Approaching Praxis: YPAR as Critical Pedagogical Process in a College Access Program

Mary Alice Scott, Ph.D.
New Mexico State University
mscott2@nmsu.edu

Kimberly B. Pyne, Ph.D.
Elon University
kpyne@elon.edu

Darris R. Means, Ph.D.
University of Georgia
dmeans@uga.edu

To address the persistent failure of schooling to support underserved students, youth participatory action research (YPAR) has emerged as an alternative and critical paradigm for educational practice. YPAR re-centers authority on marginalized voices and understands research as a tool for social change. Grounded in critical pedagogy, such projects enable students to collaboratively critique oppressive structures and envision more equitable possibilities. In this article, the authors analyze a YPAR project on educational inequities conducted with high school students in a college access program. Through case study analysis of in-depth interviews with student-researchers and participant observation of the research process, the article suggests that the YPAR model moves students towards praxis by helping them develop more authoritative voices, renegotiate identity as part of a social process of belonging, and begin to envision their roles in creating a more just world. We argue that the tensions inherent in critical pedagogical processes like that of YPAR present fruitful challenges for continuing reflection on working both within and against existing educational systems.

Keywords: youth participatory action research, college access, critical pedagogy

> *"Young people from oppressed communities experience social and economic threats on several levels: personal, community, and society. Therefore, knowledge critical for their transition into healthy adulthood must be embedded in a social justice youth development process that helps young people sustain positive racial, ethnic, and gender identities; strong commitments to improving conditions within their communities; and sincere empathy for those beyond their immediate communities who may also suffer from oppression"* (Cammarota & Romero, 2009, pp. 56–57).

In August 2010, an anthropologist, a professor of education, a professor of English education, a higher education administrator, and a counselor took on Cammarota

and Romero's challenge to create spaces to foster critical consciousness with youth. To do so, we embarked on a year-long youth participatory action research (YPAR) project with a group of limited-income students. The students, aged 15–18, were part of a college access program housed at a mid-sized private university in the southeast, which employed all of the authors as teachers, program coordinators, and advisors. Offered outside of regular programming, the YPAR project was a learning opportunity designed to engage students in a critical pedagogical framework exploring educational inequities in their own communities. In addition to guiding the students' work, the authors examined the impact of the YPAR experience on the college skills and critical consciousness of the young people involved. Through the course of the project, we also became aware of the particular challenges raised by situating such a project within the ideologies and practices of a college access program.

The college access program sponsored the project to expose its students to the potential of research to contribute to social change. By designing, conducting, analyzing, and presenting research on a community issue, we hoped that students would deepen key academic skills (critical reading, argumentative writing, research), become more confident students, and see themselves as capable of making contributions to their communities using their academic talents. In doing so, we would directly support their future college success. We also intended the study to reveal some of the often-invisible forces that shape social, cultural, and pedagogical decisions and structures. By creating a collaborative framework of discovery, we aimed to provoke critical thinking and action about local, regional, and national social justice issues.

In this article, we focus on students' reflections on their learning process in designing and implementing research that was experientially relevant and authentic. We look closely at how four of those students, representatives of the larger group, navigated the challenges of developing a more complex social and critical consciousness. Our analysis suggests that the YPAR model moves students towards praxis by helping them develop more authoritative voices, renegotiate identity as part of a social process of belonging, and begin to envision their roles in creating a more just world. We argue that the tensions inherent in critical pedagogical processes like that of YPAR present productive challenges for continuing reflection on working both within and against existing educational systems.

Principles of Youth Participatory Action Research

YPAR projects share a set of fundamental pedagogical values that work to support the potential development of more complex social and political consciousness. An outgrowth of long-established participatory action research, YPAR is grounded in many of the same principles.

YPAR is a *collective and collaborative* endeavor. YPAR projects involve a group of researchers working on a shared problem (Cammarota & Fine, 2008) from the beginning to the end of research (Kirshner, 2010) and engaging in collective decision-making (Tuck, Allen, Bacha, Morales, Quinter, Thompson, & Tuck, 2008). This process supports research *alongside* all stakeholders rather than research *on* a particular group. It is guided by the understanding that "it is often those at the bottom of social hierarchies who know the most both about social oppression and also about the radical possibilities toward redressing domination" (Tuck et al., 2008, pp. 50–51).

YPAR is *multivocal*. By valuing the perspectives of all stakeholders, it recognizes, along with other critical research methods, the strength of counterstories that challenge accepted perspectives on the world and give voice to hidden or silenced

knowledges rather than assuming a single, unified, and dominant truth (Delgado Bernal, 2002).

YPAR takes a *critical* approach to knowledge. It encourages multi-level analysis of and reflection on power relationships in order to shed light on the complexity of social problems (Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Tuck et al., 2008). It focuses on knowledge that challenges the status quo and understands all knowledge to be political within its context (Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Nygreen, 2005; Tuck et al., 2008). Often YPAR projects create spaces for "exiled" voices to "talk back" to dominant paradigms (Tuck et al., 2008, pp. 61–63) and produce transformational experiences in which youth begin to recognize the structural inequities present in their own lives (Fine, 2009; Goto, Pelto, Pelletier & Tiffany 2010; Kirshner, 2010).

YPAR is *emancipatory and visionary* for those who participate, allowing researchers to break from the confines of everyday realities and imagine better futures (Ginwright, 2008). Such projects often draw on the power of collective imagination to do public research. In other words, YPAR researchers imagine a more just world than the one we currently live in and, in so doing, support movement toward that imagined place (Ginwright, 2008; Kirshner, 2010).

YPAR requires *active* rather than passive knowledge production. Because knowledge is the foundation for action and strategizing, YPAR involves understanding that research itself is not the end point (Cammarota & Fine, 2008). Instead, it directly supports participants to achieve personal awareness and transformation and act as change agents in their own contexts and, perhaps, beyond (Cammarota & Romero, 2009). Dissemination of research results and acts of ally-ism in support of participant/researchers are likely outgrowths of the research process.

