Critical Policy Studies

Marginalized stakeholders and performative politics: dueling discourses in education policymaking

Celina Su[a]

[a] City University of New York, New York, USA

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Marginalized stakeholders and performative politics: dueling discourses in education policymaking

Celina Su*

City University of New York, New York, USA

American urban education policy debates pivot around dueling lines of discourse on what ails inner-city youth; such students are portrayed as emblems of a largely African-American and Latino 'culture of failure', even as their voices remain largely absent from debates about them. In response, youth-led organizations attempt to forward youth as political stakeholders. I draw upon ethnographic data from two such organizations to examine the performative aspects of their campaign work. I focus on how they engaged in (1) counter-scripting, to imagine themselves as political stakeholders and substantively prepare themselves for their new roles, and in (2) counter-staging, to gain greater access to existing public stages and construct new, alternative spaces, for more deliberative interactions with policymakers. The strengths and weaknesses of these organizations' efforts have implications for other groups of marginalized stakeholders campaigning for policy reform, especially in their attempts to demonstrate local knowledge and expertise.

Keywords: education policy; performance; participation; discourse; students

In May 2006, members of the Urban Youth Collaborative (UYC), a coalition of more than two dozen New York City student-led social change organizations (SCOs), met with Schools Chancellor Joel Klein. They questioned the effectiveness and legal validity of the 1998 Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between the New York Police Department and Department of Education, which focused on use of force in the schools by more than 5000 agents and 200 armed officers. The UYC presented 7500 signed postcards denouncing police tactics. They demanded data not only on incidence rates, but also graduation rates. The youth wanted to know what happened to the students who got pushed out of schools, and they requested that infractions such as being late to school be punished via school-based measures, such as detention and mediation, rather than via the Police Department. Chancellor Klein reasserted that the MOU was effective. One young woman pleaded: 'You keep staring at your piece of paper and referring to questionable "data." Please look up and listen to us. We're sitting in front of you. We are the data' (Alonso *et al*. 2009, p. 30).

In city hearings over the past six years (and in response to a New York Civil Liberties Union Freedom of Information Act request), city officials insisted that an explicit extension to the 1998 MOU was unnecessary, since the mayor controls both police and schools. In 2009, Assemblyman Karim Camara found that an explicit MOU extension did exist: a

*Email: celinasu@gmail.com

one-paragraph document signed by Mayor Michael Bloomberg and Schools Chancellor Klein on 2 January 2003, with no expiration date. This MOU stated that until further notice, 'the performance of school security functions' would be extended.

The students retorted, 'If we were adults, they wouldn't treat us like that.' The policymakers had perpetuated the prevailing line of discourse of youth as 'troublemakers', emblems of a largely African American and Latino 'culture of failure' – even as student voices remain largely absent from the public policy debates about them.

In response, the teenagers argued that they, too, deserved a voice in policymaking, and that they possessed invaluable data and reform ideas often overlooked by administrators. Thus, social change organizations attempted to help students forward a dueling line of discourse, that of youth as political stakeholders. I draw upon ethnographic data of two case study SCOs to analyze how they did so. Both organizations, Sistas and Brothas United (SBU) and the Brotherhood/Sister Sol (Bro/Sis), are members of UYC and work with African-American and Latino students from high-poverty neighborhoods in New York City.

In the course of this article I briefly describe the American system of education governance, underlining the importance of local politics in policymaking, as well as the role of cultural politics, and the aforementioned dueling lines of discourse, in debates on urban education in the United States. I then outline the important role social change organizations play in this context. After reviewing the histories and backgrounds of the two case study organizations and my methods in data collection and analysis, I turn to the performative aspects of the campaigns in the case studies – namely, counter-scripting and counter-staging.

Here, *counter-scripting* refers to the 'efforts of antagonists [students] to undo the effect of scripts of protagonists [policymakers]' (Hajer and Uitermark 2008, p. 3), and *counter-staging* refers to antagonists' arrangements of *new* rules of engagement, ones which disrupt previous stagings by protagonists and blur the lines between active players and passive audiences. In the counter-scripting section I analyze how SCOs provide 'safe and open spaces' that enable the students to envision themselves as political stakeholders, and how the organizations help the youth develop, rehearse, and realize new, substantive speaking roles for themselves through leadership training – in research, analysis, public speaking, and community organizing.

Still, even after students articulate and voice their arguments, policymakers treat them as antagonistic audience members who should quietly listen to the 'real' experts. Thus, in the counter-staging section I analyze how youth sometimes 'sneak' into the public decision-making arena by cultivating adult allies, and how, at other times, they develop alternative spaces for more deliberative interactions with policymakers. These efforts are essential to activist efforts in education policy reform, especially in how they highlight alternate forms of local knowledge and expertise.

I conclude the article by discussing implications for other groups of marginalized stakeholders engaging in the performative politics of policy reform, as well as remaining challenges for both practice and future research.

Governance and cultural politics in American education policy

Although the American federal government provides some funding and mandates some minimum standards in public schools throughout the United States, no grand American school system exists. Rather, education policymaking is largely decentralized; the bulk of school financing comes from state and local taxes, and schools are organized into

roughly 15,000 semi-autonomous school districts (Low *et al*. 2003). For example, state governments set the number of charter schools – publicly funded private (usually non-profit) entities exempt from local education laws regarding teachers' unions, etc. – that are allowed to open or operate each year. Within the confines of federal and state regulations, each individual school district retains considerable sway over most education policies. Advocates claim that decentralization allows schools to better meet the needs of local constituents; critics contend that this decentralization leads to dramatic disparities in the quality of schools provided to American children in different school districts (Alonso *et al*. 2009). Local politics matters greatly in American education policy.

As the biggest school district in the Unites States, New York City serves more than 1.1 million students each year. From 1969 to 2002, New York City schools were organized into 32 community districts, each with an elected school board. Proponents of community control originally argued that decentralized governance would bring education policymaking the flexibility, pragmatism, and ground-level knowledge that it required. It would empower parents and students, the ultimate stakeholders in New York schools. They could not garner empowerment simply by electing better representatives; they had to engage in governance themselves (Gordon 1968).

The resulting New York City school boards' track records were mixed. Some community advocates even felt that the 1969 reforms were designed to sabotage any chance of success (Mediratta and Fruchter 2003). In 1996, after almost three decades of teachers, parents, and politicians criticizing school boards for being ineffective and corrupt, state legislation transferred some key powers, such as the hiring and firing of superintendents, from school boards to the chancellor. In 2002, state legislation placed the entire school system under the control of the mayor. Mayor Bloomberg shut down the Brooklyn-based Board of Education, replaced it with the Department of Education (located right next to City Hall), and implemented the Children First initiative. He imposed a uniform curriculum on most elementary schools and eliminated community districts and accompanying school boards. Instead, an appointed Panel for Education Policy held city-wide jurisdiction. In addition, each school boasted a parent coordinator that answered to the principal, belonged to one of the city's nine school 'regions', and reported to a local education council.

These changes gave the mayor the most control in 130 years of school governance. According to the city's Department of Education, parent education councils are meant to be advisory, and in 2010 many positions remain unfilled. Thus, parents have lacked formal opportunities to respond to several overhauls, including increasing emphases on 'small schools' and charter schools, accompanying 'phase-outs' of traditional high schools, public safety and policing, and other policies affecting the district's students.

Mayor Bloomberg has argued that centralized governance gives him an unfettered chain of command, and the public a clear idea of whom to hold responsible for both strengths and weaknesses in the public schools: 'I want the teachers and the principals to control the schools, not the parents' (quoted in Benjamin 2009, Barrett 2003). Education organizing groups maintain, however, that an election every four years does not give the public enough opportunities for feedback, and that mayoral control inhibits bottom-up accountability.

