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Be(com)ing Critical Scholars: The Emergence of Urban Youth Scholar Identities Through Research and Critical Civic Praxis

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Abstract

This phenomenological case study examined the emergence of critical scholar identities among five urban youth who participated in a 2-year critical research fellows program. The program was grounded on the theoretical framework of Social Justice Youth Development, which included the development of self, social/community, and global awareness leading to critical consciousness and social action. Findings depict the personal and programmatic components of nurturing urban youth's critical scholar identities and contribute to the growing body of literature in critical youth studies and scholar identity development with marginalized urban youth.

Keywords

urban youth scholars, critical consciousness, critical civic praxis, urban education, scholar identity, youth agency, UN Sustainable Development Goals

The seemingly polarizing sociopolitical context has inspired a burgeoning body of scholarship centered on new directions in critical youth studies. Such

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metaphors as the Matrix (Cammarota & Fine, 2008), Youthtopias (Akom, Cammarota, & Ginwright, 2008), and Zombies (Conner & Rosen, 2015) have come to frame the imagined and realized worlds wherein disenfranchised youth organize, develop critical consciousness (L. M. Gutierrez, 1995; Watts, Abdul-Adil, & Pratt, 2002), are empowered (Hipolito-Delgado & Zion, 2017), and engage in critical civic praxis (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2007). Recent research has found utility in blending elements from youth activism and youth participatory action research (YPAR) to pursue the goals of youth development (Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Dolan, Christens, & Lin, 2015). Yet, the said literature reveals that opportunities to engage in this type of critical work most often occur outside of traditional educational spaces (Baldridge, Beck, Medina, & Reeves, 2017; Conner & Rosen, 2015; Ginwright, 2004; Kirshner, 2015; Murray & Milner, 2015), although *learning* transpires in and out of formal institutions and what has been referred to as the third space (K. Gutierrez, Rymes, & Lawson, 1995; Rubin, 2007; Soja, 1994).

It has been well documented that urban youth need safe places and spaces of resistance and resiliency (Akom et al., 2008) to interrogate the existing structures and institutions that consistently contribute to the perpetuation of their oppression (Baldridge et al., 2017; Dolan et al., 2015). Often urban youth are left out of conversations and even more so decisions that directly affect them. The need to strengthen youth voice (Dolan et al., 2015; Hipolito-Delgado & Zion, 2017) is as salient as ever in a climate that often criminalizes youth of color, gentrifies their neighborhoods, rejects their cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005), and subjects them to subpar educational opportunities. Bearing this in mind, *The Urban Youth Scholars Fellowship Program (Urban Youth Scholars)*[1] was established drawing inspiration from Cammarota and Fine (2008):

> Young people learn through research about complex power relations, histories of struggle, and the consequences of oppression. They begin to re-vision and denaturalize the realities of their social worlds and then undertake forms of collective challenge based on the knowledge garnered through their critical inquiries. (p. 2)

The *Urban Youth Scholars* was enacted as a 2-year after-school program in an urban-intensive (Milner, 2012) high school in Philadelphia.

At the onset, it is important to frame the way in which *urban* is operationalized in this article. Howard and Milner (2014) contend that urban often serves as a Euphemism for Black, Brown, and poor children, while images of disorder, discipline issues, and low academic achievement (Rury, 2012) are often (mis)represented. To reject such pejorative conceptualizations and to

reimagine urban from a place of decline to a place of possibilities (Leonardo & Hunter, 2007), the *Urban Youth Scholars* centered "the rich array of excellence, intellect, and talent among the people in urban environments-human capital that make meaningful contributions to the very fabric of the human condition in the United States and abroad" (Milner, 2012, p. 558). Through this perspective, we employed Social Justice Youth Development (SJYD; Cammarota, 2011; Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002; Ginwright, Cammarota, & Noguera, 2005) as a theoretical orientation and conceptually drew upon literature in critical youth studies, YPAR, and scholar identity development. In this article, we share the findings from a phenomenological case study of the emergence of critical urban youth scholar identities in the *Urban Youth Scholars* program.

The Possibilities of Urban Youth Agency

As direct heirs of the communities in which they reside, urban youth possess a wealth of knowledge, innovative ideas, and lived experiences that have the potential to transform their communities. Not only do they have the ability to view existing and unforeseen problems with new, fresh eyes, but collectively, they are poised to be change agents who challenge the status quo and perpetual injustices that they themselves and their communities face (Ginwright et al., 2005). The field of critical youth studies stresses the importance of debunking traditional conceptualizations of urban youth that focus on problematic and deviant behaviors such as apathy, crime, violence, and substance abuse (Akom et al., 2008). Such deficit views render urban youth objects of their oppression versus active agents in responding to the myriad structural problems that impede their academic, social, and economic livelihood. Young people who engage in efforts of civic engagement, activism, organizing, and critical inquiry provide a counternarrative to otherwise commonly held beliefs that are often perpetuated within education policy, the media, and the legal system that they are immature and reckless (Conner & Rosen, 2015; Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002; Kirshner, 2015; Morrell, 2004). Akom and colleagues (2008) describe the prospects of youth agency: "young people have the ability to analyze their social contexts, to collectively engage in critical research, and resist repressive state and ideological institutions" (Akom et al., 2008, p. 2). Maintaining asset-based orientations of the capacity of urban youth can ultimately espouse social justice and equity (Akom et al., 2008; Flanagan & Levine, 2010; Ginwright et al., 2005).

Given the radical potential of urban youth to engage in critical social analysis and critical consciousness building (Akom et al., 2008; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Mira, 2013; Watts & Hipolito-Delgado, 2015), to then take

action through various forms of resistance and civic engagement (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2007), research shows that they often feel the loss of a sense of agency as a result of their inability to actively participate in decision-making processes that directly affect them (Midgley & Feldlaufer, 1987; Whiting, 2006). Often times, youth voice is silenced and disregarded by members of their proximal and distal communities (Checkoway, 2011; Ozer & Wright, 2012; Silvia & Duval, 2001). A number of studies on critical youth development demonstrate that there is a strong interest on the part of young people to become actively involved in solving community problems, (Checkoway, 2011; Finn & Checkoway, 1998; Zeldin, Gauley, Krauss, Kornbluh, & Collura, 2017); however, findings also show that young people believe that the decisions made in their community benefit adult members of the community (Kane, 2016; Murray & Milner, 2015), reject their input and suggestions (K. Burke, Greene, & McKenna, 2014; O'Donoghue, Kirshner, & McLaughlin, 2002), and are not enacted for their long-term advantage (Finn & Checkoway, 1998; Lawn & Grosvenor, 2005).

