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Strategies for Systemic Change: Youth Community Organizing to Disrupt the School-to-Prison Nexus

Jesica Siham Fernández, Ben Kirshner, and Deana G. Lewis

The school disciplinary landscape across the United States changed significantly through the enactment of policies that criminalize students' behaviors during the 1990s and 2000s. Schools began to involve the police and criminal legal system in school disciplinary issues that used to be handled by school administrators. This shift led youth of Color[1] to increasingly come into contact with the juvenile legal system through school suspensions, expulsions, and referrals to alternative schools—what we characterize as the school-to-prison nexus.

Conceptualizing the school-to-prison pipeline as a nexus, or interlocking system of power over youth, allows us to understand how the criminalization of youth is a systemic problem that demands structural change and interventions across multiple levels of analysis and settings, including local schools, school districts, police departments, and state policies. Although important research has documented the ways that Black and Latino youth are referred to the juvenile legal system through punitive school policies, there has been less attention to the actions youth are taking to critique and dismantle these policies. Youth community organizing (YCO) against the school-to-prison nexus represents an arena of youth activism that deserves further attention and analysis. In this chapter, we define YCO as groups that create spaces for young people to think critically about their everyday social conditions, identify root causes of social problems, and build political power and voice to create policy solutions and change in their communities (Ginwright, Noguera, & Cammarota, 2006; Kirshner, 2015; Watts, Griffith, & Abdul-Adil, 1999).

To illustrate young people's role in YCO to disrupt the school-to-prison nexus, this chapter draws on two campaigns. We focus on the Solutions Not Suspensions (Coleman Advocates/Y-MAC, San Francisco) and the End the School to Jail Track (S2J) (Padres & Jóvenes Unidos, Denver) campaigns in order to highlight differences and similarities across each YCO site. We describe each campaign in relation to the YCO, as well as the leadership of young people in employing three strategies—problematization/denaturalization, testimony, and community accountability—to win their campaigns. Each campaign was organized to address practices and/or policies associated with the school-to-prison nexus. In Coleman Advocates, Y-MAC mobilized students, educators, community members, and board of education officials in a campaign to replace zero tolerance policies in schools with restorative justice practices, while at Padres & Jóvenes Unidos, the youth membership, Jóvenes Unidos, implemented legislative polices to hold school districts and police departments accountable to behavior prevention strategies to reduce student exposure to the criminal legal system. The strategies that characterize each campaign address different, yet related aspects of a systemic problem: the racialized criminalization of youth in schools.

Through specific examples of intergenerational and youth-centered organizing, we posit these campaigns are models of contemporary youth activism because they constitute part of a broader social movement to address issues of racial and education justice in schools. Our goal is to demonstrate the strategies youth employed to successfully drive grassroots campaigns to disrupt the school-to-prison nexus.

THE SCHOOL-TO-PRISON NEXUS

The school-to-prison nexus is an interlocking system that disciplines, punishes, and forces youth out of schools and into the legal system through a network of institutions, policies, practices, and ideologies (Hartnett, 2011; Kim, Losen, & Hewitt, 2010; Meiners & Winn, 2010; Morris, 2012; Winn & Behizadeh, 2011). These institutions include schools, law enforcement agencies, and social service agencies that seemingly work in collusion to disenfranchise youth of Color. The ideologies that fuel these practices in schools are informed by the criminalization of young people of Color, specifically Black and Latino youth (Fenning & Rose, 2007; Noguera, 2003; Wallace, Goodkind, Wallace, & Bachman, 2008). Although young people are "tracked" into a criminal legal system, the process does not necessarily follow a linear trajectory or pipeline. In effect, several interlocking practices of power and oppression intersect to create a "nexus" that locks youth out of education, economic, health, and social opportunities.

Zero Tolerance Policies

Discourses on the school-to-prison nexus center on a number of punitive disciplinary policies that criminalize young people. Among these are zero tolerance policies, which originated in 1994 when the U.S. Congress passed the Gun-Free Schools Act (GFSA), which required states that received federal money for their schools, or local educational agencies (LEAs), to institute state laws that required LEAs to expel a student for one year if she or he brought a weapon to school[2] (Skiba et al., 2006). As part of the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), the law was meant to keep schools safe for their participants by imposing harsh penalties for those who broke the law and the loss of funding for states and LEAs that did not comply with the law. Although the federal government allowed states to include an exception for the "chief administering officer" of the LEA to review expulsion cases individually, the GFSA was straightforward in its requirements and consequences for not fulfilling those expectations (Office of Safe & Drug Free Schools, 2013).

