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Participatory action research in schools: unpacking the lived inequities of high stakes testing

Participatory
action research
in schools

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to examine a school-based Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) project on educational inequity and high stakes testing.

Design/methodology/approach – A former high school teacher (currently a university professor) and two former students (currently research assistants and university students) take up a youth studies framework to collaboratively resee multimodal artifacts from a tenth-grade course in qualitative research.

Findings – Findings illustrate the power of finding allies in peers and educators; the transformative power of deep participation; and the longitudinal nature of social change and action. Thus, this research demonstrates that when students are positioned as researchers, experts and knowledge producers, they can collaborate with one another, teachers and administrators to confront social inequities within their schools and beyond.

Originality/value – This study has value for applying critical, youth-centered pedagogies in secondary English language arts classrooms and schools.

Keywords Youth, Adolescence, Youth Participatory Action Research, Literacies, Multimodality, Epistemic privilege, Community, Activist

Paper type Research paper

Young people's experiences in school are impacted by high stakes testing almost daily – in the form of test preparation curriculum, benchmark assessments, or the exams themselves. Yet, young people have little voice in robust scholarly conversations about the impact of high stakes testing on pedagogy (Au, 2007). In much of their time in school, youth are asked to defer to authority figures (e.g. teachers, administrators, policymakers, test makers) in deciding both the content of their studies and how their learning is assessed. Constructions of adolescence/ts as “not yet adult” or lacking maturity serve to further disenfranchise and oppress youth (Lesko, 2012). Moreover, educators regularly dismiss adolescents as “hormonal, apathetic, angsty, diffident, developing, risk-taking, emotional, moody, rebellious, insecure, contradictory” (Niccolini, 2015, p. 22) – deficit assumptions that work to constrain and demean youth, especially youth of color (Vasudevan and Campano, 2009).

In schools, youths' capacity as knowledge generators is often denied in place of prescribed content and enforced by the preponderance of high stakes exams. Testing discourses and practices rely on the idea that “adults know best” what kids should learn. Furthermore, the testing industry similarly disenfranchises adults in schools, limiting

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teachers' and schools' curricular autonomy and potential to innovate (Petrone and Lewis, 2012). This article, coauthored by a former high school teacher (currently a university professor) and two former students (currently research assistants and university students), reflects on our participation in a Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) project that examined the impact of high stakes testing in a high school course in qualitative research (see the Context section).

In January 2014, Tabatha, Israt and their research team of five launched their YPAR project with the question, "Which teaching methods work best?" as they were deeply frustrated with how much "test prep" shaped classroom learning and caused sleepless nights. As they began to have conversations with one another, their peers and teachers, they revised their question to: "How does standardized testing impact students and teachers?"

Theoretical framework

Lesko's (2012) influential *Act Your Age: A Cultural Construction of Adolescence* demonstrates how adolescence is socially constructed, debunking ideas that frame adolescents as hormonal, apathetic and immature and tying these disparaging constructions of youth to a racist, sexist, class-based history. Building upon Lesko's work, Petrone *et al.* (2014) developed a "youth lens" to critically examine representations of youth in literature and provide opportunities for youth to "talk back to how the world sees them as youth" (Sarigianides *et al.*, 2015, p. 13). YPAR, because it positions youth as knowers and doers, contests biological models of adolescence and invites young people into conversations often reserved for adult researchers and policymakers (Mirra *et al.*, 2016). Educators who see youth as mature intellectual partners trust them with their own learning and build a curriculum that engages them deeply in critical thought and exploration.

Rereading adolescence impacts how educators design English language arts curriculum and how much responsibility for their own learning (or not) youth are afforded. A YPAR curriculum, specifically, fosters what Tuck and Yang (2014) call "deep participation," a rich understanding of resistance that changes participants and those around them even if it "doesn't necessarily deliver a new policy, a new regime, a political victory" (p. 14). Deep participation is valuable in that it "might re/new an epistemology. Sometimes it can deliver a movement. Other times, it forms nodes and networks and pathways to be activated episodically for more explicit participation" (p. 14). Working with one another, the youth research team in this study fostered a sense of solidarity, critical understandings of injustice and imagined new possibilities for their lives. Youth and educators who reimagine classrooms and work toward civic change directly confront notions of youth as "not yet adult" and school as simply preparation for life (Lesko, 2012). A YPAR curriculum supports the argument that young people are capable of change-making and advocacy work in the present moment.