PAR itself is fundamentally pedagogical, seeking conscientization as well as knowledge production. However, YPAR differs from its progenitor by focusing on youth as researchers and on youth learning about problems relevant to them. YPAR renegotiates classroom power relationships without abdicating the need for a facilitator. It explicitly attends to the foundational skills that are required to enact research, to engage in respectful and open-minded dialogue with others, and to consider the world more critically. It recognizes that critical consciousness is not a state, but a situated process and habit of mind that must be developed and practiced over time. Nor is it a straightforward, easy process; it involves stumbling blocks and backtracking as youth come to terms with new ways of seeing a reality of which they had not previously been fully aware. YPAR supports youth in posing problems about their lives and communities, collaboratively asking difficult questions that may have no apparent answers. In so doing, it aligns with other critical pedagogical approaches in the tradition of Freire (1970) and the many who have built on his foundation.

Critical Pedagogical Frameworks

Critical pedagogy is an approach to education that "signals how questions of audience, voice, power, and evaluation actively work to construct particular relations between teachers and students, institutions and society, and classrooms and communities . . . [It] illuminates the relationship between knowledge, authority and power" (Giroux, 1994, p. 30). It challenges the apparent political and cultural neutrality of human values and institutions, especially educational systems, recognizing that schools are sites where social and economic ideologies often come into conflict with each other and with official values and practices. Schools create, enforce, and normalize stratification in the larger society, both by overtly creating educational haves and have-nots and by covertly investing in a hidden curriculum that privileges

certain cultural ways of knowing over others (Apple, 1990; Delpit, 1995; Gay, 1995; Shor, 1992). Schools help maintain unequal power relations rather than serving as a means for individual and social improvement. McLaren (2007), for example, pointed out that while American schooling promises to be a gateway to opportunity and social mobility, "the economic returns from schooling are far greater for the capitalist class than for the working class" (p. 189).

At the same time, schools are not exclusively and entirely agencies of oppression. They can also serve to empower, transform, and provide access to advantages previously unavailable, especially when coupled with a critical approach to knowledge and practice (Gay, 1995; Giroux, 2001; Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008). Critical pedagogy recognizes this ambiguity, posing questions about how and why success happens for some but not for all and listening to the responses of those voices that have often been most marginalized by schools and society. The hope in such work is to better understand the problem and create ways to move forward more equitably and effectively. A hopeful as well as a critical stance, critical pedagogy envisions ways of teaching and learning that better enable social change. In order to accomplish this,

> Social justice educators can offer students a "language of critique" and a "language of possibility," so that they can conceptualize, analyze, theorize, and critically reflect upon their experiences . . . Here we make a crucial distinction between *reflection* and *critical reflection.* While the former is related to students' awareness of their concrete social and economic circumstances, the latter deals with the investigation of their social location *in* the world as well as their relationship *with* the world. (McLaren, 2007, p. 51)

Resonating with constructivist perspectives on education, critical pedagogues began with student-centered critical dialogue, respect for the multiple ways of knowing brought by all participants, and deliberate attention to real world issues to facilitate critical thinking and agency among students about their own lives (Shor, 1992). McLaren (2007) called this "genuine dialogue," arising from truly dialectical approaches that allow students to hear, analyze, and respond to a spectrum of positions of thought[1] (pp.31–32). Cammarota (2011) articulated the benefits of this approach: "students no longer have to accept the world in which they were born 'as is'. They can make judgments about life circumstances and determine whether they accept or reject the situation" (p. 65). Such problem-posing is at the heart of critical pedagogy.

In his foundational work, Freire argued that the essential first step of recognizing and understanding oppression was not enough for those who seek to create a more just world. We need *both* critical reflection on oppression and justice *and* action – praxis. To this end, we knew our project needed both to help students examine their educational experiences through a more critical and politicized lens, but also to consider how they might develop a public voice. Student voices are often missing from policy discussions and political debates on issues that directly affect young people (Cammarota & Romero, 2009). Utilizing a youth participatory action research model supported the development of that voice.

[1] For McLaren, this "revolutionary critical pedagogy" (p. 31) is best positioned within a Marxist analysis that connects local relations to systems of global production. However, in our limited time with students, we found this level of understanding to be impossible without first approaching a more narrow (and, arguably, foundational) understanding of stratification and inequality. We found it was important that researchers/teachers begin with where students were in their knowledge, allowing them to come to understanding without overcomplication.

We also use intersectionality as a way of recognizing that voice emerges from individuals who are multiply positioned in their social worlds. Intersectionality, which is grounded in work on critical race theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Solórzano & Yosso, 2000b), developed in legal studies as a framework that shifted perspectives away from examining gender, race, and class as "identities" or "variables" to examining them as processes of historically and geographically contextualized social location that disrupt the confines of discrete categories (Anthias, 2008; Crenshaw, 1994). Intersectionality shifts us from a notion of fixed identities to an understanding of specific, non-generalizable processes of belonging (Mullings, 2002; Yuval-Davis, 2006). New notions of identity and belonging that emerge from intersectionality are particularly relevant for our work. Anthias (2008) argues that the concept of fixed identity forces us into a falsely stable understanding of people that omits the centrality of structural processes and relationships. A focus on identity also obscures understanding of belonging. Belonging and identity "live together" but differ in emphasis:

> Identity involves individual and collective narratives of self and other, presentation and labeling, myths of origin and myths of destiny with associated strategies and identifications. Belonging on the other hand is more about experiences of being part of the social fabric and the ways in which social bonds and ties are manifested in practices, experiences and emotions of inclusion. (Anthias, 2008, p. 8)

This perspective on identity and belonging challenges researchers to remain aware that "the world around us is always more complicated and contradictory than we ever could have anticipated" and to reflexively analyze the ways in which our own biases, positionalities, and assumptions influence our work (Davis, 2008, p. 79).

The knowledge that emerges from these critically reflective practices has the potential to foster a "sense of hope and the drive to challenge inequities" (Cammarota & Romero, 2009, p. 57). However, employing a critical pedagogical framework does not guarantee hope, motivation, or social change. Mentors must consciously focus on moments of hope and seek actions likely to lead to successful change (Nygreen 2005). In our case, this consciousness extended to critically reflecting on the tensions created by the very program we worked within, a college access program that in some ways could be viewed as maintaining the status quo by endorsing a more meritocratic orientation to educational practice. By enacting pedagogies that intend to develop capable college students, we encourage students to adopt and value the existing structures of higher education. However, as critical pedagogues who recognize the dual nature of such institutions, we also hope that their emerging consciousness will have longer-term impacts on the structures of higher education itself.

