Peers, Power, and Purpose:
Philosophical and Sociological Perspectives on the Theory of Peer Social Capital in Schools

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Abstract: Youth activation can take a multitude of effective forms, which are only recently being explored at scale. Although a highly promising form of youth-adult partnership, a commonly accepted nomenclature to guide high school implementation and practice has yet to be constructed. Sometimes referred to as peer social capital or instrumental assistance, youth activation occurs when young people act to improve their schools. Youth activation takes off from young people's keen interest in making their school experiences more rewarding and growth-oriented and more likely to encourage engagement, thriving, and development in the student body. Alongside adults who embrace young people's authentic leadership potential, youth activators mobilize their peers and motivate a sense of engagement and belonging, which contributes to positive school experiences. Students become problem solvers rather than problems to be solved.

On Friday, March 9, 2018, less than one month after the tragic shootings in Parkland, then Governor of Florida, Rick Scott, signed into law Senate Bill 7026, otherwise known as the Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School Public Safety Act. It was a remarkably swift legislative response in a state famous for its vigorous protections of gun owners. As Patricia Mazzei reported in the *New York Times,* at the signing ceremony, Governor Scott credited the classmates of the slain students and their parents for inspiring the bill and "praised them for helping persuade lawmakers to pass legislation." Governor Scott was reported as stating, "You made your voices heard… you helped change your state. You made a difference. You should be proud."[1] The same article quoted Rebecca Schneid, the 16-year-old editor of the Stoneman Douglas High newspaper, *The Eagle Eye*. Though not completely satisfied by the reach of the bill, Schneid reportedly said: "I never really expected to get something done so fast. We've been calling them out, and that really scared them. And that's scaring them into making sure they actually do represent us. They know that if they don't, we're going to vote them out. We're going to keep sending people to Tallahassee because when we go away, this goes away."[2]

The difference between Governor Scott's comments and Schneid's illustrates one vanguard of current American education reform. Governor Scott represents the importance of student voice, but Schneid demonstrates youth activation. Scott's language, while laudatory and appreciative, is also relatively passive. Students "help." They don't scream or shout or argue or demonstrate, but rather they "make their voices heard." They don't change the world, they "make a difference." The implication is that student protest is an act that is accomplished and done. Temporally, according to Governor Scott, this is already a historical act — to be commended and remembered — but essentially over and done with.

Schneid's vision and language, on the other hand, launch the student voice dimension into a new realm. Her language is action-packed. She and her partners "expect," they scare, they call out, they make sure, and they "keep sending." For the Stoneman Douglas High School youth activators, their work is ongoing and demands a program of vigilance and measurement.

[1] Mazzei, P. (March 9, 2018). Florida Governor Signs Gun Limits into Law, Breaking with the N.R.A. *The New York Times*. https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/09/us/florida-governor-gun-limits.html
[2] Ibid.

Temporally, they are planning for the future. Senate Bill 7026 is not history; it is a milestone on a longer strategic path. Schneid vows to take responsibility, because, and it bears repeating, "when we go away, this goes away." Schneid's voice is certainly sounded and heard, but her vision assumes responsibility and continued responsiveness. It should be noted that the Parkland students were able to leverage their position of relative privilege to attract national and international media attention in ways that communities of color have not been typically afforded. I mention Governor Scott's and Schneid's reflections to illustrate the distinction between youth voice and the kind of youth activism practiced by young people in schools and communities throughout the country. The point is youth activists don't just voice their observations and make suggestions; they pursue measurable goals and achieve demonstrable results.[3]

Peer Social Capital and Youth Activation

Youth activation can take a multitude of effective forms, which are only recently being explored at scale. Although a highly promising form of youth-adult partnership, a commonly accepted nomenclature to guide high school implementation and practice has yet to be constructed. Sometimes referred to as peer social capital or instrumental assistance, youth activation occurs when young people act to improve their schools. Youth activation takes off from young people's keen interest in making their school experiences more rewarding and growth-oriented and more likely to encourage engagement, thriving, and development in the student body. Alongside adults who embrace young people's authentic leadership potential, youth activators mobilize their peers and motivate a sense of engagement and belonging, which contributes to positive school experiences.