Dueling lines of public discourse on urban education

Policymakers and other stakeholders interested in educational governance advance dueling lines of discourse on American urban education. Here, discourse can be defined as 'an ensemble of ideas, concepts and categorizations through which meaning is allocated to social and physical phenomena' (Hajer and Uitermark 2008, p. 3).

The efforts of the case study organizations are made against the backdrop of prevailing public discourse that labels inner-city youth, mostly Black and Latino, as 'troublemakers' in a 'culture of failure'. At a 2004 National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) gala, African-American comedian Bill Cosby commemorated the fifti-eth anniversary of *Brown v. Board of Education* (the landmark Supreme Court ruling that first struck down the 'separate but equal' clause in American schools, holding that segre-gated schools were inherently unequal). Cosby (2004, p. 2) declared that, 'lower . . . and lower-middle economic [African-American] people are not holding their end in this deal' on education. Although Cosby lauded immigrant groups for embodying a positive work ethic, others contended that Latinos, too, were carriers of 'the crucible of failure'. Puerto Rican-born Congressman Herman Badillo lamented that 'education is not a high priority in the Hispanic community,' and that a 500-year-old 'cultural siesta' explains why Latinos report lower educational levels than 'more economically and socially successful immigrant groups' (Badillo 2006, pp. 50–51, 32).

The discourse of inner-city youth as 'troublemakers' pinpoints a lack of educational values as the primary culprit of the racial achievement gap between Blacks and Latinos on one end, and Asians and Whites on the other. In turn, policy responses have attempted to shape behavior by African-American and Latino students (and their families), steer-ing them toward appreciating achievement, through a combination of 'incentives' for high standardized exam scores and punitive measures for low ones.

By contrast, education organizing groups have advanced a dueling line of discourse, portraying inner-city youth as political stakeholders in education policy, rather than as clients, customers, or troublemakers (Meier 2003, Giroux 2009). These groups point to pervasive segregation and unequal structural conditions as primary causes of the racial achievement gap. Nationwide, high-minority and high-poverty schools have more crowded and physically decaying facilities; fewer qualified teachers; larger classes; and, perhaps not surprisingly, lower achievement scores in standardized exams (Orfield and Lee 2005, Kozol 1992).

Different strands of scholarship have influenced current debates surrounding the 'cul-ture of failure' thesis. For example, work on the 'oppositional cultural identities' and the fear of 'acting white' supposedly held by African-American and Latino students has deeply influenced the way journalists and policymakers talk about students of color (Ogbu 1992). Focusing on immigrants, the 'segmented assimilation' scholarship argues that second-generation children, especially Latinos, embrace the 'oppositional outlooks' of urban youth, especially Blacks, and risk being dragged down the social ladder with them (Rumbaut and Portes 2001). In the meantime, Asian-Americans are said to assimilate more with whites.

However, numerous studies have suggested that cultural values are only tenuously linked to racial/ethnic groups' educational success, finding that there are wide variations in the cultural outlooks and in the levels of academic and economic achievement between and within national-origin immigrant groups (Gibson 1997, Tyson 2001, Lee and Weis 2005).

The policy implications of both popular and academic iterations of the 'culture of failure' thesis, however contentious, are evident in urban education. Nationally, discourse on a 'culture of failure' shifts attention away from the structural inequalities and perva-sive economic and racial segregation at the root of the so-called 'racial achievement gap' (Alonso *et al*. 2009). Instead of providing underprivileged students with increased school resources or more qualified teachers, the bulk of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legisla-tion focuses on penalties that would serve as 'incentives' for achievement (on standardized exams). Thus, NCLB pushed schools to give 65 million more mandated tests on top of

Table 1.   Dueling lines of discourse on urban youth and their schooling.

	Youth as troublemakers	Youth as stakeholders in education policy
Policy problem	Urban youth, especially Black and Latino ones, are immersed in a 'culture of failure' and lack educational values	Students care, but pervasive segregation and resource inequalities prevent them from attaining a meaningful education
Implications for education policy	'Incentivize' achievement so that students care; enact punitive measures for low-scoring schools and students	Relieve overcrowding, avoid excessive policing, and implement college-preparatory curricula for *all* students
Implications for school governance	National legislation on standardized exams hold students accountable for their success; centralized city-wide governance gives mayor ability to implement effective school policies	Parents and youth play important roles in bottom-up accountability; mayoral elections are not sufficient opportunities for community influence

those already being given (Karp 2007); schools that fail to meet specified annual goals face increasing penalties, such as parent notifications allowing parents to transfer children elsewhere, increasing district control, and reconstitution.

Bloomberg's local policies largely parallel NCLB's focus on standards reform, though they also include an expansion of policing (Mukherjee 2007). The city has also implemented several programs 'incentivizing' schooling to inner-city students, i.e. offering cash for top exam scores, even as student groups continue to petition the Department of Education to offer more challenging classes (Medina 2007).

New York youth organizing groups assert that they do not need 'incentivizing' policies to value education; in fact, they have repeatedly protested cases where officials encouraged struggling students to drop out or attend alternative, non-diploma-bearing programs, so that these students would not lower average standardized exam scores. These students argue that they need resources to prepare for college (Mediratta 2006), and more fundamentally, opportunities to work with administrators and elected officials in policy-making.

Table 1 summarizes key aspects of the dueling lines of discourse in urban education.

The role of social change organizations

Social change organizations – grassroots organizations embedded in local communities and working towards systemic social change – play an integral role in contexts where stakeholders like parents and students cannot easily make their voices heard (Chetkovich and Kunreuther 2006). SCOs argue that their involvement leads to many of the traditional benefits of civil society actors in democratic governance – the capacity to pinpoint and articulate real-life, street-level problems and school strengths, the ability to help with the execution and the monitoring of implementation, and a stamp of stakeholder legitimacy (Polletta 2002, Fung and Wright 2003, Fischer 2006). Further, they play an integral role in helping members to define their collective identities, 'political purpose', and positions vis-à-vis social and economic structures (Marquez 2001).

While SCOs do not always see themselves as parts of larger social movements, they are similar to social movements in that they help constituents to mobilize participants, identify potential allies, and weave stories about their struggles (Morris and Braine 2001). In other words, they help constituents not to conjure up new grievances, but to find alternatives to

official public stages, and to harness and perform new roles as political stakeholders, rather than disgruntled audience members.

Scholars have begun to consider the central role of SCOs in constructing positive visions of schooling for underserved communities (Shirley 1997, 2002, Warren 2001). For example, youth organizing groups nationwide assert that they generally lack not discipline, but dignity and adequate funding in their schooling (Ishihara 2003). Such groups provide essential links among teachers, administrators, students, and parents, providing a non-conventional opportunity to 'challenge hegemony in urban schools' (Stovall 2005, p. 12).

Nevertheless, SCOs do not easily 'challenge hegemony' or successfully put forward students as political stakeholders. In a larger context of local educational governance and dueling lines of discourse, youth are not readily admitted to deliberative spaces for policymaking. As Young (2001, pp. 671, 676) writes,

> The activist is suspicious of exhortations to deliberate because he believes that in the real world of politics . . . democratic processes that appear to conform to norms of deliberation are usually biased toward more powerful agents . . . While not deliberative, then, in the sense of engaging in orderly reason giving, most activist political engagements aim to communicate specific ideas to a wide public . . . because discursive arguments alone are not likely to command attention or inspire action.

In other words, local education politics is not just about reason-giving and persuasion, but also performance and dramaturgy. Youth must fight for the opportunities to present their arguments in the first place. In order to do so, they must 'think outside the box', and come up with creative ways to 'perform' and grab attention as activists.