Cultivating critical awareness in youth serves to illuminate dominant narratives that promote the interest of the controlling majority (Morrell, 2004), providing them foundational tools of "understand[ing] the root causes of problems that directly impact them and then take action to influence policies" (Powers & Allaman, 2012, p. 1). Watts and Flanagan (2007) agree that socio-political activism is an important pathway to critical consciousness and civic engagement for youth of color that encourages youth empowerment beyond traditional community service. Similarly, fostering marginalized youth's psychological empowerment has given youth a sense of greater control over their lives and their abilities to affect their communities (Hipolito-Delgado & Zion, 2017; Lardier, Garcia-Reid, & Reid, 2018). Educational programming and activities designed to raise critical consciousness in marginalized students further support the position that when young people are engaged in the civic milieu of their communities, there is a reduction in risky behavior, increase in success in school, and promotion of greater civic engagement later in life (Center for the Study of Social Policy, 2011; Lardier et al., 2018; Morrell, 2004; Serow, Ciechalski, & Daye, 1990). For disenfranchised youth, particularly youth of color, this represents a pivotal moment in their development of youth agency in response to their contextual inequities (Spencer, Dupree, & Hartmann, 1997).

Youth of color are called upon to intuit stereotypes and biases that are inherent within the fabric of society (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995), and therefore, they do not possess the luxury of acting upon what they perceive to be an injustice without considering how society will view their active participation. Their responses to these situations are based upon an understanding

that their marginalized identities are largely "devalued by society" (Hipolito-Delgado & Zion, 2017, p. 702). Particularly, today's youth bear witness to societal pushback and resistance against contemporary movements of social justice such as Black Lives Matter, "take a knee," and the #metoo movements of this generation. Nevertheless, marginalized, minoritized youth possess funds of knowledge acquired through their home and cultural influences (Cammarota & Romero, 2011), which support their sense of agency. In the same regard, YPAR has emerged as a powerful social justice platform to support the development of youth agency.

YPAR and Praxis

YPAR engages youth in opportunities to research issues and problems affecting their daily lives to which they can then take collective action to solve them (Cammarota & Fine, 2008). YPAR has been found to be a valuable component in the improvement of communities at large (Cammarota & Fine, 2008; O'Donoghue et al., 2002; Flanagan & Levine, 2010; London, Zimmerman, & Erbstein, 2003), as well as a tool for advocacy and social change (Akom et al., 2008; Dolan et al., 2015). Centering youth's lived experiences in the YPAR process is critical (K. Burke et al., 2014; Mira, 2013), and for many, the desire to learn about, connect with, and make a difference in their communities are determining factors for venturing into critical research (Chao & Long, 2004). The growing popularity of YPAR with young people as a preferred method of learning and development can be attributed to YPAR's concern with "democratizing knowledge and yielding power to ordinary people as they seek justice regarding social issues that directly affect their lives" (Lac & Fine, 2018, p. 564). For example, Cammarota and Romero's (2011) Social Justice Education Project (SJEP) used YPAR to facilitate participating students' engagement in their own social contexts and acquisition of knowledge in support of their personal and social transformation. Dolan and colleagues (2015) found that YPAR was a significant resource for supporting youth organizing and strengthening youth voice to effect changes in local policies and institutions. These outcomes are what is hoped for in YPAR, to further leverage the potential of historically marginalized youth to become community change agents.

Uniting reflection, theory, and action to arrive at a point of praxis is important in YPAR. Freire's (1970, 2015) conceptualization of praxis as "reflection and action directed at the structures to be transformed" (p. 126) espouses oppressed groups of people's critical awareness of their own condition, and in solidarity with allies they can strive and struggle for liberation. Watts and Hipolito-Delgado (2015) contend that action must be embodied through

strategic behavior at the levels of personal, group, and mass action to advance said liberation, while Akom et al. (2008) describe how critical consciousness is facilitated by bringing praxis to life in their discussion of "Youthtopias":

> Through engagement in real world issues that shape their daily lives such as environmental racism, police brutality, school safety, school closure, tracking, and racial profiling, youth learn to move past victimization and confront unjust social and economic conditions . . . a Youthtopian framework facilitates a process that develops critical consciousness and builds the capacity for young people to respond and change oppressive conditions in their environments. Youthtopias are simultaneously individual and organizational processes that promote civic engagement among youth and elevate their critical consciousness and capacities for social justice and community activism. (p. 10-11)

While the possibilities of urban youth agency and the resulting impacts on their racial, ethnic, class, gender, sexual, and civic identities (Hipolito-Delgado & Zion, 2017; Ibrahim & Steinberg, 2014; Nasir, 2012; Rubin, 2007) have been examined in previous research, less is known about urban youth's development of scholar identities.

Scholar Identity Development

Urban youth are holders and creators of knowledge, even though their histories, cultures, and experiences have been devalued and omitted in formal educational environments (Bernal, 2002). Insofar as their epistemologies and systems of knowing (Ladson-Billings, 2000) are validated, are they able to internalize their own agency in producing new and transformative knowledge? One way of supporting urban youth's contributions to their community is through their development as scholars. The word scholar has widely been regarded to describe an expert; a person who has made important contributions to advance knowledge in a given field of study. Yet, a quick Google image search of the word *scholar* yields a collage of White, (mostly old) men. It is not hard to see how the centering of Eurocentric, patriarchal epistemologies as normative ways of knowing can further alienate and marginalize urban youth of color from seeing themselves as contributors of knowledge. Moreover, scholarship and the methods that systematically advance a field through rigorous inquiry are often reserved for the academy through exclusionary and inherently racist policies and practices (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Nevertheless, nurturing urban youth's scholar identities can be an important component of strengthening youth agency.

