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Booker, Angela

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## Ethical Commitments in Community-Based Research with Youth

Angela Booker

*Department of Communication, UC San Diego*

**Abstract:** This essay offers an ethnographic account of a formally organized group of students who worked to influence policy in their schools and the adults they encountered in this activity. I also address my role as an observant participant to highlight a series of emergent “ethical opportunities” that created contexts for mutual human development. This account is intended to contribute to a discussion of the developmental role of contradictions highlighted in Cultural Historical Activity Theory. In particular, I seek to highlight opportunities afforded by community-based research for all involved to respond to contradictions as learners rather than arbiters of ethical practice.

**Keywords:** ethics, community-based research, youth, mutual development

In this essay, I want to think about responsibility and responsiveness in community-based research as an ethical opportunity and practice. For purposes of the present discussion, responsibility refers to questions of commitment and obligation, as well as how to decide when and how to act or to be silent. Responsiveness is about new practices that emerge from collaborative efforts when the research is designed and undertaken in a partnership between researcher and community. While responsibility can feel timeless, responsiveness implies imminence. The space between timelessness and imminence is where my practice as a scholar has been most challenged.

Both Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) and Cultural-Community Psychology (CC) offer help here. CHAT accounts for the “energy of contradictions” that are made visible and actionable in activity: “Contradictions are historically accumulating structural tensions within and between activity systems. ... Contradictions manifest themselves in disturbances and innovative solutions. In this sense, an activity system is a virtual disturbance- and innovation-producing machine” (Engeström, 2011). Here, I examine these contradictions and tensions through a lens of ethical opportunity situated at intersections of cultural practice and community contexts. As I have defined it, responsibility has been most closely aligned with cultural practice that facilitates an ongoing negotiation of meaning among people. Expectations for responsiveness have to be rooted in emerging contexts for activity. The space I am investigating between responsibility and responsiveness—between negotiated meaning and contexts for participation—is well aligned with premises of CC that analyze how communities, particularly intersecting communities, change (Langhout, 2015; O’Donnell & Tharp, 2012).

The focus of the project I draw upon to develop these ideas took place as part of my overall inquiry into how and when young people negotiate for power to shape their lives and communities. For two years I participated in the activities of a

Student Advisory Board (SAB)<sup>1</sup> that brought together students from 17 high schools to participate in policymaking in a large metropolitan school district.

As a means of drawing out and filling out the ethical issues that arise in community-based research conducted by University researchers, I begin by describing the nexus of state and community-based organizations that served as the empirical setting for my work. This description should give the reader a rough idea of why I consider the work to provide rich evidence concerning occasions in which ethical issues involving responsibility and responsiveness become visible, not only for the researcher, but the other players, and the reader, as well.

### The Student Advisory Board and its Institutional Ecology

The Student Advisory Board is an organization that has existed since 1961. As it was in the 1960s, its charter when I began the study was to represent the voices of students as they participated in and sought to influence policymaking and administration of the School District. It is one of many such organizations that have been present in California since at least 1947.<sup>2</sup>

At the time, there were many changes going on in the District and a lot of political turmoil around budget cuts, proposed closures and school reforms that included an arrangement called “reconstitution” in which teachers, administrators and paraprofessionals would have to re-apply for their jobs. It was during that time that student effort to influence policy in the District hit a roadblock.

I learned about the Student Advisory Board during my graduate career at a time when I was seeking a setting in which I could study youth political development, and especially, practices that were designed to promote youth civic engagement. I was on a small research team that interviewed the Executive Director of a local Community Based Institute (henceforth, the Institute) doing local policy advocacy with youth. During the interview, she told us the story of how the Institute had begun providing staff and technical support to the SAB. The SAB had previously been staffed within the school district. The SAB had two student representatives serving as delegates to the Board of Education, but the Superintendent had removed one from his post. The representative had been publicly challenging the Superintendent at meetings. Some adults working with the SAB added he had not always displayed the decorum expected of student delegates to the Board, even though his points were well taken. Eventually, the Superintendent determined that the delegate had been improperly elected to his post and had him removed. In addition, the SAB was required to update its bylaws, which had not been updated for nearly 30 years. Since the SAB was created and governed by the Board of Education, this regulatory action effectively removed the SAB from active status as an advisory group to the Board until the bylaws were rewritten and successfully approved by the Board. On top of that, the group lost their in-house District staff.<sup>3</sup>

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1 All names are pseudonyms.

2 The California Association of Student Councils (CASC) was established by the California Department of Education in 1947. It is a student-led organization that provides “leadership development for elementary, middle, and high school students and their advisors in California and across the world...” (<http://www.casc.net/about/> - accessed on 2/13/2015).

