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Youth Researchers Wrestling with Gender and Sexuality

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BEYOND BINARY GENDER IDENTITIES

sj MILLER, *Column Editor*

Working in research teams, public school students in New York approached questions about gender identities and sexualities and then, based on their findings, advocated for institutional reforms.

Youth Researchers Wrestling with Gender and Sexuality

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“Is our school a safe place to come out?”

“How do gender role stereotypes affect the way students in our school identify themselves? How do these stereotypes affect how safe, included, and welcome students feel in our school community?”

These research questions were written by queer youth and allies in collaboration with their teachers in a public school in New York City. Their inquiries were part of a semester-long critical participatory action research (PAR) project that employed qualitative research methods to investigate how peers, educators, and administrators created spaces of inclusion and exclusion, as well as how they reified and resisted dominant tropes. I was a teacher of this qualitative research course for its first two years and have continued to stay

involved as a mentor for an additional four years.

This column invites youth and adult allies to take an inquiry stance to investigating gender identities and sexualities in school communities, whether through research projects in English classes, research collaborations with their school’s Gay Straight Alliance (GSA), or as part of multisite inquiries affiliated with local and national advocacy organizations. The small public high school I describe boasts a robust research curriculum that includes required quantitative and qualitative courses. Each year, small groups of students form research teams and ask questions about social issues that affect their school community.

A DEFINITION OF CRITICAL PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH

Classroom-based critical PAR highlights the ability of youth, community members, and other stakeholders to analyze their communities, build coalitions of resistance, and work toward local change (Cammarota and Fine; Fine et al.;

Fox; Public Science Project; Smith et al.). A “formal pedagogy of resistance,” critical PAR with youth is rooted in critical pedagogy (Freire 1) that “teaches young people that conditions of injustice are produced, not natural; are designed to privilege and oppress; but are ultimately challengeable and changeable” (Fine and Cammarota 2). It starts from the belief that everyone has the “right to research” (Appadurai 167) and that inquiry should be democratic.

Students in this class often note that doing critical PAR opens dialogue in a way that is unusual in school; instead of teachers offering “shoulds” and “oughts,” “use this word” or “don’t use that word,” inquiry projects create opportunities for young people to be curious, to listen to one another, build solidarity, and develop the vocabulary, capacity, and confidence to advocate for change. Students gather data on their own experiences and those of their peers and offer advice on how curriculum, pedagogy, and school policies might resist binary thinking about gender to represent and honor their intersectional identities.

INQUIRIES ON GENDER IDENTITIES AND SEXUALITIES

Over the past six years, the students in the class have approached questions on gender identities and sexualities, alongside teachers who have championed their brave and affirming research and advocacy work.

BUILDING CLASSROOM COALITIONS

Research teams collaboratively brainstorm and map social issues they'd be interested in studying for the semester. Students in the school are diverse in terms of race, ethnicity, socioeconomics, and gender identities, so conversations tend to cross intersections of culture, privilege, gender, and sexual orientation. The teachers are leaders of the GSA and build a curriculum that includes gender-expansive voices. Each year, students choose to craft research questions about gender identities and sexualities.

RESEARCHING IN COMMUNITIES

Students are trained in qualitative research methods and taught to create spaces that honor and respect the stories and experiences shared in their community. Peers, teachers, and other stakeholders across the school (e.g., guidance counselors and principals) become resources such as interviewees, connections to outside organizations, and focus group participants. Anonymous surveys are distributed to peers via social media to gather data on questions ranging from safety for nonbinary

students to questions about how often transgender stories are part of the school curriculum. Their observations document heteronormativity and gender bias throughout the school day. Reflections on Day of Silence—a student-led national event where educators and students take a vow of silence to highlight the silencing and erasure of LGBTQ people (see glsen.org/day-silence/)—are collected as data. Data collection becomes part of the advocacy work; in conversations, students begin to educate one another by sharing their stories (see DeJaynes and Curmi).

CONNECTING WITH LOCAL STAKEHOLDERS AND ADVOCACY GROUPS

Youth researchers attend local events such as NYQueer's Conference, a part of the New York Collective of Radical Educators, in which they have the opportunity to meet others invested in transforming schools. Students connect with youth and teachers at the Harvey Milk High School, a small public school in New York City designed for LGBTQAI youth. Furthermore, youth examine laws and Department of Education policies to historicize and situate their experiences in official discourses.

SHARING DATA WITH LOCAL COMMUNITIES

One tenet of critical PAR is that the research is given back to the communities of study. It's a commitment to the ethic, "No research on us without us." Research products are primarily for making change in the community. Youth

have used their findings to critique school policies and practices; they have resisted sexist and gender normative dress codes; called out the heteronormativity of their sexual health class and advocated change; educated peers and teachers on nonbinary language for discussing gender; and advocated for trans-inclusive curriculum.

One example was the flier a youth research team distributed with the following recommendations, based on their research findings:

- We need more LGBTQ education with an emphasis on the T.
- We need to know more about the LGBTQ community than just the definitions of homosexuality and transgender.
- We need to continue to have LGBTQ events with GSA, including Day of Silence.
- We need to be taught proper pronoun use, including *they* and *them*.
- We need trans inclusive sex ed.
- We need non-gender facilities (bathrooms).

To accompany their flier, they presented the findings in classes and at the school's Research Symposium. They shared the "genderbread person" (Killerman), an online educational resource that teaches about using more inclusive language. They screened the short films "A Girl Named Kai" (Zue) and "I'm Just Anneke" (Shurnik) and

led robust conversations on trans and nonbinary gender identities and their intersections with race and privilege. Their research findings mirror those of sj Miller et al., who call for “trans-inclusive civic education (or trans-inclusive education on diversity)” (349). Even in their progressive urban public school, nonbinary genders are rarely included in the curriculum. Youth and their teachers need language to discuss a range of genders and decouple gender and sexuality.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Inquiry is a robust tool for moving beyond binaries toward more inclusive teaching practices and school policies. Critical PAR is an invitation, an engagement between youth and adults to ask questions, gather data, to build coalitions and work toward change. Collective advocacy and activism are central to this

work. Teachers who take up critical PAR in their schools have a responsibility to partner with youth and leverage adult allies and GSAs, so that risk is shared rather than falling on the shoulders of young people who may already be vulnerable.

In future years, my colleagues and I hope to foster more sustained research and advocacy and to develop structures where students can pass the baton from year to year, building robust relationships with internal and external organizations and creating more opportunities to share what they have learned with peers, families, teachers, administrators, and invested others. 

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