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"If you don't read, it is like you don't exist": The Transformative Power of Critical Literacy at an Alternative Charter High School

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LOYOLA MARYMOUNT UNIVERSITY

"If you don't read, it is like you don't exist":

The Transformative Power of Critical Literacy at an Alternative Charter High School

by

Jesse Sage Noonan

A dissertation presented to the Faculty of the School of Education,

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DEDICATION

This project is dedicated to all of the students

I have ever worked with,

particularly the 12 co-researchers from

the Summer of 2008:

you are the people who made me a teacher

by teaching me to truly listen.

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ABSTRACT

"If you don't read, it is like you don't exist":

The Transformative Power of Critical Literacy at an Alternative Charter High School

By

Jesse Sage Noonan

The purpose of this youth participatory action research (YPAR) project was to challenge

the pedagogy of traditional literacy instruction for low-income Latino/a students,

particularly the overuse of scripted curricula and standardized tests mandated through the

No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act. Twelve student participants served as co-teachers

and co-researchers as they created, implemented, and evaluated a critical literacy class

based on the theoretical frameworks of critical pedagogy and critical literacy and the

methodology of youth participatory action research (YPAR).

The YPAR Critical Literacy Group and research took place at one of a network of

small, independent-study alternative schools called Future Horizons Charter High School

(FHCHS, a pseudonym), located in southern California. Critical pedagogy and critical

literacy formed a theoretical foundation upon which the students and teacher built a class

based on the tenets of dialogue, problem-posing, and generative themes based on the

interests of the student co-researchers. This alternative practice of co-creating knowledge

with students was paramount in facilitating young peoples' learning to think critically about their positionality within their political and social spheres. Critical literacy does not focus simply on the development of decoding and comprehension skills for reading, but students of critical literacy must "read the word and the world" (Freire & Macedo, 1997), grounding their acquisition of literacy skills through their own experiences and social contexts. This research examined the capacity of critical literacy and YPAR methodology to transform both learner and teacher.

The YPAR Critical Literacy Group at FHCHS positively impacted the student co-researchers. Elements of qualitative research, including interviews and transcription positively impacted the students co-researchers' traditional literacy skills. Student co-researchers evaluated the course as a positive experience throughout, and engaged in and comprehended texts far above their traditionally-defined decoding and reading comprehension reading levels. Attendance and engagement in the class for the 4-month period was consistently higher in the critical literacy class than in other reading classes offered at the school. The students experienced preliminary transformation and early stages of critical consciousness from the beginning to the end of the course, evidenced by the evolution of their reflective writings and progressively sophisticated analyses of social injustice at the school and within the broader community.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

> We said, what we know, the solutions we have, are for
> the problems that people don't have.
> And we're trying to solve their problems by saying they
> have the problems that we have the solutions for.
> That's academia, so it won't work.
> So what we've got to do is to unlearn much of what we've
> learned, and then try to learn how to learn from the
> people.
>
> --Myles Horton, founder of the Highlander Center, in an
> interview with Bill Moyers, June 5, 1981 (Horton, 1983)

A policy brief on No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation declares that

"learning to read is an essential foundation for success in our society" (Kauerz, 2002, p.

1). Yet who designates and evaluates the meaning of success for students? What

members of society decide what and how students in public schools will learn to read?

Further, what does a lack of fundamental reading skills for economically, politically, and

academically disadvantaged teenagers say about the opportunities for "success" available

to this substantial group of young people? While the importance of students learning to

read is clear, the pedagogies employed to help secondary students become more literate

are widely contested (Kellner, 1998; Macedo, 1994; Shoenbach, Greenleaf, Cziko, &

Hurwitz, 1999; Shor, 1992; Shor & Pari, 1999a). The profusion of standardized tests,

scripted curriculums, and other "scientifically-based reading programs" (Kauertz, 2002,

p. 3) to ensure that children read at or above grade level reveals a narrow view of what it

means to be literate in our society.

Popular education (Foley, 1998; Horton, 2003; Torres, 1995), critical pedagogy, and critical literacy, as defined by educational theorists including Paulo Freire (2000), Peter McLaren (2007), Peter Giroux (1988), Michael Apple (2004), and educator and Highlander center founder Myles Horton (1990), offer emancipatory, student-centered versions of literacy instruction. These less conventional versions of teaching and learning literacy include political consciousness and a critical view of the world and the students' place in it (Freire & Macedo, 1997). This dissertation is born from the theory and practice of these and other theorists and educators. The study aims to work alongside students to develop a youth participatory action research (YPAR) project around a literacy class that helps students read both "the word and the world" (Freire & Macedo, 1997).

Background

Reading and Literacy

Empowering education (Shor, 1992) and critical literacy (Freire & Macedo, 1997) do not isolate the act of reading from literacy in general, or from a person's experience in the world. Much of the current No Child Left Behind policy and celebrated "scientific" educational research treats reading as a set of connected skills to be tested and acquired, such as phonological awareness, word recognition, fluency, and comprehension (Shavelson & Towne, 2002). This dissertation rejects this notion and adopts a theoretical framework based on the critical literacy notion of both reading and literacy as the "relationship between text and context," not a skill set made up "merely of decoding the

written word or language; rather, it is preceded by and intertwined with knowledge of the world" (Freire & Macedo, 1997, p. 29).

Clearly, a students' ability to decode and comprehend any text he or she comes across is an important part of creating this knowledge, and was not overlooked in the YPAR project conducted alongside students. In order to ensure that education is truly "the practice of freedom" (Freire, 2000, p. 81), it is inexcusable for any text to remain out of reach to young adults because of inequitable schooling. It is also crucial that the texts and contexts that students encounter in school are not solely those of the dominant language and culture. In the context of this dissertation, I contextualize reading as one element of a broader definition of literacy. Literacy, according to Freire and Macedo (1997) "becomes a meaningful construct to the degree that it is viewed as a set of practices that functions to either empower or disempower people" (p. 141).

Literacy Injustices

At the high school level, millions of students arrive each year unprepared for the work that will be required for graduation. According to a U.S. Department of Education study, "47% of Black and 46% of Hispanic 8th graders read below the basic level" (Adolescent Literacy Research Network, 2007), with "basic level" defined as having a literal understanding of 8th grade level texts and being able to make basic interpretations[1]

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[1] Literacy is traditionally defined as the ability to read, write, talk and speak in order to communicate, or the ability to produce and interpret text. Issues of "viewing, representing, and thinking" (Irving, Buehl, & Klemp, 2007, p.12), as well as the addition of media and other texts to what is "read" by literate people are included in more contemporary views of teaching and learning literacy. Teaching traditional literacy often includes instruction in the skills of phonological awareness, decoding, fluency, comprehension, and vocabulary. Some researchers argue that strategies for teaching

(National Centers for Reading Statistics, 2007). Eighth grade statistics illustrate qualitative literacy levels students possess just prior to enrollment in high school. The overrepresentation of students of color in groups of readers with low literacy levels continues at the high school level, as evidenced by the National Assessment of Educational Progress findings that the gap in reading proficiency between whites and minorities remains wide. While 43% of white students in 2005 read at or above the 'proficient' level, only 20% of "Hispanic" and 16% of "Black" students scored at the same level. While issues of test bias and lack of qualitative results remain an issue, these statistics provide some basis for the claim that literacy injustices persist in our current educational system. Viewing literacy itself as socially constructed and acquired through many more avenues than just schooling (Cook-Gumperz, 2006), though, requires that we also problematize the ideology of literacy. What kinds of literacy are valued most in the arena of school, and what then deems a student "far below basic" or even "illiterate?"

Our current system of widespread, high-stakes testing from kindergarten through 12th grade, based on the requirements of NCLB legislation, require reading a variety of instructional texts and responding to multiple choice questions on standardized assessments (Kauerz, 2002). Thus schools feel the pressure to prepare young people to decode and comprehend reading assessments above all other types of texts, including literature and students' own writing (Giroux & Schmidt, 2004). In stark contrast to the titular objectives of the act, No Child Left Behind seems to be widening, rather than

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secondary literacy to struggling readers should focus attention on subject-embedded comprehension rather than decoding or phonological awareness, much of which is mastered in the early grades (Shoenbach, et al., 1999).

narrowing, the achievement gap for African American and Latino/a students (Paul, 2004).

While the Reading First guidelines within NCLB legislation target elementary-age

students, adolescent literacy has been similarly affected, with a constant focus on

standardized testing, direct instruction, and quantitative, rather than qualitative, literacy

instruction (Conley & Hinchman, 2004). The standardization of curriculum and teaching

based on NCLB has created a widening gap between rich and poor, as well as privileging

demands of policymakers and the marketplace over the needs of students (Giroux &

Schmidt, 2004; Hunter & Bartee, 2003).

Harm to students is evident in what NCLB excludes: higher-order skills, a focus

on deep inquiry, and especially a space for students to give voice to their experiences and

contest the inequity of their worlds. As Giroux & Schmidt (2004) note, "While testing

has become a centerpiece of educational reform, there is nothing to address how student

achievement and learning are linked to the distribution of resources, power, and politics"

(p. 214). Particularly in this era of accountability and assessment, student empowerment

lies not simply in being able to comprehend texts and be initiated into the status quo, but

more importantly in understanding systemic inequities and having the ability to resist

them. Through a critical, emancipatory literacy curriculum, teachers can help students

transform the most detrimental aspects students encounter in the world of schools

(Shaull, 2000), the very aspects of schools that make students vulnerable to fail.

Who are the high school students with below-average reading scores, and what

impact does this deficit have on their future livelihood? A litany of "scientifically-based

reading research" (Kauerz, 2002, p. 3), including test results for high school students

reveal that an overwhelming number of poor students of color have below-average reading and writing skills. Children of immigrants, oftentimes entering schools with the label of "second language learner", are typically segregated from mainstream students and labeled "at-risk" if they start school speaking more Spanish than English (Halcón, 2001). Language-minority students continue to struggle to read at the high school level (National Centers for Reading Statistics, n.d.) while English only advocates (Halcón, 2001; Macedo, 2001) frequently win in a divisive battle against proponents of bilingualism and biliteracy in the classroom (Ruiz, 2001).

The students who have reached high school without strong reading, writing, and speaking abilities have been failed by a variety of social structures, including school. Yet we must resist labeling students and instead work with those young people to challenge the systems that created these circumstances. According to Margonis (1992), "the term *at risk* is a deficit conception that justifies neglecting the people involved" (p. 351). The constant testing and labeling of students only serves to further compartmentalize them and alert them of their failure, but neglects to address the true detriment of inferior literacy instruction. The cost of depressed literacy abilities is experienced by students themselves, and not just within the school walls. There is a direct link between low reading skills and increased chance of dropping out of high school (Adolescent Literacy Research Network, 2007; Slavin & Madden, 1999): 80 percent of students who drop out are struggling readers (Perie, Grig, & Donahue, 2005). These young adults are left behind at a time in our country's history when it is perilous to enter the world of work without a high school diploma (Christenson & Thurlow, 2004).

The vast numbers of students, particularly those from low socioeconomic backgrounds, second language learners, and youth of color, dropping out before graduating has become both a national crisis and a crisis of civil rights (Orfield, Losen, & Wald, 2004). Only two out of three high school students receive a diploma, and statistics are far worse for students from minority ethnic groups, particularly minority boys. On average, only about 50% of African American and Latino/a students graduate, and African American boys, the most vulnerable for school failure, have a graduation rate hovering around 43% (Orfield et al., 2004). According to Christle, Jolivette, & Nelson (2005), high school dropouts constitute 82% of the adult prison population. In considering the deleterious effects of leaving high school, including the perpetuation of poverty, unstable family units, and incarceration, the relationship between literacy and school success must be considered. Institutional deficits in schools push students out of school before they graduate, constituting an essential social justice issue for the educational community. These teenagers left behind are not currently being served by literacy programs focused on scripted curriculum or focused on lower-order thinking skills in constant test preparation lessons (McLaren, 2007; Reyes & Halcón 2001)

Beyond high school, literacy "plays a vital gatekeeping function in creating or limiting access to postsecondary education, which is essential to increasing the life chances of students" (Mercado, 2001, p. 168). Students cannot succeed in the current school structure without being able to read and understand texts across the curriculum and on standardized tests such as exit exams, yet NCLB does not include research on illiteracy as resistance to the oppression of dominant culture (McLaren, 2007) or view

student voice as an important part of literacy instruction. Instead, it defines the "scientific" basis for reading instruction and offers teacher-proof curriculums to help bolster below-basic students to levels required to pass mandated tests. Moreover, the critical reading and thinking skills that are not assessed on state tests, such as analyzing the social injustice of the data presented above, is out of reach to those students who are not able to comprehend texts at their grade level.

Much research has been done in the areas of literacy instruction and dropout prevention, and many critical theorists have positioned their arguments for literacy instruction that empowers the disenfranchised (Freire & Macedo, 1997; Jimenez, 1997; Jiménez, Garcia, & Pearson, 1996; Kellner, 1988; Kellner, 1998; Shor, 1992). In addition, there is a growing body of research and curriculum that offer practitioners examples of using Freirian critical literacy practices in the classroom (Shor, 1987; Christensen, 2000; Reyes & Halcón, 2000; Comber & Simpson, 2001). However, there remains a need for more youth participatory action research that engages students as co-researchers and elicits their perspectives on critical literacy instruction and classroom practices (Mitra, 2004; Oldfather, 1995; Peters, 1997). This study aims to bridge theory and practice with student voice and perspectives in the creation and assessment of a YPAR Critical Literacy Group at an alternative charter high school.

Authentic student voice will play a key role in the theoretical frame, methodology, and specific content of this study. Critics of mainstream student voice research argue that incorporating the words and participation of students in research has become a fad, and that rather than benefiting students through true engagement in the

problems they face in school, their voices are often co-opted in order to advance an adult agenda (Fielding, 2002; Mitra, 2004). At its worst, critics argue, mainstream student voice research "undermines rather than enhances empowerment" (Fielding, 2002, p. 287) if researchers take student's time and words during the research process and keep the results and benefits within the world of academia. These critics argue that the more controversial or oppositional student voices are often ignored, and that respondents in interviews are often guided and manipulated through narrow questions that do not address the true experiences or responses of student participants (Brooker & MacDonald, 1999; Fielding, 2002; Giroux, 1988; Miron & Lauria, 1998). Authentic student voice, on the other hand, offers a "dialogic alternative: speaking *with* rather than *for*" (Fielding, 2002, p. 295) students. In authentic student voice research, the researcher pays attention to issues of power and the dangers of student disempowerment, is open to criticism and debate, fights the impulse to control the process and outcomes, and consciously moves away from confining students to responses that support the status quo (Fielding, 2002). The student is ultimately at the center of what makes student voice authentic: they must actively engage in the research process as co-researchers and serve as leaders who "shape the subject, pace, and pattern of the research" (Fielding, 2002, p. 307).

In an effort to ensure both that the critical literacy YPAR project is co-developed and taught with students at Future Horizons Charter High School and that this research focuses on students' responses to the curriculum and strategies of the course, authentic engagement of student voice will be accomplished through "dialogic alternative" of the youth participatory action research process where students work alongside the teacher-

researcher as students, co-teachers, and co-researchers. Open-ended questions, student creation of topics for discussion, focus groups facilitated by students themselves, and student-run research projects will all be methodological responses to the issues of co-option critiqued in the literature about student voice.

Emancipatory critical literacy (Freire & Macedo, 1997) provides a framework for helping students think about the contexts in which they live while utilizing their lived experiences and histories as a starting point for literacy development. According to Freire, emancipatory literacy is "one of the major vehicles by which 'oppressed' people are able to participate in the sociohistorical transformation of their society" (Freire & Macedo, 1997, p. 29). This paradigm of literacy instruction responds to issues of social justice, as well as the moral responsibility of schools to lead students to high achievement so that they can improve their own circumstances and those of other oppressed people. The emancipatory effect of deep and critical reading skills cannot be overstated: without the ability to read and analyze texts and the world around them, there is no justice, social or otherwise, for low-achieving students (Freire & Macedo, 1997; Macedo, 1994).

Future Horizons Charter High School

Future Horizons Charter High School (from this point forward referred to by its acronym FHCHS) is the pseudonym I use for a network of small, independent study, continuation charter high schools, located in commercial spaces (mostly mini-mall storefronts) throughout California, where this research was conducted. Each school site, termed an FHCHS "site" serves approximately 200 students, with the entire charter network serving approximately 6,000 students per year across Southern California. The

student population varies from site to site in terms of socioeconomic status, ethnicity, and the quality of traditional high schools from which students hail. The variety of reasons for school leaving among FHCHS students include pregnancy, gang affiliation, expulsion, substance abuse, prolonged illness, and recent return from juvenile hall or rehabilitation centers, and vary among school sites. Although the students have diverse experiences that lead them to the school, all students at FHCHS lack credits to graduate and they enroll in the charter school days, months, or years after leaving traditional high school.

Upon enrollment at FHCHS, each student is assigned to a teacher, who acts as a counselor when assessing credits, assigning classes, or talking with students using strategies of motivational coaching. The teacher also tutors the students at biweekly appointments in the various subjects students need to complete in order to graduate. Students complete independent study work packets as they move through all required elements of the curriculum. Each teacher has a caseload of 55 students that she sees twice weekly in small groups of no more than five for an average of two hours.

Since influxes of students arrive at FHCHS without the reading skills needed to complete work independently, in April of 2007 FHCHS augmented its teaching staff with Literacy Specialists, of which I was the first. As Literacy Specialists, we work as tutors or run small groups for students struggling in one or both of the academic areas. This YPAR project was housed in the Literacy department, where I now serve as Literacy Coach, both teaching small groups of students and creating curriculum and training other Literacy Specialists across the network of charter schools.

This project took place at the North Valley site of FHCHS, where 83% of students are Latino/a, and 90% of Latino/a students are designated low-income, qualifying for free or reduced lunch because of a family income below the poverty line. The Latino/a students at the school are either first- or second- generation students, the majority of whom are from Mexico or Central America. The population at the North Valley site has a much higher proportion of older students with fewer credits earned towards graduation than students at the more affluent sites. There is also a larger population of students at this site than any other site in the charter network reading four to six grades below grade level and have been identified, on both the school's entrance exam and state-mandated tests, as "far-below basic" in reading. The YPAR Literacy Project ran with a group of 12 students who were partners in the creation, implementation, participation, and evaluation of a class based on concepts of critical literacy and empowering education. Students and I implemented this youth participatory action research project with the intent of creating a class that is replicable for students throughout the network of FHCHS charter schools. Students received credits towards graduation for their participation in the project.

Problem Statement

The lack of critical literacy skills has been utilized to further disempower students who are already oppressed by a system that often provides them a low-quality education. Paulo Freire defines his "pedagogy of the oppressed" as a "pedagogy which must be forged *with*, not *for*, the oppressed…in the incessant struggle to regain their humanity" (Freire, 2000, p. 48). In an era of school reform based on standards, accountability, and

punitive measures taken against students and schools that do not perform up to expectations, how can educators help students "regain their humanity"? Can elements of critical literacy (Freire & Macedo, 1997; Giroux, 1988; Shor, 1992), made tangible through a classroom-based experience with youth participatory action research, help students strengthen their critical and analytic skills? Would students learn not simply to read their worlds but begin to transform them?

The cultural reproduction (Bordieu, 1973) of literacy skills is evident at the microcosm of FHCHS. The school runs independent study sites in both affluent and low-income areas of Southern California. Eight sites in the Porres Valley serve students from the same school district, yet in comparatively much higher-income areas, the students nearly all score at or above grade level in reading. At the site in the North Valley, most students live below the poverty line and average reading scores are the lowest of the fourteen sites in the school's charter. "The starting point for the critique and transformation of the conditions of oppressive and inequitable moral and social regulation," (Dippo & Simon, 1986, p. 197) then, is the YPAR Critical Literacy Group[2] itself. This youth participatory action research, which centered on the voices of students and asked them to engage in and respond to practices of critical literacy, will symbiotically critique the current literacy practices at FHCHS and seek to transform them through the frameworks of critical pedagogy and critical literacy.

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[2] The students named the group after learning about the principles of critical literacy and youth participatory action research. I encouraged them to refer to the project as a "group" rather than a "class" as a way to change our perspective of how we viewed our work together. I wanted us to remove the teacher-student dynamic of typical classes, and to work together to change the space of the classroom to create a more democratic and emancipatory space.

A significant problem lies in the gulf between theory and practice, between the academy and the experiences of young people in schools. Critical pedagogy addresses the need for praxis in response to this disconnect. Myles Horton believed that in any true education it is "essential to start where the people are" (Horton & Freire, 1999, p. 99). He also agreed with Freire in a "dialectical" view of theory wherein "theory is always becoming" (p. 101). Correspondingly, this project aims to "make the road by walking" (Horton & Freire, 1999), in that student co-researchers themselves will create their own theories of effective literacy instruction. The student co-researchers challenged the notion that the students themselves "failed" to develop grade-level literacy skills, but instead followed Varenne and McDermott's (1999) assertion that the students themselves were failed: "In any schools, the successful and the failed are the specific products of long interactional sequences involving much work by many people (Varenne & McDermott, 1999, p. 14). Built on the foundations of critical pedagogy and critical literacy, the students and I used the YPAR Critical Literacy Group to "gnaw off the arm of the system a little bit" (Horton & Freire, 1999, p. 229) by questioning and challenging the systems and pedagogies that have categorized them "far below basic" in reading.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this youth participatory action research study was to engage 12 low-income Latino/a students who struggle to read at the high school level over a 4-month period as learners, co-teachers, and co-researchers. Alongside their adult ally, students created, implemented, and evaluated the curriculum and pedagogy of the YPAR

Critical Literacy Group. The perspectives of students at Future Horizons Charter High School (FHCHS) were central throughout the development and evaluation of a course for and by low-income Latino/a students with below basic reading skills at FHCHS.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this study is based on the foundation of 1) critical pedagogy (Giroux, 1988; Freire, 2000; McLaren, 2007), and the related theories of 2) critical literacy (Freire & Macedo, 1997; McLaren 2007), 3) bicultural education (Darder, 1991), 4) empowering education (Shor, 1992), and the notion of 5) popular education and Citizenship Schools put into practice at the Highlander Center (Horton & Freire, 1990). The methodology employed, namely working with students as co-researchers on a youth participatory action research project, is based on a multitude of emancipatory pedagogy translated into the realm of research (Freire, 1982). The "dialogic alternative: speaking *with* rather than *for*" students (Fielding, 2002, p. 295) is paramount not only in accessing students authentic voices, but also in facilitating their learning to think critically about their positionality within the political and social spheres where they live.

Social Reproduction and Resistance

As an educational theory, critical pedagogy has its roots in The Frankfurt School of critical theory and the work of Max Horkheimer and his contemporaries as a radical, emancipatory reinterpretation of Neo-Marxist theory (McLaren, 2007). Focusing on the centrality of class struggle, this social theory argues against the scientific notion that facts are "value-free" and rejects that society should remain "organized around wage labor,

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exchange relations, profit and accumulation" (Gibson, 1986, p. 209). Social reproduction sociologists Bowles and Gintis (2002) further indict education as a tool for the state to replicate the capitalist economic system, ensure inequality, and reproduce school failure and low-wage work for those at the bottom of the system (Bowles & Gintis, 2002). Bourdieu's (1973) theory of social reproduction posits that the education system reproduces a society's class structure when those students in the upper and middle classes enter school with more cultural capital than those in the lower classes.

This theory also posits that the education system is designed to reproduce social inequality, supporting the concept of literacy injustices that purposefully impact some groups more than others. Literacy itself is value-laden and the assessments of "adequate" literacy institutionalized (Cook-Gumperz, 2006), outside the control of students themselves and part of the overall reproduction of class and a caste system within schools. Yet resistance theory frames social reproduction differently, viewing much of students' refusal to submit to the structures of school and expectations of their learning as a rejection of the dominant society (McLaren, 2007).

Critical Pedagogy

The theory of critical pedagogy offers educational solutions against the destructive power of oppression and hegemony. Critical pedagogy contextualizes education and schools as "part of the existing social and political fabric that characterizes the class-driven dominant society" (McLaren, 2007, p. 185). In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2000), Paulo Freire describes his "'banking' concept of education" (p. 72) as traditional pedagogy that places the teacher as the producer and communicator of

knowledge, which the students must "receive, file and store" (p. 72). This type of education leaves the oppressed students with no access to true "creativity, transformation, [or] knowledge," (p. 72) thus denied their essential humanness. In Freire's notion of emancipatory education, teachers and students must enter into a partnership of knowledge-building and expression, and liberation is described as a "praxis: the action and reflection of men and women upon their world in order to transform it" (p. 79).

Critical Literacy

Critical pedagogy is tied intimately with the use and development of language and literacy. Furthermore, Freire's theory of critical literacy is the framework that informs many aspects of the YPAR Critical Literacy Group at FHCHS, as well as the classroom strategies and teaching methods that will be used to communicate ideas and dialogue with students. According to Freire, critical literacy needs to:

> develop pedagogical practices in which the battle to make sense of one's
>
> life reaffirms and furthers the need for teachers and students to recover
>
> their own voices so they can retell their own histories and in so doing
>
> 'check and criticize the history [they] are told against the one [they] have
>
> lived' (Freire & Macedo, 1997, p. 15).