Moreover, young people often join in the collective struggle for change, only to have their efforts and critical insights dismissed or infantilized. From testing walk-outs in Seattle to youth Climate Strikes around the world to March for Our Lives, youth are mobilizing against injustice and inequity. YPAR work in English studies imagines how schools might move from constraining activist impulses toward nurturing young people's criticality and insightfulness.

Review of relevant literature

YPAR offers a rich approach to examining educational inequities. Caraballo *et al.* (2017) note that YPAR historically highlights the "organic intellectualism of those who are most affected by educational and social inequities" (p. 1). Tuck (2012) and her New York

City-based YPAR team Collective of Researchers on Educational Disappointment and Desire studied the lived impact of accountability policies (i.e. high-stakes testing, mayoral control and secondary school exit exams) on high school completion. They found that these accountability policies often served merely to push youth out of school, sometimes toward the General Educational Development (GED) credential rather more meaningful routes to graduation. For well over a decade, the Council of Youth Research (teams of youth, teachers, university faculty and graduate students in a summer institute) investigated school inequities, buoyed by the *Williams v State of California* lawsuit that called public attention to the separate, unequal and substandard schooling afforded low-income youth of color in Los Angeles (Mirra *et al.*, 2016). Similarly, Fine *et al.* (2004) brought together urban and suburban youth from New York and New Jersey and university-affiliated researchers and artists to investigate the ongoing segregation of public schools on the 50th anniversary of *Brown v. Board of Education*. YPAR projects such as these intentionally surface intersections of race, class and gender to create productive “contact zones” across differences where knowledge and experiences can be compared and deconstructed (Torre, 2005).

In bringing together youth across metropolitan areas, participatory research has documented system-wide inequities in educational access and mobilized diverse youth and allies toward change. For example, youth researchers on the Polling for Justice project designed a large-scale, city-wide survey to study:

[. . .] the ways in which social policies, institutions, and practices systematically deny youth of color key human rights across sectors (education, criminal justice and health care), and the ways youth mobilize to resist, negotiate, and challenge collectively these various forms of dispossession (Fox and Fine, 2012, p. 156).

YPAR offers opportunities for multimodal and multigenerational leadership and shared expertise (DeJaynes and Curmi-Hall, 2019; Fox and Fine, 2015) as well as a rich space for adult facilitators to engage in “critical self-reflection” and “collective identity” with youth (Kennedy, 2018, p. 301). Furthermore, participatory research often highlights creative methods of data collection and representation; visual arts, dance, poetry, chapbooks and photovoice, and other modes of representation are valued as a means of building (and sharing) data with community participants (Fox, 2015; Girls for Gender Equity, 2011; Tuck, 2012).

YPAR has recently become embedded in schools, both through local non-profits such as Girls for Gender Equity (2011) who organize young women across New York City to study sexual harassment in their own schools, and also through the work of scholars partnering with innovative educators. Ozer (2017), for example, partnered with schools in the San Francisco Bay area to build YPAR elective courses where youth choose to study topics such as improving school lunches, reducing student stress and improving the school climate for English language learners. In one project, youth researchers studied disengagement in their own classrooms, then offered professional development to teachers on more engaging and culturally relevant teaching methods. Ozer and Douglas (2013) found that this research “was associated with increases in sociopolitical skills, motivation to influence their schools and communities, and participatory behavior” (p. 66). Similarly, Chajet’s (2011) participatory research and activism on college access and college persistence for first-generation, low-income students hinged on a model of youth leadership, whereby high school students supported one another in the college application process and thereby increased college-going. Despite this important work, most YPAR work in schools is elective-based or extracurricular.

As YPAR moves into schools and classrooms, scholars are beginning to examine how the liberatory potential of YPAR might be “schoolified” into a series of mere graded assignments (Rubin *et al.*, 2017) or its critical and participatory aspects constrained or even squandered within institutional structures (Brion-Meisels and Alter, 2018). Yet, in our experience, a YPAR curriculum also has the potential to foster a “culturally sustaining pedagogy” (Paris and Alim, 2014) that leans into critical capacities of youth as researchers and agents of change (Mirra *et al.*, 2016).

