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Beyond Resistance! Youth Activism and Community Change:
New Democratic Possibilities for Practice and Policy for
America's Youth
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BEYOND RESISTANCE!

Youth Activism and Community Change

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Civic Activist Approaches for Engaging Youth in Social Justice

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In the last decade, the youth development field had successfully shifted the public dialogue and research base of youth work from one that was deficit oriented to one that articulated the kinds of supports and opportunities young people need to become healthy and functioning adults (Connell & Gambone, 2000; Gambone & Arbreton, 1997; Pittman & Irby, 1996). While youth development research and policies had created a more holistic public dialogue about the developmental process, it did so without due attention to the environments and sociopolitical context in which development occurs (Ginwright & James, 2002; Mohamed & Wheeler, 2001). Neighborhood and community factors such as poverty, unemployment, violence, and underresourced schools impede civic participation and are serious barriers to the developmental process (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Brooks-Gunn, Duncan, & Aber, 1997; Chalk & Phillips, 1996; Garbarino, 1995). Examining such factors is an important step to addressing the systematic barriers that impede the positive development of young people.

In order to address this gap in the research, many youth development scholars began to take a harder look at context in efforts to address the needs of vulnerable adolescents (Granger, 2003; Lerner, Taylor, & von Eye, 2002). More specifically, there is growing consensus that effective youth programs need to address the cultural, social, and political contexts that support or impede young people's healthy development (Phelan, Davidson, & Yu, 1998). Scholars in Community Youth Development (CYD) have addressed context by advocating for an approach that channels the power of youth to take action in

their communities, while simultaneously challenging communities to embrace their role in the development of youth (Cahill, 1997; Gambone, Klem, & Connell, 2002; Hughes & Curnan, 2002; Irby, Ferber, Pittman, Tolman, & Yohalem, 2001).

Despite the emerging interest in youth action and political engagement, few empirical studies exist in this area—particularly studies of youth in low-income urban communities. Most research has focused on the benefits of traditional forms of political engagement and/or community service (see Walker, 2002; Youniss & Yates, 1997; Youniss & Yates, 1999). Few empirical studies have explicitly explored the relationship between youth development and youth activism. Emerging scholarly works on the development of an activist orientation and sociopolitical capacity, however, have begun to lay the groundwork for a study in this area. Watts, Williams, and Jagers (2003), for example, explore concepts relevant to sociopolitical development among African American youth. Building on concepts from community psychology, such as oppression, liberation, critical consciousness, and culture, Watts et al. claim that sociopolitical development is a key process by which individuals acquire the knowledge, analytical skills, and emotional faculties necessary for participation in democratic processes and social change efforts.

The study of civic activism we conducted and discuss in this chapter is one step toward addressing this void in the research literature, as we focus explicitly on the engagement of marginalized youth in social justice efforts. The study focuses on the work of civic activism groups because of their applied strategy for engaging youth as actors and “experts” on issues of public policy and community concern. By supporting political skills and knowledge, civic activism efforts support young people’s capacity to engage directly with power brokers, decision makers, and institutions in their communities. Such efforts have the potential to transform the capacity of families and communities to provide for young people (Forum for Youth Investment, 2001). It is through the politicized analysis of the inequitable contexts and policies that shape young people’s day-to-day lives (schools, healthcare, public services, etc.) that civic activism groups seek to promote the conditions for healthy youth development.

Framing Youth Activism and Identity

Our research approach assumes that social justice is not confined to the public sphere. It has an explicitly personal dimension, one classically illustrated by the feminist anthem, “The personal is political.” That is, social justice is embedded in the choices of individuals to resist dominant discourses and prejudices in the course of their day-to-day lives, just as it is embedded in overt action to transform the policies and institutions around them. The concept that social change involves ongoing “self-work” resonates with the theories of Jürgen Habermas, who argued that “*insights gained through critical self-awareness are emancipatory in the sense that at least one can recognize the correct*

reasons for his or her problems.” (Habermas, 1970, p. 371). We would argue that critical self-awareness not only helps an individual identify the seeds of her own problems, but also sheds light on dominant discourses that contribute to her marginalization and oppression of others. Education about the “self” and identity is key to social transformation because it helps individuals identify and articulate what it is that needs to be changed.