States instituted yet more strict mandates by passing laws that not only banned firearms, as defined by the federal government, but also other weapons that could cause bodily harm and drugs or other substances (Kim et al., 2010; Skiba & Peterson, 2000). Skiba and Peterson (2000) argue that these rules expanded to student behaviors that might be perceived as potential weapons or threats to the social order of schooling.

Since the early 2000s students, educators, and researchers began to notice a problem with zero tolerance approaches. First, students were sent to the police for offenses that in past eras would have been handled by a principal. The Advancement Project (2005) documented the most egregious of these: a 10-year-old handcuffed and brought to the police station for bringing scissors to school; a 7-year-old brought to the county jail because he hit a classmate, teacher, and principal; a 14-year-old girl arrested and charged with battery for pouring chocolate milk over a classmate's head. Considering these events, the Annie E. Casey Foundation reports that there was a 72% increase in referrals to juvenile detention facilities from 1985 to 1995, despite the fact that less than one-third of the youth in custody had been charged with violent acts (Hoytt, Schiraldi, Smith, & Ziedenberg, 2002).

Referrals to the police were disproportionately levied against students of Color, mostly African American and Latino, who were already at a disadvantage due to the lack of resources available in their low-income city schools and communities (Sughrue, 2003; Wald & Losen, 2003). Among youth with no prior detentions who were charged with the same offenses, African Americans were six times and Latinos three times more likely than white youth to be incarcerated (Hoytt et al., 2002). White youth represented 71% of the

youth arrested for crimes nationwide but only 37% of youth committed to juvenile prisons (Shollenberger, 2013).

Zero tolerance policies have profound implications on young people's futures, especially their academic trajectories (Casella, 2003; Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera, 2010; Sughrue, 2003). The proliferation of zero tolerance policies, coupled with the lack of resources in certain communities, makes schools physically and psychologically unsafe for youth (Winn & Behizadeh, 2011). Moreover, referrals to the police from school created a record for students that could track them into future unemployment. Such experiences can have a destructive impact on youths' well-being, education, employment, and future civic participation. In many states, for example, serving time in prison leads to a permanent loss of voting rights. Michelle Alexander (2010), a civil rights attorney, calls this the "new Jim Crow" wherein racialized social categories are replaced with prison-time status, thereby leading to the systematic and legalized disenfranchisement of a whole class of people, who are mostly African American and Latino. Zero tolerance policies are not a constructive solution, nor do these policies support students' academic thriving. In fact, these policies do the opposite, pushing more youth of Color into the criminal legal system (Blake, Butler, Lewis, & Darensbourg, 2011).

School-Based Alternatives to Zero-Tolerance Policies

Restorative practices in schools are one alternative to zero tolerance policies that have gained currency in ending the school-to-prison nexus (Payne & Welch, 2015; Stinchcomb, Bazemore, & Riestenberg, 2006). The goal of restorative practices, or more specifically restorative *justice* practices, is to provide individual youth with support and resources for them to learn to develop the social and emotional skills to cope with and work through their stressors. Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) are one example of restorative practices. Such programs are aimed at changing the behaviors and emotional response of young people who are undergoing difficult experiences (Bradshaw, Koth, Bevans, Ialongo, & Leaf, 2008). PBIS focus on resolving conflicts through collaboration and dialogue among all involved. Some aspects that characterize restorative justice practices include conflict resolution strategies, such as finding a positive solution to an issue, deescalating conflicts, and avoiding victim blaming and punitive punishments such as suspensions (Mendez & Knopf, 2003; Payne & Welch, 2015; Stinchcomb et al., 2006).

Restorative justice practices provide an alternative solution to the police presence in schools, while encouraging constructive and supportive dialogues between students and teachers. Some restorative justice practices demonstrate successful outcomes (Mendez & Knopf, 2003; Payne & Welch, 2015),

however, these programs must be developed and sustained over time to best support youth. Equally important is ensuring that teachers and school staff have access to the skills and resources to engage, communicate, and respond to youths' needs. Implementing practices like these across school districts nationwide requires young people as well as multiple constituencies coming together to create awareness and structural change.

In the next sections, we highlight three strategies youth employed to lead successful YCO campaigns to disrupt the school-to-prison nexus. First, young people in YCO *problematized* and *denaturalized* their social conditions in schools in order to develop a sociopolitical consciousness of the racialized schooling experiences that have systematically disenfranchised youth of Color by pushing them out of schools and into the criminal legal system. Second, through the use of *testimonios* (testimonies), youth organizers created greater awareness of zero tolerance policies in schools and the disproportionate impact these policies have on students of Color, thereby garnering the collective power of youth, community members, and school officials in support of their campaign. Third, youth organizers implemented strategies of *community accountability* to hold school districts and police departments accountable to implementing restorative justice practices in schools. Before discussing these strategies further, we must first describe the context of our study, specifically the two YCOs that served as sites for the campaigns that are the focus of this chapter.