Thus critical literacy does not focus simply on the development of decoding and comprehension skills for reading, but students of critical literacy must "read the word and the world" (Freire & Macedo, 1997), grounding their acquisition of literacy skills through their own life experiences and social contexts, while simultaneously developing a critical consciousness, or "*conscientização*"(Freire, 2000, p. 67). The ultimate goal of critical

literacy is to help students become empowered to analyze their position in society and, if they choose, to create a more just social system.

Critical pedagogy and critical literacy offer ideas intended to be applied in practice. Suggestions for texts or classroom practices that could be used to implement a true critical pedagogy in the schoolhouse are found in the frameworks of critical bicultural pedagogy (Darder, 1991), Shor's (1992) descriptions of "empowering education" used with community college students, and Citizenship Schools (Horton & Freire, 1990; Horton, Kohl, & Kohl, 1990), described briefly below but explored in greater detail in Chapter II.

Bicultural Education and Empowering Education

Using critical pedagogy as the foundation, Darder expands theory to reach the classroom in a discussion of language, authority, and curriculum that all work towards "cultural democracy in the classroom" (1991, p. 99). Critical bicultural education theory suits the work of the YPAR Critical Literacy Group at FHCHS, as the majority of students at the school have bicultural identities as Latino/a students: all are either first- or second- generation students with families from Mexico or Central America.

Ira Shor (1992) defines his concept of empowering education as "critical teaching for social change" (p. 1) While steeped in critical education theory, Shor's writing focuses on the practice of teaching and the realities of classrooms, specifically those in the Writing department at a community college in the South Bronx. Shor (1992) describes problem-posing, generative themes in classrooms, and the learning process of students from the perspective of an educator, thus providing practical pedagogy:

strategies that could be implemented in any classroom. Although Shor is a college professor, his suggestions for critical teaching are applied in this study to older high school students typically found at alternative schools like FHCHS.

Popular Education and Citizenship Schools

The work of Myles Horton at the Highlander Center and its Citizenship Schools is a third practicable framework for the YPAR Critical Literacy Group and this youth participatory action research study. The Highlander Center began in 1932 as a leadership training and community center, first for workers in the labor movement, and later playing a key educational role in the Civil Rights Movement. Horton's commitment to work outside a government system, reject academia, and focus his efforts on practice stemming from the needs of the people, contrast some of Freire's work within government systems and academic circles. Yet their theoretical similarities far outweighed their differences, and their common goal of emancipatory education for working people and "the linking of literacy and enfranchisement" (Horton & Freire, 1990, p. xxvii) led them to "speak" a book together, *We Make the Road by Walking* (1990). As an educator and activist, Horton aligns himself with the concepts of critical pedagogy and critical literacy, while rejecting theory and academia and choosing instead to demonstrate the possibility of a grassroots, popular movement in the United States (Horton, Kohl, & Kohl, 1990). The curriculum of Citizenship Schools will be explored both in the theoretical framework of the study and with students during the YPAR Critical Literacy Group.

Horton focused deliberately on adult education, explaining:

Adults run society. Students don't run society. They have very little

say within the schools let alone…the larger society. So I decided I

wanted to deal with the people who had the power, if they wanted to

use it, to change society, because I was interested in changing

society (Horton & Freire, 1990, p. 183)

Although later in his life Horton adapted his philosophy to include the education of

young people (Kohl, 1991), as necessary for achieving a "new social order" (Horton &

Freire, 1990, p. xxiii) based on justice and liberation, the majority of Horton's career was

intentionally focused on adults. One of the aims of this project is to investigate the

usefulness of the curriculum of the Citizenship Schools and Horton's educational

philosophies of treating learners with respect and building literacy programs around

students' needs and interests with older high school students. The students will assess

their experiences with the class as a means of challenging the injustice of younger

students having "very little say" in schools and society.

Classroom Practice

In addition to the theoretical frameworks of Freire, McLaren, Darder, Shor, and

Horton, classroom practitioners such as Linda Christensen (2000) and Jennifer

McCormick (2004), as well as youth development curricula like Youth Involved in

Leadership and Learning (Hofstedt & Brink, 2008) are incorporated in this project.

Alongside the practitioners are groups such as Rethinking Schools, committed to a return

to "common schools" (Lowe, Peterson, Levine, & Tenorio, 1995) and WestEd's Reading

Apprenticeship (Shoenbach et al., 1999), which provides practical ideas for teaching struggling secondary readers. Rethinking Schools and WestEd's focus on metacognition and working with students to create their own texts and ownership over students' ideas fits fluidly into the theories of both critical pedagogy and Freire's critical literacy framework.

Research Questions

The research questions driving this youth participatory action research (YPAR) study are as follows:

1. According to low-income Latino/a high school students with a history of school failure and below basic reading levels, what kind of critical literacy instruction would impact their literacy experiences in school?

2. In what ways do the curriculum, pedagogy, and methods of the YPAR Critical Literacy Group impact students' perceptions of themselves and experiences with reading, both within the class context and their positionality in the larger community?

3. In what ways does this YPAR Critical Literacy Group project create opportunities for transformation for students, teachers, and the school?

Methods

The researcher-researched relationship has the potential to mirror the teacher-student relationship, both negatively and positively. In what Freire (2000) terms a "banking" approach to education, teachers "fill" students with knowledge and students

are responsible only for "receiving, filing, and storing the deposits" (p. 72). There is no emancipation for the oppressed, the students, or the oppressor, the teacher, in this type of education. Similarly, a banking model of research might collect data on students through observations, questions, and assessments created by the researcher, leaving the group or individual researched without any active participation in the process. The notion of research as a "colonizing" construct with parallels to European colonization of indigenous peoples is summed up by Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) as "they came, they saw, they named, they claimed" (p. 80) Emancipatory research, then, like emancipatory literacy (Freire & Macedo, 1997) would not co-opt the words and ideas of students (Fielding, 2002; Mitra, 2004). Instead, the method of youth participatory action research (referred to by its common acronym, YPAR) engages students in research questions, outcomes, and creation of curriculum in order to ensure that marginalized students' experiences of schooling and research about education is transformative rather than oppressive.

Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR)

Peters (1997) interrogates traditional research methods when he asks:

If the researcher stands to gain more from a study of other peoples' lives than the people whose lives are studied, how much might the people learn if they were also the researchers? Moreover, how much more might they learn if the focus of their inquiry was on their own lived experiences? (p. 63).

The use of youth participatory action research (YPAR) for this study allowed for true collaboration between the students and the teacher as the whole group acts as researchers. In addition, learning took place for both the teacher/researcher and the students themselves, who were involved in all aspects of creating, implementing, and researching the class as it evolved.

PAR is an extension of Latin American critical pedagogy theorists, with Freire at their center (Torres, 1995). Freire's 1982 article "Creating Alternative Research Methods: Learning to Do it By Doing it" will serve as the launch pad to connect the theoretical framework of this study to its methodology in Chapter 3. PAR as a methodology is in-line with Freire's (2000) concept of "praxis: the action and reflection of men and women upon their world in order to transform it" (p. 79). Through simultaneously acting and reflecting upon the YPAR Critical Literacy Group in the looped-learning cycle of PAR, the class of student-researchers and teacher-researcher were able to offer suggestions for more transformative literacy pedagogy in the alternative school environment of FHCHS.

As envisioned by Kemmis and McTaggart (2000), PAR "opens communicative space between participants" (p. 578), aligning this study with the goal of a more empowering classroom environment among students and their teacher. In addition, at its best, participant action research is 1) "self-reflective and cyclical" (p. 566), 2) a social process, 3) participatory, 4) "practical and collaborative", 5) "critical", 6) "reflexive and dialectical" (p. 567), and 7) "aims to transform both theory and practice" (p. 568). These seven features highlighted by Kemmis and McTaggart will served as the methodological foundation for the type of youth participatory action research done in this study.

Participants

Since "the key to qualitative sampling is choosing those cases from which one can learn the most" (Krathwohl & Smith, 2005, p. 127), this study assumes that students with reading struggles will learn the most from a YPAR Critical Literacy Group, and that their assessment of what type of class will lead to their transformation will be most valuable for future classes. Since students with the lowest reading comprehension scores are also those most silenced academically (Fine, 1991; Kroeger et al., 2004), selecting students that have become low-performing readers and focusing on their ideas and words in a PAR project had both a methodological and student-empowerment aim.

Low-performing readers at the North Valley Site of FHCHS were identified using the school's requisite EdPerformance test[3] as a baseline, as well as teacher reports about students who struggle with comprehension of independent study curriculum and student self-assessments about reading comprehension and confidence. The project and its aims were explained to the identified group of students and their parents through both in-person and telephone contact, and I went over the parent consent form (see Appendix A) and student assent form (see Appendix B) with students and their parents. Participation was voluntary and limited to 12 students; only those students interested in participating in the design and research of the class took the course, for which they received five elective credits. The YPAR Critical Literacy Group took place over a 4-month period, from July

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[3] FHCHS uses Scantron's EdPerformance test, an online reading comprehension test that students complete prior to enrollment in the program. They must score a minimum of 2500, approximately 4th grade reading, in order to enroll in the program. Scoring between 2500 and 2800 designates students as "far-below grade level" in reading, and teachers assign them sheltered classes. The students scoring in the 2500-2800 group will be the ones targeted for this study.

through October 2008. The first month (July) was spent co-creating and researching the basis for the class. Since students attend FHCHS year-round, it was possible for the class to be conducted in the summer months of July, and August, as well as September and October.

The small, autonomous nature of the school, the lack of bureaucracy in creating classes and assignment credits, and the encouragement of teacher-leaders by the administration all make FHCHS an ideal site for conducting this YPAR project. Several FHCHS administrators, including the Superintendent and Area Supervisor for the North Valley Site, agreed to consider the findings of this study in the future implementation of reading classes at the school. Administrators used both quantitative (EdPerformance and CAHSEE passage rates) as well as qualitative (student and parent evaluations, student work portfolios, curriculum-embedded authentic assessments, interviews, etc.) data produced during the project in evaluating my work and the program. The support of administrators and teachers is crucial if our work on the project is to have a lasting effect on the curriculum and pedagogy of the literacy program at FHCHS. The unique nature of the school environment and the capacity for research to effect change at FHCHS will be explored further in chapter 3.

Method of Data Collection

I conducted student co-researcher interviews with the YPAR Critical Literacy Group, using a semi-structured interview protocol with open-ended questions for preliminary interviews, mid-process interviews, and final interview. These are provided in appendices. Focus groups with the student co-researchers were also employed. I was a

participant observer in the class, serving as both the principal researcher and as a learner while we looked critically at a variety of texts chosen by the students. I used a variety of data collected through class observations, interviews, student reflections and projects, and my own journaling. Class observations of students working alone and together were completed using note-taking and both audio and video recording methods. While participating in the group discussion, I used audiotape to record the lesson and created field notes later, attending to whether my teaching fulfilled the expectations of a critical literacy instructor and other emerging themes. The student co-researchers and I used a critical literacy observation protocol (see Appendix K) at various times over the course of our group to evaluate whether the work we were doing together fulfilled the descriptions of critical literacy that we were learning.

I conducted interviews with student co-researchers in addition to student focus groups before (see Appendix G), during (see Appendix H), and after (see Appendix I) the 4-month span of the class. The questions for both interviews and focus groups were created with the student co-researchers, fulfilling both an educational and research goal. Inquiry and question-making is a large part of the comprehension strategies we focused on in the group; likewise I aimed for their authentic voices to be present in all aspects of this dissertation. Document review included the course syllabus and curriculum created with the students, written student work, and the written reflections and research presentations of students in the YPAR Critical Literacy Group.

Since, in effective PAR projects, "action is used to change things" (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000, p. 560), the students and did not simply evaluate whether our

experience together transformed the twelve student co-researchers' literacy practice and improved their ability to read texts and the world, but also to apply this learning for future use with other students in other classes. Using the "spiral of self-reflective cycles" that include "planning, acting, observing, reflecting, and replanning" (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000, p. 563), we adopted this fluidity of action and reflection to propose a new way of approaching literacy at our school.

<div align="center">Significance of the Study</div>

Freire reminds us that "the educator must help learners get involved in planning education, help them create the critical capacity to consider and participate in the direction and dreams of education" (Freire & Macedo, 1997, p. 139). In order for literacy instruction to be empowering, we must equip students with the critical skills necessary to analyze their experiences in schools and define their role in improving their ability to read both texts and their own contexts (Freire & Macedo, 1997).

This research is significant because it created spaces of true participation and expression of voice for students traditionally subordinated and excluded from curriculum-making and evaluation of literacy practices. Together, we explored the capacity of critical literacy and YPAR to transform both student-teacher and teacher-student. In its attempt to bridge theory and research, as well as the student-teacher and researcher-researched divide, this research also aimed to enlighten other students and educators about the possibility of expanding the traditional notions of literacy pedagogy to include critical literacy.

Most of the high school students with whom I have worked are distinctly aware of both the importance of reading and the shame and powerlessness that come with low reading skills. The title of this dissertation comes from the homework assignment of one of my former literacy students. Referring to the reading struggles of a character in a story, he wrote, "If you don't read, it is like if you don't exist." I hear similar responses in class when we discuss students' own reading skills. Students feel isolated and embarrassed by reading problems, and they are often ashamed to ask for help. They also see how reading allows them access into the worlds of higher education and work, worlds they often value but do not envision as realistic possibilities for their futures. This study is significant in that it responds to real problems students face and asks for their true voices to be heard regarding to one response—the YPAR Critical Literacy Group—to the problem of their low reading comprehension skills.

This project aimed to portray the voices of students engaged in a new course at their alternative high school. In addition, it should serve as a resource for teachers and administrators in low-income, urban schools looking to develop courses for struggling readers. The data collected in this case study answers whether a course based on the principals of critical literacy as defined by Freire (Freire & Macedo, 1997) and elaborated by other scholars and practitioners (Comber & Simpson, 2001; Reyes & Halcón, 2001; Kellner, 1988; Kellner, 1998) had a transformative power on the group and on individual students and on me.

Another contribution this project aims to make to the field is in the area of student voice and youth as co-researchers. There have been many studies of the impact of critical

literacy on groups of school-aged students (Christensen, 2000; McCormick, 2004; Shor & Pari, 1999b) as well as investigations of the impact of student voice on youth development (Brooker & MacDonald, 1999; Fielding, 2002; Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002; Kroeger et al., 2004; Miron & Lauria, 1998; Mitra, 2004), but there are relatively few studies that link critical literacy and involvement in a YPAR project to investigate the ability of high school students to read and read their worlds[4].

The final area that this study plans to address is the unique environment of an alternative independent study charter school serving mostly students who have already left high school at least once before. There is very little research on independent study schools, and with growing enrollment rates and new FHCHS school sites being developed every year, there is evidence that non-traditional school environments are becoming an option for more students every year (Conley & Hinchman, 2004; EdReform, n.d.; Hill, 2007). Focusing on a small group of students in this alternative school environment, this study looks at the power of a non-traditional education practice: critical literacy, and the potential transformative power it could have on the group.

Finally, the creation and analysis of the critical literacy curriculum at FHCS that utilizes students' lived experiences as both the texts and contexts for the course serves as an opportunity to empower both teachers and students in development of literacy and

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[4] One exception is Oldfather's (1995) study "Songs 'come back most to them;: Students' experience as researchers." However, this study was longitudinal and focused to a small degree on literacy, centering more on how work as co-researchers empowered the students to continue their PAR project for many years. Another exception are the projects described in *Revolutionizing Education: Youth Participatory Action Research in Motion* (Cammarota & Fine, 2008), which focuses more on youth development than critical literacy.

literacy curriculum. If the students involved in this research achieved significant qualitative gains in comprehension, critical thinking, and participation through this literacy curriculum, results of this research will have more far-reaching impact on the methods of literacy instruction at FHCHS.

Organization of the Study

This YPAR project, completed in collaboration with my students, aims to test critical literacy theory in the practical realm of the classroom and discover whether or not the practices will help them become stronger readers of both written and spoken words and the students' worlds. Chapter 2 reviews the literature on critical pedagogy, critical literacy, and related theories and pedagogical application based on both. Chapter 3 focuses on the youth participatory action research methodology employed in this student-centered project. Chapter Four explores the main findings from emerging themes in the project. Chapter 5 includes an analysis of the findings, focused on the three research questions highlighted in this chapter as well as the emergent themes discovered. Chapter Five ends with a discussion and implications section, as well as recommendations for further research of YPAR critical literacy instruction with student co-researchers.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Introduction: "Standing on Shoulders"

This project centered on the daily life of student co-researchers and their adult

ally in a classroom. Yet running beneath the activity of the classroom were research

questions and the theoretical frameworks, research studies, and descriptions of literacy

injustices that make up this review of literature. Just as the students in the YPAR Critical

Literacy Group at Future Horizons Charter High School (FHCHS) learned about the

history of critical pedagogy literacy and the theorists involved in its inception and

evolution, so too must readers of this study be presented with the foundations from which

the YPAR Critical Literacy Group was built.

The point of departure for of this review of the literature is a theoretical

framework of critical pedagogy. The review then moves to the theoretical underpinnings

of critical literacy as defined by Paulo Freire and Donaldo Macedo (1997) and advanced

by Henry Giroux (2006) and Ira Shor (1992), as well as issues of student voice and

metacognition in the research process. Following the broader frameworks of critical

pedagogy and critical literacy, a variety of studies and curriculums based on critical

classroom practices grounded the day-to-day classroom activities of the study with a

foundation in the literature.

Moving into more specific literature related to FHCHS and the students involved

in the study, the review describes areas of more traditional secondary literacy practices

for low-income Latino/a students, as well as No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation

and its effect on classroom literacy practices. The final section of this chapter

contextualizes FHCHS, looking at definitions of alternative programs and a brief history

of the charter school movement. Positioning the study more specifically in the type of

school and population of student FHCHS serves, a new argument placing alternative

charter high school students within the group of "adult learners" described by Paulo

Freire (1997), Myles Horton (2003), and Ira Shor (1992) is advanced.

<center>Theoretical Framework</center>

Critical Pedagogy: "Theory is always becoming"

In the book *We Make the Road by Walking: Conversations on Education and

Social Change* (Horton & Freire,1990), Myles Horton, educator and founder of the

Highlander School in the American South and Paulo Freire, Brazilian educator and

critical theorist, dialogue about education and its role in social change. Discussing

authenticity of theory, both men refer to the dialectical nature of theoretical knowledge

prompting Freire to say, "Theory is always becoming" (p. 101). It is with the spirit of

unfixed and transformative knowledge that the theoretical framework for this project is

defined.

Critical pedagogy was born of multiple international strands and influences,

without one concrete source or birth date (Darder, Baltodano, & Torres, 2009). Although

intimately connected to many radical education theories and notions of democratic

classrooms, there is no uniform movement of critical pedagogy, but rather a common

<center>32</center>

objective: "to empower the powerless and transform existing social inequities and injustices" (McLaren, 2007, p. 186). Theoretical roots of critical pedagogy in the Frankfurt school of critical social theory are widely established (Darder et al., 2009; McLaren, 2007) included a Marxian analysis of class struggle and an alternative to the scientific notion that facts and knowledge are subjective (McLaren, 2007).

Myles Horton. There are American forbearers to social reconstructivism, such as John Dewey in the early 1900s and Myles Horton in the 1930s and 1940s (Darder et al., 2009). Dewey's radical notions of school as an "embryonic society" (Dewey, 1915, p. 13) that ought to reflect and encourage a just and egalitarian democracy (in all notions of democracy, not simply as a form of government) helped lay the groundwork for much of the progressive pedagogy that followed (McLaren, 2007). According to McLaren (2007), contemporary critical pedagogy, as opposed to a "reappropriated" liberal perspective of education, "allows us to scrutinize schooling more insistently in terms of race, class, power, and gender" (p. 189).

Myles Horton's "pedagogy of questioning and dialogue" (Jacobs, 2003, xiii), and his unique involvement in the education of civil rights leaders and the civil rights movement, was grounded in popular education and the notion that activism and education had to begin and end with the people (Darder et al., 2009; Jacobs, 2003). According to Horton, imposing theories or ideas on people is futile and oppressive. He concluded, "For people to be really free they must have the power to make decisions about their lives, so that they can acquire knowledge as tools to change society" (Horton, 1983, p. 119). This insistence on following the needs and honoring the voices of economically- and socially-

oppressed people is echoed in the contemporary resolve within critical pedagogy on

student voice (Brooker & MacDonald, 1999; Christensen, 2000; Mitra, 2004),

participatory action research (Masters, 1995; Peters, 1997; Udas, 1998; Kemmis &

McTaggart, 2005; James, Milenkiewicz, & Bucknam, 2008), and youth participatory

action research (YPAR) (Checkoway & Gutiérrez, 2006; Cammarota & Fine, 2008) all of

which are at the center of this research.

  Freire and the elements of critical pedagogy. Brazilian educator Paulo Freire is

credited as the most influential theorist of critical pedagogy (Darder, Baltodano, &

Torres, 2009; McLaren 2007) and the founder of the practices of critical teaching and

learning (Shor, 1992; Shor & Pari, 1999a; Bartlett, 2005). Among Freire's influential

ideas were that of emancipatory education for the oppressed (Freire, 2000) versus the

traditional "banking" approach to education in which the teacher produces and

communicates knowledge which is deposited into students to "receive, file, and store"

(Freire, 2000, p. 72). In Freire's notion of emancipatory education, the students and

teachers enter into a partnership of meaning-making. Freire also saw schooling as a

political act, with the capacity to either oppress or liberate (Freire, 2000; McLaren, 2007;

Darder et al., 2009). As such, he encouraged educators to work towards an emancipatory

pedagogy, claiming "instead of reproducing the dominant ideology, an educator can

denounce it, taking a risk of course" (Horton & Freire, 1990, p. 118). Empowering

students and teachers to fight domination within the political act of education played a

major role in Freire's involvement with literacy campaigns in Brazil, both before and

after his forced exile from his country, and in Chile, Guinea Bissau, and Mozambique, as

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well as his philosophical work in education (Horton & Freire, 1990; Freire, 1992; Freire, 2000).

Two other Freirian critical pedagogy concepts that featured prominently in this study and the research conducted with students in the YPAR Critical Literacy Group are the concepts of "praxis" and dialogue. According to Freire (2000), "there is no transformation without action" (p. 87). Theorizing is hollow, therefore, without action and reflection in the real world, or what Freire refers to as "praxis: the action and reflection of men and women upon their world in order to transform it" (p. 79). Likewise, Freire viewed activism void of theory is pure verbalism (2000). The idea of praxis corresponds with the methodology of this study: youth participatory action research (YPAR). Student co-researchers learned to transform the classroom through an investigation and reflection on their traditional literacy practices.

Dialogue is another key concept that Freire explores in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2000) within his concept of "reading the word and the world" (Freire & Macedo, 1997) reciprocally among those who wish to change it. An extension of the rejection of "banking" concepts of education, Freire viewed dialogue as "the encounter in which the united reflection and action of the dialoguers are addressed to the world which is to be transformed and humanized" (2000, p. 89). Russian philosopher Bakhtin's (1981) discussion of "ideological becoming" included the idea that all learning derives from social interaction and dialogue. Bakhtin saw conflict and contention among members of a dialogue to be the most effective in promoting the acquisition of language and knowledge. The echo of critical pedagogy in Bakhtin's writings has led educational

theorists to apply his philosophy to critical literacy and language acquisition research (Ball & Freedman, 2004; Norton & Toohey, 2004).

The critical pedagogical notion of dialogue was incorporated into the research methods of the study, as well as techniques of dialogic teaching and problem-posing pedagogy. Group interviews, as well as classroom dialogue, become the data by which we will discover the practicable effects of critical literacy in the classroom. Two of Freire's North American mentees, Antonia Darder and Donaldo Macedo, advanced notions of bicultural pedagogy (Darder, 1991) and critical literacy (Freire & Macedo, 1997) based on many of Freire's ideas.

Giroux, Apple, and McLaren. Other founders of the critical pedagogy movement are Henry Giroux, Michael Apple, and Peter McLaren. Although critical pedagogy is theorized and practiced by many authors and educators worldwide, these three American theorists and educators created some of the seminal critical pedagogy works. Their writings serve to inform the foundations for the YPAR Critical Literacy Group at FHCHS, as they write often of the application of critical pedagogy in the North American context.

Henry Giroux was the first author to use the term "critical pedagogy" in a textbook (Darder et al., 2009). Like Freire and Macedo, Giroux also provides a clear thematic link between critical pedagogy and critical literacy in his writings. "Literacy," Giroux states, "as discursive intervention is an essential step toward not only a broader notion of self-representation, but also a more global notion of agency and democracy" (2006, p. 191). His view of literacy echoes Freire's: at its best, literacy has the capacity

to be emancipatory and counter domination (Freire & Macedo, 1997; Giroux 1988; Giroux, 2006). Critical literacy offers a critical education strategy based in the theory of critical pedagogy, and will be explored in the following section. Giroux also offers a Neo-Marxian-inspired view of radical education and resistance theory, insisting that schools cannot alone create a more just society. As sites of reproduction and possible resistance, however, Giroux argues that the teacher-student relationship must help schools become critical so that they may move towards being emancipatory sites for students (Giroux, 2006).