How they do so remains understudied, however (Polletta 2006, Su 2007, Payne *et al*. 2008). Much of the research on youth focuses on their participatory roles in social service organizations or in research (Checkoway and Richards-Schuster 2004). While there have been significant studies on how high schools themselves can facilitate resistance (Fine 1993, Fine *et al*. 1997), there remains room for analyses that articulate how SCOs can both elicit personal transformations and policy changes (Gambone *et al*. 2006, Checkoway and Gutierrez 2006, Oakes *et al*. 2006). This is especially true when few *formal* scenes of policymaking dramaturgy exist. Here we highlight two key performative practices, counter-scripting and counter-staging, in SCOs' efforts to put forward youth as stakeholders in education policy.

Case study organizations and methods

The ethnographic case studies of two youth organizations working on New York City education reform are relevant here: the Brotherhood/Sister Sol in Harlem and Sistas and Brothas United in the Bronx. In contrast to the overall 20% poverty rate for New York City as a whole, the neighborhoods served by these organizations have poverty rates between 39% and 44% (Community Studies of New York 2004). Both organizations belie traditional social services and political organizing models by combining both activities.

Bro/Sis provides Black and Latino youth with the mentoring and peer support necessary for effective coping mechanisms in the face of adversity. In 1995, two childhood friends and recent graduates of Brown University, an elite college in Rhode Island, decided to return to New York and mentor young men in their old neighborhood. They began by working with 45 young men from two high schools in Harlem, including a school attended by one of the co-founders. Soon, the organization expanded in both size (with additional staff members) and in scope (to include mentorship of young women).

The organization provides five overlapping academic and social support programs to approximately 150 youth each week. Bro/Sis' core program, Rites of Passage, partners with high schools in the neighborhood to form gender-specific chapters of 10 to 18 youth members each. To join, each student member and his/her parents must commit to participation for four to six years, until the youth graduates from high school. Over the course of the program, each chapter writes its own mission statement, and each participant engages in community service, conflict resolution, and other leadership development activities.

In addition, the organization's Liberation Program, which explicitly puts forward youth as political stakeholders in education reform, consists of two components: first, in a four-week summer Liberation School, teenagers research youth activism around the world and analyze sociopolitical conditions in their immediate context. Second, youth who successfully complete the training receive an honorarium and join the Liberation Collective, practicing goal-setting, developing action plans, strategizing, and recruiting in political campaigns.

SBU is a subsidiary of the Northwest Bronx Clergy and Community Coalition (NWBCCC). Local pastors and community leaders founded NWBCCC in 1974, as they worked to stem the economic and physical devastation ravaging the borough. In response to plunging property values and occupancy rates, there were cases of landlords setting buildings on fire – sometimes still with people in them – so that they could collect insurance money (Jacobson and Kasinitz 1986). In the 1980s and 1990s, New York's fiscal crisis abated, and community leaders began to work on additional campaign issues, including education.

Like Bro/Sis, SBU works primarily with Black and Latin youth and began in the mid-1990s. In 1997, youth in the Mosholu-Woodlawn South and Kingsbridge Heights neighborhood associations of the NWBCCC actively participated in organizing campaigns against summer youth employment budget cuts and for education reform. After forming a group called Kingsbridge Heights Youth, their ranks grew and spanned beyond the neighborhood. NWBCCC came to rely upon the teenagers to organize and implement campaigns, especially large-scale rallies. Eventually, these students demanded official board representation; in 1998, they won two seats on the NWBCCC board.

SBU has grown steadily since then and has a current base of around 200 members. It focuses its campaigns on alleviating overcrowding, overpolicing, and funding inequalities in education. In 2005, it helped to open the Leadership Institute, a small public high school focused on social justice issues. Every day, SBU leaders advance public policy proposals and pressure elected officials and civil servants to heed these proposals through meetings, petitions, rallies, and protests. The students also peer tutor and simply spend time together.

Finally, SBU is one of five 'core' organizations of the Urban Youth Collaborative, which was discussed at the beginning of this article, and Bro/Sis is one of eight additional organizations of the UYC Student Union. As members of the collaborative, SBU leaders help to strategize campaigns in two ways: behind the scenes by writing vision statements and repeatedly sending faxes to Schools Chancellor Joel Klein in the hopes of garnering a meeting, and during public events; and in public by holding press conferences or rallies on the steps of City Hall. Student Union members like Bro/Sis are more likely to help core leaders pinpoint campaigns issues, such as abuse of police powers inside the schools, and to attend large-scale events, and are less likely to work on UYC campaign activities in between.

I collected fieldwork data for this article via semi-structured interviews, direct observation, and interpretive analysis (Yanow 1999, Yin 2002). In particular, I conducted two to four hour semi-structured interviews with 11 people from the two organizations.

Each of these included in-depth discussions on the interviewees' roles in the organizations, the activities and practices of the organizations, and the political strategies of the organizations.

My interviews at Bro/Sis were part of a larger study of SCOs in the Ford Foundation-funded Leadership for a Changing World program, which granted awards to American social justice leaders and organizations 'bringing about positive change', 'tackling tough social problems with effective, systemic solutions', being 'strategic', and bringing 'different groups together' (Ospina and Schall 2001).[1] Similarly, my interviews at SBU were part of a larger study on organizational cultures of participation and political strategies in grassroots organizing. In addition to conducting interviews, I attended over two dozen rallies, meetings, workshops and campaign events, and engaged in informal conversations with staff, board members, and other participants (including active members, also known as 'leaders').[2]

For both studies, I worked with the premise that the participants themselves can help to shape the themes and direction of my research. Key questions, for example, were developed collaboratively and focused not on individual leaders' characteristics, but also on collective practices in the organizations. I then examined the data for emerging themes in the case studies. For this article I particularly focused on the two youth-led organizations that were part of the larger studies. Overall, I engaged in several iterations of fieldwork, data analysis, triangulation and data verification, to articulate findings that foregrounded the voices of the participants themselves. The names of all fieldwork participants have been withheld for confidentiality reasons.

Social change organizations and performative politics

The local policymaking arena fails to meet many of the criteria commonly associated with deliberation: reciprocity, inclusiveness, openness, and bottom-up accountability (Bohman and Rehg 1997, Fung and Wright 2003). Ideally, reason-based deliberations compel participants to supplant preexisting opinions with new preferences (Benhabib 1996, Young 2001). However, not only are policy problems and solutions socially constructed and open to interpretation; so too are political actors (Dryzek 1994). As Hajer (2005b, p. 626) writes,

> . . . [W]hat is said, what can be said, and what can be said with influence? . . . [T]he setting in which utterances are made has a performative dimension: practices of participation construct their participants and some may construct people as protesters, whereas other practices may create collaborators.

Indeed, policymakers and teachers prepare youth for their roles as 'proper' students in different ways; these youth may be excluded from the public stage altogether. Key questions lie in not just identifying the biases in deliberation, but in pinpointing ways in which policymaking can be made more inclusive. Each line of public discourse on urban youth and urban schools foregrounds certain political actors on the public stage, acts as a series of script templates, and presents condensed narratives that link specific events (such as reports on city-wide standardized exam score results each year) to specific discourses.

Students often conceive of themselves as audience members, not political actors. How can they usurp assigned, better-seen-than-heard roles in order to speak up? Answering this question requires an in-depth look at the process of *counter-scripting*, and how youth in the case study SCOs sought the roles of legitimate political stakeholders (Delgado and Stefancic 2001).

Further, a bounty of critical research points at how seemingly public forums often exclude certain groups – the elderly, women, youth, etc. – in different ways, and how they often conscribe pre-set roles for politicians, technical experts, and different constituent groups (Barnes *et al*. 2003, Cornwall and Brock 2005). How can students gain access to public stages, policymaking arenas, or the proverbial big oak tables where decisions are made? Drawing upon Hajer's studies of performative politics (2005a, 2005b, Hajer and Uitermark 2008), I contribute the concept of *counter-staging* in order to describe how students at SBU and Bro/Sis arranged new rules of engagement with policymakers.

