Forging Bonds and Crossing Borders
with Youth Participatory
Action Research

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Youth participatory action research (YPAR) has been used in various school and community contexts for empowerment (Goessling & Doyle, 2009), literacy (Morrell, 2006), and to increase youth activism (Fine, 2008; Torre & Fine, 2008; Tuck, 2008; Tuck et al., 2008b) amongst students of color. However, in the process of raising students' critical consciousness of social justice issues that confront their school and community, fostering positive interethnic relations could represent a critical nexus to achieving research goals. Studies of interethnic relationships have been prevalent in political science and community development literature (Gay, 2004, 2006; Quiñones, Ares, Padela, Hopper, & Webster, 2011; Sanchez, 2008) and in sociology literature (Dixon & Rosenbaum, 2004; Ellison, Shin, & Leal, 2011; McClain et al., 2006; Quillian & Campbell, 2003). While traditional studies of intercultural relations primarily reflect a Black/White binary, more recently scholarship has focused on an increasingly multicultural populace (Dixon & Rosenbaum, 2004; Quillian & Campbell, 2003). In 2005, the majority of Black and Latino/a students attended schools that had 75 percent or higher minority enrollment (NCES, 2007). Despite increases in contact between these particular groups, and evidence of potential interethnic conflict in school settings, there is limited research that speaks directly to relationships between Black and Latino/a students in educational settings (Quillian & Campbell, 2003). This research review will explore the potential of YPAR to address intercultural relations in urban classrooms and school communities amongst urban Black and Latina/o students.

LITERATURE AND PURPOSE

Youth Participatory Action Research

In framing a discussion of YPAR and interethnic relations between students in urban schools, it is necessary to first explore the larger body of literature related to engaging youth as co-researchers, as well as data concerning general contact between races and the importance of relationships and attitudes in educational settings.

YPAR's focus on engaging students to "investigate their own realities" (Rahman, 2008, p. 49) in ways that are nonhierarchical, enlightening, and empowering (Berg, 2004) while conducting critical analysis of the specific contexts of their schools and communities (Cammarota & Romero, 2009; Freire, 1970) for the purpose of social justice makes it an appropriate vehicle through which to theorize building stronger relationships and communities in urban schools. The ideology behind YPAR borrows from critical theory, critical race theory, and critical pedagogical traditions in challenging dominant narratives and engaging in praxis (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2010). McIntyre (2000) outlines three major components of participatory action research (PAR): "(1) the collective investigation of a problem, (2) the reliance on indigenous knowledge to better understand that problem, and (3) the desire to take individual and/or collective action to deal with the stated problem" (p. 128). Although YPAR may not represent a panacea for the complex issues faced by urban schools, it holds potential for empowerment and transformation (Stovall, 2005). YPAR provides a framework through which youth as researchers may raise their critical consciousness (Freire, 1970) of issues confronting their schools and communities, and work for change in ways that are critical and collaborative.

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Interethnic Relations in Urban Schools

Evidence of tension and strained relations between Blacks and Latino/os has been documented in both community settings (McClain et al., 2006; Sanchez, 2008) as well as schools (Quillian & Campbell, 2003). Multiple contributing factors have been posed including economic strain and competition for limited resources (Gay, 2004, 2006; Ellison, Shin, & Leal, 2011) and difficulty in transitioning to a collective other mentality or feeling a sense of commonality and linked fate (Quiñones, Ares, Padela, Hopper, & Webster, 2011; Sanchez, 2008). Echoed in Quiñones et al. (2011) description of Latinas/os hesitancy at being thrown into the same category of Blacks as collective other, Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) critique aspects of a colorblind multiculturalism that operates under the false assumption that "all difference is both analogous and equivalent" (p. 61) in which "students are taught erroneously that 'we are all immigrants' and, as a result, African American, Indigenous, and Chicano students are left with the guilt of failing to rise above their immigrant status 'like every other group'" (Ladson-Billings, 1998, p. 18). I concur with Quiñones et al. (2011) in asserting that relations between Blacks and Latinas/os represent an "under-theorized subject," that requires additional study (p. 105).