Whiting (2006) offers an articulation of a scholar identity model consisting of such descriptors as self-efficacy, self-awareness, internal locus of control,

and racial identity, among others, which are useful for recognizing the fundamental characteristics of underrepresented students' scholar identities. He asserts that youth with positive scholar identities envision themselves as academicians, are studious, competent and capable, and intelligent and talented. Although his model was developed expressly for K-12 Black males, his findings are applicable for young people across racial, gender, and socioeconomic boundaries, with particular emphasis on the positive correlation between scholar identity and racial pride. Researchers are in agreement that positive identity and ethnic identity are reliable determinants of psychological empowerment (Molix & Bettencourt, 2010; Tamanas, 2010); however, the abovementioned praxis (Freire, 1970) requires that youth transition from a state of knowing to a state of doing (Carr, 2003). For this to take place, young people must be afforded opportunities to participate in critical conversations and research, or critical civic inquiry (CCI; Hipolito-Delgado & Zion, 2017), about the issues of injustice that affect them in a manner which allows them to deconstruct these issues on their own terms, to arrive at a point where they can conceive and enact potential solutions. Kirshner (2015) provides a framework for CCI that conceptualizes how students can move from being passive reflectors to active participants and constructors of knowledge. The framework involves three key practices: (a) sharing power with students, (b) critical conversations about educational equity, and (c) participatory action research. Similarly, youth knowledge construction occurs within a given context.

Knowledge Construction in a Changing World

The world that youth encounter today does not resemble the one experienced by young people less than two decades earlier (Nayak, 2016). Technological advances have eliminated temporal barriers in communication and restrictions in connectivity. Foucault (1980) renders prior knowledge disqualified in the context of societal advances. Not only must there be new ways to address old issues, but new issues will invariably need to be approached with new methods when outdated solutions will not suffice. Similarly, Darling-Hammond (2010) describes the need for a shift in how knowledge is constructed, noting that students need to think critically and learn for themselves to apply knowledge in new situations to "manage the demands of changing information, technologies, and social conditions" (p. 4). According to Bruner (1990), learning is not an individual, solitary occurrence; it will always stem from some other source of knowledge. In this sense, prior knowledge cultivated from interactions with adult members in proximal and distal relationships is linked to youth's future knowledge construction. As a result, adult allies are essential to the development of youth's knowledge creation and scholar identity development.

Adult Allies and Partners

The capacity for young people to actively engage and take leadership roles in the critical researching of issues and problem solving of their respective communities requires adults to view them as contributors, partners, and stakeholders of a shared living space (Chao & Long, 2004; Kilroy, Dezan, Riepe, & Ross, 2007; London et al., 2003). Adults must shift their propensity to categorize youth as individuals for whom ideas must be developed (O'Donoghue et al., 2002; Thorne, 1993), for this perspective deprives youth of the opportunity to critically investigate and engage in solutions that will affect the survival of their communities (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002). Adults may not intentionally seek to discourage the participation of young people; rather, many have admitted to being unsure of how to include youth in matters where they customarily have not been involved (London et al., 2003). Nevertheless, unintentional or deliberate resistance by adults who possess power (W. Burke, 2011; Watts & Hipolito-Delgado, 2015) can stymie the development of youth scholar identities. Power-sharing, or even more so, the yielding of power, is often a challenge given the inherent inequality of adult–youth relationships (Ozer, 2016). Interestingly, it is the existence of this power struggle that helps to nurture critical awareness, as youth seek to disrupt the status quo (Morrell, 2004).

Studies exploring the association between youth–adult partnerships underscore the importance of fortifying the generational bond (Camino, 2005; Serido, Borden, & Perkins, 2011; Whitlock, 2007; Zeldin et al., 2017) and emphasize the impact adults have on positive outcomes of youth-initiated efforts. It is often against the backdrop of individuals who have been the bedrocks for previous inquiries and life lessons that budding scholars must attempt to mature and develop their scholar identities. The feelings of discomfort or fear that would-be scholars experience when challenging old ideas or introducing new ones (Checkoway, 2011) are understandable sentiments that can be alleviated when adults share power and support and encourage youth as competent, community builders (Hipolito-Delgado & Zion, 2017; Kilroy et al., 2007). Extant literature also supports the assertion that encouragement from parents and trusted adults (i.e., teachers, counselors, clergy) is a significant component in empowering youth (Diemer & Li, 2011; Hipolito-Delgado & Zion, 2017; Ozer & Schotland, 2011; Tamanas, 2010). On a larger scale, incorporating young people into activities that have a direct effect on policies and programs in their communities allows young people the opportunity to establish and nurture intergenerational bonds (Magnuson & Baizerman, 2007). Of note here is the retort to Foucault's (1980) disqualification of prior knowledge, which is the continuum of historical knowledge that

occurs when these activities are supported by the older members of the community, ensuring that with the infusion of youth's innovative ideas, the culture of the community is preserved.

In summary, the existing literature details the possibilities of critical youth development and critical consciousness building through critical social analysis and participatory action research in support of youth agency. The literature also highlights the development of various identities such as racial, ethnic, and civic identities. However, this body of scholarship could benefit from more knowledge about the specific process of urban youth's knowledge construction and critical scholar identity development. Therefore, this study is interested in how urban youth think about what it means to be a critical scholar and what the process of developing a critical scholar identity entails. Thus, this study seeks to contribute to existing and emerging bodies of scholarship in this area.

An SJYD Framework

The theoretical framework upon which this study is grounded is the SJYD framework (Cammarota, 2011; Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002; Ginwright et al., 2005). SJYD promotes the praxis of integrating critical consciousness and social action so that youth can make sense of and begin to transform their social worlds (Murray & Milner, 2015):

> Critical consciousness and social action provide young people with tools to understand and change the underlying causes of social and historical processes that perpetuate the problems they face daily . . . intimately tied to the concrete ways that young people respond to oppressive forces in their communities. The capacity for youth to respond to pressing social and community issues transforms both youth and the environments in which they live. (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002, p. 88)

SJYD praxis incorporates three levels of awareness: self-awareness, social awareness, and global awareness. According to Ginwright and Cammarota (2002), self-awareness includes identity exploration in relation to one's race, class, gender, and sexuality. As a result, youth gain an understanding of how one's identity may be shaped by privilege and/or oppression through power. Social awareness or community awareness (Cammarota, 2012) promotes students' critical thinking about issues in their own community. The capacity building of social awareness includes students' own ability to analyze complex community problems through the development of skills that encourage investigation, analysis, and problem solving. As an extension of self-awareness, social

awareness also supports students' understanding of how "power is central to knowing how groups and institutions sustain or ameliorate inequalities at the community level" (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002, p. 89).