Counter-scripting: developing new roles as political stakeholders

What did the students' participation in the case study SCOs look like, and how did Bro/Sis and SBU help the youth to transform from 'mere' teenagers into full-fledged activists and political stakeholders?

At both organizations, students put in hours that would be deemed unrealistic, if not unfathomable, at most adult organizations. At SBU, every day from 2 to 8 pm, dozens of high school students show up to volunteer on outreach and political campaigns. These days, SBU works on large campaigns concerning new school facilities, school safety, and over-crowding. Students get together to review the latest research on the New York City school system, talk about their campaigns, attend workshops on outreach and other campaign development skills, and work on their homework (sometimes drawing upon the expertise of SBU's Tutor Coordinator). In the few weeks before a large event, students put in especially long hours, often staying at the office until late at night. The youth also spend a lot of time simply 'hanging out' – sharing spoken word and written poems about personal experiences and political observations, downloading music, and confiding about crushes, family, and friends.

At Bro/Sis participation is a bit more structured, and activities are less likely to be dominated by the (often unpredictable) rhythms of on-going political campaigns. Instead, they might follow curricula designed to explicitly both help leaders engage with social justice issues and prepare for college. For students who participate in Bro/Sis throughout the academic year, their involvement might mean working with the other young men or women in their respective chapters to write both personal and organizational mission statements, articulating personal goals for the year, attending workshops and retreats, and peer counseling. Participants in the summer Liberation School are more likely to spend more time on the same grassroots organizing activities that occupy SBU leaders.

The students' commitment to school reform campaigns challenges the notion that they are 'troublemakers'. Nevertheless, the 'culture of failure' line of discourse is pervasive enough that many inner-city Black and Latino youth do not see themselves as political stakeholders, even when they make specific critiques of local education policy. For instance, one SBU leader stated that before becoming involved with the organization, she 'didn't know what to do', and one Bro/Sis leader had felt resigned to the thought that 'that's just the way it is'.

Thus, forwarding a counter-script involved nurturing the confidence to step onto the public stage in the first place. By providing 'safe and open spaces', SBU and Bro/Sis helped the students to imagine themselves as key characters in education politics – as political stakeholders, rather than troublemakers or passive spectators of policymaking. As a result, the teenagers began to view seemingly personal problems (like getting to class late because of police harassment at the metal detectors) as public, political ones. Then, the SCOs helped the youth to substantively fulfill their roles as political stakeholders,

developing leadership skills such as conducting research on educational inequalities and potential remedies, writing and analyzing policy proposals, and public speaking.

Realizing activism in 'safe and open spaces'

At both organizations, student leaders and organizers (all of whom were former youth members themselves) emphasized the importance of providing a 'safe and open space' in developing new leaders. The two organizations did this in two key ways: first, they welcomed students regardless of whether they were honors students, struggled in school, or dropped out. Second, they made sure that all key activities were peer-driven and youth-led.

Even straight-A students sometimes felt ill at ease when they first arrived at SBU. As one young woman described it, 'At the beginning, I did not speak at all. I felt so over-whelmed, so intimidated with all of these . . . *youth* who spoke like they did not care about anything else. It was different from what I saw in school.' Her discomfort is ironic because, to outsiders at least, she looked like a model student – one who clearly relished learning and possessed 'good' education values. Indeed, at least initially, she herself looked down upon fellow SBU members, especially the ones who struggled in school. She states that, over time, she learned to become a less

> judgmental person, to get to know them and know what they've gone through, and why they made the choices they made . . . I was so ignorant about things and the world outside me. I used to look at young people and see them cursing, talking about things in the street. I used to look at them with contempt, to be honest. Now, I kind of understand . . . I've met a lot of people here, who are those kids who have changed or seen things happen. To be honest . . . I was 'in the box'.

It is significant that this young woman and her fellow SBU leaders came to understand and respect one another as activists. As one young man stated, 'It is just more of a sense of community. More of a love thing in our SBU thing.' That a 'love thing' appears to make such a big difference is hardly a novel notion. Yet, it is discordant with the assumptions held by the 'culture of failure' line of discourse – that only tougher standards will motivate students and get them to suddenly do better in school, and that anything else is coddling. Instead, the 'love thing' appears to be essential in enabling students – both 'good' ones and 'troublemakers' – into envisioning themselves as political stakeholders.

The youth-led activities disrupted preconceptions of activist leadership and adolescent as being mutually exclusive, dichotomous roles. Leaders engaged in regular discussions and campaigns with peers who often faced similar troubles at school or at home. Several leaders said that they joined only because a friend asked them to do so. One member specif-ically stayed at SBU because she 'could relate to all the people here.' Otherwise, it would have been 'another routine thing, you got to listen to older people do this, and say that.'

Along the way, leaders spoke about how they began to see personal struggles via a political lens, one that lent itself to organizing campaigns. For instance, several Bro/Sis leaders had noticed that Public School (PS) 186, a once-beautiful building that has stood abandoned since 1975, fell to new levels of disrepair. However, until they joined Bro/Sis, they had not thought of it as a campaign issue: 'The first time I walked past it was a few years ago, and I thought wow, what a big waste that a huge school was allowed to be burnt out for so long.' After researching the building's history, Bro/Sis leaders learned that the city, in 1986, had sold it to a local organization, the ML Wilson Boys and Girls Club. The contract included a clause stating that 85% of the available space had to be used for

non-profit services. Instead, the ML Wilson Boys and Girls Club allowed the building to languish and to be sold to a private developer. Placed in this context, PS 186 was no longer an impersonal tragedy, but 'the picture of a broken promise'.

In such contexts, these teenagers articulated their personal stakes in local policy debates. No longer on the sidelines, they began to imagine themselves as *dramatis personae* in the public sphere of education reform. Similarly, at SBU, a leader recounted a story of personal change that became political:

> With my little cousin – he went to summer school, and that's punishment alone. Then, I am helping him with his homework and picking up his book, I see that I can't help him with his homework because there's a hundred pages missing. Before, I would just feel like . . . that's the way it usually goes, and just leave it alone. This time, I thought of the history of resources going into the different schools, and about school budgets, how they are determined. Me, myself, and I need to learn about the larger picture. I got mad.

'Safe and open spaces' thus referred not only to physical places, but to consistent opportunities for meeting, conversation, and exchange in forming a collective identity, somewhat akin to so-called 'free spaces' (Evans and Boyte 1992). Guinier and Torres (2003, pp. 95, 147) state that 'free spaces' help constituents to recognize the solidarity that 'those who have been [socially] raced often experience,' thereby constructing political, rather than essentialist, notions of race and 'enclaves of resistance'.

In some ways, these 'free spaces' are figurative rehearsal halls that have allowed the youth to probe and mine the complex and sometimes contradictory motivations, back stories, and hidden dimensions of their recurring character roles. Often, the free spaces are also literal rehearsal spaces, as both SBU and Bro/Sis feature spoken word poetry, hip-hop, and college application essay workshops that allow the youth to prepare speaking roles for press conferences, rallies, college entrance interviews, community board meetings, and political summits with city administrators.

In other ways, however, these free spaces are not means to greater ends, but are ends in and of themselves. Students experiences in SBU and Bro/Sis should not, that is, be seen as mere precursors to 'higher' or more 'real' levels of formal electoral politics. Indeed, in regard to what has been called liminal or 'in-between' participation, scholars have begun to note how traditionally marginalized stakeholders – like recent immigrants or youth – sometimes engage in politics outside of established institutions and social movements (Jones-Correa 1998, Su 2009). As Saito (1998, pp. 5–6) notes, 'The lived experiences of everyday life are a critical site of observation. They link the micro-level with the macro-level and reveal how institutional structures . . . enter into and affect daily life and, in turn, how people understand, accept, and/or contest such social structures'.