Realizing that COVID-19 school interruptions may have been an inflection point for the recognition of the effectiveness of youth activation, Chelsea Waite of the Christensen Institute recently released a report on a survey of the emerging field of student-run support services. According to Waite, "As schools develop strategies for supporting students to both survive and thrive, the power of peer social capital is a lesson worth remembering. Across the entire high school to career pipeline, peer networks are an immense, but still latent, resource in the student success equation."[4] Waite highlights four ways that peer social capital is leveraged by schools, colleges, non-profits, and the students themselves to measurably improve outcomes:

1. Social support to foster belonging, identity formation, and social and emotional skills;

2. Academic support to drive learning outcomes and keep classmates on track;

3. Guidance support to expand post-graduate options and ease transitions;

4. Mental health support to promote well-being and reduce loneliness.[5]

Waite documents work already being done in these four modalities, arguing that student-driven success occurs because it leverages the nascent social capital that resides in every school setting. For Waite, "Social capital describes access to, and ability to mobilize, relationships that

[3] Portions of this paper originally appeared in Sherman, Robert and Frome, Keith W. (2019). *A Guide to Youth Activation: Peers, Power, Purpose and Partnerships.* PeerForward, Inc.
[4] Waite, Chelsea (2021). *Peer Connections Reimagined: Innovations Nurturing Student Networks to Unlock Opportunity.* Christensen Institute, 3.
[5] Ibid.

help further an individual's potential and goals. Just like skills and knowledge, relationships offer resources that drive access to opportunity."[6] In the following discussion, I want to establish the foundations of Waite's taxonomy by pointing out that there is a significant, antecedent psychological, sociological, and philosophical body of literature that supports and deepens the work already being done in the area of peer social capital. For the purposes of this paper, I'll use the term "youth activation" to refer to the deliberate and systematic leverage of peer social capital networks stipulating, specifically, that *youth activation* occurs when *youth, along with their peers and school/civic partners, create and execute student-designed solutions to pressing challenges that they themselves identify in their schools.* In particular, youth activators:

> **Challenge**: They *identify* an important issue — a pressing problem or compelling vision that matters, and to which a solution or improvement is sought;
>
> **Solve**: They *generate* youth-powered solutions that can make a measurable difference; and
>
> **Partner**: They *ally* with peers and school/civic leaders to work on the identified pressing problem in order to increase impact and press resolution.

To understand the dynamics of youth activation, the concept must be distinguished, but not entirely separated, from related concepts of youth *voice* and youth *agency*. Within the context of the development of youth activation as an area of study, the University of Chicago Consortium on School Research emphasized the developmental importance of addressing student agency in schools. In the consortium's 2015 report on "integrated identities,"[7] *agency* is defined as the feeling of being effective and being able to influence one's world positively, knowing how to get what you need to progress or problem-solve. Likewise, *voice* refers to the ability to communicate feelings and goals and to participate through one's actions and words.[8] By focusing on the perspectives and needs of the community, youth activation integrates and catalyzes student agency and voice. Youth activation in practice incorporates performance management and organizing techniques to develop stronger renegotiated relationships with adults, some of whom may have broad influence in a school or district. Youth activation creates learning environments that emphasize the importance of peer relationships and collaboration, where goals for improving the community can be verbalized and established as opportunities for student voice, and collective actions can be taken to realize school improvement goals as opportunities for student agency. The practice of youth activation prioritizes student-determined goals and places youth interest and motivation at the core of the educational enterprise. Working with and alongside adults whose roles are supportive and facilitative, young people positively impact the school experience for themselves and their peers. Through youth activation, students hypothesize and act.

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[6]Waite. *Peer Connections Reimagined*, 4.

[7] Dickson, S., Ehrlich, S. B., Farrington, C., Hayes, K., Heath, R. D., Johnson, D. W., Turner, A. C. (2015). *Foundations for Young Adult Success.* The University of Chicago Consortium on School Research. https://consortium.uchicago.edu/publications/foundations- young-adult-success-developmental-framework

[8] Sturgis, C. (2015). *Three Factors for Success: Agency, Integrated Identity, and Competencies.* Competency Works. https://www.competencyworks.org/reflections/three-factors-for-success-agency-integrated-identity-and-competencies/

Youth-Adult Partnerships in an Era of Supply-Side School Reform

There are two fundamental reasons schools tend not to be structured in ways that unleash the power of students through authentic youth-adult partnerships: supply-side school reform policies and the banking metaphor of learning and teaching that continues to bewitch educational practice. Recent decades of school reform efforts have focused on the supply side of the education equation and neglected the demand side. Instead of investing in developing assets that already exist in communities with struggling schools, namely the capacities of students and families, the mainstream reform agenda addressed school-side deficits by externally supplying everything from technology to training to standards to assessments to brand new schools and new leaders. Two of the most influential educational reform documents of the past three decades, *A Nation at Risk* (1983)[9] and *The Turnaround Challenge* (2007),[10] recommend myriad supply-side responses to the urgency of diminished student success rates. Neither of these reports mentions or recommends leveraging the power of young people to influence and drive their classmates to take charge of their academic and career narratives or to improve the lives of their families and friends. As previously noted, young people are naturally motivated to improve their given situation, but schools are not investing in the support and structures necessary to catalyze and encourage this natural inclination. A typical school budget does not allocate expenditures for implementing anything resembling a youth activation strategy, which does not naturally fit into standard school budgeting categories. "Student Support" dollars are spent on adults — guidance counseling, health, attendance, and special needs service providers — but not on students supporting students.

