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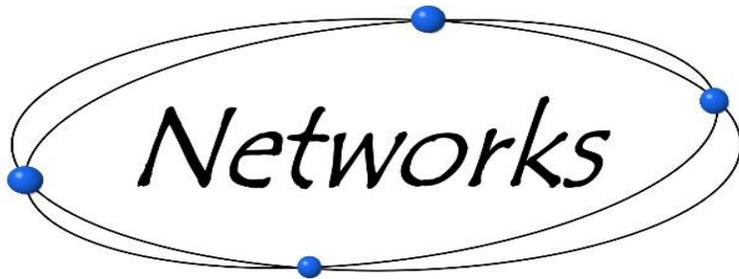


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Empowerment for whom? Empowerment for what? Lessons from a Participatory Action Research Project

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Abstract

This article sets forth the process through which I, an educator of over 20 years, my research mentor, and my 52 Latino/a students answered questions that were important to us through participatory action research. I start the process by asking if and how I am empowering my students, and they start their own parallel process by asking about their relationships with their White teachers. By engaging in various data collection approaches, including Boal's (1985) Theatre of the Oppressed and Photovoice, we are all able to answer these questions. I learn that as a teacher I do not empower students; they empower themselves. As we conduct the research together I watch them and see the processes of empowerment the students go through for myself. I learn how as an educator I can create empowering situations and opportunities my students can take advantage of in the future. In parallel experiences, the students learn that they have always had a voice, but this project helps them discover – and use – the voices they have always had. Overall, our group finds that empowerment takes place in spaces and moments of mutual, active inquiry, where individual voices can be raised to re-imagine what can and should be taking place within our schools.

Keywords: participatory action research, empowerment, Latino education.

I (Christine) have been a classroom teacher of Spanish for 20 years. For the past few years I have taught at a rural high school that has a significant Latino population. As such, I have many Latino students in my classes. As most people reading this journal I work hard for all of my students – for their learning, their growth, their development, their empowerment – but I work particularly hard to help those who, for one reason or another, are more challenged both in school and society. Sometimes I wonder, though, am I really empowering these students? What are they really learning? What are they gaining? How can I know that I am helping them grow? Sometimes I feel like I have so many important questions but no way of reliably answering them.

A few years ago I was at a family reunion and was talking with one of my relatives who at the time was finishing her doctoral degree in inquiry methodology. She was excited

about a participatory action research (PAR) project she was doing. When I asked her what it was about, she explained that this approach seeks to answer the authentic questions of real people about their everyday lived experiences (Torre, Fine, Stoudt, & Fox, 2012). She said that PAR allows these “real” people with “real” questions to conduct their own research, ask their own questions, and find their own answers, aided by formally trained researchers within a democratic and participatory research collective (Fals-Borda & Rahman, 1991; Guishard, 2009; Torre & Fine et al, 2008). PAR honors the expertise and knowledge of individuals who are not typically allowed into the research process, and by doing so allows typically silenced voices – such as those of students and teachers – to be heard (Fine & Weis, 2003). This was exactly what I was looking for. I wanted to ask the questions I felt were important but I needed help figuring out how to answer them. This paper is a record of the process my relative and then research mentor (Meagan, the co-author of this article) and I went through to answer my questions – questions I think many teachers ask but might not be able to answer.

Determining My Own Research Question

Over the next three months my research mentor and I talked often about what we could do. The most important of our many discussions was when she asked me, “Christine, what is that one authentic question you want answered through this research?” Without hesitation I responded: “I want to know if I’m actually empowering these students. We say that’s what we’re doing, but are we really? Am I really doing anything to help these kids?” I could hear her smiling over the phone: “Great! Let’s build our project around that.”

Research Site

Headquartered in Utah but working throughout the western United States, a non-profit organization called Spanish Speakers Serving (SSS) has organized over the past decade to empower Latino youth by providing cultural, service and leadership opportunities in a way that will allow these students to build their resumes and hopefully attend and then graduate from university. The class is an application-based class. Students must be bilingual (Spanish and English), must maintain a certain grade point average, and must be actively involved in at least one extracurricular activity. Current students interview prospective students and then all applications are reviewed by the SSS teacher, currently myself, and finally approved by school administrators.

