

Youth Participatory Action Research as Critical Pedagogy: Lessons from Practice

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Research Questions

- How can the principles of critical pedagogy translate into academic interventions with urban adolescents? What are the desirable outcomes of a critical urban pedagogy? How are these outcomes best measured?
- What are overlaps between the principles of participatory action research and critical pedagogy? How might YPAR push forward conversations about applications of critical pedagogy with urban youth?
- What is Youth Participatory Action Research? How is it practiced? How can it function as a critical pedagogy?
- What are the multiple outcomes associated with YPAR as a critical pedagogy strategy with urban youth?
 - Literacy Outcomes
 - Identity Outcomes
 - Advocacy and Action for Social and Educational Justice

What is Participatory Action Research?

- Defined by its “who,” its “how,” and its “why.”
- According to McIntyre (2000) there are three principles that guide most PAR projects
 - The collective investigation of a problem
 - The reliance on indigenous knowledge to better understand that problem
 - The desire to take individual and/or collective action to deal with the stated problem
- Participants become researchers about their daily lives in hopes of developing realistic solutions for dealing with the problems that they believe need to be addressed.
- By assuming active and full participation in the research process, people themselves have the opportunity to mobilize, organize, and implement individual and/or collective action. (Selener, 1997)

Summer Research Seminar: 1999-2004



Seminar Format

- The five-week seminar brings together students, teachers, and parents from urban schools and communities throughout Los Angeles to design and carry out critical qualitative and quantitative research projects on issues of immediate concern to these schools and communities.
- The students work in groups of 4 or 5 on research teams that are led by a teacher in the local schools.
- Two primary goals are to (1) use the seminar space to help students acquire the literacies and tools they need to function within the academy and (2) engage teachers, students, and parents as collaborators in community-based praxis-oriented research.

Data Collection: 1999-2006

- Digital videotapes of all seminar activities (300 hours)
- Digital photographs from each seminar (3000 photos)
- Student research papers and PowerPoint presentations (30)
- Student-generated short films (11)
- Student journal entries and critical essays
- Supplementary products related to research process (surveys, interview protocols, student field notes, student videos)
- Interviews with students, teachers, parents, and university faculty members
- Academic achievement and college-going data
- Review of complementary research on participatory action research (450 sources)

Youth Participatory Action Research as Critical Pedagogy



Becoming Critical Sociologists

- Reading seminal texts in urban sociology and the sociology of education
 - Involved basic reading comprehension, vocabulary development, synthesizing ideas
 - Seminar discussion and activities
- Learning to read the world through the lens of critical sociology
- Learning to see themselves as legitimate critical researchers
 - Daily reflections and the critical memoir
 - Creating a context of rigor and respect
 - The relationship between collective agency, counterhegemonic pedagogies and student confidence and motivation
- Designing local, community-based research projects that include methods used by social scientists (participant observation, interviews, surveys, database analysis, visual sociology, oral history)

The Pedagogy of the City

- A significant portion of seminar time involved field work in neighborhoods and schools around the city of Los Angeles
 - Introducing students to new neighborhoods in a segmented and often fragmented city
 - Changing the nature of the relationship students have to members of the city infrastructure (superintendents, police, local media personalities, Parents, alumni of local schools)
 - Changing the way that students look at the city (Critical Public History Project; Civic Engagement Project)
- A significant component of the seminar also involved developing relationships with community based organizations around the city

Critical Pedagogy and the Praxis of Distribution

- Locating and developing meaningful sites of exchange for the student research
 - Provides rich, authentic context for students to develop superior products
- Positioning young people as scholars and intellectuals
- Developing competencies in multiple genres including: formal reports, PowerPoint presentations, memoirs, and short film
- Hosting the Teaching to Change LA website, which received over 1 million hits during the period of 2000-2006

YPAR Involves Sophisticated Academic Literacy Practices

From Hip-hop Research Project (Seminar 2000)

We also found that the average student owned 10-15 hip-hop compact discs, several students own more than 20 compact discs and some own 5-10 compact discs or less. The average student watches 3-5 hours of hip-hop videos a week on television and listening on the radio. Several students watch 10 hours of hip-hop videos a week and a few students watch an hour or an hour and a half. With this abundance of information, we found that the average student believes that hip-hop music has an extreme influence on teens.

The students we interviewed and surveyed in the Los Angeles area believe hip-hop is so widely listened to for a myriad of reasons. The most popular reason was that they like it. The second most noted reason was that the students could relate with the music. It has to do with everyday things they have to go through. Students gave responses such as: "Hip-Hop is an expression of the soul that everyone can relate to because it combines so many art forms," and "they talk about what teens are experiencing in life, so the teens feel a connection with the music." (Morrell, 2005)

YPAR Increases Student Engagement in Academic-Intellectual Work

- Students volunteer their evenings, weekends, and summers to participate in PAR projects
 - Students are more willing to take writing to extra drafts before submitting to external audiences
- Students make impassioned presentations of their work to school officials, elected officials, and other power brokers
- Students feel as if they have more power and voice
- In Interviews, students admit to being more interested and engaged in academic-intellectual work

YPAR Projects Confront the Social and Cultural Barriers to Educational Attainment

- Student research is legitimate research in its own right
 - Student researchers from UCLA's Institute for Democracy, Education, and Access (IDEA) have:
 - lobbied policymakers,
 - informed literacy practitioners,
 - published in peer-reviewed journals,
 - lectured at major universities
 - presented at national conferences such as the American Educational Research Association (Morrell, 2004)

Final Papers and Presentations

From Learning Resource Group 2002

The differences are exposed. The demands are voiced. Like the Chicano, Black, and Women's civil rights movements before us, we are engulfed in social and educational reform. We demand equity and the preservation our civil rights. We demand that all our schools in urban and suburban communities be taught equally and be provided with the same quality educational resources. Otherwise, how are working-class people supposed to become an active part of society? Cesar Chavez once said, "Once social change begins, it cannot be reversed. You cannot un-educate the person who has learned to read. You cannot humiliate the person who feels pride. And you cannot oppress the people who are not afraid anymore." We are educated, full of pride, and united by a common goal for social change. We cannot be uneducated nor can we be humiliated. We are no longer afraid.

Implications for Critical Pedagogy and Urban Education

- It is possible to draw upon the principles of critical pedagogy to develop curricula and practices that are effective with urban youth
- Cannot separate critical pedagogy with urban youth from the development of academic literacy skills (too many sophisticated literacy skills required for true praxis)
- Promoting Youth Participatory Action Research as a Pedagogical Approach across K-12 spectrum
- More focus on principles and applications of participatory action research in teacher education programs, Masters degree programs, and Ph.D. programs in urban education
- More venues for the distribution of youth participatory action research and research on YPAR as critical pedagogy