3 I learned of the removal of the student delegate and this change in staff through the interview with the executive director and through informal conversations with students and adults before beginning data collection. Student representatives indicated that one staff person was fired and one

These moves suggested to students that they did not have real power and that their role was one of token representation.<sup>4</sup>

These changes got the attention of local youth advocates and youth leaders who pressured the Superintendent to clarify her commitment to youth voice in the district. The Institute's executive director explained that her organization had accepted the contract to staff the SAB with the understanding that the district would demonstrate commitment to youth voice, working alongside the Institute, which had a reputation for honoring youth leadership. In addition to staff support from the Institute, the district provided a part-time liaison to the SAB. At the end of the interview, the executive director suggested we contact her if any of us were seeking internships. I followed up.

### Getting the Job: Becoming a Participant

At that moment, the idea of hiring me arose and with it the first ethical opportunities around my participation and student voice. When I expressed interest in doing research with the SAB, the staff person at the Institute took it to the SAB representatives. The students discussed the possibility and then sent two of their representatives to interview me for a position as an intern. They were interested in why I wanted to do a research study with them. They also intended to make sure I understood the nature of the work—that it was *youth-led*.<sup>5</sup> Once they were satisfied that I was willing to work *for* them in addition to with them, they approved. The Institute hired me as a part-time assistant. The work was new for everyone at the Institute, so my role was allowed to unfold in collaboration.

### Negotiating My Presence

Could our interests develop in a mutual way? It was a complex question. I was a graduate student with my own institutional agenda—a dissertation to produce. I was also a newly minted employee of the Institute that the District had hired to replace the SAB's previously, in house, staff (a contentious issue as well), although I was an employee of the Institute only because the SAB had agreed to take me on as their intern.

During my initial attendance at meetings, one student would regularly sit next to me, read over my shoulder as I typed what I observed, and sometimes call out to the group what I was typing. In a light moment, one student shouted a random word, I typed it along with as much of the ensuing conversation about my note taking as I could, and the student reading over my shoulder read it out to everyone. We all had a good laugh: Okay, she types what happens. After some preliminary meetings, during which I began observing, we agreed that I would take field notes during meetings that were available for their scrutiny at any time. I would then turn those field notes into meeting minutes, which the SAB were responsible to keep and post as a public group.

We had found a point of mutual usefulness. At each meeting they reviewed the minutes, made any corrections they deemed necessary, and voted to accept them.

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resigned, but I have not confirmed those accounts with the District.

4 For a discussion of the distance between tokenism and active participation see Hart, 1992.

5 At the Institute, the model was youth-adult partnership, and this was a point of negotiation for the SAB during this trust-building period, as evidenced by multiple comments across events during meetings in the first year of the study.

In this way, the data record encompassed our varied perspectives across the two types of documents and was available as a resource for all of our purposes. This was both ethically and methodologically satisfying.

But there was also a negative impact of my presence. After two months of converting field notes into meeting minutes, I was diligently typing away during a cabinet meeting—the meeting where the SAB’s elected leaders set the agendas for the full meetings. Here is my field note about halfway through the meeting: “Cabinet roles – This came up because [Calli] didn’t feel like she had a job [AB Note: I’ve been taking over the minutes too much]” (Field Note, January, Year 1). By taking notes and preparing minutes, I had inadvertently stepped into one of the roles held by the SAB secretary, Calli. Her responsibilities had included taking notes and minutes, taking attendance, and notifying members and their schools if they had missed a critical number of meetings. At that point, she was taking notes by hand while I was typing notes on a laptop. She would give me her handwritten notes, and together with the notes I had typed, I would write the minutes and distribute them to the group. As a result, she did not have a clear role.

The group checked their bylaws and discussed what to do. They saw a lot of work to be done, and two other cabinet members—the vice president and the historian—agreed that their roles were also not clear. All of the members of the cabinet, including Calli, said they liked having the notes I was taking included in the minutes and they wanted to continue, but they also wanted to make sure the SAB leaders had clear roles. The group identified a number of needs including developing a website, coordinating regular communication with the group, insuring attendance, and developing expertise in the bylaws and parliamentary practice used to run meetings. The tasks were divided among the cabinet members according to the responsibilities listed in the bylaws and their respective interests. In addition, after comparing my field notes with Calli’s meeting notes we agreed that what we captured was distinct enough that we would both continue taking notes. I would then continue to incorporate the two sets into the minutes. This also meant that Calli’s notes continued to be part of the artifact data I was gathering.

