a flyer and thinking, “that would be a nice group to join and help out, or try out just for a little.” He did not become committed to the group until after attending an annual DREAM graduation in Washington, D.C. and an anti-racism workshop where he learned more about the Civil Rights Movement. He explained, “It showed that the youth have a lot of power and really bring out injustices to the government and social system.” Like Oliver, Andres had just graduated with grades high enough to earn him admission to a four-year university. However, the high cost of out-of-state tuition compelled him to enroll in a community college instead. He was also working part-time.

Carla. Carla had just graduated from high school and earned a scholarship that would allow her to attend a competitive four-year university. Carla also had the staid voice and pensive demeanor of someone much older, so I was somewhat surprised to learn she was a cheerleader. Her maturity may be related to the fact that she had to take on an adult role at the age of six. She recounted crossing the Mexico-US border at that age, along with her two younger siblings and without the company of her parents, who had to cross separately. She remembered making sandwiches for her younger siblings and changing her sister's diaper in the absence of her parents. The woman that transported them offered little help. Carla explained, "When my little sister cried she would be like, 'Go outside. I don't want her crying inside the house.' And so we'd have to be outside until she got quiet we could go back inside." The other three did not remember living anywhere other than North Carolina. Carla joined YIA after her brother (also a member) brought her to a lobbying event, where she met Oliver and learned some political strategies. She explained:

Oliver taught me five minutes before going into the office what to say, and he sat with me and told me the type of things that I should be looking for, or the types of things that I should be saying and responding. And then I just kind of went for it. I really liked it so I told him I would love to get involved.

All four demonstrated political efficacy and deep understanding of the legislative process, as well as resiliency in the face of xenophobia and hostility from policymakers and others. Their political engagement and empowerment are something civic education strives for and often fails to achieve, particularly with students from marginalized communities (Levinson, 2012). Their stories, then, may offer important lessons for civic educators in general as well as specifically those working with populations who have historically been denied access to power. As a way of organizing these lessons into a framework for civic educators, I use a concept I call *power literacy*. In the next section I describe the theoretical foundations of this concept, followed by an explanation of how YIA exemplifies power literacy in practice.

Power Literacy Defined

In this essay I am arguing for a reframing of citizenship education as power literacy. I define power literacy as the capacities to both understand and use the particular discourses and other cultural structures involved in maintaining or transforming social conditions. This definition draws primarily from three prior concepts: Freire's (1970) *critical literacy*, De Lissovoy's (2014) epistemology of emancipation, and Delpit's (1988) culture of power. In the Freirean tradition, Ira Shor (1999) defined *literacy* as "social action through language use that develops us as agents inside a larger culture" (p. 2) and *critical literacy* as "learning to read and write as part of the process of becoming conscious of one's experience as historically constructed within specific power relations" (Anderson & Irvine, 1993, p. 82). Power literacy, then, translates this learning into political action—specifically into an acquisition of power by the traditionally disempowered.

At the same time, this distinction between knowledge and action is troubled in De Lissovoy's (2014) concept of the "epistemology of emancipation" (p. 544). Through his analysis of youth social movements in Arizona and on California's higher education campuses, De Lissovoy asserted that these students' actions are already a form of knowledge—"a radical *knowing in action*" (p. 552). He argued, "oppressed groups have proven the authority of their

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analyses in the very moment of striking out against the forces that subjugate them” (p. 545). In doing so, they legitimate their capabilities to engage in knowledge production. Power literacy draws upon the idea of *knowing in action* in that the appropriation and use of power is not a subsequent step after learning about power or an application of this learning; rather the use of power is itself a form of knowledge.

Finally, power literacy builds on Lisa Delpit’s (1988) concept of the culture of power. She used this term to describe the codes and rules for participating in power, such as the ways that those with power speak, dress, write, and interact. Delpit argued that students who are not from upper and middle-class homes need explicit instruction on the culture of power if they are to have a reasonable chance of acquiring power. Whereas people who are already members of dominant groups learn these codes implicitly, through daily interactions, outsiders need an insider—a teacher for instance—to make these hidden codes visible. Power literacy is deep knowledge of both this culture of power as well as *the mechanics* of power. In other words, the disempowered also need to understand the political processes that those with power use to maintain their dominance. One example of the mechanics of power would be the implementation of policies that charge undocumented students out-of-state tuition rates. Another example would be voter identification laws, which federal courts ruled were intended to depress turnout from poor and minority communities (Wines & Blinder, 2016). Delpit was right that students from marginalized communities need explicit instruction on the hidden norms of the culture of power, but I would add they also need knowledge of the mechanics of power if they are to participate in activities that can change social structures—activities such as lobbying, protesting, and awareness-raising. In the case of YIA, this knowledge came mostly from within their group, rather than through explicit instruction from a powerful insider; however in the last section I will describe how cooperation from insiders, such as teachers familiar with the culture and mechanics of power, is necessary if power literacy is to be accessible to more than a handful of extraordinary youth such as those in YIA.

