Youth are much smarter than adults tend to give them credit for, which is ironic since we were all youth once and know what being marginalized feels like. Youth know right away when something is unfair—they recognize it immediately but don’t always know what to do when they witness this unfairness. Or else, they’ve been socialized by adults to be complicit with the way things are.

At the Michigan Roundtable for Diversity & Inclusion’s Youth Program in Detroit, our issues change each year with each new group of youth that join our program. One of our program principles is that youth should organize on the issues that they’re passionate about; that they are directly affected by. In our program, our youth decide on the issues they want to focus on as they are living those experiences. Last year, the group focused on disability justice, structural racism, strengthening alliance with LGBT communities, and immigration. This year’s group is focusing on Islamophobia, educational justice, sexual assault against teen girls, and organizing youth to be better connected across the city.

It’s necessary to provide youth with a structure and training for skills to help them be successful in proposing/implementing solutions to these challenges. Their access to opportunity and resources is so intertwined into intuitions of social, racial and class inequalities. Some youth are over-intellectualizing, which detaches them from what’s happening to everyday people. How could they ever connect with one another, especially young people in low-income neighborhoods where that intellectual language and mindset is not in their everyday vernacular. If we can help them understand our complex systems by meeting them where they’re at, they can create equitable solutions.

It’s also important to help them understand the history of where they live. With Detroit’s history of racist FHA policies, the intentional segregation of racial/ethnic communities by one of the automotive companies, racial rebellions, and a myriad of other things, history informs us of where and why we are in the neighborhoods we are today. We use intergenerational oral histories to help young people learn about what our region was like “back in the day” and hear that history from the perspective of people who look like them.

Youth should learn the history of their communities from their own community members. Ethnic Studies is the reason why I’m an organizer today. When I finally learned about the oppression faced by API communities in the U.S., I had an “A-ha, this shit is fucked up” moment. It was truly an awakening for me that opened my eyes to the ways in which my K-12 public school education had brainwashed me into believing—that the U.S. was this amazing country founded on the principles of freedom, liberty and justice. And yet, we have a horrific history of devaluing and dehumanizing people of color, women, non-Christians, queer communities, and the disabled. I learned about amazing API women who were standing up and speaking out for justice, I learned about exclusionary policies, Japanese Internment, and Vincent Chin, whose murder happened right here in Detroit. If we don’t offer ethnic studies, we only maintain the dominant narrative of whiteness (and other privilege) in this country. We have to challenge that narrative as often as we can to dismantle oppressive behaviors and mindsets. When a safe space is created, as in a diversity workshop or an ethnic studies class setting, we can begin to probe, challenge and devise new ways of connecting to one another.

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