Caraballo *et al.* (2017) identified four dominant entry points for YPAR:

- (1) academic learning and literacies;
- (2) cultural and critical epistemologies;
- (3) youth development; and
- (4) youth organizing and civic engagement, all four of which exist to some degree in our inquiry.

The project on high stakes testing we share illustrates how young people can leverage both in-school and out-of-school resources in research and activism. Based on this research, we argue that YPAR in schools has the potential to impact how young people think about themselves as learners, how they read texts, how they conceive of their own agency and how they form common cause toward disrupting inequities in institutions.

Context

The small public high school in our study is diverse in terms of race, ethnicity and socioeconomic status: in the 2013–2014 school year, students identified as 36.2% Hispanic or Latino; 25% White; 24.1% Black or African American; 11.2% Asian or Native Hawaiian; and 3.4% multiracial. Also, in the year of the study, 45% of students were considered “economically disadvantaged”; 11% of students had individualized education plans (IEPs); and no students were currently classified as English language learners (New York State Education Department, 2014). The school’s selective admission policy screened potential students with middle and high school reading and math scores and interviews. Overall, the school readily met state and district literacy and math standards, something that likely provided a protective layer for a critique of high stakes testing, which we will address in the study findings.

In the required tenth grade qualitative research course, two semester-long curricular units – an auto-ethnography unit and a critical YPAR unit – rooted the course in school and neighborhood communities. (For further information on the course, see DeJaynes, 2018.) YPAR project requirements included data collection (e.g. interviews, focus groups, artifact analysis) and collaborative data coding and analysis, familiar to qualitative researchers. Tabatha, Israt and their coresearchers used participatory research to value the “epistemic privilege” or lived experiences of their socially and ethnically diverse peers, friends, teachers, parents, siblings and other community actors who held deep, first-hand knowledge of the impact of high stakes testing (Campano and Damico, 2007).

Each of the youth researchers investigating high stakes testing had different orientations to the research topic in terms of academic grades and schooling; some felt confident on standardized tests and others less so. Tiffany identifies as White, middle-class and female; she had completed her doctorate and taught for several years, something that contributed to her willingness to take pedagogical risks and push boundaries within the school. Tabatha, who identifies as Puerto Rican American and female, was frustrated that she participated in extensive SAT test preparation as part of an extracurricular college preparation program.

Israt, who identifies as Bangladeshi American and female, worked in a testing center preparing elementary school children for state math exams. Amy [1], whose family immigrated from China, began learning English in public school classrooms and remembered the pain of testing while still mastering the language. Charles, a white male, joined the research team because he was deeply concerned about students with IEPs who did not have time to complete the exam or had to be sequestered in separate testing rooms for “extra time.” William, who also identifies as white and male, found the “timing of tests” absurd; he found the irritating math of having “literally 47 s to answer each multiple-choice question” an impediment to his learning and engagement in school. All were frustrated with the countless hours of instruction devoted to preparation for high stakes New York State assessments, which often serve as obstacles to graduation.

The research team’s original rationale for the study, written as they began their study, is as follows:

- *Research question:* How does standardized testing impact students and teachers?
- *Problem statement:* Our group is studying the impact that standardized testing has on both teaching methods and student learning. This is a major concern of ours because many teachers are molding their curriculum around these standardized tests. These evaluations do not test students’ knowledge as much as they test students’ ability to memorize facts and question formats. In the long run, teaching in preparation for the test can be harmful toward the student if not done effectively. This can be harmful because it takes away from the curriculum that is intended to teach students critical problem-solving skills that can be applied to one’s life outside of the classroom.
- *Personal connection:* Like many students in New York, we have not only been required to take standardized tests but also expected to flourish on them because it is a crucial factor of whether or not we move on to the next grade. These assessments evaluate students’ ability to solve a problem based on their prior knowledge and on the courses they have taken. In preparation for these exams, they tend to play a major role in students’ lives as well as teachers’ lives. The teachers’ role in school is to acknowledge students and to prepare them for these tests. We are interested to learn how these tests affect how the teachers present their lessons and how the students learn. The reason for studying this is because we aim to gain insight into how they affect teaching methods and student learning. Students often describe these tests as pressuring and nerve-racking, which is why we want to learn the difference between the teaching methods used to prepare students for the test versus not preparing students for exams (Classroom artifact, February 2014).