Power Literacy Exemplified by YIA

YIA members had an intricate knowledge of both the culture of power and the mechanics of it. Their combination of knowledge of grassroots organizing along with their efficacy to effect change constitutes these youths’ power literacy. They understood complicated state legislative processes and how the judicial system operates, and they even knew the personality characteristics of individual members of the NC General Assembly. They regularly visited local representatives’ offices and the state capitol to meet with Assembly members. Carla explained that they decided to focus their lobbying on House members because state Senators were too difficult to reach. She informed me that there were three types of Republicans in the state House of Representatives. One type opposed in-state tuition for undocumented students out of a desire for retribution; as they said to Carla, “Well your parents came here illegally so the consequence of their actions is going to be you not going to college, you know.” Carla explained that the second type was “afraid that if he changes his mind he's going to lose people [votes] you know? And that freaks him out a lot. So then they are like sorry I can't help you.” The third type was concerned about the economic impacts, which is where YIA saw an opportunity for perhaps changing their minds. One strategy they used was to bring their parents’ tax return documents to prove that undocumented immigrants do pay taxes. When Carla used this tactic, however, she found that most representatives were unmoved.

Nevertheless, YIA members showed deep understanding—not only of which representatives opposed in-state tuition—but also their justifications for opposing it. The members were then able to categorize the legislators by reason for opposition and then plan their lobbying arguments accordingly. YIA members also taught themselves and each other lobbying methods. For instance, if a representative refused to meet with them, their strategy was to wait outside whatever room the representative was in and then walk with him or her to the next meeting. Carla explained:

I think we just kind of learned off each other you know because we didn't really have anyone that could help us. But Oliver went to a lobbying training and after that he's been the one to train all of us what to say. Whenever we get denied, or representatives are like, "He's in a meeting," Oliver's always like, "Ask what room. That way we can walk and talk with him." He'll always give us little hints of what to do.

Their civic knowledge extended even beyond state politics to federal and judicial processes as well. Oliver wrote petitions for deportation cases and explained to me which counties were part of ICE's 287(g) program, under which the state has authority to enforce immigration restrictions within their jurisdictions (Delegation of Immigration Authority Section 287(g) Immigration and Nationality Act, 2014). In the recent midterm election, members organized to oppose Kay Hagan, the incumbent Democratic candidate for U.S. Senate, based on her history of voting against the DREAM Act and her stance against DACA.

The YIA youth also taught themselves the legal procedures for protecting people from deportation. Oliver said of his work, "What I have done was talk to families that are affected by these deportation cases and just getting their basic information about the person that got arrested and writing petitions and doing legislative outreach to help stop the deportation." Andres has done similar work. After his arrest for a community college sit-in, he met five immigrants in detainment whom he believed qualified as low-priority for ICE and therefore were being unjustly deported:

One of them had been living in the United States for 28 years, and so living so long in one country and then all of a sudden being kicked out just didn't seem right to me. And the other people have families here, kids here, and they are the only source of income for the family so that's gonna tear the family apart and leave them in poverty. So that's another reason why they shouldn't be deported.

Andres made some phone calls and was able to get legal counsel for these five men. YIA members displayed extensive knowledge not only of local, state, and federal policies and representatives, but also of the forms of political involvement available to them, such as petitioning, lobbying, and engaging in civil disobedience. In the following quote from Andres, he conveys both his sense of efficacy as well as a realistic awareness of the constraints they faced: "I can't just snap my fingers and make it happen. It takes a lot of people to change policies. It's not completely in my power, but we do have some power."

