Multicultural Perspectives, *11*(4), 194–199

ISSN: 1521-0960 print / 1532-7892
DOI: 10.1080/15210960903445905

Reinvigorating Multicultural Education Through Youth Participatory Action Research

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This article explores youth participatory action research as a promising instructional practice with the potential to reverse the depoliticizing and "softening" of multicultural education. It demonstrates how, with its explicit commitment to action, youth participatory action research can help to improve the educational experiences and outcomes for youth traditionally underserved by schools.

Youth in general, and urban youth of color more specifically, have been pathologized and demonized in society, blamed for the underperformance of schools and a host of other social ills, resulting in an escalating assault on youth that has been manifested in a variety of ways. Educational policies such as high stakes testing and increased accountability measures, for example, with their myopic focus on standardized test scores, have served to limit opportunities for students traditionally underserved by schools. The limited snapshot of test scores is exacerbated by the practice of neglecting the variance—often determined by race and class—in students' access to the educational content needed to pass the test or a qualified teacher to assist with learning (Kohn, 2000; Noguera & Akom, 2000). Furthermore, the increased hyper-vigilant surveillance of urban youth of color vividly demonstrated by the practice of placing police officers, security cameras, metal detectors and the like in schools, illustrates the mind-set and the role that schools play in contributing to and reifying the school-to-prison pipeline. Such beliefs and accompanying actions have resulted in the grossly disproportionate incarceration of people of color—who often enter the prison industrial complex as youth. In these times, critical approaches to education that respond to the lived realities of marginalized youth are vital but often go overlooked.

Concurrent with an increased assault on youth, in many schools and communities multicultural education has lost the critical edge espoused in its definition, resulting in a "softening" of curricular content and an abandonment of the activist roots and ideals of the approach. This softening is reflective of what Ira Shor has referred to as the "conservative restoration" (Shor, 1992), right-wing efforts to dismantle the civil rights gains and the subsequent educational policies that emerged from them. Beyond attacks from conservatives, arguably the greatest danger to multicultural education has come from educators who purport their practice to be multicultural yet whose work can be best categorized as a "heroes and holidays" approach that fails to challenge structural inequality (Gorski, 2006; Amosa & Gorski, 2008). In contrast, this article explores youth participatory action research (YPAR) as a promising practice within multicultural education. YPAR demonstrates the potential to reinvigorate the field and bolster our efforts to use teaching and learning as a vehicle for simultaneously facilitating the development of academic and interpersonal skills among students and engaging youth as equal partners in the struggle for social justice and educational equity. As scholars in this themed issue take inventory of the field and speak to where we are now, this piece affirms the need to "reACTivate"[1] multicultural education and highlights current, hopeful practices well-aligned with the goals of multicultural education that are improving the educational experiences and outcomes for youth who have been marginalized by schools and society at large.

The article begins with an overview of the goals of multicultural education and participatory action research, taking note of the similarities between the two as well as problematizing areas of potential conflict. It then calls attention to research documenting participatory action research projects with youth, noting how the process and

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[1]The term "reACTivate" is borrowed from the theme for the 2008 Annual Conference of the National Association for Multicultural Education.

outcomes of YPAR overlap with the characteristics of multicultural education. The piece concludes with a brief discussion of implications of youth participatory research as multicultural education praxis.

Multicultural Education and the Elusive Quest for Social Justice

Multicultural education emerged during the civil rights movement as a response to severe societal inequities and their manifestation in schools (Grant, 1995). Education during this era was characterized by *de jure* segregation, resulting in a two-tiered system with stark contrasts in resources and opportunities for White students and students of color. English was the exclusive mode of instruction, even for students who had little if any understanding of the language. The curriculum in most schools was Eurocentric, often misrepresenting or completely excluding the perspectives of people of color and others. The development of multicultural education accompanied the wave of civil rights legislation emerging from the civil rights movement, including Brown v. Board of Education (1954) which ruled *de jure* segregation was unconstitutional and Lau v. Nichols (1974) which legislated that education for language minority students had to be linguistically accessible.

More than a tool for inquiry solely for use by credentialed researchers in the ivory tower, participatory action research is deeply rooted in the struggle for social justice and educational equity.