In addition, a pernicious framework organizes much educational theory and practice, which the Brazilian educator and philosopher Paulo Freire called the "banking model."[11] This educational dynamic situates students as empty vaults to be filled by the banker/teacher with currency, i.e., knowledge, standards, and skills. The teacher acts on the student, who is passive and academically disconnected from his or her classmates. The role of the student is to display the amount absorbed or "banked" through a series of tests and assessments. It is no coincidence that "accounting" and "accountability" are related words that dominate contemporary educational practice.

Divorced from a concomitant focus on the power and assets of students and families, supply-side reform and the banking metaphor of pedagogy have contributed to decades of lackluster outcomes. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, even though high school graduation rates and college enrollment rates were increasing, college completion rates had been stubbornly incremental. In 2015, 12% of low-income high school students achieved a bachelor's degree, signaling an increase of only six percentage points over a span of 44 years.[12] Not surprisingly, over the same timeframe, the percentage of Americans who were earning more money and enjoying a higher standard of

[9] Bell, T. H. (1983). *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform*. The National Commission on Excellence in Education.
[10] Calkins, A., Guenther, W., Belfiore, G., & Lash, D. (2007). *The Turnaround Challenge*. Mass Insight Education & Research Institute.
[11] Freire, P. (2000). *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (M. B. Ramos, trans.). Continuum Publishing Company.
[12] *Indicators of Higher Education Equity in the United States: 2017 Historical Trend Report*. (2017). Pell Institute. http://pellinstitute.org/downloads/publications-Indicators_of_Higher_Education_Equity_in_the_US_2017_Historical_Trend_Report.pdf

living than their parents, i.e., living the "American Dream," tumbled from 90% to 50%.[13] Pointing to inadequate education as well as increasing rates of crime, drug abuse, depression, suicide and obesity, a U.S. military organization determined that 75% of American youth were ineligible to serve in the military.[14] Within this context, youth voice, agency, and activation proponents are seeking to invert the supply-side, banking paradigm with the expectation that outcomes on numerous measures, from academics to physical and mental well-being to hopefulness to civic engagement, will significantly improve, especially as schools emerge from pandemic restrictions.

Foundations of Youth Activation Theory

Generating a robust youth activation theory requires attention to a large body of interdisciplinary literature with entries from the fields of sociology, youth organizing, developmental psychology, neuroscience, civic education, and moral philosophy. Among these foundational fields, the philosophical aspects of youth agency, voice, and activation have been largely overlooked, even among the most ardent youth advocates. Here, my goal is to survey the scholarly foundations of youth activation theory grounded in advancements in research on school culture, with the hope that future practitioners will take up a more in-depth exploration of these and other frameworks.

Sociological Foundations of Youth Activation

Beginning with the work of Otis Dudley Duncan in the 1950s and 1960s to more recent studies by Robert Crosnoe, Laurence Steinberg and Andrew Sokatch, quantitative sociological research has documented both the positive and negative impacts of peer influence on academic achievement and social mobility. Sokatch's regression analysis study of postsecondary outcome data suggested that among a cohort of low-income high school students of color, peer-group expectations were the greatest predictor of college attendance.[15] Sokatch found that having encouragement from friends who planned to attend college increased the students' chances of enrolling in college by nearly 30 percentage points.

Much of the sociological research on youth activation (which Crosnoe and other scholars refer to as "instrumental assistance") turns on the distinction between formal and informal schooling processes, although in many cases, a school's informal and formal processes are organically intertwined and impact one another. For example, the intended outcomes of a school's formal processes may be thwarted or accelerated by its peer networks and groupings. In order to understand how a school's formal processes work, one must also understand its informal, social context. Formal processes involve the deliberately designed and constructed aspects of schools as institutions including curricula, success metrics, calendars, standards, disciplinary procedures, evaluations, awards, extra-curriculars, student and faculty evaluations, and academic groupings. Informal processes are found in the social context of a school, including how peers select their social groups, choose their identities, and visualize their futures.