SSS has recently expanded to working in two areas in Idaho that are relatively more densely populated with Latino youth than other areas in Idaho. One of these areas is my town, Atkinville¹. Approximately 11,000 people live in the town, with Latinos making up about one-third of those. There is one high school in Atkinville, Atkinville High School (AHS). AHS has approximately one thousand students in attendance every year, grades 9 through 12. Latinos make up about half of the student population at AHS. There are two teachers and one administrator at the school who identify as Latino/a.

Empowerment through Inquiry: Identifying the Students’ Questions

I was getting more and more excited as I continued to learn about PAR because, as a Spanish teacher and one close to the Latino community, I knew that all too often

¹ This is a pseudonym.

“researchers” conducted research “on” or “to” the Latino community with very little Latino input. I was thrilled when I learned that PAR researchers argue that “domination of masses by elites is rooted not only in the polarization of control over the means of material production but also over the means of knowledge production, including control over the social power to determine what is useful knowledge” (Rahman, 1991, p. 14). That is how I could answer my question! Not by asking my students, “Am I empowering you in this class?” which seemed fairly manipulative and bound to reap only superficial findings, but by engaging the students in the research and in fact turning over ownership of the research to them. So, the project would be one of “mutual inquiry”:

The process of participatory action research is one of *mutual inquiry* aimed at reaching intersubjective agreement, mutual understanding of a situation, unforced consensus about what to do, and a sense that what people achieve together will be *legitimate* not only for themselves but also for every reasonable person (a universal claim). Participatory action research aims to create circumstances in which people can search together collaboratively for more comprehensible, true, authentic, and morally right and appropriate ways of understanding and acting in the world. (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2008, pp. 296-297)

So, students would be able to ask their own question(s). I began to realize that I myself would not be empowering students; they would empower themselves. As we conducted the research together I could watch them and see the processes of empowerment the students would go through for myself. That way I could learn more about how I could create empowering situations and opportunities they could take advantage of in the future.

We started the project of mutual inquiry by asking all 52 SSS students that were in my class that trimester² about what were some of their own “authentic questions.” What did they want to know? What issues touched their lives? What was important to them? They came up with several poignant responses that we eventually narrowed down to a question about racism in schools, particularly between teachers and students. Why, they wanted to know, were racist teachers allowed to teach?

Data Collection: Theatre of the Oppressed and Cops in the Head

I was nervous about the political-sounding topic, but was determined to go forward. The first phase was the collection of data. What data would we use to answer this terribly complex question? We decided to first explore the students’ own conceptions of what it meant to be racist. We thought that if we as a research collective could unpack how the students felt during or about specific negative experiences they had with teachers we might be able to determine a more concrete path toward building more positive relationships between the mostly white faculty and the Latino student population. To do this we used a technique called Theatre of the Oppressed.

Theatre of the Oppressed was created by Augusto Boal (1985) as one way of doing pedagogy of the oppressed as articulated by Paulo Freire (2006). Freire, as many

² My school runs on trimesters, which means the number of students in the SSS class has fluctuated throughout the course of our research, which began during the fall of 2012 and is ongoing. During the first trimester all 52 SSS students considered themselves co-researchers. Since then many of these students, whether enrolled in the SSS class or not, have continued to work with the research collective. However, a core group of about 23 students have remained fully engaged to this point since the beginning of the project.

progressive teachers know, was an educational criticalist specifically interested in educational approaches that could wrestle with, confront, and eventually free participants from oppression. For Freire, liberating people from oppression involved raising people's awareness and helping people discover new ways of both knowing and acting that transform oppressive relationships and liberate both oppressors and oppressed. From Boal and Freire's points of view, this required people working together. Boal suggested through his Theatre of the Oppressed that even the smallest gesture could reflect and teach us about oppressive relationships. He also argued that our awareness can shift – can be made more inclusive, wider, in a sense; we can experience moments of consciousness-raising and discover the wisdom to act and live in new ways by using theatre to explore social events and issues (Dennis, 2009). By finding new ways of acting we could find new ways of being in this world, and by being different we would free ourselves from the oppressive relationship (Dennis, 2009).