According to Ginwright and Cammarota (2002), youth gain complete praxis at the global awareness level, which encourages youth to practice critical reflection to empathize with the struggles of oppressed people throughout the world. This includes an analysis of historical forms of oppression such as capitalism and colonialism, White supremacy, and patriarchy, as well as fostering youth's capacity to demonstrate "connectedness with others, empathy with suffering, and resistance to oppression" (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002, p. 90). More specifically, critical civic praxis includes consciousness building to inspire youth toward social justice–oriented change and activism (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2007). The *Urban Youth Scholars* was developed bearing these hallmarks of SJYD in mind, and critical civic praxis was infused throughout the program.

The *Urban Youth Scholars*

The *Urban Youth Scholars* was created by the first author to hone the prowess of urban youth to become critical scholars of issues that often affect their lived experiences. Herein, the program purposed to illuminate the injustices and inequities that students were well aware existed in their communities (Murray & Milner, 2015), yet often felt disenfranchised to address. With generous funding from the Drexel School of Education Office of the Dean, a partnership was formed with the local school to implement the program as a weekly after-school program over the course of two academic years. In the beginning of 2016, the co-authors hosted an interest meeting with potential participating juniors and began recruiting students for participation in the program. From the pool of 11 student applicants, five students were selected to participate by a review committee consisting of the co-authors, the Dean of Education, and a school teacher liaison. The program culminated at the end of their senior year in Spring 2017 after participants' all-expenses-paid trip to present their research at an international conference and a special reception at home to celebrate their accomplishments.

The Participants

All five youth scholars selected to participate in the program remained in the program throughout its 2-year duration. For this study, we began each interview by asking participants to briefly tell us about themselves. Rather than us

provide a description of them, we have included their own words to highlight the aspects of their self and identity that they deem most important:

> I just graduated from high school this June. I'm going off to (University) in the fall and I've been in Philly for about six years now, so since 2010. And before that I was in Boston and New Jersey. (Arielle, 17 years old, African American female)

> I just recently graduated from (high school) and I'll be attending (University) next year. I don't know what I'm going to major in. I applied undecided. But I'm interested in some of the bioethics-related programs that (University) has. So I might major in something like health and societies, which deals in sort of public health, in addition to political science. I'm really looking forward to going to school next year. (Evelyn, 18 years old, White female)

> I just graduated from high school and I've lived in Philadelphia my whole life. My mom is from Ecuador and that's always been a big part of my life. I'm bilingual and I go to Ecuador a lot, and I'm really involved in the culture. And I consider it a really important part of who I am. (Inez, 17 years old, Latina American)

> From an academic standpoint, it's probably important to know that I'm dyslexic, so I've gone to school for dyslexic students and people with special learning needs for most of my academic life, up until high school actually. So ninth grade was the first time I've been in a public school and the first time I've been in the non-special needs oriented school. So when you met me, I was still kind of adjusting to I guess the new environment is just different from what I've basically grown up with my whole life. Well, I'm also Black which is fairly important in all fields of life especially in the highly racialized America that we live in. I'm also bisexual, which comes less into play I feel than my race if I'm completely honest. I am maybe a little bit weird. I kind of prioritize, I think I prioritize my Blackness over my sexuality, which is weird that I have to do either, but still something that I do. I know that I'm intersectional, I'm a bit of a weird intersection just because I'm Black, dyslexic, and the gay thing kind of makes me not a token character, but something along that lines, where I feel like I'm deeper—I fulfill a lot of boxes that people are trying to check off. (Jacob, 18 years old, African American male)

> I come from a developing country. I came here approximately seven or eight years ago. My dad has been here for over 16 years. I'm a big medicine person. I love medicine and science and all this. I'm not so much into technology, science and tech, but I'm more into science. I want to be a cardiothoracic or maxillofacial surgeon. That's my hope. And also, work side by side on reducing inequalities that are happening with women. That will be my main research for college. (Thomas, 19 years old, Bangladeshi American male)

The Program

The purpose of the *Urban Youth Scholars* was to support urban youth's process of critical social analysis wherein they begin to interrogate various social inequalities in their communities and the ways in which sociopolitical power maintains them (Hipolito-Delgado & Lee, 2007). The program did not focus on issues and problems alone, but focused on the generation of solutions through research leading to social action and critical civic praxis (Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Ginwright & Cammarota, 2007). The *Urban Youth Scholars* was purposed to arm students with the knowledge, skills, mind-sets, and dispositions that are often reserved for the academy. Much of the focus of the program was to interrogate what it means to be and who can be a *scholar*. For us, the perpetuation of White, patriarchal ways of knowing and scholarly contributions was problematic and our intent was to support students' acquisition of critical urban youth scholar identities to internalize their positions as knowledge producers and experts in solving problems that directly affect their communities.

The *Urban Youth Scholars* and corresponding curriculum was developed employing tenets of culturally relevant (Ladson-Billings, 1995), responsive (Gay, 2010), sustaining (Paris, 2012), and affirming (Allen, Scott, & Lewis, 2013) pedagogies. Thus, the program was built upon the very strengths that the participants brought to bear on our collective learning experience. Each week we encountered lessons that encompassed critical social analysis and critical consciousness building through various reflective and courageous discussions about our personal realities, local realities, broader community realities, and global realities. We began by having participants situate themselves within their Bio-Ecological Systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) to further engage in the crucial self-reflection and identity work that precludes critical consciousness building (Murray & Milner, 2015). After several lessons of personal reflection and grappling with the intersecting social, political, racial, and economic historical and contemporary realities of urban communities, we began lessons that demystified the "scientific process." We discussed the art and science of research and scholarship and exposed students to diverse epistemologies and paradigms. Also, we learned about critical theories such as critical race theory, LatCrit, QueerCrit, and Black feminist theory and how these theories support critical scholarship. We then learned about the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals (UN SDGs) and how our self and local context is connected to broader community and global contexts in the spirit of SJYD.

The UN SDGs represent 17 goals intended to address systematic barriers to sustainable development across social, economic, and environmental

Table 1. *Urban Youth Scholars*'s Research Topics and Connections to the UN SDGs.