### Setting Early Expectations for Responsibility & Responsiveness

While the Institute created the possibility of an internship, I was only able to get the job if the SAB gave the go ahead. Their voices were heard. Then began a process for them and for me where we collectively figured out some really creative ways to ensure their voices would ripple across the organization and make it more effective and worth future investment. It was a positive solution. That does not mean everyone loved it. While most of students I interviewed at the end of the study valued the minutes produced through this compromise, one student said adults were doing too much and thought students would have learned more if they had been left more to their own struggles and devices.

### Getting the Job *Done*: My initiation

My trial period, when we were negotiating our roles, began with the effort to resolve the ongoing conflict between the District and students that I had learned about during that first interview with the Institute’s executive director. For several months I attended SAB meetings and subcommittee meetings where they were hammering out the new bylaws—the place where the students specified the

group's purposes and rules of practice. Those rules included defining the leadership roles and election rules of the SAB's cabinet. In essence, they were simultaneously rewriting the bylaws and putting them into practice, both of which had steep skill development requirements. This gave them and gave me a bird's eye view of how the bylaws could work. But the process took several months, multiple drafts, as well as back and forth communication between the SAB, the Superintendent's office, and the District's Legal Department.

Throughout the process, the SAB wrote several drafts as they debated technical issues and their intent to push past tokenism: "...those instances in which children are apparently given a voice, but in fact have little or no choice about the subject or the style of communicating it..." (Hart, 1992, p. 9). During that time, students expressed concerns about following protocol in order to stabilize their ability to participate, hence a deep concern with the technical aspects of public decision-making. At the same time they were trying to ensure that the SAB was a true haven for youth voice. There were many examples of this contradiction in action.

For instance, they carefully wrote students into the bylaws as decision makers about how SAB representatives were chosen and then had to negotiate their way to a mostly student-led process. As they passed drafts back and forth between the Superintendent's office, the District's legal office, and the SAB, they received recommended edits which implied freedom of choice and non-negotiable edits that had to be made to follow existing laws and the state's Education Code. They also received "strong recommendations" to change a few of the areas where they had written in youth decision making power. That led to some push back from the SAB about whether a "strong recommendation" was really a recommendation or more of a threat; they had to weigh the risk of having their bylaws rejected by the School Board if they ignored those particular recommendations. They also thoughtfully debated whether to adopt simple majority or a super majority for establishing a quorum. They asked, should we prioritize taking actions with ease or should we send a message about our integrity by adopting a more stringent standard than is required? Ultimately, they went with the simple majority, and they established a compromise that maintained students' roles in determining the makeup of the SAB. The risk they faced was that their draft would be sent back to the drawing board. To their relief, the Board unanimously voted to accept their new bylaws. By that time, two-thirds of the school year had passed.

The time spent in this preparatory activity came at a cost: a dramatic decline in attendance and participation. Writing bylaws was tedious, technical, and distant from the key concerns of most students. The onerousness of the work was a real threat. The loss of student interest meant they were barely able to achieve a quorum; their ability to take any action at all was in jeopardy. Even the vote to send their final draft of the bylaws to the School Board for approval was at risk. They had to strategize to get enough students to the meeting to take the vote. Still, for those representatives who participated continuously, their technical knowledge of bylaws and processes governing public work grew considerably, though the benefit of that knowledge was unclear at this early stage (for more detailed accounts of the ways the SAB developed and mobilized their bylaws see Goldman, Booker, & McDermott, 2008; Booker, 2010).

As for adults' roles during this time, Institute staff provided training and support that included information about bylaws, parliamentary procedure, and the roles these matters played in governing public groups. Together with the liaison from the Superintendent's office, the Institute staff provided resources meeting space and coordinated the SAB's communication with the Superintendent's office. Together with the student delegates to the School Board, they helped navigate the process of seeking the Board's approval. At times, adults also had to negotiate with the SAB about whose voices should be heard and when. All the while, I attended meetings, took notes, distributed updated drafts to the group by email, and helped with administrative tasks at the Institute. During meetings, I had field notes to keep me busy and quiet. Outside of meetings, I got to know my colleagues at the Institute. We talked about how to honor the SAB's commitment to youth voice at the same time that we tried to honor the Institute's commitment to youth-adult partnership. In other words, we asked when we should provide support by waiting to be called into service, and when we should offer suggestions or ideas.