In order to engage in this active approach to understanding our place in and then freeing ourselves from oppression, my students wrote journal entries over a two-day period in which they reflected on experiences they had encountered with racism in our school.³ They wrote their experiences as scenes that could be acted out. Once we had the experiences written down we sat in a circle in the classroom and students volunteered to act out each scene. At first each scene was acted out without any interruption – we just got familiar with the storyline. Then the same students would act the scene out again, and this time audience members (other students and myself) were invited to freeze the scene at any time by raising their hand. They could then comment on what was happening, ask questions, or challenge an action that was taken.

We also engaged in another version of Theatre of the Oppressed called Cops in the Head (Boal, 1995). Cops in the Head are the influential voices we hear – both consciously and subconsciously – telling us what we should do, think, and feel (Boal, 1995; Dennis, 2009). Often these voices are given to us through socialization, but they can remain with us as a prominent form of self-censorship, authorization, and oppression. One of my cops in the head is my mom. When I grow my hair out I hear her saying, "Women above a certain age really shouldn't have long hair." A simple example, yes, but important because we see how even the most mundane choices we make may be influenced by "cops" in our heads. Through Cops in the Head we bring these voices to the surface. We raise our consciousness of them. In this way we confront and disrupt assumptions, norms, and other mechanisms of oppression that often go unnoticed in everyday interactions (Boal, 1995; Dennis, 2009).

Our class worked on this for three full class periods. The learning was amazing. Students eventually made the approach their own by challenging each other, saying things like, "Well, that's just how that teacher is – you have to ask her in this way instead of how you did," or "What did YOU do before that which might have caused her to react that way?" or "I don't think he meant what you think he did," and so on. One student reflected on the experience:

We talked about bad experiences we've had with teachers...we acted it all out and then we asked each other, 'What do you think the teacher was thinking and that moment?' and 'What do you think he, the student, was thinking at that moment?' Or the people

³ Reflective journaling is a regular part of the SSS curriculum so students did not need much preparation or guidance for this portion of the reflective data collection process.

around, and stuff like that...I feel like it was a good exercise because it made me think about things that the teachers could have been thinking about...I actually was one of the ones that presented an act. We acted out when I had gone up to ask [my teacher] a question about one of the words in the test question and I had no idea what it meant. So I went up and asked him what it meant and he kind of didn't really pay attention to what I had asked him, so all he said was, 'Go look it up on the iPad, that's what they're for.' And I was just like, 'What?' And after that I'm like, 'What a jerk. Like, he's so rude.' But then I thought what he might have been thinking. I mean I probably could have looked it up on the Internet, but I just thought it was easier to just go ask him. Because he had made up the study guide and he had made the word sheet, so I thought he could have helped, that's all. But I think it was good because after that I wasn't really mad at him, I was just like, 'Oh, whatever, it's just some small incident.' Instead of being like, 'He's rude and I'm not going to deal with him anymore.' (Mila, SSS student, personal communication, May 3, 2013)

This example illustrates a shift in perspective, a kind of compassion that the students developed through this activity. I was worried that perhaps they would develop too much compassion and not try and challenge what might have been subtle racism. The students' responses to this activity, though, showed me that they developed the compassion that allowed them to more calmly respond to, and even challenge, what they saw as injustice or unfairness in teachers' dealings with them.

The students also reflected on the experience of Theatre of the Oppressed (Boal, 1985) in their journals and we talked about what we all learned through the process. Students described how surprised they were, that they began the process thinking teachers were racist and nothing could be done, but that maybe misunderstanding played a role – both on the side of teachers and on the sides of students.

It's taught me that the way some teachers say things negatively, or the way they say things but they don't mean it that way, we can also do that. And I didn't really see our teachers, I just saw them as adults. But I never really saw them as a human. I saw them as a teacher. Like they should know what they're doing. But after the whole research I realized that they are human that you can't just like, "Oh, well, she's this, she's that." No, you kind of have to give them a chance, you kind of have to give it some effort (Suehey, SSS student, personal communication, May 3, 2013).