Scholar	Research topic	UN SDGs
Arielle	Food deserts in urban communities	Goal 1: No poverty Goal 2: Zero hunger Goal 3: Good health and well-being
Evelyn	Wastefulness and consumption in urban communities	Goal 12: Responsible consumption and production
Inez	Undocumented students and mental health	Goal 16: Peace, justice, and strong institutions
Jacob	The intersection of urban life and marine ecology	Goal 6: Clean water and sanitation Goal 14 Life below the water
Thomas	The impacts of childhood marriage on young women and girls	Goal 3: Good health and well-being Goal 5: Gender equality

Note. UN SDGs = United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals.

domains (United Nations, 2018). Some of the goals include no poverty, zero hunger, quality education, reduced inequalities, clean water and sanitation, and decent work and economic growth. We decided to use the goals as a foundation for situating students' local context within the global community. Thereafter, each student identified a problem/issue affecting his or her community in support of developing solutions for one or more of the UN SDGs (see Table 1). Murray and Milner (2015) assert the need for students to first develop a cultural, community, and social context awareness as a foundation for critical analysis of oppressive conditions, which can then be broadened to consider connections that might be shared globally. After spending two academic years engaging in critical consciousness building, research knowledge and skill development, researching their topics, and writing a peer-reviewed academic paper (reviewed by the authors and the other scholars, not peer-reviewed in the traditional academic sense), scholars were featured presenters at an international conference and then at a special reception in their honor where they also presented their research to their family, friends, school leaders, and the local Philadelphia community.

Method

This study is a phenomenological case study of how urban youth develop critical scholar identities and make sense of these identities throughout their participation in a critical research fellows after-school program. We asked the following questions:

> **Research Question 1:** How do urban youth engaged in a 2-year critical research fellows program narrate their perceptions of what it means to be a scholar in relation to their own internalization of a scholar identity?
> **Research Question 2:** How do urban youth engaged in a 2-year critical research fellows program narrate the components that contribute to the development of a critical scholar identity?

This design was chosen based on our interest in the participants' perceptions. Particularly, we were focused on the meaning-making process of their lived experiences (Creswell, 2013) as urban youth scholars, wherein we examined the phenomenon of their perceived and internalized scholar identities.

Role of Researchers

We come to this work in the role of program founder/lead researcher (Ayana) and graduate research assistant (Shawnna). As Black women mothers and scholars, our worldview is informed by a Black feminist and critical race lens. In the *Urban Youth Scholars* specifically, we positioned ourselves as facilitators, mentors, collaborators, and adult allies with the youth researchers. We met with students in person weekly over the course of the 2 years (occasionally online over the summer) and worked closely with the students throughout their critical consciousness building and research processes. It was therefore essential for us to manage our own potential biases throughout the research study by keeping in mind our nonunitary subjectivity (Bloom, 1996) in relation to the participants'.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with each student after they had completed the program and graduated from high school. This article is one in a series of articles currently in progress and/or forthcoming from all of the data that were collected over the 2 years in the program (e.g., see Allen-Handy et al., in press). To answer the abovementioned research questions, we facilitated questions about their experiences in the research fellows program and their development as critical scholars throughout their individual research processes. Due to the nature of phenomenological research, questions were framed to support a storytelling atmosphere.

Upon collection of data, interviews were transcribed and analyzed using the following inductive and layered analysis process. We read all transcriptions in their entirety and applied a holistic-content analysis (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zibler, 1998) to gain a global impression of each interview. Next

we employed open coding to identify emerging patterns in the data and then axial coding to identify subthemes (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Then we identified common themes and subthemes across all narratives to which we formulated meaning through the clustering of the themes (Creswell, 2013). We then compared and contrasted students' perceptions of what it means to be a scholar with their perceived scholar identity formation, as well as the point within their narratives that they identify their scholar identity throughout their research processes. Finally, we integrated the clustered themes which then led to the emergence of the study's findings. We assessed intercoder reliability and engaged in the process of intercoder negotiated agreement by comparing codes and reconciling any of the coding discrepancies that emerged among the authors (Campbell, Quincy, Osserman, & Pedersen, 2013).

Findings

This study examined the development of critical scholar identities among urban youth engaged in a 2-year research fellows program. Participants were asked to describe in detail what a scholar was and how they saw themselves in relation to their definition of a scholar. This question was asked to gain more insight into their perceptions of what it means to be a scholar juxtaposed to their own internalized scholar being.

> **Research Question 1:** How do urban youth engaged in a 2-year critical research fellows program narrate their perceptions of what it means to be a scholar in relation to their own internalization of a scholar identity?

Sense of Be(com)ing: Becoming Versus Being

The findings indicated a strong sense of becoming a scholar versus internalizing a true scholar identity. For example, when students were asked how they saw themselves in relation to their understanding of what a scholar is, their narratives demonstrate how youth researchers struggle to see themselves and internalize their scholar identities, but they exhibit the hope that lies within embracing their own process. Inez likened it to a pathway:

> I think I've sort of started on the path to becoming a scholar, but I think I need to do a lot more work and actually produce my own ideas before I would consider myself a scholar

Here, Inez depicts that developing new ideas is a precursor to being a scholar. She has not internalized that she herself is yet a scholar even though she

engaged in this research process and offered various recommendations to the field based on her research. Jacob also demonstrates this sense of becoming a scholar and likewise highlights his path:

> I see myself working towards it. I don't consider myself to be—I suppose in a purely academic sense, I am something of a scholar. But I think in life and in general, I'm working towards becoming more scholarly as my academic path takes me there through college and perhaps grad school and what not. I've always been vaguely curious, but I've never had many answers for the things I'm curious about, and I'm developing answers for my questions, basically, which is exciting and also a little bit frightening

In his narrative, it is evident that he exhibits scholarly behavior for the fact that he is even curious and has research questions brewing. Even still, he also considers himself to be in the process of becoming a scholar. On the contrary, Evelyn never outright states that she is or is not a scholar, but has come to negotiate this tension by focusing on her ideas and how further exploration may support her continual scholar identity:

> I have a lot of ideas and I think that the work that I did with the Urban Youth Scholars program has made me realize that I have a lot of ideas that can be backed up by research, and that should definitely be backed up by more research. And so I think that I have some good ideas. And I definitely hope that in my future education I can do field research and make some calculations and observations of my own.

Arielle highlights the importance of mentorship and adult allies in the development of a scholar identity:

> I think as long as someone helps you along the way then it's easier to see yourself a scholar. They're like, okay, well if you research further and if you research into this more, maybe you'll be able to see something different. I think a lot of support is a good way for you to like see yourself as a scholar.