The members not only taught themselves how to employ power in the service of others, they also did so despite the deportation risks they incurred as a result. Oliver described one protest for which he was arrested:

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The first time I got arrested was for the DREAM nine. It was a really big campaign to bring DREAM act eligible youth back to the United States after Obama said he wouldn't deport any DREAM act eligible people. So there was a group of nine youth, they came back to the United States and they needed congressional support. So we talked to representatives asking them if they would support the DREAM nine. Mel Watt in Charlotte, he wouldn't—there have been many attempts to try to communicate with him—but he wouldn't give a position on the issue. So we were there for three days and on the third day, we—me and this other group member—we sat down at his office after closing hours. And the police came and they asked us to leave. We said that we wouldn't leave until Mel Watt gave us an answer. So they arrested us.

Referring to his two arrests, Oliver stated, “Both times I was running the risks of being deported because I still didn't have my deferred action paperwork in.” They were willing to face these risks as they saw their work as a collective effort for a higher cause; Andres explained, “This really isn't just for me. It's for people just like myself.” As other social movements have shown, it is this kind of collective, grassroots work that may have the most power to transform social systems (Gonzales, 2013).

Democratic Power Literacy

The YIA youth not only offer lessons on power literacy through their political knowledge and activism; they also exemplify democratic practices through their organizational structure and meeting procedures. Members did not use the word *democratic* in describing their practices or goals, but the ideals of self-rule and equal sharing of power were evident. Oliver explained that he has seen other organizations working with undocumented youth in which others

speaking on their behalf, like speak about their problems and they come up with ways on how to improve them without having much consent with the actual people that are affected by it. I thought, I was really surprised by that, and so that's kind of what a really big idea behind YIA is that we want the undocumented youth to be the forefront of it. To make all the decisions and all the actions.

The group has no officers or other leadership roles often present in other youth and adult civic organizations. Leroy explained,

I personally feel if you have some kind of leader you will kind of want to do what they do and won't try things for yourself, versus if no one's really a leader everybody feels the opportunity to be recognized. I think that's one of the things we try to make this a space where everybody's equal and everybody's voice can be heard, and nobody can be put down.

In fact, anyone who attends a meeting, member or not, is afforded equal recognition and participation. I was welcomed into their meeting despite my difference in ethnic background and legal status, as have several US-born, White, high school-aged allies over the years. Leroy described what happened when two students from a nearby university visited a meeting:

They are really enjoying themselves. It's not like we just make them sit there and watch what we're doing. We let them in the conversation: ‘How do you guys feel about this? Tell us a little bit about you.’

Perhaps because YIA functions in a truly democratic way, in that all are entirely equal, they believe in the democratic ideal, in contrast with many students from marginalized communities who perceive a disjuncture from American ideals and their own experiences (Rubin, 2007). Ironically perhaps, by actually enacting the democratic ideals other teens may disavow, these youth display faith in a political system that denies them formal recognition as members. It may be this denial of recognition that actually inoculates them from the hegemonic mystification that keeps legal-but-marginalized citizens unaware of their subordination and thus accepting of their roles (Lukes, 2005). They are able to do so, in part, by treating “citizenship not as a legal status but as a form of identification, a type of political identity: something to be constructed, not empirically given” (Mouffe, 1992, p. 231). In the absence of such an empirically given citizenship, the YIA youth reclaimed and thus constructed it for themselves. If others approached citizenship in the same way, we might have a more engaged citizenry.

Transformational Resistance via Power Literacy

One lesson we might take from the case of YIA is that if these youth—who are denied more political power than most American youth in that they cannot vote or run for office—can develop power literacy, then all youth should be able to. Even more encouraging, these youth became change agents when many in their situation withdraw in frustration. Upon learning of their citizenship status—which for most does not occur until late in high school (Gonzales, 2011)—many go through a disorienting period of “learning to be illegal,” in which they are compelled to abandon prior plans and aspirations (Abrego, 2006, p. 608). Students like Oliver, who excelled in school and were expected by teachers and peers to attend competitive universities, find themselves having to re-evaluate the utility of good grades and a high school diploma if college is no longer tenable. When Oliver realized that he faced what he called “this big wall in front of us,” he went from someone who was “in honors classes all the time, you know an ideal student” to a truant who even stopped participating in YIA for a while:

I was just like, ‘What’s the point of working hard now if it’s not going to pay off later on?’ I didn’t show up to class a lot of the time, and I didn’t do the essays. The consequence of that: I failed my English class my junior year and I had to take it over the summer online.