Looking at the current sociopolitical context in which students are educated, one can easily argue that times are as dire now (if not more so) as they were when multicultural education was first conceptualized and implemented. Jonathan Kozol (2005) suggests that the education system in the United States today continues to reflect the dichotomous opportunity structure that characterized schools prior to the civil rights movement. He categorizes schools into two types—those with adequate materials and facilities, which serve primarily White, middle and upper class students, and schools characterized by a lack of access to resources and quality teaching as well as a "relentless emphasis on raising test scores" through scripted curricula, serving primarily poor students and students of color (Kozol, 2005, p. 64). As we approach the end of the first decade of the 21st century, schools are characterized by an apartheid-like segregation based on race and class and are more segregated now than they were in 1954 when the Supreme Court deemed legal segregation unconstitutional (Orfield, 2001). The academic success, or lack thereof, of students of color is still an issue of grave concern, as their high school completion rates continue to lag significantly behind that of White students (NCES, 2008).

An immense and highly significant body of research has forwarded multicultural education as a vehicle for addressing these inequities and creating a more egalitarian society (Gollnick & Chinn, 1986; Nieto, 1992; Sleeter and Grant, 1994; Sleeter, 1996; Banks & McGee Banks, 2001; Gay, 2004). Although definitions of multicultural education abound, there are common themes that permeate many prominent descriptions including: education for all students, education as a political movement, education as social justice, and education to create an empowered school culture. Sonia Nieto (1992) delineated and continues to assert (Nieto & Bode, 2008) perhaps the most comprehensive definition, one that is informative and useful for the purposes of this discussion. According to Nieto,

> Multicultural education is a process of comprehensive school reform and basic education for all students. It challenges and rejects racism and other forms of discrimination in schools and society and accepts and affirms the pluralism (ethnic, racial, linguistic, religious, economic, and gender, among others) that students, their communities, and teachers reflect. Multicultural education permeates schools' curriculum and instructional strategies as well as the interactions among teachers, students, and families and the very way that schools conceptualize the nature of teaching and learning. Because it uses critical pedagogy as its underlying philosophy and focuses on knowledge, reflection and action (praxis) as the basis for social change, multicultural education promotes the democratic principles of social justice (Nieto & Bode, 2008; p. 44)

This definition has been advanced through an understanding of seven characteristics, and in what follows I link practices within YPAR to these characteristics, which I combine into four categories.

Youth Participatory Action Research as Multicultural Education Praxis

Although not systematically implemented across districts or states, YPAR has emerged as a promising practice with the potential to improve the educational experiences and outcomes for students of color and groups of marginalized students. With a focus on engaging youth

in research connected to the material conditions of their lives, participatory action research "is typically undertaken as critical scholarship, by multi-generational collectives, to interrogate conditions of social injustice through social theory with a dedicated commitment to social action" (Fine, 2008; 213). More than a tool for inquiry solely for use by credentialed researchers in the ivory tower, participatory action research is deeply rooted in the struggle for social justice and educational equity. According to Shawn Ginwright (2008), "With an emphasis on democratizing knowledge, fostering critical inquiry of daily life and developing liberatory practices, YPAR is both an art and a method to engage youth in democratic problem solving" (p. 14). As such, many of the scholars working on YPAR projects with youth have documented societal changes brought about as a result of these efforts as well as the positive impact such projects have had on students' academic trajectories.

Instead of being positioned as "problems" to be fixed, young people engaged in YPAR serve as researchers identifying problems, collecting and analyzing data, and developing and delivering recommendations to address issues they identify as relevant and in need of transformation. In what follows, I document research emerging from a diverse array of YPAR projects that address the characteristics of multicultural education Nieto forwarded (Nieto, 1992; Nieto & Bode, 2008). This is by no means an exhaustive review of YPAR research. Rather, my goal here is to provide examples of works that address particular aspects of the definition and document the connections between multicultural education and YPAR. It is important to note that many of the studies included here are multifaceted and address more than one of the characteristics of multicultural education. Taken as a whole, this body of literature clearly positions YPAR as a promising practice within the field of multicultural education.

Multicultural Education as Comprehensive School Reform and Basic Education

At the core of multicultural education is a desire to provide quality educational experiences for all students, regardless of their race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexual orientation, religion, or primary language. Schools as they are currently constructed often do more to perpetuate inequality than to dismantle it. Therefore, comprehensive school reform is necessary to ensure that students have equal access to courses and opportunities for learning. To counter the tendency of schools to reproduce social inequality, multicultural education is as important as the basic skills schools value, such as reading, writing and arithmetic, and as such should be seen as part of a "basic education" as opposed to being on the periphery of the curriculum (Nieto & Bode, 2008). There are several studies documenting YPAR projects that speak to student engagement within school reform efforts and position the research skills students acquire through the process of PAR as inextricably linked to the academic and interpersonal skills young people need to survive and thrive in schools and beyond.

