

Streetwise for Book Smarts

Grassroots Organizing and Education Reform in the Bronx



June 20, 2008

Celina Su

Cultural toolkits matter

- Cultural practices and implicit values help to shape the *strengths* and *preferences* of social change organizations.



3 key tensions

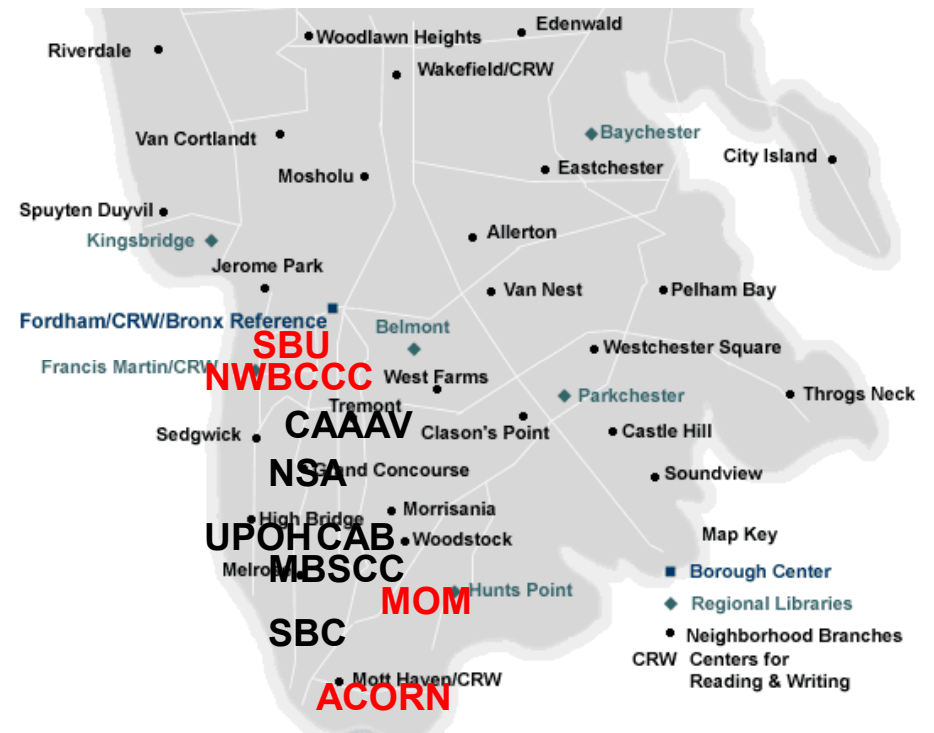
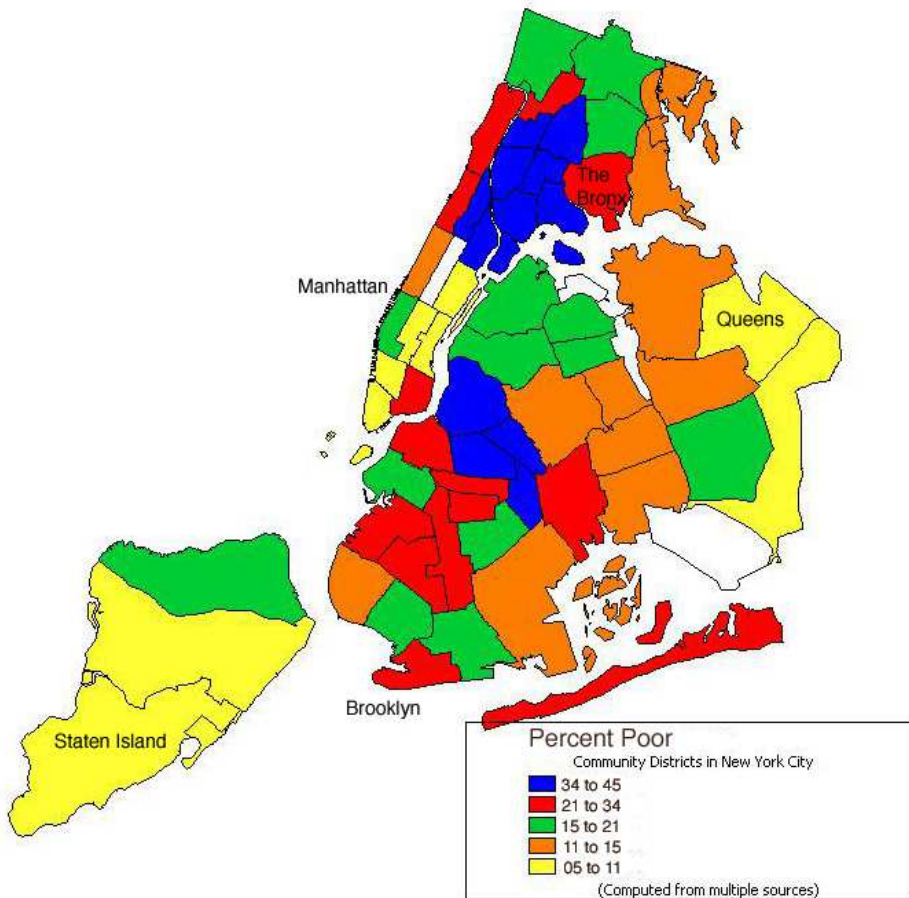
- whether groups address issues of race in campaigns,
- their aims for electoral policy adoption versus policy formulation in the policy-making process, and
- the balance between confrontational and collaborative strategies.