Proponents of the contact theory assert that "close and sustained contact, with members of other cultural groups provides direct information about the values, lifestyles, and experiences of members of those groups" which in turn provides "a more favorable perception of the group(s) in general, countering or displacing unflattering images or other inaccurate perceptions" (Ellison, Shin, & Leal, 2011, p. 938-939). However, other theorists have countered that the assumptions that prejudice is remedied by superficial contact oversimplifies the entrenched nature of prejudice and that effects of contact vary depending on the quality, quantity, perceived status of group members, degree of competitiveness in the environment (Allport, 1954/1979; Dixon & Rosenbaum, 2004). In keeping with this theme of exploring the complexities of contact, Ellison, Shin, and Leal (2011) discusses factors that contribute to

friendships and contact by exploring attitudes towards Latina/os in the United States. Ellison, Shin, and Leal (2011) could only establish a firm, consistent link between, not simply contact, but close friendships with Latina/o(s) and "attitudinal outcomes, including stereotyping, respect for the contributions of Latina/os, social and cultural distance, and views of immigration policy" (p. 951-952). Therefore, despite Blacks and Latina/o students' regular contact in neighborhoods and schools, research suggests that simply sharing the same spaces in schools and neighborhood does not constitute the type of contact that necessarily builds friendships, changes stereotypes and misperceptions, and promotes community building between the two groups. Additionally, viewing interaction between blacks and Latinas/os through the same lenses used to discuss Black/White relationships or as simply an issue of propinquity fails to consider the effects that language, immigration, and class/economic issues may have on people of color.

METHOD

Research Questions

The potential of YPAR to address youth empowerment, literacy, and advocacy has been well documented (Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Morrell, 2006; Stovall, 2005).   However, in order to frame a discussion of the potential of YPAR to address interethnic relations amongst Blacks and Latino's in urban school, I began by selecting two research questions to guide the analysis. 1) Has YPAR been utilized to address interethnic relations between students in urban schools? 2) How has YPAR been used to raise students' critical consciousness about issues that may influence interethnic relations?

Identification of YPAR studies

In keeping with Jackson's (1980) description of appropriate procedures for conducting research reviews, I outline the rationale for the particular methods and analysis used in this review.

Researchers that assume more of a community engaged research approach to YPAR often view students as co-researchers in the investigative process in which, depending on the initial goal, may take the form of formal articles, interactive websites, policy documents, oral presentations, conference presentations, or formal reports to be presented to a particular audience.   Therefore, in identifying YPAR studies that addressed student relationships, I attempted to make my initial search as broad as possible which included academic search databases (ERIC /EBSCO), a search of the campus library special collections which contains reports of research and reports conducted locally, book collection searches, the CES4Health database that provides abstracts of community and school-based research, and a general internet search.   A variety of search terms were used including urban education, urban schools, action research, participatory research, youth (generated 212 results in EBSCO/ERIC) and the search was narrowed considerable (68) by adding the term relationships.   The web search was conducted with the terms youth participatory action research, Black, Latino, and relationships.   Then, articles/websites were chosen for further analysis that specifically engaged in school or community YPAR with multiethnic groups of urban middle and high school students.   Therefore, in keeping with the research goals of the review, articles were excluded when all participants were identified as being of the same race or ethnicity or when articles identified as simply action research without the youth as co-research component that YPAR advocates.

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Analysis of Studies

Articles, websites, and reports generated from the search were read and initial coding was conducted to identify ethnicity of participants, stated goals of the YPAR project, and stated outcomes of the YPAR process. Next, more detailed coding was conducted for YPAR projects that specifically engaged in research with urban Blacks and Latina/o students. Initially open coding was conducted to ascertain what categories and ideas emerged from the findings. Then, after preliminary categories, informed by initial codes as well as existing literature, were identified, initial findings were revisited for additional ideas and themes. Then, findings were grouped according to the following broad themes: interethnic relationships, confronting deficit ideology, and empowerment. In speaking to the data quality of YPAR findings, it was important to consider the diversity and wide variety of YPAR projects. While in

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most findings, researchers described the product (report, website, etc) produced by students, data involving the level of consciousness raising and empowerment experienced by participants may have been relayed through rich, anecdotal and narrative formats that detailed how students engaged in the YPAR process. In the sections below, I highlight four YPAR research projects and describe their contribution to a discussion of improving interethnic relations in urban schools.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In determining the extent to which findings from YPAR studies addressed the research question, Has YPAR been utilized to address interethnic relations between students in urban schools, it is important to note that practically all studies analyzed were conducted with Black and Latina/o participants. Initial results indicated that none of the data identified improving interethnic relations as an explicit research goal; however, two projects highlighted interethnic relations as crucial components of the YPAR process: 1) Torre and Fine (2008)/Torre (2009) 2) Cahill, Rios-More, and Threatts (2008). In response to the second research question, How has YPAR been used to raise students' critical consciousness about issues that may influence interethnic relations, I highlight three studies that focused specifically on producing counternarratives to deficit impressions of urban students and emphasizing student empowerment: 1) Ozer & Wright (2012) 2) Tuck (2008)/Tuck et al. (2008b) 3) Goessling and Doyle (2009). Listed in the sections below is a more detailed discussion of how these components may inform a discussion of improving interethnic relations between students through the YPAR process.