Once the interplay of formal and informal processes is understood, then policies and programs may be manipulated and implemented to harness the power of positive peer influence

[13] Chetty, R., Grusky, D., Hell, M., Hendren, N., Manduca, R., Narang, J. (2016). *The Fading American Dream: Trends in Absolute Income Mobility Since 1940*. http://www.equality-of-opportunity.org/data/
[14] Christeson, W., Messner-Zidell, S., & Taggart, A. D. (2009). *Ready, Willing, and Unable to Serve*. Mission: Readiness. Military Leaders for Kids. http://cdn.missionreadiness.org/NATEE1109.pdf
[15] Sokatch, A. (2006). Peer Influences on the College-Going Decisions of Low Socioeconomic Status Urban Youth. *Education and Urban Society*, *39*(1), 128-146. https://doi.org/10.1177/0013124506291783

in order to drive academic and social-emotional outcomes such as belonging, well-being, and a sense of hope. Published in 1961, James Coleman's *Adolescent Society: The Social Life of the Teenager and its Impact on Education*, was among the first studies to make this argument. Coleman's work suggested that because interscholastic athletic competitions nurtured a school's positive peer culture, schools should also establish academic leagues to similarly inspire each student to pursue academic achievement as a service to the school's community.[16] Crosnoe extended Coleman's arguments in the 2011 book *Fitting In, Standing Out*. Crosnoe's mixed-method study explored how social aspects of schooling impacted academic achievement.[17] By analyzing a school's social structure in terms of its peer networks (people you know) and its "crowds" (self-selected groupings that give participants a sense of identity), Crosnoe demonstrated that networks and crowds can and do positively motivate students to succeed and to engage in pro-social behaviors. Crosnoe noted that schools could leverage the social dynamic by intentionally strengthening positive peer influence and employing the conduits of networks and crowds through extra-curriculars, peer mentoring systems, and accessible mental health services. A robust summary of this literature can be found in "The Social Contexts of High Schools" by Crosnoe and colleagues. [18]

Philosophical Foundations of Youth Activation

In addition to sociological studies, theoretical tenets of youth activation can be located in the literature on moral development from the field of developmental psychology. I contend that these developmental frameworks take shape for youth activation when read alongside theories of compassion and hope from the field of moral philosophy. A few examples illustrate the importance of philosophical foundations to any discussion of youth activation.

In Lawrence Kohlberg's theory of moral development, people develop a capacity to think and act morally by progressing through six stages of moral reasoning arranged into three levels, the pre-conventional, the conventional, and the post-conventional. In pre-conventional moral reasoning, the person is either interested in avoiding punishment or enhancing their self-interest. Those operating at the conventional level make moral decisions based upon considerations of conformity to social norms, such as being a "good boy" or "good girl," or analyzing the right course of action based on what protects the social order from chaos and confusion. The post-conventional level represents, for Kohlberg, the highest platform for moral thinking and includes the fifth and sixth stages of moral development. Thinkers and actors at the fifth stage seek to contribute to a social contract that enhances the well-being of as many individuals as possible, whereas those who operate at the sixth stage base their judgments on universal moral values such as goodness, justice, truth, and fairness.[19]

Youth activators tend to exhibit at least stage-five thinking in Kohlberg's taxonomy and many speak in stage-six terms using universal moral precepts to explain their work. For instance, a team of youth activators wanted to improve the relationships between 12th and 9th graders in

[16] Coleman, J. S. (1961). *Adolescent Society: The Social Life of the Teenager and its Impact on Education*. Free Press of Glencoe.
[17] Crosnoe, R. (2011). *Fitting In, Standing Out: Navigating the Social Challenges of High School to Get An Education*. Cambridge University Press.
[18] Crosnoe, R. et al. (2018). The Social Contexts of High Schools, in Schneider, B. (Ed.). *Handbook of the Sociology of Education in the 21st Century*. Springer International.
[19] Kohlberg, L., & Hersh, R. H. (1977). Moral Development: A Review of the Theory. *Theory into Practice, 16*(2), 53–59.

their Idaho high school which had a history of toxicity. They devised a Kindness Week campaign wherein 12th graders would do acts of kindness for the underclassmen and register these acts on Instagram. The mayor of their town caught wind of the campaign and declared that every citizen should participate in Kindness Week, renting space on a billboard to announce the effort. This example, indicative of many documented youth activation efforts, reveals elements of stage-five and stage-six thinking, including taking action to authenticate and reinforce the social contract to serve the well-being of individuals throughout the social arenas involved in the activation. Expressions of activation echoed beyond the walls of the school in service of universal values such as fairness and kindness.[20]

Criticisms of Kohlberg's research have pointed to its exclusion of women and girls, its neglect of relationships and narrative, and its lack of attention to the power of care and empathy in moral development and action. For example, analysis from both Carol Gilligan's *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*[21] and Nel Noddings' *Caring: A Relational Approach to Ethics and Moral Education*[22] suggested that Kohlberg's theory failed to account for how compassion motivates, drives, and lubricates moral action. Though youth activation uses performance management and community organizing techniques to drive measurable outcomes, these outcomes ought to be grounded in a framework of compassion.