Acquiring leadership skills for 'meatier' roles on the public stage

The students' participation at SBU and Bro/Sis gave them a sense of social support and responsibility in working towards school reform, but they nevertheless struggled to meaningfully step into their new roles as political stakeholders. They wanted 'meatier' lines to deliver to the policymakers, as well as the know-how to persuasively deliver these lines. To accomplish these goals, the youth worked to develop a roster of leadership skills, especially involving statistical analysis, political structures, writing, and public speaking.

At SBU, for example, the youth also helped each other to read government documents, access and process public data, and work with research institutes of local universities to collect good evidence of inequalities in the school system. Often, these analyses also gave

the leaders a better sense of how city and state agencies operate. One leader noted how 'the [physical plant] funding works so that you're reimbursed 9 cents for a building, and 17 cents for repairs. So you have built-in disincentives against getting new school buildings. And then we look at how different things are in the suburbs.'

In addition to such analysis, leaders at both Bro/Sis and SBU visited other school districts, attended conferences, conducted research, and analyzed the components of schooling they *did* want to develop into potential models for better schooling.

At the same time, both SCOs also trained students in traditional community organizing skills, such as goal-setting, campaign development, agenda-setting, speech-writing, and outreach. At Bro/Sis, for instance, the students studied the 'legacy of youth activism' both domestically and abroad, and they visited local organizations to examine how longer-term campaigns translate into day-to-day work. This work required leaders to publicly and persuasively vocalize concerns that they might have previously shared only with friends:

> [We held events] in front of PS 186 . . . We actually got to get up on the mic and just voice our opinions, our concerns . . . get people . . . pumped up, because there were a lot of apathetic people, people who thought, *Oh, that's never going to get fixed, nothing's ever gonna happen . . .*

At SBU, leaders also spoke about how hands-on training helped them to gain the skills and confidence necessary to spearhead education reform campaigns:

> When they gave me training, I learned how to put this there, start this off, and change [the speeches]. How to watch somebody else chair a meeting, and when I finally got to chair, I'd had training but was still missing some skills, but then you watch other leaders to pick it up like that [snap]. 'That's how you do it.' . . . I'd get so much support from them.

The students' cumulative experiences in the 'free spaces' provided by SBU and Bro/Sis are significant in that they do more than ignite latent activism. After all, the youth are not spending their time just imagining themselves as political stakeholders and activists; with substantive training and support, they *became* stakeholder activists.

Counter-staging: booking the venues for their new performance

How are these youth received as political stakeholders on the public stage, when they had been presumed to be members of the audience? As the two SCOs helped students voice campaign proposals, policymakers repeatedly challenged the students' legitimacy as stakeholders. The teenagers wanted to prove to policymakers that their critiques reflect real-life conditions at the schools, that they are not an 'excuse for failure', and that all students, even struggling ones, can speak about improving schools. In order to do so, they had to create new scenarios (complete with new physical settings and new modes of interaction among students, teachers and other potential adult allies, and policymakers).

Thus, paying attention to performative politics involves not just counter-scripting, whereby activists demand new roles in the established public sphere, but also simultaneous efforts in counter-staging – first, in an expansion of existing public stages and, second, in the construction of new, alternative stages for deliberation.

Finding adult allies to access a more inclusive public stage

While both organizations have launched successful campaigns, this was possible only with adult allies, with whom the students also sometimes had uneasy tensions.

Bro/Sis leaders began campaigning to renovate PS 186 into a 'People's Community Center' in 2002. They asked the ML Wilson Boys and Girls Club whether the building would be renovated soon, and they were told that the building's plans were none of the students' business. The Club's Executive Director, for instance, stated that,

> If you have a house and you own that house and someone comes into your house and says this is the way I think your house is supposed to look, I don't think that's the way we would want to work. And we are talking to the community. We're talking to the community boards, we're talking to the schools and all of that is going to be part of the development and the building and its usage.

In response, the students argued that the 'house' and its corresponding policymaking public sphere should be more inclusive than the Club's Executive Director suggested. One student contended that, 'Being a member of the community and also working on the campaign made the situation very personal to me', and a staff member avowed that PS 186 belonged to all city residents: 'We should get the building back . . . we the people of the City of New York . . . whose tax dollars built this structure in the first place.'

In order to show the ML Wilson Boys and Girls Club and New York City administrators that their arguments had merit, and that PS 186 was thus part of a larger public stage rather than just a private space, Bro/Sis leaders collected over 5000 petition signatures. They interviewed many of the elderly residents who attended PS 186 between 30 and 50 years ago, as well as a variety of community opinions on what the building's future plans should look like. On that basis, they developed an exhibit called 'PS 186: A Dream Deferred' that eventually traveled to Riverside Church and the University of North Carolina.

Further, the youth sought invitations onto the figurative stage; they did not rush it on their own. In this case, they not only formed alliances with former, older PS 186 students; they also enlisted the help of Broadway Housing, West Harlem Group Assistance and students of the Milano New School for Management and Urban Policy and the Parsons School of Design. Together, they presented architectural designs and a feasibility study for the People's Community Center. The project won third place in the national JP Morgan Community Development Competition in April 2005. It was then that the local community board and the ML Wilson Boys and Girls Club began to pay more attention to the Bro/Sis campaign. In 2008, the Club accepted a renovation plan that largely mirrored the one forwarded by Bro/Sis.

Like the Bro/Sis activists, SBU leaders spoke at length about how they went through a slow, painful process of proving themselves to each new authority figure they wished to impress. One leader stated that, at first, teachers were largely unresponsive to SBU's inquiries about what resources educators needed most: 'We were starting to do interviews of teachers . . . I was discouraged . . . We had asking questions face-to-face in mind, but then teachers never had time to meet with us.' Eventually, however, some teachers accepted invitations to meetings. An organizer described the result in these terms:

> The teachers who came to these meetings were blown away. They saw students who they had pegged as troublemakers leading discussions about teaching and learning . . . If teachers took the time to talk with the students, they would know what is going on in that student's life and why they missed school or acted the way they did . . . If students had a chance to shine in schools, they would do better. (Carlo *et al*. 2005)

Even though these students had not been able to combat the 'culture of failure' line of discourse inside their classrooms, then, they convincingly played their new roles in the SBU

office. Poignantly, along the way, the students shifted from acting as audience members inside the classrooms to key actors; the roles were reversed for the teachers. Thus, the aforementioned 'safe and open' spaces are essential not just to counter-scripting, but to counter-staging as well. Sometimes, these spaces serve as the alternative public stages that allow the counter-scripts to become prominent in the first place.

This is not to suggest that once teachers arrived at Bro/Sis and SBU offices the student activists had an easy time. Collaborations between students, teachers, and other education experts were occasionally tense. The youth aspired to participate as equals, but adult experts and educators often treated the youth in paternalistic ways. For example, one SBU campaign focused on opening a new, social justice-focused small public school. (The school, called the Leadership Institute, officially opened in 2005.) One leader gave this account of the situation:

> We are trying to design a school where youth have an actual voice – besides sitting on a student council and figuring out what parties to throw – in figuring out what funds go to what programs and how teachers are hired, and in designing the curriculum . . . A lot of educators are not used to hearing that . . . and it scared them.

Still, an SBU staff member argued that, while the students rightfully claimed that administrators were uncomfortable with so much decision-making power in the hands of students, the proposal also needed a stronger pedagogical rationale for curriculum change.

Thus, without *both* alternative stages and set speaking roles for each political actor, the groups sometimes floundered in their efforts.

