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ORIGINAL CATEGORY

Trying on and Trying Out: Participatory Action Research as a Tool for Literacy and Identity Work in Middle Grades Classrooms

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Abstract This article explores the role of collaborative, ethnographic, participatory action research (PAR) with eighth grade students as a set of possible literacy practices for involving students with issues connected to their lives, resources, language(s), and communities. Findings are based on a year of fieldwork conducted as part of shared inquiry into one public school community's experiences with gentrification and meeting the complex needs of diverse learners. Findings bring to life the ways in which PAR facilitates the redefining of reading, writing, and research; the reconsideration of languages; the rethinking of literacy practices; and the repositioning of participants within and beyond given research endeavors.

Keywords Participatory action research · Identity · Ethnography · Literacy · Writing · Critical literacy

Recent political discourse in the United States is riddled with references to the economic, health, energy, foreign relations, and education challenges facing our nation and our world. These issues call for people to come together as a democratic citizenry to identify, understand, and solve problems in contexts in which easy answers are not readily available for implementation. Complex social issues like these require in-depth study, reflexivity in thought, the tools to examine, question, and understand complex circumstances, the ability to see situations from multiple viewpoints, and the agency to develop, propose, and act on possibilities for collective benefit. If we, as a democratic society, are to tackle issues such as these, we need to remind ourselves of what democracy looks, sounds, and feels like in action. In our current educational landscape this includes critically examining the realities of our school contexts and pedagogies, and taking action such that our efforts work in the service of nurturing citizens who are well prepared to engage with future, yet-to-be known, issues and dilemmas.

In a 1936 address about education and new social ideals, John Dewey poignantly stated that democratic ideals, including liberty and equity, need not change as our society grows. Rather, what changes are the ways in which democratic ideals may be realized. Although stated nearly three-quarters of a century ago, Dewey's thinking resonates with contemporary contexts and challenges. Recognizing the need for the evolution of our social practices honors a participatory notion of democracy in which we are constantly creating and recreating democracy as we work and learn in the company of others.

Public education has long been considered the vehicle for habituating young people in democratic participation—developing habits of mind and tools that they can use throughout a lifetime (Dewey 1959; Gutmann 1999). If systems of formal education are intended to prepare students to be active, contributing members of society, then a serious disjuncture exists between these democratic ideals and the school practices being enacted in far too many schools—particularly schools in high poverty contexts. Research documents a history of persistent educational inequities in material conditions, experiences offered, and the ways in which immigrant, poor, and/or working class young people too often internalize, rather than resist, oppression when defining who they are and who they think they can be (Jones 2006; Kozol 1992; Locke-Davidson 1996; Olsen 1997; Valenzuela 1999). Furthermore, National Assessment of Educational Progress (2008) data

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document a history of gaps in academic performance between black, Hispanic, and white students—a history that contains some gains for students of color, but demonstrates continued, significant, and increasing disparities. In a time of increasing school segregation (Orfield and Lee 2006), schools serving primarily poor and working class students of color are often staffed with the least qualified, often uncertified, teachers (Peske and Haycock 2006) and make use of a highly regulated curriculum devoted to the acquisition of dominant society's "official knowledge" (Apple 1993), a curriculum in which students are expected to "conform to the expectations of a system that does not recognize their skills, intellect, creativity, and promise" (Campano 2007, p. 29). Such curricular conditions lead to contexts that privilege English language use (Garcia et al. 2008), have little or no relevance to students' lives, and limit the possibilities for students to see themselves as successful members of a school community—or society at large.

For far too many students, the persistence of an educational system that does not meet their needs results in the dropping out of formal systems of schooling at alarming national rates; data from the National Center for Educational Statistics (2006a, b) report that 22% of Hispanic students, 11% of black students, and 6% of white students drop out. Income-based statistics reveal that nearly 60% of those who dropped out in 2006 are classified in the lowest income quartile. For many students who remain in the system, their experiences merely prepare them for low-wage, service industry, and/or diminishing twentieth century production jobs, denying them opportunities to study engaging curriculum and relevant social issues in ways that invite creative thinking, genuine communication, deep analysis, reflection, and collective action—the very skills needed for active democratic citizens in our twenty first century society. In other words, "official knowledge," mandated curricula, and the many inequalities in current school practices run counter to democratic ideals.

Despite difficult times and the dominant discourses of accountability and curricular uniformity in education, there are contexts in which educators recognize and are committed to the complex, reflective work of democratic education. In such spaces, educators are encouraged to assume an inquiry stance with respect to their own learning lives and the learning of the students in their care (Cochran-Smith and Lytle 2001; Freedman 2001). For these educators, an inquiry stance and/or a commitment to action- or teacher-research is considered central to professional growth, pedagogical improvement, and student achievement. Teachers taking an inquiry stance gather in the company of knowledgeable others to engage with colleagues in iterative cycles of thought and action with time and tools to reflect their experiences (Dewey 1997; Freire 1970). For example, teachers might study student work, looking for trends to inform future curricular actions. They might invite students to participate in surveys or interviews in order to elicit students' perspectives.

Although teachers in such contexts have access to rich learning processes in which students' voices are represented in the data used, students themselves are peripheral to the research practices and may be unaware of the processes and purposes involved in the collection and analysis of data and the ways that findings can be used to inform changes in the community, curriculum, and/or educational policy. And yet, these inquiries and learning experiences must be made a part of students' school experience, as they require the types of intellectual engagement and new knowledge construction that are at the heart of what it means to be literate in the new millennium.

However small, there have been recommendations and efforts to use participatory action research (PAR) and/or ethnographic practices as tools for including students in K-12 classrooms in rich, authentic learning experiences (Egan-Robertson and Bloome 1998; Gonzalez and Moll 2002; Hume 2001; Landis et al. 2006; Morrell 2004). The work of these educators paves the way for schools to become sites of learning relevant to students' lives, where students move beyond being recipients of knowledge in banking models of education (Freire and Macedo 1998) to becoming active learners and citizens who use diverse resources to generate knowledge, tackle issues of genuine personal interest, and conduct inquiries that impact their schools, neighborhoods, and communities.