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For example, important research by Tara Brown and students from Rock Creek Alternative High School provides "insider" perspectives into school policies that serve to alienate and exclude students from school (Brown, Bridges, & Clark, 2008). While much of the research exploring dropping out focuses on risk factors among students, their families, and communities, the high school researchers in Brown's project provide valuable insights into the role and responsibility of schools in creating dropouts. As part of their project, student researchers critically examined how schools "push" students out of school through problematic pedagogical practices and policies and how schools might be constructed to better support students. Data emerging from the efforts of Project ARISE (Action Research into School Exclusion) speak to the potential of young people to positively inform school reform efforts.

In an article co-authored by Veronica Garcia (2006) and a group of high school student researchers with whom she was working, students share their perspectives on the 2001 No Child Left Behind Act's definition of a "highly qualified teacher" (U.S. Congress, 2001). Instead of positioning the participants as passive recipients of the legislation, students were encouraged to critically analyze the law and develop and disseminate their own characteristics of a "highly qualified" educator. As one can imagine, the students' responses extended the notion of "highly qualified" beyond certification requirements to include the development of culturally responsive learning communities as well as the establishment of

meaningful relationships with students and families. Their collaborative work forwards a new vision for teacher development, emerging from the lived experiences of urban youth, offering a model for positive school reform through the personal and professional development of teachers.

Similarly, Melissa Rivera and Pedro Pedraza (2000) speak to the power of YPAR in their description of efforts to include urban youth in the creation of a community-based curriculum that is connected to students' lives. Teachers and students co-created units that simultaneously enhanced students' writing skills and engaged students and teachers in a collaborative effort to address the threat of the construction of a waste transfer station in their community. Their research at El Puente Academy for Social Justice in New York City highlights the potential for students to collaborate with faculty, staff, and community members in the development of culturally responsive schools and curricula.

By actively engaging youth as researchers of school reform, there are significant academic benefits for students. Reporting on the outcomes of a multi-year critical inquiry project that engaged African American and Latino/a students in participatory action research, Ernest Morrell (2008) convincingly documents academic growth among student participants as a result of engaging in a collaborative research project which focused on the development of students' activism and improving their literacy skills. As a result of this project, which took place over the summer during school vacation, students became more critical consumers of text as well as skilled producers of various textural products. The students demonstrated their skill development and academic prowess by more successfully navigating school and gaining access to higher education as well as delivering presentations that emerged from their research at professional meetings and conferences. Given the gaps in indicators of achievement, particularly in literacy, the work of student researchers in this project is especially noteworthy.

Referencing her work with students enrolled in an alternative high school in Canada, Candace Lind (2008) documents how knowledge is not only created through research outcomes but also through the process of conducting research, underscoring its connection to basic education posited by Nieto and Bode (2008). The author reflects on the learning that results from students adopting roles as researchers, noting that there is a need for adolescents to play a more meaningful role in research.

YPAR challenges the traditional roles of youth as passive recipients of education and consumers of knowledge by repositioning them as active learners and knowledge producers. Given the seminal role that schooling plays in the lives of young people, many of the recommendations that emerge from these projects provide significant implications for school reform efforts.

Multicultural Education as Anti-Bias Education and Important for All Students

Another significant feature of multicultural education is that it is explicitly anti-racist education and challenges all forms of discrimination. As urban youth of color are systematically marginalized by schools, YPAR can serve as a vehicle for challenging multiple forms of oppression. The media often disseminates negative depictions of urban youth, contributing to the development of grand narratives, or common misperceptions, that contribute to a negative portrayal of this group. A study by Jeff Duncan-Andrade (2007) documents how a group of students enrolled in a summer research institute that focused on media literacy used YPAR to develop counternarratives related to inequality, debunking majoritarian notions, and contributing to a more robust and accurate portrayal of urban youth of color.

Urban youth have also leveraged YPAR to address discrimination and advocate for expanded educational opportunities in their communities (Stoval, 2006). In David Stoval's collaborative study, student researchers organized to develop a new community high school in their neighborhood. Their innovative proposal called for students in various aspects of school governance including the design of the curriculum and discipline policies. In contrast to the common perceptions of youth as unable to identify their own needs and requiring adults to intercede on their behalf, the urban youth featured in Stoval's (2006) research assert agency and foreshadow new possibilities for relationships between school agents and students, schools, and communities.