Developing alternative stages of deliberation by highlighting local knowledge

Several of the leaders noted that it was difficult for them to get policymakers to take them seriously, even after they developed strong policy proposals with experts. For instance, one young woman observed,

> Some people say, 'You're students, you have no place in the system, what are you doing here?' . . . Sometimes, it is hard, because people do not listen to us. But that's another motivation to keep us going.

On occasion, then, Bro/Sis and SBU youth disrupted previous staging rules, demonstrating bravado to prove to policymakers that they meant business. One SBU leader recounted this striking episode:

> At a huge meeting we were having with Dennis Wolcott, the Deputy Mayor of Education, in a huge auditorium at Martin Luther King High School, I see that he's not paying attention. He's . . . playing with his PalmPilot . . . when I am talking about the concerns we have. So I stop talking, lift up my chair, and walk across the room, around the table to where he's sitting, and plop my chair down next to him, so that I am in his face, and he can listen to me. I saw [the then-Director of NWBCCC] looking at me, like, 'What are you doing!!?' But after I did that, he listened. And at the end of the meeting, we were all going, and he comes up to me and says, 'Do not leave me without shaking my hand.'

Ironically, this student had to risk *furthering* his image as a troublemaker – breaking rules of meeting decorum – in order to get administrators to listen to him as a serious participant in the discussion.

The students engaged in various counter-staging strategies in order to garner policy-makers' attention. They knew that, even if they became well-versed in education policy, they would remain at a disadvantage in formal decision-making arenas, like City Hall. Further, because they had not yet obtained formal educational degrees, they would not be considered educational experts. Thus, both Bro/Sis and SBU leaders worked to bring poli-cymakers to *their* turf, namely school classrooms, offices, or rally sites. (Notably, the youth felt like they were primarily audience members vis-à-vis teachers in their classrooms, but became key political actors and school spokespeople vis-à-vis elected officials in the same rooms. The same physical space can serve thus multiple staging roles, depending upon the script being performed.)

The teenagers disrupted previous stagings by collecting their own data, amassing local knowledge with other student groups, and presenting these data to visiting policymakers. In one campaign, SBU members compared their school experiences with those of the Young Intellects, a group of young Muslim women also from the Bronx. Specifically, guidance counselors contacted members of the Young Intellects for pre-college advice several times a year, while SBU members unsuccessfully attempted to reach their guidance counselors for months. The Young Intellects voiced the suspicion that, because many of them were Asian or African immigrants, they were perceived to be outside the 'culture of failure'. In other words, the guidance counselors' typecasting of the SBU members prevented them from performing their true roles or receiving appropriate school resources.

SBU youth collaborated with the Young Intellects to document all assignments they received, their attempts to arrange appointments with guidance counselors, and all meet-ings with counselors. It was only via teaming up with other Bronx youth, ones assigned distinctly different roles, that SBU could document severe counseling inequities within Bronx schools.

To these students, no amount of data is as valuable as firsthand bodily experience in pinpointing the strengths and weaknesses of their schooling. For example, statistics show that the Bronx has fewer veteran teachers than other boroughs, but they do not capture the experience of sitting through classes without enough books, and with young, well-meaning teachers who have not yet mastered a range of pedagogical techniques. Thus, for the PS 186 campaign, Bro/Sis produced a podcast and constructed traveling photography and oral history exhibits to present the local knowledge they collected in their campaign, expertise that complemented technical knowledge and could not be disproved by city administrators.

Indeed, although leaders at the Urban Youth Collaborative (the coalition that includes both Bro/Sis and SBU) regularly recite statistics to bolster their complaints about school overcrowding and violence, they are most excited when hosting policymakers inside the schools. They want these policymakers to see and feel firsthand the crush of quickly grow-ing, awkwardly carried teenage bodies trying to push their way to their subsequent classes, the girls' bathrooms without stall doors, the upper-story floor-to-ceiling windows missing glass panes and bars, the rooms with constant heat neighboring the rooms with no heat in winter, the 45-minute lines before passing through the metal detectors, and the strange smells emanating from classroom closets. They wanted the politicians themselves to feel the indignities of being a student there, together with the tension of imminent violence. The policymakers would then see the disconnect between the educational reforms the students truly needed and the inadequate ones the policymakers usually proposed in City Hall.

Every once in a while, the students accomplish a break-through success through their counter-staging efforts. One school safety campaign, for example, involved a forum where police officers and SBU youth formed respective teams and performed skits about how they perceived the others. The students also drew maps of violence and drug dealing from

Table 2.   Key performative practices in education policy-making: scripting and staging.

	Youth as troublemakers	Youth as stakeholders in education policy
Scripting/ Counter-scripting	Efforts to create particular effects by determining the key characters in the performance (*dramatis personae*) and constructing roles for behavior. Example of script: pedagogical experts, teachers, and policymakers are the primary *dramatis personae*; parents have occasional cameo or guest roles; youth are largely excluded	Efforts to not just undo the effects of the protagonists, but to forward an alternate script and prepare antagonists for new roles of behavior. Example of counter-script: in addition to the *dramatis personae* in the dominant script, students are the ultimate stakeholders in education; in their new roles, they begin to analyze personal experiences via a political lens
Staging/ Counter-staging	Deliberate arrangements of interactions, distinguishing between active players and passive audiences (*mis en scène*). Example of staging: pedagogical experts and teachers advise policymakers in shaping education policy, in meeting rooms and governmental chambers like City Hall; these adults tell students to stay off the public stage and focus on their studies	Arrangements of *new* rules of engagement and interactions, disrupting previous stagings. Example of counter-staging: students build coalitions with adult allies to gain access to the public stage; students develop alternative stages for more deliberative policymaking, e.g. bring policymakers into schools to highlight local knowledge/expertise in the *bodily experience* of education

their perspective, pointing out trouble spots that had not been effectively patrolled by the police. Later, the youth and police officers jointly developed a protocol for more respectful interactions in schools. The youth finally conveyed their expertise in the bodily experience of urban education, which could not be taken away from them.

The above table summarizes the key ways in which the case study SCOs engaged in performative politics to put forward students as political stakeholders in education policy.

Conclusion

Hajer (2005b, p. 644) writes that, 'more important than openness in policy deliberation is the usage of particular techniques that create a meandering conversation that allows a variety of people into the policy deliberation.' In this regard, both SBU and Bro/Sis searched, in Hajer's (2005b, p. 643) terms, for 'particularly effective way[s] of breaking though the [dominant] discursive code'.

Even as they advanced 'rational' grounds for their protests, seeking to enter public fora and to reveal fissures in the discursive code so that they could present their reasons and proposals to policymakers, the students also paid attention to performative aspects of activism. They found that counter-scripting – imagining themselves as leaders and political stakeholders, writing and preparing 'meatier' lines – helped them to convincingly become political stakeholders. Further, even as they sought to attain legitimacy via technical expertise and statistical analysis, they were able to break through the dominant discursive code only by engaging in counter-staging – gaining access onto the stage,

rendering it more inclusive by cultivating alliances, and relying on personal testimonies and tactics that highlighted local knowledge and alternate forms of expertise (Scott 1998). Through these practices, the students paid attention now only to *whether* they participated politically, but *how* – through community mapping exercises, oral history podcasts, and spoken word pieces, for instance, alongside more traditional policy vision statements.

Far from being mutually exclusive, reason-giving and performative politics were sometimes mutually reinforcing (cf. Torgerson 2002). Counter-scripting and counter-staging efforts helped Bro/Sis and SBU leaders to garner meetings with policymakers where, finally, they all sat at the same, deliberative decision-making table. Their campaigns were especially helpful in highlighting the unintended consequences of well-meaning policies, and the importance of checks and balances overall. The students brought distinct perspectives to the problems at hand and to the kind of educational reforms that were needed in response.

