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The praxis of ethnic studies: transforming second sight into critical consciousness

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This article focuses on a youth participatory action research (YPAR) program called the Social Justice Education Project (SJEP) that fostered young people of color’s critical consciousness. Their critical consciousness emerged through praxis (reflection/action) while focusing on preserving ethnic studies in Tucson, Arizona. Because the SJEP home was in ethnic studies, the youth also struggled to keep their program alive. The Arizona Department of Education claimed the program bred ‘radicals’ who wanted to overthrow the government and therefore lobbied the state legislature to ban K-12 ethnic studies in public schools. In January 2012, the ban went into effect, shutting down ethnic studies classes as well as the SJEP. Young people’s qualitative research on their struggle led to action to save the education that gave them hope for a more equitable and just world. The article addresses the praxis of YPAR, which sparks a thought process leading to the drive to take action. Observing and documenting educational injustices inspire the need to seek radical change of Self and schools. Through the reflection and action facilitated by YPAR, young people of color construct a message about the importance of ethnic studies for individual as well as social transformation.

Keywords: ethnic studies; praxis; critical consciousness; Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR); Social Justice Education Project (SJEP)

In the Souls of Black Folks, W.E.B. Du Bois writes about a ‘double consciousness’ in which African Americans perceive the world through two competing lenses. The first lens views the Self pushing forward from the social position of a marginalized other. The second lens focuses on how the dominant social group describes and represents marginalized others to drive them backward toward subordination. These competing lenses facilitate what Du Bois identifies as a ‘second sight’ that provides people of color with an extraordinary social perspective to recognize that society has strayed from the path of realizing greater humanity. Second sight ‘gives the

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oppressed the distinct vantage point from which to see dominant subjectivities and their relations to others’ (Medina 2004, 96). Historically, society has ignored this ‘gift’ by continuing to structure these relations in a hierarchy based on power and privilege. Differentiated relationships prevent the attainment of an egalitarian and democratic order that would guide people to liberation. Without possibilities of freedom, oppression takes hold and destroys the hopes and dreams of many.

My contention is that young people of color in particular have a second sight deriving from marginality based on both racial difference and youthfulness. However, second sight is only a vantage point for observing injustice and does not guarantee that young people of color will attain the critical consciousness necessary to identify social and economic forces fomenting oppression and initiate action generating change. In fact, Du Bois warns that the competing lenses of duality leave people of color without ‘self consciousness’ and thus they become unaware of how social and economic forces affect them or the role they could play with addressing injustice. Second sight stems from marginalization and presents the possibility of recognizing how oppression operates in society. In order for second sight to attain this recognition, it must be ‘raised to a conscious level, cultivated, and directed. … The insight of the oppressed is neither innate nor inherent; it must be worked for, struggled for’ (Holt 1990, 306). Research reveals how people of color acquire the critical consciousness necessary for actions that challenge and transform dominant structures of oppression (Solórzano and Delgado Bernal 2001). However, more research is needed to show how pedagogical processes facilitate the critical consciousness of youth of color within educational systems that oppress them.

In Tucson, Arizona, ethnic studies has been a strategy to develop critical consciousness despite the oppressive context of schooling. Because ethnic studies challenges the educational function of sorting students into racial hierarchies, the state legislature passed HB 2281 in 2010, which bans ethnic studies in public schools. This article highlights a youth participatory action research program (YPAR) called the Social Justice Education Project (SJEP) that was part of ethnic studies in Tucson and thus shut down because of the ban. The irony is that the Arizona Department of Education and legislature believe that teachers should not be discussing oppression in this so called ‘land of opportunity’ but fail to realize that the ethnic studies ban is a prime example of how young people of color are oppressed. As the ban was being implemented, students in the SJEP had plenty of injustice to focus on in their YPAR projects.

YPAR is a pedagogical process that cultivates the recognition of oppression through reflection and action or what Freire (2000) calls ‘praxis.’ It is through praxis that young people of color transform second sight into critical consciousness. Linking praxis to YPAR suggests that research and pedagogical objectives center on challenging and overcoming an unjust social
order (Fischman and McLaren 2005; Glass 2001; Kemmis 2010; Lather 1986; McLaren 1992; McLaren et al. 2004; Rahman 2008; Renner and Brown 2006). Through reflection and action, youth illuminate how societal institutions, such as schools, can shift from sites of oppression to spaces of liberation. They look to challenge dominant representations of their identity and culture attempting to perpetuate their subordination. The challenge leads to new visions of education that foster their voices, community commitments, and social activism.

