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Education's Histories

methodological grist for the
history of education

Notes

¹ This class, Harlem Digital Research Collaborative, is taught by Assistant Professor Ansley Erickson from the program in History and Education. Students were a mix of pre-service social studies teachers, history students, and students from various other departments, most of whom had little knowledge of Harlem's history.

Youth Historians in Harlem: Exploring the Possibilities in Collaborative History Research Between Local Youth and Scholars (Part 1 of 2)

Barry M. Goldenberg

“Flipping” the Script on Historical Knowledge: A Youth-Led Walking Tour

For three weeks, seven high school students, Ansley Erickson (Teachers College, Columbia University) and I strategized about creating a historical “walking tour” of Harlem for a small graduate class.¹ However, there would be one caveat—local high school students in Harlem would be positioned as the resident tour guides and historical experts. The goal was for high school youth to lead an informational tour around the neighborhood, helping graduate students link their readings to the specific spatial context in which the history had unfolded. In preparatory sessions, as a group, we discussed elements of a walking tour, made decisions on how to design the tour as a history of young people in Harlem, and most importantly, chose seven spots or areas in Harlem (one space or place for each student) to present during the walk.

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One of the Youth Historians pointing out to both his peers and graduate students the significance of this particular street corner on 135th Street and Lenox Avenue, nicknamed “The Campus,” which served as an iconic speaking location for African-Americans leaders such as Malcolm X and Marcus Garvey. Photograph and caption by Barry M. Goldenberg. Personal collection.



Another Youth Historian student explaining to the group the history and architecture of Wadleigh High School, one of the oldest public schools in New York City, as well as discussing his current experiences attending a co-located school in this same building. Photograph and caption by Barry M. Goldenberg. Personal collection.

It was this final task where our collaboration first confronted some initial tensions, challenging notions of hierarchy and authority within the norms of the typical teacher-student relationship. Despite my constant plea that students select spaces in Harlem that might have been significant to young people, they were reluctant to do so. I had hoped they would identify places beyond the well-known and famous, using their perspectives as young people to remind us to look for the places that mattered in students' daily lives, such as popular historical after-school student hangouts. Although students' lack of exhaustive knowledge of Harlem's history was a barrier, they also had difficulty identifying their own ideas as valid in comparison to what had, elsewhere, been validated as the most important places in Harlem. Furthermore, students expressed apprehension about stepping into the role of an oral "storyteller," weaving together both the history of the place and their own lived experiences—essentially, shifting the historical narrative within this (new) teacher-student context.

We ended up deciding on an eclectic list of stops that reflected our shared opinions. Whereas I thought mostly about specific buildings, the students also suggested broader spaces, which reflected their lived experiences in Harlem. For example, during the tour one student discussed 125th Street and how it once served as an iconic location for restaurants, shops, and entertainment for youth. He also talked about how this space still serves as an important place in Harlem for youth today, which he elaborated on during the walking tour, beyond his notes and rehearsal sessions. Our richest preparatory discussions occurred when we discussed how to highlight students' points of view, in hopes of making the tour more valuable and engaging for the graduate students in ways that Alan Peshkin and others have long advocated for.² For instance, during the tour, one student presented the history of the public housing project where he lives close to Columbia, commenting on the history of the space and his own experiences feeling excluded from the University and its adjacent, more affluent, housing structure.

In practice, the walking tour "flipped the script" as high school students taught graduate students about Harlem's educational history. The dialectic exchanges between high school students and graduate students blurred the lines of hierarchy in who possesses historical knowledge, in what forms

² See Alan Peshkin, "In Search of Subjectivity—One's Own," *Educational Researcher* 17, no. 7 (1988): 17–21.

