

Confronting “limit situations” in a youth/adult educational research collaborative

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Abstract

This paper highlights a participatory action research (PAR) project involving adolescent and university researchers that provided a learning experience that was markedly different from that which many of the youth – low-income Blacks and Latina/os – had previously experienced in school. Specifically, the paper considers “limit situations” (Freire, 1970, p. 104) – 1) being labeled as deficient, 2) being invested in hierarchies power relations, and 3) having insufficient academic preparation – that posed challenges for the research team. We examine these how the team confronted these limit situations, which was vital to carrying out the work and meeting the goals of the project. This examination is conducted using poems composed by the youth researcher and author (KG), drawn from his personal experience and project data, and connecting them conceptually and by example to the implementation of the project through the more conventional academic writing of the principle investigator (Tara).

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Introduction: Youth in schooling and research

The involvement of youth has been essential to academic educational research since university scholars arose as authorities on K-12 education in the early 20th century (Tyack, 1974). However, youth participation largely been characterized by a lack of control over inquiry processes and outcomes. Adults (e.g. parents and teachers) have also experienced a relative lack of power in university-based research. However, the silencing and objectification of youth has been particularly severe for reasons linked to hierarchical power relations in schools and society and embedded cultural beliefs about children and adolescents.

Buckingham (2000) points out that young people are “defined in terms of their [assumed] lack of rationality, social understanding or self-control” (p. 14) and “denied the right to self-determination” (p. 13). This reflects widely-shared cultural perceptions that youth cannot discern their own needs and how they should be addressed and that (responsible) adults must act on their behalf. These perceptions are often deeply manifest in schools serving poor, Latino/a and Black, “low-achieving” children, especially those identified as having learning, emotional and/or behavioral disabilities. In these school settings, young people’s activities are often highly regimented, regulated and configured in ways over which they have little control. Given assumptions about their intellectual inadequacies, it is not surprising that they are afforded little or no power over the terms of or investigations into their schooling conditions. This also reflects a long-standing belief, within the academy, “that naming the world [and people’s experiences within it] is the task of an elite” (Freire, 1970, p. 90), based on a false dichotomization of the revered “expert” knowledge of academic researchers and the devalued “experiential” knowledge of local people (Gaventa, 1993). This, in combination with diminished perceptions about young people’s intellectual capacity creates a “double jeopardy” that is intensified for educationally and socio-politically marginalized youth who have been unduly scrutinized, problematized, and disempowered in academic research processes (Cammarota & Fine, 2008).

University-based, educational research directly impacts the daily lives of youth through its influence on school policy and practice. Denying them control over this research violates a basic democratic obligation to afford people “the opportunity to speak [their] mind, be heard and counted by others, and... to have an influence on outcomes” (Cook-Sather, 2006, p. 363) in matters related to their lives. This is not, however, merely a matter of ethics. Young people hold valuable insights into schooling, from which university researchers are largely distanced (by virtue of age, race/ethnicity, class, everyday experience, etc.). Further, they have tremendous capacity to discern, analyze and respond to the challenges they face, as demonstrated in the *Opportunity Gap Research Project* (Fine, Bloom, Burns, Chajet, Guishard, Payne, Perkins-Munn, & Torre, 2005) (Fine et al., 2005), in which youth researchers were able to “identify cracks in the opportunity structure... and to develop their own intellectual and organizing

capacities” for addressing educational inequities (p. 523). Thus, we delimit young people’s role in educational research at the expense of the quality and applicability of scholarly knowledge and the interventions they inform.

In speaking about social transformation, Freire (1970) asks, “Who are better prepared than the oppressed to understand the terrible significance of an oppressive society? [and] Who can better understand the necessity of liberation?” (p. 44). This speaks to the significance of investment in change. Noguera (2003) points out that in public education failures to significantly ameliorate educational inequities reflect a lack of “will and conviction [among those in control] to make it happen” (p. 157). Many researchers and policy-makers build successful careers investigating and responding to inequitable schooling conditions and outcomes that do not directly and negatively impact their everyday lives and opportunities for success. However, educationally marginalized youth suffer directly from these inequities and have the most to gain from their transformation. Thus, we believe that they are particularly promising agents of change. Thus, we ask: Who better to help us understand and address the ways in which schooling has not worked for some, than those for whom school has not worked?

However, although educationally marginalized youth are profoundly negatively impacted by schooling inequities, their conscious investment in change – in understanding and action – requires a process of (re)education through which they must confront, critically analyze and overcome “the situations which limit them” (Freire, 1970, p. 99). Therefore, in addition to methodological considerations, scholarly research projects on educational equity and justice that engage marginalized youth in meaningful ways must also be a pedagogical process dedicated to their intellectual, social and political growth and development.