Michael Apple is another theorist and educator whose critical pedagogy work informs the theoretical framework of this project. Apple's discussions of "hidden curriculum" (Beyer & Apple, 1988), "official knowledge" (Apple, 1999, p. 22), and the ways in which class and cultural power manifest themselves in the lives of teachers students in schools (Apple, 1999) all figure prominently in the critical view of literacy in an alternative school that this project took. The "official knowledge" promoted in scripted curriculums and assessed by constant mandatory tests in NCLB legislation were called into question through alternative pedagogy in this project; students learned about Apple's thoughts on "hidden curriculum" and analyzed their traditional school curriculum to see if they see evidence of it in their own lives. In addition, his commitment towards clarity of expression and inclusion of practitioners in the development of theory finds special relevance in this youth participatory action research project. Discussing conflicts among theorists, Apple (1999) states:

We must balance theoretical elegance with a commitment to do a number

of other things. We need to have respect for the actual daily lives and

insights of people in the institutions of schooling and in communities and

in social movements who are often struggling mightily in tremendously

difficult conditions (p. 19).

This promotion of critical theory as a real-life phenomenon that includes the

experiences of student and teacher practitioners relates closely to the actions taken

by myself and the student co-researchers in this project.

McLaren (2007) extends his notion of critical pedagogy and radical education to

globalization and the deleterious effects of capitalism on working people. His critical

pedagogy focuses on the "need to create a socialist alternative based on radical

humanism" (2007, p. 295). Referring to NCLB legislation as an "attack by the Bush

administration on public schools" (p. 302), McLaren promotes a radical critical

pedagogy, and criticizes American "so-called progressive, critical classrooms" for

promoting "an ersatz critical pedagogy, a domesticated approach to Freirian teaching that

stresses the centrality of engaging student experiences and histories" (p. 302). This

critique is evidenced in the promotion of "critical thinking" and accessing schema

throughout standardized curriculum, without the goal of helping students truly "read" or

transform the world that keeps them at the bottom of a failing system. During this project,

efforts were made to engage students as true co-researchers and investigators into literacy

practices, rather than diluting the exposure to true critical pedagogy and critical literacy.

Critical Literacy: "What is needed and what is possible"

  Early roots. Critical literacy has its roots in Paulo Freire's work in adult literacy and popular education in Brazil. First as the director of the Movimento de Cultura Popular (MCP), an adult education program in Recife, Brazil, and later as the head of the National Literacy Program just prior to his exile in 1964, Freire was developing his philosophy of critical literacy (Horton & Freire, 1990). In its first incarnation, Freire worked with an adult education of Brazilian peasants who were not permitted to vote unless they were literate. He developed a method of using "generative words" (Shor, 1987, p. 47) to teach literacy. Beginning with the students' everyday life as a starting point, the preliterate students in Brazil brought words such as "slum, vote, land, food, work, [and] salary" (Shor, p. 48) to a discussion. Then, using a process called "codification" (Horton & Freire, 1990, p. 89), common words typical in the learners' culture are broken down into their component syllables. Utilizing the individual's own lived experience as a starting point, Freirian critical literacy then provides students "the power to critique and act on their conditions (Shor, 1987).

  Critical literacy in the U.S. context. Freire himself was insistent that his experiences in Brazil were applicable outside of the South American and developing world, and evidenced The Highlander Center and the work of Myles Horton as proof that "the ideas apply to the first world too" (Horton & Freire, 1990, p. xvi). Freire was not alone. Ira Shor believed that the work of Freire could be adapted for the American context and that "questions of dialogic pedagogy, cultural democracy, critical awareness, and structural perception are urgently relevant in this technically advanced culture"

(Shor, 1980, p. 127). Specifically, Shor saw how critical literacy and the generative theme approach would be powerful and emancipatory, even with students who were technically able to read and write (Shor, 1992).

In *Life in Schools* (2006), Peter McLaren identifies mass illiteracy in the United States as a form of resistance against the "relentless logic of consumerism and privatization" (p. 44) and offers a form of critical literacy that "frames reading and writing in terms of moral and political decision-making." Rather than defining literacy, as NCLB does, within the ability to read "functionally," with a focus on "workplace documents" (NCLB Policy Brief), or "to read advertisements and become better consumers," McLaren (2007) advocates a critical literacy that "links language competency to acquiring analytical skills that empower individuals to challenge the status quo" (p. 44).

Traditional Literacy Instruction

Comprehension Skills: Reading the Word

Metacognition, the study of "what readers know about themselves, the task of reading, and various reading strategies" (Jiménez et al., 1996, p. 93) is at the center of many reading theories and instructional programs that focus on the perspective students bring to the texts they read (Brooker, & MacDonald, 1999; Shoenbach et al., 1999; Reyes & Halcón, 2001; Leslie & Caldwell, 2006). Through the Reading Apprenticeship framework, approved for secondary literacy instruction by NCLB and chosen by Future Horizons Charter High School (FHCHS) to instruct struggling readers, metacognition is

explicitly taught as part of an active reading strategy curriculum, where the student learns to notice and articulate "mental processes of which a reader can be explicitly aware and therefore can control" (Shoenbach et al., p. 58). Employing this structure, teachers encourage students to "Think Aloud" when reading a text (Shoenbach et al.), making the invisible processes of reading apparent to both students and teachers. The teacher "apprentices" a student, making his or her own reading strategies visible for students to model.

While this model takes first steps in empowering students—their connections, clarifications, and questions are central to the reading of every text—student voice is absent in curriculum-making and evaluation is lacking. Curriculum-making is generally considered the role of teachers and other adult experts, and can end up marginalizing the voices of students (Brooker & MacDonald, 1999). In contrast, Freirian critical pedagogy sees the learner as central to the curriculum- and meaning-making processes. According to Freire and Macedo (1997), "the educator must help learners get involved in planning education, help them create the critical capacity to consider and participate in the direction and dreams of education" (p. 139). Literacy instruction in this context places students and their voices at the center. Active participation in meaning-making through the self-study of metacognition allows students to find themselves reflected in the curriculum; critical literacy incorporates this strategy but takes the next step of ensuring a "dialogic alternative" to literacy instruction, where we as teachers and researchers are "speaking *with* rather than for" their students (Fielding, 2002, p. 295).

Secondary Literacy and NCLB

While No Child Left Behind (NCLB)-approved methods for teaching secondary learners with below-grade level reading skills include programs such as Reading Apprenticeship, it also includes scripted curriculum and phonics-based instruction in the lower grades through the program Open Court (Kauerz, 2002). The commitment to "systematic, empirical methods that draw on observation or experiment" (Kauerz, 2002 p. 3) for teaching reading to younger students still leaves 46% of Latino/a students entering high school without the basic reading skills required to read the texts that they will be expected to comprehend and interpret before completing 9th grade (Adolescent Literacy Research Network, 2007). NCLB does not adopt constructivist alternatives to teaching reading or Freirian literacy approaches (McLaren, 2007) that would allow students to generate relevant words, or for teachers and students to rely on methods of codification to break down words into their proponent syllables in a true student-centered form of literacy practice. NCLB literacy legislation privileges "scientifically-based reading research" (Kauerz, 2002, p. 3) and the corporate interests that mandated curricula and assessments serve (Metcalf, 2002) over all else, including student voice and critical literacy research.

This research begins with the assumption that student participation in both creation and evaluation of curriculum serves to empower them to reach their potentials in school. We already know that "voice is important because students who perform poorly in school tend to be silent—or worse, pushed out of the school system" (Kroeger et al., 2004, p. 52), and the positive impact of student involvement in school decision-making

and curriculum decisions have been established by several case studies (Comber & Simpson, 2001; Fielding, 2002; Mitra, 2004; Cobb, 2005). Freire's model of critical literacy further informs us that "literacy is not…merely a technical skill to be acquired, but as a necessary foundation for cultural action for freedom" (Freire & Macedo, 1997, p. 7).

Critical Literacy in Action

Critical Classroom Practices: "Education is problem-posing"

Positivist, "research-based" knowledge, like that reified in NCLB legislation and the 2002 National Research Council study *Scientific Research in Education* often assumes certainty where little or none may exist. The NRC report (Shavelson & Towne, 2002) promotes "rigorous, sustained, scientific research in education" as an answer to what they consider "folk wisdom about how students learn" (p. 50). The qualitative investigation that this project proposes, based on theories of critical pedagogy and YPAR methodology, is in direct contradiction to the concept that "the advancement of scientific knowledge is facilitated when investigators work with the same set of variables and theoretical constructs" (p. 150). Following this logic, would a group of struggling high school students be able to contribute their research findings to the educational research community? Who would define the variables they used? What if the student co-researchers did not subscribe passively to the theoretical construct of positivism and "knowledge production for social engineering…toward extreme right wing ends" (Erickson, 2005, p. 9)? Such blind commitment to an extremely narrow view of "science"

serves to disempower students and teachers by putting curriculum and pedagogy into the hands of the State, through legislation that administrators are mandated to implement (McLaren, 2007).

Approaching this project as a rejection of scientific positivism and the narrow view of NCLB, the student co-researchers and I stood on the shoulders of theorists like Giroux, Freire, Macedo, McLaren, Darder, and Kellner. We also created our own critical and revolutionary classroom based also on the work of practitioners like June Jordan, Linda Christensen, and Jennifer McCormick. Theory void of action, after all, is as oppressive as Freire's description of "banking education" (2000, p. 75), postulating on the circumstances of students and teachers without grounding ideas in the realities of classrooms. At the same time, activism in the classroom without a theoretical foundation is hollow (Freire, 2000). The notions of praxis and youth participatory action research strive to lift the words off the page and actualize the theory in the real world of students and their teacher. Freire writes, "liberation is a praxis: the action and reflection of men and women upon their world in order to transform it" (p. 79). Thus theory served as a lens through which the student co-researchers and I could look at our experiences and create the YPAR Critical Literacy Group and allow our practice to inform the theory.

Critical literacy begins with the notion that "educators must develop radical pedagogical structures that provide students with the opportunity to use their own reality as a basis of literacy" (Freire & Macedo, 1997, p. 151). This foundational idea is elaborated by practitioner-researchers who ground their practice and writing in the everyday lives of teachers and students. Shor (1980; 1992), Auerbach (1999), Christensen

(2000), and Cadiero-Kaplan (2002), will lend their concrete classroom practices to color in the lines drawn by the theorists enumerated above. Explains Cadiero-Kaplan (2002), "Critical teachers promote classrooms that value student voices, experiences, and histories as part of the course content" (p. 379). The YPAR Critical Literacy Group at FHCHS sought to value and create a teaching and learning partnership with the student co-researchers.

Critical pedagogy philosophers exalt the application of theory in the real world of schools and classrooms: "the starting point for organizing the program content of education or political action must be the present, existential, concrete situation, reflecting the aspirations of the people" (Freire, 2000, p. 85). Thus the concrete situation of students with below-grade level reading scores at a "last chance" high school will the starting point. The work of several practitioners will help the student co-researchers and I create activities, curriculum, and classroom practices based on the "aspirations" and preferences of the students themselves.

"Reading, Writing, and Rising Up." We employed texts such as *Reading, Writing and Rising Up* (Christensen, 2000) in order to ground student co-researchers in the type of learning that critical literacy advocates. This book focuses on social justice and empowerment through the practices of reading and writing, and echoes a framework of critical pedagogy in its claim that "reading and writing are ultimately political acts" (Christensen, 2000, p. vi) and that there is emancipatory value in learning to do both critically. Christensen provides suggestions for activities from writing and speaking assignments in which students describe the roots and meanings of their names to reading

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poetry as "the rest of the story" of those who struggled, and as the opposite of history, "a tale of the winners" (p. 129). These types of activities did not serve as a cookie-cutter approach to critical literacy in the classroom, but rather as suggestions that student co-researchers were provided to utilize as they approached the task of creating their own practices in the YPAR Critical Literacy Group. Since critical literacy is so divergent to most of the traditional literacy practices that students encounter in the classroom (Shor, 1992), it is important to provide these concrete ideas so that students can see an example of the types of texts and activities they may choose to use in the class.

"Writing Words, Changing Worlds." In the volume of articles they edited, *Critical Literacy in Action: Writing Words, Changing Worlds* (1999a), Shor and Pari also turn a practitioner's eye towards the theory of critical literacy. Shor asks key questions that can be used when introducing the concepts of critical literacy to a class of high school students: "How have we been shaped by the words we use and encounter?" and "If language helps make us, how can we use and teach oppositional discourse so as to remake ourselves and our culture?" (p. 1). After discussing whether or not the students desired oppositional discourse, these questions were a powerful jumping-off point for a class that utilized the frameworks of critical literacy, while still providing the space for the student co-researchers to design their own research questions and methods.

In the same book, Auerbach's (1999) article "Teacher, Tell Me What to Do" provides an overview for using participatory approaches in the literacy classroom. Suggesting everything from beginning the class with the students' needs and interests to creating real-life actions outside the classroom, Auerbach gives concrete suggestions on

how to use critical literacy practices in a school milieu. This research aims to treat older high school students, many of whom are chronologically older than their grade due to lost credits, as adult learners. Therefore recommendations made by Shor and Auerbach for adult learners were offered to the student co-researchers for their evaluation and adoption.

Teaching Literacy with Low-Income Latino/a Students

Theories and practices of critical literacy and empowering education are not only for students persecuted by the oppressive race and class divisions alive in our schools (Freire & Macedo, 1997; Shor, 1992). According to Freire, both the dominating elite and the oppressed workers must engage in critical dialogue in order to achieve a more just society. He saw it as the "great humanistic and historical task of the oppressed: to liberate themselves and their oppressors as well" (Freire, 2000, p. 44). Since the aim of the YPAR Critical Literacy Group was to help student co-researchers explore "the word and the world" (Freire & Macedo, 1997) in the historical and cultural context of the student, a similar course could be created and developed with any group of students, and should be. The group of student co-researchers at FHCHS, however, all identify themselves as Latino/a, both first and second generation, with families from Mexico and Central America. Thus, the theoretical framework and curriculum will be structured with their experiences and cultural backgrounds in mind. This section of the literature review focuses on literacy instruction for Latino/a students specifically.

Bicultural Education

Over 75% of the students in the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) are Latino/a. According to Reyes and Halcón (2001), "literacy fads and literacy wars have come and gone with no significant positive impact on the literacy development of Latinos" (p. 3). The aim of this youth participatory action research study engaging young Latino/a students as co-researchers is to investigate whether a YPAR Critical Literacy Group will offer one way to positively impact the literacy development of this group of Latino/a student co-researchers.

There is a substantial amount of evidence that literacy development in English is supported through a curriculum drawing on the bilingual and bicultural knowledge of bilingual Latino/a students (Darder, 1991; Walsh, 1991; Jiménez et al., 1996; Mercado, 2001). Instead of treating Spanish-speaking students as deficient or limited, these authors encourage viewing biculturalism and bilingualism as a "potential strength" (Jiménez et al., 1996, p. 90) and the students themselves as "gifted and talented,"—*not* "at risk," *not* "culturally disadvantaged," *not* "limited English proficient"!" (Reyes & Halcón, 2001, p. 2).

Drawing on the foundation of Ramírez and Castañeda's (1974) seminal work on the bicultural identity of Mexican American students, described as "permit[ting] the child to enjoy satisfying relations in more than one cultural world and to identify with aspects of both of those cultures" (p. 16), Antonia Darder extends the notion of bicultural education into the realm of critical pedagogy (1991). Darder infuses the notions of culture and power into bicultural educational theory through the lens of critical pedagogy and a

"dialectical continuum" between the dominant culture and the subordinate culture (Darder, 1991, p. 55). Encouraging educators to approach teaching through this theoretical framework, Darder claims those who "possess this dialectical understanding of biculturalism will be better equipped to assist their students of color in critically examining their lived experiences in an effort to reveal genuinely the impact that cultural domination has on their lives" (p. 54).

The YPAR Critical Literacy Group brought these theories into the classroom, honoring the linguistic and bicultural knowledge of the students by placing their words and lived experiences at the center of class readings, discussions, and activities. Rather than utilize an inadequate multicultural curriculum which may "simply repackage conservative and neo-liberal ideologies under a discursive mantle of diversity" (McLaren, 2007, p. 287), the YPAR Critical Literacy Group used aspects of the frameworks of critical and radical multiculturalism (McLaren, 2007), critical pedagogy, critical literacy, and empowering education, described in greater detail in the next section of this literature review, in order to work alongside students as their teacher and school begin to honor the unique knowledge and cultural and linguistic knowledge that they bring to the classroom. As with all the theories that went into the theoretical framework of this project, I presented the theory of bicultural identity to the student co-researchers and asked them to view it critically through their own experiences and knowledge.

Secondary Literacy Instruction: "But they can barely read…"

Reading comprehension is only one component of literacy, but a crucial aspect when viewed in the context of secondary students' ability to "read the word" and make

meaning of any text they encounter. The crisis of secondary readers comprehending far below grade level is confirmed throughout the gamut of reading research (Vacca, 1998; Shoenbach et al., 1999; McEwan, 2007; Irvin et al., 2007). Yet the focus on building literacy foundations in younger students occupies the majority of grants, research, and legislation. NCLB legislation focuses far more resources and legislation on reading programs for early childhood and elementary students with its Reading First program (Kauerz, 2002), despite the fact that one-third of American secondary school students score in the "below basic" category on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (National Centers for Reading Statistics, n.d.), almost guaranteeing them failure with middle and high-school curriculum (McEwan, 2007). Richard Baca, former president of the International Reading Association refers to the "benign neglect" of secondary students and their literacy needs. He identifies a specific mindset:

> …a political and public mindset that literacy learning is critical only in
>
> early childhood. The faulty and misguided assumption, 'If young children
>
> learn to read early on, they will read to learn throughout their lives,'
>
> results in more harm than good (Vacca, 1998, p. 606).

The disproportionate focus on young elementary school children is a detriment to the growth of literacy skills in adolescents and young adults.

In high schools nationwide, teachers complain that students cannot read grade-level material across subjects (Shoenbach et al., 1999). Grumblings that "these kids can barely read" echo through teaching lounges and copy rooms, and pressures of accountability lead teachers lower standards, spoon-feeding summaries to classes of

disengaged students or changing syllabuses to "get through" difficult texts with students who have been failed by the our school systems (Shoenbach et al., 1999). Like much educational inequity, low-income students of color experience less school success in literacy than other, more privileged, student groups in public schools across our nation. Some have related this to pedagogy that is unresponsive to students' home cultures (Erickson, 1987) or fallacious definitions of "success" and "failure" (Varenne & McDermott, 1999). Iris Young (quoted in McLaren, 2007) describes the "five faces of oppression" as "exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, [and] violence" (p. 43). All are used to elucidate how marginalized groups are oppressed by the dominant culture, reflected in the structure of schools. Since this project was undertaken by a group of Latino/a students, statistics cited here focus on Latino/a students exclusively, yet the situation is similar for other groups of low-income minority students.

High school graduation and literacy level data of Latino/a students indicate that these students are being failed by American schools. While 68.9% of all California high school students receive a diploma, only 57% of Latino/a students graduate (Orfield et al., 2004). In 2005, 25 percent of Caucasian students assessed read at the below basic level, while the percent of Latino/a 8th graders with the same low levels was upwards of 46 percent (Adolescent Literacy Research Network website). A recent report from the Pew Hispanic Center (Fry, 2002) found that while many 18-24-year-old Latinos who graduate high school choose post-secondary education (35 percent, compared to 46 percent of whites), Latinos are over-represented in two-year community colleges and over half of these students never receive a bachelor's degree. This college drop-out rate is attributed

to several variables in the report, including the need to work while in school, the choice of more affordable college options, and many Latinos are "products of under-funded, under-staffed and under-performing high schools, and as such have not had an adequate preparation for college work" (Fry, 2002, p. 12).

The body of laws that make up 2002 Elementary and Secondary School Act, the reauthorization of the 1965 act of the same name, was named "No Child Left Behind" in an effort to highlight the main goal of closing the achievement gap between students and to reinforce Bush's mantra of "challenging the soft bigotry of low expectations" (2001). The Act has been touted with its focus on "scientifically-based research" and reading assessments of secondary students manifested in the form of standardized, multiple-choice tests, yet has done little to improve the comprehension levels of the nation's secondary students (McEwan, 2007; Irving et al., 2007). In fact, some critics of education policy based on high-stakes testing conclude that it is depreciating the quality of schools and leading to higher dropout rates, particularly among Latino/a and African American students (Paul, 2004).

Although it is an obvious benefit for all students to be literate in many languages, particularly English in an English-speaking country, there are secondary students for whom legislation and regulation do more to harm than support. For bicultural students in general and English Language Learners in particular, the legislated contemporary focus on English-only through high-stakes testing has deleterious results for teenagers in schools (Darder, 1991; Macedo, 1994). Literacy instruction at the turn of the century contributed to the linguistic genocide of many minority languages in the United States through its focus on "helping children discard their ethnic cultures in order to embrace what educators saw as American ideals and habits" (Cuban, 1993, p. 63). Correspondingly, literacy instruction at the turn of the millennium tends to focus on

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scripted curriculum, English-only, and high-stakes testing, all of which present a narrow and conservative definition of what it is to be educated and literate in America.

This project focused on progressive literacy teaching practices, including metacognition (Shoenbach et al., 1999) and critical literacy (Shor, 1987; Freire & Macedo, 1997; Comber & Simpson, 2001), interpreting each and utilizing them in the ways the student co-researchers deemed most appropriate for high school literacy instruction. The political climate and school context of NCLB, English-only, and compulsory classes needed for graduation and college admission loomed large above the YPAR Critical Literacy Group student co-researchers and me. Yet we chose to reject this status quo and begin from the social and cultural context of the student co-researchers and their everyday lived experiences. We identified generative themes and texts that helped them to advance their reading of word as well as the world surrounding the young people (Freire, 2000). After all, "it is not possible to work with any simple formula, and each group of students' specific cultural and political histories impact what is needed and what is possible" (Comber & Simpson, 2001, p. x)

Charter Schools and Alternative Education

FHCHS is a unique environment: an alternative, independent study charter high school. Exploring each of those categories in this section will help contextualize the school and why this type of research could take place in the milieu, as well as identifying areas where more research on literacy instruction this type of alternative program is needed. Rather than delve into the controversy surrounding charter schools, a brief

history and definitions will be provided, with an emphasis on opportunities for innovative curriculum and student participation within this particular type of school.

Charter Schools

Charter schools are publicly funded institutions that come into being through a contract—or charter—with a state agency or local school board (Brouillette, 2002; Bulkley & Fisler, 2003). Most definitions of charter schools characterize them as having autonomy than district-run public schools, while simultaneously having greater accountability to the chartering agency than their traditional counterparts (Brouillette, 2002; Bulkley & Fisler, 2003; Rofes & Stulberg, 2004). This is due to the goals and strategies submitted with the charter application, which typically describe the ways the charter will serve as an alternative to local public schools. Charter schools are meant to fulfill needs of parents and students that are not being met in the traditional schools.

Critiques. Skeptics of charter schools and their ability to invigorate the public school system argue that their original purposes and promises were never fulfilled: that of providing alternative competition to public schools, thereby encouraging improvement and innovation in the public sector through market forces (Arsen, Plank, & Sykes, 1999). Although unsubstantiated, many critics also claim that instead of improving public schools, charter schools effectively drain resources, students, and teachers from their public counterparts (Bulkley & Fisler, 2003; Geske, Davis, & Hingle, 1997). Critics also argue that after a decade of charter schools, there has been little to no evidence of improved student achievement at charter schools, as originally suggested (Bulkley & Fisler, 2003). A final critique, which is invalidated by the existence of FHCHS, is that

charter schools are unable to accommodate "at-risk students" (Geske et al., 1997, p. 22). Adopting a similar perspective as those who argue against vouchers, these critics argue that the more informed parents often possess more economic and cultural capital, and that charter schools are able to effectively skim the "cream," the "best" students, because more involved families know how to find and apply for charter schools (Geske et al., 1997). Although concerns about equity and damage to public education are of great concern, the population served by FHCHS provides evidence that students who struggled in traditional schools can find alternative opportunities at charter schools, whether or not their parents are involved with their school choice. What follows contextualizes charter schools in general and FHCHS in particular.

Charter school history. The first charter school was approved in Minnesota in 1991, based on the promise of innovative schools created by licensed teachers (Brouillette, 2002). California's Charter School Act of 1992 signaled the growth of these publicly-funded schools that enjoy relative independence from state regulation (Kemerer, Sansom, & Kemerer, 2005). While accountability has become more of an issue for charter schools over the years, leading to upwards of seventy provisions in the California Education Code (Kemerer et al., 2005) to legislate some aspects of schools with these charters, most charter school teachers do not have the same bargaining rights as public school teachers who are members of unions. Over fifteen years since the inception of the first charter school, the number of these schools has grown dramatically: there are currently over 4,100 charter schools serving more than 1.2 million children in 40 states and the District of Columbia (Edreform, n.d.). There is no one type of charter school,

although most pride themselves on providing choice for students, parents, and teachers, and many have a theme or unique vision that allows them to distinguish themselves from the traditional public school.

Alternative Education

FHCHS is an independent study, alternative charter school. It is under the umbrella of "alternative programs" in the state of California because it provides an alternative method of high school completion for students who are not successful in traditional high schools (Hill, 2007). As an alternative school, FHCHS works with students in both short-term capacities in which they return to traditional schools after recovering credits, and as a more long-term solution, since students can earn all the credits needed for graduation in a minimum of two-and-a-half years. Besides the state-designated purpose of working with "at-risk students" as a "safety net" (Hill, p. 3) to catch students when they fail at traditional schools, alternative schools can also be seen as providing another option for students whose schools themselves have *placed* them at risk for failure in a broken system (Waxman, 1992). It may be more fitting for the California Department of Education (CDE) to report that alternative schools provide an avenue for school completion when the traditional school has been unsuccessful in helping the child succeed. A constructive way to look at alternative schools may be to look at the positive qualities many of them share: small class and school size, a voluntary group of students, the commitment to respond to the particular needs of the school community, and flexible and responsive to change (Conley, 2002). FHCHS certainly possesses many of those qualities; the small group instruction opportunities provided for students, as well the

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flexibility and responsiveness of the administration and teachers, allow for a project like this one to take place.

