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The Social Justice Education Project

Youth Participatory Action Research in Schools

Julio Cammarota

Youth participatory action research (YPAR) offers great potential as a methodology for investigating and improving educational practices (Ca-hill 2007; Cammarota and Fine 2008; Fine et al. 2005; Kirshner 2007; McIntyre 2000; Morrell 2006; Torre 2009; Tuck 2009). Research in which young people are both the researchers and the focus of the study can provide critical insider perspectives into how schools produce success or failure. Young people are arguably the most important stakeholders of education inasmuch as their everyday school experiences provide a wealth of knowledge, ranging from the obvious to the subtlest interactions. This knowledge allows students and other stakeholders (teachers, families, and education researchers) to take action to improve various aspects of education, including teacher effectiveness, pedagogy, service learning, school counseling, school safety, student-teacher relationships, school climate, and student engagement, to name a few (Akom 2009; Berg, Coman, and Schensul 2009; Krueger 2010; Ozer, Ritterman, and Wanis 2010; Smith, Davis, and Bhowmik 2010; Schensul and Berg 2004).

However, rarely do adults listen to the recommendations and conclusions offered by youth who conduct their own original education-based research. Some have documented how adult audiences for YPAR projects often dismiss or challenge young people's research findings on the basis that juveniles are supposedly too young to generate knowledge worthy of attention (Fine et al. 2005; Torre 2009). Those adults who dismiss YPAR

findings fail to understand that effective educational change requires the voices and ideas of students. The most important voices, and unfortunately the ones most often missing in the dialogue, are surely those of students who represent possibly the best critical evaluators as a result of their daily and long-term exposure to schooling. Education is one of the only institutional processes in which those most affected by it have the least say in its design and function. When it comes to school, the opposite should be true. Those who have the most at stake should be empowered to take part and lead in decision making. The empowerment of students through research is the basis of YPAR, thereby bringing young people into the fold of evaluating, analyzing, and ultimately changing education to better meet their needs.

This chapter discusses a YPAR program in Tucson, Arizona, called the Social Justice Education Project (SJEP) and students' research analysis of disparities between different educational tracks. The SJEP is a senior-year government course with a YPAR component built into the curriculum. Tucson Unified School District (TUSD) offered six of these specialized social science course at four high schools.¹ For this chapter, I focus on one SJEP course during the 2009–2010 school year that was offered at one of TUSD's high schools, Mountain High. I select Mountain High for this discussion because of its unique magnet structure that divides the campus into two separate and unequal schools. Mountain High offers the regular curriculum primarily for students of color. Scholastic High, a college prep school on the same campus, serves primarily white students. This overarching disparity of educational experiences establishes the premise for myriad other disparities that run through Mountain High's "regular" curriculum. Therefore, students' YPAR projects include an analysis not only of the differences between Mountain and Scholastic but also of the inequities within their own educational context.

Before discussing the students' research at Mountain High, I provide a brief explanation of the principles of YPAR, focusing on its potential as a research methodology. A discussion of the origins and purpose of the SJEP follows. Then the chapter reports on the students' YPAR project at Mountain High through an analysis and discussion of field notes taken by them throughout the school year. Field notes are the primary source of data for the students' research. Finally, I conclude with students' recommendations for improving their educational experiences and thus fostering greater equity in school outcomes for students of color.

YPAR Principles

Rodriguez and Brown (2009) state that YPAR has at least three important principles. The first is that YPAR projects should be situated in young people's lives so that they can understand and address the problems negatively influencing their experiences. Situating the research in young people's experiences allows for the opportunity to use findings and research products to engender qualitative improvements in their lives. In other words, YPAR projects should have a direct impact on young people by generating results that can change the institutions most responsible for youth policies and practices.

Second, YPAR projects are participatory in design, which involves taking a collaborative approach to the production of knowledge. Knowledge emerges within a collective dialogue in which young people work together to design, implement, and analyze their research. Each step of the inquiry process therefore requires consistent dialogue about the purpose, objectives, and outcomes to generate questions that provoke discussion and emergent insights. Thus, the inquiry-based dialogue adopts a democratic character in that intellectual and creative works in projects are collectively shared endeavors.