Methods

Data sources for this inquiry included a digital portfolio of the research team’s proposal, data collection plan, transcripts, analysis codes, archives of their final presentation (a Jeopardy game), photographs and videos of presentations and notes from educational conferences where we shared this work. Tiffany also used lesson plans, audio notes and teacher journal reflections of the class in the tradition of practitioner inquiry (Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 2009).

Luttrell’s (2010) notion of “collaborative seeing” offered us a methodological framework for “reseeing” these artifacts of our earlier work together intergenerationally and multivocally. In Luttrell’s longitudinal study, she examined photographs taken by children

with them at intervals throughout their lifespan. We drew on her work as an invitation to consider retrospectively how our interpretations of events, images and artifacts, shifted or were refined over time. As we relooked at multimodal artifacts such as photographs, drawings, print materials and a game nearly six years later, we revealed new and sometimes hidden stories and tensions to one another, often those related to research team dynamics or curricular intentions.

Our process was personal, intergenerational and retrospective, or to use Luttrell's terms, "dynamic and relational" (p. 225). "Collaborative seeing" enables collective, intergenerational meaning-making, and an unhurried kind of research that makes space for conflicting stories and interpretations to emerge. Similarly, [Weis and Fine \(2012\)](#) advocate for "critical bifocality" or a commitment to "documenting at once the linkages and capillaries of structural arrangements and the discursive and lived-out practices by which privileged and marginalized youth and adults make sense of their circumstances" (p. 176). Thus, we attend to intergenerational ways of seeing structural and lived experiences, taking note of privilege and marginalization.

Tabatha and Israt were Tiffany's research assistants in 2019 when we decided to do a retrospective analysis of the 2014 YPAR project. The three of us recorded our conversations and jotted observations as we re-looked at the artifacts. Tiffany was drawn to an analysis of the curriculum as visible through the tasks and ways in which the research team completed them; for example, she was curious about the team's process of coauthorship of the research proposal and how ideas were generated for creative data collection. Tabatha and Israt recalled moments of rupture or delight not visible on pages we examined, and they reflected on how various experiences had impacted them in their college years. For example, Israt shared the playfulness involved in building the Jeopardy game and the social media memes and messages she had used to motivate her team to stay on task. We immersed ourselves in the data, retrospectively examined the artifacts and coded for constructions of adolescence, voice and silence, power, modes of expression (e.g. visuals, poetry), systems and communities engaged. These categories coalesced into subcategories, which were both emergent and informed by our reading of YPAR literature. Finally, we crafted memos and applied our codes to other bits of data, identifying themes such as the importance of allies; deep participation; social action; and the systemic constraints of schooling.

Findings

We trace the ways in which school-based YPAR projects enable youth who sit in classrooms together to realize common cause and engage with rather than flatten the differences in their experiences. Our findings illustrate:

- the power of finding allies in peers and educators;
- the transformative power of deep participation; and
- the longitudinal nature of social change and action.

Finding allies in peers and educators

A two-step "Big Paper activity" kicked off the semester-long YPAR unit. Its purpose was to identify the social issues that concerned youth, to document and honor the expertise of the youth in the room ([Mirra et al., 2016](#)). Explicitly uplifting youths' knowledge and expertise about their own lives, that is, honoring the epistemic privilege of youth, their families, teachers and other stakeholders, meant looking for "circuits of dispossession and privilege," ([Fox and Fine, 2012](#)), something buoyed by the diversity of the school community.

The curriculum explicitly built-in time and space for youth to share their ideas, experience and knowledge with one another. On the third day of the unit, the classroom was strewn with packages of markers and oversized post-its or “Big Paper.” In large print at the tops of the “Big Papers” were topics from the prior day’s free-writes about social issues that concerned youth in the class. Topics on post-its were distilled into short phrases such as “Impact of Testing,” “Stop and Frisk,” “LGBTQ Safety,” “Rape Culture,” “Street Harassment,” “Standardized Testing” and “Scanners at [School].”