This article focuses on a YPAR program, SJEP, that transformed young people of color’s second sight into critical consciousness. Their critical consciousness emerged through praxis and inspired them to oppose oppression. Because the SJEP home was in ethnic studies, the youth struggled to keep their program alive. The Arizona Department of Education lobbied the state legislature to ban K-12 ethnic studies in public schools. In January 2012, the ban went into effect, shutting down ethnic studies classes as well as the SJEP. Young people’s documentation of their struggle led to action to save the education that gave them hope for a more equitable and just world.

The article contains three sections that focus on the themes of: (1) second sight with the empowerment of praxis; (2) SJEP with the emphasis on YPAR; and (3) documentation with the message about transformation. The first section briefly explains the second sight of double consciousness and how it applies to the experiences and subjectivities of young people of color. To facilitate the discussion of how youth utilize or apply their second sight, I draw from Paulo Freire’s concept of praxis, which explains how a process of reflection and action leads to a critical consciousness. I must note that critical consciousness involves not only perceiving injustice, such as with second sight, but also recognizing one’s potential to initiate the transformation of reality. Critical consciousness, therefore, includes both observing the problem and acknowledging ‘political efficacy … the perceived capacity to effect social and political change via individual and/or collective activism’ (Watts, Diemer, and Voight 2011, 50). Second sight must move through praxis for youth of color to perceive how transformation might occur.

The second theme of the SJEP looks at the role that YPAR plays in transforming second sight into a critical consciousness. YPAR is a pedagogical and methodological approach to critical inquiry that involves young people observing, documenting, and challenging injustices in their own lives (Cahill 2007; Cammarota and Fine 2008; Fine et al. 2005; Kirshner 2007; McIntyre 2000; Morrell 2006; Torre 2009; Tuck 2009). In the SJEP, YPAR became more than a pedagogical and methodological approach to critical inquiry but also an epistemology based on knowing how and in what ways social justice can be attained.² YPAR is an emancipatory process that allows young people to engage in ‘research as praxis’ and transform ‘by encouraging self reflection and deeper understanding of their particular situations’ (Lather 1986, 263).
The third and final theme addresses the praxis of documentation, which sparks a thought process leading to the drive to take action. Observing and documenting educational injustices inspire the need to seek radical change of Self and schools. Through the reflection and action facilitated by YPAR, young people of color construct a message about the importance of ethnic studies for individual as well as social transformation.

**The second sight within double consciousness**

Du Bois describes double consciousness as existing in conflict while possessing the potential through its consequence to manifest a distinctive social perspective (Dickson Jr. 1992). Although Du Bois applied the concept originally to African Americans, people of color or other ‘colonized people’ experience a corresponding double consciousness (Black 2007). The conflicting duality emerges from a person of color seeing him/herself as a racial other and then simultaneously seeing him/herself through the lens of how white society perceives people of color. The former viewpoint recognizes that people of color have been tagged with races that are different from whites while the latter understands that difference to mean secondary status. Du Bois (2007, 9) writes that these viewpoints represent ‘two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body.’ A person of color moves forward content with contributing to the world from the position of racial other. However, another anxious thought tells him or her that any real contribution can only derive from becoming white and shedding the skin or veneer of darkness. The conflict emerges from the realization that society will never accept people of color as white. Their contributions will always be marred by secondary status.

The conflicting duality leads to an emergence of a perspective of society focusing on the excruciating pressure imposed by racial dominance. People of color recognize the roadblocks of racism preventing passage into a better and fuller humanity. Du Bois refers to their particular perspective as a ‘second sight’ gazing into the injustices that dampen the spirit and stifle the strivings for a greater good. It must be reiterated that the gift of second sight has the potential to blossom into critical consciousness, but it must be developed. The potential starts, ‘from the perspective of one’s own culture, the skill to perceive in another that which is opaque to its own practitioners’ (Allen Jr. 1992, 273). Although the dominant culture often fails to recognize the suffering imposed by its own domination, people of color cannot help but notice. This recognition leads to a special insight into the dominant’s use of power to subordinate people of color (Henry 2005). Second sight emerges from marginality to view the structures of oppression that deny the intellectual potential to create and recreate a world better than the one in which we were born. Interfaced with Freire’s praxis, second sight develops into a way to ‘read the world’ and recognize the societal barriers that
suppress the will to evolve intellectually. It is from praxis that second sight can evolve into critical consciousness, which is not only seeing oppressive structures but realizing the capacity to challenge them.