Arielle underscores that in the absence of adult support, viewing herself as a scholar is a challenge. This being said was in contrast to Thomas. Thomas had internalized his scholar identity. When asked how did he see himself in relation to his definition of a scholar, he posits, "Oh totally! I am fully into solving this problem of underage girl marriage." He had fully embraced his scholar identity.

Another question we posited to gain a deeper understanding of their emerging scholar identities was, "At what point in your research process did you become a scholar?" This question was intentional to a degree because we

wanted to subtly insert "become a scholar" which implied being scholars versus becoming scholars. The students represent various points at which they perceived they became scholars through this process. Thomas noted that he became a scholar at the point at which he presented his research at the international conference:

> After the presentation, people were coming up and asking me questions. I don't know if I've got asked questions like that after my science fair presentations. So that's the part where I realized it feels like a scholar. After the presentations, I think there were three ladies that were coming up and all these other guys.

Inez, Arielle, and Jacob each discuss their scholar identity emergence through their actual written paper and research processes. This finding indicates how each of these students viewed their active participation in the research process, which led to their final paper which was presented at the conference. Similar to Thomas, they demonstrate the ways in which a "final product" supports their sense of a scholar identity:

> Once I was done with my paper and I had finished all or most of the research that went into it, and actually written something and kind of analyzed some of the sources, I felt like I guess I'm somewhat of a scholar. (Inez)

> When I was just going through the different published studies and just kind of reading through them and seeing what other people thought about the situation, I think that really kind of made me feel like a scholar because I was like, okay, well, I'm going in depth on all these little studies that well, not little, but all these that people were doing and kind of creating my own, you could say, study based off of all their research. (Arielle)

> Once I started actually interacting with my material. Once I was working with professor's work and actually dissecting people's arguments and analysis, that's when I figured, this is what scholarly work actually looks like. (Jacob)

Evelyn found both the completion of her paper and her presentation to be important to her emerging scholar identity. The ways in which she is coming to understand her emerging scholar identity are evident in her narrative:

> I think at times when I was writing my essay, I thought this was a pertinent point. This makes sense, and it's supported by research. And again, when I was at the conference, I thought when I saw what other people were doing and how they were presenting their points, I kind of felt like, I can do that, too, just in a different way, without my own field research, because I'm not a college professor or an education professor. Yeah, I thought even if this research is different it's not illegitimate.

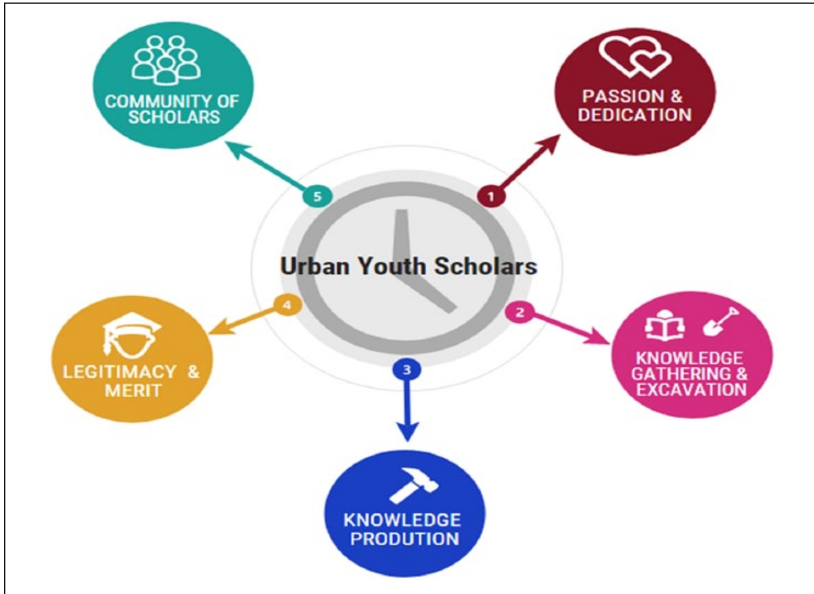

Figure 1. An ecological framework for nurturing critical urban youth scholar identities.

Overall, a sense of *be(com)ing*, the continual process to internalize one's being as a scholar, emerged as a salient finding.

> **Research Question 2:** How do urban youth engaged in a 2-year critical research fellows program narrate the components that contribute to the development of a critical scholar identity?

The *Urban Youth Scholars* intimately tied students' personal lived experiences to their local communities and the collective global human experience. Herein, the program focused on developing critical stances of social justice toward issues plaguing their communities. We sought to gain a better understanding of the personal and programmatic components that they believed most contributed to the development of their emerging critical scholar identity. Six key findings yielded concerning this emergence of critical scholar identities in this study. They are (a) passion and dedication, (b) knowledge gathering and excavation, (c) knowledge production, (d) legitimacy and merit, (e) community of scholars, and (f) time (see Figure 1).

Passion and Dedication

As a result of reflecting on their experiences in the program and throughout their personal research journeys, participants identified that a scholar had to find passion for a purpose-driven cause of dedication. In so doing, they illuminated that a scholar, and particularly a critical scholar, needed to center his or her scholarship in purposes greater than his or her self. For example, Thomas highlighted,

> A scholar is someone who is advanced on a subject that he has to be fully dedicated to. I don't think a scholar should be someone that knows a thousand topics all at once. And not just advanced on a subject, but passionate about making a difference on a larger scale.

While Jacob expands,

> You must consider the broader scope of things as opposed to anecdotal evidence which is easy to come up with. And although it definitely has a place in your research, as it relates to you, you have to understand that it can't be the basis of your argument. You have to be dedicated and passionate about your research. You can't just talk about how things impact you specifically or your personal experience with things just because it's kind of like fluff and it's easy to sift through. And if you don't have an actual supporting bigger argument to impact change underneath it, then it makes for a very weak, easily dismissed thesis.

The other participants also indicated the need to find a sense of passion for a topic that could be inspired by its impact on their proximal relationships and communities. At the same time, they recognized that to become a scholar, their dedication to the topic had to be evident. What is interesting in this finding is the way in which they all tied their passion to their local context, but understood the implications on a broader scale. Evelyn shared how her passion was nurtured throughout her process:

> I always sort of thought whatever I do with my life, with my career, I want it to help others and impact the world for the better and I am now more passionate and better understand how I can do this now from the standpoint of research

Findings exemplify students' understanding that be(com)ing a scholar and even more so a critical scholar necessitated passion and dedication.