The third principle is that YPAR projects should be transformative. An ultimate goal of YPAR is to initiate changes to institutions, social structures, and communities in ways that promote and sustain social justice. Thus, YPAR projects intend to transform situations or conditions to liberate youth from any form of oppression, whether it is classism, racism, sexism, homophobia, or xenophobia. Liberation is accomplished through self-reflection and action, or what Paulo Freire (1993) calls praxis. By engaging in praxis, young people attain a consciousness that perceives the self above and beyond oppressive ideologies that attempt to limit their capabilities. Praxis also requires addressing those structures that hold people in a subordinate reality.

I believe that YPAR has a fourth principle of empowerment that complements Rodriguez and Brown's (2009) trio of situated, participatory, and transformative principles. Empowerment is perhaps the most important principle of YPAR when it comes to education-based research. Students feel empowered to take ownership of their education in ways that ultimately serve their needs and the needs of their communities. Once they gain analytical skills from YPAR projects, students understand how certain qualities of their education can be helpful while others can be detrimental. The YPAR analysis moves young people through a process of

reflection and action that “results in increased agency at the individual level and group level” (Berg, Coman, and Schensul 2009, 349). It is through knowing what is right and wrong and being able to recognize the pitfalls of educational institutions that young people reach a higher level of empowerment, which enables them to bring changes to the institutions that have the most impact on their lives. They can comprehend the difference between a good and bad education.

The SJEP in Tucson, Arizona

SJEP started at Cerro High School in TUSD. The program expanded to three other high schools including Campo, Pima, and Mountain. A total of six SJEP courses were offered every year. The students who enrolled in the SJEP were mostly working-class Latinas/os from southwestern Tucson. This high concentration of Latino/a students resulted from the schools’ locations in primarily Latino/a neighborhoods. Other ethnicities of students enrolled in the SJEP included white, African American, and Native American.

Students met every day for one period, usually second period, and four semesters straight. The social science program was aligned with state-mandated history and US government standards and involved students in YPAR projects. By participating in our second-period social justice program, students received social science credits for graduation and the knowledge of how to conduct original YPAR projects. The program was split between state mandates and YPAR; three periods per week were devoted to US history and government requirements while two periods per week focused on YPAR.

Their YPAR involved critical analyses of social justice problems and presentations to influential people in their community to initiate change. Students learned qualitative research methodologies for assessing and addressing the everyday injustices limiting their own and their peers’ potential. They learned how to conduct observations of different sites on campus, including other classrooms, the main office, and the cafeteria. Students wrote up observations in weekly field notes. They also documented their observations through photographs. They learned how to conduct taped interviews of their peers at school.

The students chose to investigate problems and issues that affected them personally. For example, they selected research topics from poems they created expressing various problems they faced in their social worlds. To facilitate the student poetry, we provided them with examples of social

justice-minded poems: “Still I Rise” by Maya Angelou or “I Am Joaquín” by Rodolfo “Corky” Gonzales. The students discussed these poems and their social justice messages before creating their own. Then they collectively identified the poignant social justice and “generative” themes throughout their poems.

Identifying generative words or themes in poetry derives from the literacy work of Paulo Freire (1993, 1998). In his adult literacy program in Brazil, Freire taught reading and writing with words that originated from his students’ lived experiences. In other words, Freire would never teach literacy with words originating from outside the students’ sociocultural context. Rather, students would select the themes, topics, or words for study themselves, which allowed for the creation of new meanings and knowledge grounded not in dominant ideologies but in the students’ everyday experiences.

Thus, our SJEP students developed research topics from self-selected themes that they thought needed urgent attention. For instance, some students selected the topic of border and immigration policies because family members had died crossing the desert. Others addressed discrimination against Latinas because they saw how schools, workplaces, and governments unfairly treated them and the women in their families.