The praxis of critical consciousness

The method to attain critical consciousness is ‘praxis’ — critical reflection and action. Scholars assert that praxis entails a feedback loop in which theory and practice move through a cycle to continuously inform each other (Akom 2009; Fals-Borda 1979; Carpenter et al. 2013; McLaren 1999; Nylund and Tilsen 2006). The phases of the cycle include: (1) reflection on a situation; (2) plan of action to change the situation; (3) implementation of the plan; and (4) evaluation of the outcome; and then loop back to the beginning (phase 1) to start the process over (see Figure 1). Each pass through the cycle means that theory and practice continuously become stronger and more effective with transformation.

Praxis leads to both internal and external forms of transformation contributing to the development of critical consciousness. The internal form involves the Self reflecting on a particular situation and then transforming the perception of the reality driving this situation, leading to knowledge of how to implement change. Internal transformation requires a movement of thought, a Self-action so to speak, from dysconsciousness (King 1991) about injustice to critical consciousness of the changes needed to attain equity. Critical consciousness is a necessary precursor to any action taken to transform the objective world. One has to see the world in its true dimensions and possibilities before attempting to generate change. External transformation involves the Self reflecting on a situation and then taking direct action to change it. Freire (2000, 52) states that:

![Figure 1. The cycle of praxis.](image-url)
the oppressed must confront reality critically, simultaneously objectifying and acting upon that reality. A mere perception of reality not followed by this critical intervention will not lead to a transformation of objective reality – precisely because it is not a true perception.

By knowing how to initiate and implement changes, the Self learns about the causal factors producing certain phenomena and thus knows how they transform. This knowledge circles back to processes of reflection to provide greater depth and strength to critical consciousness.

Some scholars claim that young people of color can develop critical consciousness that leads to a transformation while generating ‘cultural products that embody a critique of oppression, a desire for social justice, and ultimately lay the foundation for community empowerment and social change’ (Akom, Cammarota, and Ginwright 2008, 110). These cultural products include spoken word, poetry, music, art, and the results of YPAR projects and represent ‘youthtopias’ – imaginary landscapes that portend an equitable world of hope with infinite possibilities (Akom et al. 2008). It is through a second sight transformed by praxis that the imaginary is unlocked and set free to envision a future brightened with the light of liberation.

SJEP and YPAR

In 2002, the SJEP started at Cerro High School on the southwest side of Tucson, Arizona. This area of Tucson contains a large community of low income/working class Latina/o immigrant families. Therefore, most students at Cerro and in the SJEP were second or third generation Latinas/os. The first cohort in 2002 consisted of 15 Latina/o and two Native American students. Students in this first cohort had fallen so far behind that they were about to drop out. I partnered with the teacher of record to develop the SJEP, which met the educational needs of these students of color by providing them with the opportunity to conduct social justice based research.

Although the program centered on research, the teacher covered the state standards on US History and Government. The course was listed in the mainstream curriculum as a viable option to traditional social sciences. Therefore, students who were enrolled in the SJEP received all their social science credits for graduation. Having the SJEP as a core course as opposed to an elective was a critical and important move. As a core course of the curriculum, students had incentive to take the subject matter seriously. In the SJEP, content always related to the students’ life experiences of injustices. Linking life experiences with core-course content validated the students and provided them with a sense of importance. Furthermore, the teacher and I could collect data for a comparison between the SJEP and traditional social science courses. These data could reveal the effectiveness of the SJEP for students of color. In fact, SJEP students outperformed their non-SJEP peers on standardized tests (Cabrera et al. 2014).
Race and generation marginalized the students in the first cohort. However, class compounded this marginalization by positioning students on the extreme fringes of their school. Positionality allowed the students to easily access a second sight in which they could see the injustices negatively impacting their social contexts. Although they could witness oppression, these students lacked the analytical tools to describe and address thoroughly the external pressures limiting their possibilities. We believed that guiding their second sight through the praxis of YPAR would provide the students with a language and consciousness to name and challenge their oppression.