### Performing Responsibility & Responsiveness

The bylaws were accepted. The students had their public voice and were back at the table. For the students writing and revising the bylaws, responsibility meant articulating their role in unassailable ways. That was the job. They examined their rights as participants (and expressed their skepticism) through the lens of bylaws. They were also concerned with perception as a path to legitimacy. The bylaws became a dual exercise in repairing District leaders' perception of the SAB while trying to inscribe students voices into District decision-making. In a symbolic move after the passage of their bylaws, they wrote an Oath and swore it before the Superintendent in a brief ceremony at the District office:

We, Student Advisory Council Representatives and Alternates, do solemnly swear to faithfully perform the duties of [District Student Advisory Board] members to the best of our abilities and to serve the concerns of the student bodies that we represent with diligence, honesty, and respect. We also swear to adhere to the [Student Advisory Board] bylaws when carrying out our duties.  
—Student Advisory Board Members Oath

Through their mutual participation, the oath ceremony formed a kind of tacit moment of agreement between the SAB members and the Superintendent: the SAB would meet the expectations of decorum and technical practice, and the Superintendent would respect the SAB's bylaws and their rights to participate. The Students wrote and modeled their definition of responsibility.

They were also committed to responsiveness, and they met that commitment through the effectiveness of their technical work. The SAB wanted to be ready to take action quickly. They had already experienced the detrimental effects of delay. In this way, their quorum debate was an early example of their commitment to being responsive. They grappled with how to *perform* responsibility—maintaining the diligence, honesty, and respect they had sworn in their oath—when they considered requiring a supermajority to take action. But the decline in attendance had had given them first-hand experience the importance of a quorum for taking

quick action. So, in that case, their decision to stick with a simple majority was a way to prioritize responsiveness.

### Productive but “Neutral”: Making Strategic & Stable Practice

The students had historical precedent to expect that their actions—particularly boldly ventured in debates addressing systemic contradictions—would, at some point, be regulated by powerful adults. There was going to be an inevitable confrontation, though the specifics of its emergence would come as a surprise to the adults in our various positions. But first, I want to focus here on a period of relative stability. A number of student initiatives were adopted by the SAB and successfully taken up by the School Board from the end of Year 1 to the middle of Year 2. But they all had this one fault in common: They were useless for enacting policy, and this was not lost on the students.

It was during this time that I learned how seemingly neutral actions played a role in holding space for the student representatives to explore their own ethical perspectives and negotiate a loose set of collective agreements among themselves. The students did not put it in these terms—the actions they took were thoughtfully negotiated and important to them. But they were careful not to stir the pot. I noticed that they consistently talked through how adults might react to the moves they were making and what that might mean for their long-term intentions to exercise influence in the District. The group’s focus was largely on whether they would be tokenized or would establish real participation for youth (their terms). They asked who might object to their practices and proposals and why. In this regard, “neutral” actions were those that did not threaten or promote changes in the relative distribution of decision-making power in the District. This was also evident in the absence of the SAB’s ability to enforce their accepted resolutions.

When the SAB endorsed a local community organization that was calling on the District to formally reject irradiated food in school cafeterias (foods that were not being served in the District anyway), no powerful adult was moved to challenge or support the action. Similarly, when a local antiwar group pushed the District to eliminate military access to students in the District, thereby eliminating the JROTC program, the SAB was persuaded by JROTC students and their families to reject the proposal. The School Board was split on this decision, and the debate was passionate. However, no actions were taken to restrict or eliminate the SAB’s ability to be heard on the issue. In these examples, as with other events during this period, the SAB’s actions did not inspire powerful decision makers within the system to organize either resistance or support beyond surface approval. In that regard, the SAB’s actions could be read as neutral with regard to the discourses of power.

### The Making of A Neutral Act

The SAB representatives treated neutrality as both a strategy and an obstacle. Here is a look at how this double-sided orientation occurred in practice. The SAB developed a resolution that initially called for district-wide commitment to providing access to a broad range of programs—from Advanced Placement courses to Speech and Debate clubs—but eventually narrowed the list to providing equitable access to extracurricular programs across the district. They worked to get a Board member to co-sponsor the resolution, and the Board ultimately passed it unanimously. After 5 drafts produced over a 5-month period, the resolution—



Equalizing Extended Learning Opportunities for Students Outside the Classroom—was a celebrated success.

Table 1 shows excerpts from the text of the adopted resolution. It illustrates the kind of voice they were adopting to participate in policymaking—a highly debated and negotiated voice among SAB members. It is an example of the kind of arguments that were safe to raise—in effect, neutral within this particular context.

[INSERT TABLE 1 HERE]

The final draft of the resolution raised a real concern about equitable access to extracurricular activities without taking an overtly political stance. Instead, the resolution mapped on to district protocols by acknowledging resource limitations, calling for formal commendations, seeking a budgetary analysis, and calling for a commitment to equity—all consistent with the rhetoric and technical practice of district leaders.