YOUTH COMMUNITY ORGANIZING TO END THE SCHOOL-TO-PRISON NEXUS

Study Background: International Study on Youth Organizing

The two campaigns we discuss in this chapter were led by organizations that took part in a larger study that investigated seven youth community organizations in four different countries: Northern Ireland (1 site), the Republic of Ireland (1 site), South Africa (1 site), and the United States (4 sites).[3] Data collection across all sites began in 2012 and continued until 2015. The first and third authors were local ethnographers in San Francisco and Chicago, respectively, for three years. Over this time period, local ethnographers wrote field notes, conducted semistructured interviews with youth and YCO staff, administered surveys, and collected digital artifacts, videos, documents, and photographs. Periodically, local ethnographers completed analytic memos, higher inference observations, site profiles, and detailed descriptions of the organizational structure of their sites. For the purposes of this chapter, the case study narratives of the sites relied on an examination of the field notes, interviews, and artifacts.

In the United States, all sites worked directly with youth on issues that were impacting their education experiences. Although the issues varied from place to place, most youth across these YCOs prioritized issues related to education justice and affiliated with the Alliance for Educational Justice (AEJ), a nationwide coalition of intergenerational youth organizing for educational justice. The two organizations we focus on in this chapter developed campaigns to end the school-to-prison pipeline.

Youth Community Organizations (YCO)

Coleman Advocates for Children & Youth (San Francisco, California).   As a multiracial, member-led community organization in the heart of San Francisco, Coleman Advocates for Children & Youth has been in existence since 1975. Over its institutional career, Coleman has followed a grassroots community organizing approach toward social change, advocacy, and leadership development. Coleman has gained national recognition for its efforts to bring justice and equity to youth, families, and communities in the city by asserting that the people most affected by a problem must be the ones who determine and fight for the solutions. Through this approach, Coleman has won many victories for San Francisco's communities. It has built strong coalitions among community members, activists, advocacy groups, and local power holders and boasts a track record of successful campaigns focused on economic and education justice.

The unique organizational structure of Coleman allows for its constituents to organize separate, yet interconnected campaigns. Coleman's organizing model consists of adults and youth planning and leading separate campaigns yet working collectively and intergenerationally on issues that concern the wider community. Work is led by three distinct groups: Parents Making a Change (P-MAC), Youth Making a Change (Y-MAC), and Students Making a Change (S-MAC). Y-MAC tends to orient strongly toward high school youth and ensuring that young people in San Francisco can access equal opportunities in K–12 education, higher education, employment, and quality of life. S-MAC focuses on the political education of college students in order to mobilize them to make demands for education equity and changes at the college level.

Within Coleman, Y-MAC led the Solutions Not Suspensions (SNS) campaign, which focused on "ending the school-to-prison nexus by implementing Restorative Justice Practices in schools, along with Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) in San Francisco's public schools" (Coleman Advocates, 2013). The campaign was primarily led by Y-MAC with the support of the wider Coleman Advocates community. Data from California echo national data about the school-to-prison nexus. For example, during the time period of this study, African American students represented less than 10% of

the student body in San Francisco schools but made up more than 50% of the suspension rate (Coleman Advocates, 2013). Under the subjective category of "willful defiance," students could be suspended for minor issues, such as forgetting their textbook, leaving their hat on during class, or engaging in nonconforming classroom behaviors, like failing to raise their hands before speaking. Willful defiance suspensions made up nearly 42% of all suspensions in California and 37% of all San Francisco Unified School District (SFUSD) suspensions.

Padres & Jóvenes Unidos (PJU) (Denver, Colorado). Located in Denver, Colorado, Padres & Jóvenes Unidos is a multigenerational, multiracial, member-led organization that is committed to organizing efforts on racial justice, immigrant rights, quality health care, civic engagement, and educational excellence for all people. Founded in 1992 by a group of parents who organized to remove a principal at a local Denver school because he had punished elementary-age students for speaking Spanish by forcing them to eat their lunches on the cafeteria floor, PJU has been active in organizing movements for social and racial justice. The strong presence of young people, and their desire to have their voice and needs heard within PJU, led to the development of a subgroup called Jóvenes Unidos. Since 2000, Jóvenes Unidos has developed youth-centered campaigns that focus on various issues disproportionally affecting young people in Denver's public school (DPS) system. Among the issues Padres & Jóvenes Unidos advocate for are immigrant student rights and ending the school-to-jail track.