The nature of independent study at FHCHS is that teachers have more time to work one-on-one with students. Although they see their students less frequently than at a traditional school, the time is more individualized to meet the needs of individual students. The group instruction program at FHCHS grew out the students' need for more math and literacy instruction than what they could receive with their individual teacher covering all subjects. Since the numbers in these group classes can stay very small (under 12) and the instructor is freed from much of the regulations and scripted curriculums placed on schools in the era of NCLB, this aspect of the independent study program at FHCHS has the capacity to fulfill Conley's (2002) most optimistic interpretation of alternative education, in terms of small class size, flexibility, and responsiveness to the needs of students.

Independent study is defined by the California Department of Education (CDE) as "a strategy, not an alternative curriculum" (CDE Website) provided to students of all ages for a variety of reasons, including accelerating the studies of gifted students, students with health issues or full-time employment, and students lacking credits. Independent study allows for more flexibility in terms of schedule, but state law requires that the education received using this strategy be "at least equal in quality and quantity to that offered in the classroom" (CDE website). Since independent study is a strategy, rather than a definition of a school or curriculum, independent study schools vary broadly

(Conley, 2002), with a commonality being flexibility of schedule and independent work done by students who are supervised by a credentialed teacher.

Independent study is at odds with many theories of learning and social development. Vygotsky (1978) theorizes that social interactions are fundamental to cognitive development and learning, stating:

> Every function in the child's cultural development appears twice: first, on the social level, and later, on the individual level; first, between people (interpsychological) and then inside the child (intrapsychological). …All the higher functions originate as actual relationships between individuals (1978, p. 57).

Independent study does not allow for this type of interpsychological learning or relationship-building. Typically, independent study alternative schools do not provide students with opportunities for social interaction or collaboration with adults or other students in their "Zone of Proximal Development" (Vygotsky, 1978), where supported problem-solving allows students to learn collaboratively in ways they cannot do independently. Freirian concepts of problem-posing dialogue (Freire 2000; Shor, 1992) as a collaborative means of building knowledge and critical literacy contradict most independent study programs, which required that students do much of their learning in silence and on their own. There is a dearth of literature about independent study, with most of the related research available centered on higher education and distance learning

(Phipps & Merisotis, 1999; Duffy & Kirkland, 2004). This is one of the gaps in research that pertains to FHCHS that will be explored in the subsequent chapters.

Conclusion

When high school teachers despair that their students can "barely read" and schools place students with the lowest reading test scores in literacy support, or "reading recovery" classes (Shoenbach et al., 1999), they are almost always talking about fluency and comprehension, the ability to read a text in any subject and paraphrase or answer multiple choice questions about it. Rarely are they referring to critical literacy, imagined by Freire as "a vehicle by which the oppressed are equipped with the necessary tools to reappropriate their history, culture, and language practices" (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. 157). If they did refer to critical literacy, they would be correct: the majority of students in our schools are not able to read the world and their place in it critically, because they are never asked to. Viewed through the lens of critical literacy, most people can barely read.

What's more, often students with poor technical reading skills are treated as though laziness and deficiencies in their communities or families have led them to remedial classes (Compton-Lily, 2004). Rarely are poor school achievement or low scores on standardized tests viewed by teachers and administrators as an act of resistance against a system of education that favors dominant groups (Giroux, 2001; McLaren, 2007) and provides instruction primarily in the cultural language of the dominant class (Darder, 1991).

What, then, does the accumulation of research and literature in the areas of critical pedagogy, critical literacy, and critical classroom practices leave for this study to contribute to the field of secondary literacy instruction? Are there any holes that the YPAR Critical Literacy Group at FHCHS and the related youth participatory action research helped to fill? This project aimed to augment the field of adult literacy and secondary education. Freire, Horton, and Shor all discuss adult literacy practices, and many qualitative studies and dissertation projects have looked at the use of critical literacy in the college classroom (Shor, 1992; Hanschke, 2001). This project viewed older high school students through the lens of adult literacy, using the critical literacy practices typically aimed at adult learners. This is due in part the older chronological age of students in lower high school grades because they lack credits, and in part due to the belief that the theories and practices of critical literacy will have a transformative impact on a group of adolescents.

The literature reviewed in this chapter told the story of critical literacy through lenses of the theoretical framework of critical pedagogy, critical classroom practices, and the specific contexts of FHCHS. The next chapter will discuss the research method employed, youth participatory action research, and the ties of theory and practice that bind it to critical pedagogy. In this way, the foundation of theory and method form a structure upon which the students co-researchers and implemented our YPAR Critical Literacy Group project.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

> The silenced are not just incidental to the curiosity of the
> researcher but are the masters of inquiry into the underlying
> causes of the events in their world. In this context research
> becomes a means of moving them beyond silence into a quest to
> proclaim the world.
> —Paulo Freire (Freire, 1982, p. 29).
>
> Participatory research and education are the same thing.
> —Myles Horton (Horton & Freire, 1990)
>
> Nikaury, a youth researcher from the Lower East Side of
> Manhattan, stunned an audience at Teachers College Columbia
> University with her astute reflection on participatory action
> research, and its benefits: "I used to see flat. No more...now I
> know things are much deeper than they appear. And it's my job to
> find out what's behind the so-called facts. I don't see flat
> anymore." (Quoted in Fine, M., 1991)

Introduction

The theoretical framework of this project informed and complimented the

research methodology employed: youth participatory action research, or YPAR. Features

of critical pedagogy, including praxis, counter-hegemony, dialectical theory, and the

historical context of knowledge (Darder et al., 2009) all figure prominently in

participatory action research, or PAR. The burgeoning field of YPAR adds both a

pedagogical and youth development factors to PAR, a methodology with   a longer

history of study and implementation. Thus, I will focus on the frameworks of both of

these related research methods, initially describing the research approach of participatory

action research.

Employed as social analysis and critique of the status quo (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005), PAR and YPAR are not simply compatible with this localized study of critical literacy in a high school classroom, but a natural extension of a theoretical framework (critical pedagogy and critical literacy) into a research method. In his book chapter entitled *Creating alternative research methods: Learning to do it by doing it* (1982), Freire states, "people have to think about their thinking and not be only objects of my thinking…in doing research I am educating and being educated with the people" (p. 30). I subscribe to Paulo Freire's philosophy of education; thus I adopted this point of departure for research. My original aim was to learn and teach with my students, so I decided I must likewise conduct research together with the students, who would be reframed in the study as "student co-researchers." The symbiosis of our relationship as teacher-learners and student-researchers demanded that my students and I approach this research project together. Due the to the unique nature of our school and the independence granted our students, this project also considered whether alternative schools could be purveyors of popular education, moving towards emancipatory education practices with YPAR at their center.

In order to explore the world theorized in the literature and experienced by the students and teachers at FHCHS, an appropriate methodology was one that placed the students at the center of the research and required their active participation, inquiry, and reflection. Emancipatory education practices require a methodology for investigating and improving them. Involving students in the project as co-researchers and participants transforms the project from one that might co-opt their voices and experiences for my

benefit as the sole researcher to one which engages the community of the classroom in learning. We investigated of our own classroom practices and began to augment students' ability to transform themselves and their environment, what Freire referred to as "*conscientização*" (2000, p. 67).

Perhaps more imperative, this research stayed in the realm of students by employing the action research cycle (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005) and the direct participation of students to create concrete action steps required to improve the literacy practices at FHCHS. According to Myles Horton (2003), "research becomes a form of action when it is done by people who themselves must act… [action research] is a way for community people to define problems, collect the facts, and act collectively" (p. 252). In order to allow this study to live in the schoolhouse and among students and teachers, the project itself becomes actionist when created and implemented by those experiencing the problem.

As a teacher, I see and feel the problem of standardized curriculum and ineffective literacy practices. My students experience more intimately the effects of state mandates and curriculum in which they do not seem themselves reflected. Although as a graduate student, I straddle the worlds of academia and high school teaching, I engaged with the student co-researchers in the YPAR Critical Literacy Group as an adult ally (a YPAR term for the adult who supports young people in their youth-led research), asking that they analyze our combined struggles of literacy teaching and learning through a critical lens. In these ways, we fulfilled Horton's requirements for our research to be considered "action."

As an investigation of one particular class at a unique charter school, this project did not aim for scientific certitude or generalizability to every high school classroom. PAR rejects the ideology of positivism or a carte blanch acceptance of what is "scientifically verifiable," empirical knowledge (Kincheloe, 1995). Instead, "critical knowledge production begins when action researchers illuminate the taken-for-granted…As action researchers maintain such a perspective on their everyday experience, they are able to explore the tacit forces that have encoded their own lives and their students' lives" (Torres, 1995, p. 241). With students involved in the creation the investigation, this project offered an empowering and educative form of research that does work *with* rather than *on* students.

This chapter explores how the methodology of PAR will be the most appropriate lens for investigating a YPAR Critical Literacy Group at FHCHS to answer the following research questions:

1. According to low-income Latino/a high school students with a history of school failure and below basic reading levels, what kind of critical literacy instruction would impact their literacy experiences in school?

2. In what ways do the curriculum, pedagogy, and methods of the YPAR Critical Literacy Group impact students' perceptions of themselves and experiences with reading, both within the class context and their positionality in the larger community?

3. In what ways does this YPAR Critical Literacy Group project create opportunities for transformation for students, teachers, and the school?

Organization

The organization of this chapter is as follows: the Research Approach section introduces the qualitative lens and PAR/YPAR methodology. The Site and Participant Selection section presents FHCHS and the student researcher/participants; The Data Collection section will discuss the three main ways that data will be collected through the work of students and teachers; The Data Analysis section will discuss how the collected data will be analyzed; The section on ethical concerns, the limitations of the study, and the role of the researcher section will address critical race theory, literature on "whiteness" and the roles of white teachers working with students of color; The conclusion will reiterate the purpose for the study and the rationale behind using the YPAR methodology to answer the research questions.

Research Approach

Roots and Features of Participatory Action Research

Although the precise origins of both action research and participatory action research are debated in the literature (Masters, 1995; Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005; James et al., 2008), there is a clear theoretical link between participatory action research, critical pedagogy, and popular education (Freire, 1982; Torres, 1995; Horton, 2003). With roots in Latin America, PAR provides a link between education and research, between academia and the community (Torres, 1995; Gormley, 2003).

PAR is a subset of the wider umbrella of action research, the research concept most often attributed to the work of Kurt Lewin, an American social psychologist, in the early to mid-1900s (Masters, 1995; Udas, 1998; Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005; James et al., 2008). Lewin described action research as "an iterative process in which social work and educational practitioners plan for action, act, and then perform reconnaissance" (Udas, 1998, p. 206). Often represented graphically as a flowchart or spiral, the cycle of AR research includes recursive steps such as "plan, act, observe, reflect, replan…" (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005, p. 563; see Figure 1), "investigation, examination, criticism, and reinvestigation" (Freire, 1982, p. 30) or "diagnose, act, measure, reflect…" (James et al., 2008, p. 15). Regardless of the names given to each step, key features of action research are that it is practitioner-driven and includes continuous action and reflection cycle within the milieu studied (Wadsworth, 1998). The steps of participatory action research spiral include planning an action, acting and observing, reflecting, and revising the original plan before beginning a new iteration of the process (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Cycle of Participatory Action Research
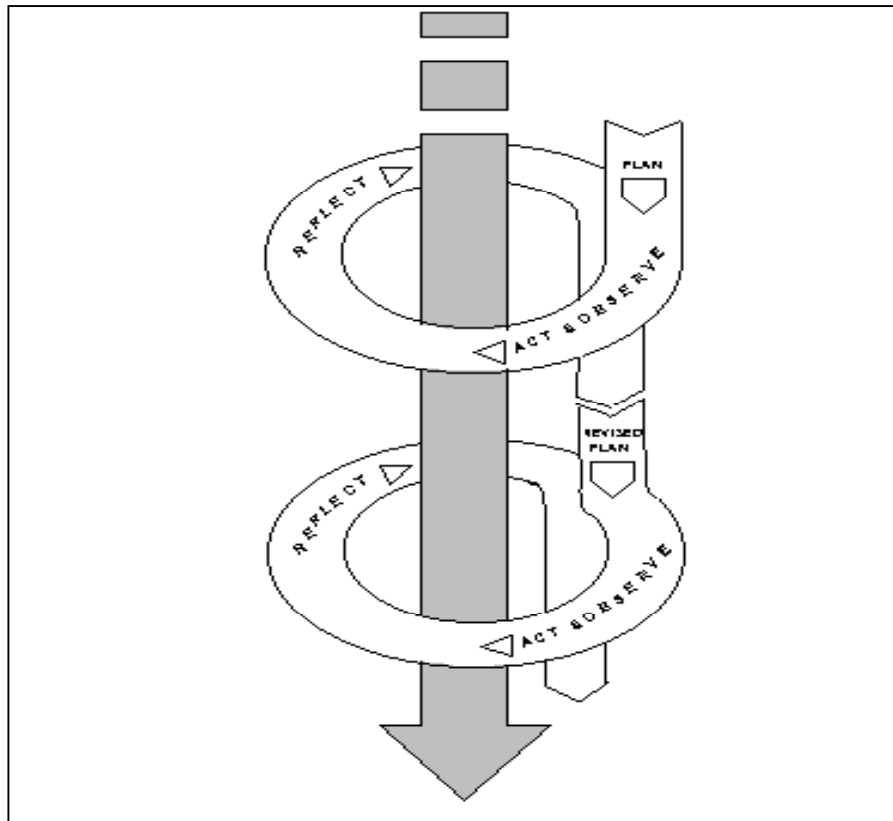
Modified from Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988[5]

The key distinction of PAR within the family of action research is its inclusion of

all people involved in the action as authentic investigators (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005;

Udas, 1998). According to Kemmis and McTaggart (2005), ideal participatory action

research "is a social process of collaborative learning realized by groups of people who

join together in changing the practices through which they interact in a shared social

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[5] From dissertation by B.R. Lorenz (2001)"Review of agricultural knowledge systems in Fiji: Opportunities and Limitations of participatory methods and platforms to promote innovative development". Retrieved from http://edoc.hu-berlin.de/dissertationen/bachmann-lorenz-b-r-2000-12-21/HTML/bachmann-ch3.html

world" (p. 563). In the "shared social world" of a classroom, then, YPAR insists on authentic collaboration between a teacher and her students.

The "generation" of PAR that serves as the foundation for my research methodology and parallel theoretical foundation is that of theorists, practitioners and researchers that grew out of Latin American social movements in the developing world (Torres, 1995; Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005). Paulo Freire and Orlando Fals Borda in Latin America, as well as Myles Horton and Budd Hall in North America are a few of the main advocates of a critical-emancipatory view of PAR. This version of reflective and participatory research offers marginalized people an opportunity to engage in investigation and reflection into their own situations, simultaneously providing space for "more 'actionist' approaches to action research" (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005). The action component in this version of PAR allows for people themselves to become actors in the struggle for justice. This marriage of critical pedagogy and participatory action research is a perfect example of praxis to be experienced by the student co-researchers involved in this project.

According to Orlando Fals-Borda, one of the key proponents of the PAR movement in Latin America during the 1970s, the work of the participatory action researcher is to move from being the object of research to its empowered subject, and to "investigate reality in order to transform it" (Fals Borda, 1979). Within a critical-emancipatory definition of PAR, which served as the basis of this research, the social world is not neutral, and dominant structures and ideologies are all part of what is investigated and deconstructed through the cyclical research process (Freire, 1982;

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Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005; Udas, 1998). According to Kemmis and McTaggart (2005), participatory action research is emancipatory in that it "aims to help people recover, and release themselves from, the constraints of irrational, unproductive, unjust, and unsatisfying *social structures* that limit their self-development and self-determination" (p. 567). Thus the reach of this research project aims to extend beyond the four months students will spend in class, engaged with the research.

Rather than co-opt the voices of the youth engaged in this project, the youth participatory action research process was created to consciously provide an educational, empowering, and possibly transformative experience for the students involved (Cammarotta & Fine, 2008). This research agenda itself is educative, and not simply an illumination of theory or practice. According to Freire (1982), this type of looped research in and about a situation or social phenomenon that "involves study—and criticism of the study—by the people is at the same time a learning process. Through this process of investigation…the level of critical thinking is raised among all those involved" (p. 30). Thus the ultimate goal of YPAR Critical Literacy Group was to provide students with transformative critical literacy practices through a project they engaged in as co-teachers and co-researchers. By the end of this local and time-limited process, students were able to reflect in the PAR cycle about both their personal and group experiences in the class, as well as articulate their own learning. Within their reflections, documented in this project, are the blueprints for the next stages of planning for a new class within the PAR cycle, either with the help of these same students or the next group of student volunteers.

More contemporary views of PAR indicate two key critiques of previous studies and descriptions of the process that are important to this study. The first is that that the cycle of inquiry is more "fluid, open, and responsive" (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005, p. 563) than the traditional diagrams of action, observation, and reflection is able to convey. Keeping this in mind, I will work with students to come up with a visual and written description of our process that leaves room for a more open and responsive PAR spiral.

The second critique, levied by Fals Borda (2006) is that PAR has, since the work of Third World investigators of the 1970s, been institutionalized and colonized by "western Euro-American culture" (p. 353), often ignoring the foundational work done by many Latin American scholars, and instead focusing the PAR trend on North American researchers and audiences. We worked to combat this institutionalization of the process, which seemed perversely contrary to the very notion of participatory action research, embedded in resisting hegemonic practices and creating a hierarchy which places the "scientific" researcher or academic (in this metaphor, the Euro-American culture) above the researched (or Third World scholars). The first way we resisted colonization of the process was by studying some of the foundational work of Latin American scholars as group, as well as discussing the ways in which YPAR and much of Freire's (2000) philosophy in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* were inextricably linked. Due in part to the time constraints of the project, I provided the student co-researchers with a general history of the development of youth participatory action research, from action research of the1970s to the inclusion of youth co-researchers. We spent little time researching Lewin

and the development of action research. Instead, we spent a full class session discussing a 1982 article by Freire, specifically his quote:

> The silenced are not just incidental to the curiosity of the researcher but are the masters of inquiry into the underlying causes of the events in their world. In this context research becomes a means of moving them beyond silence into a quest to proclaim the world (Freire, 1982, p. 29).

Together we analyzed and discussed the meaning of the statement, as well as its ties to critical pedagogy and the rejection of banking education for oppressed peoples. We also discussed typical research projects and how they "silence" the "subjects," discussing how this project would aim to do exactly the opposite, through creating a space where the students' voices would dominate and they would become the "masters of inquiry."

PAR and the YPAR Critical Literacy Group

In order for the PAR process to be successful in the YPAR Critical Literacy Group at FHCHS, the method and its related theory needed to be accessible for the struggling readers who participated in the group. As discussed in Chapter 2, Myles Horton (2003) was successful in meeting people where they were and speaking their language instead of presuming they would learn to speak the language of academia. I worked with students to create a research spiral based on terms like "define problems" and "collect the facts" that they understand and relate to, so the process of co-researching our YPAR Critical Literacy Group had the potential to truly be "reflexive, recursive, [and] dialectical]" (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005, p. 567). As a social process, the YPAR

project at FHCHS was only effective because my students and I shared common language about our practice and our research.

Working through the iterative "spiral of self-reflective cycles" described by Kemmis and McTaggart (2005, p. 563), the students I and ensured that we were truly conducting PAR. The first part of the cycle, "planning a change," began on the first day our group met. The general ideas of the study and focus on critical literacy were part of the premeditated change to curriculum, and the only portion of the project that students did not choose themselves. Within a framework of critical literacy, however, there was ample room for students to voice their own opinions about traditional literacy instruction they received in the past, as well as what texts and projects would best test the notion that critical literacy could be transformative for them.

The plan moved into action during the month of July, when we began creating the YPAR Critical Literacy Group activities and research topics together. "Acting and observing the process and consequences of the change" (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005, p. 563) occurred throughout the process as we acted on our ideas for the group, created student-run research projects, collected data, and observed and reflected on the transformations occurring over the course of the group.

 "Reflecting on these processes and consequences" (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005, p. 563) took place through formal reflections, interview and observation data, and the work produced by student co-researchers. Due the limited time available to students in the independent study program, we only had July through October available to create the course, implement it, and conduct research. Therefore the recursive steps of "replanning,

acting and observing again" (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005, p. 563) were limited. In order to ensure that these important steps are considered and that students had the opportunity to continue with their own critical literacy practices and projects, we spent several days at the end of the group reflecting on the experience as well as providing recommendations for further study. Efforts are currently being made to allow the critical literacy group to continue their research and involvement in curriculum-making, evaluation, and school leadership.

Youth Participatory Action Research: An Emerging Praxis

An emerging field of research methodology is Youth Participatory Action Research, or YPAR, which brings together youth researchers and their adult allies to practice the rigorous cycles of PAR in order to resist oppression encountered by youth and challenge the status quo. Described by Cammarota and Fine (2008) as a departure from critical youth studies, the youth engaged in YPAR conduct research "designed to contest and transform systems and institutions to produce greater justice" (p. 2). The major enhancement to PAR in YPAR is its focus on youth learning and development. According to Cammarota and Fine (2008), "although YPAR includes everything described above as participatory action research, we believe that YPAR is also explicitly pedagogical, with implications for education and youth development" (p. 6). This element makes youth participatory action research more descriptive of my aim with the student co-researchers at FHCHS: serve as their adult ally as we research, evaluate, and propose action to ameliorate the social injustices in the school community and the literacy injustices that have left them reading below grade level. There was an overtly

educative goal in everything the student co-researchers and I did together, particularly the development of traditional and critical literacy. YPAR evidences Myles Horton's claim that participatory action research must include actions "by a group of people whose lives are directly affected by that problem" (Horton, Kohl, & Kohl, 1990, p. 208). Horton also had a prescient view of the educative possibilities for youth participatory action research when he said "participatory research and education are the same thing" (Horton & Freire, 1990, p. 120).

Qualitative Methods and the Emancipation of Knowledge

The critical-emancipatory view of YPAR rejects the notion that only empirical knowledge and positivist social science research is worthy of study. In fact, the very notion of knowledge being created through research conducted by a researcher *on* or *about* a group being researched is in direct opposition to Freire's concept of knowledge itself. In Freire's view, knowledge is socially constructed through dialogue and a subjective view of the local world (Freire, 1982; Torres, 1995). According to Freire, there is no real understanding of a "subject" if an outsider conducts research.

Speaking about a PAR project in Tanzania, Freire (1982) insisted, "instead of taking the people here as the object of my research, I must try, on the contrary, to have the people dialogically involved also as subjects, as researchers with me" (p. 30). Knowledge produced over the course of the YPAR Critical Literacy Group and this project, therefore, was not simply to increase my own knowledge of students, but for me and the student co-researchers to engage dialogically in the making of a class, and to reflect on the new knowledge that we created together.

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Site and Participant Selection

Description of the Site

Future Horizons Charter High School is a publicly funded network of charter schools throughout Northern and Southern California. The school where this project was located is in a small low-income urban area, approximately 18 miles from a large urban center in Southern California. A district that seeks the support of a non-traditional school charters the school. Since the advent of statewide student identification numbers (California Department of Education Website), schools must track their students who leave and support them in finding an alternative to traditional high school graduation.

FHCHS serves as an alternative for many students who were unsuccessful in passing their classes and earning credits towards graduation at a traditional high school. The majority of students are lacking so many credits that they would be unable, at the point they enter FHCHS, to graduate from a traditional high school even if they wished to, since students who turn 19 while still in high school must transfer to an adult school. Through an independent-study work packet model, in addition to small group instruction, students can accelerate their earning of credits to the point that a student turning in the maximum amount of work per week could graduate in two and half years instead of four.

Students' reasons for leaving the traditional environment are varied, and there is no "typical" FHCHS student, yet we have a large population of students who are pregnant or parenting, wards of the court, affiliated with gangs, recovering from substance abuse, or dealing with illnesses or issues in their families that keep them from attending school regularly. Some students report none of the experiences listed above, but simply stopped going to school or ceased doing any work, and consider FHCHS their last

chance to receive a high school diploma. Most FHCHS students work part- or full-time jobs in addition to school, and many help support their families.

The system at FHCHS is similar to those used by independent study and other alternative schools throughout California. Students can enroll at any time in the year or join a waiting list if a school is at capacity. The charter covers over 20 "sites," or distinct small school buildings, in different urban areas throughout Southern California. The only requirements for enrollment is a referral from the home school and passage of a baseline reading test, indicating that the student can read well enough to handle independent study work at a minimum fifth grade level. The referral, requested by the parent or suggested by the school for students lacking or severely lacking credits, is simply a way to track that FHCHS fills a need for neighboring schools.

Once enrolled, each student is assigned to a teacher who plans the student's course of study based on which courses the student needs to complete in order to graduate. In addition, the teacher serves as a students' academic advisor, tutor, and coach towards graduation. Teachers are trained in motivational strategies for working with students struggling to graduate, and keep in close contact with parents. The student, parent, and teacher discuss the choice of whether to regain credits and return to traditional school or to graduate from FHCHS. The diploma awarded by the charter school is valid, and FHCHS is accredited by The Western Association of Schools and Colleges. However, if students wish to attend a college in the California State or University of California systems, they must attend courses in science and foreign

language at a local community college, since neither required course is offered at FHCHS due to the lack of lab science facilities or foreign language group instructors.