this knowledge is shared, and in what setting—also forcing me to re-assess my own assumptions about the exchange of knowledge more broadly. For decades, Hayden White has argued that the history discipline is closer to the literary tradition than the social sciences, and in doing so, that histories are actually “verbal fictions” which are more closely tied to the author’s imagined narrative than any set of established “facts.”³ White’s push against the traditional orthodoxy of how we, as scholars, codify knowledge became apparent during the walking tour. Students’ constructed narratives of Harlem’s history and its relation to their own lived experiences as youth were no less “historical” than those of established scholars—at least as internalized by the graduate students, many of them pre-service teachers, who were learning about Harlem’s educational history for the first time. Thus, by taking on the role as teachers and tour guides, students challenged the discipline’s acceptance that knowledge can only be created by credentialed historians. Although historical accuracy, on its most basic level, remains important, events like a walking tour lend nuance to notions of legitimacy in historical research, particularly around oral displays of perceived knowledge (or lack thereof) by the historical “storyteller.”⁴ Furthermore, similar experiences also underscore the role that other factors—such as personal feelings, perspectives, and social power—can play in exchanges of historical information. Education scholars from other disciplines have illustrated the benefits of pre-service teachers learning from youth, and there is no reason this principle should not be engaged by historians of education.⁵ In the case of the walking tour, having high school students step into the role of teachers enriched graduate students’ understanding of young people in Harlem’s rich history. Pedagogically, preparing and leading the tour helped authorize the high school students as knowers, researchers, and teachers of historical knowledge—a necessary intellectual belief among students and starting point for more in-depth collaborative research later in the year.

³ Hayden V. White, “The Historical Text as Literary Artifact,” in *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978): 82.

⁴ In subsequent essays where oral histories become my explicit focus, I will explore the many questions surrounding this type of oral knowledge as it pertains to youth researchers. These ideas around storytelling will also come into greater focus as the program progresses.

⁵ See, for example, Ernest Morrell and Anthony M. Collatos, “Toward a Critical Teacher Education: High School Student Sociologists as Teacher Educators,” *Social Justice* 29, no. 4 (90) (2002): 60–70.

Building on the Past: Origins of the Youth Historians in Harlem (YHH) Project

Students who participated in the walking tour were part of Youth Historians in Harlem (YHH)—a project that developed out of my particular graduate student context. As a historian in training and

⁶ This work stems from my post as a Research Fellow for the Institute for Urban and Minority Education (IUME) at Teachers College, Columbia University; A. A. Akom, Julio Cammarota, and Shawn Ginwright, “Youthtopias: Towards a New Paradigm of Critical Youth Studies,” *Youth Media Reporter* 2, no. 4 (2008): 5. For more information about YPAR, see Julio Cammarota and Michelle Fine, eds., *Revolutionizing Education: Youth Participatory Action Research in Motion*. (New York: Routledge, 2006); and Ernest Morrell, “Youth-Initiated Research as a Tool for Advocacy and Change in Urban Schools,” in *Beyond Resistance*, eds. Pedro Noguera, Julio Cammarota, and Shawn Ginwright (New York: Routledge, 2006), 111–128.

⁷ Although YPAR has primarily been conducted using social science methodology, there have been studies where young people have researched history, such as Bernadette Arnand et al., *Keeping the Struggle Alive: Studying Desegregation in Our Town* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2002). However, more rare has been historians of education engaging with young people with YPAR, with the goal of exclusively focusing on historical methodology.

⁸ For more information, please visit www.youthhistorians.com, and read the “News & Notes” section, which features blogs from the past two years; See Daniel Calhoun, “The City as Teacher: Historical Problems,” *History of Education Quarterly* 9, no. 3 (1968): 312–325; Ernest Morrell and John Rogers, “Students as Critical Public Historians: Insider Research on Diversity and Access in Post Brown v. Board in Los Angeles,” *Social Education* 70, no. 6 (2006): 367.

⁹ Barry M. Goldenberg, “Youth Historians in Harlem Project: A Community-Based Initiative in Rethinking History Education in Urban Schools,” Presented at CUFA at the National Council of Social Studies, St. Louis, 23 November 2013; The first two years of the program also mirrored as a qualitative research study, and these conclusions are based on a bevy of qualitative data including ethnographic field notes, student surveys, and informal interviews.

a doctoral student in History and Education at Teachers College, I am primarily concerned with producing new scholarship and historical knowledge. Yet, I also participate in another methodological tradition that informs my work (and my interest) with young people: Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR), a research framework that centers youth as capable knowledge producers and agents of change by having them participate in social justice-themed research, particularly in ways that “break down the barriers between the researcher and the researched.”⁶ As I thought about weaving these two different contexts of history and YPAR together, a compelling line of inquiry arose: how can young people participate in the production of historical knowledge, particularly in the history of education?⁷