Social change organizations



Education organizing in the Bronx



Social change organizations and the context of education organizing

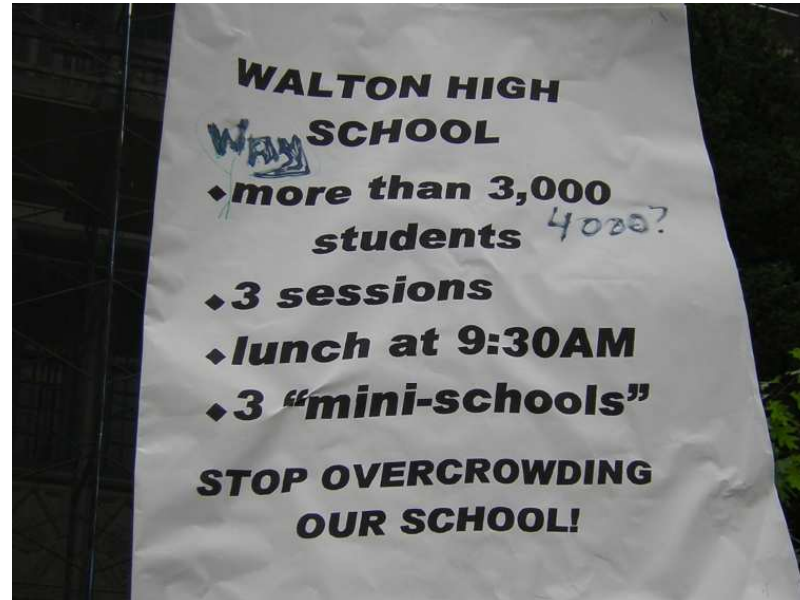
- Imperfect policymaking cycles
 - Problem articulation, policy formulation, policy adoption, policy implementation, monitoring, evaluation
- The special case of education
 - Longer-term collaboration
- Laboratories of democracy



Methods

- Data collection
 - Archival research
 - Direct observation
 - Interviews

- Analysis and theory-building
 - Iterative with data collection



Categories of toolkits

- Alinskyite archetype
- Freirean archetype



Categories of cultural norms



Saul Alinsky

- Alinskyite category
 - Emphasis building the organization
 - Activities focus on recruitment
 - Leadership development with the organizer as teacher

Strength in unity

- ACORN

- Citywide meetings & rallies
- Large membership bases
- Organizers do research
- *Edison signature campaign*



- Northwest Bronx Clergy & Community Coalition

- Workshops, meetings, research groups
- Larger percentage of core leaders
- *Capital Plan signature campaign*

Categories of cultural norms, contd.

- Freirean category
 - Emphasis on building the individual
 - Activities focus on trust-building
 - Leadership development with the organizer as partner



Paulo Freire

Strength in diversity

- Mothers on the Move

- Consensus-based meetings
- Oral histories, binders, retreats, cook-offs, talent shows
- Working to tweak with and implement new policies
- *New middle school and parent involvement signature campaigns*

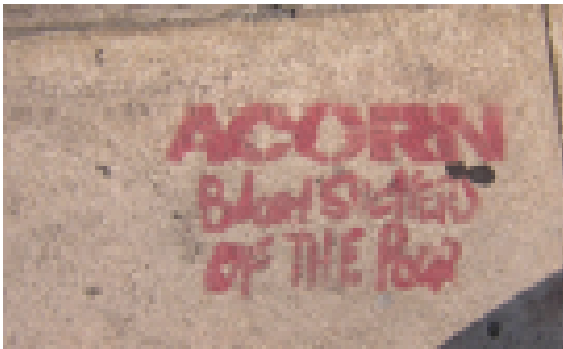
- Sistass and Brothas United

- Hanging out, peer tutoring
- Overcoming differences from within
- Highlighting inequalities within a system
- *Overcrowding and new leadership high school signature campaigns*



Tensions in political strategies

- Forwarding colorblindness as a common denominator in ‘winnable’ campaigns
- Capacity in holding large actions
 - Holding politicians accountable
- Stated preferences that direct action is sexier, has more cachet, and feeds you with adrenaline
 - Anything else is wimpy





- Highlighting the socially constructed nature of race and finding different groups' cross-cutting commonalities
- Capacity for research, policy analysis, and infusing the political process with new, different ideas for social change
 - Getting to the policy-making table
- Stated preferences for collaboration and pride in local knowledge
 - To not recycle the same old, same old

Striking the right balance

- Organizations *and* movements?
 - Developing cross-cutting alliances to bridge racial divides
 - Developing layered capacities for policymaking
 - Being fair-weather friends



Remaining challenges

- The fine line between legitimacy and co-optation
- Scaling up for the Freirean groups
 - By forming networks
- Developing lifelong activists



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