YPAR for these students represented an individual as well as a collective process in which they could struggle for liberation. The students through YPAR became both the researcher and the researched, allowing them to apply their experiential knowledge and second sight for identifying transformative strategies that strengthen justice in education. The students also became generational and critical race theorists, because generation and race unified them more so than class, disability, gender, or sexuality. In the end, YPAR for these students led to action that engendered not only structural change but also transformation of themselves. This formula of individual/collective process, object/subject convergence, generational/critical race theory, and internal/external transformation became the template for developing YPAR projects for the first and subsequent cohorts.

The approach to YPAR was based on praxis; students collected data through participant observation, photography, and poetry while simultaneously analyzing them to sharpen their reflections. The first action taken by students in YPAR praxis was recording their observations in field notes. The act of writing became a form of action such that students needed to transform how they saw themselves in the world. Writing served as a powerful tool to revise their perception of themselves from being victims of oppressive forces to becoming agents of social change. When students experienced this internal transformation, they were ready to challenge the external injustices in their social context. The knowledge produced by any PAR project should:

... ideologically and intellectually arm society’s exploited classes in order that they may assume their conscious roles as actors in history. This is the ultimate destination of knowledge, that which validates the praxis and fulfills the revolutionary commitment. (Fals-Borda 1979, 43)

The students in the first cohort moved through the sequence of praxis and created the cultural product of a video that symbolized ‘youthopia.’ This video documented the inferior conditions of their school, including dysfunctional water fountains, broken toilets and urinals, no soap or paper towels in the bathrooms, ceiling tiles falling down, and rows and rows of empty
shelves in the library. The hope was that highlighting problems would bring changes to the school. The students distributed copies of the DVD to school board members, administrators, teachers, community members, and students. Within a few months, Cerro High School received funds to make school improvements. While the improvements were a minor victory, the biggest success occurred from students and teachers from other schools in the district wanting to start their own SJEP programs.

By 2008, the SJEP was in four schools across the Tucson Unified School District (TUSD). The program was the primary social science component of TUSD’s Mexican American Studies (MAS) department. At the program’s high point in 2008, the SJEP was held in eight different classes and served more than 250 students per year. Because the program operated through the MAS department, most students who enrolled in the course were Latina/o. There were at times a few African American, Anglo American, and Native American students in the SJEP.

In this same year, the Arizona state superintendent of instruction, Tom Horne decided to lobby the state legislature to pass legislation that would ban MAS and the SJEP. His decision was based more on ideological than educational concerns (Cammarota and Romero 2014). In short, Horne disliked programs where students of color became radical, free thinkers who held beliefs different from his republican ideology. SJEP students possessed a critical perspective, unlike Horne, and understood that racism was still generating significant inequality in American society (see Horne 2007). Horne failed to have the legislature pass anti-ethnic studies bills in 2008 and 2009. However, by 2010, he was successful. The state legislature passed HB 2281, which targeted MAS in Tucson, Arizona.

The Arizona Department of Education deliberated for more than a year to finally declare that MAS and the SJEP were out of compliance with A.R.S.§ 15–112(A). By January 2012, TUSD’s governing board voted to suspend all MAS classes, including the SJEP. The governing board suspended classes to avoid the state’s threat of cutting the district’s budget by 10% for non-compliance. One day in early January, district officials watched teachers as they boxed up books, including Pedagogy of the Oppressed and Critical Race Theory: An Introduction, which could no longer be taught in TUSD. Students cried as they witnessed their education that offered them liberation being carried away to lay dormant in some district warehouse. They, however, did not feel defeated or demoralized. They learned from the SJEP to act against injustices, and were active in the struggle for ethnic studies every step of the way.

**Transforming second sight with praxis**

This article reviews students from Mountain High (one of the four high schools housing the SJEP), and their documentation of ethnic studies in the
program’s last full year (2010/2011). Mountain High students focused their YPAR projects on the politics surrounding their ethnic studies classes. These students conducted observations and wrote field notes on the day-to-day realities of the program and struggles to keep the SJEP and ethnic studies alive. Field notes reveal how students aimed their second sight on the injustices imposed by Tom Horne and the Arizona Department of Education, while moving on the path of critical consciousness. These data reveal how students may experience two related and mutually reinforcing types of critical consciousness, what I identify as *internal* and *external* transformations (see Figures 2 and 3). Internal transformation involves seeing injustice with second sight and then acknowledging one has the capability and knowledge to bring about change. It is recognition of his or her efficacy with challenging oppression. Recognizing one’s potential to initiate change is a precursor to external transformation. This type of critical consciousness entails not only seeing injustice with second sight but also taking the initiative to transform objective reality.