For the past two years, I have worked with local public high school students in an after-school program in a small high school in Harlem. The program encouraged students to discuss history beyond the textbook, introducing them to scholarly research practices that enabled them to learn the history of their Harlem neighborhood by using “the city as [a] teacher,” with a goal of becoming “critical public historians.”⁸ By “critical,” I wanted to students to not only be able to understand history as a source of knowledge or information, but as a source of identity that could be both internalized and shared with others in their community. Students benefited both academically and socially; for example, YHH helped students develop their public speaking skills, learn how to navigate archives and collegiate settings, and perform basic research online. Students also demonstrated an increased interest in history and a sense of empowerment as emerging “scholars.”⁹

I benefited as well. Helping these high school students find historical sources, read and interpret them, and learn about Harlem improved my thought processes as a scholar. I began to develop a more nuanced understanding of Harlem in the present as it pertained to education—what interested students, the significance of their family histories, and their challenges living and learning in the neighborhood. Participating in historical dialogue with high school students about their present-day perspectives of Harlem also led me to think about my research methodologies. I was reminded of what Joyce Appleby wrote over a decade ago: that historians must “make more salient the embeddedness of history in the present,” and that doing so can help us “view the whole from a

¹⁰ Joyce Appleby, “The Power of History,” *The American Historical Review* 103, no. 1 (1998): 12.

different angle of vision.”¹⁰ Working with local youth, I realized, could provide a new contextual portal through which to create, and examine, historical questions about education.

Exploring a Collaboration Between Local Youth and Historians of Education

This academic year, the students and I will work together on a broad-scale original research project on the history of education in Harlem. Before jumping into a yearlong collaborative research project, however, I wanted to first create a “bridge” connecting students’ previous years work to our new focus on collaboration and original research where their voices would be centered—the youth-focused Harlem walking tour served this purpose. The current group consists of six African-American and two Latino males of varying academic skill sets; seven of them are returning 12th grade students who previously participated in the program, and one is a new 11th grade student. Each student volunteers to meet twice a week for two hours at Teachers College, Columbia University. The topic of our collective inquiry is a school called Harlem Prep that existed from 1967 to 1975 and is generally absent from the historical record. Holding classes in an old supermarket, Harlem Prep was an independently financed “community school” that served former high school dropouts, recovering drug addicts, Vietnam War veterans, older adults, and other non-traditional students. Even with limited resources and a challengingly diverse population, the school sent hundreds of students to college, including many dozens to highly selective institutions.

This year’s collaboration involves three phases. In the first, *planning phase*, students and I devise a research strategy and compelling historical questions for the year, as well as learn the historical context of Harlem in the 1960s and 1970s based on my preliminary research on Harlem Prep. In the second, *research phase*, students learn oral history methodology and prepare to conduct oral history interviews with Harlem Prep alumni.¹¹ Finally, in the third, *dissemination phase*, we will create digital exhibits (using Omeka content management system with the Neatline plug-in) to share our oral history interviews with both the general public (particularly the Harlem community) and the

¹¹ There are a variety of reasons why I am choosing to ground the research project in oral history. Not only is it necessary due to the scarcity of available archival materials, but oral history, more than other methodologies, lends itself to more porous boundaries between the researcher and the researched (i.e., the community), which is particularly salient for this experimental collaboration. Oral history “offers a challenge to the accepted myths of history, to the authoritarian judgment inherent in its tradition” in ways that align with the specific questions (addressed below) this series of essays will examine. Paul Thompson, “The Voice of the Past: Oral History,” in *The Oral History Reader*, 2nd Edition, eds. Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (New York: Routledge, 2006): 31, 29.

scholarly community, as well as hold a year-end event where we present our collaborative research-in-progress together at Teachers College, Columbia University.

This project faces unanswered questions not only about historical content but about the conceptual and methodological underpinnings of historical practice. In two subsequent essays, I will explore the opportunities and tensions involved when scholars work with youth apprentices in genuinely collaborative ways:¹²

1. When historians and local youth conduct historical research together, how does their work challenge notions of hierarchy and authority and/or complicate ideas about legitimate knowledge?
2. How do processes of historical research shift, and responsibilities change, when creating history with students via online digital formats?

I approach these questions with a sense of playfulness and a necessary comfort with the unknown. As sociologist Norman Denzin writes:

Since one can be trained only in what is already known, training sometimes incapacitates one from learning new ways; it makes one rebel against what is bound to be at first loose and even sloppy. But you cling to such vague images and notions, if they are yours, and you must work them out. For it is in such forms that original ideas, if any, almost always first appear.¹³

Denzin's poignant explanation can, and should, apply to scholars in history. As historians of education often located within colleges of education, we have a unique opportunity to probe for new methodologies by working with youth. Our affinity for studying the education histories of students offers the possibility to research with them in ways that might be less than optimal for historians

¹² Unpacking what this "genuine collaboration" looks like in practice is an underlying theme that I will continue to explore throughout this endeavor.