Students said they felt like they could interact with teachers in a more positive way now, and felt empowered to do so. The project was working!

Data Collection: Student-Teacher Interviews

A few months after we engaged in Theatre of the Oppressed and Cops in the Head we reviewed what had been done to that point and the students decided they needed to continue to collect data to more clearly understand why white teachers seemed to be racist at their school and what they as students might be able to do to build better relationships between white teachers and Latino students. The students decided to invite individual teachers to the SSS classroom to interview them. The students took time preparing a list of possible questions they could ask and gave themselves the assignment of taking detailed notes on each teacher's responses to the questions. Some of the questions they asked included:

1. Why did you become a teacher?

2. What does it take to be a really good teacher of Latino students?
3. What teaching methods do you use for those that have a hard time understanding the subject you teach?

Four teachers came to be interviewed, including myself. Several others were invited but chose not to attend (I think they might have been a bit intimidated by both the topic and the forum). The interviews were a grand success. Teachers were impressed by the students' articulate questions as well as by their professionalism. Students got to know the teachers in a different way. One student said:

I thought [the teachers'] answers were way better than I thought they were going to be. And, some of the questions I had were answered. So, now I know what to do in their class, or what they expect from me when I have them. And, I also learned from this experience that they love to be with us and care about us so much. And, some students don't even know how much they care and they treat them with disrespect. I have a lot more respect for them now! (Xavier, SSS student, personal communication, May 7, 2013)

Another student remarked:

The interview with [the teachers] gave me a good idea on what kind of teachers we have at this school. I feel like students believe that teachers are out to get us and just give us work. But these teachers are passionate about what they do. They truly want us to succeed. (Mila, SSS student, personal communication, May 3, 2013)

Some students said teachers seemed more relatable after the interviews:

I have learned that teachers are just normal people. They go through the same type of struggles that we go through. Teachers are like students. They have a reputation, just like us. They learn something new every day, just like us. Teachers aren't here to ruin our high school experience. They are here to help us, and help us get a good future. Teachers are my friends. (Herman, SSS student, personal communication, May 6, 2013)

One of the students captured the feelings of many in the class:

I think this was a really good idea. I learned a lot about what teachers think. I liked the way both of the teachers said racism is not acceptable. I learned that a lot of the issues teachers have with students is because of them not understanding our culture. (Karlee, SSS student, personal communication, May 3, 2013)

This led to a class discussion about what steps to take next. The group had collected data about their own experiences with and thoughts about racism as well as their teachers' thoughts and experiences. We had informally analyzed the data as a collective during group discussions⁴. What could we do about it?

Presenting Our Findings by Taking Action: Photovoice

Students said they now realized that misunderstanding, although not accounting for all experiences with racism, played a major role in their negative experiences with

⁴ Analysis of the data discussed in this paper, including journal entries, stories, interviews, and surveys, is ongoing. As of the date of publication, students have engaged in coding and thematic analysis as a collective. For the purposes of this portion of the project, though, group discussions and brainstorming served the purposes of data analysis.

teachers, and Latinos' experiences in their community in general. Now they wanted to share that knowledge with others. But, how?

Our collective wanted others in the school – not just the teachers – to understand the Latino culture more, to understand that while we are all people, we do have differences that are important and should be celebrated. We decided to do a photovoice exhibit, which is an approach to research where participants take pictures that represent their everyday lives, write captions or stories to explain those pictures, and then present the pictures and stories in an exhibit in the hopes of increasing understanding and learning among a chosen community (see Wang, 2006). They agreed that by telling their unique stories they would (hopefully) be able to increase the school's and the community's understanding of Latinos, thereby confronting and disrupting that oppressive relationship that Freire (2006) and Boal (1985) talk about.