Andres knew his citizenship status, but did not know about the state’s tuition policy until he became involved in YIA:

I didn’t know until I was in this group. . . . I was like, ‘Wait school is already expensive. How are you going to make it four times more expensive than it already is for me, just because I wasn’t born here? Even though I’ve lived here for like most of my life, ever since I was four. I started school here so how can you charge this?’ It seems ridiculous.

Amplifying this sudden recognition of “this big wall,” the YIA youth were continually reminded of the racist nativism that underlies common perceptions of who counts as American (Lopez, 2010; Pérez Huber, 2010). At various times during their political activities, all four had been discriminated against, dismissed, and in other ways suffered antagonism. Oliver recounted being called a “job-stealer” and “terrorist,” and Leroy remembered being told by multiple people at a meeting to “go home,” explaining that they meant, “like Mexico, not even go home to your house.” Andres stated,

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At rallies you had people who are really disrespectful and throw up the middle finger and start cursing at you, but it's not like this whole group--It's just this one individual. We just ignore them, or at the least I do. I don't pay attention to them.

Such hostility could have steered the youth toward forms of resistance that were more reactionary or self-defeating (Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001), such as withdrawing from high school or disengaging from social groups. For many undocumented youth, realizing the “wall” excluding them from higher education leads them to conclude that high achievement in school serves no purpose for them (Abrego, 2006), as demonstrated by Oliver’s sudden detachment from school. But the YIA youth instead engaged in what Solórzano and Delgado Bernal (2001) called *transformational resistance*, which the authors defined as “political, collective, conscious, and motivated by a sense that individual and social change is possible” (p. 320). Andres’s quote illustrates this sense of possibility:

I feel like every time I go to a rally where we ask a representative like [their representative’s name] to change some policy it feels like success in that moment because there's people [sic] out there with you chanting for the same thing.

Power literacy does not have to be transformational; one might effectively apply knowledge of the mechanics of power in order to maintain a condition, rather than transform it. However, when transformational resistance—or behavior motivated by an interest in social justice and critique of oppression (Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001)—is present, it seems likely that so is power literacy.

Summary

Throughout interviews with the four youth, their sense of efficacy, empowerment, and critical hope were constant. These are integral components of power literacy. They were able to critically read the world (Freire, 1970) by recognizing that the out-of-state tuition policy is unjust. It is based on a desire to punish the parents who brought their children to the US, despite the fact that the children had no say in the matter, and it denies these youth equal access to education, which most of the world has deemed a basic human right (United Nations, 1948). The youth also demonstrated the epistemology of emancipation in that their political knowledge was not a precursor to their actions, but rather their political acts were constructing a form of knowledge. Finally, they showed understanding of both the culture of power (Delpit, 1988) in speaking and dressing in ways that would grant them access to state legislators, for example, but also knowledge of the mechanics of power. They understood complex state and federal legislative processes, the judicial process, deportation procedures, and lobbying strategies. Just as literacy includes not only the ability to read text but also to produce it through writing, these youth were able to both read the world and produce changes to it. Complementing this power literacy was an embodiment of transformational resistance, in that the desire to promote social justice motivated their appropriation of the mechanics of power.

Reframing Citizenship Education as Power Literacy

The case of YIA illustrates two problems with citizenship education as it is currently taught in the US: a) the partial and contradictory way in which students understand what it means to be a citizen, and b) its failure to truly prepare young people for active

participation in government. I will elaborate on these before describing how power literacy education can address these two problems.

Addressing the Problems with Current Conceptions of Citizenship

YIA highlights shortcomings in both the common understandings of citizenship as well as the conceptualizations offered by citizenship theorists. In terms of the first, young people (and adults) tend to hold dual understandings of the definition of citizenship—as political standing and as rights and responsibilities—which these undocumented youth show to be in conflict with one another. Theories of citizenship originating in the civic republican model envisioned by Aristotle and Rousseau—and continuing to dominate American perceptions of “the good citizen”—emphasize the importance of political agency and active citizenship (Leydet, 2011). When researchers have asked students how they would define “the good citizen,” the most common responses were related to helping others and obeying laws (Chiodo & Martin, 2005; Hickey, 2002). Thus among students as well as adults, the notion of a citizen appears to be more typically associated with the actions one takes than the legal status one has. Although the YIA youth lacked legal citizenship standing, they exercised protected rights and fulfilled civic responsibilities by actively engaging in the political process. Their activism exposes a potential contradiction in the idea of *the good citizen*—can one be a good citizen without being a citizen in the legal sense?