They spent the latter part of their second year analyzing the poems, notes, photos, and interviews, using Chicano studies concepts and critical race theory as their analytical lenses. Their analyses become written reports, presentations, and video documentation. The students presented their findings to family members, teachers, principals, district superintendents, school board members, and federal, state, and local officials—with their voices being the focal point of their action strategy. We hope that, through YPAR, students gained the confidence to challenge the social and economic conditions impeding their life opportunities.

The effect of conducting original research and presenting their results to key stakeholders, including family members, was that students attained the intent and goal of praxis as they thought deeply and critically about impediments to their own social and economic progress while building relationships to help them remove these impediments.

In this regard, students understood the difference between transformative resistance or actions and self-defeating resistance or actions. Solórzano and Delgado Bernal (2001) define transformational resistance as student behavior that demonstrates both a critique of oppression and desire for social justice. The goal of most YPAR projects is to provide pedagogical strategies that promote transformational resistance (Cammarota and Fine

2008). Self-defeating resistance, according to Solórzano and Delgado Bernal (2001), refers to students who may critique oppression but lack motivation for social justice. Examples of our students' transformative resistance and actions include exposing structural decay at their school; fighting to ensure that the SJEP be offered for them and future students; and, with SJEP alumni, organizing the takeover of TUSD's Post Unitary Plan Community Forums to fight to continue socially and culturally responsive curricula throughout the district.

This chapter focuses on the field notes of students from one course offered at Mountain High during the 2009–2010 school year. SJEP students examined the educational disparities within their own school and also between Mountain High and the college preparatory school, Scholastic High School, on the same campus, including a detailed look at racial tracking. Mountain High's student body is 64 percent students of color and 36 percent white. Meanwhile, Scholastic High is 42 percent students of color and 58 percent white. Not only do a majority of white students receive a better education at Scholastic High, but white students are also overrepresented in the higher tracks at Mountain High.

Intraschool Tracking

Although Mountain and Scholastic are tracked differently, tracking also exists internally within Mountain. An ability-grouping program at Mountain called the "housing" system is a prime example of how students have disparate educational opportunities within the same school. A senior SJEP student, Anita Diaz, wrote about her experiences being tracked at Mountain High in the housing system when she was a freshman:

In this system, we were separated into different groups. There were four groups, which were known as the green, orange, pink and gold houses. The green house was known as the honors group since all the students had Advanced Placement classes. The rest of the houses, according to the teachers, were supposedly at the same level. But the students thought differently. They believed the houses were at different levels and placed in these different levels according to how smart the students were. When I was a freshman, students told me that the green house was the first, gold house second, pink was third, and orange fourth. At the beginning of the freshman year, we were never asked which house we wanted to be in. We were never given the choice. The green house was

mostly made up of white students but there were some exceptions. The other houses were mostly minority students. While being placed in these houses, we didn't get a chance to meet other people for almost two years except for those who were placed in the same house as you were.

I was placed in the pink house for my freshman and sophomore years. The pink house was mainly minority students. Everyone in the same house had the same group of teachers, whether it was English, math or science. In my second semester, my math teacher gave up on us. He no longer taught us anything. He would just put a power point on, sit behind his desk and talk to his teacher's aide or look at his computer. There was also my science teacher. In the beginning of the year, we would do projects but by the second semester we ended up doing only bookwork. We would get to class, open our books and read and answer questions from the text. In those two classes, I didn't really learn anything. In one class, the teacher gave up on us. In the other class, we did only bookwork.

The house system placed us into different tracks. For instance, the green house was preparing students to go to college. The rest of the houses were not preparing students to go to college, especially if you had teachers who didn't care if you received an education. One time I was given an auto shop class, which I didn't want. I tried to switch out but all the other business classes were already full. We are put into this track to lead us into a job instead of going into college.

With her observations, Anita provides a fine-tuned analysis of some of the problems of tracking. First, she describes how the students were segregated by race in ways that provided white students with better educational opportunities. Second, she states that she was prevented from actually meeting other college-bound students (white or youths of color), which according to social capital theory indicates that she was denied relationships with peers who could help her improve her academic performance. Third, the quality of teaching was inferior in her track. Some teachers were negligent, failing to provide the kind of instruction needed to learn. Fourth and last, she realized the some students, especially the white students in the green house, were receiving an education that was preparing them for college. Meanwhile, Anita felt that her education was leading her to some kind of vocational career.