In order to earn credits, students must complete work packets, alongside a textbook or other course material, in each subject. The packets are a combination of assignment sheet, worksheet, and study guide, in which students may respond to questions, complete vocabulary activities, or draft essays. Once students complete a packet, they take a test on the material. A completed test, in addition to an alternative assessment, which may include an essay for English, a study guide for Math, or a map activity or art project for Social Studies, must both be passed in order for the student to receive credit for that unit of work. After completing five consecutive units of a particular class, the student receives credit for that class. Since they complete their work primarily on their own, students are not typically able to discuss their learning in a group or extend their learning farther than the end-of-unit test.

Group instruction is a fairly new addition to the FHCHS pedagogy, and aims to add opportunities for students to work collaboratively in their zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978) and to receive more support in their academic areas of weakness. Students struggling in Math or English have the resource of a group instructor with expertise in one of those two content areas. Students receive support in their academic subjects through either small group tutoring sessions or classes run with up to 12 students who work through the content of a particular class together with their group instructor. As the Literacy Coach at FHCHS, I am responsible for teaching classes at one school site, while supervising a group of literacy teachers in implementing instruction

both one-on-one and in small groups at 35 sites throughout Southern California. The pedagogy of the program is based on Reading Apprenticeship (Shoenbach et al., 1999), a framework for helping students build strong reading strategies by noticing their stumbling blocks and methods for making sense of texts both on their own and in a group. I am also responsible writing new curriculum and training literacy teachers in new instructional strategies. The results of the YPAR Critical Literacy Group in the summer of 2008 will inform the new classes and teaching strategies I use as a coach in the program.

Student Demographics

Of the 228 high school students enrolled at the North Valley Site of FHCHS, 83%, or 189 students, identify themselves as Latino/a in their enrollment paperwork. 5% identify as African American, 4% as Caucasian, and 8% either left the Race/Ethnicity category blank or declined to state. 61% are female, and 84% receive free or reduced lunch, indicating that their families live below federal poverty level, in Southern California in 2006/2007 defined as translating to $30,444 per year for a family of four (Application for Free and Reduced Price Meals, 2007). The majority of students has either dropped out of traditional high school or been sent to FHCHS due to lack of credits. Only 46% of students state that their home language is Spanish. Anecdotally, in my previous work as a teacher at the school, I identified many students who spoke solely Spanish with their parents at home, but circled "English" as their home language in a box that allowed only one language to be checked.

Each teacher extrapolates information from student's transcripts regarding his or her English Language proficiency, but the FHCHS does not do any of its own language testing or specific ELL instruction. Due to recent NCLB mandates, the school is only beginning participate in the California English Language Development Test (CELDT), required for any student whose primary language is other than English (California Department of Education, n.d.), so English proficiency is judged by the testing of each students' previous school. FHCHS also does not currently have a system in place for following the language development status of its students. A compliance officer has been appointed whose responsibility it will be to ensure that CELDT tests are administered in the coming years and that students are reclassified as English speakers before graduation.

Anecdotally, I have encountered many students who received their early elementary education in Mexico or Central America and remained in English as a Second Language (ESL) courses until entering FHCHS. While student receiving special education services must have a notation on their Individualized Education Plans that independent study is a viable placement for the student, many of the English Language Learners at FHCHS are required to basically teach themselves using unsheltered textbooks, without Special Designed Academic Instruction in English (SDAIE) strategies implemented uniformly by all teachers. Since this project is focused at the school site with our largest English Language Learner population, judging from transcripts rather than FHCHS's own data collection on students, a major part of the action research will be to identify whether the pedagogy and strategies of the Critical Literacy course have transformative effects on the literacy of students with ELL needs.

The students at the North Valley FHCHS site are demographically distinct from many of the other sites in Southern California. Some FHCHS school sites are in higher socioeconomic areas with successful traditional schools. Most have greater racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic diversity than the North Valley Site. While there are struggling students in all FHCHS sites, the North Valley school site has the highest percentage of students dropping from the program, the lowest yearly graduation rates, and the lowest math and reading scores of any of the charter school's 30 school sites. In terms of income, while 84% of students at the North Valley Site qualify as low-income for free and reduced lunch, only 50% of students at an FHCHS site 13 miles away from the North Valley Site qualify. All of the comprehensive high schools in the area of the North Valley alternative school site are Title I schools in their fourth year of Program Improvement, meaning they have not yet met their goals for Average Yearly Progress set by the state. Although most students (82%[6]) at the North Valley school site say that they prefer FHCHS to their previous traditional school (Noonan, 2006), students still struggle to meet the minimum requirements of the program both in terms of attendance and work completion.

I chose the North Valley Site at FHCHS because the literacy issues are more pronounced at this site, and there is a strong connection between failure to complete work independently and below-grade level reading skills. In addition, the roots of

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[6] In 2006, I had students at North Valley FHCHS complete a questionnaire about their motivation levels and contentment with the program. 82% of 100 students surveyed said that they preferred FHCHS to their previous high school, noting everything from "now I actually do my work because I care" to "it allows me to be more independent and responsible."

emancipatory critical literacy were laid with the working class (Shor, 1987) and learners "oppressed" by the dominant society (Freire & Macedo, 1987). This school site in the North Valley, populated by mostly low-income Latino/a students who have far fewer options than those students in areas with better-funded and higher-performing traditional schools, struck me as the most appropriate location in the network of charter schools to conduct this youth participatory action research project.

Further, the FHCHS charter began in late 2007 to expand into inner-city areas of the nearby large metropolis, as well as contracting with homeless youth services agencies and gang-prevention programs, all with greater numbers of low-income students and English Language Learners than the school has served before. Thus the youth participatory action research conducted by and for the students of the North Valley Site has the possibility of a more far-reaching influence on current and future students in the expanding charter school. Finally, after teaching at the North Valley Site for almost three years, I considered its students "my" students, and I hoped for them to learn actively as well as become more empowered participants in their school and community. I spent years teaching the students reading strategies and trying to help them connect their present actions to their future possibilities, but assuming Freire (1982) was correct that PAR would allow them to "learn to do it by doing it" (p.29), then I was overjoyed to bring this project to the students of the North Valley Site of FHCHS.

Description of Participants

The 12 participants in the YPAR Critical Literacy Group served as co-researchers in the youth participatory action research (YPAR) project taking place in their group.

Since this project utilized the qualitative research method of YPAR, generalizability or representing the demographics of the school was not a goal of the selection of participants. Instead, I utilized convenience sampling in recruiting participants for the class and project. Students who were available several hours per week and expressed an interest in participating both in the YPAR Critical Literacy Group and as co-researchers were invited to participate. Since I worked with teachers to recruit their students, and the project detracted from some of the hours teachers could spend each week with their students, some teachers were more interested than others in encouraging their students to participate. The 12 students were all recruited from three of the five teachers at the North Valley FHCHS Site. I also did not allow teacher power to dominate which students participated; if a student was not interested in the project, I worked with teachers to ensure they were not forced to be involved.

Although student test scores and teacher recruitment played a role in selecting participants, students themselves had the final say about whether or not they wished to participate. I opened up the project to all students who meet the criteria of below grade level reading scores on the EdPerformance test, and accommodated all interested students, except for a few students who asked to join several weeks after the YPAR Critical Literacy Group began to meet. These students were able to participate in interviews conducted by the student co-researchers, but I wanted to maintain the integrity of the original group by not adding additional students after the first week we met.

There are a few aspects of the method for selecting participants that suggested purposive, rather than purely convenience, sampling (James et al., 2008). Purposive

sampling refers to choosing participants who possess some trait that the research is interested in investigating (Silverman, 2006). In this case, the trait was reading achievement. I purposely limited participation to those students whose reading scores are at the lower end of the school's test for admission or who the student's teacher indicated had trouble comprehending their independent study work. FHCHS school-leaving data indicates that those students with the lowest reading scores have a much higher chance of leaving the school before graduation. Therefore, the group of student co-researchers who analyzed the transformative power of the critical literacy curriculum were those students at the greatest disadvantage to graduate from the independent study program. On one hand, this is the group that I was most interested in implementing a future program with; on the other hand, I hypothesized that this is the group that involvement in a YPAR project would benefit most.

Many youth researchers on other YPAR projects praise the benefits of their participation (Oldfather, 1995; Fine et al., 2004; Kroeger et al., 2004). A student from a published research study who strikes me as (Myles) Hortonian in his simple, sharp, and clear case for students to work as co-researchers says "It is better to know *what* is wrong than just to know you don't like something. But if you have no idea what is wrong, you just know that something is wrong. Then you are not going to be able to do anything about it" (quoted in Oldfather, 1995, p. 136). I have not yet worked with a struggling high school student in a literacy course who was not aware of his or her difficulties with reading, and most are critical of the educational experiences of their pasts. This YPAR

project sought to act upon these issues, both at the individual level of the 12 participants and more broadly within the pedagogy of FHCHS.

Recruitment through Snowball Sampling

Although I intended at first to recruit students solely on the basis of reading levels and teacher referral, recruitment was eventually more effective through reputational, or snowball sampling (Gray, Williamson, Karp, & Dalphin, 2007). The first group of students recruited reflected the gender ratio of the school and were appropriate participants in regards to their below basic reading levels, yet they were not consistent and many of the first group of students were persuaded by teachers to attend the group and did not return after the first session. When the semester began again in July, I asked students to create a "campaign" to more effectively explain to fellow students the goals and qualities of a Youth Participatory Action Research project, as well as to recruit a group of students who they thought would benefit from the focus on critical literacy and literacy development.

Although usually used with groups who are closed to convenience sampling or difficult to recruit (Gray et al., 2007), this method was effective in bringing together a group who were more informed on the project, had free choice to participate, and felt allied with at least one other participant, unlike the original group that was mostly teacher-referred. One result of the snowball sampling was that the group was predominantly female. Two girls who started in the earlier group brought their sisters, and several others brought friends. Due to the sometimes gender-segregated nature of high school alliances, the female students all brought female friends. All students still

maintained the low reading achievement trait that the project originally aimed to target, but this type of sampling led to a predominantly female group (ten girls and two boys), thereby not representing the overall student population (61% female, 39% male). The link between participation and gender is also one that I did not focus on in this study, although anecdotally the attendance and participation of girls at all the 35 FHCHS learning sites is higher for girls than for boys.

Description of the YPAR Critical Literacy Group

Students were involved at every level of the group. We worked together in inquiry-based reading and classroom discussions to come up with a working definition of critical pedagogy and critical literacy. Beyond that, there was a concerted effort to avoid "banking" education (Freire, 2000) in the classroom by empowering students to be the true teachers of themselves and each other over the course of the 4-month project. We read critically, but the choice of texts was predominantly up to students. We constructed "norms of interaction," or the way we ran the group and treated each other, together. In addition, questions for discussions and assignments were devised by students within the classroom, both democratically and through students choosing independent projects to complete, and aimed towards helping students problematize their place in society. The fairest method of selection was decided by students, which resulted in groups of students working on two different projects. I offered my knowledge of research methods and as responded to questions, as well as helped with locating research and text. I also asked the students help me limit "teacher talk" in the classroom by participating actively at all

levels of teaching and learning and by making me aware when I began to dominate discussions.

I aligned the YPAR Critical Literacy Group with California State high school Language Arts standards so that they could receive five elective credits towards graduation upon completion in October. Reading comprehension standards such as "2.3: generate relevant questions about readings on issues that can be researched" and "2. 5: extend ideas presented in primary or secondary sources through original analysis, evaluation, and elaboration" (California Department of Education Content Standards) were applicable to the texts and subjects students chose to study.

Data Collection

In my role as principal researcher, I predetermined the data collection methods for my own project and asked students to choose their data collection methods within their own research studies. I interviewed all students both before the class started, halfway through the group in August, and at the end of the project in October. The interviews lasted between 20 and 45 minutes, and were open-ended and semi-structured, providing some consistency across interviews but still providing space for students to guide the interview process. I tape recorded each of these interviews and transcribed them within a week after the interviews were conducted. I worked without student input to create the interview protocol for the first group of interviews, but students were more active in shaping the protocol questions for the second and third set of interviews.

There were also two focus groups over the course of the group, the first of which I facilitated and was on the topic of reading injustices. The second focus group was facilitated by the student co-researchers and based around the issues they decided to research. Since the student co-researchers and I were both active participants in the group, it as be difficult to record field notes. Therefore I videotaped or audio taped each group session so that we could analyze the interactions of members as well as the effectiveness of our critical teaching and learning. While I originally planned to have students complete this analysis with me, time constraints meant that they only did so with the first focus group. I completed analysis on group sessions independently.

The group itself served as a research site for data collection, which we documented through both video and audio tape, as well as through our reflections and the work produced in class. Student work included reflections and essays, as well as the presentations they created from their own research on environmental justice and student dropout/pushout issues. The only assignment that I required was a literacy autobiography (Shoenbach et al., 1999) at the start of the group. Through the autobiography, which students could have take the form of a traditional narrative or a creative assignment, such as a visual art piece, comic, book, video, or poem, students explored their previous experiences with literacy as defined by reading, writing, speaking, and listening.

Finally, interviews, focus groups and group dialogue were used as part of the data collected as a way to explore the social construction of knowledge. According to Freire, "Discussion is an ordered and managed communication of monologues…Dialogue, in

contrast and complete opposition, involves the critical investigation of knowledge or thinking." (quoted in Allman, 1994).

Data Analysis

The data analysis in participatory action research, much like all the steps in the PAR cycle, is iterative and reciprocal (James, Milenkiewicz, & Buckman, 2008). The course ran from July through October, and we could not wait until November to begin analyzing the data. Instead, the group itself and the way we taught and learned within it responded to the data we collected at the beginning and middle of the group. The post-group data was be utilized to inform how literacy classes and youth development activities may be conducted at FHCHS in the future.

Data analysis for this project was inductive, in that I searched for relationships and patterns of meaning within the data (Hatch, 2002), allowing the data to tell the story rather than identifying themes before data collection began. I collected data though interviews, focus groups, transcripts from tape recorded classes, and student reflections, which I coded, or sorted into categories (Silverman, 2006; James et al., 2008). These categories and themes were developed after a substantial amount of data had been collected, however I began transcribing and analyzing the data from the beginning of the project so that I could follow up with student co-researchers on questions that arose in the data. Factors related to the research questions posed were included in the coding, and collected data was analyzed within and among these categories. The coding of data helped organize it so that a story emerged, beginning to expose the types and degrees of

transformation and literacy development were evident in group, during students'

dialogues, in interviews, and in student writings. While coding developed the necessary

story for this dissertation project, students decided on their own means of displaying the

data they were involved in collecting, such as in a group presentation, spoken word open

mike night, or film. In the end, they decided on traditional PowerPoint presentations to

present their work to youth and adult audiences.

While the first three chapters of this dissertation focused on an academic,

doctoral-level audience, the final write-up of the data collected in Chapter Four will

incorporate more of the voices of students. The overall tone will be more narrative and

reflective, in order to allow the experiences of my students and I to speak for themselves.

Ethical Concerns, Limitations, Role of the Researcher

Ethical Concerns

Students dedicated a vast amount of time and thought to the YPAR Critical

Literacy project, with the premise that it will further impact literacy instruction in the

school. In a charter school with goals designated by the Department of Education and a

quantitative results-oriented leadership structure, there is a very real chance that some or

all of our recommendations will not be adopted. I addressed this concern by being

forthcoming about this possibility, and offered it as a topic for discussion: why would a

school or school district not want to follow the recommendation of student and teacher

researchers?

Another ethical concern is the length of the YPAR Critical Literacy Group. Most group instruction classes at the FHCHS run anywhere from six to eight weeks, so the length of the YPAR Critical Literacy Group is not atypical, yet many of the issues raised and research begun with the students were hard to fully address in the time allotted. In response to this limitation, I continued engaging students in "member-checking" (Silverman, 2006), showing them drafts of the final two chapters of the dissertation in order to ensure that I did not co-opt their words and that they remain part of the process. I also continued to work with interested students in the group in the support capacities they desired once the course drew officially to a close, described in chapter 4.

Access and Negotiation

The structure of FHCHS and the access that teachers and students have to administrators made this project uniquely possible in the milieu. It would be much more difficult to implement at a traditional high school. Many aspects of FHCHS make it an alternative program, including a non-hierarchical supervisory structure, available funding, and a lack of bureaucratic hurdles in order to create non-traditional classes and award credit to students. In such a school context, there are more opportunities for teacher and student-initiated projects to take place, while the independent study flexibility allows students to earn credits for completing projects like this one.

This project remains unique in that it explores a school environment typically associated with students categorized as "at-risk" and "continuation school" curriculum sometimes viewed as rote, unimaginative, and "remedial," and instead offers a group of students the ability to participate in a youth participatory action research project based on

the generative themes that most interest them. The time, space, and freedom to create such a project, however, would be far less accessible in a different type of school environment.

Limitations

Although the administration of FHCHS agreed to this project and remains open to considering recommendations created as a result of the group, the charter school persists in an educational environment that honors quantitative over qualitative data. While the school has a culture of promoting student success through stories and celebrations, management meetings are largely focused on numbers. Average Daily Attendance (ADA) and the funding it generates, California High School Exit Exam (CAHSEE) scores and gains, Academic Performance Index (API) goals and growth, and student-to-teacher ratios all dominate discussions, sometimes to the detriment of dialogues about teaching and learning. One limitation of the results of this project is they offer qualitative recommendations in a quantitative environment. Critical literacy is not measurable on a multiple-choice reading test. Beginning transformations over the course of the group were based on unquantifiable changes occurring within students and among the group.

One way to address this limitation was to change the expectation for the institution and simply use the YPAR Critical Literacy Group to offer authentic participation to the students involved in the group and the YPAR project. According to Anderson (1998):

> Authentic participation moves beyond concerns with legitimacy and
> public relations to shared control. It conceives of participation as

important for the development of the individual, important for the

creation of democratic institutions, and important as a means to increase

learning outcomes. (p. 595)

Even if our recommendations are not immediately adopted, the existence of the project

and the knowledge we produced together in the group are a learning outcome in and of

themselves.

"Valid" Outcomes

This project did not aim to be replicable in the form the class took. This does not

mean it is not valid. As a qualitative study, the aim of the project was to search for one or

more of Peshkin's (1993) outcomes of "description, interpretation, verification, and

evaluation" (p. 24). Our goal was for the individuals in the group to participate in a

unique experience together in order to discover whether the pedagogy and practices of a

YPAR Critical Literacy Group would impact on the student co-researchers who were also

struggling readers at the North Valley school site of FHCHS. Rather than seek traditional

forms of research validity, this project aimed instead for catalytic validity:

Catalytic validity represents the degree to which the research process

re-orients, focuses, and energizes participants towards knowing

reality in order to transform it. (Lather, 1991, p. 68)

Consciously Freirian in its approach to transformative action in the research process, the

notion of catalytic validity in action research is further explained as a "spiral" (Anderson,

Herr, & Nihlen, 2007) in which participants grow their reflection and understanding of

the social reality being studied and ultimately take action to change it "or to reaffirm their

support of it" (Anderson et al., 2007). Catalytic validity is intimately related to both the theoretical framework and youth participatory action research methodology of this project. Our spiraling growth of knowledge within the social reality of our classroom, school, and community are evidenced in the findings and actions derived from this project.

In addition, the project aims for "outcome validity," centering on whether or not the YPAR Critical Literacy Group and experience with youth participatory action research had a beneficial effect on students' learning (James et al., 2007). "Process validity" is more nuanced, having to do with whether the project improved the overall learning and systems in the education environment where the project took place (James et al., 2007). Since the group was somewhat isolated from the rest of the school, the presence of this type of validity can only be discovered after students decide what impact they would like to have on the broader school environment in terms of literacy instruction. "Dialogic validity" has an important place in this project, as it refers to the collaboration of the practitioners involved and whether or not data collection and reporting are agreed to by consensus, as well as whether the researchers benefit from the actions developed by the group (James et al., 2007). Since dialogue, collaboration, and educative benefit directed at students are part of the processes and goals of this project, our group of co-researchers undoubtedly aimed for dialogic validity.

Role of the Researcher

As co-researcher, teacher, and doctoral student with deadlines to meet, I straddled a fine line in my work with the student co-researcher involved in the YPAR Critical

Literacy Group. Although this is a YPAR project and not autobiographical self-study research, there are guidelines within self-study research that helped me retain integrity in the collecting and reporting of this data, namely that "quality self-study research requires that the researcher negotiate a particularly sensitive balance between biography and history" (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001, p. 15). In this case, my own experiences in the class and as the instigator of a YPAR project involving students needed to remain grounded in a theoretical framework, and required that I explore the impact of the process on my experience and growth as a teacher. I created my own literacy autobiography along with the class and shared it with them. Additionally, we often discussed the parallels in my research on the literacy outcomes of our group and their research on environmentalism and pushout/dropout issues. Employing techniques of reflection that moved me from a reflective practitioner to a researcher (Singer, 2005), I predicted from the start of the process that the transformative power of this YPAR Critical Literacy Group would not only be on the students in the group, but also upon me as their co-teacher, co-learner, and co-researcher.

Race and power in the classroom. As the teacher-researcher in this study, I tried to be transparent with students about my own positionality of power within both the classroom and the society in which we all live. According to Darder (1991),"to even begin to comprehend the bicultural experience requires that teachers from the dominant culture invest time and energy into establishing critical dialogues with people of color if they wish to understand their communities better" (p. 119). The students of color in the class were asked to look critically at the power structure of their world and become

"social change agents" (McLaren, 2007, p. 53) through their participation in the YPAR

Critical Literacy Group. As their white, middle-class, college-educated teacher, a member

of the dominant class, I engaged honestly and self-consciously in these "critical

dialogues" with the student co-researchers.

In addition, I took Frankenberg's (1993) "color cognizant" approach, wherein I

was aware and critical of racism in her life and the lives of the student, and actively

challenged it. Through consciously acknowledging the contradictions inherent with

asking students to challenge a status quo that I benefit from, as teacher-researcher I hoped

to actively challenge my role in a cycle of oppression. Further, I strived to bring issues of

race to the fore in group discussions to the extent that the student co-researchers were

interested in pursuing the topic. Following the logic that "inequalities are a logical and

predictable result of a racialized society in which discussions of race and racism tend to

be muted and marginalized" (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995, p. 47), we attempted not to

marginalize or silence critical race conversations in the YPAR Critical Literacy Group.

Conclusion

Based on the aim of the project—to identify what critical literacy practices a

particular group students identify as impactful and transformative— youth participatory

action research is the ideal research method. Certainly, it complements the theoretical

framework of the study. More importantly, though, it offers a methodological avenue for

emancipatory teaching practices. "The legitimation of these different discourses would

authenticate the plurality of voices in the reconstruction of a truly democratic society"
(Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. 56).

Definition of Key Terms

Adult Ally—a youth participatory action research (YPAR) term used to describe the
adults who support young people in their youth-led research. Key qualities differentiate
an adult ally from a teacher, mentor, or principal researcher. Adult allies must be
conscious of and open with youth about their positionality and build trusting relationships
with youth (Checkoway & Gutiérrez, 2006). In addition, adult allies advocate for youth
leadership and empowerment while consciously combating adultism (Checkoway, 1988)
and allowing students' voices to dominate discourse. Adult allies also share power and
responsibility for both successes and failures of the YPAR project.

Below Basic Reading— based on a score of 2700 or below on Scantron's computer-based
EdPerformance that FHCHS utilizes, below basic reading is 5.2 reading level and below
(approximately texts written for students in the second half of fifth grade) for students
whose credits or age places them in 9th through 12th grade.

Dominant Ideology—in Marxian theory, the set of beliefs and values held by the majority
of people which serve the interest of the dominant class to the detriment of the working
class. Although there are those who argue against the presence of any ideological unity of
the dominant class (Abercrombie, Hill, & Turner, 1980), most critical pedagogues
continue to discuss the variety of ways in which dominant ideologies effect curriculum,
pedagogy, and the lives of children. The idea of oppositional ideologies as a challenge to

dominant ideologies (McLaren, 2009) is reflected in both the research methods and challenges to previously held beliefs encountered by the student co-researchers and adult ally in this project.

Future Horizons Charter High School (FHCHS)—pseudonym for the alternative, independent study charter high school where the YPAR Critical Literacy Group was developed and taught. The majority of FHCHS students left or were referred to the school by their traditional public high schools because they lack credits.

Critical literacy—Paulo Freire's theory of critical literacy (Freire & Macedo, 1997) is based on praxis, "reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it" (Freire, 2000, p. 36). As envisioned by Freire, critical literacy "needs to develop pedagogical practices which…reaffirms and furthers the need for teachers and students to recover their own voices so they can retell their own histories and in so doing 'check and criticize the history [they] are told against the one [they] have lived'" (Freire & Macedo, 1997, p. 15).

Curriculum—refers to original texts, classroom-based lessons and activities based in our school's traditional "packet" form and incorporating activities and texts from the Reading Apprenticeship student and teacher texts, as well as a variety of media texts and outside readings chosen by students.

Latino/a—label of an ethnicity, as opposed to a race, referring to people from Latin America and their descendents. The majority of the Latino students at FHCHS are first- or second-generation immigrants to the United States from Central American countries. While demographic information does not specify country of origin, discussions with them

inform us that the majority of Latino/a students at the North Valley FHCHS Site are of Mexican descent.