Multicultural Education Affirms Pluralism

Eschewing "melting pot" models of assimilation, multicultural education proactively seeks to affirm cultural pluralism. A significant feature of many YPAR projects is that they engage participants in multigenerational collaboratives across explicitly named lines of difference—including age, race, gender, social class, and education level, among others. In addition to fostering collaboration among diverse individuals, much of the content explored within YPAR reflects a commitment to promoting cross-cultural understanding. Maria Elena Torre (2005) convincingly demonstrates the power of "integrated spaces" and the power of engaging in collaborative research along lines of difference in an article documenting the findings of a study that brought together high school and college-aged youth, university

researchers, community members, spoken word artists, and others to analyze data related to the educational opportunity gap. In one example of the rich dialogues that emerged through the project, participants discussed the establishment of an independent public high school for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender youth. Although not a direct focus of the research, the dialogue that emerged within the collective illustrates the far-reaching impact of YPAR and its potential as a vehicle for the affirmation of diversity.

Generally speaking, schools have been slow to acknowledge and affirm the cultural and linguistic richness and other positive attributes of sociopolitically marginalized communities. Consequently, valuable "funds of knowledge" (Moll, 1992) that can positively inform student learning and personal development remain untapped. Central to YPAR is the value placed on the knowledge of participants—those most directly impacted by "the problem" and those with the most to gain from actions taken to address it. Schools do not operate in a vacuum; therefore, it is critical that the communities schools serve are incorporated as meaningful partners and stakeholders in the development of youth.

A powerful example of student learning through engagement in community organizations can be found in the work of Shawn Ginwright and Julio Cammarota (2007). The authors describe how African American and Latino/a youth connected with the community based organizations they studied responded to problems in their communities and schools. Based on their work with youth in these settings, Ginwright and Cammarota (2007) conclude that neighborhood organizations are vital in helping urban youth develop what they refer to as critical civic praxis—" a process that develops critical consciousness and builds the capacity for young people to respond and change oppressive conditions in their environment" (p. 699). This study and others like it speak to the importance of affirming the diverse perspectives that emerge when engaging in community-based work, presenting significant implications for schools.

Multicultural Education as Education for Social Justice that Permeates the School Curriculum

All of the YPAR research presented in this article has an explicit commitment to social justice, a primary goal of multicultural education. Throughout this impressive body of research, scholars speak to the need to address power relations and engage with youth in multigenerational, multiracial/ethnic, diverse collaborations to address structural inequalities to improve the lives of youth and the communities to which they are connected. This transformation involves raising critical consciousness (Freire, 1970) among youth whereby they develop a deeper understanding of the forces that oppress them and others to develop a more informed perspective from which to combat those multiple forms of oppression (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002).

Unfortunately, YPAR cannot be described as permeating the curriculum in the overwhelming majority of schools today. The function of schools as vehicles for social reproduction (Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Anyon, 1997) has remained largely unexamined by teachers, administrators, and other school agents, resulting in hostility for orientations toward education and pedagogical practices that aim to make students more critical consumers of schooling. As a result, despite the fact that many YPAR projects directly address issues emerging from or with direct implications for schools, YPAR research has most often been located outside of K–12 schools, in institutions of higher education or in community-based organizations. If schools are ever to become space for critical conscious raising and liberation, the relationships between teachers and students and schools and communities must be transformed.

Conclusion: The Promise of YPAR in Multicultural Education

In this era of high-stakes testing and increased accountability pressures in schools, efforts to improve student academic achievement—particularly among urban students of color—have often failed to address the sociocultural realities of students' lives. The research literature on YPAR explored here offers a model for teachers, administrators, researchers, and others genuinely invested in the lives of urban youth to create opportunities for students to develop the skills necessary to positively shape their life trajectories, while simultaneously challenging the multiple forms of oppression that delimit them and reproduce social inequality. With its explicit goal of "action," YPAR can serve as a vehicle to reinvigorate multicultural education. The various studies explored in this article underscore opportunities for learning and quality teaching practices that are congruent with the goals of the field, including the development of a more critical edge in curricular content, encouraging the co-construction of knowledge, and the affirmation of diverse perspectives, thus creating exciting possibilities for social change.

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