**Methodology**

The following sections discuss students’ field notes and their engagements with internal and external transformation. I gathered all field notes generated by the Mountain students during the 2010–2011 school year and looked for data revealing the impact of ethnic studies on the students’ critical consciousness. The students’ field note data represents the best way to answer questions about attaining critical consciousness in the oppressive context of schooling. Through field notes, students have the opportunity to reflect on their own level of awareness and how it has changed. The field notes reveal

![Figure 2. Internal transformation.](image-url)
two types of transformations that led to an awareness of the structural conditions influencing the students’ reality. One involved a self-reflection on lived experiences and change in perception of individual effectiveness. The other required taking direct action, both individual and collective, to bring about social justice. I coded these different pathways to critical consciousness as internal and external transformations.

I also corroborated the student data with my own observations and experience working within the SJEP. From its inception, I have worked with teachers within the SJEP and taught students how to conduct qualitative research. Since the SJEP was billed as a MAS course, the overwhelming majority, about 95% of the students, was Mexican American. Females represented more than half of the SJEP students. Most students, if not all, came from working class backgrounds. My experience working with these students in the classroom has been documented through my own extensive field note writings. In addition, I have attended many of the events and protests the students refer to in their field notes. My study of the SJEP involved participant observation and field note documentation of the classroom, events, and protests.

**Internal transformation**

Students do not need to protest in the street to engage their critical consciousness through praxis. When students write themselves into field note narratives as empowered, the act of writing can become a form of praxis that transforms second sight and thus leads to an internal transformation. Writing through a praxis framework involves reflecting on a particular situation and describing either the instances of injustice or moments of
empowerment. Woven into this description is a visualization of injustice and an analysis of how to challenge it while becoming empowered. This type of analysis requires the student/researcher to perceive him/her capable of engendering change, while encouraging internal transformation and thus elevating his or her confidence. Lisette Montoya writes about how the SJEP classroom had transformed her into a critical thinker and better student.

I love learning each day more and more in Mr. Gomez’s [SJEP teacher] class. I feel like I can be myself in that classroom without anybody judging me for who I am or where I come from. It is a critical thinking class everywhere you turn to look. We learn what they don’t want us to learn and that’s the history of our past and what’s happening in our present. Mr. Gomez’s class is like my second home where I can express everything I feel. It gives me the confidence to change and know that I could also be an outstanding student in my other classes. This has been a long fight [to keep Ethnic Studies] but everyday we are all moving forward and learning from each other.

Lisette writes herself into the field note as someone who becomes empowered by the SJEP classroom. The course provides her with the opportunity to construct her identity with a strong sense of historical agency. She embraces this blossoming of her identity and feels comfortable voicing her thoughts and ideas. The benefits of SJEP praxis-based pedagogy include not only a sense of empowerment but also the confidence to succeed in all classes. The empowerment and confidence facilitates her involvement in saving ethnic studies, which she knows has provided her more intellectual growth than any other course.

Lisette reflects on the oppression of state laws and how her critical consciousness moves her beyond the rhetoric to see racism. She hopes that there are not new laws passed ‘attacking us like HB2281 or the big SB1070.’ She makes a distinction between her critical consciousness and lawmakers who remain unaware and ignorant. ‘I mean what kind of people come up with these laws; it’s mainly people who rise up to power and are not critical thinkers and are always surrounded by the media.’ People who do not attain critical consciousness can become easily controlled and manipulated. She adds that ‘the media brings more information and we believe what is said if we are not critical thinkers.’ Although second sight may develop into an increased awareness, people may lack the critical consciousness to keep their eyes open to oppression. Lisette states, ‘many people haven’t opened their eyes to realize that we should stand up for our rights and not be taken advantage of.’ She realizes through her writing that she possesses the critical consciousness to struggle for justice.

Other students reflect on the SJEP class as part of their YPAR projects on ethnic studies. This reflection on their own educational experiences is a necessary component of praxis by helping them understand that the SJEP
motivates them to take action and become critically conscious. Arturo Rojas writes about his SJEP course and the power received from gaining knowledge.