A month after its passage, Milton, one of the student delegates to the Board, identified next steps:

[Milton] reviewed the resolution that the [SAB] passed about a month ago. The resolution went through two committees at the Board of Education and then came up to the Board. All 6 members co-signed the resolution. [Milton said,] “It’s better than a yes vote because they’ve all signed on.” [He wanted] to make an announcement at the [next] Board Meeting that would also be broadcast on the radio...that with budget constraints, there are school closures and loss of programs, etc. [and] he’d like to ask that when funding is available, they’d like to push for a coordinator for these activities and for stipends for teachers who help and participate. He asked if the [SAB] objected to his making an announcement like this or if anyone had anything to add. (Field note, May, Year 2)

The representatives agreed with the statement. They knew that while their effort had been symbolically successful, they were not in a position to ensure the substance of the resolution would be enacted. They wanted more than a symbolic show of support, yet the limitations of their position were clear. So, they closed their long-term discussion of the curriculum resolution. Publicly, a neutral tone was preserved.

Privately, SAB members pursued a potentially contentious goal: to gain voting power on the School Board. They interpreted their advisory role as an unjust limitation. It was not an accident that the SAB did not publicly raise these concerns at the time of the passage of this resolution. By operating within accepted parameters, they muted the potential for opposition. Once they learned that obtaining a vote would require a change to the state’s Education Code, they realized it was part of the long game that would require a sustainable strategy that had to be taken up by future members of the SAB.<sup>6</sup> The students knew the Institute was a favorable ally in that goal, having had a history of supporting long efforts by

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<sup>6</sup> The intent to gain voting rights for students on the School Board goes back at least as far as the SAB’s inception. A pamphlet published by the newly formed SAB of 1976 posed the same goal (San Francisco Public Schools Commission, Wong, & Abrahamson, 1976).

youth to achieve policy change, but they were less confident about the District's powerful decision makers.

### Responsibility & Responsiveness in Relation to the Neutrality Strategy

From my discussion thus far it should be evident that while opportunities to “learn about” were ever present, opportunities to “participate” were vigilantly monitored—by the SAB, adult allies, community youth advocates, and powerful decision makers. All this monitoring was an indicator of the potential for conflict. At times, adults wanted to ally with the SAB and at others some wanted to limit the scope of their participation depending on the activities and topics being addressed. Because the work was varied and situated within a broader public discourse, student representatives were primed to debate technical, pragmatic, and political ways of framing their potential actions (Booker, 2010). Where the work appeared neutral with regard to existing discourses of power—in that there was generally held agreement across interest groups about the reason and value of particular actions, or the actions were seen as reasonable for youth to address—ethical questions appeared to evaporate. This was, however, only an appearance.

That appearance functioned as a form of shelter within which the SAB could debate whether and how to take up an issue with relatively little interference. That shelter extended to me as I learned to navigate multiple positions: increasingly trusted adult ally, researcher, graduate student, intern, and human with a bias in favor of people having decision-making power and influence in their lives and communities. As the students debated, opportunities unfolded for me to think through my ethical position (which is a good thing, because it was going to get tested!). I did not know if and when they might choose a more contentious approach to their work, and they debated those decisions constantly. So, I was able to see and hear what they expected of allies. I had opportunities to think about how I (and others) would and/or would not fit their expectations. They modeled for me their own sense of what responsibility and responsiveness looked like - its parameters and practices: discretion, a willingness to be led by young people, sharing of resources, etc. How they arrived at their decisions was as important to them as the decisions themselves. While they were quick to sanction adults who offered unsolicited opinions, when SAB members did solicit adult feedback, they wanted honest, direct assessments and were open to hearing different perspectives. They were rigorous about clarifying what was meant by comments. They rarely all agreed on something as individuals and were developing a practice for handling the many perspectives in the room. They strictly followed protocols for meetings of a public body in order to maintain legitimacy. Observing and participating in those processes gave me an opportunity to “rehearse” my own ethical ideas.

### A New Confrontation: Some topics are not your business

By the end of the second year of my participation, the SAB representatives had developed a visible degree of confidence, and they were becoming increasingly savvy in their approach to the work. Privately, in youth-only spaces, they began strategizing about how to bring student perspectives into two contentious public debates: (a) the financial details of the Superintendent's contract, and (b) the

Superintendent's school reform program requiring teachers and staff at schools at selected schools to reapply for their positions. While these topics were being hotly debated and covered by the local news media, when students tried to join the debate, the legitimacy of their voices was challenged.