In this paper, we examine such a project – a participatory action research (PAR) project involving high school students and university researchers that investigated educational issues. Throughout the implementation of the research we found “limit situations” (Freire, 1970, p. 104) to be a significant challenge. Following, we describe the project and examine three limit situations facing the youth researchers – 1) being labeled as deficient, 2) being invested in hierarchies power relations, and 3) having insufficient academic preparation – that the research team had to confront so that it could successfully carry out the work and meet the goals of the project. We conduct this examination using poems composed by the youth researcher and second author (KG), drawn from his personal experience and project data, and connecting them conceptually and by example to the implementation of the project through the more conventional academic writing of the principle investigator (Tara).

The ARISE study

Theoretical Context

The study described in this paper, Action Research into School Exclusion (ARISE), was a two-year participatory action research (PAR) project. PAR is a methodological approach in which those affected by the issue under investigation actively engage in all stages of the research. PAR has the explicit goal of “action” or intervening into the problem under investigation in a meaningful way. PAR draws on the work of critical theorists like Antonio Gramsci and Paulo Freire, who posit that controlling knowledge is primary means through which dominant groups exercise their power over subjugated groups (Córdova, 2004; Gaventa, 1993). PAR projects customarily focus on aspects of social inequality and are designed to assist oppressed peoples in better understanding and transforming the conditions of oppression.

PAR is grounded in the assumption that effective understandings of and interventions into social problems require the knowledge of those affected by the problem – local informants – and an essential component of validity is that the ways in which problems are conceptualized, investigated and represented be authentic to local informants. This reflects the epistemological orientation of PAR work, which holds that local people are experts in their own experiences.

Study Setting and Participants

The setting of the study, from which the ARISE youth researchers were drawn, was an independent, urban, alternative special education school. All students were court-appointed to the school through social services or the juvenile justice system and were identified as having a physical, behavioral, emotional, and/or learning disability. All were Black or Latina/o and many had been expelled from area public schools. Over the course of the study, 12 eleventh and twelfth-graders participated as researchers – four boys and four girls were African American, three girls and one girl were Latina/o. A core group of seven participated consistently. The research team included Tara Brown and two doctoral graduate assistants (GAs). Consistent with PAR methodology, the study was driven by the concerns and interests of the youth researchers who collaborated in study design, data collection and analysis, and the use and representation of study findings. To train and support the young people in the work of the project, the adult researchers taught a for-credit *Research and Action Seminar* twice a week at the school.

Project description and methodology

ARISE was a two-year study whose goals were: 1) to better understand the schooling experiences of adolescents excluded from mainstream public schools, 2) to build on the strengths and address the challenges of students at risk for exclusion, and 3) to develop an action plan to improve the schooling experiences of excluded students. The research team conducted interviews with students and teachers at the school. Interviews were videotaped, transcribed, and analyzed. We also analyzed local and national statistics related to school disciplinary policies and procedures. As action, the team designed and conducted four workshops for pre-service teachers at a local, major research university and presented our research at three national research conferences. At these events, work products like PowerPoint presentations, artwork, reflective writings, videos and other multimedia projects, which the team created to represent study findings, were used for presentational and educational purposes.

Confronting “limit situations”

Deficiency labels: Un/truth in advertising

As previously noted, all of the youth researchers were labeled as having a learning, emotional and/or behavioral “disability” or “disorder.” These labels and the assumptions they engender were both salient and extremely painful for many of youth researchers and participants. For example, a student interviewed, Tanisha, said, “I understand that they [teachers] feel that we’re special needs students and that we’re not gunna amount to much, that we’re not gunna learn much in life...” As with Tanisha, there was a prevailing belief among the youth researchers that labels like “special education,” “behavioral problem,” and “learning disabled” signaled to others that they were deficient in some way. Being removed from the general school population fortified this belief. KG captures the challenges and doubts that accompany being labeled as deficient, particularly with regards to one’s ability to learn.

Purpose

*A connection rang
It followed me as it sang
Telling me what I am
flowed out like a water dam
People knowing what I have become
Still ponder if I'm the special one
What are my needs
Education is ready to be feed
Wanting it so much
Just my luck
strikes to punch
I ask do you really care
this is what I have finally shared
– KG*

KG describes how a person's way of being gets connected to schooling. Specifically, if how one learns does not match expectations in school, it can result in official declarations or deficiency labels that follow a young person throughout their formal education. As KG infers, these labels are socially constructed and ascribed by others. While some see special education identification as a process of *finding out what's wrong with a person*, KG characterizes it as a process of *making what's with a person wrong* in a public way. This is evident in how he characterizes "learning disabled" not as something he is, but something "I have become," through a process over which he had no control.