Knowledge Gathering and Excavation

Another finding presented is the need to adopt a stance toward ongoing knowledge gathering and excavation. This commitment to continued knowledge

gathering was rooted in maintaining diverse and critical perspectives. Not only were we able to witness students' constant interrogation of a topic, wherein new knowledge gained led to the need for additional supporting knowledge, but it was noted that to be(come) a scholar, there was an underlying mining for "truth" and moreover an interrogation of whose said truth was sanctioned.

Jacob discusses the process of gathering knowledge:

> A scholar actively pursues knowledge or expertise on a certain topic or a range of topics and tries to relate them to each other and see either individual anomalies or larger systems

Jacob's depiction of the pursuit of knowledge is in connection to Arielle who highlights the need for diverse perspectives while gathering knowledge:

> I think learning from different aspects, rather than just looking at your research from one perspective. You can see different perspectives and even if someone disagrees with you, you can understand why they're disagreeing. And that's what makes someone a good scholar. I think once I get into a subject, I try to look at it from different ways. So rather than just being single-minded, I try to see, okay, well this person thinks this way, and this person thinks this way. I start to combine these different ideas to see the subject in a completely different way.

An interesting representation of knowledge excavation is presented by Evelyn. She drew comparisons between a scholar being someone who researches and one who thinks:

> A scholar can be someone who theorizes such as a philosopher who thinks about things without researching it. I think a scholar thinks and does to get an answer.

In the knowledge gathering and excavation finding, students noted the need to expand one's knowledge from broad to focused, and through nurturing their curiosity and question raising, new knowledge could be gained.

Knowledge Production

The finding of knowledge production often went hand in hand with the notion of a scholar engaging in knowledge excavation. It was highlighted in the data throughout that a scholar needed to make a contribution to the field or to the larger community. Inez notes the connection between knowledge gathering and knowledge production:

> A scholar takes time to learn about maybe a bunch of different topics but has one focus, too, on something they're interested in. And they spend a lot of time gathering knowledge and maybe producing their own knowledge through research.

In a different vein, Jacob explains his process of what he deems to be knowledge production:

> I wanted to connect a social issue to the ocean because I have kind of reoccurring interest in subjects of oceanography and marine biology. And it seemed to be—there was a very clear intersection between, even past just economics and culturally between marginalized groups of people and the ocean, from Afro-Caribbean people to I think people who basically depend on the ocean as an economy and for other cultural and social uses. And on a local level because the oceans or water systems are interconnected. It seems like it would relate to me as someone in the city because people in cities don't seem to consider their impact on oceans, especially when they're not near water, when they're landlocked.

Throughout his narrative, he depicts how he is making sense of his topic and even more so his ability to make a contribution through new and dynamic research. It is also noted how he connects this new knowledge to his own positionality and context. Evelyn, on the contrary, presented her skeptical perspective on knowledge production and thus the emergence of her critical disposition:

> I often worry about theories, mine or other people's that are baseless. I'm often critical of theories that seem like they come out of thin air.

In so doing, Evelyn has put forth the tension of creating new knowledge in an often critical context.

Legitimacy and Merit

Legitimacy and merit is another finding for the development of critical scholar identities. All of the participants noted their struggles in believing that their research was legitimate and worthy to make a contribution. One of the biggest struggles faced was their preparation to present their research at the international conference. The participants noted their anxiety and fears about holding their own in a space full of seasoned professors and scholars. Evelyn highlights the tensions she experienced in internalizing her scholar identity:

> I was really excited to talk about what I was researching, but I just wasn't convinced that I was legitimate enough to be talking about it. I think I felt like I ought to be a philosopher to be talking about this and not a high school senior.

As noted earlier, Evelyn constantly alluded to her navigation of the legitimacy process. "I'm not a college professor or an education professor," but at a later point in her process she acknowledges that she felt her research was what she claimed "different," yet she recognized that different did not necessarily equate to illegitimate. Jacob and Inez expressed their negotiation of their legitimacy as nervousness:

> Seeing other presentations at the conference, basically seeing a 30-year-old adult who's been doing this his whole life, definitely kind of gave me this sense of this is just the way of things and well I'm not sure I fit into that. (Jacob)

> It was completely different than anything I've ever done before in front of real professors or adults instead of just other high school students. I was really nervous and it was kind of the thing I most dreaded. When I went to see other presenters and saw them talk about their ideas, it was really interesting and engaging and I thought I would really enjoy to be able to put my ideas out there so I got a little less nervous. And once I was actually presenting in front of the audience, I didn't feel as nervous as I thought I would. (Inez)

Other narratives of the struggles to feel legitimate and then feeling a sense of legitimacy after having presented their research brought about how participants believed their work to have merit.

Community of Scholars

In this work, the nature of the program lent itself to creating a community of scholars. This network of scholars consisted of a faculty member, graduate student, high school teacher/liaison, and high school students. The community of scholars built strong bonds and broke down any perceived boundaries among the participants. Thomas conveys the nature of this community of scholars:

> We didn't just make this project about yourself. It's not just your own project, it's a whole group project that we had been working on for months. It's important to take advice from other people and stuff like that because they all really become helpful.

Similarly, the other student narratives depicted the shared experience of this process and the building of relationships through the weekly meetings and

activities, and traveling abroad together to present their work and have their research featured at the international conference. Not only did they mention the community of scholars that we nurtured among our group, but also the larger network of scholars that they created at the conference.

Arielle states,

> It was nice to kind of have people there to support you while you were researching and helping you along. So if I had gotten to a roadblock, I wasn't sure what to do, everyone kind of helped me push along so that I could get to a better final product.

A subtheme of this is the notion of a public scholar identity. Once students presented their work in retrospect, that was the time in which they felt more scholarly as Thomas noted earlier. Contributing to the body of scholarship helped to reinforce their feelings of a scholar identity, which was even more so nurtured within the community of scholars.

Time

The relevance of time was a pervasive theme in terms of length of time and depth of time as it relates to the perceived emergence of scholar identities among the participants. The notion of time, a relatively nuanced concept and a concept that is quite relative in and of itself, was another theme identified in participant's emerging scholar identities. Time was needed to become a scholar, and for this very reason, most of them identified that they were not yet scholars because they perceived that to be a scholar, time was of utmost importance. They each connected their scholar identity to needing time such as in Inez's narrative that scholars "spend a lot of time gathering knowledge." Similarly, Arielle highlights that "good scholars go in depth and take a lot of time for their ideas and issues." Time is a fluid concept which links all of the other themes together, and is represented in Figure 1 through the clock in the center of the figure.