In anticipation of a backlash, SAB members had begun holding "secret meetings" —how students referred to them in interviews with me. The first public indication of the "the secret meetings" came when Shannon, one of the representatives, announced the SAB would formally challenge both the Superintendent's contract and her reform program. Shannon made the announcement at a Youth Summit—an event that the SAB had organized for the District's high school students, which was sponsored by Superintendent's office. Fairly quickly tensions rose. SAB members reported being pressured to back off the issue (e.g., a school principal threatened a senior's graduation status; a member of the Institute's executive team tried to influence an SAB representative's vote; there was talk of legal action if the SAB held a meeting the Superintendent had tried to cancel). Media attention flared. By that time, the SAB had learned quite a bit, including how to contact local reporters and issue press releases, something they learned from the district's public relations staff when publicizing the Youth Summit. They took their case to the local news media, a move that came as a surprise for adults at the District and the Institute with their morning papers. In response, the Superintendents' office generated a 30-page press release, ostensibly raising concern for student well-being by making accusations of adult manipulation of a student group while simultaneously discrediting student actions. With that, the pressures mounted for everyone involved.

The students were also were urged to move forward by groups whose interest heightened because the SAB was taking up one of their issues (e.g., the Teacher's Union that opposed reconstitution; some School Board members who shared the SAB's opposition). In a contentious period like this the students thought about their records as a resource to support the actions they would take (e.g., emails, publicly noticed meeting agendas, minutes):

I saved emails...Sometimes questions going back and forth. I tend not to delete them because in case something happens, I have proof. I like to be very thorough because I'm president and I don't want to get us into trouble. Documentation helps. (Interview with Eliza, Year 2)

Given the pressures on youth and adults alike, it is important to remember that their planned action was to publicly vote on non-binding resolutions: they had no power to enact the recommendations in their resolutions.

Increasingly, they began to invite trusted allies to "the secret meetings" as they moved from private to increasingly public actions: three staff members from the Institute including a college intern who was a former SAB member and current Youth Commissioner at City Hall, the lead coordinator, and myself, and several student activists from a local community organization who were experienced with organizing in contentious conditions. Because this was a private meeting called by student representatives of the SAB, those of us employed by the Institute faced an ethical choice simply in deciding to attend the meeting and then, in deciding to keep it (and the students' emerging strategy) to ourselves. They didn't involve us in

every step. Their earlier decision to go to the local media, for instance, was something they kept among the students and peers experienced with organizing.

In the face of massive pressure, they invoked their bylaws, parliamentary procedure, and a state statute to justify their decision to proceed. The minutes from their June 13 meeting—a special meeting the SAB called after the school year ended, hoping to achieve quorum before students disappeared for the summer— included a brief summary of the previous week’s events:

At the [SAB] meeting on [June 6], the council voted to hold an additional, special meeting on [June 13] to vote on the resolutions, “Supporting Goodwill Compromise of Superintendent’s Contract” and “Opposition to School Reconstitution.” The Superintendent was unable to attend a meeting on [June 13] and postponed the meeting until [June 20]. The [SAB] decided to hold a meeting on [June 13]. The following comments are regarding this series of decisions. (Minutes, June, Year 2)

On the road to scheduling that special meeting to publicly take their advisory vote, the SAB encountered the following moves: pressure to vote a certain way; the Superintendent’s attempt to legally postpone the meeting and the Boardroom reservation because she was traveling and could not attend; dismissal of their request to hear the Superintendent’s feedback through alternative means; and a Board Member’s reinstatement of the Boardroom reservation.

Once they finally began the special meeting in the District’s Board Room on June 13, they received notice of possible legal action by the District’s general counsel if the meeting was held as well as a personal offer of pro bono defense from another lawyer in the room if they continued. The Institute’s Executive Director spoke, stating that if the Superintendent did indeed have the legal right to postpone the meeting, the Institute would honor the decision and staff the meeting on June 20. The SAB thanked everyone for coming, voted unanimously to proceed after confirming they had a quorum, and took public comment from students, parents, teachers, and other adults in attendance. Afterward, they made their own comments, made a minor amendment to one of the resolutions, and voted unanimously, save one abstention, to pass the two contentious resolutions. While the resolutions were non-binding, and that remained a non-trivial problem, the experience was powerful for students. In every interview that followed, students reported to me how they had discovered their potential for influence. Still, more upheaval was in store.

One week after the June 13 meeting, the Institute that had provided staff support—and tripled the funds provided by the District—gave its 30-day notice to the Superintendent in protest of her actions and anticipation of a community backlash. The decision to cancel the contract prompted the Institute’s full time SAB program manager to resign in protest, citing concern for supporting students at a critically vulnerable time. The SAB’s circumstances had begun to resemble their situation at the start of the study.