When we began our ethnographic work, the End the School to Jail Track (S2J) campaign had been in operation for more than five years and was beginning to see victories. Yet, the youth membership, Jóvenes Unidos, recognized that they needed to implement a significant piece of legislation called the Smart School Discipline Law (SSDL) (House Bill 1345, Senate Bill 46).[4] This state-level law required schools to improve their student behavior prevention strategies to reduce student exposure to the criminal legal system. The legislation constituted part of the broader S2J campaign that sought to end the disproportionate rate of suspension in DPS.

According to an accountability report released by PJU for the 2013–2014 academic year, Black students were six times more likely than white students to be suspended from schools. Students of Color, especially African American, Latino, and Native American students, were more likely to be suspended, expelled, and referred to law enforcement compared to white students. Although all school districts are required to improve and increase their data collection methods to account for various forms of disciplinary actions and the racial composition of students who were disproportionately being affected, Jóvenes Unidos recognized that in addition to holding schools accountable,

police departments also had to be held accountable. Over the course of the S2J campaign, a Memorandum of Understanding between DPS and the Denver Police Department was implemented to further ensure that students would not be disciplined and criminalized for behaviors that school administrators could resolve.

STRATEGIES IN *YCO* CAMPAIGNS TO END THE SCHOOL-TO-PRISON NEXUS

Problematizing and Denaturalizing Schooling Experiences

Two interconnected practices we identified in our study of YCO campaigns to end the school-to-prison nexus included what Freire (1970) terms problematizing and denaturalizing the social world. Problematizing is a strategy employed to critically analyze one's social condition and role in the society. This is then complemented by a process of denaturalizing, which involves deconstructing oppressive social circumstances by recognizing that social problems are embedded within institutional structures that have been rendered normal, or "the ways things are," but can actually be changed.

One activity that demonstrates how Y-MAC (Coleman Advocates) youth engaged in a practice of problematizing and denaturalizing their schooling experiences included an activity in which young people were asked to visually demonstrate with drawn symbols and images what "institutional oppression" means to them. In these field notes, we documented the conversations that unfolded as youth shared with one another what they had drawn to represent institutional oppression:

[Jalissa][5] (Filipina American, Y-MAC organizer) and [Tamara] (Samoan American, Y-MAC organizer) discussed the three different types of "oppression: institutional, internalized, and interpersonal." [Tamara] stated, "Institutional oppression is the power of one or some institutions taking over another institution." [Jalissa] agreed and mentioned school as an example. [Gloria] (African American, Y-MAC organizer) added that school districts run the schools, and the state and government run the school district. [Khalil] (African American, adult staff) agreed and stated that the system worked in such a way that "one would not [be] able to know or determine who is responsible because the system is set up to work together to oppress or make people do something." [Khalil], (African American, adult staff) shared that one time he and his friends were hanging out, and the security guard came up to them and told them "we were rolling too deep." When he said this, [Roxanna] (African & Filipina American, Y-MAC organizer) spoke out loud that a

similar experience happened to her and her friends the other day. [Khalil] acknowledged [Roxanna's] comment and added that the setting was meant to "put surveillance on people that look like they're up to no good." He continued by saying that, "the system is set up to make you feel that you've done something bad when you haven't; it criminalizes you without a crime." (6/6/2013)

As demonstrated in these field notes, Y-MAC youth—Jalissa, Tamara, Gloria, and Roxanna—and an adult ally and Coleman staff member, Khalil, engaged in a problematizing and denaturalizing process. Two Y-MAC leaders, Jalissa and Tamara, began by posing three different forms of oppression, which were further discussed and contextualized through examples offered by Gloria, Khalil, and Roxanna. The concept-defining process allowed youth to share and discuss among themselves how they understood and experienced institutionalized oppression. Jalissa mentioned schools as an example, and Gloria echoed her remarks by adding that schools are part of a broader structure that links them to the school district, the state, and the government. Khalil offered an example of being "policed" by security guards, which thus served to validate Roxanna's experience and the subsequent remarks made by Tamara. By critically reflecting and discussing institutionalized oppression, Y-MAC youth were able to see their experiences in school as stemming from systems of oppression.