Three issues merit further research. First, adult allies oscillated between paternalistic and dialogic practices vis-à-vis the youth. Like other constituency groups with few resources, the students continue to need mentoring and support, but they face steep challenges in finding the sorts of 'mediators' essential to meaningful political participation (Barnes *et al*. 2003).

Second, building a broad-based youth identity is difficult in a context of pervasive segregation. Until a critical mass of suburban high school students, mostly wealthier and more likely to be white and Asian, join urban youth in their struggles for school reform, activists like those discussed here will continue to be portrayed as mere exceptions within an overall 'culture of failure'.

Finally, do these counter-scripting and counter-staging practices work similarly for other groups of marginalized stakeholders? Further research might examine the ways in which stakeholders aiming to reform other policy fields, both inside and outside of SCOs and social movements, construct alternative public stages for deliberation and demonstrate the efficacy of local knowledge and expertise.

Acknowledgements

Notes on contributor

Celina Su is Associate Professor of Political Science at the City University of New York and researches civil society and the cultural politics of education and health policy. She is the author of *Streetwise for Book Smarts: Grassroots Organizing and Education Reform in the Bronx* (Cornell University Press, 2009) and *Our Schools Suck: Young People Talk Back to a Segregated Nation on the Failures of Public Education* (New York University Press, 2009).

Notes

1. For a fuller description of methods in the Leadership for a Changing World study, see http://www.wagner.nyu.edu/leadership/about/methodologies.html.
2. For a fuller description of methods in the study, see the appendix 'Pounding the pavement: research methods' in Su (2009).

References

Alonso, G., Anderson, N., Su, C. and Theoharis, J., 2009. *Our schools suck: students talk back to a segregated nation on the failures of urban education*. New York: New York University Press.

Badillo, H., 2006. *One nation, one standard: an ex-liberal on how hispanics can succeed just like other immigrant groups*. New York: Sentinel.

Barnes, M., Newman, J., Knops, A. and Sullivan, H., 2003. Constituting 'the public' in public participation. *Public administration*, 81 (2), 379–399.

Barrett, W., 2003. The underside of Bloomberg's school reform. *Village voice*, 22–28 October.

Benhabib, S., 1996. *Democracy and difference: contesting the boundaries of the political*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Benjamin, E., 2009. Bloomberg: no mayoral control would 'resurrect the Soviet Union'. *The Daily News*, 25 June.

Bohman, J. and Rehg, W., 1997. *Deliberative democracy: essays on reason and politics*. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Carlo, F., *et al*., 2005. *Youth take the lead on high school reform Issues* [Online]. Available from: http://www.rethinkingschools.org/archive/19_04/yout194.shtml [Accessed 3 August 2009].

Checkoway, B. and Gutierrez, L., 2006. Youth participation and community change. *Journal of community practice*, 14 (1), 1–9.

Checkoway, B. and Richards-Schuster, K., 2004. Youth participation in evaluation and research as a way of lifting new voices. *Children, youth and environments*, 14 (2), 84–98.

Chetkovich, C.A. and Kunreuther, F., 2006. *From the ground up: grassroots organizations making social change*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Community Studies of New York, 2004. Area Profiles [Tabulated Data]. Available from: http://www.infoshare.org/ [Accessed 3 August 2009].

Cornwall, A. and Brock, K., 2005. What do buzzwords do for development policy? A critical look at 'participation,' 'empowerment' and 'poverty reduction'. *Third world quarterly*, 26 (7), 1043–1060.

Cosby, B., 2004. Address at the NAACP's Gala to Commemorate the 50th Anniversary of Brown v. Board of Education, 22 May; reprinted in *The black scholar*, 34 (3) (Winter 2004), 2–5.

Delgado, R. and Stefancic, J., 2001. *Critical race theory: an introduction*. New York: New York University Press.

Dryzek, J., 1994. *Discursive democracy: politics, policy, and political science*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Evans, S. and Boyte, H., 1992. *Free spaces: the sources of democratic change in America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Fine, M., 1993. Democratizing choice: reinventing, not retreating from, public education. *In*: E. Rasell and R. Rothstein, eds. *School choice: examining the evidence*. Washington, DC: Economic Policy Institute, 269–300.

Fine, M., Weis, L. and Powell, L., 1997. Communities of difference: a critical look at desegregated spaces created for and by youth. *Harvard educational review*, 67 (2), 247–285.

Fischer, F., 2006. Participatory governance as deliberative empowerment: the cultural politics of discursive space. *The American review of public administration*, 36 (1), 19–40.

Fung, A. and Wright, E., 2003. *Deepening democracy: institutional innovations in empowered participatory governance*. New York: Verso Books.

Gambone, M., *et al*., 2006. Youth organizing, identity-support, and youth development agencies as avenues for involvement. *Journal of community practice*, 14 (1), 235–253.

Gibson, M., 1997. Complicating the immigrant/involuntary minority typology. *Anthropology & education quarterly*, 28 (3), 431–454.

Giroux, H., 2009. *Youth in a suspect society: democracy or disposability?* New York: Palgrave MacMillan.

Gordon, S., 1968. The community school and decentralization: dilemma or opportunity for planners? *Pratt planning papers*, 5 (1), 31–36.

Guinier, L. and Torres, G., 2003. *The miner's canary: enlisting race, resisting power, transforming democracy*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Hajer, M., 2005a. Rebuilding Ground Zero: the politics of performance. *Planning theory & practice*, 6 (4), 445–464.

Hajer, M., 2005b. Setting the stage: a dramaturgy of policy deliberation. *Administration & society*, 36 (6), 624–647.

Hajer, M. and Uitermark, J., 2008. Performing authority: discursive politics after the assassination of Theo Van Gogh. *Public administration*, 86 (1), 1–15.

Ishihara, K., 2003. *Urban transformations: youth organizing in Boston, New York City, Philadelphia, and Washington, D.C*. New York: Funders' Collaborative on Youth Organizing.

Jacobson, M. and Kasinitz, P., 1986. Burning the Bronx for profit. *The Nation*, 15 November.

Jones-Correa, M., 1998. Different paths: immigration, gender, and political participation. *International migration review*, 32 (2), 326–349.

Karp, S., 2007. Exit strategies: finding the way out of Iraq and NCLB. *Rethinking schools*, 21 (4), 14.

Kozol, J., 1992. *Savage inequalities: children in America's schools*. New York: Harper Collins.

Lee, S. and Weis, L., 2005. *Up against whiteness: race, school, and immigrant youth*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Low, B., Ostrom, E., Simon, C. and Wilson, J., 2003. Redundancy and diversity: do they influence optimal management? *In*: F. Berkes, J. Colding and C. Folke, eds. *Navigating social-ecological systems: building resilience for complexity and change*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 83–114.

Marquez, B., 2001. Choosing issues, choosing sides: constructing identities in Mexican–American social movement organizations. *Ethnic and racial studies*, 24 (2), 218–235.

Medina, J., 2007. Schools plan to pay cash for marks. *New York Times*, 19 June.

Mediratta, K., 2006. A rising movement. *National civic review*, 95 (1), 15–22.

Mediratta, K. and Fruchter, N., 2003. *From governance to accountability: building relationships that make schools work*. New York: Drum Major Institute for Public Policy.

Meier, D., 2003. *In schools we trust: creating communities of learning in an era of testing and standardization*. Boston: Beacon Press.

Morris, A. and Braine, N., 2001. Social movements and oppositional consciousness. *In*: J. Mansbridge and A. Morris, eds. *Oppositional consciousness: the subjective roots of social protest*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 20–37.

Mukherjee, E., 2007. *Criminalizing the classroom: the over-policing of New York city schools*. New York: New York Civil Liberties Union.

Oakes, J., Rogers, J. and Lipton, M., 2006. *Learning power: organizing for education and justice*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Ogbu, J., 1992. Understanding cultural diversity and learning. *Educational researcher*, 21 (8), 5–14.