The importance of this aspect of social justice work is best captured in identity-based social movements. Bernstein argues that identity is an end goal of collective action in that “activists may challenge stigmatized identities, seek recognition for new identities, or deconstruct restrictive social categories.” (Bernstein, 1997, p. 538) In line with this argument is research that illustrates that identity support includes both the opportunity to form a positive identity through relationships with adults and peers who once struggled through similar identity issues, and the opportunity to critique mainstream institutions and values (Ginwright & James, 2002; Lewis-Charp, Yu, Soukamneuth, & Lacoé, 2003; Tatum, 1997). Moreover, research on young people’s participation in identity-based movements can contribute to our understanding of young people’s social and political development (Inglehart, 1990; Johnston, Laraña, & Gusfield, 1994). As youth make the connection to broad social movements, their understanding of how civil rights apply to their context and their notions of social justice are likely to be affected.

Our examination of civic activism looks explicitly at the role that identity plays in creating an orientation toward social justice in marginalized young people and sowing the seeds for their social and political development. While researchers have well documented identity-based movements among young adults in the civil rights era (e.g., McAdam, 1988), we know very little about the complex dimension of identity-based collective action in the post-civil rights era. As will be discussed further in our presentation of findings, we argue that civic activism groups facilitate collective action among marginalized youth in two key ways. First, they nurture collective forms of identity by helping young people come to understand their connections to others who share their race, gender, sexual orientation, social class, and so on. Second, they make social change tangible through systematic work on issues that youth find meaningful and relevant to their lives.

The research questions guiding our analysis and reporting of the study include:

1. How do civic activism groups provide a forum for youth to actively address social justice issues?
2. How do civic activism groups promote a social justice orientation among marginalized youth?
3. What implications do our findings have for youth development practice and policy?

Methods

Our data was gathered during two visits to 11 youth civic activist organizations, approximately one year apart (2001–2002). These visits lasted 2 or 3 days and included in-depth interviews with youth participants, program staff, and community members. We also observed program activities such as meetings, rallies, trainings, retreats, or cultural activities to provide a context for our evaluation and better understand the programs offered by the organizations. Thorough training for our researchers ensured a high level of consistency and reliability of data collected from the 11 organizations. Prior to each round of site visits, we conducted document reviews for each organization, including reviews of their annual reports, newsletters, and organizational planning documents.

Study Sample of Youth

The youth in our sample come from unique backgrounds that may affect their engagement in youth development programs. Table 2.1 highlights the key challenges faced by young people across civic activism groups studied. When compared to statistics on the general U.S. youth population, youth in civic activism organizations face a high percentage of barriers and risk factors. For instance, a high percentage of the youth within these organizations come from single-parent households (50%), come from families that receive public assistance (43%), and have limited proficiency in English (12%). Histories of drug and alcohol use (29% and 32%, respectively) are also high relative to the

Table 2.1 Risk Factors Faced by Youth in Study Sample and National Statistics
(N = Participants from 9 organizations)

	Civic Activism Groups	National Average
Single-parent household	50%	31%
On public assistance	43%	9%
Alcohol abuse	32%	5%
Drugs	29%	5%
Physical abuse	28%	1%
Language other than English is spoken at home	26%	17%
Incarceration	20%	18%
Attempted suicide	19%	9%
Sexual abuse	19%	1%
Limited English proficiency	12%	5%
Pregnancy	11%	27%

Source (for national data): Yu & Lewis-Charp, 2003.

general youth population, as are histories of sexual abuse (19%) and attempts at suicide (19%).

Further, given the very focused recruitment strategies of some organizations, these risk factors look more serious when examined by individual organization. For example, in one organization, 85% of youth come from single-parent households. Meanwhile, 100% of youth at two of the organizations come from homes where a language other than English is spoken. In another organization, 70% come from families that are on public assistance. Similarly, 72% of youth at one organization face problems with drug use, compared to a cross-site average of 29%. Thus, some of the civic activism organizations recruit and serve youth with risk factors that are above and beyond the cross-site and national average.

Summary of Findings

This chapter represents a summary of findings from qualitative research of these 11 diverse civic activism organizations.¹ We begin our summary with a brief discussion of the characteristics of civic activism organizations. Subsequently, we present civic activism practices that inform our understanding of how civic activism organizations engage marginalized youth by (1) nurturing collective forms of identity, (2) making social change tangible, and (3) coaching strategies to foster lifelong activism. After the reporting of findings, we articulate the implications of these research findings for youth policy and practice.