Political philosophers Kymlicka and Norman (1994) argued that “we should expect a theory of the good citizen to be relatively independent of the legal question of what it is to be a citizen, just as a theory of the good person is distinct from the physical (or legal) question of what it is to be a person” (p. 353). This mutual independence is not so clear-cut in the first case, however. Physical personness would be a necessary precondition for being a good person. By analogy, if physical (legal) citizenship is a necessary precondition for being a good citizen, are the YIA youth not good citizens? Many, I expect, would say they are, given that these youth are more politically informed and involved than the vast majority of legal citizens. Most of the latter group do not even vote in midterm elections, much less take up more active forms of participation such as lobbying and protesting (Levinson, 2012).

One of the most well-known citizenship theorists, T.H. Marshall, argued that there are three interrelated dimensions of citizenship: civil, political, and social (Marshall & Bottomore, 1950/1992). As with other theories of citizenship, examining the case of YIA makes this framework more complicated than it may initially seem. Marshall defined the civil element as the rights necessary for personal freedom, such as the right to justice and freedom of speech; the political dimension as including the right to vote and run in elections; and the social element as the ability “to live the life of a civilized being according to the standards prevailing in the society” (p. 8). He named education as the institution most associated with the social element. Here again, the YIA youth complicate this categorization of dimensions. They have some, but not all, of the components of all three dimensions. Although they have political power through lobbying, they cannot vote or run for office. While they are provided free K-12 education, they are denied the same access to higher education that legal citizens have. We might imagine the primary importance of the political dimension to be guaranteeing the right to participate in governance and protection of civil liberties; however in this case we see that the political dimension (or legal status) is primarily needed for access to the social dimension of citizenship. Because the YIA members already exert more influence over governance than could be achieved through voting,

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the political question becomes secondary to the social one: they need access to the forms of education that will grant them access to the “life of a civilized being according to the standards prevailing in the society” (Marshall & Bottomore, 1950/1992, p. 8). Perhaps a revised theory of citizenship would help address these paradoxes, but that is beyond the scope of this essay.

The central question posed here is how we should we teach citizenship. To leave in place the common perception of citizenship as legal status is to alienate the 7% of children in the US who are undocumented or have at least one undocumented parent (Krogstad & Passel, 2014). As we have seen, this is not the only drawback of perpetuating this simplified—though prevalent—understanding of citizenship. It also can be in conflict with the second conception of citizenship as engagement in political and civil life. If good citizenship is more about the actions one takes than the legal status one has, then good citizenship is just as available and applicable to undocumented youth as to native-born citizens. YIA has shown that the political power of individuals is unrelated to legal documentation. Another problem with this conception is that those who do have legal standing are granted the status of *citizen* even if they never engage in any of the political activities of their communities or nation.

Given the unlikelihood of transforming the entire population’s understanding of *citizen*, I propose instead that we redefine and reframe citizenship education as power literacy. This addresses the above dilemmas in several ways. First, it is inclusive of all of our students, regardless of their immigration status. Second, it addresses the anemic definition of *good citizen* often provided by students: rather than merely needing to obey laws, for example, a good citizen must be more active—must be able to use knowledge of the mechanics of power to influence policies. Third, the groups for whom there is a civic empowerment gap (Levinson, 2012) may develop the political knowledge and efficacy necessary to close this gap and acquire more power, a precondition for reducing social inequalities. At the same time, students with legal citizenship may be motivated to do more than exercise basic responsibilities such as voting and obeying laws, if they learn that *good citizenship* requires more than these basic activities paired with legal status.

A Proposed Initial Framework of Citizenship Education for Democratic Power Literacy

We know that “the young learn much about citizenship, for better or worse, outside school” (Parker, 2001, p. 8). Indeed, YIA primarily taught themselves power literacy in their group meetings and in a few trainings, such as the anti-racism workshop Andres attended. When I asked about the extent to which they learned any related lessons in schools, they gave a few isolated examples, usually of individual conversations with teachers rather than curricular lessons. Carla, for instance, described how after-class conversations with her Government teacher have helped her:

He will tell me what he thinks as to whether the laws are going to be passed or not. He'll tell me in what ways we can change certain things that more representatives that are Republican would be open to. And he'll tell me what kinds of things to say to them [representatives] when I walk into the room.