Another student, Ana Federico, wrote field notes about her experience as one of the only Latinas in her Advanced Placement English class at Mountain. She states:

The change that these classes so desperately need is the presence of racial diversity. Diversity is always lacking in these classes, because all I see are Caucasian students. I hear conversations of college plans, moving out of parents' house to have their own apartment, someone's new car of the year. And not a single student is something other than Caucasian. And I can't help but wonder why that is? The answer is that everything was planned out for them since the beginning. Their families led them to a track of academic achievement; they were there for them to help in anything and putting them in extra curricular activities. Many other friends that I know could do it too I'm sure of it, but social reproduction retrains the capacity of many of them and others.

Ana sees white students who have the privilege of material wealth. They do not have to worry whether they will obtain the items or experience the conditions that make life comfortable. Their world is different than Ana's. She does have to worry about resources and whether she will have enough money to afford college. She makes an important distinction between the white students and herself by realizing that they do not have the same worries as she does and therefore can focus on their future plans without much distraction.

The SJEP course provided Ana with the theory of social reproduction to help her understand why some students have better opportunities than others. Social reproduction is the process by which economic classes reproduce themselves from one generation to the next. For instance, a white middle-class youth will receive certain advantages from his socioeconomic background, such as economic resources, educated parents, and a well-funded school system, which provide him or her a better chance at staying in the same class location or rising above his or her parents. Meanwhile, someone of lower economic status experiences a life of diminished resources and opportunities and most likely will not have the possibility to leave his or her class location. Ana realizes that people she knows have the capability to take Advanced Placement classes but were denied the opportunities that would have prepared them for such classes.

The resource differential that produces varied opportunities for young people exists not only in society but also within Mountain High. Lola Martinez talked about the difference in resources between her SJEP class and an Advanced Placement (AP) English class. She was a student aide in the AP class, which provided her with an insider's view. She states that the AP English class has "good desks and the students all have computers. They all have good books and chairs that move around." She then compares her

SJEP class with the AP class. She writes that they did not “have books, computers, good desks.” The differences were apparent, making Lola realize that certain students at her school were expected to learn while others were expected to fail.

The disparity of resources translates into a hierarchy in which certain students believe they are superior and thus more entitled than others. Another SJEP student, Lisette Montoya, wrote in her field notes about a conflict between students in her English class that shows how certain students perceived that they were culturally superior, and believed that the school therefore should have a preference for their cultural orientation. The incident happened after the school announcements over the PA system, which were given in both English and Spanish—English first and then Spanish immediately after. When the Spanish announcements were completed, one student shouted, “How Ghetto!” Lisette states that one “girl yelled, ‘Speak English,’ while another added, ‘We’re in America.’” A Latina student angrily stated, “Well look around the majority at this school are Hispanics.” A white student responded by saying, “I speak English so everyone else should too, we’re in America.” The anti-Spanish students were obviously attempting to maintain their dominance over the majority at the school. Although the school’s demographics were rapidly changing, white students wanted to sustain the English dominance at the school and thus keep their advantage. Becoming a white minority does not mean that these students would lose their power and status. An apartheid structure at Mountain is a present and unfortunate reality. By maintaining English as the dominant language, these students continue to hold onto and argue for cultural superiority, even though they represent the minority.

Interschool Tracking

Mountain students are painfully aware that Scholastic students have the greater prestige and therefore the better capacity for academic advancement. Ana Federico states that Scholastic students receive an education that “prepares them for college, while Mountain students get a lower education that prepares them for work.” This difference, according to Ana, makes Mountain students want to “rebel” against their school, “due to the unbalanced education.”