This class is based upon doing the right thing. Tom Horne says that these classes teach students to overthrow the American government and that they are only for a certain ethnicity yet these classes have at least one student from each ethnicity enrolled in them. Are we taught to be racists? No! We talk about racism but we aren’t taught to be racists. We are taught to fight with our knowledge and not our fists because if we do we will eventually get worn out. When you are an informed individual, you can take a stand against something and be one hundred percent sure that you are correct and you don’t have to stand down or be intimidated. When you are informed, you can make a difference.

Students in the SJEP learn that the most powerful tool for generating change is knowledge. Once knowledge is gained, the student feels he or she has the consciousness to recognize injustice. Although the students may have second sight, they realize that seeing oppression is not enough to access the agency needed for liberation. They must engage a process of praxis to address this oppression, which involves the acquisition of knowledge through reflection and its application to foster change. Arturo engaged praxis through his reflection and the action of writing about how he has changed his relationship to those who try to argue against his perspective. He feels confident in what he knows and does not have to pull away from his point of view.

**External transformation**

When Mountain High students started to record their observations on ethnic studies, Arizona Governor Jan Brewer had already signed HB 2281 into law. She signed the bill on May 11, 2010, and students from the four high schools offering the SJEP decided to organize a 24 hour vigil at Central High School (one of the four SJEP high schools). Mountain High student Vanessa Cortez who attended the vigil reflects on this event and writes these observations in her field notes.

I had recently become aware of what had been happening and decided to take action. As the bell rang to end the day, I was on the bus heading to Central High School. As I got closer to the entrance of the school, there were only around 15 students standing and holding posters protesting HB 2281. I found a few familiar faces there that I had seen in marches or previous protests. Some students noticed that I came to help out so they gave me a poster and told me where I should go. I had to ignore my shyness and get loud so that the few students that were there could also become loud.
Vanessa had followed through with meeting the exigencies of praxis while engaging her second sight. She reflected on the situation of banning ethnic studies and extended her thoughts outward by taking action for external transformation. Then she allowed this action to circle back inward to foster the confidence to overcome the ‘shyness’ that prevented her voice from loudly naming the oppression perceived through her second sight. Glass (2001, 18) states that Freirian education, ‘as a critical reflexive praxis, must grasp the outward direction, meaning, and consequences of action, and also its inward meaning as the realization and articulation of a self.’ Vanessa’s self-realization encouraged a loud proclamation of injustice, which was needed not only for her sake but also that others might gain the confidence to strengthen their voices.

Almost one year after Vanessa attended the vigil, Mountain High student Maria Fernandez hoped to find ways to keep the program alive. The anti-ethnic studies bill HB2281 had been Arizona law for a short time and nobody seemed to know what would happen to MAS or the SJEP. Maria writes in her field notes that she was ready to take action.

We are in a battle right now and we all need to fight to get involved. Day after day the attacks seem to grow bigger. The ethnic studies classes are still being attacked, and now counselors [at Mountain High] are telling students to not sign up for the classes! This is absurd, wrong and I will not stand and let this be done.

Maria realized that second sight transformed by praxis leads to a strong desire to not only see the problem but also address it. She took action by attending a meeting on HB2281 to find out about the new law and how she could initiate a challenge. The meeting was held at Central High where Maria states, ‘I volunteered to speak on behalf of my experiences in my ethnic studies classes.’ At this meeting, she made a plea to those in attendance to ‘fight to keep these classes and show that it is not acceptable to do what is being done. We can’t let the hard work of the people who fought for our classes back in the sixties go down the drain.’

A part of the critical consciousness emerging from praxis is a strong sense of responsibility to history. ‘Collective memory,’ according to Fals-Borda, consists of ‘those elements of the past which proved useful in the defense of the interests of exploited class … which may be applied to present struggles to increase awareness.’ (Fals-Borda 1987, 339). Moreover, realizing how present opportunities often arise from the long struggle initiated and played out by previous generations leads to an awareness or consciousness of one’s historical role in preserving these opportunities not only for self-edification but also for future benefit. Critical consciousness, in this way, is grounded in history and thus follows from the struggles and successes of those who engaged in praxis before us.
According to Maria, young people hold the responsibility to history, because the protections they put into place now can be carried and safeguarded by them into the future. She states, ‘We are the fighters, the students and the future generation.’ In terms of ethnic studies, youth are the stewards of the gains we made in the past, which are continuously subjected to the state’s attempt to rollback any progressive change in education. Maria asks about the state’s white patriarchs who have reveled in denying students of color an empowering educational experience. ‘Are we really going to let Horne and Huppenthal get their way?’ Her answer is ‘to show the people who are attacking us that we won’t go down without a fight.’