Characteristics of Civic Activism Organizations

We really focus on developing people. A lot of times, organizers are focused on quantitative measures of membership.... We develop qualitative goals around analysis, around leadership development, around personal growth.... We look at people's minds and people's beliefs as centrally important.

—Staffer at C-Beyond, in Concord, California

As illustrated by the above quote, the priority that civic activism groups place on young people's personal growth distinguishes their work from that of more adult-led traditional community organizing. Civic activism groups provide diverse young people, largely from resource poor communities, opportunities to explore and act on social issues. They use varied activities from the fields of multicultural counseling and community organizing, such as critical education on prejudice and discrimination, support groups, political education, issue identification, advocacy for the rights of marginalized populations, and direct action.

The civic activism groups we studied valued youth leadership, and most had youth on staff or in core leadership positions, youth members on their

board, youth steering committees, and so on. The tendency for high levels of youth involvement in decision making within civic activism is partially an outcropping of the philosophical value for grassroots leadership that characterizes most organizing efforts (Alinsky, 1971). Within civic activism organizations, there is a sense that young people are the only ones who know their own experience and therefore are the only ones who can mobilize their peers to take action on issues that are relevant to youth.

Nurturing Collective Forms of Identity

We believe that before you go out into the community and make change, you have to really understand where you're coming from and understand yourself. This is about identity development, the history of your people, where your people stand in the bigger picture.

—Staffer at CAPAY (Coalition for Asian Pacific American Youth), in Boston, Massachusetts

As evidenced by this quote, civic activism organizations focus on raising awareness and strengthening individuals' ability to navigate and negotiate the challenges they face. In doing so, they seek to "make the personal political" among youth from marginalized social groups in the United States. Civic activism organizations recruit youth from marginalized ethnic, racial, or cultural groups; within our study, there were organizations focused explicitly on African American, Native American, Asian American, and gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered, and questioning (GLBTQ) identity. There were other organizations that coalesced around larger identity categories, such as youth of color.

We found that there was a clearly defined need for identity support among the young people within these organizations. Youth we interviewed described that before joining these groups they had a poor view of themselves, had been ignorant about their history, and/or had been involved in self-destructive behaviors. For instance, as one youth explained, "When I first realized I was queer I felt really powerless and really scared of myself. And that was really scary; to be scared of who you are is totally diminishing." Other youth said that they "didn't know there were so many different kinds of Asians," "didn't know about self-hatred," or didn't "understand what really happened in the civil rights movement; schools didn't really give you more than the basics." The need for identity affirmation, therefore, within these youth populations was particularly strong. It is important, however, to point out that civic activism organizations moved beyond mere identity affirmation, gearing their work in such a way as it set the groundwork for a broader social justice orientation.

Most organizations offered "critical education" on prejudice and discrimination as an entry point for social justice issues in order to help youth understand

the legacy of oppression and identify present-day challenges facing their identity group. One organization, for example, believed that the barriers faced by African American youth are best addressed once youth have considered the legacy and impact of their own history, including the painful scars left by slavery and segregation. They encouraged youth to reflect on and "heal" these scars so that they could transcend internalized racism and learn to effectively function in society. This approach is consistent with Watts et al.'s argument that African Americans benefit from an understanding of the social structure of power and privilege. In their struggle against oppression, African Americans can "benefit from a strong sense of self that incorporates both the cultural and sociopolitical aspects of their African American heritage" (2003, p. 188).

Civic activism organizations move beyond the exploration of the history of particular identity groups, seeking to emancipate youth through a process of deep critical analysis and reflection. Some organizations are intentional about pushing youth out of their "comfort zone" by asking that they interrogate their assumptions about themselves, each other, and about the society around them. One youth captured this aspect of this approach when he said,

I don't think it's about being comfortable all the time. It's about learning different circumstances that make you uncomfortable, where you have to stand up for what you say, even if it's not the majority opinion. It's about getting over the discomfort you feel.