The youth researchers resisted the labels ascribed to them, sometimes in ways that challenged the work and goals of the project. For example, in our first university workshop I suggested that we invite interviewees to attend the presentation. The youth researchers agreed with one caveat – most did not want to invite Tanisha because they felt she resembled the stereotypic image of a special education student. She wore glasses, had one eye that strayed outward, and as one researcher said, "says some crazy stuff." The prospect of being seen as the same "kind" of person as Tanisha was distressing, causing one researcher to say, very sadly, "I never thought I'd be in a school with someone like her." Of course, excluding Tanisha went against our core principles which were anti-exclusionary and strove to honor everyone's contributions and ways of being. I was adamant that we invite all or none of the interviewees. The research team opted to invite none, much to my disappointment. However, this incident, which occurred early in the project, helped us to build vital understandings about each other and about working as a team.

When I, as the adult and seminar instructor, made the case for Tanisha, the youth researcher most in disagreement assumed a foregone conclusion. He grew despondent, saying, "Go ahead, bring her. I don't care." The deliberations that ensued, which eventually led to the consensual decision not to invite any of the interviewees, demonstrated to the youth researchers that I meant to seriously consider their perspectives and was committed to collaborative decision-making. This incident impressed upon me, as one never ascribed a deficiency label, the incredible depth of personal pain and stigma they cause and their potential for raising doubts about one's own capacities and self-worth.

KG addresses this, “still ponder[ing] if I’m the special one.” The youth were clear about what being labeled “special” in the school context meant to others but were in a constant process of figuring out what it meant to them, particularly as learners. As low-income, Black and Latina/o, special and alternative education students schooling had too often “come[s] with a punch.” That is, exacerbated their troubles through low expectations and menial curriculum, lack of adult caring, gendered and racialized stereotypes, and administrative disorganization (Brown, 2007; Dance, 2002; Ferguson, 2000; Grant, 1994; Lopez, 2003; Nieto, 1999; Noguera, 2008; Oakes, 1985; Valenzuela, 1999). The youth researchers struggled to reconcile the messages from such prior schooling experiences with what they knew about their own promise.

The youth researchers accomplished many things (e.g. conducting academic research, designing and implementing teacher trainings, and presenting at conferences) that exploded perceptions about the intellectual capacity of students labeled as deficient. One way that I encouraged them to think about and use the deficiency labels ascribed to them was as evidence of their lack of “truth in advertising,” which was a major finding of the study. This required that they publicly acknowledge the labels, which proved to be painfully difficult. Before each workshop and presentation, the youth deliberated over whether to take the personal risk of acknowledging their ascribed labels in order to make the vital point about the true intellectual potential of youth labeled as deficient. That this had to continually be renegotiated shows their profound desire to begin with a clean slate and to just be “normal.” Each time, they arrived at a consensus to acknowledge the labels, which speaks to their dedication to confronting and overcoming this limit situation in service of project goals.

Reconstituting power

Virtually all public schools have a clear power hierarchy in which students are the least powerful constituency. In schools serving relatively large numbers of “at risk” youth, particularly those with academic or disciplinary troubles, the press to control students is often intensified and the power structure can be especially rigid (Akom, 2001; Fine, 1991; Haberman, 1994; Noguera, 2003). Facing highly structured and controlled curriculum and harsh and inflexible disciplinary policies, many of these young people grow accustomed to capitulating to the power of school adults even when it is not used in their best interest.

In the following poem, KG describes how school adults’ power over youth can be both destructive and replete.

Truth with a Stare
People don't care
Damage your life that you can't even spare
You keep going but things aren't fair
The reality that you can't bare
Take the time to listen to be aware
Why do these people even dare?
Why can't people be there?
Spilt the life of student until it tears
Let them breathe, give them air
Life damages until you declare
People are ready to share
But life seems so cold with a stare
Things just come with a blare - (Loud harsh noise)

Life comes with a harsh glare
Truth comes with a scare
– KG

“Truth with a Stare” conveys the sense of powerlessness among some youth to protect lives that they “can’t even spare” from the devastation of uncaring school adults. In the poem, KG questions their motives and beseeches them to understand their impact on students and to change their behaviors. For him, the power of school adults to “split the life of student until it tears” juxtaposed to his lack of power as a student has been a difficult reality to lay bare.