Conversations such as this served as powerful discursive tools to denaturalize youths' lived experiences that were constructed as normal and unchangeable. Similar to Y-MAC, Jóvenes Unidos youth engaged in problematizing and denaturalizing practices. Jóvenes Unidos youth often discussed the goals of the S2J campaign in relation to their schooling experiences. Employing a denaturalizing strategy toward zero tolerance policies that disproportionately targeted students of Color, Santiago, a Latino youth organizer, offered the following explanation to the local ethnographer when asked to discuss the goals of the S2J campaign:

The purpose of the [S2J] campaign is for students to be equal in schools. Police officers at our schools—Right now students are getting tickets and ending up in court, even doing jail time for a minor offense that could be solved within school. So a student is getting tickets for jacking in a bathroom stall, or talking back to a teacher. They're [students] getting tickets for that, when back in the day that was just like giving detention, or cleaning the school after school. Right now, it can be taken to another level! So that's why we try to get police officers out of schools. Also to have equality in our schools, since white students, Anglo students, are preferred in schools right now—It's the black or brown

students who make a [problem] in school, but if a white student also
does it, the white student wouldn't get punished as the brown or black
student. (12/1/2012)

Santiago drew a historical comparison ("back in the day") as a way to
make the familiar policing practices strange. Santiago explained his experi-
ence of racialized practices in his school and argued they were unjust and in
need of change. Engaging Santiago and other who were most affected by
punitive disciplinary policies in the S2J campaign was a necessary strategy
that afforded him an opportunity to make a change. By problematizing and
denaturalizing his schooling experience, Santiago was able to participate
in the S2J campaign and experience his social conditions being systemati-
cally changed and transformed. Like Santiago, other youth who participated
in campaigns to end the school-to-prison nexus discussed their schooling ex-
periences in relation to structural problems in order to build collective power
to support their movement.

In most cases, the problematizing and denaturalizing strategies, which of-
ten began with a question that served as a trigger to elicit a reaction, led
youth to reflect and participate in critical dialogues with one another about
their schooling experiences (Freire, 1970). These critical dialogues were a
crucial strategy and starting point for engaging young people in YCO. In ef-
fect, youth participated in a discourse that framed their experiences not as
isolated events or personal failings, but as collective experiences of racialized
punishment and oppression in schools. The sharing of each other's experi-
ences via critical dialogues within internal YCO meetings was just a starting
point for efforts to build collective power in public settings.

Building Collective Power Through Testimony

Words in the form of stories, or *testimonios*[6] (testimonies), have great power
to effect change (Cammarota & Ginwright, 2007; Delgado Bernal, Burciaga,
& Flores Carmona, 2012). In our study, we observed the ways that testimo-
nies afforded youth an opportunity to voice their lived experiences and cri-
tiques of the failing education system, while simultaneously allowing them to
build collective power and awareness of the issues they were facing in schools.

Y-MAC, for example, with support from Coleman Advocates, organized a
community-wide event that served as a catalyst to generate awareness about
the disproportionate suspension rates in San Francisco's schools and the im-
pact of zero tolerance policies on students, specifically Black and Latino youth.
The event brought together young people, students, educators, activists, and
community members who were concerned and eager to get involved in dis-
rupting the school-to-prison nexus.

At the launching event, the goals of the SNS campaign were introduced along with a list of demands made by young people affected by punitive disciplinary schooling practices. Young people took an active role at this first event by sharing their testimonies and highlighting the impact of zero tolerance policies. Itzel, a Y-MAC member, was among the first youth to share her testimony at a SNS campaign event:

> [Itzel] (Latina, Y-MAC organizer) came up to the front of the room, and introduced herself as a 10th grader at [Costanoa] (high school). She began to share her testimony of a time when she was suspended for eating another student's cupcakes. She mentioned that the next day she went to school, she was called into the principal's office and told to leave the school because she was suspended. [Itzel] didn't know that she had been suspended because no one had followed a protocol to call her or inform her of the suspension. [Itzel] added that she felt "stupid and embarrassed" as if she didn't "belong at school." [. . .] The room became silent as [Itzel] sobbed, and [Keanu] called out "Deep breath [Itzel]! You got this!" Soon thereafter [Itzel] turned around and continued to talk in a much stronger tone about her anger and frustration. [Itzel] mentioned that she didn't want to go to school because everyone, teachers and students alike, would label her as a "bad student." She added, "School didn't teach me anything; I didn't see the point in going to school." [Itzel] exclaimed, "Suspensions don't teach anything! Suspensions are just about unfair treatment!" She began to unpack this point by talking about the demographics in her high school; how the majority of the students were white or Asian American and she was among the very few Latina students who, on account of her race, was viewed as "a trouble student with no future." After several suspensions [Itzel] remarked that she didn't see the point in school so she stopped going, and began to believe that she really wasn't a good student. [Itzel] concluded by stating: "Schools need to change their policies and treatment of students, otherwise they risk pushing them out of schools and into prisons." (10/29/2013)

Itzel's testimony demonstrates the impact of zero tolerance policies on students' perceptions of themselves and their academic aspirations. Her story shows how such policies create oppressive environments where students begin to internalize deficit and disempowering narratives about themselves, such that they begin to see themselves as "bad students." Through zero tolerance policies, youth like Itzel are given the implicit message that school is not a place for them.