Pedagogy—includes the variety of classroom practices and strategies, including both original and from the theoretical bases of Freire's critical literacy and the Reading Apprenticeship framework, which focus on reflections and group work.

Transformation— From Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed,* transformation, or "conscientização" refers to the oppressed people in a system becoming independent thinkers and actors. According to Freire, to help the oppressed (in the case of this study students lacking grade level literacy skills) experience transformation, "The solution is not to "integrate" them into the structure of oppression, but to transform that structure so that they can become "beings for themselves" (Freire, 2000, p. 74). For students and the group in YPAR Critical Literacy Group, transformation was be determined by the students themselves, after they have been exposed to this theoretical framework.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

"Reading empowers. Reading is fun. Reading answers questions"
--Los Angeles Public Library Adult Literacy Program Poster

Restatement of Purpose of the Study

This youth participatory action research (YPAR) project aimed to engage student

co-researchers in critical literacy practices, as well as for the youth researchers

themselves to define the transformative potential of critical pedagogical practices.

Twelve low-income Latino/a students who struggle to read at the high school level

participated over a 4-month period as learners, co-teachers, and co-researchers. Together,

we created and evaluated a student-run YPAR Critical Literacy Group at Future Horizons

Charter High School. This project also sought to elicit student perspectives on critical

literacy instruction and classroom practices. Through creating curriculum and research

topics alongside student co-researchers, the goal was to analyze the transformative and

educative effects of critical pedagogy and youth participatory action research.

A related purpose was to provide opportunities at an alternative charter high

school for social justice education and critical literacy for students who were previously

failed by the system of school. This social justice framework was made explicit to the

students, parents, and school administrators supporting the project, although the

educative goal was defined as "improved literacy skills." In addition, the purposeful

selection of low-income Latino/a students with basic and below basic reading levels was

to challenge the common wisdom of national and state mandates that offer scripted

curriculum and standardization of both instruction and assessment as an answer to the literacy achievement gap (McLaren, 2007; Reyes et al., 2001). In utilizing critical literacy and youth participatory action frameworks and practices with the 12 student co-researchers, we expanded the definition of literacy growth to include the development of critical consciousness and transformed reading to include both written texts and the world.

Research Questions

1. According to low-income Latino/a high school students with a history of school failure and below basic reading levels, what kind of critical literacy instruction would impact their literacy experiences in school?

2. In what ways do the curriculum, pedagogy, and methods of the YPAR Critical Literacy Group impact students' perceptions of themselves and experiences with reading, both within the class context and their positionality in the larger community?

3. In what ways does this YPAR Critical Literacy Group project create opportunities for transformation for students, teachers, and the school?

Introductory Summary of Findings

Five main themes related to the theoretical framework of the project emerged from the data:

1. Growth of reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills

2. Trust and power

3. Distinctiveness of voice

4. Development of critical researchers

5. Beginning stages of transformation

These five themes emerged to differing degrees over the course of the 4-month project. Later in this chapter as I tell the story of the project as it unfolded, I will organize that telling around these five themes within and the changes that were occurring among the group and within individual student co-researchers.

The findings in this section are organized by student co-researcher as well as chronologically and by theme. After explaining the troubles we encountered at the beginning of the project, the story is told through the lens of each of the 12 student co-researchers. Then the focus shifts to a thematic telling of the project as it changed and influenced the transformation of students during the months of July, August, September, and part of October. I then return to the individual student co-researchers and present their own perspectives on their transformation. Finally, I include a specific discussion of my transformation as a teacher, principal researcher, and adult ally over the course of the research.

<p style="text-align:center">The Process</p>

Recontextualizing Future Horizons Charter High School

This youth participatory action research project took place in a school setting whose alternative nature and malleable structure allowed the student co-researchers and

me the freedom to conduct research and present our findings, while still providing the students much-needed credit towards graduation. In its role as an independent-study alternative charter school, Future Horizons Charter High School (FHCHS) has the ability to grant credits for independent study projects that align with California state standards, even if the method of study and assessment is unconventional. In March of 2008, three months before the group met for the first time, I submitted a proposal to the Curriculum and Assessment Department of the school for approval of course credit for this student-led independent study class. As per the requirements of our school's charter agreement, I created a course contract for the project that outlined the academic goals, assessments, and standards met through the "Group Literacy Class." Included in the synopsis of the class was the following, which includes many of the hour and assessment requirements necessary to get an independent study class approved:

> A minimum of 12 hours of research and literacy activity will be required for every unit: Eight hours of class time including all independent assignments completed in class, two hours of independent reading, and two hours of independent writing out of class. In order to successfully complete the five credit class, students will have engaged in a total of 40 classroom hours of participatory research and literacy small group instruction.

> The theme of the course is in developing effective critical thinking, research, reading, and writing strategies to support student comprehension in all academic areas. Students will learn the elements of a qualitative research project, including brainstorming topics of interest, generating research questions relevant

to the topic, deciding on research methods including interviews, surveys, document analysis, internet research, and observations. The class will culminate in a final presentation of the research for a varied audience including students and adult allies. The aim of the final projects will be to make recommendation for solving some of the community issues addressed over the course of the class. Students will demonstrate their mastery of research methods, PowerPoint skills, rhetoric, and reading and writing strategies. (Noonan, 2008)

Due to the constraints of traditional assessment practices, I had to devise a way to assess student learning in the group that was beyond simple participation. Since there was no way to "measure" transformation or critical consciousness, I stated in the application that I would assess their work based on:

1. Active participation in all sections of the class

2. Teacher observation and review of student work

3. Alternative assessments (including the Literacy Autobiography and Research Presentation)

All the students who completed the 4-month project received a grade of "A."

Another aspect of the program at FHCHS that was critical to the successful completion of the project was the flexible schedule of students and teachers. Since students only attend appointments with teachers twice per week for one hour, and teachers serve between 50 and 55 students over the course of a week, students participating in the project were able to easily change their "appointment times" with the teacher to fit the time demands of the project. During typical FHCHS "appointments,"

students ask their teacher with help with independent study work they did not understand, turn in work packets, and take tests in order to receive credits. Students only receive credit if they pass the multiple choice test with 70% or higher, pass the "alternative assessment" (typically an essay or project) and complete the entire packet of work. If students do not pass tests on the first try, they must study from their work packets and text books and return to retest the next day. They have a maximum of three tries to pass a test, or they are required to redo the work packet. The YPAR Critical Literacy Group met Tuesdays and Thursdays from 1:00-3:00 p.m., and all teachers whose students participated had no trouble adapting the students' appointment schedules to meet that time demand.

Administrative support of my leadership in the project was also crucial. Typically I only teach one class per month in my role as Literacy Coach, but my supervisors allowed me to replace that class with the YPAR project for its 4-month duration. The flexible administrative structure and freedom allowed by the charter school's unique staffing and instructional design contributed to my ability to do this work.

First Incarnation of the Youth Participatory Action Group

Recruiting students for small group instruction classes at Future Horizons Charter High School often presents a challenge. Group instructors must convince the students' individual teacher that group class will benefit the students, and that the teacher will be able to log a completed unit of credit for each week a student participates. Since independent study charter schools like FHCHS survive on state funding from students' work products (typically completed packets in various high school subjects with

multiple-choice tests and alternate assessments such as essays or projects to verify "mastery"), teachers' performance is evaluated and compensated based on the students on their rosters completing at least four credits of work per month. Student participation in small group instruction classes takes control of student performance away from teachers; the group instructors are only able to promise work if students attend classes and remain engaged long enough to complete whole courses. Due to my close professional relationships with the teachers at the school site, I was able to explain the scope of the project, as well as the ways it would likely benefit low-performing readers. Three of the five teachers referred the majority of student participants.

Convincing the North Valley FHCHS students to participate proved to be even more of a challenge than persuading my colleagues. Most of the students fell behind in credits at traditional high schools due to not attending classes or to leaving school altogether, so it was difficult to convince them that they should come twice per week for 12 weeks to participate in a student-run group based on methods and philosophies they had never heard of (critical literacy and youth participatory action research). I told the students some form of the following explanation each time I talked to a potential recruit: "It will be different than other classes you have taken; we will study things that you guys are interested in and learn more about how to analyze the structures of society to see if that will improve your literacy." When they asked why we were doing such a thing, I would tell them it was to help me with my research to "become a doctor, but not like a medical doctor, a doctor of education." Students had questions, but most of them related to how long the group would be, when we would meet, how much work it would entail

and when they would get the credits. All were suspicious they would be receiving credit without taking tests.

In the end, promises of "five credits by August if you do all your work, a field trip, and the occasional gift card for helping me out" resulted in a group of 12 "perfect" student participants on the first Tuesday in June. By perfect, I mean that student arrived with a written informed consent document to participate in the study, signed by a parent (see Appendix A), and a student assent form (see Appendix B), signed by a student. The seven girls and five boys had all scored basic or below basic on the EdPerformance reading test and each had been referred by a teacher thinking needed more support to read at the high school level.

The selected students played along with icebreaker games, listened intently when I told them this class would have no tests, just projects about topics student co-researchers would chose, and discussed Freire's concept of banking education when asked. In reference to Paulo Freire's critique that in banking education teachers act as though "the teacher knows everything and the students know nothing" (Freire, 2000, p. 72), a 17-year-old named Samantha[7] looked at me deadpan and said, "that's true, you're obviously going there to learn." After passing around photocopies of chapter two from *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2000) and giving a brief description of Freire's philosophy of critical pedagogy, I asked if they thought he was right based on their experiences. 16-year-old Jacqui responded "Maybe he just sees the world differently."

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[7] Each of the student co-researchers chose their own pseudonyms, and several of them changed their "names" over the course of research.

I was confident that I had my group in place and that they would work alongside me so that we could look to for authentic transformation in four short months. In my mind, I had reeled them in with promises of independent thinking and a critique of the status quo in schools, and now their learned addictions to the school economy of fast credits and extrinsic rewards would be smashed to pieces. We would march into the August sunset, revolutionizing education as we knew it at our school as I scrawled in my research journal. They would transform their literacy experiences and prove once and for all that Paulo Freire and Myles Horton were right about everything. We shall overcome!

Reality, of course, is always more complicated than our most overconfident visions of the future. On the second day of class, two female student co-researchers arrived right at 1:00, when our class was scheduled to start. One male student straggled in at 1:15, saying there was trouble with the bus.

That was it. I had 75% attrition on day two of a group that was scheduled to meet for 3 months, and no one could offer a reason why. The students with the answers to my questions were still at home. When asked why they thought attendance had dwindled, one student co-researcher said simply "lazy," another offered that "they had other things to do and they forgot about it," and a third said "it's too freaking hot." It was June, and if students promised to turn in four work packets to their AR teachers by July 5th, they were given the last three weeks of June off; many students were taking an extended break while I was asking the youth participatory action research (YPAR) group to come twice a week for two hours.

What followed were a frustrating and humiliating two weeks. The small group who continued to come kept asking if the other student co-researchers would get credit for the class and how we would pick research topics if only a quarter of the class was participating. I decided to give them a week off. On June 24th, the three remaining, resolute student co-researchers who had been coming since the first day of group helped me with a "marketing campaign" targeted at identified students returning on July 5th, complete with a flyer (see Appendix C) created by student co-researchers that shouted "Be your own teacher!", "Research what you want to research!", "Earn five credits!", "Learn new things", and "SNACKS!" They also decided to create a survey entitled "Ways to Make Class More Fun!!!!!!"

They surveyed each other as well as any new student co-researchers we recruited to the group, and included questions such as "What would be your dream class? Explain?" Completing their own survey, the three unwavering student co-researchers wrote "My dream class would be fun not boring. And working together in a group," "My dream class would be one that it can help me and learn new fun stuff," and "my dream class would be fun. I see myself doing fun things like field trips, projects, and more things." The students wanted to give the group a name so that they could talk about it to other students. Since we had talked about how we would be looking at the world through the lens of critical literacy and using Youth Participatory Action Research as our methodology, the students chose The YPAR Critical Literacy Group.

I decided that we needed to define "fun" based on the student co-researchers' values, not my own, and that I needed them to help me recruit new and former

participants back into the group at the start of July. I had to do these things and more if I was deliver on the promise of Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) and act as an adult ally to my students as they created "formal resistance that leads to transformation— systematic and institutional change that promote social justice" (Cammarota & Fine, 2008). I had to challenge myself to loosen the reigns on the project and on group sessions, breaking 7-year-old teaching habits of designing group agendas, facilitating all discussions, and knowing what I expected from students at all times. In the not- knowing lay a great deal of fear, but it was a fear that I hypothesized was necessary for my own transformation as a critical educator. I was not sure if these changes would help keep student co-researchers attending and involved in the project, but I had no choice but to try.

The Participants

Miraculously, the group of 12 who started in the YPAR Critical Literacy Group together on July 5th remained part of the project and still attend FHCHS, with only two exceptions: one student has since left on maternity leave and one returned to juvenile hall. Of the 12 student co-researchers, three had stayed throughout, three returned from that first day of group, and six new students were recruited through a combination of teacher efforts to find other students who met the requirements for the project and students efforts to recruit fellow students. The group was predominantly females (10 females, 2 males), due to our use of snow ball recruitment and convenience sampling. I will introduce these 12 co-teachers and co-researchers by the pseudonyms they either

created or agreed upon, paying special attention to their experiences in school, and with

literacy development before the class, as well as their comments and attitudes towards

school and the project. In this way, I hope to follow these 12 students throughout this

chapter, marking their growth and transformation over the course of the project.

Jaqui

Jacqui was one of the original 12 student co-researchers who began in June. A

gregarious and vocal leader from day one of the group, 16-year-old Jacqui had enough

credits to be a first semester 9[8] grader, and remained candid about her own experiences

with reading, as well as a variety of personal experiences throughout our five months

together. In her initial literacy autobiography, completed in early July, Jacqui wrote:

"Reading has always been a part of my life. I have never been the best reader but I

always try my best. When I was in elementary reading was the most difficult because I

didn't have a lot of help."

In her preliminary interview (see Appendix G), conducted in June when class

began, Jacqui spoke of how she was at FHCHS because she "flunked 9th grade" at a local

comprehensive high school. She also identified middle school as a time when she began

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[8] FHCHS designates student grade levels by credit, not by age. Most students attending
the school are lacking credits and hope to accelerate credit recovery during their time at
the school. Each high school course carries a 5-credit value and FHCHS' district requires
220 credits to graduate. The following are credits needed to pass to each grade:
0-29 credits-1st semester 9th grade
30-59-2nd semester 9th grade
60-89-1st semester 10th grade
90-119-2nd semester 10th grade
120-159-1st semester 11th grade
160-179-2nd semester 11th grade
180-199-1st semester 12th grade
200-220-2nd semester 12th grade

to struggle. "I've always been like really into school just like until I went to middle school I had problems but I always been really…into school and tried to do my best in it."

When asked what changed for her between elementary and middle school, Jacqui said

Well, when I was in middle school most of the teachers since they have

more students, they don't really pay attention to what you're doing. Like,

since it's more students, they just give you an assignment. They really

don't care if you do it or not. They're just doing their job but...I

understand that students have to do their job and actually do the work, but

they don't…I don't think that they put more effort in actually teaching

what more about reading and stuff like that.

From the start of group, Jacqui was skilled at articulating her experiences, as well as generating ideas for student and teacher behaviors and seeing issue through multiple perspectives.

Jacqui had an experience early in high school before coming to FHCHS in an English class where her teacher introduced the class to parents of Iraq war veterans. The class visited a non-profit organization dedicated to providing support to Latino military families and did projects on Latinos serving in the Iraq war, looking at the issue through multiple perspectives of immigration, culture, and patriotism. This experience meant that Jacqui was one of the first student co-researchers to articulate types of projects that the YPAR Critical Literacy Group could work on, and during our preliminary interview she

expressed the benefits of doing student-motivated research. "I feel like most of the subjects in class like they don't have anything to do with what people go through every day, I think reading about more subjects about that help students react to life more." When discussing the types of subjects she would be interested in learning more about, Jacqui referred again to the project she did in her English class, and said "I don't know if my other classmates have done about the war, I would like them to study more about the war, because it actually is really interesting, and it helps them see things from a different point of view."

Jacqui was interested in differing perspectives and multiple viewpoints from the start of group, but had to learn to give others the chance to speak in group discussions. Whenever I or another student in the group posed a question, Jacqui was usually the first person to respond, and she quickly became the second authority figure in the group. Part of this was due to her participation since the start of group and excellent attendance, both of which made her more knowledgeable than most student co-researchers on the subjects we discussed. In group discussions at the start of class, Jacqui also admitted to having a hard time letting others speak, and said she was beginning to learn the skill of "step up, step back" where those who are more vocal need to give others a chance to speak.

Genny

17-year-old Genny had the credits of a first semester 10th grader when class began. Genny and her sister Natalie were recruited by their teacher David to participate in the group because he thought they both could benefit from the reading support as well as to the exposure to speaking aloud in front of other students. As a student at FHCHS since

2006 with one brief and unsuccessful return to a comprehensive high school, Genny had been working independently for several years and David thought she could use the experience of a group environment. In the literacy autobiography she and each of her classmates wrote in July, Genny told the story of her earliest literacy memory:

> When I was four years old my mom told me that I use start writing little circles thinking that I knew how to write…I know I use to pretend how read books too I use to get my books that I didn't know how to read of course and pretended I was a teacher.

Genny wrote that she doesn't read "thick giant books simply because I don't have the time," but loves comic strips and teen magazines.

Genny was at the first group session in early June, but did not return again until July when the other student researchers recruited her again. She said that since she and her sister were both on vacation from their regular school appointments, she didn't think she had to come to group. Later, she admitted she did know she was supposed to come, but didn't want to because they were supposed to be on vacation. Social by nature, Genny flourished in the environment of a small group class. She shared her future goals of "work[ing] as a paramedic because I think it's a real cool thing to save people" Genny was a kind presence in the class, often acting as arbitrator in group debates and discussions. Very quiet at the start of group, Genny contributed more of her thoughts to group discussions by the end of our time together. When sharing the stories of our names in class, Genny said that she could never understand where her parents got the spelling for her name and said she had begun spelling it the "normal" way: Jenny.

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Natalie

Genny's sister Natalie was a 15-year-old first semester 9th grader at the start of the group. One of the youngest student co-researchers in the group, Natalie was also the student with the most interest in reading when group began. Although she was below proficient on the EdPerformance reading test, she scored higher than her older sister. Natalie told me that in her family she is known as "the smart one in the house." She also said "it makes me feel bad because my brothers get mad at me like *tu te crees* you think you're all that just because you know more stuff than we do." In her literacy autobiography, Natalie recounted enjoying elementary school and developing as a reader and writer, then wrote "but as I started middle school, I didn't really know what had happened but I started going down. My grades were at C's and D's and that really shocked me." She also mentioned two teachers who motivated her with their discouragement:

> During my last two years in middle school, I remember having two horrible
> English teachers. One used to cuss at us in Armenian and saying 'we were stupid
> bad kids who will never have a future.' The other one said 'you are never going
> to succeed in life and by the time your[9] in high school some of you guys will drop
> out. He was a real jerk but as I graduated from middle school I told him 'I'm
> going to prove you wrong! I'm going to graduate and get my diploma rub it in

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[9] [*sic*]. I will not use the [*sic*] symbol throughout this text in transcription of student co-researchers' voices. I do this to maintain the voice of each speaker and refrain from constantly pointing out students' writing or speaking that deviates from Standard English grammar, spelling, pronunciation, and usage.

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your face then I'm going to college and a university and your theory will only be

a myth just you wait and see!"

Although very shy and quiet at first, it was with this same spunk and determination that

Natalie approached our project. She quickly adopted a critical approach towards looking

at the reading and discussing we did in group. One of the leaders of her group research

project into environmental issues, Natalie impressed even herself with her confidence. By

the middle of July, Natalie wrote in a reflection:

My experience here in this class has changed my life a lot meaning that I feel

really comfortable talking around people. Basically I was a shy girl. I didn't really

talk when class started but as I began responding questions and coming often I

started having tremendous confidence. I started talking to people without them

talking to me first.

Catelina

Catelina was 15 when class started and had just enough credits to be classified as

a 10th grader. She turned 16 in August of our class and found out she was pregnant

around that same time. She was part of the original group, and did not speak aloud in

front of the whole group in all of June, although she participated in pair work with Jacqui,

who she knew from one of the comprehensive high schools they attended together, and

responded to all group reflections and homework assignments. Catelina's literacy

autobiography was the longest and most detailed of the group, as well as one of only

three assignments that were typed. Her memory of first grade was particularly vivid:

"First grade was way different than kinder. And that's when my fear started to attack

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me….that day I was the opposite of most kids, I was quiet and scared. Although I tried to concentrate I simply couldn't." She wrote that English was her favorite subject, and that she enjoyed the *Goosebumps* series, as well as echoing what many other co-researchers said about the changes they observed in their middle school experiences, writing "During middle school, I had to concentrate more because of all the distractions. People goofed around instead of doing their work and therefore didn't let you concentrate either."

In our preliminary interview, I had a hard time encouraging Catelina to talk about her experiences with reading and in school. Her mostly one-sentence responses indicated her positive attitude towards reading and writing. She said, "Actually, I like reading. Because it distracts me...I could do reading instead of like watching TV or something." She also indicated some negative experiences with school since she entered middle school and in written responses at the beginning of group referred several times to having "flunked" 9th grade. Reading seemed to be an escape for Catelina, something "fun" she did when she was bored.

Her pregnancy became an issue in the middle of class when she was absent several days during her first trimester. Her teacher and Jacqui told me about her pregnancy. She did not tell me herself until we were at an amusement park on the final day of class and she was not able to go on a ride. She mentioned that she was pregnant, and said that she thought everyone already knew.

Eva

Eva was 17 when class started, and had the credits of a second semester 9th grader. She is a young mother who proudly speaks of her 2-year-old daughter and the

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impact her daughter has had on Eva's life. Most interviews and reflections turned back to her most transformative experience: becoming a mother. I gave all the student co-researchers the option of expressing their literacy autobiographies using visuals, videos, comic strips, poetry, or any other way they wished. Only Eva told her story outside of the essay format, creating a large poster with photographs and symbols to represent important turning points in her life. She accompanied the poster with a written page of explanation, which focused more on life experiences than those with literacy. She wrote: "What my poster is trying to say is that I ended up growing up. I am not a full grown up yet but I ended up having a beautiful little girl with the wrong guy." I wrote letters to all the student co-researchers commenting on their literacy autobiographies and asking further questions. In trying to help Eva focus on the effects of her life experience on her literacy development, I wrote "I can tell your daughter had a huge impact on your life and maturity. What effect, if any, do you believe she had on your literacy?" In response, Eva wrote:

> I do feel that since her birth I've grown up. I feel more mature and am better at making decisions in life. By the way, I really don't know what effect she had in my literacy but most likely it's a good thing.

> Before her daughter's birth, Eva ditched school and used drugs, lacked motivation and considered dropping out. She wrote, "When I got pregnant I started concentrating more on school and now that she's born that's all I am dedicated to you know trying to finish school." She reported reading aloud in class more than before because she wanted to practice her reading, as well as putting more effort into all her work.

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During her preliminary interview, Eva explored her relationship with reading and writing, taking responsibility for much of what she missed in school. When asked about her experiences acquiring reading and writing skills in elementary school and middle school, she responded, "Honestly, I can't remember because I was like a messup back then so like I can't really say that I learned anything cuz I didn't just because I didn't pay attention." Eva also identified reading and writing experiences that gave her confidence and held her interest because they related to her life:

Jesse: Do you like reading?

Eva: Hmmm....no but there was this book that I fell in love with, it's called *A Child Called It* (Pelzer, 1995). I love that book and it was like the only book I ever finished. That's the only book I ever fell in love with as if I pictured it in my head as if it was really something...it is a true story but I could actually picture it like if I was in it.

Jesse: Why do you think you liked it more than other books you tried?

Eva: It just seems so real and the author was able to express hisself very good and the way he explained that these happened to him it's just...it's sad. So it kind of puts, it makes the readers put themselves in his shoes.

When asked about writing, Eva responded "I think I'm good at writing. No one's ever given me compliments on my writing but just me myself I think I'm alright at it." When asked how she became a good writer, her response indicated a personal connection to writing that proved her skill:

We all learn how to write because the teachers they teach us how to write but

maybe because I like writing. I like writing letters, I like writing a lot, and every

time I write letters to my uh...daughter's father, I write letters to him from 10

pages to 18 pages.

The father of Eva's daughter remains incarcerated, and came up repeatedly in class and in

individual conversations I had with Eva about choices she made in the past that she

regretted. Her continued correspondence with him did seem to reflect in her writing

fluency and ability to free write continuously. Whereas other student co-researchers in

the group would stop writing for fear of making mistakes or because they had run out of

ideas, Eva could express herself for pages without stopping.

Karen

14-year-old Karen and her fraternal twin sister Samantha were on track with

credits for their age, both with credits to make them second semester 9th graders when the

group began. Samantha and Karen's mother decided to place the girls at FHCHS directly

from middle school not to recover credits but, according to Karen "my mom was saying

that there was like problems in school…and like all the drug things." There is a small but

growing population of students at FHCHS whose parents enroll them in the charter

school for fear of the dangers they see in the local comprehensive high schools, including

drugs as mentioned by Karen's mother, as well as gang issues, pregnancy, and other

negative influences that parents fear.