Building upon this work, this study investigates the ways in which PAR facilitates experiences that "ensure that all students benefit from learning in ways that allow them to participate fully in public, community, and economic life" (New London Group 2000, p. 9) by inviting students to be cultural meaning-makers and text producers in ways that encourage the use of multiple languages, intelligences, technologies, and resources that are often not part of school literacy instruction. Findings speak to PAR's potential for pursuing more socially just public education that is capable of repositioning who young people are and can be—because if it can happen in one school, it is a possibility for other contexts and participants.

Informing Theory

The work in this study is grounded in sociocultural and educational perspectives regarding research in and about schools as well as a complex understanding of being and becoming literate in the twenty first century.

Understanding Research in and About Schools

Contemporary educational discourse is replete with references to research—including frequently used terms such as "data-based decision making" and "scientifically based" or "scientifically valid research." Those seeking definitive answers or solutions often engage in positivist and sometimes reductionist practices. For example, the National Reading Panel report claims to be a "manifesto for a particular philosophy of science" (Cunningham 2001, p. 326) by equating scientifically-based research with methodological standards that include only experimental or quasi-experimental design. Report authors impose their a priori set of criteria on the body of research concerning reading, extracting a small fraction of qualifying studies without examination of the consequences of their definition of science or research—consequences that include reducing reading instruction into five discrete components that often result in prescriptive drill and practice rather than real reading within schools.

Others see research as a more nuanced, situated activity that calls for qualitative inquiry into particular practices. Although discourses of accountability and scientifically-based research often fit within larger societal discourse that privileges quantitative, positivistic research, action research has offered promise and possibilities for informing changes to educational practices and in reform efforts (Meyers and Rust 2003; Rust and Meyer 2006). Action research, and other forms of practitioner inquiry, have encouraged stakeholders, including teachers, administrators, and other education professionals, to collaborate in moving from action research to policy implementation, enacting change at both local and national levels. Although this research perspective has worked to reposition teachers' voices and (re)locate theorizing in spaces of active learning (i.e., the classroom), its primary players typically still wear the title of educator in some way, shape, or form.

Although action research efforts expand participation, students, who are also primary stakeholders in educational processes and practices, continue to be mere recipients of insights gained and decisions made, rather than active players in the process of learning about the impacts and effects of how school lives are lived. However, the word 'research' is not an unknown term for students. For many, the word refers to gathering information about an assigned topic, parsing out and recording small bits of information, organizing note cards into categories, producing outlines, and reproducing what is already known in a different textual form. But if we look at the word itself, 'research' implies intentionality and reflexivity as one repeatedly examines what is known, wonders about what is not yet known, and searches for new ways of understanding (Grumet 1991). Whether studying something new or "making the familiar strange" (Geertz 1973), research from the perspective of participatory action research is not about reiterating existing information, rather it is about constructing new understandings, discovering new insights, and acting upon what is learned.

Conducting research grounded in the latter of these two perspectives requires that one embrace an understanding of knowledge that moves beyond the acquisition of known facts to the active construction of knowledge by people, including students. In Hume's (2001) work, she not only involved her gifted sixth and seventh grade students in PAR practices, but unpacked key components of their processes including the primacy of researchers' stance toward what she refers to as *knowledge building*—a "focus by all participants on knowledge as an object that is both constructed and continually improved through the multiple perspectives and competing viewpoints that [are brought] to a question" (p. 151). PAR invites community members to construct new understandings as they collectively inquire into issues of shared concern. Through collective processes participants are encouraged to share perspectives, note patterns, and explore anomalies using tools of inquiry such as hypothesizing, collecting data, dialoguing, theorizing, writing, and revising to think about the(ir) world.

Research that is understood as a generative process, in which participants come to new and useful findings, requires researchers to possess agency—efficacy, power, and access (Nieto 2002). Marginalized populations, including those in the United States who are newer English language learners (ELL) and/or are children, are frequently excluded from such intellectual endeavors or, at best, positioned on the peripheries of such activity. However, including students, particularly ELL, in PAR offers possibilities for "help[ing] marginalized people attain a degree of emancipation as autonomous and responsible members of society" (Park 2001, p. 81). Participatory action research, while far from a packaged set of techniques or activities, is a way of viewing research participants, inquiries, and insights. It is a perspective that produces knowledge and acknowledges such productions. It is a way of understanding changing social worlds and meshes well with expanding notions of literacy and becoming literate in the twenty first century.

Understanding Literacy in a New Millennium

Literacy, like learning, is a social process of apprenticeship into the social practices of a culture. Literacy is not neutral, nor is it the end result of a scripted process or the evidence of appropriation of a set of predetermined, context-free skills such as how to decode and/or encode information in a particular language (Kucer 2001; Street 1995; Wells 1999).

Becoming literate involves taking on situated social practices required for participation in particular contexts or communities of practice (Barton and Hamilton 1999; Lewis 2001; Wenger 1999). It involves people manipulating cultural artifacts within the orchestration of their participation, a process in which participants come to see themselves as members (or outsiders) to what Frank Smith (1998) refers to as "the literacy club." In some contexts valued literacy practices might involve vocabulary flashcards, in which members of the literacy club are those who can read and define words in isolation. In other contexts, joining the literacy club requires members to select and read novels by group-negotiated deadlines and engage in rich literature circle conversations. In either case, literacy work is social work connected to who learners are and can be.