Research Site and Methods

This article qualitatively examines the potential for YPAR to develop college-ready research skills and critical consciousness with youth in a college access program, the Elon Academy. The Elon Academy works with academically-promising high school students with financial need and/or no family history of college. The three-year program supports students during the academic year and provides intensive four-week summer residential experiences at an affiliated liberal arts university. The program also continues to support the students once they enter college. It currently serves approximately 75 high school students and 75 college students (approximately 30% White, 30% Black, and 30% Latina/o).[2]

[2] For a more detailed program overview, please see http://www.elon.edu/e-web/academics/elon_academy/default.xhtml.

The student-researchers developed a set of research questions[3] and data collection methods through a series of workshops presented by anthropologists, sociologists, and higher education researchers based at the university housing Elon Academy. The students co-designed semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and a survey. Their research participants in these activities were other Elon Academy students. They also recorded field notes and took photographs depicting their daily lives as underserved students, literally and metaphorically. The dominant themes of their work, which are explored more fully in a book authored by the students ((Elon Academy Research Team, 2011), included the negative impact of limited course opportunities and low academic expectations, the need for improved college counseling despite over-burdened guidance offices, the complex role of family support, and the particular challenges faced by undocumented students with uncertain futures. The book[4] became a focal point for ongoing social actions which included delivering copies to key stakeholders in the schools (counselors, administrators, and selected teachers), having conversations with the university's Board of Visitors, and publicly presenting their book and accompanying photographs at a book signing and gallery exhibit. Some students involved in the project have also continued their engagement in issues of educational equity in college. Their current activities include peer mentoring in GEAR UP, assisting with facilitating another YPAR project, and mentoring in a first-year college program. One student is pursuing educational policy as her major. Another plans to become a high school counselor.

Our analysis of the project process examines the following questions: How can YPAR contribute to the development of college-ready skills for students in a college access program? How can YPAR contribute to developing social and critical consciousness in high school student participants? What are the challenges to development of critical consciousness? Our data comes from interviews with each high school student participant and from participant observation during research team meetings, workshops, and classes. Students were recruited for the research project during an Elon Academy meeting in which the lead investigator described the project and invited interested students to an initial informational meeting. Twenty-seven students attended the first meeting; 13 completed the project.[5]

This study captured the learning processes of the student-researchers who participated in the entire YPAR project. We conducted three semi-structured interviews

[3] The two major research questions students developed were: (1)How does a student's social location(s) influence college access? And (2) do the challenges and obstacles students face in working toward access to college create opportunities for entering and being successful in college?

[4] The professional researchers suggested the idea of writing a book as the method of disseminating the results of the research. The students quickly embraced this idea, but given it was our suggestion it may not fully fit the model of YPAR in which the youth develop the project themselves from start to finish. In this, as in our initial framing of the project as a whole, we strove for the strategic balance recommended by McLaren (2007) – a "counterhegemonic role" (p. 250) that respects student voice and authority while also not abdicating our role as teachers in directing "the dialogue in ways that both deepen and extend self and social analysis" (p. 251). Given this critical pedagogic mandate as well as our time constraints, we suggested a general framework for research including the final product as a starting point for discussion. The student researchers did not, however, accept our framework without revisions. Significantly, they altered the data collection methods to include surveys because they were not getting the information they hoped to obtain through qualitative data collection alone. They agreed that the book was their preferred method of going public with their results and ideas, with most of them repeatedly citing the publication as a major motivator for quality work and a source of individual pride.

[5] In the first meeting, we presented the concept of YPAR and the potential scope of the project. Following that information session, ten of the students decided that they did not have the time to participate given other academic and personal commitments. Four additional students decided to end their participation later in the project due to family crisis or workload in advanced academic courses. For the research presented in this article, all participants in the YPAR project agreed to also serve as research participants in this meta study.

with each participant at the beginning, middle, and end of the project. These interviews documented change over time in the ways that the student-researchers understood research, evaluated their own skills and knowledge, and articulated their understanding of systemic educational inequalities. Additionally, we observed participants during monthly research team meetings, an intensive summer research institute, and the summer program during which the student-researchers wrote up their results of the year-long research process. In each setting, one of us sat out of facilitation in order to focus on field observations. The resulting notes – detailed records of observations, analysis, and interpretations – included discussions among students during large and small group sessions, seating choice among students (who tended to sit with whom, for example), and body language that communicated beyond the spoken word. These field notes supplemented the data collected through interviews. In qualitative research, participant observation improves both the quality and the interpretation of the data and helps modify research questions or develop new ones that are grounded in the daily lives of research participants. It provides a tacit understanding of culture that shapes interpretation and analysis (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2002). For example, our observations led us to probe more deeply into the ways in which critical consciousness may be both enhanced and hindered due to the framework of the college access program.

Using a grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2000; Glaser & Strauss, 1967), we developed a set of initial codes arising directly from the data, locating relevant, widely-shared themes as well as unique but significant themes. We then chose four students who were representative of the group in several ways. They represented the racial/ethnic and gender diversity of the group,[6] as well as different backgrounds, life experiences, family situations, and positions of awareness about educational inequity and self. They expressed the range of development that we identified across all students' experiences in the project. Focused analysis of these four students' experiences resulted in detailed case studies. We re-analyzed the case studies to ensure that the overarching themes and concepts that had emerged from our initial cross-case analysis were well represented. Moving between the micro lens of an individual's experience to the more macro perspective of the full data set allowed researchers to check and cross-check the analysis as we progressed and reminded us to actively seek disconfirming or problematic aspects to refine our understanding. We do not seek to generalize the experiences of these students beyond this particular research project, but instead to provide one example of how YPAR methodologies may function in students' lives and to suggest challenges for future research.

Participants

Pink volunteered to participate in part because she wanted a place to belong. She was a Latina sophomore at a high school that was once threatened with closure because of low performance. Nearly 80% of the majority Black and Latino/a student body received free or reduced lunch, an indicator of socioeconomic status (North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services, 2011–2012). Despite a high Latina/o enrollment at the school, Pink often felt exiled from social groups because of her strong opinions. This research project, she imagined, might be a place where her emerging leadership skills and critical thinking would be valued.