Perhaps because of Karen and Samantha's age, as well as their lack of experience

in traditional high school environments, these two sisters were the students who

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participated least in initial group sessions. Karen, in particular, had the tendency to dissolve into giggles whenever asked a direct question during a group session or one-on-one interview, and both girls were slow to warm up giving more than brief one-sentence responses to interview questions.

Karen did not turn in her literacy autobiography until several weeks into the semester, and each time I asked her about it she would say that she didn't remember anything about learning to read and write. Finally, she told me it was hard for her to think of multiple sentences to put into a paragraph and she did not have that much to say. I suggested she do one of the creative alternatives to an essay, such as a collage with explanation, or a poem or cartoon strip. She said she wanted to try the essay, and finally did turn a draft into me five weeks later than everyone else. In her preliminary interview, Karen said she did not like reading and she never had. When prompted to answer why, she said "Too long. And sometimes [the books]'re boring." She said learning to read in first grade was "kind of hard not that easy" and that she sometimes read at home in Spanish with her mother. Her reasons for not liking writing included "too much paragraphs" and asked to recall any writing assignments that she can remember being fun, Karen responded "Yeah, when they're short" and giggled.

Samantha

Karen's 14-year-old fraternal twin sister Samantha had enough credits to be a second semester 9th graders when the group began. In contrast to her twin sister, Samantha turned in her literacy autobiography on time and was more active in group discussions. In her literacy autobiography, Samantha recalled: "Through my life I've read

books but not as much as my teachers expect me to read. Just because of the simple way that I did not like to read." Samantha described some of the picture books she remembered enjoying as a child, particularly *The Three Little Pigs*. She ended her autobiography by stating "I know I have to read books because it would improve my reading and I'm going to understand English more." During our preliminary interview, Samantha contrasted her elementary school teachers to her middle school teachers. In third grade, Samantha said her teacher "explained clearly. Like someone like wouldn't like understand and she'll like sit next to you and go over the stuff she read or something." In contrast, Samantha said "she didn't teach me as well as I wanted her to teach me in middle school." When I asked how she would have wanted her to teach, Samantha responded "to explain it like more clearly so I could like understand."

Samantha and Karen both spoke only Spanish at home with their parents, both English and Spanish when speaking with each other, and English while in school. At the start of class, Samantha preferred working in groups to working alone, and would immediately ask me for "the answer" when she struggled with a reflection question or piece of reading. At the beginning of our time together, she seemed afraid to answer questions unless they were sure they were "right" and asked for help before attempting to figure things out independently. Her teacher David also remarked on this lack of independence in both Samantha and Karen's work, which made it hard for them to complete core subjects on their own. It was his hope that through participating in the projects they would grow their confidence and be able to work more independently.

Hugo

14-year-old Hugo, who had credits to be a on track as a 9th grader, was in and out of class from the start of June, returning in July and participating with the group until he was arrested for the third time in July and sent to a juvenile detention camp for 6 months to a year, longer than either of his previous two times in detention.

Hugo never completed a literacy autobiography, but from my work with him in a previous required developmental literacy class for students reading below grade level, I knew that Hugo struggled with speaking aloud in class. He was also a conscientious and motivated student who always came to class on time and assisted those who needed help. We spoke together about his involvement in gangs and in the juvenile justice system. Hugo told me that his brother and uncle were both involved in the gang and that he was not ready to leave yet, but that once he was he would utilize the resource numbers I gave him to a youth program in the area.

When the YPAR group began, Hugo had already been in a class with me, so his preliminary interview referred to that class frequently. Regarding his acquisition of reading skills, Hugo said, "My experiences with reading were quite good. Started reading like around first grade until now pretty much. I like reading horror, drama, teen life, sports." Hugo said he read several books while he was in "camp" the last time, and also mentioned the book *Always Running* (Rodriguez, 2005), which he had read in my previous literacy class. The autobiography's focus on gang life in the 1970s and Rodriguez's efforts to leave his gang intrigued Hugo, and he did a beautiful artistic rendering of one of the scenes for his final project. He said in his interview about that

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experience, "The projects we did, the book helped me understand, like pronounce the words better."

When we first began talking in group about subjects that student co-researchers would be interested in studying, Hugo indicated that prison law was a subject he wanted to learn more about. In his preliminary interview, he said: "prison laws interest me cut like prison laws like the inmates and how they go in through prison and how they come out it's real interesting to me." I gave him a summary of a participatory action research project done by women in prison about sexually transmitted diseases (Fields, 2007) and he excitedly read the summary and presented the findings to his classmates. Although this subject was not chosen by the rest of the group, Hugo remained interested in it and we discussed him using the group research on dropout/pushout issues to investigate education requirements in the juvenile justice system before he was arrested and sent to camp again.

Iris

Sixteen-year-old Iris was different from many of the student co-researchers in the class, in that she was ahead in credits and prepared to graduate early at 17. She entered the group as an 11th grader. She was at the high end of the spectrum of readers in the group. Based on the EdPerformance test given for admission to the school, she was at the basic level nearing proficient. Iris was a student who rushed through tasks with more of an eye towards completion than an attention to detail. What she lacked in thoroughness, she made up for in consistency and promptness. In her short literacy autobiography, Iris wrote that "literacy has a big impact in my life" and indicated a different experience from

the other co-researchers, most of whom mentioned struggling in middle school. In contrast, Iris wrote, "throughout elementary I read very interesting books but all of them were assigned to me" but that "once I started Middle School I became more interested in reading." She spoke throughout the project about the books she found most interesting, from *The Bitch Posse* (O'Connor, 2005) to the *Chicken Soup for the Soul* books, which she wrote were her favorite because "they help you out and show you that your not the only one that has problems."

Another theme that Iris spoke about from the start of the project was the lack of resources in her previous schools and the overcrowding that led to negative class experiences. Speaking about an English class at one of her previous comprehensive high schools, Iris said during a group discussion, "It was like 40-something students in that class so a lot of us had to stand up cause there were no seats. At the end there was like 20 students left cause we got kicked out." She had many opinions about how schools should be changed, and in one discussion wherein the students were discussing the benefits of FHCHS over their previous schools, Iris said of her past experiences, "if you have problems with a certain area, they should like focus on that. Cuz like there's so many students in one area now, no one gets attention anymore." Iris disliked her name because she didn't understand where it comes from and said people had a hard time pronouncing it. Her nickname was "Barbie," but most of the group members continued to call her Iris. A consistent member of the group, Iris missed the group several times for different medical issues she encountered. A leader by nature, Iris was often outspoken in group

discussions and would get frustrated when she did not feel that other student co-researchers in her YPAR project were pulling their weight.

Kat

Kat turned 17 while in the YPAR literacy project with enough credits to classify her as a first semester 10th grader. Kat knew Iris from their previous high school, and the two became closer friends over the course of the project. Kat prided herself on her individualism, wearing unique clothing and hairstyles that stood in stark contrast to the other young people, most of whom dressed simply. The ends of her hair were bleached gold while several inches of roots grew in dark brown. Kat enjoyed dressing in animal prints, sometimes with vests and suspenders, and often enjoyed taking contrary views to the majority of the group, on everything from gay marriage to why students drop out of school.

Since she was outspoken in the group, I was surprised when Kat expressed her nervousness at our preliminary interview. She was not sure where her anxiety came from, but she spoke boldly about it, clearly expressing her emotions. When asked about her experiences with reading, Kat interpreted "reading" as many student co-researchers interviewed at first did, as reading aloud in group. She said:

> Um…they're horrible. Well I have good experiences with it but I'm just…I don't know, when I read out loud, I get nervous. Just like right there when we were doing the talking I get nervous and I can't speak right. I get nervous, I just blabber, I stutter.

When I told Kat that she did not appear to be nervous in group, Kat smiled and said "I'm a good liar." She talked about losing interest in the reading she did for school, saying "I'll try to read it if it's like homework, I'll just like I need to reread it to understand it cuz I'm not paying attention to it." In terms of writing, Kat said she loved it and that if she had to choose a career, it would be as a writer. Then she qualified her choice.

> Kat: But I'm not very, how do you call it…you know when you write you have to be very proper, you have to write correctly, and I don't do that when I write.
>
> Jesse: How do you write?
>
> Kat: I write um…I forget how to spell words…I spell them I don't know. I don't know how to explain it, I just forget…I'm very…I forget, I just forget…

Kat's nervousness during our one-on-one interviews would begin to change over time as she began to get to know me better

In her literacy autobiography, Kat was the only student who mentioned the value of her bilingualism. She wrote:

> When I was in kindergarten my mom put me in a bilingual program. She didn't want me to be one of those kids that didn't know how to speak Spanish well. So like a lot of other people I have a greater advantage. I speak, read, and write in English and Spanish well. Now a days there's a lot of job out there that need bilingual speakers.

Despite Kat's professed anxiety about reading aloud and speaking in our interview, it was the confidence illustrated above that characterized Kat throughout the project. She was excited from the start by the idea of "paying it forward" which she had seen in the film

Pay it Forward (Abrams, 2000). Kat explained to the group that if they could learn something from their YPAR project and share it with others, and then those they taught could share with more people; they would be able to "pay forward" the impact they would have on other student co-researchers. Kat remained committed to this concept throughout the project, and several months after the project ended, came to me to see if I would help her to organize a canned food drive for the holidays.

Ray

Seventeen-year-old Ray had enough credits to be a first semester 10th grader when the project began. Both in reading fluency and comprehension, and in writing skills, Ray was one of the lowest students in the group. He had been in the same developmental literacy class as Hugo, and struggled to complete his book and projects. He needed a substantial amount of one-on-one help from both me and his teacher Jason in order to complete the work for the class. In the six months since the developmental literacy class ended and the YPAR project began, Ray began helping his uncles in their auto mechanic shop and found a new purpose for improving his reading:

> I have to start reading a lot more because now at work that gets me kinda....I work
> with my uncles and I don't know how to put stuff apart and I go to Auto Zone and
> buy me a manual and it takes me a while, like a long time…

In addition to auto repair, Ray also developed an interest in computer graphics, and his traditional literacy autobiography was accompanied by a macabre graphic he created of a Grim Reaper-type character writing on a tablet, surrounded by ghouls at his feet. Ray's name was written in a matching ghoulish font across the top.

In both his preliminary interview and literacy autobiography, Ray focused on several negative reading experiences he encountered with elementary school teachers. When asked about his experiences with reading, Ray told me:

> They were good and bad…good because the teachers would yell at me to make me read, that's the way I learned. I wouldn't want to read, I mean I would stay and just look at the teachers like, no. They would yell at me, they'd have to call my mom, then my mom would go sit down with me to like read, and I still wouldn't read. They would put me through hell basically so I would read and I wouldn't.

I found it interesting that he believed he learned to read because teachers would yell at him "to make me read," so I asked him to explain. He said "I could read but once the teacher called me stupid cause I messed up, so ever since then I was like okay, I ain't gonna read then." Ray mentioned the same feeling of defiance in his literacy autobiography. He described how the teacher called him stupid and Ray refused to read even after his mother was brought in to school to reprimand him. Ray wrote,

> It was a proud moment for me because I stuck up for my self, I got into so much trouble my mom yelled at me that day for hours and she asked me if I liked to put her to shame in front of the whole class. She got over it I think.

This story was particularly interesting to me in lieu of the defiance Ray sometimes exhibited in class. He told me of his previous high school experience, "I never stay long enough in a class…I'm usually…when I was in high school, I would get kicked out 5 minutes in and that's it. I would never stay that long so I didn't really learn much."

Although he usually followed instructions and worked well in small groups, he would sometimes choose not to do the work at all or spend time working on a drawing or tagging his paper. I inferred that Ray's prideful defiance after being verbally abused by his teacher had this effect on him, and that he sought control over classroom situations by acting in a similar way. When I member-checked this theory with him, Ray saw a different cause for his lack of focus in class. He told the group that a doctor once told him that he may have Attention Deficit Disorder and that he thought this was the reason he had such a hard time focusing. Ray tried to convince his classmates to study the relationship between educational justice and Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD), saying in a group discussion, "ADD students have the right to learn too. People think they're distracted but they have the right to learn." The students discussed this point, but no one else in the group besides Iris, who explained her brother also suffered from the disorder, expressed interest in studying his topic. It seemed hard for the other students to take his suggestions seriously; Ray often made jokes when the others were engaged in a serious discussion or appeared as though he wasn't listening.

Of all the student co-researchers who participated in this project, I feel that I was the least successful at including Ray. After Hugo was arrested, Ray was the only male student who remained, and this coupled with his noticeable difficulty concentrating left Ray with less of an active role in the group. I wish I had worked with him to figure out a way to participate more actively and study the topics that interested him. Perhaps because the other student co-researchers worked so well together and moved in unison towards

more independence in their projects, coupled with the fact that his outward laziness frustrated me, I made less effort than I should have to include Ray.

Paulina

Named after a popular Spanish-speaking music star like all of her five siblings, at 16 Paulina entered the group as a second-semester 10th grader. She entered the group two weeks into July, begging me to let her participate because she heard the group was fun. I had tried to recruit her in late May after David included her on a list of students that met the requirements for the project. I allowed her to join the group late, but required that she complete extra assignments to make up for the days she had missed and still earn the credits.

Paulina considers herself a strong reader and writer and said during her preliminary interview:

> I've always been a good reader. Like, that's my subject and since I was like small, like I would always like be in the, what's it, like the spelling bees? Yeah. And I would always have good grades in reading and in English. That's always been my subject.

Her literacy autobiography focused only on elementary school, beginning with when she was four and began her education at "a children center. The ladies there were really nice. They would show me everything from shapes to colors, to numbers, reading and sometimes writing."   The last part of her 3-page literacy autobiography focused on her 5th grade spelling bee, where her family came to watch her and "Unfortunately I ended up

in 10th place. At least I was not the last one out of 30 kids." Paulina also reported that she went to a good middle school, and took responsibility for not passing her classes.

It was in middle and high school when Paulina began having trouble in school, ditching classes and not getting along with other students. At the start of the class, Paulina had the tendency to act in a contrary manner or be defiant of me even when student co-researchers were leading the group. She would often say she wanted to do easier things than research, like "vocabulary and multiple choice." When she first started the group, she was focused much more on external than intrinsic motivators; with everything from the five credits she would receive for the class to her description of what makes somebody a good teacher: "They give you prizes."

Table 1 summarizes characteristics of the student participants.

Table 1: *Student Descriptives*

Student Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Semesters Behind	EdPerformance Reading Level	YPAR Project[10]
Catelina	Female	15	1	Basic	ROP
Genny	Female	17	3	Below Basic	EIA
Eva	Female	17	3	Below Basic	ROP
Samantha	Female	14	0	Basic	EIA
Hugo	Male	14	1	Basic	ROP
Iris	Female	16	1	Basic	EIA
Kat	Female	17	2	Basic	ROP
Natalie	Female	15	0	Basic	EIA
Ray	Male	17	4	Below Basic	EIA
Jacqui	Female	16	5	Basic	ROP
Karen	Female	14	0	Far Below Basic	EIA
Paulina	Female	16	2	Basic	ROP

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[10] Students in the Roots of the Problem (ROP) group studied why students drop out or are pushed out of school. Those in the Environmentalism in Action group (EIA) focused on issues of environmental injustice as well as global warming.

The YPAR Critical Literacy Project in Action

The student co-researchers decided to call the group The YPAR Critical Literacy Group. This section highlights and describes the curriculum, pedagogy, and methods of that group while bringing into focus the research projects conducted by the students, as well as the daily structure of the group and links to literacy development.

Curriculum Planning

This research proposed authentic student involvement in all aspects of the curriculum and presentation of content, but I realized by our second meeting in June that I would need to do more to scaffold student co-researchers' understanding of Critical Literacy, YPAR, and the options for issues that they would study in their group research projects. For the first six weeks of the group, I loosely structured an agenda each time we met that allowed for the group to go in unexpected directions while still providing the structure to help student co-researchers become skilled researchers. Most of the materials I brought to the group were primary sources from Freire (2000), Horton (2003), and Shor (1992), as well as Youth Participatory Action Research projects pulled from the CUNY PAR collective website (Institute for Participatory Action Research and Design, 2008), a virtual community of researchers and students creating and sharing their PAR and YPAR projects. We also used activities from the Youth Involved in Leadership and Learning (Y.E.L.L) Curriculum (Hofstedt & Brink, 2008). Created at Stanford's John W. Gardner Center for Youth and Their Communities, the curriculum included units to help adult and youth facilitators help students new to YPAR create their own projects.

We also viewed a variety of films, both adult-produced documentaries and student-created films. To provide background on the educational philosophers we were basing the group on, we watched an introductory video on critical pedagogy (Paulo and Natalie Freire International Project for Critical Pedagogy, 2008). As a group, we watched "Bill Moyers Presents: Interview with a Radical Hillbilly" (1983). Once students picked the topics they wanted to study, I brought in *Who Killed the Electric Car* (Paine, 2006) because one of the groups wanted to study environmental justice. A student suggested an episode of the documentary television show *Thirty Days* (Spurlock, 2005) about a Minuteman who moves in with a family of Mexican immigrants in Los Angeles when we were discussing the effect of legal status on motivation in school. We also watched student-produced films on Urban Dreams Video Projects (2008) website to generate ideas for multimedia presentations student co-researchers could create to present their research.

On the first day of class in June and then again with the new student co-researchers in July, I created and distributed a worksheet that divided Freire's concept of "banking education" (2000) into the ten aspects of this kind of teaching and learning and asked student co-researchers to mark whether they agreed or disagreed that this matched their general experiences in school as well as provide thoughts and questions (see Appendix D)[11]. . In addition, I provided five Freire quotes about power, students, and

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[11] I decided to begin the class with Freire's concept of banking education (2000) as a way of defining the YPAR project in contrast to this type of pedagogy. I also wanted students to connect the definitions of banking education to their own experiences in school. I saw this as an opportunity to begin with the students' own experiences in school and provide a critical frame through which they could begin to analyze them.

education and asked the students to "talk to the text" on the page. Talking to the text is a key feature of the Reading Apprenticeship literacy instruction model that several of the students had learned in other classes they had taken with me (Shoenbach et al., 1999). When students talk to the text, they mark the text with their questions, reactions, connections, clarifications, and even draw visuals to help them comprehend what they read. These markings and marginalia on the quotes as well as the checklist of Agree/Disagree statements would allow me to see what student co-researchers comprehended independently, as well as providing us with a baseline assessment from the start of class to revisit at the end of class. The checklist and talking to the text on quotes served as an anticipation guide as we began to ground ourselves in critical pedagogy and explore the students' experiences in school through the lens of banking education. In addition, I knew we could return to the quotes and concepts of banking education later in the group, not simply as an assessment of learning but as a way to return to the same concepts with new understanding after experiencing the differences between banking education and youth participatory action research.

When the 12 student co-researchers began together in July, I created two group sessions of activities in the first week meant to build community and introduce them to the basic concepts of critical literacy and participatory action research. They got into teams and created definitions of the word 'research,' and then 'participatory action research' and illustrated these definitions. We shared the stories of our names in pairs and then with the rest of the group. They created a list of injustices at the school, then got into small groups and created skits based on how they would address these problems present

solutions to the principal or school board. We did writing activities in pairs based on brainstorms about "My Best Teacher Ever" and "My Worst Teacher Ever." First we brainstormed, and then told the stories of both topics to a partner who wrote the story down for us.

Choice and Academic Focus

While the topics we studied were left in the hands of the students after we had set our theoretical foundation, by the time we started choosing research topics, the group took on an academic tone. Ray always had his iPod attached to a class laptop's external speakers at the start of group and we would start the 1:00 p.m. sessions with music and a few minutes of checking in about our weeks. These check-ins became personal in the first few weeks of July, with Eva sharing about struggles with finding childcare for her daughter and Iris often talking about her frequent medical issues. I typically had a few activities or readings planned for each session during July; once the student co-researchers began to take over sessions, they typically either planned activities or worked in small research groups on their projects.

The student co-researchers were not limited in what we discussed in the group; in fact, they created the norms of interaction and I did not limit the topics they discussed. They were not prohibited from using "profanity" or told that certain topics were off-limits. The only time I interceded about a topic was when the group considered researching domestic violence and wanted to conduct surveys and interviews with students at the school about their experiences with abuse. In this case, I explained my role as a mandatory reporter of child abuse, and we discussed the ethical implications of

asking questions about abuse and violence simply to gather our own research. While the student co-researchers saw the benefits of this topic, they decided in the end against finding alternate ways to conduct such research.

I believe that the fact that the student co-researchers chose to study issues of environmental justice and school leaving speaks to both the preparatory groundwork in critical literacy and YPAR that we did in July and the enthusiasm the student co-researchers displayed for "paying it forward" and doing action research that would effect the social issues facing their communities. Certainly, I guided them with brainstorms about social issues and exposure to YPAR projects that focused on issues of injustice. I did not spend a great deal of time doing media analysis with them or working to find aspects of youth culture that we could use as fodder for discussions. Instead, I asked what issues mattered to them, what problems they thought they could address with YPAR, and what they saw as the deeper institutional structures that perpetuated injustices. In this way, I did play a part in guiding the tone of the class towards social issues and academic research. The group had the final word about their topics and projects, however, and one of the many unique aspects of this group is that they were impassioned very early in the process about broader social issues effecting entire communities.

Negotiating Spaces and Voices

The bulk of the group sessions for the next six weeks were similar to a college seminar. For two hours twice per week, we met and discussed issues identified as important to the youth co-researchers. At first I brought in reading materials and assigned

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reflection topics at the end of the group, but by the end of the six weeks student co-researchers were bringing in their own resources printed from the internet or found in books and developing the reflection questions. In order to teach about focus groups and set the ground rules for group discussions, we developed "norms of interaction" for the group during the discussion below:

Jesse: A focus group is pretty much just like a group discussion but it's focused on just one topic or group of questions. Like a group interview. But you guys are going to learn how to run these yourself. We need norms, which means the way we act during these focus groups, both together and with other students. One example of a norm might be that we don't use cell phones. What are other norms we should have?

Jaqui: To not talk while someone's talking? To be respectful.

Jesse: How do you know if someone's listening to you?

Eva: They're paying good attention. I't simportant that you're actually paying attention.

Jesse: Do you think everyone should have to talk?

Jacqui/Eva/Samantha/Ray: Yeah.

Jesse: What if they don't want to talk?

Eva: Maybe they should write it down?

Jesse: Oh that's interesting! Why don' t I put down "participate either through speaking or writing?"

> Kat: We should use names. It's important to use someone's name in a conversation. Maybe we could play a name game to make sure we know each other's names?

In the end, our norms for focus groups included the following:

1. No cell phones

2. Be respectful

3. Speak one at a time and listen when you are not speaking

4. Participate, either through speaking or writing

5. Use names

We used these same norms of interactions for all group discussions, which were typically facilitated by me at first, with student co-researchers guest-facilitating for sections they chose. We always had a text, film, or experience at the center of our discussions, and I asked students to try to refer to these as they made their points. At the beginning of July, I noted that most student co-researchers directed their responses at me, looking at me when they spoke and avoiding direct interaction with other students. By mid-July our discussions were more interactive, with students talking to each other and asking follow-up questions. Unlike other groups I have taught in the past, I did not plan any "discussion etiquette" activities to help students speak one at a time, refer back to the text, or ask follow-up questions. Instead, this began to happen naturally after a few discussions, perhaps an outgrowth of the norms of interactions they had created. In the mid-process interviews I conducted with the students in the beginning of August, most of the student co-researchers mentioned the discussions as their favorite aspects of the

project. Jacqui said she liked the group because "you get to see different things and you get more knowledge of different people."

Research Groups

The student co-researchers spent July studying the literature and discussing their ideas, while August and September were dedicated to the students' own research topics, and the texts for the group became the transcripts of the interviews, focus groups, and surveys they conducted. The student co-researchers knew from the beginning of the project that they would be choosing a topic from the list of "social issues" they created in July and working individually or in small groups to conduct YPAR projects based on those topics. They would create research questions, choose research methods, analyze and present their findings by late October. This section of the curriculum was much more student-driven and student co-researchers knew from the start that they would have the freedom to design their projects and that my research question was whether this type of work would help them increase their literacy.

While in June and the first part of July, I created our activities and discussion topics from primary sources, I realized as we began isolating issues student co-researchers wanted to study that I hadn't done a good enough job of helping them understand the components youth participatory action research (YPAR) was or how they could go about creating research questions. I returned to a curriculum I had been referred to in late May by a colleague who was doing action research projects with students in New York City. The Youth Involved in Leadership and Learning Curriculum (Hofstedt & Brink, 2008), created at Stanford's John W. Gardner Center for Youth and Their

Communities, included units to help adult and youth facilitators help students new to

PAR form their own projects. Units on "Communication," "Leadership," and "Research

and Action" included session plans for everything from "Understanding the Power of

Research" to "Take Action: Advocacy, Activism, and Education." I modified and

combined sessions to meet our group's needs, and later in the project students facilitated

sessions within their own research groups. This curriculum helped focus our process, and

provided excellent, youth-friendly guidelines for exploring research, choosing research

methods, and taking action.