Knowing that available literacy practices shape student identities and worldviews, teachers and scholars have worked to deepen our understanding of critical literacies (Comber 2001; Freire 1970; Giroux 1993; Janks 2000; Shannon 1995, 2002). Critical literacy practices take us beyond decoding words and discussing personal connections to literature. Critical literacy practices invite participants to read against the grain by examining "common sense" understandings and considering multiple viewpoints (Lewison et al. 2002). Critical literacies engage students and educators in practices aimed at transforming social conditions (Freire and Macedo 1998) by moving from the personal to larger sociopolitical contexts (Lewison et al. 2008) as well as reconstructing texts to be more inclusive of all the worlds' people (Jones 2006). Although broader, more social, and more critical definitions of literacy permeate educational literature, in practice many schools hold onto narrow definitions of literacy and intelligence (Blythe and Gardner 1990; Gardner 1998; Harste 2001)—valuing linguistic and mathematical means of thinking where the focus remains on the acquisition, rather than construction and questioning, of knowledge. If we see schools as places of social apprenticeship, then students must be invited to make and critique meanings using tools that extend beyond language, as well as be engaged in practices that develop students' intra- and inter-personal ways of acting in the world.

If we want all students, including those new to English, to expand their communication and thinking potentials and see themselves as people engaged in making the world more the way they think it should be, they will need tools for noticing and naming issues, tools for thinking about those issues, and tools for taking action. They will also need sanctioned spaces for participation in this important work—physical spaces as well as theoretical spaces that embrace the values, customs, and practices that support creative, critical, and active social participation (Campano 2007; Gutiérrez et al. 1997).

This article explores the role of collaborative, ethnographic, participatory action research with eighth grade students as a set of possible literacy practices for involving students with issues connected to their lives, resources (including language(s), literacies, intelligences, etc.), and communities.

Context and Methods

The findings shared in this article stem from a yearlong collaboration with Rivers[1] School community members, including students, teachers, administrators, parents, and guardians. According to the Illinois State School Report Card (2004), Rivers, a pre-K through eighth grade Chicago Public School, has been a long-time home to working-class families with a large Latino/a (73.8%) student body. A little over a third of the students are classified as new English language learners. Over the last 10 years, this school community has planted a community garden, produced a visual trail of their collective history through hallway murals and permanent art exhibits, explored progressive literacy practices, and frequently gathered families together as a school community beyond the confines of the school day. Not unlike many other public schools in the city, this diverse site has been experiencing changes that accompany gentrification, including declining enrollment due to increased housing costs and demographic shifts to include a greater numbers of white, monolingual children who now live in the neighborhood.

Over the past 2 years, families new to the neighborhood have become involved with the school as they aim to make decisions about enrolling their children at Rivers. Although Rivers remained a welcoming and inviting environment, tensions became more prevalent. Newcomers shared their concerns and lobbied for structural and curricular changes aimed at aligning existing systems to middle-class school ideals. Simultaneously, long-time members of the school community struggled with shifts in the school's identity, their long-standing commitments to culturally and linguistically diverse practices and events, and the visions being expressed regarding what it meant to be and become educated people.

As an educator, university-based researcher, and community member, I have learned from and with this school community since coming to Chicago in the summer of 2003. Shortly after my arrival, Rivers families elected me to serve as the community representative on the Local School Council. During my 2 years as community representative, I spent time at Rivers with my undergraduate and graduate preservice teacher candidates, and participated in

[1] All site and participant names are pseudonyms.

community events in the school garden. My own experiences learning Spanish, teaching in bilingual classrooms in the Midwestern United States and Mexico, and living internationally helped me to build relationships with the community using both Spanish and English. I felt that my perspectives were valued and my involvement welcomed.

As the challenges and tensions accompanying school changes heightened, conversations among long-time members of the Rivers community, including an experienced teacher, several administrators, and a parent community leader lead to thoughts of reviving Parent Project as a useful forum for all families to dialogue, think, and take action with regard to their changing community. In previous years, Parent Project (Vopat 1994) had been a regular, weekly forum where adult family members were invited to participate in school practices, such as literature circles, as a means to understand school practices their children were involved in at Rivers. The program had faded into the background of school life as the shrinking school size had decreased the number of teachers actively participating in the progressive literacy practices in their classrooms—practices that were at the heart of Parent Project meetings. Reviving Parent Project with an eye toward meeting the needs of current families was a means of creating space to dialogue about Rivers' past, present, and possible future. I was asked to be part of these efforts and accepted, as the invitation suggested an opportunity for local action and larger scale reflection.

Observing the nature of change at Rivers, I noted an increasingly heavy focus on curriculum, class configurations, and professional development for primary years teachers. Many new families were enrolling pre-K, kindergarten, and first grade students. These classrooms were responsible for boosting school enrollment and demanded frequent attention from administrators working to meet the needs of all learners and their families. Specifically, with increases in monolingual-English speaking students, the school was working to ensure that the needs of new ELL students were being met. Because of the need for assistance in documenting, studying, and communicating Parent Project happenings and my commitment to equity, access, and linguistically rich educational experiences, I decided to recruit a team of collaborators from the eighth grade at Rivers. Eighth graders were invited to work with me because of my previous connection with their teacher and the perceived need to intentionally focus on the literacy experiences of older learners as well as those in the primary grades. Recruiting a research team with Spanish language experience was also important because the Parent Project was to include both Spanish and English dominant participants. It also seemed essential to develop and articulate the language-as-a-resource (Ruiz 1984) perspective within and beyond the Rivers community because of the declining presence of Spanish in school, on the playground, and at extra-curricular events, and given the growing concern circulating amongst newcomers that newer English language learners would stifle academic opportunities for monolingual, English-speaking students.

Working in collaboration with the eighth grade teacher, we identified potential student candidates who lived in households that, at some point in the youth's lives, included Spanish. We then selected participants attending to gender and academic achievement. We aimed for a diverse sample of six students so that student researchers would not outnumber family and facilitator participants. Four-eighth grade boys and two-eighth grade girls ranging in age from 13 to 15 were invited to participate in the work and related study. Three of the six participants were Mexican Americans who were members of the first US-born generation of their families. Two student researchers—one girl and one boy—had emigrated from Mexico in their early school years. One of the boys left Honduras in third grade. Collectively they represented a broad range of school success—from an aspiring lawyer to students characterized as apathetic and detached from academic life. Grades and test scores positioned two on the brink of school failure and attendance records threatened the promotion potential for another. The presence of more boys than girls was representative of the class as a whole.