Because there are few institutionally-sanctioned ways that students can effectively challenge school practices, resistance often takes punishable forms like disruption, disrespect and insubordination (Brown & Rodriguez, 2008; Fine, 1991). All of the ARISE youth researchers had engaged in punishable resistance in school which, for most, was the primary reason for their exclusion from mainstream public schools. Yet, they remained invested in traditional school roles in which control is taken by adults and relinquished by youth. This posed challenges to creating a genuinely collaborative research process and proved to be a “limit situation” that the research team had to confront, reflected in the following two examples.

Over the first semester of the project, the team lost four youth researchers and I wanted to replace them (two dropped out, one left school and one was incarcerated). I posed this to the remaining five and four rejected the idea. I asked them to give it more consideration, promising to revisit the conversation the following week. At the next discussion I decided not to risk disturbing the group dynamic and cohesion by adding new members. However, I soon changed my mind again after further thought about my own needs as a tenure-track assistant professor and the heavy workload of the project. I raised the issue again and some of the young people were clearly exasperated. One said, “First you say we’re not adding people and then we’re not. Just make a decision!”

In the second instance the research team was reviewing a draft of questionnaire we were designing. I asked the youth researchers for feedback on a particular question to ensure it was worded in a way that would evoke an honest response. One researcher hastily offered a suggestion, which I asked him to repeat, so I could write it down. He repeated the question in an exasperated tone saying, “It’s simple. *You’re* supposed to be the doctor!” Rather than helping me with the questionnaire, the youth researchers spent next five minutes trying to convince me why I should not have needed their help.

In both instances, the young people pressed me to be the “expert” decision-maker who directed their actions. They were likely comfortable with this arrangement, which is prevalent in high-poverty urban schools like those they had attended (Haberman, 1994; Lipman, 2004) and is easier for students than grappling with difficult decisions. It was clear to me that some of the youth researchers had never been expected to exercise control over the terms of their learning or to collaborate with adults in the ways I expected. They were clearly uneasy with my indecisiveness, my admitted lack of expertise, and my reliance on their knowledge. This was likely also connected to one of the study findings: students’ confidence in teachers rests, in part, on their ability to “control the classroom,” as one interviewee said.

Investment in traditional teacher/student power hierarchy – the young people’s and our own, as former classroom teachers – was a limit situation that we all had to confront and overcome in order to achieve genuine collaboration and shared decision-making, which are key components of PAR. This required a continual process of conscious re-socialization that, through

the regularization of things like consensus-building, collaborative teaching and learning, and leadership development, became easier for us all over time.

Academic preparation: Meet where I am and take me where I need to go

Most of the youth researchers had attended high-minority, high-poverty, urban public schools for most of their lives. As research shows, these schools are often fraught with troubles that stunt students' academic development. Inadequate funding, low expectations, lack of teacher training and menial curriculum are among the long-standing problems (Ferguson, 2000; Grant, 1994; Oakes, 1985; Rist, 1973; Skiba, Knesting, & Bush, 2002; Valenzuela, 1999). This was evident in the academic skill levels of the ARISE youth researchers. For example, KG, who was the class valedictorian, was required to take remedial classes at the community college to which he was provisionally accepted. This reflects the relatively shoddy academic preparation that many young people receive in urban public schools.

Students struggling academically are often denied and perceived as incapable of mastering rigorous curriculum and challenging ideas. Project ARISE explicitly worked against common assumptions about students with histories of school failure and disengagement. Thus, youth participation had no academic prerequisite. However, I realized early on that many of the research tasks would be extremely challenging for most of youth researchers. Due to time constraints, not every youth researcher was thoroughly trained in every aspect of research. However, my GAs and I used strategies develop academic skills and to ensure that they could all participate in each stage of the research.

For example, conceptually situating our research required critically analyzing scholarly texts. As some of the youth researchers read at an elementary-school level, we had to find strategies to make these texts accessible. We took turns reading texts out loud, paragraph by paragraph, and each young person highlighted unfamiliar words on their copy. We ascertained the meanings of individual words and sentences. Then we re-read the paragraph and pulled identified the main idea(s). This was a very time-consuming process but deconstructing texts in this way helped the young people to build vocabulary and comprehension skills. We also used many non-textual resources like related documentaries and radio segments (many from National Public Radio).

The youth researchers were also challenged by traditional methods of data analysis like statistics. One way we addressed this was by conducting a workshop on calculating percentages, which was vital to understanding existing data on disciplinary exclusion. Coding interview transcripts also proved difficult, particularly for those with underdeveloped reading skills. As all interviews were videotaped, we addressed this by adding a video analysis component. All researchers reviewed the footage of each interview, making note of key words and phrases and non-verbal cues. As a group, we discussed and compared our notes and identified significant patterns and themes using deductive and inductive approaches to make sense of the data.