¹³ Norman K. Denzin, *The Research Act: A Theoretical Introduction to Sociological Methods* (Piscataway: Transaction Publishers, Rutgers 1970/2009), 6.

located outside colleges of education. Karen Graves recently reminded readers about shrinking opportunities for historians of education and how we must better elucidate the importance of our field in colleges of education with the increased pressures on the liberal arts in an era of school reform.¹⁴ Projects like Youth Historians can help answer her call to action—researching history with local youth allows us to remain true to our discipline while also contributing to the lives of students through tangible hands-on work that is needed in education today.¹⁵ Within this context, and as we proceed into our collective inquiry on Harlem Prep, I hope to spark a dialogue about the many untapped synergies among historians of education, historical research, and local youth.

¹⁴ See Karen Graves, “Because It’s Good for You: An Argument for History of Education in Liberal Education,” *History of Education Quarterly* 54, no. 1 (2014): 98-102.

¹⁵ James W. Fraser, “HES Presidential Address: The Future of the Study of Our Educational Past—Whither the History of Education?” *History of Education Quarterly* 55, no. 1 (2015): 1-32.



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Youth Historians in Harlem: Exploring the Possibilities in Collaborative History Research Between Local Youth and Scholars (Part 2 of 2)

Barry M. Goldenberg

Earlier in the year as I was searching for an accessible text that would push my high school students to think about their relationship with history, I was reminded of Eric Foner’s cogently titled book, *Who Owns History? Rethinking the Past in a Changing World*.¹⁶ In his preface, Foner hinted at the idea that history is in fact *not* the province of scholars alone and that many groups of people have claims of ownership on history.¹⁷ Beyond a short exercise for my students, I realized that the Youth Historians project built upon this notion specifically within the context of the Academy: If historians are not the sole “owners” of history, then it becomes troublesome when only *some* of the many people who “own” history are authorized to produce their historical accounts and others, such as local youth scholars, are seemingly not. To be sure, Foner also understands that there are “commonly accepted professional standards” in the discipline that separate the lay person from the scholar, which remains particularly relevant in today’s era of digital accessibility. I wondered, then, what would happen—and what it would look like in practice—when high school students were trained in historical methodology, and then “authorized” *as scholars* in a way that recognized them as historians, to also produce historical knowledge.¹⁸ Apropos to the book’s subtitle, centering students as knowledge producers can change the way historians think about—or more accurately, *conduct*—our study of the past by challenging notions of hierarchy in the history of education. Currently, a hierarchy of who can write the past exists in historical research, and it seeps into our methodologies to create a hardened set of hierarchical norms that are difficult to disentangle. As scholars, how can we conduct historical studies about a community without their input and then later, invite these same subjects to accept this scholarship when they did not have a genuine role in producing it in the first place?¹⁹

¹⁶ Eric Foner, *Who Owns History? Rethinking the Past in a Changing World* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2002); In his introductory essay, Foner explains that his book deals “with the relationship between the history and his or her own world,” xviii.

¹⁷ As should be noted, most of Foner’s essays in his book were actually written before the digital age, and this notion of ownership has certainly changed from when these essays were written in the 1980s and 1990s. Today, with the expansion of the web, anyone has the ability to create—if not own—historical interpretations. Thank you to Jack Dougherty for pointing this out.

¹⁸ Throughout the Youth Historians project, starting with the walking tour in Part 1 and continuing with the oral history interviews, a main goal of the project was to help students internalize the notion that they have the ability to produce knowledge by virtue of their training and participatory role at Teachers College and their innate ingenuity. Since this project seeks to break down barriers, I do not mean “authorized” in a hierarchical sense, but to connote that current norms state that institutional disciplinary training conveys credibility and credentials—both of which these students will gain by participating in this scholarly research project.

¹⁹ See K. Tsianina Lomawaima, “Tribal Sovereigns: Reframing Research in American Indian Education.” *Harvard Educational Review* 70, no. 1 (2000): 1–21.