The differences between the schools’ reputations translate into differences in expectations. In the minds of SJEP students, Mountain and Scholastic students share the same academic capabilities. However, it is obvious

that Scholastic students experience higher expectations, thereby making a world of difference in educational experiences. Ana Federico wrote, “Mountain and Scholastic students start the same way in having dreams, everything starts as a dream.” She states that accomplishing dreams is difficult “because there has to be people who will believe in that dream and will help in following it.” The primary difference between Mountain and Scholastic students, according to Ana, is that “Scholastic students are given that opportunity in which their teachers and parents believe in them. Parents and teachers are essential in this process because they have the power more than anyone to place students on the right path toward reaching their dreams.”

As part of their research, SJEP students documented the rare occasion when they needed to visit Scholastic High School. On these occasions, SJEP students noticed the unique dynamics between teachers and students. One SJEP student, Geraldo Castro, had to bring a note to a teacher at Scholastic High. When he reached the classroom, he noticed:

All the students are looking forward and writing on their papers. I'm surprised that no student turns to look and see who is at the door. Not one movement, they are robots. The teacher stops abruptly and stares at me. The worst stare I have been given, my heart turned cold and my eyes felt heavy. I ask the teacher if she's the teacher whose name is on the note and she yells at me, “I was told that there wasn't going to be any interruptions during my class!” I asked her again are you this teacher? She responds, “No! She is in the computer lab three doors down! Now leave my class and let me teach these bright students.”

Geraldo was not bothered by the teacher's demeaning attitude because he was a Mountain High student. Instead, he was concerned that “no student talked, no student moved while the teacher yelled at me. I felt uncomfortable knowing that many of my friends went through that. I felt that they had no life during school.” Geraldo felt sorry that Scholastic students learned to behave as if they had no feelings, indicating that they had internalized passivity. They had become submissive to the teacher's authority and remained consistently silent, even in times of crisis.

Other SJEP students had the impression that Scholastic students seemed stoic and passive in their classes. Judy McDougal visited Scholastic to see how it compared with Mountain. She asked the teacher if she could observe his classroom for one period. He agreed and told Judy to sit in the back. She wrote in her field notes:

Each student filed in one by one, really no one talking to another. There was an assignment written on the board. The students made their way to their seats and started pulling out their work, no words said. The late bell rang, the door closed and let me tell you no one was late. The teacher was sitting at his desk not saying a word, not even a hello to the students. They have to review the page they read for homework (a whole chapter) and read another chapter and answer the review questions. There were no moans or groans from the students saying that it is too much work. A couple words are said from student to students here and there but no conversations.

Judy noticed that Scholastic students have higher expectations in that a greater amount of work is assigned to them, which they accept without complaint. However, the difference in workload was not what concerned Judy. She observed that there was little to no communication between the students and the teacher. The students' primary task was to sit quietly and engage with the text without any dialogue. They were learning individually, missing out on the opportunity to share and build knowledge collectively.

When the teacher finally interacted with the students, he lectured and handled the dissemination of knowledge as a one-way street from him to the students: "He stands there and lectures starting from the beginning of the sections that the students read for their homework. They automatically take out notebooks and start taking notes. These students sit here as the teacher banks the education into the students' head. He doesn't even ask for the students' perspective on the subjects he was talking about."

In the SJEP course, students learned about Paulo Freire's (1993, 1998) concept of problem-posing education, which centers on building knowledge not as the distribution of unquestionable facts, figures, and ideas, but through problems that the students address with questions facilitating the discovery of solutions. The differences between the banking and problem-posing pedagogies are vast. The former leads students to the kinds of knowledge that the teacher wants them to learn. The latter allows students to discover knowledge as the primary process of learning, which shows students how they can create and develop knowledge on their own. The problem-posing approach teaches autonomy such that students realize they can become knowledgeable without the help of an authority. Problem-posing pedagogy promotes leaders who can solve problems with their own intellectual processes. In contrast, banking education forces students to become passive learners who cannot think independently of an authority or outside

expert. Outcomes for problem posing include students who think critically and pose questions to find the best solution to a particular problem.

Despite the differences in expectations between the two schools, SJEP students would rather attend Mountain given the opportunity to choose. Judy McDougal wrote, “[there are] huge differences between our two schools. These students [at Scholastic] are taught to all be the same, pretty much have no individuality. If it were left up to me, I would go to Mountain.” More specifically, SJEP students felt that the problem-posing education that they received in the SJEP course was the reason for their choice.