Below are two slides that visually framed the activity on the classroom whiteboard:

(1) Big Paper Step 1:

- A time you—or someone you know—experienced the social issue.
- What you’ve heard of it in the media, school, or family.
- What you might potentially research about this topic, or what you’re interested in learning about it.
- Any questions you have about the topic/issue.

(2) Big Paper Step 2:

- Write a detailed response to one of your peer’s responses. (This makes me think [...] I wonder [...])
- Respond to one of your peer’s responses by posing specific questions. (What if [...] ? How would [...] ?)
- Jot down specific and potential ideas for research: communities, people, artifacts, and places associated with the issue.
- Place an asterisk * by social issues that have impacted you in some way and describe your connection.

After students completed the two steps, the class took an additional five minutes to revisit the last bullet: “Place an asterisk* by social issues that have impacted you in some way and describe your connection.” This rooted the work in the communities represented by the young people in the room, and began laying the groundwork for “deep participation,” for connecting to projects they might later “feel in their bones” (Tuck and Yang, 2014).

On the “Standardized Testing” paper, students wrote things like, “I hate them,” “I have so much anxiety,” and “I’m tired of being judged by them,” as well as comments on how they impacted the structure of school: “We could be learning instead of doing test prep.” The three teachers in the room (Tiffany, a special education coteacher and a pre-service student teacher) all wrote honest responses about frustration with the testing regimes and feeling demoralized and undermined by testing. Israt later recalled:

We were so surprised that the teachers were like, “we hate these exams.” As a student, I think that was the first time I ever heard a teacher say that they also don’t like the exams. It kind of baffled me. I was like, “so then why are we doing this?” I had never gotten that perspective, that I’m not the only one being affected by these exams. A lot of people are.”

Realizations of sharing a common cause like the one Israt described are critical to building alliances to work toward social change collectively.

Honoring the epistemic privilege of youth, furthermore, critically reframed how adolescents were seen and how they saw other youth and teachers in their community. Tabatha recalled being taken aback by the willingness of peers, teachers, principals and a university professor to share their insights, and importantly, their time. The following list

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summarizes the research team's data collection, which took place over about five weeks in the middle of the project:

- four focus groups (peers, teachers, students in an enrichment program);
- five extended interviews (students and teachers);
- two creative responses for 12+ participants each (poetry and drawing);
- a long-form qualitative survey with 21 respondents;
- three observations of test prep lessons (in an after-school program and a nearby school); and
- five artifact reviews of commercial and state test prep materials available online, in local libraries and bookstores.

Everyone in tenth grade participated in one another's focus groups, surveys or interviews, and shared personal stories and reflections. This bonded students together over shared experiences, creating space to vent about testing. Participants were surprisingly open about their challenges, including specific barriers for them, revealing a layer of humanity, openness and honesty that moved Tabatha and Israt.

Focus groups opened with poetry to specifically evoke emotions and set the tone for a conversation about how the testing industry impacted the school community. Gabriel's poem points to a major finding in the study: the weight of the tests as a graduation requirement is the cause of undue stress.

*It's dehumanizing, being judged by a number alone,
after YEARS of hard work,
how can a single test convey how much I've grown?
I know this stuff, but these are riddles not questions
Yet if I fail now, it'll be due to my lack of attention
The tension causes facts to slip from my mind
no matter how deep I dig they're too hard to find*

Furthermore, as reflected in Gabriel's poem, the tests dehumanize because they do the work of dividing and sorting, putting students in competition with one another rather than encouraging collaboration. In the focus groups, the conversation was collective; participants claimed the right to a fair and just education and found compassion for one another's suffering. Language to name the corporate forces that intentionally pitted students against one another, teachers and their learning community was an important part of understanding inequity. Focus groups were restorative and opened space for repair by enabling participants to envision alternatives and find sometimes unexpected allies in one another.

Tabatha remembered her surprise that her physical education teacher Mr. F happily started writing poetry in a focus group with teachers on how the curriculum was impacted by high stakes testing. He wrote:

*Sit there for hours
All of high school depending
On one stupid test*

He counseled stressed-out students (often his advisees) and planned gym activities to address the mental health of the school. His critique immediately positioned him as an ally in a way she had not seen him before.