Prior to our first Parent Project meeting, I spent time interviewing each of the students individually in order to understand their perspectives on schooling, research, literacy, and their potential roles as literate members of their community. The six students then convened each Monday of the fall semester—arriving just before the parents and staying after the parents departed to participate in debriefing sessions. At our first meeting, I presented students with field journals and invited them to assume the role of observer charged with recording observations and taking notes with the following questions in mind: What issues were on parents' minds? In what ways were the parents interacting with one another? What literacies were alive within parental practices? How was this community of learners negotiating learning in multilingual and diverse contexts?

As a research team, we were interested in how this forum could open spaces for dialogues about culture, changing social landscapes, and the impact on curricular practices in this school. I was also interested in the roles of PAR in students' academic and social lives. Therefore I taped our debriefings as well as kept my own field notes. After the first 5-week fall session concluded, students continued to meet with me during the winter and spring for further data analysis, manuscript drafting, and reflective interviews regarding their experiences as student researchers.

As a research team, we shared data collection responsibilities. The decision to use audio recordings and transcripts was based on my belief that field notes alone lead to missed opportunities for studying the complexities, nuances, and social work present in participant talk. Because students were learning to be ethnographers through participating in ethnographic work, they approached their work with uncertainty about what exactly they should be doing as evidenced in the types of notes taken over the course of the study. We needed additional shared ways of returning to activity and exploring research possibilities. Therefore, students took turns as videographers and photographers during Parent Project meetings while others sat with field journals and laptops taking notes, drawing maps of participant configurations, etc. We also kept copies of written or visual work that parent participants produced during meetings. I collected similar data when I made visits to the students' classroom during reading and writing time so that I could better understand their thinking and interactions when working as Parent Project ethnographers.

Multiple layers of analysis occurred during and after the year of fieldwork. The full research team used field notes, digital images, and audio recordings to create primary records of parents' activity. I facilitated sessions in which we verified and collaboratively constructed a transcript involving parents' participation in literature discussions stemming from Parent Project participants' shared reading of a young adult novel, *Becoming Naomi Leon* (Muñoz-Ryan 2006). The book had been selected and read by participants because it attended to cultural themes that paralleled experiences of Rivers community members, it was often a focal novel in Rivers classrooms, and it was published in both Spanish and English versions. We decided to focus analysis on conversational moves and practices within this particular context using emergent codes and categories. During winter and spring meetings, the students and I crafted a co-authored manuscript that details our findings about parent practices (Van Sluys et al. 2008).

At the same time that I was working with the research team, I was interested in naming and understanding the particulars of conducting PAR with eighth grade students. In other words, while the students and I were studying the parents, I was also studying the students' engagement as participatory action researchers. Using principles of critical ethnography (Carspecken 1996), I spent additional time with my field notes and other data (including debriefing and interview transcripts, student field notes, and classroom writing samples). I infused observer comments within fieldnotes and transcripts, parsed out interactive sequences for further study, and closely examined activity and claims within particular sequences. I focused on the normative claims made by participants related to enacted social practices as well as the identity claims students were making as they engaged with collaborative ethnographic work.

Findings

Findings presented in this article focus on the impact of students' perspectives toward literacy work and towards themselves as literate people; research team findings with respect to parents' practices are published elsewhere (Van Sluys et al. 2008). Eighth grade student involvement in this research process revealed configurations of social practices that I group into four broad categories—*redefining reading, writing and research; reconsidering languages; rethinking literacy practices;* and *repositioning selves.* Examples and explanations of each grouping follow.

Redefining Reading, Writing, and Research

During my initial interviews with the students, I inquired about their experiences and perspectives with respect to writing and research. Their responses unveiled experiences grounded in their lives as readers, writers, and researchers.

As writers, students recalled writing stories, essays, "a letter to my family in Mexico," or "a summary of a book [they had] read about." All of their responses, while mostly linked to assigned school writing and/or personal writing, suggested that a writer draws from their experiences and life to "express themselves." Although all of the students had something to say about writing, they struggled to talk about examples from their own lives and/or what such writing might look or sound like. Pedro's words noted the ambiguity surrounding his actual writing processes. Describing his frustrations, he says, "you've got so much on your mind, you just got to put it in words, you just don't know how." This struggle seemed real to Pedro when I looked at his classroom journal filled with short, one to two line entries which were almost all about the Chicago Bears and his hopes for Super Bowl victory.

In terms of the qualities of good writing, students also struggled to describe what such writing might look and sound like. When Tina talked about a classmate, Selma, who she labeled as a good writer, she talked only about Selma's compliance with school norms without mentioning decisions, habits of mind, or actual qualities of Selma's writing work. Selma always, "concentrates with all her work" and "Selma's smart … she's a good student, she gets good grades … she participates, she listens well, she does her homework all the time." Three of the students mentioned that, from time to time, they (or a teacher) would reread their writing for spelling errors, missing punctuation, and correct grammar, but instances of the