[6] The student-researchers included 10 females and three males. Of the females, three were Latina, four were African American, two were Euro-American, and one was Pacific Islander. Of the males, two were Latino and one was Euro-American.

Sarah brought the high energy characteristic of her personality to the project. She wanted to be involved in as many academic and extracurricular opportunities as possible. An African American sophomore attending one of the largest schools in the county, she was one of approximately half of the school's students eligible for free or reduced lunch (North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services, 2011–2012). She was interested in using the project to build her resume for college applications, but she was also genuinely curious about the questions that the research project might explore.

Jack was one of only three male students who completed the research project. A Latino sophomore who attended a high-minority high school, Jack was formerly undocumented. He began the project as one of the quietest students in the group, and his motivation to participate came largely through the encouragement of his father. Jack had to balance major responsibilities at home, including helping to mentor and care for his younger brothers, with his commitment to the project.

Julie was a sophomore at the high school with the county's highest graduation rate, and she was one of the few Euro-American participants. She struggled to maintain a focus on college in a family where nearly all of the females near her age had married, dropped out of high school, and had no plans for further formal education. Joining the project was, for her, an act of determination, a character trait that would see her through the challenging academic work.

Findings

Through participation in the YPAR project, students rethought their experiences and worldviews, leading them towards praxis in several interlocking ways. Most students began by rethinking research. As they recognized their ownership in the research process, they became the experts. Working together on their own research, they developed meaningful relationships with each other that allowed them to rethink belonging and challenge simplistic notions of diversity. Both of these processes led most students to rethink justice, beginning to imagine themselves as part of social change work. The students' experiences demonstrate both the potential for and the challenges in critical pedagogical practice.

Rethinking Research

Students recognized the value of school-based learning, but described research as something one "has to" do in school to earn a grade, rather than as something that has a "real" effect. In initial interviews, they understood "research" to be a process of information synthesis and summary, not an act of questioning or discovery. "Research" involved achieving predetermined results in a science lab or looking up existing information for papers in social science or humanities classes. Their audiences were typically classmates or teachers for whom their "findings" were rarely new. In the students' minds, adults, particularly men in white lab coats, conducted "real research" in the "hard" sciences.

Students expected the research team to enhance their most foundational college-going skills: writing, reading, time management, and research in general. They spoke about matching their strengths to various aspects of the research project and using the project to shore up areas of weakness with supported practice. For example, students who recently completed a statistics course imagined they would bring those analytical skills to the survey data. Jack expected to utilize his responsibility and neatness, to "have to be responsible for talking to people and keeping track of all the information that I get from interviews . . . I'll keep track of every

paper and maybe help other people keep track of their papers." He hoped this would prepare him for his upcoming "graduation project," an independent project required of all seniors at his high school, as well as with college assignments:

> I think it will greatly help me. Like, in the senior project, I guess I might do something like this . . . I'll know how to conduct and work more faster and quicker. Also, I think in college I might have to do a lot of these types of research. So, yeah, in college I think it's gonna help me a lot, too.

Many students realized that the end product of the project meant that they would be writing substantial amounts. "I'm going to have to be good at writing, or else get better at writing the book," Julie said, looking ahead to a time when she hoped to "be good" at writing, a skill she readily admitted was one of her personal struggles. Unlike Julie, Pink considered herself a "pretty good" writer from the beginning and hoped someday to write her own book. She saw the research project as a way to learn how to approach such an enormous task. She admitted in her initial interview that her work habits in school were less than perfect, and she was determined that the project would help her "do better for myself." Seeing a challenging project through to the end, she thought, would build her capacity to achieve her goals. "I wanna do something. I want to go to college . . . I want to have the strength that I can pursue whatever I want," she explained. She felt the project would provide opportunities for self-reflection and assessment, helping her to "learn more about myself and about all the things that I can do."

Students also understood that their work might have the additional benefit of "looking good" on their future college applications and were excited to do something often unavailable to other high school students. Project leads explained that participation in the research, as with most Elon Academy programming, would likely enhance their college resume. The uniqueness of the project might help them stand out in the college admissions process:

> [The Academy Director] said that it would look really good on my college application; that was a really big thing. 'Cause it's something that other high school students don't really do. . . [It's] something amazing to put on my college application. 'Cause I don't know anybody in high school who's ever done research like this, and so that'll blow a lot of people out of the water, which is good.

Julie and other student-researchers, as students with financial need, had a particular awareness of needing competitive applications that would impress college admissions officers and increase their potential to garner scholarships.

While motivating at the start, these narrow and essentially self-serving understandings of the role of research paralleled their view of schoolwork as a means to an end—a grade, recognition, college admission – but not rewarding in itself. Early in the project, however, their concepts of research began to shift. Students were intrigued to learn that social science research examined lived human experiences and that such research might address problems relevant to their own lives, such as inequities in the college-going pipeline. Although this was only a vague understanding in the beginning, students expected they would learn something new and valuable. Their roles had the potential to be, as Pink said, "part of something bigger. Not just like school." They began discussing research as something that one "wants to" do because of its potential to inspire change in the world. This was particularly evident in their visions of a co-authored book that could be presented to real audiences who might have the power to improve the educational environment in their county or beyond. Recognizing that their voices could carry

real-world authority, students honed their research abilities, not for the sake of the grade or the personal perk, but rather to ensure effective arguments and powerful communication. This sense of ownership and authority pushed students beyond skills and toward metacognition, encouraging critical thinking, decision-making, self-reflection in ways their previous classroom-based research experiences had not. Julie explained:

> [In high school], I wasn't really thinking about why I do research. I was thinking…with school I have to do it. But this time I was thinking about willingly doing it, and one of the things I'd need to know is why we're collecting the data and what people would need.

For Julie, high school research lacked ownership; it was both compulsory and could be done by rote. The multivocality of the YPAR project required Julie to become an authoritative researcher, asking bigger questions such as the purpose of the project and the need for the selected data, as well as considering her role in relation to her research partners and the project as a whole.