Thus, youth within these organizations are pushed to extend their thinking, to confront their own biases, and to ask hard questions of the leaders within their communities. Further, they analyze issues of oppression and consider how their own personal experiences relate to the struggles of others within and outside of their own community. This kind of identity support, in turn, creates a sense of purpose in young people to take a civic activist stance and to work with others in their communities to end various forms of oppression.

Making Social Change Tangible

Social change happens at the personal level, at the gut level, and has to come out of self-interest. People mobilize because their daughter has asthma and they need to do something about it.

—Staffer at 21st Century Youth Leadership Movement, in Selma, Alabama

As captured by this quote, the desire for social change is often rooted in personal needs and experiences, and as such, connection to collective forms of identity can be a precursor to social action. Civic activism, however, also

depends on the identification of tangible goals for social change, an articulation of a coherent strategy for reaching those goals, and a belief in the power and efficacy of groups of people to effect change.

Further, we have found that the social change goals or “wins” that civic activism groups use to measure their own progress are, by design, incremental so that youth can remain engaged in the process. These include press coverage of their issues, the number of people they recruit to attend rallies or events, and the number of meetings they hold with people in power. Over the course of the study, civic activism groups achieved some relatively large-scale community wins. These include one organization’s success in closing down a cement plant in their community, another’s successful defeat of a city council measure to create a daytime curfew for teens, and a third organization’s successful effort to have a sexual harassment policy created for their school district. These types of victories fueled young people’s sense of purpose and their belief that they could make a difference. The following quote from one youth is illustrative of the sense of enthusiasm and competence that young people within these groups radiated.

We have a big voice. There aren’t a lot of other youth who are as involved as we are. . . . But, we’re at the point now where we are taken seriously. We earned their respect by the actions we take. When we were opposing the cement plant, the owner challenged us at a city council meeting. He told us to be more “productive.” So, we went out and got 1,000 signatures opposing his plant and that shut him up and impressed the city council people.

Civic activism groups use a variety of strategies to build the capacity of youth leaders to effect change. One of most universal and potent strategies used by organizing groups is political education. This approach enables youth to learn about social movements (e.g., the civil rights movement), political processes (the electoral process) and current events (e.g., racial profiling and the effects of 9/11 on immigrant communities). Through political education, youth organizing groups hope to support critical-thinking skills and develop values and attitudes that move youth to act against injustice. Political education sessions often seek to make connections between larger social issues and young people’s day-to-day lives, and center on such issues as policing, school quality, environmental justice, and immigrants’ rights. On one level, youth are seen as experts on these issues, and they are encouraged to share their experiences as well as compose and defend their own opinions. On another level, youth are pressed by program leaders to think about these issues abstractly, on a scale beyond their individual experience, including a consideration of the international or global characteristics of power and oppression.

From a base of political education, civic activism groups have progressed toward the development of a clear and manageable community-change

agenda. They have sought, at the most basic level, to empower youth to take leadership on issues in their lives, emphasizing their role as grassroots leaders within their communities. The first step in that process is to identify the issues most salient to the youth who participate in the organization. The second step is to ask youth to actively seek out the perspectives and concerns of other community members, in an effort to find issues of broad concern that can serve as the basis for sizable coalitions and collective action. Thus, the issues that civic activist groups address are reflective of issues that community members face. The process of listening to and raising awareness about such issues is seen as a high priority in and of itself. Issues identified as most relevant to youth and their communities include the lack of recreational spaces, lack of green spaces, environmental pollution, sexual harassment in schools, policing and the increased incarceration of youth offenders, and unfair working conditions.

Coaching Strategies for Fostering Lifelong Activism

Without grounding youth in the larger sociohistorical context of social movements and introducing them to concrete strategies for social change, impassioned youth would be at a loss to translate their ideas and beliefs into action. Civic activism groups use a variety of mechanisms or levers (“direct actions”) for change, including education, letter-writing campaigns, petitions, public presentations, meetings with people in power, protests, and boycotts. In taking such approaches to civic engagement, youth activism groups dispel some of the stereotypes that characterize their work as “oppositional.” They emphasize the need to work within the system to the extent possible (i.e., through participation in decision-making bodies), while always being prepared to apply pressure from outside the system (i.e., through protests and boycotts). In the words of one program director, “We’re clear that being in the system or out isn’t important. It’s a strategy that’s rooted in systems change that is important.” Further, civic activism groups embrace a philosophy of nonviolent and peaceful activism; they are concerned that youth develop a social justice orientation that is positive and affirming, because they believe that this is necessary to sustain social action in the long run. The following quote, by a staff member at one organization, speaks to this issue:

We don’t organize out of hate, but out of love—our love for people. Because hate is very defeating, and can motivate and charge you to do something about injustices. But [we ask youth], how long is your hate going to sustain your commitment to social justice?