Implications

Within Mountain High, students experience the range of consequences of tracking. In the lower tracks, expectations are minimal so students feel less motivated to achieve. There is also a difference in resources between high and low tracks, which makes higher-track students appreciate their learning opportunity while lower-track students, who realize they have been shortchanged, tend to resent their education. In addition, the educational focus seems to be different for each track. Higher tracks are geared toward college preparation, while lower tracks guide students toward vocational learning.

Moreover, students from different tracks rarely interact, which deprives lower-track students of important social capital. If they had the opportunity to interact with higher-track students (white or youth of color), then those in the lower tracks could build the type of peer relationships that could help them achieve academic success. Furthermore, separating students by “ability” often is a proxy for separating them by race and culture. This racial segregation leads to tensions between groups such that the dominant racial group will attempt to maintain dominance while the subordinate group will struggle for equal rights and treatment.

SJEP students recommend that the negative aspects of tracking be removed, including lowered expectations, limited resources, unequal preparation, and racial segregation. The students would also like to see the two schools, Mountain and Scholastic, merged to construct one college preparatory high school. They believe that all students have the same capabilities to excel but not all students have the same opportunities. If the students at Mountain and Scholastic were given the same opportunities, more students would graduate and experience academic achievement.

SJEP students would like the SJEP pedagogy of inclusion and participation to become standard throughout the school. Allowing students to

participate in the construction of knowledge and have their voices and ideas matter engages young people in the learning process.

These feelings of inclusion and participation are not necessarily experienced throughout the general curriculum at Mountain High. In some Mountain High classes, students experience banking education. Ana Federico wrote about her English class, “Everyone is quietly reading and waiting for her [the teacher] to say today’s assignments, which is a discussion of the chapters we were supposed to read by today. As always everyone is afraid to say his or her opinions, afraid to say anything to this woman, this figure of authority known as the teacher. We have witnessed her making faces and rolling her eyes at the opinions students make. We are afraid to express our opinions and have become silent.”

Teachers who show authority by judging students in ways that make them feel ignorant tend to cast a shadow of fear over the classroom. When students feel afraid, they accept their silence and hold back their opinions and ideas. A classroom in which the teacher negatively judges students’ thinking becomes a place of a singular source and ownership of knowledge. Without the space for a collective production of knowledge, the classroom will appear fiercely undemocratic and oppressive.

With YPAR, students in the SJEP course have the experience of a democratic pedagogy, and any other type of education seems oppressive in comparison. They are treated as complete human beings with thoughts and ideas and the agency to bring changes to their environment. In settings of banking education, SJEP students feel less than human, because their intellectual and emotional capacities are suppressed. Once they experience democratic pedagogy, students understand that learning in this way is naturally human—an educational situation in which all students’ intellect and ability to construct knowledge are engaged. Moreover, a natural way of learning involves not only the students’ understanding of history but also their recognition that they too have the agency to become history makers. This approach of empowerment is what makes democracy such a compelling structure for education. Collectively, people learn to participate in how to understand and engage their world. Collective participation in the construction of knowledge leads to a sense of equality among participants. YPAR collectives challenge “traditional social hierarchies” and encourage democratic relationships among students (Torre and Ayala 2009, 389).

Once students learn that they too can contribute to history, they become more engaged in their education. YPAR is empowering for young people, particularly young people of color, because they comprehend their places and possibilities in history. Schooling that fails to develop the historical

agency of students is the reason why so many young people of color feel disconnected from education. Most often students of color attend schools that focus on social control instead of promoting pedagogical practices that increase their agency. Young people who miss the opportunity to learn how to become agents of change will lack the motivation to seek knowledge. People who feel as if they have no effect in the world will avoid engagement and participation. YPAR builds agency and the sense that they can have an effect. Students of color, through YPAR, see their place in history and thus recognize their capacity to make positive contributions.

Notes

1. As of 2012, all SJEP courses were suspended as a result of ARS 15-112 (A).

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