The plan to share their book across the larger local community became a major touchstone for most student-researchers. As the primary motivating factor during the summer weeks of drafting and revising, it served as a vehicle for their findings and an expression of their ideas, thoughts, struggles, and triumphs on the road to college. The mere fact of authoring a "real" book for a "real" world audience, made the long hours of work worthwhile, an act of personal pride and accomplishment. When asked why the chance to be an author was exciting, Jack explained, "I would see [the book] in the future, and then I would say, 'I did this.' And it wouldn't be some other person, like any other book. It would be special for me."

Long before the writing began, many student-researchers professed a strong commitment to the book itself, something outside of their expectations for themselves prior to the project. Julie looked forward to "seeing the end product. I mean, we're gonna have book signings or famous people talk about our issue, and I just think it's really exciting to know that it's not just us that's addressing this, but other people are, too." The book was to be unveiled to the university campus and the local community at an event that included a presentation by a nationally-recognized YPAR scholar and a gallery exhibition of the students' photographs, officially situating their work as part of an ongoing tradition of YPAR scholarship and as a local response to questions of equity and college access. The book initially represented an imagined vision of what students might accomplish and celebrate. As it became more of a reality, it also connected the student-researchers with professionals in the field (both in the literature and in person) who shared their concerns, worked to answer similar questions, and integrated their work into larger conversations about educational equity.

Learning new skills - writing, making deadlines, interviewing - and becoming authors and experts tested students' capacity to confront the tensions inherent in academic and personal development. By the end, all of them felt they had made real academic strides. For Julie, this showed especially in the process of research, of effectively revising her work, and even in the "grammatical stuff," although she felt she was still learning. The project gave Julie an authentic reason to work harder than was typical for her in school-based learning, and to challenge herself in ways she had not imagined at the outset:

> Some of it I might have done. Like, I would have…looked up a few research things. But I wouldn't have known where to go. I would have looked it up on

> Google or…in the library…I wouldn't have the concrete information that I could have now. And I wouldn't have gotten my paper checked as many times 'cause I would have read it, and I would have been, like, "Oh, this sounds good." And I might have checked it myself one or two times, but I wouldn't have had someone else check it. I'm not a really good writer, so that's not really a good thing. I've become a better writer since this, though. It's improved.

Student-researchers not only exercised their college-readiness skills, but they also became increasingly metacognitive about academic and personal habits, especially those that challenged them. Sarah explained:

> [The research project was] a good experience, 'cause–since I'm probably going to be in more situations like this. I know more of my bad habits, so I know in advance what I should fix and what I should watch out for . . . It made me more of a deep thinker. Like, I like to question things, but usually when I first hear something I just take it as it is and don't think twice about it. But, from being here, it's made me question even more.

Like Sarah, many of the students agreed that they became "more of a deep thinker," capable of critical and self-reflective practices. But as students delved into uncomfortable new ideas and struggled to inhabit new identities, they also developed new fears. Sarah articulated these fears clearly in her final interview, revealing that her concerns over contributing fully to the project actually increased over time. She reported feeling more stressed about contributing her writing and pictures as the project was coming to a close than in the beginning. For Sarah, this increase was related to a heightened recognition that others would be viewing her work in book form, and she didn't want to "sound dumb."

Overall, however, students saw these higher stakes as motivation to "give it my all," as Pink explained. "With the research, it's like there's a deadline for everything, you know, 'cause we need to get it done, and we need to get it done well." Even when the work was "really hard" and "really tedious" (such as transcribing interviews or plowing through articles about college access for resonant ideas and useful supporting data), quality of work and persistence were especially valuable. Perhaps even more importantly, mistakes were acknowledged as a part of the process, something to be avoided for validity reasons (such as "projecting" onto interviewees or misinterpreting what was said), but something that would also be overcome as a natural part of the learning process. Even Sarah, whose nervousness came through so clearly in her interviews, learned to put mistakes in perspective. "I can still mess up," she said, when asked about her ongoing ability to contribute to the project near the end. "But I'm still passionate about it. So I can—I want to do it."

Critical pedagogy advocates listening to the voices of marginalized peoples, creating spaces where these can be heard and can have impact. While not necessarily critical in McLaren's (2007) "revolutionary" sense, this is nevertheless a foundational step, one which the authority-shift and authenticity of YPAR approaches can make more real. Like Jack, Julie, Sarah, and Pink, many of the students in the YPAR project developed a sense of confidence and authority in their own voices that enhanced their engagement with each other as they explored the difficult, critical issues of educational inequities through their own and others' experiences.

Rethinking Diversity

One of the challenges for researchers engaged in social justice-oriented work is to be able to reflexively analyze the ways in which our own positions in the world influence our analyses. For the student-researchers, their positions in the world did

not just influence the work, it *was* the work. They came to understand the centrality of belonging as they developed closer relationships with one another and spent more time together in the challenging pursuit of research. These were not merely friendships, however. In the context of a research project that required them to re-examine themselves and the contexts of their lives, they began to recognize others' experiences as more real, valuable, and connected with their own. They practiced listening to each other's perspectives without immediate judgment, and then analyzed their own lives more critically in the mirror of these alternative experiences.

In their first interviews, most students articulated apolitical understandings of diversity as simple difference. Generally "good," diversity helped people learn about each other and defined human individuality. Jack argued that diversity helped people find cultural commonalities: "Most cultures aren't the same, so everyone could learn about each other and speak about how their different cultures are similar, I guess." Pink suggested that diversity was "good" because it exposed people to different foods: "Diversity is a great thing. It really is, because when you wanna go out to eat, you got Mexican, you got Italian, you got different stuff, you know?" Sarah saw diversity as important because "if everybody was the same, it'd get really boring."

Student-researchers also articulated diversity as rooted in individual differences more than larger cultural trends. Pink argued that who she was as an individual person was related to her background. "What I've lived and where I come from is who I am, and the values that I've gotten makes me me," she said. Similarly, Sarah argued,

> Your past is the most important thing…that's what makes you most diverse. 'Cause a whole bunch of people can be Black and a whole bunch of people can be White - that's not very different…your past is what really makes up who you are.