Each research task or some aspect of it was adapted and/or scaffolded to meet the youth researchers where they were – academically and intellectually – and to push them, with adequate support, beyond their preexisting abilities. In these ways, we were able to make all stages of the research process accessible and provide means for all researchers to contribute in a meaningful way. This enhanced the validity and rigor of the study, which could not be compromised. Following, KG writes about how Project ARISE and how participation was experienced, particularly by the youth researchers.

Rose up, No illusion
How a project came with a high level
Students & teachers listen as we trembled
Poetry Meet ARISE
ARISE brought nothing but time
Helped us open our minds about our self
Thinking how we can help
Knowledge, background, and strength came from within
Leader spoke out with no pretend
Action Research Into School Exclusion
This team delivered the final conclusion
There is no confusion
ARISE was not a delusion
– KG

Here, KG writes about the rigor of the study and how the youth summoned their background knowledge and experience and inner strength to meet the challenge. In doing so they became outspoken leaders and activists in the educational community, teaching and informing university and K-12 faculty and administrators through workshops and conferences.

Their successes also reflect the project goal to capitalize on their interests and strengths, which included music, art, and videotaping and editing, and various forms of writing. One example of this is the present article, which in its writing, took us through a challenging process. As a component of PAR (the use and representation of findings), it was imperative that KG contribute to this paper in a meaningful way. However, he is not yet able to write at the academic level expected in a research journal. I provided multiple writing prompts and we engaged in collaborative editing that, most often, compromised the authenticity of KG's original texts. Ironically, it was months before I considered the aforementioned project goal. Capturing human experience through poetry is one of KG's strengths that we incorporated throughout the project, as reflected in the line, "Poetry Meet ARISE." It was not until KG and I decided to unite the forms of writing that we each do well that this paper came together.

The project tasks were very often at levels of intellectual and academic rigor at which deficiency-labeled and excluded low-income Black and Latina/o adolescents are expected to fail. For most of the youth researchers, their lack of academic preparation posed a limit situation over which they were able to prevail in many ways, with the support of the research team. As KG writes, how he now perceives his ability to take on challenging work like that of the project, and how he developed personally and academically through that work "was not a delusion." That is, these are not false beliefs held in spite of the contradictory evidence, namely, the vestiges of inadequate schools and common assumptions about young people like him. About that, he writes, "there is no confusion."

Conclusion

At the outset of this paper, we made the strong case for university researchers engaging young people in social science research focused on issues that affect their everyday lives and we have found PAR to be an extremely effective methodology through which to do this. Using this methodology can enhance the quality and validity of research and scholarly knowledge and the interventions they inform and help young people to develop competencies they will need to

“build political structures that can challenge the status quo” (Giroux, 2001, p. 203). (Giroux, year, p. 203). This is particularly vital for marginalized youth have the most to lose if the current structures are not transformed.

As we have shown, despite diminished perceptions about the intellectual capacities of youth, specifically low-income, Black and Latina/o, excluded, and deficiency-labeled youth, they are quite capable of rigorous intellectual work regardless of their existing academic skills and school histories. However, having experienced the social and intellectual traumas associated with urban public schools, many of these young people are likely to be initially unprepared for the rigors of academic research. This speaks to the general issue of preparing local informants – particularly, educationally, economically and sociopolitically marginalized youth and adults – to conduct scholarly research and generate knowledge that they can actually use to work against the ways in which they have been pathologized and disenfranchised.

We found that in truly collaborative research any limit situation facing an individual researcher became a limit situation facing the research team that had to be confronted collectively in order to accomplish the tasks and goals of the project. With few existing resources, we dealt with our limit situations largely through trial and error. In justice-oriented participatory action research we would like to see the dissemination of more information on the theoretical and methodological preparation and development of local researchers. This would contribute significantly to the capacity of university-based researchers to plan and implement and increase the rigor and validity of PAR – a methodology that we see as vital in (re)constructing academic research as an instrument for real and realized social transformation and justice.

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Kevin Galeas is a researcher in the Action Research into School Exclusion (ARISE) project. He worked in the field for two years, conducting research and implementing teacher professional development workshops as the action component of the study. He graduated from high school in June 2008, valedictorian of his class. Kevin is also a poet and visual artist. He is now attending community college and plans to transfer into a college for arts and, eventually, work in the field of graphic design.