This is the second essay in a series about the Youth Historians in Harlem (YHH) project. Part 1 outlined the goals of YHH, introducing my collaboration with local high school youth to produce historical research. Relying on the questions put forth in the first installment, Part 2 examines how scholarly norms of hierarchy in methodological processes and authority in narrative-making can be explored and challenged by conducting collaborative oral history interviews with current high school students in a way that promotes shared knowledge-making.

Learning Oral History Methods, Together

Following the walking tour where I hoped students internalized the notion that they could have agency as historians, we moved forward with the project's agenda: conducting oral history interviews with Harlem Prep alumni. Uncovering the history of Harlem Prep, an independent school that enrolled former high school dropouts and other non-traditional students in New York City from 1967 to 1975, remained my goal that I invited students to partake in.²⁰ To prepare for interviews, students and I first conducted preliminary research by reading primary source newspaper articles from *The New York Times* and *New York Amsterdam News*, viewing the only known archival film on Harlem Prep, and studying secondary sources I gathered from prior research.²¹ Next, we spent approximately four and a half weeks learning oral history methods. With Ansley Erickson's (Teachers College, Columbia University) guidance, I strategically planned a series of workshops about oral history research in incremental steps. We discussed how and why oral histories differ from journalistic interviews, the great opportunity that students had to document the unrecorded "living histories" of community elders, and the potential perils of relying on memory as a historical source.²²

Next, I sought out strategies of teaching oral history methods to the youth in ways that involved a similar level of rigor and scholarliness as my own training. Students listened to and discussed a sample oral history interview that I had conducted a year prior with a former Harlem Prep student (my only prior interview experience); I led a critical reflexive conversation with students where I reflected on my own nervousness at asking questions, which further helped students understand that we were learning these methods together. Then, I taught students how to operate the professional audio recording equipment. For the final step, students read over various tips for asking questions from the Center for Oral History at Columbia University and thematically prepared a list of potential questions to ask interviewees.²³ Students devised questions both

²⁰ As a reminder, we chose Harlem Prep as our topic for a number of reasons, particularly because I had conducted preliminary research on the school and made contact with a former teacher who was willing to connect me with other alumni. Harlem Prep also offered a seemingly unique opportunity for current Harlem students to converse with former Harlem students in a scholarly setting, all the while playing an important role in helping uncover the history of a school largely absent from the historical record.

²¹ Notably, students and I uploaded these files to a shared group Zotero (<http://www.zotero.org>) library, adding "notes" about these documents so we could easily return to them when it was time to build our digital exhibits. Zotero is an online bibliographic and note-taking tool developed by the Center for History and New Media at George Mason University.

²² Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson, eds., *The Oral History Reader* (2nd Ed.) (New York, NY: Routledge, 2006), x; I also used parts of this introductory essay as a reading for students during one of our sessions.

²³ Gerry Albarelli and Amy Starecheski, *Telling Lives Oral History Curriculum Guide*, 2005, available online from the Columbia University Center for Oral History, http://incite.columbia.edu/storage/Telling_Lives_Curriculum_Guide.pdf; I shared parts of this guide with students as a way to help them think about, and prepare, questions and themes for their interviews.

based on what they had learned from the previous Harlem Prep materials and from their own experiences attending school in Harlem, doing so in pairs around a theme that they were most interested in exploring. Our six themes, created collaboratively by students and I, were: Teachers and Teacher Pedagogy, School Policies, Students and Student Life, School Atmosphere and Environment, Historical Context of Harlem, and School Appearance/Physical Appearance. As an example of how our foci differed with regards to the specific questions we wanted to ask, I was most interested in teacher pedagogy, whereas students were very interested—and asked about—the school’s policies. With only about 60 minutes for each interview, I had not considered a topic such as school policies to be high priority. However, the youth interviewers, who are affected by policies every day and find them essential to their feelings about their own school, were very eager to learn about policies that contributed to Harlem Prep’s seemingly positive school atmosphere.²⁴

Seeking to expose students to a live interview before having them lead their own in small groups, I first scheduled a full-group interview with a former teacher at Harlem Prep with whom I had recently developed a relationship (but whom I had not interviewed). We had a packed conference room at the Institute for Urban and Minority Education at Teachers College: myself and two students, together, served as lead interviewers who would ask the questions; two other students operated the Tascam audio recording equipment; and the other four students acted as “observers” who took notes on our interactions for later group reflection, accompanied by professor Ansley Erickson and another graduate student.