These students argued that their past was about more than their race, refusing to attribute their backgrounds to essentializing categories. Students also recognized that cultural stereotypes often obscured genuine understandings of identity. Jack said, "I don't wanna be…stereotypical. I wanna learn how - just because you're a certain race, you grew up like this, or you have this, I guess, background…I wanna learn about how other people - about their individuality."

This individualized definition made it difficult for students to see structural racism and other marginalizing forces. They often argued that these either did not exist or that they were individual rather than societal or institutional issues. For example, Julie described the racial dynamics at her school as a process of individual self-selection, even as she recognized the result to be "segregated:"

> We have mostly White people, so a lot of White people hang out with White people, or Black people hang out with Black people. It's kind of, like, segregated. And we were laughing about this the other day in dance class because we have our concert, and we noticed that all the angels and dreamers are white, and the devils are black, and [the dance teacher] didn't mean to do that!

Julie laughed as she explained away the racial categorization in this situation. "It's just who was best for the part, and [the dance teacher] is Black, too, so she wasn't purposefully doing it." For Julie, the individuals involved in the dance class had been evaluated only on their performance abilities, and the segregated outcome that configured students with darker skins as "devils" was purely accidental and meaningless. Further, the dance teacher's minority identity, in Julie's mind, eliminated the possibility of individual or institutional discrimination.

Frequently, their responses to questions about diversity and racism revealed uncertainty about their own ideas. Sarah was hesitant to talk about the existence of racism. Asked about the most important ways that people are diverse, she responded, "I guess race is a really important one for people." But, she argued, "I don't think I'd pay that much attention to race or to how much money you had if people didn't bring it up so often. Like, I don't think it would be that big of a problem for me or make a very big difference in my life." Sarah wondered "how much racism is really . . . how much there is today. People in my family, they bring it up all the time like it's something we really need to worry about. But I don't - I just never see it. I've just never been around it." Even if racism still existed in some way, she felt that her family, a different generation, inflated its importance. "I think people just want it to be there 'cause they want an excuse for how - how things turned out for them."

These sometimes dismissive discussions about diversity nevertheless often led to reflections on stereotyping and were the starting point for most students. By engaging critically with each other, with scholarly literature, and with their own lived experiences, they connected difference more definitively to stereotypes and inequality. But they still struggled to place themselves and their own futures into the new perspectives brought to light by their work together. Nevertheless, for some students, such thinking was an avenue to, at the very least, entertain the possibility of structural-level issues that create inequities. In Pink's words, the research reflections "called my attention in many ways that it really applied to me." Students realized that they, too, had engaged in stereotyping, something they agreed was a negative. Jack reflected, "When I used to walk down the street, I used to see different types of people and kinda like stereotype. But now, it's different and not every race or every ethnic group is the same." He understood that stereotypes categorized people in ways that mis-recognized identity, background, and individual characteristics. At that point he saw diversity "everywhere" including in places where he used to see sameness. "So it's, like, different parts - from, like, Africa . . . and Hispanics from here are really different from Mexicans in Mexico." While he grouped people in broad categories, he was beginning to understand the problems with such categorization. Through his data analysis for the project, he saw that blanket stereotypes obscure the real challenges in the lives of marginalized students. Jack explained, "I think the most rewarding [part of the research] was getting to know . . . what other people say. Like, when I read . . . the transcriptions . . . It really shocked me . . . how they have gone through . . . all their problems in their life."

Julie also explored the consequences of stereotyping as she developed a clearer sense of the negative impact of racism on members of her own family. In her final interview, Julie discussed her biracial niece:

> I always worry about my niece because she's half White and half Black. . . . right now it's not really affecting her much, but I know some people, they don't really like that. At one point in time, [my niece] asked her mom how come she was a different color than her? Which one was she? Was she White or was she Black? . . . 'cause someone [asked], "Why are you Black if your mommy's White, and what color is your daddy?" And she was like, "My daddy's Black" and then her friend was like, "Well, what color are you?" . . . Like, I really love my niece and now I have two that are mixed and I just feel like if anyone ever messed with them because of how they look on the outside, then I would get really mad.

Julie struggled to connect racial microaggressions (Solórzano & Yosso, 2000a) with structural racism, but she did understand that stereotypes based on race could lead to unfair treatment.

Coming to understand themselves as members of marginalized groups was perhaps most difficult for students. Julie was beginning to grasp how one's identity may affect one's life experiences, but she never connected her social location as a limited-income, White female student to social inequities that existed in her own life. Instead, she saw herself as different from the students she was researching.[7] Pink, however, developed a more profound understanding of the challenges she might face as a limited-income Latina:

> I mean, I knew that to get to college I would have a lot of obstacles, and I would have to face them. But then, actually getting to see what I have to do and what I have to face in a way makes it a bit more discouraging, I would say . . . I have to work practically double, like, more than other students do, considering that my family doesn't have the amount of money to pay for college and stuff.

Pink believed that individual effort would allow her to overcome obstacles to higher education, but she was also becoming aware that her position in the world meant that her effort would have to be greater than that of other students with more resources. This realization felt discouraging, and she quickly ended the conversation with her interviewer saying, "I just don't want to get into that topic, so go on. It's just going to be really hard to go to college."

Even though she backed away from further discussion, she still expressed hope and resiliency as an outgrowth of the research. "I'm more confident about going to college a little bit now . . . because after interviewing people and going through their interviews and just see[ing] all the stuff that they had to go through, and they still make it to college . . . It's kinda like an inspiration." She continued to believe that she would get to college because she had heard stories from current college students from similar backgrounds. Belonging to a research team allowed her to recognize herself in those stories, too, buoying her up in her moments of struggle.

Students' changing perspectives were supported by the "safe place" enabled by the bonds forged during the project and their shared identity as Elon Academy students. When asked about her experience on the research team at the end of the project, Julie described everyone as being "really close to each other now" after all the work they had done together. Sarah felt the group was willing to listen to her perspectives and accept them as valid alternative positions even when they disagreed. She commented about her fellow student-researchers: "They don't mind if you have something to say." Openness to multiple viewpoints was necessary for Sarah and other students to feel comfortable questioning and expanding their own ideas. Turning a critical eye on sometimes deeply-held beliefs about the world is never an easy task. For these high school students, it was particularly essential that the research team strive to be inclusive and non-judgmental.