YPAR as a Tool to Promote Intercultural Relationships

A common thread amongst the three studies that spoke directly about intercultural relations within the research team was the idea of promoting critical understandings of systems of power, oppression, and stereotype. Through the process of engaging in critical investigations of their communities and schools, youth researchers simultaneously explored their own racial and cultural positionality within the research space. In the YPAR project, Echoes of Brown (Torre & Fine, 2008; Torre, 2009), Torre and Fine intentionally create a contact zone (Pratt, 1991) of diverse youth to investigate the legacy of the historic Brown v Board of Education decision on contemporary urban schools. They define a contact

zone as a "messy social space where differently situated people meet, clash, and grapple with each other across their varying relationships to power" (p. 25). Therefore, while creating a performance-based research project that explored social injustice, students crossed cultural boundaries and explored privilege and oppression in their personal lives. During the 3-year YPAR project, students studied segregation, desegregation, oral history, urban school tracking, and achievement scores, and presented findings in various formats to community members, school boards, educators, and policy makers across the nation. The authors conclude that, "PAR in the contact zone affects the consciousness and political work of very distinct kinds of youth by educating critically, writing personal troubles into political struggles, and performing for social justice" (p. 33).

Cahill, Rios-More, and Threatts (2008) describe a multiethnic (Puerto Rican, Dominican, African American, Chinese) YPAR group of women ages 16-22 who explore the workings of stereotypes, poor resources, and failing institutions on the identities of women of color in their neighborhood. Through an investigation of their own community, they engage one another in a process of consciousness raising (Freire & Macedo, 1987) as they come to perceive themselves and their communities in different ways. They describe the three major phases of their YPAR process as researching their community, personal transformation, and using their newfound knowledge as a catalyst for change. As a culminating project, researchers disseminate findings about confronting and resisting racial and cultural stereotypes in the form of youth-friendly reports and presentations in local schools. In describing the process by which they engaged in the YPAR project, they state,

> Whereas at the beginning of our research process what was most remarkable to all of us were our differences, through the process of doing the research project we identified a collective identification as "young urban women of color"—a shared standpoint based

on an identification of intersections of race, gender, and place. (Cahill, Rios-More, & Threatts, 2008, p. 112)

This represents a notable example of the power of critical community building in highlighting the interplay of power, structure, and agency (Bettez, 2011). YPAR studies like those conducted by Torre and Fine (2008) and Cahill, Rios-More, and Threatts (2008) suggest that in order to work towards the

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ultimate goal of a pedagogy that speaks to issues of intercultural interaction between students, we must analyze and expose systems of oppression that operate powerfully and silently in the background of urban educational and community contexts. Through the YPAR process, researchers created critical communities of youth by linking a greater awareness of social issues to an empowering praxis

YPAR as a Tool to Confront Deficit Ideology

While many descriptions of YPAR findings focused on the development, processes, and outcome of the research project, some focused specifically on countering deficit perceptions of students. Deficit ideology glosses over a discussion of systemic inequalities and suggests that "intellectual, moral, and spiritual deficiencies in certain groups of people" (Gorski, 2008, p. 5) lead to lack of success in education. In response to the second research question, *How has YPAR been used*

to raise students' critical consciousness about issues that may influence interethnic relations, I highlight Ozer & Wright (2012) who describe the ways in which teachers' impressions of students changed as students engaged in school-wide YPAR projects. Ozer and Wright (2012) conduct a qualitative study of two urban high schools that implemented YPAR as an elective course to determine whether student-teacher relationships and student voice were enhanced as a result of YPAR. "Woodson," the smaller of the two high schools, struggled with test scores in the lowest quartile in the district and high percentages of students in poverty. As a YPAR project, students researched teaching best practices through trainings and interviews, conducted professional development for their school faculty to present their findings, and then collaborated with teachers and consultants to create a "Best Practices Club" in which students were trained to observe teachers and give positive feedback about effective teaching strategies. The authors conclude that the YPAR process influenced school climate by fostering "data driven dialogue" (p. 278), changing the ways in which teachers "perceived

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student competencies and potential for contributing" (p. 277), and allowing students from marginalized communities to "be heard despite disadvantage and racism" (p. 278).The authors assert that the YPAR process changed the ways in which teachers "perceived student competencies and potential for contributing" (p. 277), and allowed students from marginalized communities to "be heard despite disadvantage and racism" (p. 278). While

Ozer and Wright do not directly address student beliefs about each other, their study illustrates the potential of youth engaged in PAR projects to begin to create counternarratives (Delgado and Stefancic, 2001) and to envision their potential in transformative ways. They identify shifts in student-teacher interaction as students who were previously marginalized in their school, began to view themselves as professionals and experts on certain topics they were researching. Pervasive deficit thinking based on harmful stereotype could serve as a barrier to positive interethnic relations between Blacks and Latino/as (McClain et al., 2006; Gay, 2004, 2006). YPAR holds potential for engaging youth in developing strategies to challenge racially and culturally deficit representations of themselves and forge new relationships with their peers and teachers.