Hence, these organizations promote spiritual and/or human rights arguments for social justice. In doing so, they seek to strike a delicate balance, supporting young people’s ability and opportunity to actively question authority while at the same time enabling youth to resist cynicism that could potentially lead to social distrust and/or alienation.

Reflections on the Role of Identity in Youth Activism

Our findings indicate that civic activism organizations provide crucial forms of identity support and build practical social justice skills. Indeed, identity can play a powerful role in shaping youth involvement in social activism, serving as an important “hook” to engaging youth in the issues that are most pressing to them. At the same time, however, the identity-based issues that define youth work today are complex and multifaceted. Participants in identity-based social movements during the civil rights era fought against very concrete discriminatory laws and practices, such as Jim Crow laws. In contrast, young people today find themselves fighting against discriminatory institutional policies and practices that pretend to be “color-blind” and to offer “fairness” and “equal opportunity.” The increasingly covert nature of discrimination means that youth activism organizations often find themselves spending increasing amounts of time educating about the insidious nature of power and oppression. Groups are discovering that it is not as easy to galvanize large groups around identity issues, because the reasons behind disparities in outcomes for different groups are often very complex and diverse. Further, the “target” is often more difficult to identify and to communicate to others.

In our study, it became clear that the identity support offered to youth provides strength and resilience in their activist roles. We also learned that although identity drives a lot of youth activism, the identities that drive an individual’s work may be fluid, changing as the issue changes. The composition of the membership of some of the youth activism organizations we studied would vary depending on the current campaign. For instance, a campaign to end a youth curfew would draw in a very racially diverse constituency, while a campaign to fight against an antibilingual education policy might draw a primarily Latino constituency. Because some groups need to maximize membership and leverage, many gravitate toward large identity categories, such as “youth identity” and “youth of color,” to attract a large number of youth. This strategy enables youth to form a strong collective identity, further bridging differences across identities that might otherwise separate them because of the issues they care about. Moreover, some organizations, particularly those that attract immigrant groups, need to form ethnic alliances based on common “American” racial schemas and categories in an effort to find common ground among diverse youth. In these cases, the organizations must dedicate time to building a sense of group or collective identity (i.e., as a person of color) so that commonalities in the experiences of different groups can be drawn out.

Many social-change theorists argue that identity-based movements can be insular and that emphasizing the uniqueness of a given group’s experience can inhibit an individual’s ability to identify common ground and to work across difference to effect change (Stryker, 2000; Wood, 2002). Our findings also suggest that emphasizing identity-based activism can be a challenge for some organizations. For instances, youth within many of the organizations we studied are struggling with the boundaries of identity; some members struggle

with what it means to be Asian and American; some with whether there is room in the GLBTQ movement for heterosexuals; some with how skin color affects racial identification, and so on. Some groups examine prejudice within identity groups, such as prejudice against transsexuals within the GLBTQ community, gender discrimination and homophobia within the African American community, class discrimination, and so on. The preoccupation with defining an identity group and its agenda does have a potential to detract from a shared or common social change agenda, and may not bode well for external solidarity. Those groups that are most effective at achieving broad social change goals tend to be diverse and inclusive in orientation. The strategies that these organizations use to bridge differences include not only creating a shared identity—such as “youth of color”—but also galvanizing around pressing social problems that affect youth of varied identities, such as youth rights and liberties in the schools and communities.

In summary, support for healthy and efficacious identities is crucial for marginalized youth, especially given the harmful messages they so often receive from societal institutions, such as schools and the media. Yet identity politics in the 21st century is increasingly complex and contested, in ways that it may not have been during the civil rights era. Identity-based strategies that nurture identity, while forming coalitions across difference, can help young people understand the connections between their personal experience and the pressing social justice issues facing their communities.