In developing research-based relationships, each student-researcher began renegotiating their understandings of their own identity as part of a social process of belonging rather than a static characteristic. They struggled to challenge the stereotypes they realized that they held, to recognize themselves as part of marginalized groups, or to see more inequalities in their own stories than they previously believed. These tensions, inherent in a critical pedagogical approach, could not be resolved in the course of a one-year project. Developing these new habits of

[7] This lack of recognition may be due to the cycle of socialization in the United States; individuals who are White are often not socialized through their families or social institutions to discuss their racial/ethnic identity or to recognize privilege or lack of privilege based on race (Harro, 2010).

mind left several students with a possibly more accurate yet decidedly less optimistic vision of their futures. On the other hand, the collaborative research process helped students to feel more equipped to face any of their possible futures because they belonged to a community that understood the struggle.

Rethinking Justice

Just as students began to see the potential for research to support social change and to gain a more nuanced understanding of diversity and structural inequities, they also expected the long-term impact of this to be exclusively local and immediate; they imagined their work would serve as a model for friends and family that addressed the gap in access to information about pathways to college. Sarah explained, "It'll help me, I don't know, just with my friends . . . I feel like it'll help me help them do better in college and things like that. If I learn anything that I think can help my friends, I'll pass it down to them."

Pink imagined "help" for other students at her high school who didn't believe they could attend college. She wanted to positively influence her friends, cheer them on, and remind them of the possibilities rather than focusing only on the obstacles. She believed that providing information and encouragement would change their perspectives and motivate them to succeed. "I'm just pretty excited that maybe being in this research we can do something, I guess, to help 'em . . . Just keep 'em motivated to know that there is no obstacle big enough that can stop you getting to college." Like other students, she hoped to "set an example for them . . . get [information] out there so people are more informed."

As the research continued, some students began to include students outside their immediate circles of friends, recognizing that many students faced similar situations – even if they did not all share the same identities. This expanding view reflected a nascent understanding of the instability of identity generally and the potential for personal identities to be at least partially shared across groups. For some student-researchers this recognition was vague. Sarah, for example, said that the purpose of the research was "to help the world." Others were more specific. Julie felt that students like her needed advance warning about the road ahead, including many of the things she learned during the research. Her vision, however, went beyond her own social group to encompass "a lot of kids" who are negatively affected by barriers to college access. Julie explained what she was learning during the research process:

> I learned that a lot of kids, they don't try to go to college because they don't think they [will be able to] pay for it. And they don't know about scholarships and financial aid until it's too late for them to apply. And they just settle on community college, which most people don't come back for the second year, or they fail out. And I learned that it's harder to go back to school after you took time off, especially if you've started a family because you have to pay the bills.

Accurate and timely advising about how to prepare and pay for college might help more students like Julie avoid being trapped by the system that makes "settl[ing]" seem like the best available option. In making this statement, Julie and other student-researchers began to shift from the small world of their friends to the larger, intersectional world of marginalized students.

Pink often referenced the plight of undocumented students, including her own cousin, as one site of much-needed change: "If you don't go to college, most people . . . criticize you without even understanding . . . your situation. Like my cousin, she can't go to college right now because of the papers issue." Her cousin had not pursued college,

allowing her grades to slip in high school because "she thought, 'I don't have papers. I'm not gonna be able to get nowhere.'" And no one told her otherwise. From the very beginning of the project, Pink saw one of its primary goals as helping students like her cousin understand that going to college was difficult, but achievable. "I think that by this research," she explained, "you can get to people and tell 'em, you're not the only person going through this. . . . It's just a great way to help others understand that there is, that college is possible and it's accessible."

As they collected data, students began to focus on even broader audiences, those far outside the experiences of marginalized students. Jack hoped the research could act as testimony and verification that obstacles like those he faced really existed: "People don't really know and, I guess I wanna show people how all the, like, obstacles of how people get there, to college," he said. Living at the intersection of marginalized identities, Jack and many of the other students found they had a story to share beyond the confines of their peer groups and local communities, one that emerged even more strongly throughout the course of the research as they heard the experiences of others and as they reflected on or questioned their own. Julie imagined inspiring additional research, a snowball effect of impact. "The idea that it's going to . . . maybe help other researchers. Like . . . maybe they could go more in-depth with [the research], or maybe they could try to expand it, and it could help them." Julie saw the potential for research to build on research, increasing the potential for eventual gains for marginalized students.

Some students moved from efforts to communicate with and inspire others to recognition of their own agency and responsibility in creating change. For Pink, doing research not only illuminated the unfairness she and others faced, it also became a way of contributing to society:

> I wanna be part of not just something just by yourself, [but] be a part of a group . . . Be part of the society I live in . . . I'm not just somebody that just is there. And I wanna be able to say, you know, I've helped. I've done something to help the people around me . . . Not just to help themselves but to help the people around them.

Pink's desire to be a part of the society she lives in could be understood as a desire to belong in an individual sense, but following Anthias's (2008) work on identity and belonging, we argue that it is something more. Belonging, as Anthias (2008) argues, is about exactly what Pink articulates – "being part of the social fabric" (p. 8). But it is also about having a stake in society, being someone who can contribute to positive social change for the "people around me."

In the process of this developing social sense of self, Pink also realized the responsibility for change existed beyond the individual level. "This [the book] could get out there, you know, and schools could actually start realizing that there's a little problem and that they need to find a solution to it," she explained. The opportunity to speak about the team's findings with one of the governing boards at Elon Academy's university affiliate was, for Pink, an act of advocacy for marginalized students that she felt confident would result in direct and immediate change. This board, in her mind, could "do something" about college access issues, and as a researcher, she was positioned to shape their ideas about how to act.