### Responding within cycles of ethical development

In the context that had developed during this series of events, ethics were emergent, dynamic, and repeatedly tested. No one arrived at this moment without

having already proceeded through previous cycles of ethical negotiation, regulation, and action. This was as true of the adults as it was of students.

The Institute's withdrawal raised the ethical stakes for everyone involved. All of this left the SAB and its student representatives—as well as a number of the adults who worked in concert with them—in a remarkably tenuous position at the end of an otherwise stable year. But stability isn't everything. The pressure on everyone at that *moment* was tremendous.<sup>7</sup> It became clear that the situation was tenuous all along. The students never lost sight of that. Where challenges to power were direct and clearly specified, the veil of perceived neutrality lifted and with it, the ability to postpone taking up ethical questions also vanished. As with their "neutral" actions, the SAB's challenges to power were equally strategic. Politely and with technical precision this time, they had voted to support those who wanted the Superintendent to take a pay cut and undo her reforming. This action caused a major rupture, and with it, new opportunities to learn about ethical issues at the heart of social change. In this instance, students put adults to the test.

Every adult who played a role in supporting the SAB throughout the study had, at some point, demonstrated a commitment to the best interests of young people. The difficulty was that those "best interests" were not fixed and agreed upon, nor could they be. When the students entered "the fray" as one journalist described it, adults took on similar stances of neutrality until pressures exhausted that practice. Adults in staff positions, for instance, privately agreed with the students but also knew their own jobs could be on the line if their support was too overt—this was evidenced by firings and resignations in past situations. A staff liaison from the Superintendent's office conveyed the Superintendent's point of view without endorsing it as his own and without judging it. He also made clear that he understood the student representatives of the SAB would have to weigh the perspectives and make their own choices accordingly. He never threatened the students. He did not offer opinions about what they should or should not do. He did, however, make it clear that the situation was serious. SAB representatives noticed and considered his comments carefully and without resistance to his voice. The full-time staff person from the Institute held a similar position. She conveyed the perspective of leaders of the Institute and consistently stood up for the SAB's point of view once they declared it. She also did not tell SAB members what to do. She had established a significant level of trust with SAB members, and several members brought their concerns to her when they were under pressure. She was not a representative of the Superintendent's point of view, but she was a representative of the Institute. When the time came for the Institute to make a decision about its contract with the District, she resigned from her job with no immediate prospects of alternative employment. Her commitment was not only to the idea of youth voice. It was to these specific students.

When the vote about whether to schedule the special meeting on June 13 came down to one representative's decision, an Institute leader who had not regularly attended meetings, encouraged the student to vote no, putting him at odds with SAB practice and the ethical expectations that had been set. As I understood it, the

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<sup>7</sup> At one point, I was home with my spouse talking through the decision I needed to make, and I became violently, physically ill—an atypical response to stress for me. I raise the point here to emphasize that navigating ethical terrain touches the relationships that make community-based research possible, and it is a visceral, embodied experience.

Institute's intent was to slow the process, not necessarily to halt it altogether. However, many students thought the Institute leadership was siding with the Superintendent. As with the SAB's "secret meetings," I was not part of all of the meetings and communications that took place between the Institute leadership and the Superintendent's office—not necessarily because they were intended to be secret but because I was not a member of the Institute's leadership team. So, I viewed these actions through the lens of the SAB.

As a researcher, I was torn about what actions to take. While I was clear about my personal commitment to the students' right to be heard on the issue, I was also concerned about my role as an observing participant. Could I act in solidarity with the students and still do rigorous and valid research? My response had typically been to declare my position, as I understood it at the time, to all who inquired. I would continue in my role as researcher, carefully document events as they unfolded, and share my data. I did not allow myself to disappear from the record of subsequent events. Yet, I was quieter than I might have been if I had not been a researcher. When the turn of events led to this high-stakes period, I was faced with choices about how to act as an ally to the students and my colleagues, whether and how to act as an ally to the Institute, and how to be a researcher all the while. It was a moment when I felt called to do and be multiple things at once: be silent but present, speak when needed, and be bold in the face of powerful pressure. It was a quintessential ethical quandary: perfect conditions for learning and development. I learned. I struggled. I was immersed in contradiction. I was not satisfied with all of my decisions, and that affords me the opportunity to continue a cycle of ethical development rather than settling into a fixed complicity with the status quo. I stated my support for the SAB holding their meeting and taking their votes and my opposition to the Institute withdrawing their involvement. I continued to provide minutes produced from my field notes and Calli's notes. I listened. I did my best to remain accessible to the students as well as to my colleagues and friends from the Institute.