Students wrote about their parents who work long hours at difficult jobs just to put food on the table; they wrote about the Quinceñera that came a year late because of money problems; they wrote about the car that reminds them of parents who were deported; they wrote about goals and plans for college attendance. Our research collective had the exhibit up for two weeks in the school library and encouraged those who attended to fill out an online survey about their experiences. One question asked which story was most interesting or inspiring. In response to that question one exhibit attendee wrote: *"I think they [the stories] all were very inspirational because they realized that everyone may be from a different background, but we all share the same common traits"* (student respondent). Another person said: *"What they have been through is what was interesting to me because I know how they feel"* (student respondent). And another wrote:

All of the stories were interesting. A lot of the stories were about challenges their families have faced or are facing right now. They were interesting because I never really realized what they go through. I just see the kids in the hall and they seem fine and in class a lot of them act like they don't care about school. I will admit that some of them do try in class and it's good to see that. (Teacher respondent)

The students had set out to increase understanding among white and Latino teachers and students throughout the school. These responses indicate that they had achieved their goal.

Conclusions: Finding Voice

The students in SSS embarked on a project that would help us as a research collective understand why racism exists in schools in general, and in our school in particular. Our collective succeeded in increasing understanding and decreasing misunderstanding in our school and in our community. Many of the SSS students said they were worried before the exhibit because they did not want students, teachers, or administrators to just feel sorry for them and their hard lives. They wanted others to see both the similarities and differences between the Latino and white communities, and be able to appreciate them in a useful way. It seems, from the survey responses, that they achieved their goal. In response to the question, "What was one thing you learned from this exhibit," an exhibit attendee wrote:

I learned that Americans underestimate Latinos; they are just like us. They have feelings and goals and want to go somewhere important in life. They also have bad things happen to them that they can't control (student respondent).

After the exhibit one student said about the project and SSS as a whole:

I think it's kind of cheesy. But I feel like it gives us a voice, in a way. I feel like I've had a lot in mind about this school, and about issues that I've seen, that I've noticed in the school. And I feel like when we all sat there and when we would vibe with you, some of the things that were brought up that we hadn't noticed...It was a good experience for us to be able to talk about some of the things that we had on our minds. Like even how we tried finding a way to talk to teachers so they could understand us. I think that was great because I feel like I had misunderstood so many teachers and I kind of didn't really like them, or I would rather not associate with them or have them as a teacher at all. And I feel like now I can actually sit there and listen to their point of view... I did have a voice but I was more afraid to kind of speak out. It's weird because now, I feel like...you know how we would talk and how we would be able to raise our hand and say what we saw. And then how you would be like, yeah that's true. And I feel like that's made me more confident in what I have to say. (Mila, SSS student, personal communication, May 3, 2013)

This was my goal. Although at first I wanted to empower my students somehow, the process I have been going through – and continue to go through – has made me realize that power cannot be *given* to anyone; it has to be found, taken up, and realized, as it was with this student. She always had a voice, as she says, but this project and this class helped her discover – and use – the voice she always had.

Reflections: Lessons Learned

As I reflect on this ongoing PAR project I realize that the lessons I learned are not really about teaching Latino students in America, or even really about teaching at all, but are about taking up my responsibility to lead. As educators we are put in positions of power, and we make decisions almost constantly about how we take up and use that power. At the same time, though, we are routinely silenced by administrators, policymakers, and even the media. We have very little say in what happens in our own classrooms, let alone our schools. Fine and Weis (2003) passionately discuss the crisis we as educators are facing in our schools. Hugely important questions of equity, imagination, learning, and morality are looming, but it seems like we as teachers shy away from them, leaving both the asking and answering of these big questions to policymakers and others. As teachers we hunker down in our classrooms, worried we would be risking our careers if we spoke up, and hoping to quietly effect some small change in one or two students each year. Through this project I have been reinvigorated, agreeing with Fine and Weis (2003) as they argue that the future of our schools – and our society – is really in our hands: “the hands of educators, working *with* students, parents, community activists, policy makers, and others to re-imagine what could be, and what must be, in those spaces we call schools” (p. 1, emphasis added).

This participatory action research project has reminded me of my responsibility to exemplify empowerment, and to help students discover their own voice and empower themselves as we work together to fill our schools and our communities with “visions of justice, possibility, and imagination” (Fine & Weis, 2003, p. 2).

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