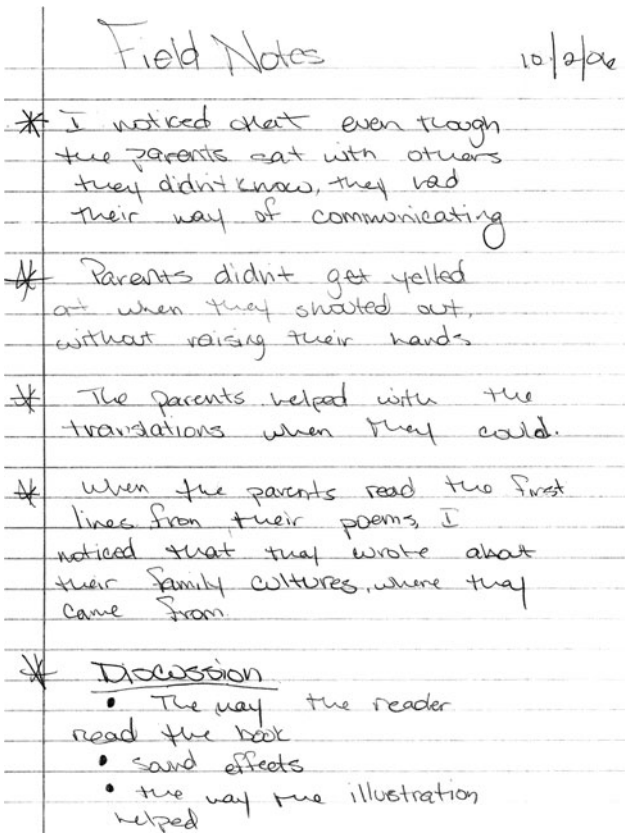
substantive reworking of ideas and revision of work was absent from their talk.

For five of the six students, their understanding of research resonated with their understanding of writing—in that research was a school engagement where students read, took notes, and wrote about assigned topics including Egypt, mythology, and cells. For the sixth student, he could not remember or think of a time when he had conducted any research. Tina's involvement in an after-school media lab was the only instance where students' talk included reflections on actual information found and a research process. During interviews three students talked about spending time at home e-mailing, IMing, searching the internet, but none considered these acts as reading, writing, researching, or valued school literacies.

Prior to the launch of Parent Project meetings, I also asked students what they knew about ethnography. Drawing upon classroom work with entomology and word study, Tina immediately offered that "graphy" mean to write. Others noted that they had heard of "ethno" before but did not know what it meant. Extended conversation led to initial shared definitions as students began to study and write about the cultural lives and practices of Parent Project participants. With field journals and video/audio recording equipment in hand, they began to conduct ethnographic research.

During the first meeting, parents were asked to participate in an activity related to their names that called upon them to write about experiences or stories related to their own names (Van Sluys 2005). Students, seemingly accustomed to following directions, wrote about their names in their own field journals. In a post-meeting debrief, students were asked to talk about what we had observed in terms of parent activity. Looking at his writing, Cristóbal queried, "so we don't have to do the work too?" As co-researchers they were being asked to work—but the work was a different sort of work. When we talked more about observations, interpretations, and strategies for capturing live activity in print, changes in their field journals began to immerge. Students first noted things closely linked to their experiences of school norms, including notes that read, "Parents didn't get yelled at when they shouted out without raising their hand" (see Fig. 1). Carlos, as one who detailed his active online life in our interviews, initially wrote very little in his field journal. During one session, I handed him a laptop instead of his field journal and asked if this might work better for him for taking field notes. His initial response was, "I don't have anything on paper yet to type." After a brief conversation about composing on screen, he dove in, producing a rich description of a segment of the days' activity (see Fig. 2).

As we met to analyze data and draft a presentation of our findings, comments like, "It's not done yet?," were not


Field Notes 10/2/06

* I noticed that even though the parents sat with others they didn't know, they had their way of communicating

* Parents didn't get yelled at when they shouted out, without raising their hands

* The parents helped with the translations when they could.

* When the parents read the first lines from their poems, I noticed that they wrote about their family cultures, where they came from

* Discussion
  - The way the reader read the book
  - sound effects
  - the way the illustration helped

Fig. 1 Tina's fieldnotes, day 2

Every morning on Monday every week right after I go to my class they take me out to smell the fresh air and then to the field house so I work on the parents project with my classmates me. Now let me tell you what the parent's project is: the parents project is us students work with the fellow parents of the students of . We write stories, we read, talk with them. Also we study them we see how we act with each other how we get along what we do. I go inside the field house and it might take my mind of the work at school but it also reminds me of what I have to do here witch is kind of complicated. works on drawing the scene of what everybody else is doing, works on writing what the parents are doing and so those T Now takes actual pictures not writing, he takes photos with a camera, and uses a video camera.

Fig. 2 Carlos' typed notes

uncommon as we returned again and again to our manuscript. Writing was becoming a lived process, which required persistent attention, refinement of thinking, as well as resources and techniques for communicating ideas well. Specifically, as writers and researchers we discussed how data could be used in our writing—lifting the responsibility from the writer to "think of everything to write on their own" and supporting one's thinking with evidence. We expanded writing repertoires by reading pieces by other scholars discussing registers and genres in which people choose to write based on the purposes of their work. We "read like writers" (Fletcher 1993)—labeling sections and noting author decisions. Together we identified thesis statements, noted how writers mapped out articles, dissected methods sections noting the type of

information included in descriptions of research contexts, etc. This attention to and reflection upon other writers' processes supported our young researchers/writers in terms of visible options for composing their own section(s) of our manuscript.

Shifts in students' conceptions of writing and research were evident through daily comments, like "I can use those words in my writing?" (a question related to the use of data in one's own drafting and perceptions that such actions might be considered plagiarism), as well as thoughts expressed during end of the year interviews. Students' comments began to reflect larger purposes and contexts for writing that moved beyond the personal. Writing is for "inform[ing] people about different topics. [Writers need] to read other people's work and stuff, they have to edit … get more people to give their opinions, have different perspectives…" Writing is also about communication and sharing information with others, as noted in Pedro's thinking about the purposes of writing as a tool to check in, "[s]ee how we're doing, [and communicate] what's going on with the community." Writing was no longer just about expressing themselves—it was about bringing together diverse perspectives, communicating, and tailoring one's work for intended audiences. Collaboratively conducting ethnographic work not only pushed students to rethink definitions and practices associated with writing and research, but in this instance, it called students to reconsider the linguistic resources they brought with them and their competencies as multilingual people.