The philosopher Martha Nussbaum's distinction between "empathy" and "compassion" is helpful here. Empathy, Nussbaum argues, is the ability to reconstruct another's experience without judgment about the value or nature of the experience, i.e., whether it is good or bad or paltry or happy or sad. Compassion is more complex, involving three elements: 1) a judgment that someone is suffering; 2) the belief that the person is innocent, that is, they did not bring about their own suffering; and 3) the understanding that we have what Nussbaum terms a "related vulnerability" in that we identify with the person because the same misfortune could befall us someday, which authentically connects us to the person as we share with them a common set of values and understandings of what is good and just. Clearly, we need the power of empathy to be compassionate. Nussbaum makes the point, though, that when the three elements of compassion are in place, their conjunction is "very likely to lead to action."[23]

Compassion is not a disposition but an *action* resulting from ideation. Thus, youth activated students are propelled to act and to, in the words of Crosnoe, "instrumentally assist"[24] their classmates in meaningfully and measurably improving their situation. In *The Monarchy of Fear*, Martha Nussbaum explores fear, anger, disgust, envy and jealousy as emotions and mindsets that tear the fabric of a community, an institution, and a country. Nussbaum describes the typical

[20] Nampa, Idaho School District Newsletter. (September 27, 2018). Skyline [High School] Senior Leads Kindness Day Efforts. https://www.nsd131.org/apps/news/article/922832 Nampa, Idaho Mayor's [Debbie Kling] Newsletter. (September 2019). Community Kindness Week, 16-21 September 2019. https://www.cityofnampa.us/DocumentCenter/View/10242/01-September-2019-Nampa-Highlights

[21] Gilligan, C. (1982). *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*. Harvard University Press.

[22] Noddings, N. (1984). *Caring: A Relational Approach to Ethics and Moral Education*. University of California Press.

[23] Nussbaum, Martha C. (2001). *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions*. Cambridge University Press, 335.

[24] Crosnoe et al. The Social Contexts of High Schools.

large American high school as a "veritable cauldron of envy."[25] For Nussbaum, the antidote to fear, anger, disgust, envy, and jealousy is hope, and she makes a useful distinction between idle and practical hope. Idle hope is merely wishing while practical hope establishes a goal for betterment, makes a plan to achieve this better state, and acts to pursue the goal.[26] Through storytelling and listening, youth activators may empathically imagine the situation of their classmates and share one another's vulnerabilities. They understand that the status quo of their community is not the fault of their classmates and friends but an accident of zip code as well as the result of centuries of injustice.

Youth activation points to the sociological, psychological, and philosophical thinking that underpins the kind of paradigm shift our educational system needs and for which our students yearn. The desired paradigm shift finds expression in a distinction between schools of envy, that emphasize individual academic, athletic and social achievement, and schools of hope that focus on agency, voice, youth activation and community-wide achievement. As Robert Sherman and I have summarized elsewhere[27], schools of hope are characterized by the following attributes:

1. Students are regarded and treated by all stakeholders as sources of solutions.

2. Students identify problems/structures/attitudes/rules/habits that are meaningful and consequential, and whose improvement would be important to their peers and their communities.

3. Adults provide support, scaffolding, and structure as allies and partners, not as authoritarian figures.

4. Adults and students share power.

5. Students are accountable as they pursue meaningful, measurable goals.

6. When appropriate to the challenge, the greater community outside of the school is engaged and supportive of youth activation through frequent communications and celebrations.

7. The administrative apparatus of the school (schedule, resources, budget categories, evaluations, discipline processes) supports and helps facilitate all aspects of the process of youth activation.

Building on these attributes, schools may be reimagined and organizationally reconstructed as places where students are viewed as problem solvers rather than problems to be solved.

[25] Nussbaum, Martha C. (2018). *The Monarchy of Fear: A Philosopher Looks at the Political Crisis*. Simon & Schuster, 147.
[26] Nussbaum. *The Monarchy of Fear*, 206.
[27] Sherman and Frome, *A Guide to Youth Activation*, 31