Discussion

The findings in this study reveal that urban youth scholars fall on various points along the continuum from *becoming* to *being* a critical scholar. This sense of emerging scholar identities reflects the tensions and possibilities that participants in this study encountered with navigating their internalized scholar identities. The *Urban Youth Scholars* focused on youth development (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002) from the inside/out, allowing for

exploration of their personal and community contexts as a prelude to deeper critical analysis of broader and global contexts. Beyond the development of research knowledge and skills, this program focused on nurturing critical scholar identities, leading to student psychological empowerment (L. M. Gutierrez, 1995). Such development of critical consciousness, positive identity, and inspiring social action through civic self-efficacy (Hipolito-Delgado & Zion, 2017) is in line with our findings concerning how urban youth develop these scholarly dispositions through critical research.

Findings also depict the various ways in which such scholar identities can be nurtured from an environmental context perspective (Spencer et al., 1997). The program's structure facilitated a culturally relevant (Ladson-Billings, 1995) and sustaining (Paris, 2012) community of scholars approach. This community of scholars facilitated what participants perceived as the salient components that supported their critical scholar identities as well as a space where youth could build and thrive (Baldridge et al., 2017), an ecology of sorts. Herein, they could cultivate their passion and dedication to an issue through ongoing gathering of knowledge and even more so excavating for "truth" through exploring diverse perspectives. Being able to contribute to existing knowledge was also identified by the participants as having a bearing on their internalized scholar identity and that a sense of legitimacy and merit really contributed to their sense of a scholar identity. Time was the finding that bound the components together.

These findings also support the transformative nature of YPAR to employ urban students' funds of knowledge (Cammarota & Romero, 2011; Dolan et al., 2015) "as equitable partners in the research enterprise" (Akom et al., 2008, p. 5). By investigating their social contexts through research and inquiry, the *Urban Youth Scholars* moved through various levels of self-awareness to social/community awareness and global awareness (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002). The influence on the personal is highlighted by Cammarota and Fine (2008):

> Youth learn how to study problems and find solutions to them. More importantly, they study problems and derive solutions to obstacles preventing their own well-being and progress. Understanding how to overcome these obstacles becomes critical knowledge for the discovery of one's efficacy to produce personal as well as social change. Once a young person discovers his or her capacity to effect change, oppressive systems and subjugating discourses no longer persuade him or her that the deep social and economic problems he or she faces result from his or her own volition. (p. 6)

Having the opportunity to share their research with their local and international communities supported their emerging scholar identities because it situated them as "experts" and public scholars empowered to affect change. This finding is representative of how building youth power can lead to direct action (Dolan et al., 2015).

Implications and Conclusion

The *Urban Youth Scholars* and this study demonstrate the positive outcomes of developing critical scholar identities within urban youth. Nurturing scholar identities by supporting students as they interrogate existing inequities from the personal to the global not only develops global leaders but also actualizes what Ginwright and Cammarota (2002) call shared global empathy. It is essential to build youth's capacity through critical research and critical civic praxis to move them beyond the place of acquiescence as knowledge consumers to knowledge producers. Allowing youth scholars to explore and put forth their ideas to the public as well as educators and policy makers further cultivates the emergence of scholar identities. Through this knowledge production process, urban youth scholars are able to understand and internalize that their contribution is legitimate and has merit to the field and their respective communities.

Often the nature of the academy and even the current neoliberal structures of schools (Johnson, 2012) negate the positive influence of nurturing a community of scholars that can support the research processes and identity formation of critical youth scholars. Most often, research, and non–status quo research specifically, can be isolating. By removing these barriers, students can better internalize their scholar identities. Therefore, it is important to highlight youth scholars' legitimacy from the onset by acknowledging their cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) and the prior experiences that they bring to bear on the inquiry process. Finally, carving out time and space for students to engage in critical research may be beneficial in classroom contexts, informal, and third space learning settings. Classroom spaces in particular are fertile grounds to inspire critical scholar identities so that students do not believe that their contributions and production of knowledge are only valid in an out-of-school context. Rather, the very structure of schools should demonstrate the latter. Thomas highlights this:

> If I had to rate my experiences in the Urban Youth Scholars program, I'd give the program a full 10 out of 10. It's not only about us and our project, but learning from other scholarly people that were out there, and learning how they present what topics are out there. And how to actually talk to them. It's more

> about us learning than us researching and presenting. I think I learned more than my career at [School] over all these years and that felt really good.

Urban youth need increased opportunities to leverage critical research and CCI (Hipolito-Delgado & Zion, 2017) as a platform for advocacy and change in their community. Conner and Rosen (2015) contend that "some might argue that students have not amassed enough knowledge yet about how the world works to act as legitimate advisors, students tend to be viewed as citizens in training, and as such, politically powerless" (pp. 207-208). This study pushes back against this narrative and rather highlights the long-lasting implications of arming urban youth with the tools often reserved for the academy to research and write themselves out of their own oppression. Jacob represents the lasting impact the *Urban Youth Scholars* program sought to inspire. When asked do you see any possible links between your participation in the program and your future, he replied,

> I see myself doing more research in the future, I see it being very likely that I continue to research on my topic specifically. And I very much hope that at some point, I will be in a position to create research opportunities for youth of disenfranchised groups and disenfranchised people because I think it's important to ease the matriculation into higher-level learning, especially for people who have been kept at bay from it for so long. I can't stand it. The people who make things complicated just so other people can't make it makes me very sick.

His words depict the ways in which supporting critical youth scholar identities through research and critical civic praxis can in turn onset a snowball effect wherein they are motivated to bring others into the fold. In so doing, we have aspired for the *Urban Youth Scholars* to inspire "young people with consciousness that facilitate academic achievements and social activism" (Cammarota, 2011, p. 829). We believe by nurturing and making room for urban youth's passion and dedication, knowledge gathering and excavation, knowledge production, nurturing legitimacy and merit through public scholarship, and creating a community of scholars, with time and patience urban youth can move further along the continuum of be(com)ing scholars.

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