Maria continued the fight by helping to organize a youth organizing group called UNIDOS. This youth group emerged from Maria’s YPAR project in the SJEP course. Her YPAR project wanted the action component of ‘participatory action research’ to focus on stopping the ant-ethnic studies law. Their action plan was to develop UNIDOS with the sole purpose of saving ethnic studies for themselves and future generations. UNIDOS’ strategy was to appear at TUSD’s board meeting to publicly denounce the law and demand the district to keep the classes going despite the Arizona Department of Education’s attempt to shut them down. Maria writes in her field notes about the second time UNIDOS appeared before the board.

It is Tuesday March 8th, 2011 this is the day of the board meeting. This is the second appearance UNIDOS has made at a board meeting. On events like these I feel much empowered. When I gathered up with my other family in UNIDOS, I began handing red tape to everyone in the group to put around their left arm. This was to distinguish us and to stick out and let people know we were here. Many people would think from the last meeting that UNIDOS would quit, but our demands still stand and our group is well put together.

A portion of the meeting is open to the public for comments. UNIDOS had signed up to speak and waited for their turn. Many of those who spoke before UNIDOS had expressed support for ethnic studies. A couple of elderly white people raised concerns about the program brainwashing students into becoming ‘revolutionaries’ who would overthrow the government. After a dozen or so people had spoken, it was UNIDOS turn. Maria writes about their declaration to the board.

When the two representatives of UNIDOS step up to read our letter, my heart begins to beat very fast. The board members have been spoken to many times, with statistics and testimonies, but they won’t do anything to defy the bill. The letter is read and UNIDOS demands that the school board publicly defies HB2281 no matter what the state may say or do. A solid and clear demand that says: ‘Listen to us now, or we will give you a bigger issue.’

Although the school board failed to accept UNIDOS’ demands, the students were still empowered by their action. Using the power of their voices and
speaking up for their educational rights expanded and strengthened their critical consciousness. They gained an increased awareness of injustice as well as an enhancement in their sense of political efficacy. They became more confident that they could make some kind of difference. UNIDOS knew this because they already had. The students’ actions inspired the external transformation of other people, intensifying their voices and commitments. Maria writes about the response she received from those in attendance at the school board meeting.

Many people came up to the group to let us know how much they appreciated our hard work and our involvement. Those who came up to us consisted of community members and teachers. This is quite rewarding to me, to hear that we are impacting our community.

Although the school board did not change, the students, teachers, and community members did transform that day. They all felt inspired by the students’ voices to stay the course and keep ethnic studies alive. Many in attendance, including myself, witnessed the students transforming second sight into critical consciousness. Although immediate gains were not made with the school board, elevating the critical consciousness of the students and sustaining the movement became long term goals. The next UNIDOS event would have an even greater impact.

The following board meeting in April 2011 would go down in history as the most important event in the ethnic studies movement in Tucson, Arizona. Former graduates of the SJEP program and members of UNIDOS, including Maria, decided enough was enough; the school board was not listening to them. They would look to other means and give the school board ‘a bigger issue.’ The school board planned to vote on whether to move ethnic studies from core courses to electives, but the youth had other ideas. Before the start of the meeting, they rushed the dais where school board members sit and chained themselves to the chairs, preventing the board from convening.

The chaining generated several effects. First and foremost, the action prevented the vote from happening, thereby maintaining the status of ethnic studies as courses that meet graduation requirements. Second, this act of civil disobedience had catalyzed the empowerment and passion of ethnic studies supporters who were in attendance. The crowd began chanting and clapping with such fervor that district officials and school board members could only stand and watch and let the protest unfold. Third, the action had reinvigorated the most important aspect of democracy – the direct participation of everyday people, particularly those who are the most disenfranchised, within the political process. The school board members who were not listening before had no choice but to listen to youth voices shouting and chanting for change. Finally, the chains symbolized the sheer gravity of
the situation by their representation of enslavement. The shocking image of young people of color chaining themselves to the dais, and its attendant meanings, caught the attention of many news media outlets. This attention brought the protest to thousands who would continue to demand that ethnic studies remain. Youth voice had initiated external transformation by facilitating the awareness of people from across the country.