Itzel, like other youth who participated in the SNS campaign, saw her schooling experience in relation to a much broader structural problem: the

racialized criminalization of students. Itzel's explicit testimony led her to re-live the moment, such that it evoked feelings of anger and frustration, which made salient her passion to change an education system that had failed her and many students. Seeing her school as an oppressive institution that denied her opportunities in education, she directed her difficult emotions into organizing and mobilizing youth to speak about experiences when their rights to an education, and to be treated with dignity and respect, were being violated.

With Itzel's testimony setting the tone and urgency of the SNS campaign, many other actions followed. Among these were disseminating information through community flyers, the Internet, and school clubs, as well as organizing listening sessions, rallies, and meetings with school officials. Community flyers included images of Y-MAC youth with their testimonies on the school-to-prison nexus serving as a powerful strategy to generate greater youth presence and involvement in the SNS campaign. Quotations from students talked about the impact of these policies on their identities and aspirations. As one flyer quoted:

> Kicking kids out of school without ever looking at what is really going on with us—that just makes things worse. It's like saying "We don't care about you or whether you succeed in life. You are just a problem we want to get rid of." (First year high school student, Y-MAC organizer)

The voices of young people like Itzel and Roxanna were central in mobilizing constituents, as well as encouraging other youth to speak up, stand in solidarity, and build their collective power in a movement to reform the disciplinary policies in the SFUSD.

The presence of young people in the SNS campaign demonstrated to school officials and stakeholders that young people, despite being pushed out of schools, were indeed committed to their education: an education rooted in values of equity, democracy, and social justice. Y-MAC members were at the forefront of the campaign, advocating for safe alternatives to zero tolerance policies; however, they were not alone in their organizing. Several other YCOs across the nation were also engaged in similar efforts to disrupt the school-to-prison nexus. Among them was Padres & Jóvenes Unidos' campaign to End the School to Jail Track (S2J), a campaign that illustrates the third strategy: community accountability.

Community Accountability to Sustain Systemic Change

Community accountability is a term that describes the practices and procedures in place that hold constituents and stakeholders accountable to the goals, objectives, and needs of the community (Stovall, 2006). For example,

even after winning important legislative achievements or new policies, groups need to monitor public agencies for compliance and quality implementation. In this case, the community constituents were students in public schools, and practices involved ongoing report-back accountability meetings where youth organizers shared their concerns and made demands to eliminate the criminalization of youth. We draw from the S2J campaign led by youth organizers at Padres & Jóvenes Unidos to demonstrate community accountability, specifically the procedures they implemented to keep Denver's public schools and the police department "in check" after undergoing a shift from zero tolerance policies to restorative justice practices.

The S2J campaign involved young people playing a significant role as leaders and advocates for reducing disciplinary actions against students of Color. Similar to Y-MAC youth in the SNS campaign, Padres & Jóvenes Unidos worked tirelessly to organize and lead meetings with important school officials who recognized the value of restorative justice practices. To demonstrate the role of youth organizers in implementing community accountability, we offer the following field notes from the early stages of the campaign. At this stage, PJU youth were being told that they could not be part of the negotiation of the intergovernmental agreement (IGA); however, youth organizers insisted on having a meeting with DPS officials to have their voices heard and needs meet:

> The meeting began with [Yury's] (Latina, youth organizer) welcome, "I'd like to thank you for having us here. We're going to do introductions and what we're looking forward to in this meeting. My name is [Yury]. I'm looking forward to a mutual agreement." [Elliot] (school official) interrupts, "If you're a student, would you be willing to say what school you're at?" [Yury] responds, "I go to [Seaside Academy]." [Luis] (Latino, adult staff) followed, "Buenas tardes (good afternoon), I'm [Luis], a graduate of [Uptown] (high school), and I'm here to support and come to an agreement just like [Yury]." [Santiago], [Lorena], [Maritza], [Faye], [Yvonne], [Chela], and [Joanna] introduced themselves as student leaders, organizers and supporters of the PJU's efforts to end the school to jail track. [Kathy] and [Jared], staff attorneys with the Advancement Project, introduced themselves. [Jared] mentioned, "We work with grassroots organizations across the country. We're a civil rights racial justice group working to end the prison-school pipeline." School officials then introduced themselves, including a school psychologist and the DPS Executive Director of Student Services. All of them stated their support for ending the racial disproportionality in school punishment. With an emphasis in her voice, Yvonne stated, "We want to acknowledge the good work by DPS for its holistic