Another ally located through the project was Yolanda Sealey-Ruiz, Associate Professor of English Education at Teachers College, Columbia University. In an interview, she helped Tabatha think systemically about corporate greed and the larger structures keeping the exams in place, particularly the racism endemic in the tests and the surveillance of Urban Youth Culture in schools (Sealey-Ruiz and Greene, 2011). This conversation piqued Tabatha's curiosity about educational policy from more than a local/individual perspective and prompted further reading on the capitalist forces driving testing culture. Dr. Sealey-Ruiz's humanity and generosity also sent another powerful message: that Tabatha was worthy of her time and welcome in the important intellectual conversation on the impact of high stakes testing.

Transformative power of deep participation

Finding unlikely allies in educators and previously unknown peers set the stage for deep participation. Tabatha, Israt and many of their peers have described in retrospect how their connections to one another and small moments of resistance in teaching and research created important "linkages between ideas, experiences, ideals, aspirations" (Tuck and Yang, 2014, p. 15).

When it came time to share data, Israt and especially William wanted to do so in a way that was informative and engaging – and also that valued the lived experience of the audience of high school students. At the school's Research Symposium in late May, the research team presented to an audience of about 40 fellow students and teachers in the ninth and eleventh grades. (The Research Symposium was structured like an academic conference with concurrent sessions of youth researchers sharing work with peers across the classrooms in the school.) The testing operation was represented through a Jeopardy game: each question illustrated an unfair aspect of standardized testing. Below we share notable moments in the team's Jeopardy game, which was both playful and sparked outrage.

A question about the popular children's cartoon *SpongeBob SquarePants* captured the absurdity and decontextualized nature of much of high stakes testing. It read: "Squidward is actually NOT a squid. What kind of animal is he really?" He is an octopus, but this question stumped many people who knew exactly who Squidward was but "felt dumb" for not being able to quickly identify his species. This question and other seemingly innocuous questions such as "Which historic building is on the back of a five-dollar bill?" or "What is a Hannah Montana catchphrase?" were decontextualized such that they were difficult, much like participants described tests in Global History or Algebra.

The question that created the biggest impression and emotional response from the audience was the one intended to share findings on the treatment of English language learners. It read: "JeÅli Sally ma czteryjabÅ,kai Johnny ma dwajabÅ,kailejabÅ,ekmajÅ ... one poÅ,Å ... czone?" Everyone giggled nervously at first. Then, one student started translating the sentence, word by word, "If Sally has four apples and Johnny has two apples ... six apples!" She had emigrated from Poland as a child and roughly understood the Slavic language of the question. Immediately, audience members erupted, "That's not fair, she has an unfair advantage." The question effectively prompted a lively conversation on the finding, "Standardized testing does not adequately address issues of equity, especially for English language learners and special needs students."

Student interview participants had stories like Natalia's, whose family emigrated from the Dominican Republic when she was young. Natalia had shared:

When I first came to this country, I had to take a test in English that decided whether or not I would go to summer school, even though I didn't know the language. I tried asking the teacher for help because I had no clue what I was doing, and she told me that it wasn't up to her to help me,

but up to myself. It made me feel stupid, because I was not able to complete a test that everyone else in my grade was able to complete

Jeopardy audience members shared similar stories about not knowing English well-enough when they first started taking standardized tests and also of lowered self-esteem related to the tests.

The Jeopardy game and the preparation for it afforded a kind of “deep participation.” It fostered productive discussion with peers who were both older (grade 11) and younger (grade 9), creating a space for students who did not know one another well, if at all, to engage on a personal and human level and “feel something” that would resonate. The collective conversation during the Jeopardy game led to both new and anticipated insights and stories that showed how students – across a surprisingly wide spectrum – felt demoralized (at best) or were disenfranchised by high stakes testing at some point in their school career. The research team leveraged student outrage to provoke conversation and reclaim the collective right to a meaningful education. This collective advocacy within the school fostered “deep participation” that led to a strong desire to make a change and a growing investment in educational justice.