### Trying to Reach an Ethical Conclusion

Youth participants on the SAB were excellent guides from start to finish. They were willing to do their learning in public, amidst support, tension, and hefty opposition. And they were impressive—not in that "wow, youth actually did something good" way, but in that "this is how you collectively navigate challenging, complex conditions with integrity" way.

As summer wound down, I started to schedule interviews with the students, which provided repeated opportunities for reflection for each of us. I also continued to work part-time at the Institute for several months on a project with a local community media organization to co-create a web-based portal for youth doing advocacy work and participatory action research. A couple of the students on the project had been SAB members, and we formed a design team together with the journalist at the local media organization.

After I stopped attending SAB meetings, students who had not graduated had weathered another round of tensions and threats in addition multiple staff and space transitions. The Superintendent had announced her resignation citing incompatibility with the school board. A teacher in the District was providing the

SAB's staff support, and the students were beginning new efforts while continuing work on others. The graduates had moved on to college or jobs, and some had continued in youth policy and organizing roles.

While I had not planned my study with this outcome in mind, the long and slow process of my withdrawal from involvement with the SAB and the other program participants provided a different kind of conclusion to the project by seeing the influence the experience had on the stories they told about their lives. Each of us had moved through the intensity of those last meetings of the school year. By the time interviews were happening, the pressure points had been released. The SAB didn't get sued. It continued its work, albeit with new challenges. The staff and the Institute had landed on their feet, also with new challenges. I still had responsibilities as a research assistant at my university, interviews to conduct, and a dissertation to write and defend. When I decided to move on from the Institute to focus on writing, they were gracious, as were the students.

Students and staff also expressed interest in keeping up with the research results. My relationships with the staff from the Institute became friendships, and we have stayed in touch. Facebook became a thing, and young adults who had been on the SAB "friended" me. Some of them also wanted to connect professionally on LinkedIn and listed me as a reference on résumés. I periodically run into the now former Executive Director of the Institute at community events, and we chat warmly. I can say the same about former SAB representatives. While I easily shared my research with students who asked—though I don't know how many of them read it—I was hesitant to share with Institute leaders. I was concerned they would be disappointed with how I had written about that tenuous time. However, when a new member there passed along a request for a copy I sent one over. I never heard a word from them about it, but they continue to be warm with me when we meet. Perhaps they didn't read it, or perhaps I had unnecessarily feared their reaction. After all, they invited me in the first place and had an organizational history of learning from research. And so, even in a period of stability and recovering relationships, I encountered new ethical issues to think about.

## DISCUSSION

The space between responsibility and responsiveness is a space where calls for change frequently appear—as *contradictions*. The "historically accumulating structural tensions" (Engeström, 2011) of contradiction were in abundant evidence when students worked to establish decision-making power for youth. For students, these contradictions appeared where they applied pressure to the notion of tokenism and pushed for their rights to participate, whether seeking a true vote on the School Board or voicing their opposition to the District leader's compensation package. They could clearly define their tokenized state by the advisory role written into their charter. They did not have a vote, and they certainly did not wield the power of enforcement. What they did have was a voice—the means to draw attention to contradictions between rhetoric and practice.

Where the framing of youth and adult participation practices was closed—that is, students were expected to act as learners, not participants—students were not expected to disrupt traditions that concentrated authority with adults. That framing effectively held students in positions of non-participation. In those

instances, powerful adults revealed contradictions in the actions they took to limit or de-legitimize youth voice and participation and in their justifications for those actions.

Where the framing of youth and adult participation practices was open, ethical opportunities were developmental opportunities. Those opportunities pried open just enough space for some change in responsiveness. One early instance of open participation practices in action was when SAB members interviewed me and defined the parameters of my role. Others occurred as the developing dataset—my field notes and their meeting minutes—became resources for securing participation rights. Adults who committed themselves as youth allies had to learn to be responsive to the kinds of support the SAB sought. Yet, there was never a single available response to contradiction. Rather, each of us had to develop our ethical responses in context and in the doing of the activity.

It is my sense that over time acts of responsiveness become written into the history of systems of activity and have potential to become responsibilities—commitments and obligations. Whether those processes result in young people's increased access to discourses of power depends upon the degree to which adults participating in relevant activity systems can learn to be both responsible for mutual processes of development and responsive to young people's penchant for exposing contradictions. Those contradictions are what make the many needs for change visible and urgent.

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