approach, and for eliminating [school] expulsions. However, we think improvements must be made." [Yury] and [Faye] take turns reading their list of demands. [Yvonne] adds, "Before a student is disciplined, he or she must be notified of restorative justice. The school must assist. We want to highlight the help that the district will give to all students." She then shifts the tone of the conversation by sharing her testimony: "I was a freshman at [Uptown] when they showed us changes to the disciplinary policy. The teachers didn't know what to do with it so each teacher made her own version of it. Not every [student] was treated equally. So what we did was we made both of these policies into this one, which is going to be more effective and treat students equally." [Yvonne] gives examples of how one teacher could think a problem was one level, and a different teacher could think it's a different level of offense. [Santiago] adds, "This is important because it aligns with the state law (SSDL). This policy review will include: student enrollment, average classroom size, bully prevention programs, drop-out rates, conduct violations, and student demographics." [Chela] mentions, "I'm doing the SRO (school resource officer) data. We want to look at the SROs doing investigations, ticket issues, race/ethnicity, and the schools where it happens." (10/25/2012)

Youth organizers from PJU, such as Yvonne, Yury, Santiago, Joanna, and Faye, became adept at "holding their own" in high-stakes encounters with administrators. Equipped with knowledge of disciplinary policies, restorative justice practices, and a plan for collecting data on student disciplinary procedures, youth organizers built alliances with school officials and policymakers. The preparation in which youth organizers engaged, such as delegating and rehearsing roles, familiarizing themselves with the policies, and setting clear goals to help the campaign move forward, was a common practice. This was especially useful once at the meeting, in which a series of conversations unfolded in regard to the demands Jóvenes Unidos was organizing to implement to keep DPS accountable. Community accountability was therefore reflected in Padres & Jóvenes Unidos' commitment to ensuring that young people not only interact directly with power-holders and policymakers, but that they participate effectively and forcefully in keeping DPS and DPD accountable to all students. This meeting, however, was neither the first nor the last, but rather one in a series of subsequent and continuous meetings between PJU, DPS, and DPD.

Ten months after their meeting with DPS, Jóvenes Unidos called for another meeting to discuss the inclusion of youth and community voice in the creation of an IGA or a memorandum of understanding (MOU) between DPS and DPD (8/17/2013). The demands Jóvenes Unidos voiced encompassed

several interrelated objectives, such as limiting police presence in schools, implementing restorative justice practices, and creating greater transparency of student disciplinary procedures and records.

The goal was to disrupt the traditional roles of SROs by forcing the DPS and DPD to consider alternative strategies to police presence in schools, especially in regard to student disciplinary procedures. In placing the responsibility of student disciplinary procedures back on school administration, Jóvenes Unidos created a promising IGA to reduce and eliminate zero tolerance policies and police presence in schools. In effect, youth organizers argued their case for why community input in the MOU could reduce education inequalities and racial disparities and keep students out of the criminal justice system. Thus, when the MOU was passed in 2013 by the Denver City Council, the final IGA document contained many of the edits suggested by youth organizers and PJU members. It was a victory for the youth, parents of students, and concerned community members who participated in the process.

Summary

Y-MAC and PJU made three strategies—problematization and denaturalization, testimony, and community accountability—central to their efforts to engage youth in dismantling the school-to-prison nexus. Padres & Jóvenes Unidos' S2J campaign was one of the first in the country to win local and statewide victories, and it paved the way for other YCOs, like Coleman Advocates, to implement similar campaigns. In fact, Jóvenes Unidos youth organizers were part of a contingent that met with the U.S. secretary of education to propose and discuss federal reforms to school discipline policies. Both YCOs have been nationally recognized for leading the way in dismantling the school-to-prison pipeline.

CONCLUSION

The school-to-prison nexus grew out of zero tolerance policies in schools and racialized disciplinary practices associated with the "new Jim Crow" (Alexander, 2010). Although we focused on the local features of campaigns in San Francisco and Denver, we also see evidence that these campaigns were part of a broader national movement to end the school-to-prison nexus.

