

Owning an Education: Young People Inquiring into their High School and College Educations

Finance Equity and Access to College Projects

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The Finance Equity and Access to College projects are joined by PAR methodology and a commitment to having young people inquire into the circumstances and conditions of their own education, in both the present and the future.

The first of these projects grew out of the Opportunity Gap Project (see link on this website) and its desire to do participatory research with young people to investigate “race, class, and educational opportunity in education.” In 2002-2003, two groups of young people at East Side Community High School chose to train as youth researchers inquiring into the conditions of their education, as part of the school’s internship program. Meeting twice a week over the course of a semester, these groups defined more specific research topics, and then interviewed academics, politicians, teachers, principals, and others as they sought to understand the history, politics and economics of secondary and higher education in New York City and beyond.

In the fall semester, 12th graders in the internship chose to focus on conditions in their own high schools. Opening the conversation with a wide-ranging discussion around student voice, parent involvement, student-teacher relationships and other topics, students eventually narrowed down their interests and chose to examine issues of finance equity in New York City education. They began by learning about the case that was working its way through the New York State court system at the time, CFE v. State of New York. This was followed by student-directed research into the history of “rights” to an education in the U.S. and New York State specifically. Students chose to interview principals about school funding, visit schools around New York City and the suburbs, design/administer/analyze of a survey of students’ and parents’ knowledge about educational resources, and engage in conversations with state senators and city council members. At the end of the semester, students wrote an article about what they had learned (see “Urban Students Tackle Research on Inequality: What You Thought We Didn’t Know”. *Rethinking Schools*. Vol. 18, Number 1. Fall, p. 31-32); they also made a series of presentations to students and teachers at East Side, informing them about the issues of educational equity facing New York City schools. Students wrote in *Rethinking Schools*:

“In comparison to other high schools in the city, East Side’s resources aren’t the greatest, but they aren’t the worst. The gym isn’t really a “real” gym. The ceiling is so low that when one of us tries to make a jump shot, the basketball hits the ceiling. Our library is too small and it’s inadequate in terms of books, and our science labs are virtually nonexistent. At the same time, because our teachers take the time out to write numerous grants to get more activities and resources to our school, we have an arts program, a college advisor, and some other resources. We benefit greatly from this. At the same time, we know other schools get these kinds of things without this extra effort—they get it because they have money in

their budgets for it. We wondered why our school was so broke and if we are being cheated of an education, so we decided to take action.”

In the spring semester, 11th graders at East Side – also asked to consider issues of “race, class, and educational opportunity in education” - chose instead to focus on access to higher education. Interestingly, after discussing a range of topics from the fairness of the SATS to affirmative action to the military as a route to college, students once again zeroed in on money as central to educational opportunity: in particular, the availability and costs of financial aid for college. In students’ own words:

“America is supposed to be the “land of opportunity”, which means if you are poor you have the chance to become successful. Students from low-income families should share the same opportunities as students from high-income families, including the chance to attend college. Unfortunately, this is not the way it always works here. At the current moment New York is facing an economic downfall, and the first thing the state is doing is cutting funding to our public higher education. Tuition hikes at CUNYs and SUNYs will make it harder for students to afford these. Opportunity programs that help low-income students go to college are being cut as well. These schools and programs were meant to give everyone the same chance of succeeding in life, but that opportunity is being cut down to nothing.

We are part of a group of 11th grade students from East Side Community High School who have been doing a youth research project. For this project our main question was: how are current budget cuts affecting higher education? We wanted to learn about this issue because our parents aren’t making enough money to flat out send us to college and although it is already hard, the government is making it harder. We began this project when the country was debating going to war in Iraq which we knew would cost lots of money and could affect our chances of going to college.

To find out the answer to our question we visited colleges, and interviewed many people including: professors, college admissions counselors, college students, financial aid officers, scholarship representatives and other people we thought would be helpful. As we talked to all these people, our question expanded to include understanding how we could afford to go to college, given how much it costs. We believe that all young people should know about these things, as well as the political changes that are going on right now which will make it harder for them to go to college.”

At the close of the Opportunity Gap project, an outgrowth of this work continues at the Institute for Urban Education, located at the New School in New York City (see www.lang.newschoo.edu/iue/). Here, through the College Explorers program, 9th and 10th grade students use an inquiry/research approach to build skills and explore college by getting to know college students, visiting college campuses and interviewing staff and faculty there, and exploring their own questions about higher education. PAR work around access to college continues to grow as the Institute itself expands.