By the end of the project, some student-researchers articulated clear visions of social consciousness and advocacy. Others focused on more tangible communities close to home. Many stumbled along the way. Sarah, in particular, taught us how difficult this process could be. Throughout the research, she articulated a belief that one's

own personal history and personality characteristics were the most important factors in college access. In her last interview she said, "I honestly believe that your past is . . . what makes you who you are . . . and I think that's why a lot of us [students in the college access program] have such strong perseverance because . . . we know what it's like not to have it so good, and so we work harder to make our lives better." Sarah remained partially convinced that the responsibility for life situations rested exclusively on individual effort and motivation rather than being shaped by historically constructed structural inequality. Yet she also recognized that there were many situations she had not considered before: "I didn't consider all the things that people have to go through other than just being poor. I never really thought of . . . people who do not have documents . . . That could've been me. Like, they can't take AP classes and things of that nature."[8]

Sarah and others still struggled with differentiating between the effects of individual effort and those of structural oppression at the end of the project. This necessary struggle to integrate new ways of being in the world emerged from students' shifting understanding of research as a mundane task to research as a foundation for change as well as their developing sense of belonging beyond narrow conceptualizations of identity. While these shifts lay the groundwork for developing social consciousness as understood through critical pedagogical and intersectional frameworks, they cannot guarantee radical change, particularly in such a short amount of time.

Discussion

Pink, Jack, Sarah, and Julie experienced, to varying degrees, movement toward praxis alongside the other student-researchers involved in this YPAR project. As a project informed by critical pedagogy, student-researchers examined "the various codes – that is, the beliefs, the values, and the assumptions – that they use to make sense out of their world . . . [and] sort through the dialectical contradictions of their own experiences" (McLaren, 2007, p. 250). Broadly speaking, they moved from a largely individual focus on "beating the odds" to a more collective focus on the authority of their combined voices and the validity of their varied life experiences to speak about and challenge social inequities. By investigating questions that arose from their lives and connecting their realities to the wider conversation about college access and equity, student-researchers discovered that the act of research, once a disconnected and school-dictated process, could become a personally meaningful and socially transformative tool. The collaboration and reflective analysis at the heart of YPAR created a space in which students could articulate connections between their personal realities and those of the world beyond their immediate experience in more subtle and critical ways. The potential for publication meant, for some, that they could extend this compassion to other students; for others, it became a means of being heard by those with the social power to effect changes. Ultimately, the team imagined a world where the statistics on college access and success would no longer favor those with societal privilege. This new vision was the goal of the project, but it also brings into relief the challenges of this kind of work with young people.

Macedo (2002) has warned against romanticizing pedagogies that use lived experiences to provide access to voice for marginalized peoples. Sharing personal stories, however powerful, is not enough to truly chip away at larger sociohistorical inequities.

[8] Sarah misunderstood the requirements for taking AP classes, the kind of error often seen when developing new knowledge (Shaughnessy, 1977). However, her point about discovering unexpected and unfair barriers stands.

But when such stories become problem-posing dialogue, they have the potential to, as Giroux (2001) argued:

> highlight the centrality of human agency and struggle while simultaneously revealing the gap between society as it presently exists and society as it might be . . . This is no small matter, since once the affirmative nature of such a pedagogy is established, it becomes possible for students who have been traditionally voiceless in schools to learn the skills, knowledge, and modes of inquiry that will allow them to critically examine the role society has played in their own self-formation. (p. 36–38)

The movement toward conscientization and praxis was not smooth, linear, predictable, or inevitable. It passed through profoundly entrenched and often hegemonic societal norms, beliefs about the end of racism, and even the definition of valid and objective research. It became clear to us, as researchers committed to developing projects that have a social justice orientation, that intention does not automatically lead to positive impact or overwhelming transformation for everyone involved. Sarah struggled throughout to reconcile her growing recognition of the presence of racism with her desire for it to be absent in her own life. Jack recognized the hard truth that as a limited-income immigrant, he had perhaps the statistically lowest chance of attending college. Self-reflection and recognition of others' experiences revealed unexpected and discomfiting obstacles. These more nuanced and critical understandings of the world threatened to undermine their conviction that they could attain their own college goals while at the same time clarifying the way forward and refocusing their determination.

This tension illuminated a particularly difficult problem with conducting YPAR in a college access program: How do we prepare students to be successful in an arena that systematically denies and neglects students of color and/or limited-income without encouraging them to assimilate into the very structures that disenfranchise them? That very contradiction is central to critical pedagogy, and it continues to inform our ongoing reflection about this work. While the students in this project have been marginalized within educational structures given their racial/ethnic background, socioeconomic status, and lack of family history of college, they were also part of a college access program. They had showed academic promise as determined by these same educational structures, maintained high grades, demonstrated good classroom decorum, and desired to go to college. Therefore, these students were not the most marginalized or the most voiceless. They were students who have tapped into, and therefore to some extent bought into, existing meritocratic structures. They believed that with enough individual effort they could achieve any of their dreams. The project itself was a tool for working towards those individual dreams of college educations, high paying jobs, and fulfilling lives.

The existence of both the access program and the YPAR study naturally configured higher education as a universal good and, in turning attention to questions of opportunity and access, further solidified that assumption. By enacting pedagogies that help prepare capable college students, we simultaneously encouraged students to adopt and value the existing structures of higher education. Recognizing this, we nevertheless believe that the inherent critical pedagogical approach of YPAR opens the possibility of transformation, and the problem-posing nature of the work enables critique. Student-researchers capable of reflection on the problems within their public schooling lives and across the stories of their peers may also prove capable of seeing these same underlying currents in the college world and beyond. Educational practices that are more democratic, critical, and responsive to the realities of inequitable

access to opportunity not only focus attention on the barriers facing underserved students but also play a role in negotiating possible solutions.

Critical pedagogy re-centers conversations about school reform on how educational institutions both "reflect and perpetuate the oppressive practices of society" and yet can simultaneously serve as "agents of emancipation" (Gay, 1995, pp. 162–165). We suggest that bringing together the sometimes-contradictory frameworks of YPAR and college access programming offer opportunities to engage in critical conversation about how we work to address educational inequities. After all, as underserved and often marginalized students, they will themselves soon be living the contradictions of college access and success—embracing the tools that have historically marginalized those who came before them and seeking to turn these structures to better use.

In many ways, this project is only partially complete. Our continued interactions with Sarah, Jack, Julie, Pink and other members of the team give us hope that this growing consciousness will ultimately not only facilitate their personal dreams of a college education, but also remind them that the world as we know it is constructed and changeable; their collective imaginations can reconstruct different, more equitable realities.

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