Orfield, G. and Lee, C., 2005. *Why segregation matters: poverty and educational inequality*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University.

Ospina, S. and Schall, E., 2001. *Perspectives on leadership: our approach to research and documentation for the leadership for a changing world*. New York: Research Center for Leadership in Action.

Payne, C., Strickland, C. and Cobb Jr, C., 2008. *Teach freedom: education for liberation in the African-American tradition*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Polletta, F., 2002. *Freedom is an endless meeting*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Polletta, F., 2006. *It was like a fever*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Rumbaut, R. and Portes, A., 2001. *Ethnicities: children of immigrants in America*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Saito, L., 1998. *Race and politics: Asian Americans, Latinos, and whites in a Los Angeles suburb*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press.

Scott, J.C., 1998. *Seeing like a state: how certain schemes to improve the human condition have failed*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Shirley, D., 1997. *Community organizing for urban school reform*. Austin: University of Texas Press.

Shirley, D., 2002. *Valley interfaith and school reform*. Austin: University of Texas Press.

Stovall, D., 2005. A challenge to traditional theory: critical race theory, African-American community organizers, and education. *Discourse: studies in the cultural politics of education*, 26 (1), 95–108.

Su, C., 2007. Cracking silent codes: critical race theory and education organizing. *Discourse: studies in the cultural politics of education*, 28 (4), 531–548.

Su, C., 2009. *Streetwise for book smarts: grassroots organizing and education reform in the Bronx*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

Torgerson, D., 2002. Policy as performance. Workshop on changing forms of governance and deliberative democracy, Conference of the Netherlands Institute of Government, Rotterdam, the Netherlands, October.

Tyson, K., 2001. Weighing in: elementary-age students and the debate on attitudes toward school among black students. *Social forces*, 80 (4), 1157–1189.

Warren, M., 2001. *Dry bones rattling: community building to revitalize American democracy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Yanow, D., 1999. *Conducting interpretive policy analysis*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.

Yin, R., 2002. *Applications of case study research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Young, I., 2001. Activist challenges to deliberative democracy. *Political theory*, 29 (5), 670–690.

Appendix: Student Voices

The article's conceptual uses of *counter-scripting* and *counter-staging* might be further clarified through attention to more of the students' own words. In their testimony, the students emphasize the importance of their *local knowledge* and *bodily experience* in spurring and informing education reform campaigns.

In the practice of counter-scripting, organizers and leaders at both case study organizations used seemingly offhand complaints by students as building blocks for new speaking roles and incisive critiques:

> Before, I never knew where to start, or where to go from here . . . I thought, 'What could I do, here, by myself?' And the truth is, you can't really do anything by yourself; you have to have a crowd of people with you, to make sure you'll be heard. And when I came here . . . people said, 'Hey, you think school sucks? So do I! That's great; let's work on it!'

In these settings, activists encouraged one another to speak up as authorities and leaders. As one teenager commented,

> When I first came here . . . I heard a whole bunch of youth speak, and actually, [my friend] was in charge of my orientation, so I really felt like, 'Whoa, my homey's really doing it!' It challenged me! 'Wow, they know so much! I want to get to that level!' And I worked until I got to know that much stuff, too . . . Maybe, I can be just like them. I want to be a leader, to be called a leader.

In preparing themselves for new roles in policymaking, the teenagers strategically planned not only what they would say, but how, e.g. what they would wear. In one instance, some youth leaders disagreed with adult organizers about what dress was appropriate. One leader asserted that dress was integral to his political, performative role as an empowered stakeholder: 'Dressing sexy is not improper – it's empowering, intimidating. You can use it. How do you teach empowerment if you're not empowered?'

The students' enthusiasm for education reform stemmed from their personal, deep-seated knowledge of the strengths and weaknesses of their schooling, as well as their immense desire to testify to their bodily experiences in school:

> To be honest, I've noticed a lot of flaws in the structure of the school system itself. Like in standards in English classes, I am really passionate about . . . I would be open to organizing for other issues, but not in the same way as education. . . . I can pay attention every day to connect what I am learning to what works in the school system. It encourages me to learn about the issues more. Like, if I see any bias in the classroom, I would know what I can do about it; I would investigate.

Thus, some students did not believe abstract theories or statistics until they made sense of them in context. One SBU leader noted:

It also really does come down to race, in some ways. From my observations. A person might say, 'White people get this and that.' I am like, 'Well, maybe this person is pretty ignorant, and is just saying that because they do not like white people.' It was put in my mind that white people usually get this, and others that, [but] until I really saw the comparisons, and I really saw it myself, I [had not] thought that it was kind of true.

A Bro/Sis leader echoed such sentiments:

We all know what it is [like] to grow up in this community . . . I mean not even blatant discrimination, but just the school systems that are provided to us, the resources that are provided to us, the fact that we can find more liquor stores in our neighborhood than we do health food stores.

In order to highlight such local knowledge, the teenagers consistently engaged in the practice of counter-staging, establishing new rules of engagement with adults. Often they accomplished this by first inviting policymakers to the schools, away from City Hall, or inviting teachers to organizational offices. In these settings, the students often employed spoken word – a genre enmeshed with personal statements, authenticity, and hip-hop beats, in which the students excelled – to disrupt dominant discursive codes and convey their arguments:

There's many problems with our education . . .
Is it the students' fault? Just try and *think* about their status:
Got books from when the colony's first established . . .
Constantly treating them like a statistic, treating them like lab mice.
Scantrons mess up and lower scores, and *students* pay the price.
Well, if we say it is not the students' fault, let's look at a new vision.
Are the teachers to blame? Now let's just look at *their* position . . .
Forced to teach 30–35 students, and feeling like they have no weight.
Stressed while teaching, and the check ain't even that great . . .
They are raising standards for us, and it sure ain't fun,
And who's responsible for raising standards for all of them?

At campaign events, these more overtly performative pieces often served as introductory remarks, before more traditional vision statements and stakeholder analyses. The youth also attempted to put policymakers on the spot by presenting irrefutable testimonies, ones based on close observation. To outsiders, the broad scope of some of the students' concerns might appear surprising. One student, who lived for a year in western Pennsylvania, noted:

My father was already living out there, so I decided to go out there and live with him . . . In the trailer park, it was beautiful; all that space! Whoa! They had a good sense of community in the school, too. They had Homecoming, they had a football field, they had basketball games, they had concession stands, they had Pajama Day, when you wore your best pajamas there . . . These things made a *big* difference because schools are kind of like a home . . . I never knew what field hockey was until I got there. I was like, 'What is that?' I thought it was a new sport they just made up when I got there! . . . I felt like there was better education out there. They had resources . . . I do not think they had money problems. Like when it comes to science class, you actually get to do science experiments. Now, we just take notes . . . We do not have science labs; we do not have any of that stuff.

Finally, the teenagers' testimonies highlight their deep-seated connections to education policy as multi-faceted. They are aware that their future livelihoods depend upon a good education. One youth stated that, when policymakers portray him as an insolent troublemaker, he sometimes replies:

> I'm not trying to discredit your viewpoint. It's valid. But when it comes down to it, social justice for you is a hobby. For me, it's my life. For you, it's a good idea. For me, it's survival. I have a stake in these campaigns. If they don't work out for you, you have the privilege to go somewhere else.

At the same time, the students' role as the ultimate stakeholders ironically compels them to transcend self-interest in their efforts for reform. As one teenager declared,

> Every campaign we've been working on, some of the changes will happen later on, after we leave high school. That's the funny thing . . . I guess it is because we've been through the issues, we have experienced them, we do not want it to be that way any more. We do not want our kids to be fighting for the same things. We want things to be better for the future.