Longitudinal nature of social change and activism

One critique of YPAR projects such as ours is that they accomplish “conscious-raising” but amount to little more than “thinking ourselves into liberation” ([Watts and Hipolito-Delgado, 2015](#)). However, we would argue that “deep participation” of the sort students and teachers experienced has tentacles and long-term potential for change-making. The following conversation (lightly edited for clarity) highlights the multivocal nature of our collaboration and our efforts to understand change-making and activism.

Israt: I think we knew that [standardized testing] was a social issue but just being that age, because you’re that age, you just know it’s an issue but you can’t do anything about it. But us seeing how we can actually take a step forward and talk to all these people and start focus groups and get the discussion going shows that anyone can make an impact. It paves the way for future impact. It definitely impacted us in our other classes. We did our PAR projects sophomore year but when we took our other research classes (Sociology, Anthropology), a lot of the stuff that we learned from the PAR project was relevant in those classes. In U.S. History, it gave me the power to say, this is my experience and this is why it matters. It’s more than just reading from the textbook. It helped me think about how to use my voice.

Tabatha: And then when we had to decide, what now? What can we do now that we’ve collected all this data? The process of moving to the solution side of things left me in murky waters, because I was so used to stopping with “this is an issue and this is an issue.” PAR forced me to think about tangible solutions, which is hard, to this day. Even people in top policy positions [like those in my current internship] struggle with solutions to difficult questions. I think it was one of the first times that I forced myself to take it to the next level, not just complain about the issue.

Tiffany: I always ask, “Did your research matter?” It matters even to ask teachers these questions [about testing]. Are there other ways it mattered?

Israt: Even now, in college, it still impacts the way I think. For our project, I knew that I didn’t like standardized tests and that it could be unfair, but I didn’t know the system to

things and how exactly it works. I feel like it was like that for a lot of people's projects [on racism, sexism]. We didn't know how far and how deep it branched out. So it gave me perspective to see "oh this is an issue" but this issue encompasses all of these things. It really changed the way I think about things today. What caused this issue? And thinking about all the parties it affected.

Tabatha: It allowed me to realize how standardized testing was part of a larger structural issue, and it's funny that you asked that question. At the end of the day, I was a little disappointed because I didn't change the entire system. And I naively thought in the beginning that we could do that, but that's not what happened. But I still think that it mattered. I still want to go into education policy. This was one of the first times that pushed me into that space and allowed me to think about those questions more. It changed how I think about research, because there are people who only care about quantitative data, but the process of doing the project made me see how you can take qualitative research and code it in ways that help you more deeply understand issues.

Israt: Also, when it ended, you [Tabatha] were upset that we couldn't make an impact. A lot of our group members were upset that we couldn't make more of an impact. They were like, "Okay, we know all this stuff is wrong, but now what?" But after we did our jeopardy game, I think the way that we did it was great. It got the conversation going for our peers too. They said things like, "oh yeah, that's really messed up that we do this this way. And it's not fair for this person or this group of people." I remember feeling like we got the conversation started even if we didn't change and abolish all exams right now.

In this conversation, Israt raised the issue of how much her age impacted how and what she critiqued. Tabatha described the importance of moving beyond critique and the lived difficulty of actually making change. Tabatha and Israt's increased sense of injustice when they looked beyond their own frustrations around "test prep" curriculum led to a sense of solidarity with English language learners, their teachers and peers. It also led to a yearning for "tangible solutions," to be a small part of systemic change, even as we all faced the limits of time, our positionalities and the fixity of the deep structures we hoped to be part of changing.

There are activist and (in)justice-oriented linkages between this project and Tabatha and Israt's university studies in educational and labor policy and desire to work in schools – as an educator (before moving into policy work) and a speech-language pathologist for emergent bilinguals, respectively. Tiffany added curriculum to the YPAR unit to demystify systemic oppression more broadly for students, and she noted that a few teacher participants began to speak back to the ruse of the tests and joined the youth in quiet resistance alongside her. Moments of "deep participation" and coalition-building extended beyond the semester of research and advocacy by re-shaping youth and adult participants' ideologies and civic behaviors. Our retrospective approach enabled us to see the ways in which change happened over time.