While several mentioned the supportiveness of teachers, none could think of examples from their social studies classes of insights they gained related to lobbying or activism.

However, given the civic mission of schools and the amount of time young people spend there, imagine how much more they could learn about citizenship and political participation if teachers emulated (as much as possible) the context in which the YIA youth taught themselves about power and advocacy. If all students could find a social issue they cared enough about to investigate strategies for addressing, then perhaps they would need only the time to do so, the connections (interpersonal and conceptual) that teachers may be able to provide, and the reassurance that their age is not a limitation. In fact, it may be their young age and the optimism typically associated with it that makes them the most likely group to envision and create a more democratic society. The first step in teaching for power literacy, then, would be to develop students' informed critiques of the institutions that sustain inequalities in power, for instance U.S. democracy and capitalism as they currently exist.

Critiquing Sources of Power Inequalities

Unfortunately, schools often teach that the US is a model democracy, which causes a disjuncture between civics lessons and the lived experiences of many students, particularly those in marginalized groups with firsthand knowledge of the failures of the US to provide justice and equal protection to all (Rubin, 2007). There is a fear that acknowledging shortcomings of our democracy will foment cynicism and contribute to the decreasing civic engagement of today's youth (Parker, 2011). Research suggests this is not the case, however (Levinson, 2012). Developing critical sociopolitical consciousness has been shown to raise students' civic efficacy (Moya, 2012; Rubin, 2007) and close the civic empowerment gap that currently exists between middle-class White students and students from poor and ethnoracial minority backgrounds (Levinson, 2012). Abowitz and Harnish (2006) contended that students from all backgrounds would in fact benefit from a shift in citizenship education toward more critical, pluralistic approaches:

Citizenship education that engaged the debates, questions, and multiple discourses associated with civic and political life would prove to be far more enlightening, engaging, and inspiring for students than the current civics curriculum—with its vision of a more cleansed, idealized, narrow, and fairy-tale like citizenship than actually exists. Many of our students are no doubt aware of this gap between school-constructed citizenship and citizenship as actually practiced; this awareness feeds the apathy and cynicism that we may be producing in our citizenship education in schools. (p. 681)

Teaching for power literacy would address these concerns by emphasizing critical consciousness and versions of civic participation that are oriented toward social justice rather than to personal actions such as voting, or service to a particular group or organization for example (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004).

In other words, power literacy would include the understanding that “the problem is not the ideals of modern democracy, but the fact that its political principles are a long way from being implemented, even in those societies that lay claim to them” (Mouffe, 1992, p. 1). For students to understand problems in U.S. democracy and gain power, they must have a critical understanding of how decisions reflecting common interests are increasingly being displaced by decisions that benefit the capitalist economy (Fung & Wright, 2003). Frequently cited examples of this include Congress's failure to increase banking regulations following the 2008 financial crisis and the Supreme Court's decisions in the recent *Citizens United* and *McCutcheon* cases,

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which struck down limits on campaign spending for corporations and wealthy individual donors (Weiner, 2015).

YIA provides one example of how the recognition of these failures can actually inspire the type of civic engagement and knowledge that citizenship education is purported to pursue. The next step, then, is to ensure students feel a sense of efficacy in addressing these problems (Levinson, 2012; Rubin, 2007). The self-taught power literacy of YIA offers insights into such efficacy development. As Andres asserted, “youth have a lot of power.” The following section elaborates on this element of citizenship education as power literacy.

Political Efficacy Through Power Literacy

YIA demonstrates the power individuals can have through small-scale, grassroots organizing (Fung & Wright, 2003). Gonzales (2013) argued that this is the best hope for the migrant rights movement (and I would argue other movements as well) because “we have seen that those closest to the upper echelons of state power have been most willing to compromise and those based in the barrios and that are often physically and political distant from the halls of Congress have taken a more oppositional stance” (p.169). Furthermore, grassroots activists have the additional necessary “political and financial autonomy from the dominant political parties and corporate forces that fund many of the leading advocacy organizations” (Gonzales, 2013, p. 171). The case of YIA demonstrates that such organizing is possible even without funding, adult guidance, or formal training. In addition, despite their inability to vote on referenda or legislation, the YIA youth exerted political power through speaking at local school board meetings, rallying outside representatives’ offices, staging sit-ins, and mobilizing others to join their cause through coming-out rallies and other events.