Admittedly, the interview was a bit unwieldy at first. Finding a rhythm and proper pacing as co-interviewers working together was initially quite challenging.²⁵ I wanted the youth to start the interview and direct the dialogue as much as possible, with me interjecting only when I felt it was appropriate or needed to ask a particular question. Still, the students and I eventually developed a good cadence as we collectively thought that the interview was successful in both substance and process.²⁶ Pedagogically, in preparation for future small-group interviews, it also served as a needed experience for students to see that, as Martha Howell and Walter Prevenier explain, interviewing takes supreme focus and is “no simple art.”²⁷

Breaking Down the Hierarchy: The Key to Collaborative Oral History Interviews

We conducted four subsequent interviews with Harlem Prep alumni, all whom neither I nor the students had met previously. I co-conducted all but one interview alongside three students: one co-lead interviewer, one

²⁴ For example, some of the questions students developed in their pre-interview protocol were: How were the rules established—by administrators, or did teachers and students have a role in these decisions?; What were some of the school policies that you felt contributed to Harlem Prep’s success? (Any that you disagreed with?); Did you notice any school policies that changed over time?

²⁵ For more discussion of group interviews, see Hugo Slim and Paul Thomson, “Ways of Listening,” in *The Oral History Reader* (2nd Ed.), eds. Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (New York, NY: Routledge, 2006), 148-149. See also more broadly, Charles T. Morrissey, “Oral History Interviews: From Inception to Closure,” in *History of Oral History: Foundations and Methodology*, eds. Thomas L. Carlton, Lois E. Meyers, and Rebecca Sharpless (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2007), 160-196.

²⁶ One major issue at first was how students and I would initially stutter following pauses by the interviewee, unsure of who would ask the next question—and what question to ask. For example, one of the lead students interviewers explained after that he “felt awkward during transitions,” while the other lead student interviewers likewise explained that he “didn’t want to make it awkward” with regards to asking specific follow-up questions. However, as the interview progressed, we learned to make eye contact with each other before interjecting, and we learned to assume a follow-up question by the other, even though this was an aspect we collectively struggled with. As one of the observing youth commented after: “one of the things we should have done better is [ask] follow-up questions, where he would answer and we wouldn’t have a question [ready].”

²⁷ Martha Howell and Walter Prevenier, *From Reliable Sources: An Introduction to Historical Methods* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001), 27.



Together Barry Goldenberg and Youth Historians conduct a collaborative oral history interview with a Harlem Prep teacher. Photograph by Barry M. Goldenberg. Personal collection.

²⁸ Since two of the four interviews had to be scheduled on the same day and time, Ansley Erickson co-conducted one of them as I co-conducted the other, using the same student pairing set-up.

audio operator, and one additional questioner/note taker.²⁸ Notably, the co-lead student interviewer always initiated the dialogue, and I encouraged the students to frame the interview as much as possible. Employing this set-up made our goal clear—students were not just present; they were conducting the interviews as young scholars.

Although each interview had a different dynamic, collectively, they all flourished. First, the alumni were unanimously pleased to share their stories, as evidenced by each wanting to know about our future progress. One interviewee even said at the conclusion of her interview that, in response to us asking if she had any final comments: “I’m glad you all asked. I’m glad you came here to ask questions. So thank you for taking me down memory lane a little bit.”²⁹ Of course, the students were excited to participate—their diligent preparation clearly illustrated that. And of course, the students and I learned novel information about Harlem Prep that will aid our future research (and possibly my later dissertation research).

²⁹ Anonymous interview by Barry M. Goldenberg and two Youth Historians, February 25, 2015, Harlem, New York, NY.

Particularly noteworthy was how the power dynamics shifted from Ansley Erickson and I to the young people during the interviews. Interviewees seemed to recognize that the youth were also co-experts, and consequently, co-opted the purpose of the interview to speak directly to them in ways that transferred the history-making authority from the university scholars to the students and alumni. For example, one interviewee, over the course of almost one and a half hours, made eye contact almost exclusively with the youth. Although I ended up asking the majority of the questions for this particular interview, the Harlem Prep alumnus continually spoke to the students, as if I was absent from the table. The student operating the audio equipment declared to me after: “I didn’t say anything but he looked at me the whole time!” Another alumnus, who had faced traffic difficulties and arrived at the interview unsure of the setting, noticeably became more comfortable when introduced to the youth, softening the tone of her voice and overall disposition. She also commented appreciatively about student preparation and involvement—it mattered to her that the questions came from the youth, as evidenced in the transcript when she asked for the lead student interviewer’s name before starting the conversation.