Conclusions and implications

Like many approaches to critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970), affording youth agentic positions such as researchers and experts on their own experience (as test-takers, for instance) creates new possibilities for learning, engagement and advocacy. When youth researchers collaborate with one another, teachers and administrators to confront social inequities

within their schools and beyond, they share power and responsibility for the curriculum as well as the social fabric of the school. In determining their curriculum, youth and teachers in this study were afforded unusual agency to question and critique institutional systems and speak back to the deficit assumptions about adolescents and their teachers made by the corporate testing industry. We would like to imagine more literacy and learning spaces where youth are engaged in “deep participation,” the kind that focuses their sights on what they can change.

Schools offer special potential as participatory research sites

Schools, despite their position as purveyors of dominant, hegemonic discourses, offer rich sites of inquiry. Certainly, we are concerned that YPAR in school can be stripped of its revolutionary aims, but we too see great potential. A cohort of youth prepared to speak critically about the systemic inequities of high stakes testing can motivate change – in how teachers’ design curriculum (Tabatha and Israt’s goal), how we talk about test scores and how we address the inevitable anxiety testing brings.

For a school to be able to enact such work requires critical and committed educators, ones who are willing to put themselves between students and potential retaliation (from administrators, other teachers in the school, concerned parents, etc.). That said, the risk to students of activism within their school can be mediated and minimized by school-based allies but it cannot be eliminated (DeJaynes, 2019; DeJaynes and Curmi-Hall, 2019). Adults with power in the school rallied around this project: teachers wrote poetry and actively participated in focus groups, offered guidance and worked alongside youth. This work was further buoyed by an innovative school structure committed to youth-led inquiry, which regularly invited the larger school community (e.g. students, parents, teachers, guidance counselors, administrators) into critical YPAR work.

The project was nonetheless constrained by the social location of the youth researchers as students and adolescents. Tabatha was taken aback when she reread the following sentence (in 2019) of her team’s 2014 proposal: “In the long run, teaching in preparation for the test can be harmful toward the student if not done effectively.” The use of the language “if not done effectively” to soften their stance on “test prep” curriculum felt complicit, because it did not interrogate whether testing should be done at all.

Youth culture and youth ideas are often constrained in schools, especially for students of color (Sealey-Ruiz and Greene, 2011). Sometimes YPAR projects in schools are restricted by administration; youth researchers who resist may be punished, especially those who already exist on the fringes of school (Lac and Fine, 2018). Youth who resist are all too easily dismissed as rebellious, hormonal, immature or “not yet” able to understand. Furthermore, in schools serving students with the highest needs, there are often more limitations on youths’ inquiries and teachers’ instructional autonomy (Mirra *et al.*, 2016). For this reason, educators who bring YPAR into their schools and classrooms have an obligation to partner with youth and find creative ways (and additional allies) to share the risk for speaking up and speaking back to institutional inequities (DeJaynes, 2019).

Multimodal inquiry invites intergenerational solidarity

We additionally found that multimodal data collection and sharing reaches a wider swath of participants and audiences. Activities such as framing focus groups with poetry shape intergenerational conversations through shared vulnerability and risk-taking. Sharing data through interactive activities such as a Jeopardy game creates space for critique through play, competition and meaningful dialogue. In prioritizing having their audience “feel something,” Israt and her teammates created space where teachers and older and younger

students could name and unpack injustices together. In this way, coalitions are formed, and solidarity and collective outrage effectively challenge (and sometimes change) systems and neoliberal accountability policies (Cammarota and Fine, 2008). Artful, multimodal texts offer rich opportunities for multigenerational leadership (Fox and Fine, 2015).

Harnessing the activist energies of youth within English classrooms and schools requires educators who are willing to follow youth into their interests, to listen deeply to what they care about and to find ways to amplify rather than silence their resistance. Youth-led inquiry and activism in schools speak back to notions of youth as “not yet adult” and instead nurture young people’s curiosity and civic investment. When educators see adolescents as capable and motivated rather than disaffected, literacy classrooms can become spaces of inquiry where youth work toward more just worlds through resistance and allyship.

Note

1. Pseudonyms are used for youth researchers and participants who are not coauthors.

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