We mean this in two ways. First, there was some coordination and strategy across Coleman Advocates and Padres & Jóvenes Unidos. The two YCOs were part of the Alliance for Education Justice (AEJ); several youth organizers in Y-MAC and Jóvenes Unidos attended trainings and nationwide gatherings sponsored by AEJ. In the latter part of our field study, these organizations also became involved in the national Dignity in Schools Campaign (DSC) as well

as in a series of regional Action Camps coordinated by the Advancement Project. Through these networks and field-building activities, youth convened periodically to discuss local campaigns, build coalitions, and share strategies and resources to help other YCOs lead their own local or regional campaigns. At the same time, the organizational structure of each group followed a local grassroots approach to organizing. The privileging of local organizing made it possible to target the specific issues in each school district; however, the communication across YCOs enabled youth organizers to adopt effective levers for policy change, such as the implementation of restorative justice practices and the creation of IGAs between school districts and police departments.

Second, we propose thinking of these campaigns as part of a national movement that presaged the emergence of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) grassroots organizing movement to end police violence. Although charting the relationship between BLM and the YCO campaigns is for another study, we trace a connection in the substantive practices and human experiences that animated BLM and the campaigns to end the school-to-prison nexus. There may also be evidence that some of the key BLM organizers developed certain strategies and organizing skills through working to end the school-to-prison pipeline in prior years.

Implications for Contemporary Youth Organizing

In effect, the United States is in the midst of a pivotal turning point on ending the violence against and criminalization of young people of Color. Movements like BLM are but one example of the many interrelated social movements to end the systematic violence against and criminalization of youth of Color. The campaigns to end the school-to-prison nexus are connected to broader social movements like BLM because such campaigns have the potential to raise the consciousness of young people of Color and their communities who will not stand for injustice. Youth activism has created critical spaces for youth to support one another, engage in social actions, and grow in their leadership within their schools and communities (Ginwright et al., 2006; Kirshner, 2015).

Thus, in this chapter we offered a perspective on youth community organizing, specifically the collective power of youth in employing problematizing/denaturalizing, testimonies, and community accountability strategies. In doing so, we centered the voices and experiences of youth activists who are at the front lines of an ongoing struggle to not only reform, but also transform and revolutionize the structure of the education and criminal legal system in a way that honors, respects, and treats with dignity the lives of all youth. We offered a small glimpse of the strategies youth organizers employed in the context of successfully driving campaigns to end the school-to-prison nexus.

One chapter cannot do justice to the multitude of YCO practices, strategies, efforts, and voices that went into making these campaigns successful and part of a nationwide movement to end the criminalization of young people. However, this chapter, in conversation with several other accounts of youth activism, aims to shift how we think about systemic change by situating grassroots organizing at the intersections of local campaigns and nationwide movements. Indeed, education and racial justice in schools and in the criminal legal system are possible when youth community organizing and activism transgress the boundaries of education, practice, and policy to create systemic changes that revolutionize the lives of young people.

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NOTES

1. In aligning our work with feminists scholars like Hurtado (1996) and MacKinnon (1982), we choose to capitalize the word *Color* because it refers to "a heritage, an experience, a cultural and personal identity, the meaning of which becomes specifically stigmatic and/or glorious and/or ordinary under specific social conditions" (MacKinnon, 1982, p. 516). In a U.S. context, Color is therefore understood to refer to people's experiences and social positioning as distinct from whiteness and race-based privileges.

2. There is an exception in the law that allows students to bring a firearm to school if it is "lawfully stored inside a locked vehicle on school property, or if it is for activities approved and authorized by the local educational agency" (Office of Safe & Drug-Free Schools, 2013).

3. Roderick Watts, a professor at the City University of New York, was principal investigator of the study. Ben Kirshner, second author on this paper, was co–principal investigator. For more information about the study please see www.research2action.net

4. More details on the legislation can be accessed via the report "Lessons in Racial Justice Movement Building: Dismantling the School-to-Prison Pipeline in Colorado" (2012) (http://b.3cdn.net/advancement/ad2cf09c7de156e4d2_b9m6i8ubh.pdf), published by Padres & Jóvenes Unidos and the Advancement Project.

5. All names have been changed to pseudonyms to maintain the confidentiality of our respondents; however, to honor the achievements of each YCO and the campaign, we refer to each one by their actual name.

6. *Testimonio* is a practice and a method of conveying experiences and speaking against oppression and injustice. Rooted in Latin American oral cultures, *testimonio* privileges the narrative of personal experience as a source of both knowledge and political power for claiming rights and working toward social change (Delgado Bernal et al., 2012).

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