After all, this was to be expected; Valerie Yow has argued that “interview dynamics,” such as similarities and differences of race and cultural norms between interviewer and narrator can affect the outcome of oral histories, and in our case, it seemed that the young people’s status as Harlem students mattered.³⁰ Each of the youth researchers had unique insights and perspectives about schooling and education that significantly differed from mine, a white researcher—and outsider—who grew up in suburban St. Louis.³¹ It was important

³⁰ Valerie Raleigh Yow, *Recording Oral History: A Guide for the Humanities and Social Sciences* (3rd Ed.) (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2015), 197.

³¹ Barry M. Goldenberg, “White Teachers in Urban Classrooms Embracing Non-White Students’ Cultural Capital For Better Teaching and Learning,” *Urban Education* 49, no. 1 (2014): 111-144.

³² See, most accessibly, Pierre Bourdieu, “The Forms of Capital,” in *Sociology of Education: A Critical Reader* (2nd Ed.), ed. A. R. Sadovnik (New York, NY: Routledge, 1986/2011), 83-96; For examples of alternate forms of cultural capital, see Tara J. Yosso, “Whose Culture Has Capital? A Critical Race Theory Discussion of Community Cultural Wealth,” *Race Ethnicity and Education* 8, no. 1 (2005): 69-91.

³³ Alessandro Portelli, *The Battle of Valle Giulia: Oral History and the Art of Dialogue* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1997), 58.

³⁴ Recognizably, of course, this is still speculation. Conversely, what were the potential drawbacks to having students participate? Is it possible that the interviewees censored information about Harlem Prep, such as preferring not to discuss anything portraying the school in a negative light? These are unanswered questions, but a realistic possibility, too.

³⁵ Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson, eds., *The Oral History Reader* (2nd Ed.) (New York, NY: Routledge, 2006), 448.

to understand that students’ experiences attending school in Harlem amounted to valuable “cultural capital” that felt synergistic with the experiences of former Harlem Prep students.³²

Of course, students’ presence not only affected the interviewees’ demeanor, but also the actual substance of the narratives being shared; students’ agency to ask questions altered the trajectory of the interview in unique—and uncharted—ways. Alessandro Portelli poignantly notes that, “each person is at a crossroads of many potential stories,” and students’ genuine involvement elicited stories and interactions from the alumni that may have not been expressed in the same way—or at all—if I conducted the interviews alone.³³ For instance, one interviewee spoke intimately about growing up in a “rough” neighborhood in New York City, using language and terminology that described some very intimate experiences that the high school youth could relate to differently than I could. From my vantage point, the resulting exchanges between the student and the Harlem Prep alumnus were rich and vivid, contributing to a transcript that seemed to be more detailed, if not possibly more honest and raw, because of the students’ participation. Taking this into account, I argue that the youth held a key role in producing “new” legitimate knowledge—both by their presence and by their questions—in noteworthy ways that challenged the hierarchical norms of (adult) scholars as sole knowledge producers. Furthermore, the fact that students were operating as researchers within the academy while simultaneously retaining their membership to the Harlem community helped legitimize the interviewees’ personal narratives as scholarship. Although the interviews surely stemmed from my fascination and logistical preparation, the students were the catalysts in this specific instance of oral history knowledge production. In fact, it was *because* the interviewees recognized students as having at least a co-equal role in the interviews that they seemed to be so open to sharing their stories in the fashion that they did.³⁴

An Intergenerational Context: Exploring Authority in the Transmission of Narratives

A further analysis of the nature of the interactions between local youth and their elders raises additional—albeit more speculative and less understood—queries about the transmission of the created narratives themselves. As Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson suggest, “schools are an important context for intergenerational oral history projects,” particularly for a project such as Youth Historians where the young people are positioned as authorizers of knowledge.³⁵ The students, by virtue of their Harlem membership *combined* with their status as (novice) scholars part of a university research project, have a unique capacity

³⁶ This is exacerbated by the fact that Harlem Prep disbanded as an independent school in 1975 (shortly after these students graduated), and that alumni have been passing away in recent years.

³⁷ See Adrea Lawrence, “Epic Learning in an Indian Pueblo: A Framework for Studying Multigenerational Learning in the History of Education,” *History of Education Quarterly* 54, no. 3 (August 1, 2014): 286–302.