Reconsidering Language

Student researchers' experiences with Spanish varied. Three were born in countries other than the United States (Honduras and Mexico) and came to Rivers with experiences living and learning in Spanish. Most, like Carlos, felt they were "stronger in English." All but Pedro felt they could function well in both Spanish and English contexts. However, their comments positioned Spanish as an at-home language used to read magazines and communicate with parents, and English as their language of learning.

Parent Project meetings were bilingual events in that participants spoke and wrote in the language they found most comfortable. Although translations occurred at times, it was not common practice. Participants and researchers had to do the best they could.

As students listened to parent conversations, they took notes to record events and interactions. Reviewing their notes revealed students' preference for English although English texts included notes about interactions that had transpired in Spanish. One week following the meeting where parents participated in literature discussions related to *Becoming Naomi Leon*, the research team began the work of verifying a transcript draft that I had transcribed to the best of my abilities. Gathering around the table, each researcher had a copy of the transcript and a pencil as we listened again and again to small chunks of the transcript. While students found the work slightly tedious, they also began to take note of linguistic differences between their knowledge of Spanish and participant language use. They came to see the power of collective knowledge as they reconstructed talk. They discovered that conversation does not occur in complete sentences in Spanish or English. They debated colloquial Spanish phrases in terms of "what they really meant" and fixed Spanish grammar throughout the transcripts. This was "such hard work" because, as two students noted, they were not "used to writing or thinking in school in Spanish." Watching Pedro was of particular interest to me as he had completely denied any knowledge of Spanish during initial interactions, yet when the Spanish conversations became animated and intense, his nods or whispers to colleagues seemed to indicate some level of receptive Spanish language skills. In his final interview, when asked to reflect on his ability to follow Spanish use during Parent Project meetings, he described himself as a "five" on a 1–10 scale. He noted, "it was hard" but when he did not know something he just "asked one of my researchers what they were saying." His statements not only signify a shift in how he saw himself as being able to function in bilingual contexts, but also how he saw himself as a fellow research colleague.

Rethinking Literacy Practices

For the six-eighth graders on the research team, school literacy experiences included daily journaling, writing essays and reports modeled after five-paragraph state guidelines, and opportunities to select and read novels in small groups with their peers. The students were accustomed to "writing something" everyday in their journals, which ranged from Pedro's written cheers, "Go Bears!" and "The Bears All the Way!" to descriptions of weekend parties, birthdays, and video game challenges. Entries differed in length and variety across the six co-researchers. Although teachers checked journals, feedback and suggestions regarding improving writing fluency and/or form were seemingly absent. What seemed to matter most was that students put something on paper and then turned in their journals. Students wrote drafts of essays and reports and readied their writing for publication—meaning that they needed complete drafts by a certain date so that they could type their work on a computer. Completing tasks (i.e., product vs. process) became an important theme in students' school literacy work (i.e., making multiple drafts, knowing literary terms by a certain date for a quiz) and completing reading and discussion documentation

appeared to be the goal of groups meeting to discuss their novels. Several students commented, "we've got to put something down" on the conversation record sheet each group was required to complete when they met.

As student co-researchers listened to parents debate what literacy was about and for and reflected on their own uses of literacy as researchers, their perspectives showed signs of change. For example, when students were initially analyzing parent discussion transcripts, they were quick to identify and mark when a parent made what students labeled "text-to-self" connections (Harvey and Gouvis 2000), drawing upon language very commonly used in today's reading-as-strategy-instruction teaching to reference readers' efforts to draw personal connections between one's life and the text at hand. When pushed to explain what readers were doing as they made these connections, student researchers' talk became less about counting and labeling the connections and more about understanding the ways in which the connections tied the readers to the books and knit the community of parent readers closer to one another. Furthermore, technology became a tool for literacy work. Not only did students learn how to download pictures and video from digital devices, they also learned to use images and replays of live activity as a means of returning to an event for further observation and reflection. Student researchers explored the potentials of composing texts, as well as revising, inside a word processing program. And although the long process of composing a manuscript at first seemed laborious, students began to notice and comment on the progress their collective piece was making and how it was beginning to "sound real" as they listened to themselves read and reread sections of drafts they and/or their research colleagues had written (see Table 1).

In contrast to classroom journaling, where only the process of writing the manuscript seemed to matter, in the students' ethnographic work the purpose mattered as well. Although one goal was to document, analyze, and communicate the happenings inside one school's efforts to integrate a changing school community (Van Sluys et al. 2008), another was to invite students into practices that could potentially impact their stance toward literate activity in their own lives. Cristóbal's reflections during one day of manuscript drafting seemed to illustrate this second goal coming to fruition. The students had coded literature discussion data in ways that noted the techniques parents were using to move conversations forward—especially when they hit silent lulls. One technique parents used was to turn to another participant and use a long drawn out, "Soooooo…." expecting that the person would say something next. Another method for moving the conversation along was to switch from English to Spanish or vice versa to include more or different members of the group in conversation. Reflecting on these techniques Cristóbal declared, "We could do that in our [classroom] literature circles too." He went onto describe that groups in their class would get together, put something on the paper, and "finito, they were done." He wondered if the parents' techniques might work in his classroom—and on the day he tried it back in his classroom, it worked. Tina echoed Cristóbal's sentiments in one of her revisions. Responding to editorial notes and questions I'd written, she wrote:

> To be honest, in our everyday classroom lit[erature] circles, we just all agree with each other and finito we're finished. We, the peers, in my lit[erature] group, just make our conversations short…we continue reading our lit[erature] books. Studying others made me want to follow their steps, ways, techniques. It motivated me to want to start conversations with the people in my group to listen and know what they have to say.

Tina, Cristóbal, and their research colleagues were not only expanding horizons in terms of possible literacy practices; they were exploring new possibilities for engaging with texts and people, as well as new ways of being active members of their social worlds.