YPAR as a Tool for Empowerment

I highlight two distinct studies that utilize YPAR as a tool for empowerment, the Youth Researchers for a New Education System (YRNES) school report and the Thru the Lenz project. The YRNES project (Tuck, 2008; Tuck et al., 2008b) is approached from a critical, activist-oriented lens in which a multiethnic group of former and current NYC student researchers utilize a mixed methods design for the purposes of hearing the perspectives of New York City youth and changing the current conditions of NYC schools. The YRNES project report represents a useful exemplar of YPAR research and reporting by utilizing easily accessible language; inserting colorful charts and figures; arranging blocks of information under subheadings; incorporating the actual words of participants; collecting both quantitative and qualitative data; and putting forth specific implications and recommendations for increasing student perspectives in school decision making. Identifying themselves as those who have been discounted and pushed aside by NYC schools, researchers view research and activism as a way to speak back to dominant misperceptions of NYC

student and commit to remain "conscious of how society's power structures play out in our interactions, so that we can challenge them and thus allow each other more room to grow" (Tuck et al., 2008b, p. 80-81). Although the actual YRNES report describes the results of their study, in a different publication (Tuck, 2008) researchers collectively articulate the process by which they formed a group devoted to YPAR. They discuss how they negotiate power differences within the group.

> We are not an academic or government space…We fill different roles based on our interests and talents, where in other research spaces, power is usually only held by those with the most research experience. Finally, we engage in our own process of decision making, whereas other participatory spaces may rely on a one-person, one-vote decision making model that will always muffle the voices of those in numeric minority. (Tuck, 2008, p. 50)

Youth researchers go on to describe the ways in which they navigate tension and conflict when it arose during the research process.

In the Thru the Lenz project (Goessling & Doyle, 2009) a diverse group of high school students utilize photography and creative arts to gain a deeper social awareness of their identities, schools, and communities. Through photovoice, or community photography methodology, participant journals, researcher reflections, and a post-project group interview, youth researchers create spaces for candid dialogue about their school and community. The authors emphasize that, "When PAR is conducted well, empowerment naturally follows" (p. 362). These YPAR projects illuminate the ways in which negative characterizations are preserved in historical memories; analyze pervasive media images that normalize whiteness and vilify people of color; and engage in critical dialogue about how their social context may influence the potential for positive

intercultural relationships. In describing the relationship between identity and agency, Murrell (2009) emphasizes that: "School success among African American students depends on this agency and the subsequent ability to maintain identity integrity despite a variety of racially and culturally disaffirming discursive practices they experience in school" (p. 97). I would assert that cultivating agency and empowerment is particularly critical for both Black and Latina/o students in urban settings that may experience a bombardment of disempowering and negative messages about themselves from both peers and adults.

Limitations

Despite the powerful potential of the YPAR data described, there are obvious limitations to this research review that should be noted. Although data analysis showed very few studies that specifically addressed interethnic relationships as a primary goal of YPAR projects, it would be uncritical to assume that researchers and students may not have both confronted and found ways to navigate, address, or improve student interethnic relations. Additionally, although tension between Blacks and Latina/os has been documented, the assumption cannot be made that this tendency occurs in all urban settings, nor that it occurred in the settings in which the highlighted YPAR studies were located. Finally, although I discussed the potential for empowerment and decreased deficit thinking in facilitating better interethnic relations, further study needs to be conducted to establish stronger, more definitive links between these concepts. Additionally, future research in the area of YPAR could more fully describe the process of navigating relationships between co-researchers, particularly in projects that specifically address issues of privilege and power (Torre & Fine, 2008). Also, in educational and community settings that have experienced documented interethnic tension, YPAR as an intervention with the specific purpose of raising

consciousness for the purpose of improving student relationships, would yield interesting, thought-provoking findings.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Building and sustaining positive relationships between teachers and students has been widely explored in educational research (Klem & Connell, 2004), however, less focus has been placed on links between students' cross-cultural community building and school success. Therefore, an in-depth look at students' perceptions of their other-race peers will be of interest to educators and administrators who have the capacity to make decisions that affect intercultural understanding and promote school climates that promote harmony among student groups.   In addition, YPAR holds the potential to inform education programs that instruct educators in promoting cultural understanding in their classrooms, inform curriculum that addresses cultural literacy, contribute to the literature on intercultural understanding between youth of color, and explore the implications of race, relationships, and school culture on achievement. YPAR may provide a vehicle by which educators might explicitly engage students in conversations about the constructedness of their social worlds and reductionist thinking that attributes stereotypical labels to particular groups.   Teaching youth to deconstruct racist narratives must involve the cultivation of a more critical literacy to give them tools to challenge representations of themselves and others and to see both the constructedness and commodification of youth identities.

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