³⁸ Michael Frisch, “Sharing Authority: Oral History and the Collaborative Process,” *The Oral History Review* 30, no. 1 (2003), 113; This differs from Frisch’s term of “shared authority,” which he originally coined in Michael Frisch, *A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1990). The idea of “shared authority” refers more to the collaborative process of conducting oral histories. For example, see special themed *The Oral History Review* 30, no. 1, Spring 2003, which discusses these issues of collaboration and authority at length.

³⁹ Anonymous interview by Barry M. Goldenberg and two Youth Historians, February 25, 2015, Harlem, New York, NY.

⁴⁰ This idea aligns with Frisch’s belief that “authority is shared in oral history by definition”; see Frisch, “Sharing Authority,” 113.

⁴¹ See, among many, Valerie Kinloch, *Harlem On Our Minds: Place, Race and Literacies of Urban Youth* (New York, NY: Teachers College Press, 2009), which discusses how students’ experiences living in Harlem affect their multiple identities and understandings of the many social changes occurring around them, particularly gentrification.

different than mine to be the “receptors” of these elders’ untold stories. One expected reason for this is that the narratives conveyed by the Harlem Prep alumni were highly personal, in part because, as the interviewees expressed with frustration, the story of Harlem Prep is relatively unknown.³⁶ Thus, today’s current Harlem youth researchers can become the heirs of these alumni’s stories on Harlem Prep. They are the group of people who have the greatest “authority” and metaphorical claim on these stories; the interview exchanges between elders and youth were ultimately powerful because they represented something deeper and more ethereal like the passing of intergenerational knowledge in ways that that go beyond instances of sentimentality alone.³⁷ Put another way, Michael Frisch suggests the term “*sharing* authority” to explain this rather intrinsically defined commodity; there was certainly *something* noteworthy and fascinating “about the nature of authority enacted and manifest, shared or sharable or not, within the actual oral histories” of the Harlem Prep alumni.³⁸

I sensed this most during one of the interviews that occurred outside Teachers College, Columbia University at an interviewee’s office building in Central Harlem, in which the Harlem Prep alumnus took an obvious interest in the students’ lives in Harlem. As she shared her story, I felt that she did so in a tone and vocal direction that hinted at the need for students to know these stories—*her* story of Harlem Prep—as a part of a greater narrative that would help put students’ current understanding of education and the greater Harlem community in perspective. From her depictions of racism in schools as a child to her current work in the community at an African-American-owned company, from my perspective, it was as if she was saying to students: “this is what you are a part of, now go out and use this knowledge for the better.”³⁹

Although most apparent in the aforementioned interview, each of the alumni were eager to share their educational stories in Harlem because of the unique youth-adult interviewer-to-interviewee dynamic.⁴⁰ For an influential school like Harlem Prep that no longer physically exists but remains a substantial part of its alumni’s lives, current students in Harlem possess a particularly unique authority—or what social scientists might define as “positionality”—to partake in the sharing of this knowledge linked by community and educational genealogy.⁴¹ Ultimately, what this sharing means in the context of oral history methodology remains to be determined, and I hope that future projects explore this idea through similar undertakings with youth.

Rethinking the Role of Young People in Uncovering the Past

Overall, students and I both contributed in different ways to each of these interviews with the Harlem Prep alumni; outside of organizing the interviews, I asked many questions relevant to my research, concluded each interview segment, and provided assistance for the co-lead student interviewer when needed. Still, despite my presence, the youth also acted as primary participants in each interview, contributing in both very tangible and less understood ways as described in this essay.

The students' and interviewees participation in the process described above illustrate that scholars must re-think how to conduct inquiries of the past. We would be wise then to include students in our research methods. Just as there are many owners of history, there should be many producers of it, too, particularly when knowledge is being created about one's own community such as in the Youth Historians project. In these specific oral histories, students, trained in partnership with scholars, acted as the linchpin in the production of knowledge. If hierarchical norms of the discipline suggest that students cannot—or should not—lead in the process of knowledge production, these youth-led interviews challenge that. They also of course open new questions about who is “authorized” to produce knowledge and about the intricate nature of authority itself: how does the meaning of these historical stories change when received by local youth scholars, both in the context of historical scholarship and to the community at large? As the students and I begin to create digital exhibits in subsequent months, we must continue to unravel the many complications—and opportunities—latent in sharing these youth-scholar-community generated stories that shift from *questions* that the young people want to ask (i.e., the interviews) to the stories that the young people want to tell.



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