Repositioning Selves

After the first day of Parent Project, a Rivers teacher collaborating with this project turned to me and commented on the serious and mature manner of the students as they worked. This initial observation was the first of many shifts in students' identities. Over time, there were episodes that marked noticeable changes in how students saw their roles, contributions, and selves.

During the second Parent Project meeting, one of the boys meandered around the room making minimal entries in his field journal. When I questioned Rodrigo regarding the work he was engaged with, he declared that he was going to draw. Although the tone of his comment seemed to indicate that he was trying to position himself outside of research work, I responded that drawings can play an important role in field notes and we should talk more about this in our debriefing time later that day. In our post-meeting conversation we talked about the ways in which sketches of a social scene can help researchers return to the physical configurations of people and space within a particular social scene. On his own accord, Rodrigo turned to a clean page in his notebook and made a note to himself that read, "Make a chart. draw the room. who is sitting next to who and what are they talking bout!!! What kind of question or issues do parents talk about when discussing books?" The next week he followed his instructions to himself and first made a map of participants and their

Table 1 Developing writing

Initial draft	Sample revision	Manuscript version
Rivers is a Chicago Public School that has kindergarten through eight grade students. The students are friendly. Many o the eighth graders have been in the school since kindergarten. Rivers is a neighborhood school where many of the student in the neighborhood can walk to school. However some arrive on buses because they've moved. This year they have better lunches because principals and other school workers asked questions, researched, and worded to amake this change. Rivers is excellent for student because students and staff work to try to give better books, information, food and preparation for high school. Rivers community members work to change things they don't like.	A Chicago Elementary School named Rivers provides a rich context for Parent Project. Rivers is a place where students contribute a wide range of culture, talents, and languages. Riverss is located in a neighborhood that is very friendly but like many other Chicago neighborhoods it is changing. One change happening in the neighborhood is that members of the Waters community are working to change the playground from asphalt to grass. Other changes include dropping enrollment and many of the older houses are being knocked down and they're making them into condos, stores, or expensive single-family homes. According the Iowa test scores over the last five years, academic performance at Rivers is also improving. Many students represent different cultures and speak different languages. Many are from Mexico and other countries in Latin America as well as Bosnia. In 2005, the largest group of students were considered Hispanic (73%) followed by whites (18%) and lastly African Americans (5%). Rivers is an excellent school where 95% of students attend school regularly. A little less than half of the students at Rivers speak a language other than English, about 40% are considered new English language learners. Most of the students have spent many years at Rivers because less than 25% move in and out of the school.	Rivers (pseudonym), an urban public elementary school, provides a rich context for literacy learning and research. Rivers is a place where students contribute a wide range of cultures, talents, and languages. Many are from Mexico and other countries in Latin America as well as Eastern European countries like Bosnia. In 2005, the largest group of students were considered Hispanic (73%) followed by whites (18%) and lastly African Americans (5%). A little less than half of the students come to Rivers speaking a language other than English; about 40% are considered new English language learners. We know that most of the students have spent many years at Rivers because less than 25% move in and out of the school. Rivers is considered by many in the city to be an excellent school where 95% of students attend school regularly. In addition to talk about the school, standardized test scores over the last five years show academic performance at Rivers is also improving. It is a place where members of the Rivers community are working together for change. For example, right now a school and community garden covers about 25% of our school property. There are plots for neighbors and classrooms, native plantings, and space for classes to work outside. But students, parents, and administrators are trying to convince the school board to get rid of the asphalt that covers the rest of the school grounds because kids are getting hurt all the time and getting rid of the asphalt can help with water runoff problems in the sewers. This is not the only challenge facing Rivers. Rivers is located in a neighborhood that, like many other Chicago neighborhoods, is changing. Changes include many long-time members of the Rivers community having to leave. Many blame these enrollment changes on gentrification and point to the older houses and buildings being knocked down and made into condos, stores, or expensive single-family homes. At the same time, many new families are joining the community from the surrounding neighborhood.

interactions. His moves took him from resistant-student to one who could use his affinity for drawing to contribute to the collective academic work (see Fig. 3).

Students' identities as language learners and language users also showed signs of change. Pedro stepped away from his initial steadfast claims of knowing no Spanish to seeing himself as "a 5." Alejandra, while accustomed to actively using Spanish in her home and in her reading life, noted the social uses of her Spanish, moving Spanish from a personal ability to a collective academic resource. Cristóbal's observation of literature discussion practices gave him ideas about improving the quality of discussions in his own classroom. As one with new knowledge and the agency to try out his new findings, Cristóbal became one who could change the nature of classroom activity.

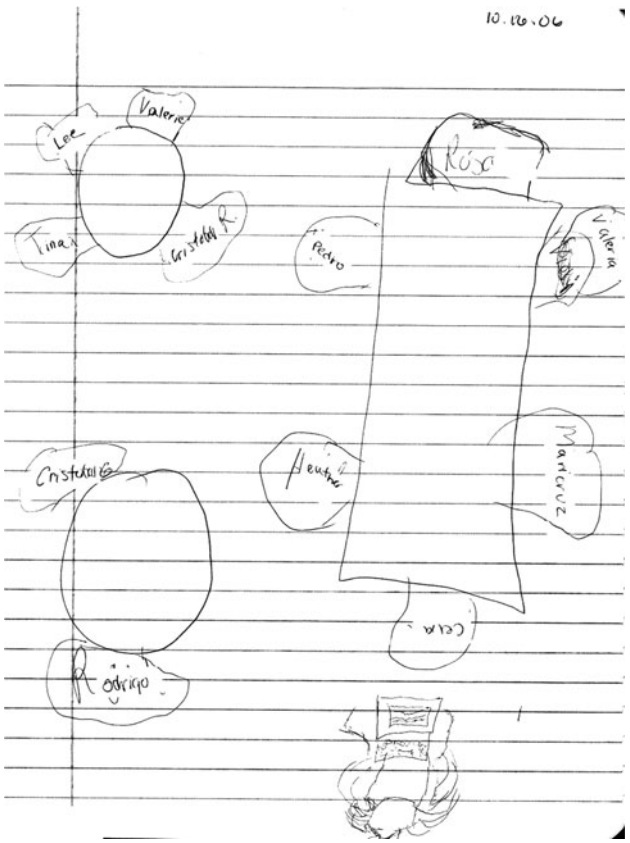


Fig. 3 Maps as ethnographic tools

Implications: Participatory Action Research, Ethnographic Practices, and Becoming Valued Members of School Learning Communities