Implications
Those who are marginalized, who exist at the bottom of society because of race, class, gender, generation, and sexuality, are falsely assumed to possess insignificant leverage to contribute to humanity. These assumptions are derived from the belief that only the ruling elite can move civilization forward. Du Bois challenges this belief with his concept of the second sight. Although those on the bottom may have few resources or limited power, they do have a vantage point to see the injustices imposed by domination. They can view how oppression harms the human spirit and thus undermines humanity by denying opportunities for important and critical contributions that would improve the lives of many. However, second sight is only a vantage point that merely provides a perspective for observing injustice. Actually 'seeing' and understanding it is a different matter. A person with second sight may or may not have the critical consciousness to fully comprehend the significance of what he or she is seeing. Second sight must be transformed into critical consciousness so that the observer recognizes the true causes of oppression and how to challenge them. This recognition is not given; it must be developed through praxis. Reflecting on an oppressive problem and then taking action to find solutions leads to an awareness of the root, structural causes fomenting oppression. Understanding root causes encourages a shift in consciousness from blaming the Self for failure to recognize how societal forces hold people down. This shift allows for the opportunity to accept one’s capability to bring about change. When praxis is initiated, people ‘become engaged in liberatory acts that challenge the limits (internal and external) of particular situations that maintain oppression or injustice’ (Glass 2001, 18).

YPAR is a form of praxis in which young people develop their critical consciousness. The data presented in this article reveal at least two modes of transformation, internal and external, which emerge through an engagement with praxis. Both modes begin the same way with a reflection on a particular situation. In the examples provided, SJEP students reflected on ethnic studies and surrounding politics in their field notes. Although their reflections were similar, the approach to action varied slightly. Those experiencing internal transformation took action by writing themselves in field notes as empowered and confident. In other words, they wrote themselves in these texts with an orientation to oppression that makes the distinct shift
from being victims to becoming aware of their capacity to generate change. Those involved with external transformation write themselves in field notes in the same way but initiate action with the purpose of changing objective reality. I must note that an internal transformation is needed for seeking external changes. One needs to feel confident about his or her ability to effect change before actually initiating some action to transform an external phenomena.

Internal or external transformations require praxis and reach the same outcome – critical consciousness. Why is it important to make a distinction? Sometimes, we are not clear as to what the action component of praxis really means. Often, I come across educators who are confused about praxis in general or just don’t ‘get’ the action side of the dialectic. Through the students’ YPAR documentation, praxis can be interpreted as a way of seeing injustice, as with second sight, and applying thoughts, words, or actions to understand how to transform reality. Given this definition, the action component of praxis is the application of knowledge through articulation or direct action for the purpose of generating social change. Therefore, action is not only protesting in the streets or chaining oneself to a school board dais but also documenting one’s experiences through research with the intention of perceiving the world as possibilities as opposed to problems. Second sight transforms into critical consciousness when seeing injustice is coupled with a sense of hope.

Disclosure statement
No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes
1. Young people of color might possess consciousness emerging from a border between multiple cultural and social influences (Anzaldúa 1987). In other words, perspectives derive not only from one’s race and generation but also from class, gender, sexuality, and immigrant status. The point is that marginality occurs from different forms of oppression, and second sights can emerge from any of them. With the scope limited to ethnic studies, this article takes up the most salient social influences within the struggle – race and generation. Objections to ethnic studies usually revolve around the empowerment or ‘radicalization’ of young people of color.
2. All real names of High Schools and students have been changed to protect anonymity.
3. A.R.S.§ 15–112(A) is the Arizona statute signed into law from HB 2281. The law was signed by Governor Jan Brewer in the same year, 2010 that the bill was passed in the legislature.
5. The program was shut down in 2012, leaving the 2011/2012 school year incomplete. The last full school year of the SJEP was 2010/2011.
6. Tom Horne is currently Arizona attorney general. Prior to becoming attorney general, he was state superintendent of public instruction. The new superintendent replacing Horne is John Huppenthal. Both have publicly denounced ethnic studies and are responsible for shutting down the program.

References