One important lesson from YIA’s work is that political efficacy and engagement can be enhanced when students recognize an injustice and are moved to take action. Thus acknowledgement of injustice, through critical pedagogy for example (Freire, 1970; Kincheloe, 2008; McLaren, 2005), is crucial for political efficacy. Teachers are often hesitant to discuss controversial issues such as social injustices (Hess, 2004; Journell, 2011). However, when these are glossed over or denied, students recognize that the curriculum is hiding something (Levinson, 2012; Rubin, 2007). Colorado students, for instance, recently protested efforts to cleanse their U.S. History curricula of any negative elements, arguing that they wanted “the truth” (Paul, 2014). Students in other studies have been inspired to act by other injustices as well, such as the war in Iraq, neocolonialism, and racial and ethnic oppression (Halagao, 2004; Levinson, 2012; Schmidt, 2008; Urrieta, 2004). Since the NC tuition policy directly and immediately affected the YIA youth, it was an injustice they were deeply passionate about. Thus a first step for teachers wishing to enhance students’ efficacy and engagement may be to provide opportunities for students to identify an injustice that concerns them, and then to step back and assist only as needed as the students seek avenues for taking action.

Many students, however, may view their power as limited, particularly given the realities of structural oppression and electoral manipulation through big money (Lessig, 2013). The political efficacy of groups like YIA can serve as a model for these students. Andres summarized this message well: “The world is at your hands and you can just change it. You’re not just some person living in it, and you can do something. People can do something.” Leroy echoed this confidence:

Just one voice can really be the last voice that's needed to take into consideration by the legislature and really get them to work on it. That's the way I see it. Even if it just that one more voice, one more vote that we need, it would always be a huge success.

Carla stated, "We have to keep fighting for it, because there's nothing worse than you could do than just not do anything. If you are at least doing something for it, then eventually it will come." The following quote from Andres speaks to the political efficacy that can develop as a result of exposure to others' activism: "It's good to see somebody like yourself doing something that you thought you couldn't. Like it empowers you to think well maybe I can do that too." Perhaps, then, by sharing examples of youth activists such as YIA, as well as others such as the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the Chicano youth who organized walkouts in East L.A. and Texas in the 1960s, teachers can empower their own students to think maybe they can "do that too." Students may no longer think of politics as corrupt or an ignoble area to be avoided (Bennett, 1997), but rather as the primary route to reclaiming power and moving toward a more socially equal democracy.

Conclusion

The democratic power literacy of YIA supports De Lissovoy's (2014) contention that, "activists and intellectuals going forward will need to learn from youth, and look to them for crucial leadership of oppositional and emancipatory social movements" (p. 552). YIA demonstrates how youth may retain faith in democratic ideals even while they recognize limitations in the US's execution of these ideals. Although higher education is inaccessible to many academically high-achieving undocumented students, impinging on their social mobility and thus political influence, these youth did not lose hope in democracy. Rather, they ran their organization with an "equal voice for all" policy and used democratic processes such as rallying and civil disobedience to advocate for the right to higher education.

The remarkable work of Carla, Oliver, Andres, and Leroy is presented here as a conversation starter for how scholars and educators might better conceptualize both citizenship and citizenship education. The paradox they present as exemplary citizens in the active participation sense, while not citizens in the legal sense, prompts us to consider more carefully how we use and teach the concept of citizenship. Furthermore, the model they provide for the type of informed engagement we would want from all students serves as a helpful exemplar as we imagine what education for power literacy might look like and strive for.

These contemplations on citizenship and democracy have implications for all members of society, but educators in particular may be a crucial starting point for transmitting these lessons. Given that the YIA members began their activism in high school, secondary teachers may encounter students at an optimal age for fostering political efficacy. Youth who have not already become politicized could find motivation in classrooms where injustices are acknowledged and power literacy is presented, in contrast to the more common, neutralized lessons on duties such as obeying the law and picking up trash (Chiodo & Martin, 2005). If citizenship education were reoriented toward developing power literacy, then perhaps the next generations could shape a more equal and democratic society. In short, we must find ways to educate all students on the power literacy these young activists have taught themselves.

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