Implications for Policy

Our findings and recommendations extend two important conclusions presented in the National Research Council’s review of the current science of adolescent health and development. In this report, Eccles and Gootman (2002) conclude that a persistent segment of the youth population remains at risk because they often live in poor, high-risk neighborhoods and repeatedly experience racial and ethnic discrimination. As well, effective, high-quality youth programs must be flexible enough to adapt to the existing diversity among young people and the communities in which they operate. We believe that civic activism addresses these issues by providing promising models for extending and deepening the youth development approach, so that it can be (1) more inclusive of older marginalized youth and (2) more successful at engaging youth as actors in their communities. As such, we make a series of recommendations.

Recommendation 1: Public and Private Funders Should Be Mindful of the Organizational Support Needed for Civic Activism Work

The infrastructure of support for civic activism groups remains weak. As small grassroots organizations, civic activism groups often lack strong infrastructures and a coherent and stable funding base to sustain their work. Their fund-raising

efforts, both for foundation and government grants, are complicated by the ongoing perception that civic activism is “radical” or “contentious.” As shown in this research study and others, civic activism approaches can have a host of benefits, such as enabling traditionally marginalized youth to actively engage in community action. Thus, there is a definite need for policy and funding streams that legitimize youth-led social action and make investments that help stabilize civic activism within the fields of youth development and community organizing. Beyond issuing grants to civic activism organizations to support direct programming, we recommend that funders and policy makers take note of the capacity building needs of civic activism groups. We have found that these groups critically need support for staff training, better staff compensation, staff retention, and development of organizational systems that institutionalize their innovative approaches, particularly in times of leadership transitions.

Recommendation 2: Youth Policy Should Consider Specific Ways in Which to Engage Adolescents of Color and Marginalized Populations

Youth policy does not thrive in a climate that sees young people’s generic “assets” without recognizing the overwhelming challenges facing so many families, communities, and young people today. We need youth policy that is unapologetic about tailoring programs to the racial history, culture, and community of marginalized groups in this country. Findings from our studies suggest that civic activism programs hold promise in reaching out to youth in a manner that sustains their interests and builds their leadership skills while also celebrating their racial and cultural backgrounds (Lewis-Charp et al., 2003). Without programs that recognize the uniqueness of different groups, general youth programs may miss attracting and retaining diverse youth who can benefit most from unique and meaningful experiences for positive development.

Recommendation 3: Youth Policy Should Recognize the Value of Social Action as a Means Toward Broad Civic Engagement Among Traditionally Marginalized Youth

If we expect our adolescents to develop into social actors and engaged citizens, then we need to support youth programs that raise their consciousness about issues in their lives and in the lives of others. In the tradition of popular education, it is crucial that such strategies draw from young people’s experience rather than being imposed from the outside (i.e., indoctrination). Strategies such as systematic issue identification, political education, historical analysis, and power analysis increase young people’s awareness of the social and political issues that are most relevant to their communities and the larger societal and historical context. These strategies have potential for broader application in youth and civic education programs, as they enable young people to reflect on how their experiences can be applied in the public sphere.

Recommendation 4: Youth Policy Should Emphasize the Importance of Hands-On and Real-World Learning Opportunities for Young People—Particularly Those from Marginalized Groups

If the youth development field hopes to be more effective at engaging adolescents and young adults, then we need to provide youth with authentic roles in their community. When young people have opportunities to engage in real-world learning and apply their cognitive and critical thinking skills on problems and policies that matter to them, civic engagement and leadership development take on new meaning. We cannot continue to express dismay about disconnected and alienated youth populations while at the same time keeping adolescents and young adults outside meaningful decision-making opportunities.

In conclusion, our research shows that civic activism has the potential to stimulate youth participation in their communities to contribute to the larger social good. Civic activist organizations have raised the bar for what youth can do. Their youth participants are seriously engaged in critical reflection about themselves and their society, uniting with their peers in positive collective action against social injustices, and engaging community leaders to see uncommon and innovative solutions to chronic problems in our society. Policy makers can support young people by being open to creating, learning, replicating, and supporting models and programs of youth empowerment so that youth determine for themselves how to solve problems and make our society a better and more just place to live.

Note

1. This article summarizes qualitative findings that are reported in more detailed elsewhere; see Lewis-Charp, Yu, Soukamneuth, & Laco, 2004.

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