This account of PAR documents the particulars of one community's processes of reflection and action as they engaged with literacy and the world. The story demonstrates what is possible when the school tools, practices, and intelligences that count are amplified to allow students to draw, talk, type, photograph, record, and collectively broker their way into successful literacy trajectories. Students' engagement with participatory action re-search created a genuine context for learning where literacy learning and democratic ideals were enlivened as researchers constructed and negotiated meaning in the company of others. Lastly, this story of PAR reveals the close ties between available school literacy practices and students' identities and academic trajectories.

Reflecting specifically on the experiences of the six featured eighth grade ethnographers, students' own final comments, as well as what happened during their experiences as co-researchers, punctuate the centrality of literacy as identity work and the need to create spaces and opportunities where students can take risks and investigate and adopt new ways of being. Knowing that people are not free to author themselves as they choose (Holland et al. 1998) and that normative social and cultural discourses position and often constrain who people can be, we need to examine social identities available to students in school settings. In the case of the six student researchers studied, labels like "non-native English speaker," "at-risk," and/or "struggling student" positioned these young people in terms of their deficits. Students, like all people, draw upon the languages, discourses, tools, and perceived beliefs that surround them to act in ways that they view as recognizable to their company. Rodrigo's experiences had framed drawing as a deviation from schoolwork, he thought a declaration that one was intending to draw rather than write would position him inline with a familiar identity (that of a resistant, disengaged student) rather than an unfamiliar identity (namely that of a contributing academic, capable of using his artistic intelligence to contribute to collective meaning-making). Pedro's desire to hide his Spanish language abilities masked the imperfections in his abilities and an emergent bilingual identity. Providing a welcoming discursive space enabled him to enter into conversation at his own pace where his Spanish approximations were accepted as meaningful and repositioned who Pedro was to himself and others. And Tina's construction of successful student identity was initially framed with language about conscientious and compliant behavior, but over time her experiences offered new and concrete understanding of moves writers make that characterize their work as high quality, thus allowing her to not only claim the identity of a "strong writer," but also to explain how she, in her role as researcher, made moves akin to nameable moves in other writers' work.

In other words, claiming a successful student identity was something learners could do once they understood different and more complex ways to define success. For these students, PAR experiences created a space in their school lives to try on and try out new ways of being while working with research colleagues. Also, as data revealed, students took initial steps to extend these ways of being into classroom activity, as evidenced by Cristóbal and Tina's sense of agency in their attempts to integrate findings from their own research into classroom discussion forums.

If we are to take insights from this study forward, we need to move beyond words to realities in our work to bring true democratic education to life (Dewey 1936). If students are to become people who understand and embrace multilingual resources, critically engage with the world, and use diverse tools and technologies to solve problems collectively, school experiences must be anchored in relevant social realities. Schooling must be an apprenticeship into society where the focus moves beyond *what* we teach to *who* we teach and *how* we teach and learn.

If our focus is *who* and *how* we teach, engaging with PAR in schools offers a compelling set of practices that invite inquiry into issues of local importance. Because PAR is not a sequence of prescribed activities, rather a process of thought, reflection, and action, participants must be aware of possible practices—such as those offered in this research account. They must be able to see and name practices and intelligences at play within (others') learning interactions and then make decisions that suit their own contexts.

If students are to become people who are multilingual, critically-engaged, and reflective democratic citizens invested in the use of diverse literacies, tools, and technologies to solve problems, than educational practitioners and policy makers need to rethink school experiences. It is unreasonable to expect different outcomes while continuing to pursue failed strategies to improve students' relationships with school life. In other words, new or continued high stakes testing and/or different curricular scripts that continue to reduce school learning to predetermined information consumption will continue to drive poor, immigrant, and/or minority students away from schools.

If we desire to move students beyond experiencing literacy learning "as demonstrations of compliance with authoritarian norms, [and towards literacy learning as] ways of acting in the world, [and] tools for doing something real" (Bomer 2007, p. 310), then PAR can be utilized as a venue for teaching literacy—as genuine data, audience, and purpose are inherent in PAR's design. Granting students access to these resources has the potential to produce more complex, rigorous school practices that can reposition who the students are as learners and people within their local communities and beyond.

PAR offers promise and possibility in working towards different outcomes. To integrate PAR into more school sites may not be easy, but given current public discourse that position schools as "failing our children" (Bussey 2008) due to lack of national standards and adequate assessments, we must foreground counter-narratives that reveal the complexities and offer alternatives for working with diverse peoples, in diverse school contexts across the United States. Furthermore, if PAR were more pervasive in schools, resulting research findings could further complicate simplistic explanations of school success or failure by increasing the visibility of the variable contextual conditions of schooling. Obstacles will arise, but each obstacle needs to be seen not as a roadblock but rather as an opportunity for dialogue and learning by all stakeholders in the educational process.

The challenges before us are real—as is the pursuit for responses and next steps. One only needs to peruse a daily newspaper to find proposed solutions to America's educational challenges—proposals put forth by many outside the educational community. Educators need to act now, foreground the resources and knowledge of the educational community, make success stories visible, unpack implications of practices in schools, and continue in the struggle for more just educational experiences that enable graduates of our public schools to engage thoughtfully with one another and the world.

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