Student co-researchers created a list of "social issues," problems they saw in their

local communities and the world, during our July discussion groups. This list included

more than 100 issues, including the issues that student co-researchers decided were most

important to them[12]:

> How immigration effects students who are not legal, poverty, sexual
>
> harassment, rape, diabetes, racism, high gas prices, bad economy,
>
> foreclosures, obesity, air pollution, global warming, child abuse, students
>
> dropping out, schools giving bad food, too much fast food, water and
>
> power too high, war in Iraq, murders, people getting locked up, grafitti,
>
> too many homeless, dirty parks, slanging (selling drugs), people dying,

---

[12] I guided students to focus on community social issues, first by showing them examples of YPAR projects completed at other high schools and youth development programs (Institute for Participatory Action Research and Design, 2008; Urban Dreams Video Projects Website, 2008). An important piece of context is that this list was compiled in August of 2008, when the gas prices in California and the United States in general were at an all-time high and the foreclosure crisis dominated the news. It is interesting to note that in this sociopolitical environment, many of the students' concerns had to do with the economy.

murders, suicide, abandonment of children, people throwing away babies,

depression, anger problems

The list was created on chart paper, constantly updated to add issues or isolate those student co-researchers most wanted to research, and remained on the wall throughout the class.

Building on Kat's concept of "paying it forward" and our studies of various YPAR projects, we decided together that we wanted to pick issues to research that we could "do something about." In our repeated group definitions of YPAR which also remained on chart paper, "participatory" was defined by students as "get involved" action was defined as "do something." "Research" was first defined as "look up something," but after analyzing other PAR projects and studying more about research methods, the students redefined "research" as "finding information to try to answer questions." The "do something" and "get involved" aspects of PAR seemed to be at the forefront of students' minds as they choose research topics.

At first the whole group was interested in studying immigration reform, teens and drugs abuse, and teen pregnancy. They were also interested in researching why the price of gas and water had become so high. As we began discussing these issues, however, several of the student co-researchers took leadership roles in referring to our definition of a good research topic:

Specific and focused, effects people in your school and community, easy to understand and explain what it is and why it matters, important to other youth,

could use more examination or deeper understanding, has realistic or possible

solutions (Hofstedt & Brink, 2008).

Utilizing this definition as a reference point to the issues that student co-researchers cared

about, they went about the task of deciding which topics they could research. Teen

pregnancy was an option. Eva said, "I actually think that teen pregnancy can be prevented

just because well if you're on a birth control method and your partner's on a birth control

method it's gonna be a miracle if you get pregnant like that." The student co-researchers

discussed creating workshops to teach students about various birth control methods,

focusing on what girls could do to avoid becoming pregnant. They also mentioned

immigration and the effect of legal citizenship on students. Catelina said, "For student

immigrant, to like have more programs to let them go to college cuz they're saying that if

they don't have certain stuff that they can't achieve…" The other students agreed, but

were not sure if we as a group could create such programs in the time we had to work on

the projects.

Another issue that student co-researchers discussed was domestic violence. Eva

said, "I keep thinking about like violence and abusement but I don't know if there really

is anything that we can do about it like preventing people from getting raped and guys

hitting woman, child abuse." Iris suggested helping students get into self-defense classes.

Since we had begun talking about anonymity of the students we interviewed, students

began talking about the difficulty of finding students who were willing to talk about

abuse. I also let them know that as student co-researchers working on a project that I

sponsored, if we found out that any minors were in danger of being hurt physically, as a

mandated reporter I would have to contact Child Protective Services. A similar

conversation emerged in discussing teens and drug use. Eva said,

> If you talk to them about it, they won't listen, I mean how many people haven't
>
> tried to talk to people who are addicted to drugs and they don't listen. You know
>
> it's really up to them if they want to stop.

We discussed the line between PAR and social work, and that we were trying to learn

about problems so we could propose solutions, but that our role was not to be therapists. I

also mentioned the differences and similarities between institutional issues and those that

are more personal. While both drug abuse and violence were symptoms of larger

distributional equity issues, the ways in which the student co-researchers were proposing

to study them were much more in line individual therapy than taking action for the wider

community.

Student co-researchers also talked about how they would need to research issues

before deciding what actions to take. When discussing students dropping out of high

school, Genny said we could "Make them feel like [school]'s more fun and not like…"

Iris finished for her, "-I know like make it more interesting." Another group of student

co-researchers was interested in "global warming," which I soon realized was their

shorthand term for any environmental issue. While the student co-researchers with that

interest began by talking about the ozone layer and climate change, their interests

emerged as more local when they began talking about possible actions they could take.

"Dirty parks" and "not enough trash cans" were the first two examples of environmental

issues that the students identified. They mentioned the differences in cleanliness between

their neighborhoods and Beverly Hills, cleaning parks and finding others in the community who wanted to recycle and help keep their neighborhoods clean. I provided that group with information on the environmental justice movement and its tenets (Bullard, 2008).

Reading the World

After taking a vote on the top five social issues that student co-researchers cared about (immigration issues, teen pregnancy, abuse, students dropping out, environmental justice) the end of that group session, we played the "But why?" game on the dry erase board. Student co-researchers would mention the issue and I would ask "buy why?" and record their responses as a way of attempting to encourage them to be more critical and analytical about the issues they cared about and connecting them to other issues that mattered to them. The following is a transcript of the "But why?" game we played with the issue of teens leaving school:

Jesse: Ok, teens drop out is the issue, but my question is "but why?"

Iris: Because they think school's boring. They have other responsibilities at home.

Samantha: They're lazy.

Eva: They let their obstacles from home—like family problems or whatever they're going through--get in their way. Get in the way of school. They give up.

Samantha: Or they just don't care about their education.

Catelina: They give up.

Genny: They don't care about education

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Jesse: Ok, so now we need to do another level of this. They think it's boring, but why?

Samantha: Because the teachers are boring.

Genny: They don't make it interesting

Karen: They don't help you sometimes

Eva: There should be more activities

Genny: There's no opportunities for them to like do good?

Iris: They don't care about education.

Genny: They don't think there's opportunities for them to like do anything about it.

Eva: or people just put them down all the time.

Catelina: Low self-esteem

Karen: They're lazy, cuz they don't want to walk to school.

Eva: They should have school like not start 'til 10.

Karen: I come to school at 9 and I still don't want to wake up, like I have to wake up at 7.

Jesse: They let obstacles at home get in the way of school, but why?

Iris: Because there's nothing they can do about it.

Samantha: Or probably the parents don't like support them. They're like, oh you're never going to do anything….

Jesse: Teachers don't help, but why?

Eva: They don't have the desire...they don't like their job.

Karen: Or probably the teachers are too old.

Natalie: They don't have no excitement in it. They're not too interested to help them out. they give up-they don't care—

Karen: They think all students are the same.

Samantha: They think they're all bad.

Genny: That they don't have dreams.

Karen: Yeah or think they're drug dealers.

Jesse: Okay they don't care about education they don't think there are opportunities. But why?

Jacqui: the immigrants and they're like well why go cuz I'm not gonna be able to go to college.

Eva:--I think it also goes that people put them down too, cause a mean why don't they think that they have opportunities? It's because people put them down. I think it's parents teachers and friends.

Karen/Samantha: Yeah.

Genny: And it all depends like the people you hang around with.

Karen: Yeah.

Genny: Like you start thinking you're going to end up like them

Eva: I think that's partly true but not completely because I've seen people like that and they still like graduate from school I saw with a lot of my friends they think…. they're hanging out with gangsters and then they still made it through and some of them even went to college

Karen: Yeah, that's true.

Jesse: So it's not everybody. So parents don't support them but why?

Samantha: They can express like the way they should they should support them or something?

Karen: They just give up.

Samantha: Sometimes we behave bad…

Iris: Sometimes the parents might be from other countries so like what they teach here they're like I don't know how to do that.

Jesse: What's the point of this game?

Iris: To show us how far we're gonna have to like go back.

Genny: I think it should be more like standards like cause a lot of parents they don't have the same knowledge that the kids have and that they can teach them because they don't know all anything we're learning right now and the centers are so expensive that they like can't afford…

Catelina: Yeah like Sylvan is really expensive.

Jesse: One other thing I just want to ask but I have a question. Then what? Then what happens?

Jacqui: People get low-income jobs if they drop out.

Ray: Some are just homeless.

Eva: Most of them get full of kids.

Iris: They don't have knowledge.

Natalie: They depend on welfare that the government pays them.

Eva: No education. Most of them are not well mannered.

Iris: So than most likely their kids are going to end up like them because they don't have the knowledge to show them.

Jesse: "Cycle of poverty" is what we call that. It's much more likely that if your parents dropped out that you'll drop out. It's a cycle right? If your parents graduate you're more likely to graduate. Okay so I wanted to show you this. Each one of these things has many, many, many levels of cause and what would be doing in our research if we did this one is asking people they did drop out or if they didn't drop out, why? What was the cause?

Eva: I like that topic.

Karen: It's too long.

Jesse: All of them are going to be long, because social issues have deep roots and they cause cycles of inequality. Let's see if we did teen pregnancy. But why but why?

Eva: It would be a lot too.

Samantha: That game just came interesting.

The "But why?" game that day helped me see that the student co-researchers already had an arsenal of experiences with these issues and opinions about causation and effects. I also wondered if their views would change after they created research questions and conducted and analyzed their research. After this game was completed with environmental issues, two groups naturally formed based on which topic was of interest to particular students.

Catelina and Jacqui had a hard time choosing between the two issues, and Ray

still wanted to focus on students with Attention Deficit Disorder. No one else in the group

was interested in working with Ray on a disability project. I asked that they choose a

group just for the rest of the day, and that they could still switch or come up with

different topics. Several student co-researchers said that they thought we should do one

project because it would be easier. I told them they needed to decide themselves on

grouping, but that I didn't want them to give up the issues they cared about just to make

things easier. We then had a debate between the student co-researchers who were

interested in studying environmental justice and those who wanted to study why students

drop out of school.

In their opening arguments, student co-researchers presented why they thought

their issues were important and what the strengths of the research topic would be.

Catelina and Eva represented the group who wanted to study why students drop out:

> Catelina: Not a lot of people talk about a drop…or dropouts or anything like that
>
> and global warming for example it's everywhere, everybody's talking about it.
>
> It's in the news it's everywhere and also there's a lot more reasons and based
>
> more on reality and more um…
>
> Eva: I think there's more like cause and effect to it. Like you could do something
>
> about global warming but like she said they're already trying to do something
>
> about it and I don't see anybody drop focusing on teen dropouts so I think that we
>
> could focus more on teen dropouts just because of that so there's more stuff to do
>
> there and I think it's like more interesting too….I mean I think pretty much

California's pretty clean so I mean people do help out but there's more point of

teen dropout, um *como se dice grave*?

Catelina: like serious

The group focused on environmental issues on a global scale:

Genny: We want people to know that this is affecting the world and like so our

future can be more safer and healthier.

Iris: It's like we think about others and how like this isn't just affecting one spot

it's affecting like the whole country. All the ice in the north is melting, and then

most of our cities are going to sink.

Natalie: The whole world the whole nation   Or maybe it's going to drown the

other nations.

Karen: And like I don't want to die!

Natalie: I don't wanna die drowning!

I knew from this debate I would have to help students in that both groups learn how to

investigate these issues in order to avoid misinformation and panic. In the end, the

student co-researchers decided to do two separate YPAR projects. Kat's comments on

"paying it forward" persuaded two of the student co-researchers in the environmental

justice group to defect to the dropout/pushout group:

It's like the movie *Pay it Forward*. If we pay it forward, we can help more

people like stop dropping out and like refocusing on school and getting a career

and like...if we had like a group of people we can tell more people about it and

then those people can tell more people about it. It's gonna be like a spider web,

like a chain. They'll tell more people and they'll tell more people and more people will be informed and less people are going to be poor and out there living with their parents.

Growth of Literacy Skills

Student Co-Researcher Experiences Reading, Writing, and Speaking

Before class began, I started to tracking students' standardized reading test scores, had them complete Personal Reading Surveys (self-evaluations where they identified their reading strategies and attitudes towards reading, see Appendix E), and talked with their teachers about each students' skill levels in reading, writing, and speaking. Since I was most concerned with their developing the ability to express themselves and analyze themselves and the world around them, I also sought to learn about their attitudes towards the acquisition of literacy skills. This was done through a variety of written reflections and group discussions.

Reading. At the start of the group, I asked students to reflect on their own experiences learning to read and write through completing independent literacy autobiographies and participating in group discussions. Our first discussion of reading quickly turned to literacy struggles and injustices. Many of the students in the group experienced high mobility in elementary school, some of them attending up to four schools between Kindergarten and fifth grade, as evidenced by the following dialogue:

Jacqui: I went to three elementaries. We moved around a lot.

Karen: Yeah we went to like four

Kat: Me too

Jesse: Do you think it's good or bad to switch schools.

Karen/Genny/Samantha: Bad.

Iris: It depends on what they were teaching you--

Eva: And how they were teaching you

Samantha: Yeah that happened to us cuz we went to one school and then when we went to the other school all the things we did I knew it cuz I had done it already. It was like it would get me behind.

All of the students in the discussion agreed that learning to read was harder when they transferred between schools. They also mentioned the education level of parents as having an effect on student reading acquisition. When analyzing 3rd grade reading data from the California census (Lucille Packard Foundation for Children's Health, 2008, see Appendix F), a few students hypothesized why reading levels differed so greatly between "economically advantaged" and "economically disadvantaged" students. In addition to noting that economically advantaged students have "more books at home," Iris said:

Yeah, you know cuz their parents like they went to the same schools they went to so they had the knowledge that they're going to teach their kids in school so they're going to be more capable of helping them, and if not helping them then putting them in study classes that will help them. And like a Hispanic parent, most of them like never even finish high school so it's like and they teach us different stuff over here than they teach us over there so it's like most of them are not going to be able to help you as much as like a person who went to school here or can at least have money to send you to places that can help you. Like tutoring and stuff.

In her organic identification of the cultural capital of the economically advantaged students, Iris grouped "Hispanic" with "economically disadvantaged" before we had looked at data based on race and ethnicity. She identified "a person who went to school here" as having a literacy advantage over someone whose parents went to school outside of the country. The other students in the discussion agreed with Iris, and only Jacqui and Kat argued the benefits of bilingualism for future professional opportunities.

In terms of their prior experiences with reading and reading acquisition, they identified the teacher as a key factor in helping or hurting their ability to become skilled readers at the high school level. In our focus group about reading, I posed the question: "Do you think all schools are equally good at teaching students to read and at the high school level?" The responses were a unanimous "no."

> Kat: No, not at all. Like to this point I could barely really read right. Not right..sorry.
>
> Iris: I know how to read because ever since 4th grade they had tried putting me in honors, tried putting me in magnet, so I had like advanced stuff. But once I got to high school, like 9th grade, I realized they hadn't really prepared me for it, cuz I was like what? And then the class I had in 9th grade was an honors class and there were only 12 students so we were all supposed to get attention but my teacher was really lazy Ms. Kelly she would just sit there the whole time and we would just spread out. And that's why in 10th grade I was 9R[13] because I didn't understand.

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[13] "9R" means repeating 9th grade. Although FHCHS does not classify students this way, traditional district schools do, so many students refer to themselves as 9R if they are old enough to be in 10th, 11th, or 12th grade but still have the credits to be placed in 9th grade

And she would make us read a lot. Like every week was a different story and an essay but we did everything on line...but she wouldn't really help us. And that's why I'm here.

Jacqui: That's why I don't think schools are equal. Because, um, like there's teachers that will help you and there's teachers that won't. So how can you learn from a lazy teacher?

Eva: Yeah, you have to dedicate time.

Catelina: I think they just like expect you to...

Gaby: They don't care if you learn it or not...

Paulina: Some people are just not meant to be teachers. They don't care if you learn it or not.

Jacqui: They think just cuz they know it they can tell you here read it and that's it.

Paulina: I had a teacher in high school who would just sit there and eat the whole time. I swear he wouldn't even teach us anything.

Eva: There a lot of teachers who are like not good at explaining things right.

Paulina: And when the time came he would be like "did you do your homework?" I was like "where the hell was the homework?" he was like, "On the board!" I was like "you didn't even teach us things, how are we supposed to know things?" Like he would just write things on the board and he would be eating like a fat ass.

Iris: No, and like a lot of them also blame it on like your prior teachers. They're like, "Well they didn't teach it to you so that's not my fault."

(under 60 high school credits. Some students add an R for each year a student falls behind, so that a 17-year-old with 9th grade credits may be called "9RRR."

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Genny: Yeah.

Iris: They would tell me that. So I was like, well aren't you supposed to teach me then? If I didn't understand it. That's what they're getting paid for.

Jacqui: That's why when you finish a year they ask you to write down what you learned that year. That way, whatever you didn't learn the next teacher is supposed to teach it to you, right? But like most of the time when you do that the next teacher won't even care. She'll teach you whatever she wants to teach you and if you learn it oh well. Cuz that's what most teachers think. Like if their job is to teach it to you and if you don't learn it, oh well that's your problem.

Karen: You've got to figure it out.

Eva: It's hard to find a teacher who dedicates time to you and actually wants to help you out. Like during my whole school years that I've been in school, I've only found maybe three..two or three teachers that have actually..they're really good teachers who actually dedicate time to you, they explain things the way they're supposed to and you're not scared to ask them anything.

Jacqui: It also depends on how the teacher's teaching you because teachers have different methods of teaching kids.

Eva: And maybe one has more patience than the other one.

This focus on teacher quality was consistent throughout the group. The general consensus among this group of students was that teacher quality was directly linked to their learning of skills and subject content, and that patience and "explaining well" were two ways that teachers could help them learn and read better. At the start of class,

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students never identified curriculum content, choice of reading material, or inclusion of student voice as linked to their interest level or learning in particular classes.

Additionally, they saw teachers as responsible for the quality of classroom learning and had a hard time analyzing the school or district institutional structure as part of the injustice. Though identifying that schools were better and cleaner and more "high class" in Beverly Hills than they were in their community, they still focused on teacher quality:

Iris: Most teachers would prefer going to teach somewhere where they know the kids there—

Eva: They're gonna learn.

Iris: They think they will apply themselves more than someone in the Valley. So they'd rather go over there and we get, I'm not going to say crappy teachers, just teachers that...

Genny: Don't care.

Writing. Regarding writing, one of the most illuminating things to happen in the beginning of the project was when the students brought in their literacy autobiographies. I had told them to express their experiences with reading, writing, and speaking over the course of their lives, more specifically "to tell the story of your life by putting a spotlight on literacy and telling the story through your learning to read, write, and speak." I told them the mode of expression was completely up to them, and suggested a poem, song, comic strip, video, or collage project, adding at the end that if they wished to write a traditional autobiography, they were welcome to. On the day the assignment was due, 11

of 12 students arrived with traditional five-paragraph essays. The students seemed

unprepared to express themselves in writing in non-traditional ways. Only Eva brought in

a collage of her life so far along with a page explaining each phase and focusing on the

birth of her daughter. In our discussion on writing and why students had chosen the essay

format, students focused on code-switching[14] in academic writing:

> Paulina: We speak all like...I speak all rude and when I write it's like different
>
> cuz you have to say the things right. You can't write 'cuz', you have to write
>
> 'because.'
>
> Iris: Like the punctuations, it's...
>
> Eva: I think it's different when you write letters to your friends. Because like me,
>
> when I write letters to my friends, I write the way I talk. But when I'm at school I
>
> write different. Even like right now, even if you say don't worry if you have to
>
> write all professional, well I still kind of thought about it even though I was trying
>
> not to I still did. It's just because I know I'm in school.
>
> Iris: Your brain just automatically trains you to switch.
>
> Jesse: Does it happen naturally in your brain or is it something else? Who
>
> decided that school would be a different kind of English?

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[14] Throughout this dissertation, I use the popular education term "code-switching" to refer to students using different vocabulary, grammar, and linguistic style in different social contexts (ie. home vs. school vs. with friends). The term arises both in transcripts of interactions with students and in my analysis. Sociolinguists, however, consider code-switching to refer to multilingual people shifting back and forth between languages, and not to the shifting of vocabulary and grammar in different social contexts (Eckert & Rickford, 2001). Sociolinguists refer to this instead as "style-shifting" (Baugh, 2001). Since code-switching was the term I was familiar with as a teacher, it is the term I (mis)used throughout to mean "style-shifting."

Iris: Whoever said that you have to be polite?

Jacqui: That one guy.

Iris: Thomas Edison!

Paulina: Who was it?

Jesse: I don't know, that's my question to you. Who said that you'd have to write in school differently than you talk?

Samantha: Our brain?

Jesse: Which language is better, the way that you speak, or the way that you write?

Iris: The way that I write? Because it has like...

Kat: More proper.

Jacqui: More formal...

Eva: No cussing.

Iris: More elegant.

Paulina: More professional.

The students knew about code-switching. Although they had never heard the term, they said the definition matched their experiences of changing the way they spoke in different environments. They had a hard time explaining why they decided to do a traditional essay instead of a more creative one, except to say that doing what they knew was "easier." They privileged formal academic writing over the letters they wrote to friends or creative writing like poetry or short fiction done without receiving a grade. In contrast, they felt the topics we discussed in group were more interesting and valuable

than much of what they learned in their core academic classes at previous schools and in the independent study curriculum at FHCHS.

Speaking. Since the majority of group time was spent on small-group and whole-group discussions, speaking became one of the main components of literacy that students focused on throughout the summer. At first, I choose topics and discussion questions based on my topic of high school literacy acquisition and critical literacy. As the group progressed and developed, however, the students chose research topics and led discussions. While at the start of class the student co-researchers always addressed me during discussions, by the end they were engaging in more of a dialogue. Even by the end, however, Iris remained invested in my evaluation of their spoken opinions.

> Iris: It's just a very different type of class where you interact with other people and you put your opinion in and it just keeps me a lot more interested.
>
> Jesse: Why does putting your opinion in keep you more interested?
>
> Iris: Well it's like in regular classes you just sit there and like, if the teacher asks you something you answer, otherwise they hardly pay attention to you. But in this class it's like you actually want to know what we think.

There were students like Iris and Jacqui who were very vocal from the start of class and learned not to dominate discussions by the end. Students like Kat, Natalie, and Karen, on the other hand, confided in me that they were shy and had a hard time speaking in front of others at the start of class, but were actively participating to different extents by the end of class in October.

Code-switching/Style-shifting. Another interesting aspect of speaking about which the students demonstrated understanding at the start of class was code-switching, or the ability to adapt their syntax and diction to various situations (Auer, 1998). Much like their innate understanding of code-switching in writing, they did not mention the term but agreed that it described their experiences. In a group discussion about our norms of interaction and the different ways adults speak to young people, the group discussed how adults can often speak more "proper," particularly in a professional environment. Eva mentioned that adults who are able to speak "at our level" actually do a better job of connecting to youth:

> Eva: I think it's kind of motivating though, when they act like that...I don't
> know..when I was looking for this job there was this guy trying to help me, he
> worked at this office that's like one of those agencies. And he used to talk like that
> [referring to "yo, what's up" example of youth speak] and usually people that
> work in offices they all talk professional but on him it sounded alright, it usually
> motivates you to do something good, well it motivated me.
>
> Jesse: Because he was speaking in a more...
>
> Eva: Yeah, you could tell he felt comfortable with you and he was trying to help
> you out.
>
> Iris: Like you don't feel like you have to be to a certain level.
>
> Eva: Yeah, like you don't feel like you have to be fake.
>
> Jesse: So do you guys think the formal stuff you have to do in school is fake?
>
> Samantha: Yeah

Karen: Yeah

Jacqui: Yeah

Eva: Not fake.

Iris: Not really..just different.

Paulina: It's better, it's...

Iris: You've got to..you know..it's like you wouldn't talk to your grandparents how you would talk to a friend, so something like that.

Jacqui: There's a time and place for everything.

The students in this discussion exhibited a complex understanding of code-switching as well as a nuanced perspective of the relationship between language and belonging. When Eva referred to the employment counselor who spoke to her in language she was familiar with as "motivating" and Iris said "…you don't have to feel like you have to be a certain level," both girls distinguished between the "fake" language of the employment office and the "different" language with which they were comfortable. Paulina, however, judged the language of school as "better" and Jacqui identified the need for code switching when she said "there's a time and a place for everything."

One other aspect of code-switching that this conversation made me aware of was the role of adult allies with youth and the part that language played in that relationship. Eva said about that employment counselor, "you could tell he felt comfortable with you and was trying to help you out" and the other students agreed. That conversation in early July informed some of the language I decided to use with students. While I did not eliminate our formal academic readings from the curriculum, I tried to remove as much

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"teacher talk" as possible from our dialogues. In a typical classroom where students' use of their colloquial language, which includes both a mixture of Spanish and English as well as some profanity, is discouraged. Instead, in the YPAR Critical Literacy Group, I encouraged students to guide discussions and set the tone for the language we would use in class. We had discussions about code-switching our language and the rhetorical advantages of using more formal academic language in presenting our research findings to audiences. The student co-researchers had no trouble switching codes, and seemed more comfortable in the group environment to be able to speak in the way they chose. When we presented our findings to a group of adult educators at Loyola Marymount University, they had no trouble adopting a more academic code, and removed their colloquialisms from their speech and writing.

Generative Themes and Problem-Posing

Since this project was based on critical literacy, YPAR, and their effects on literacy skills, we did not focus on all aspects of traditional literacy acquisition. The students already had basic decoding skills at the start of class, and all students except for Karen and Ray could sound out multisyllabic words in order to pronounce them, although many students could pronounce but not comprehend a variety of these words. Reading fluency varied from student to student, as well as silent reading rate. For example, Ray read 25 words per minute on the EdPerformance test before the start of the project while Kat read 58. In terms of oral literacy in front of the group, students such as Iris, Jacqui, and Kat who volunteered much more frequently to read aloud and I did not force students to read in front of the group. This predictably correlated with their reading levels. The

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students who scored "basic" on EdPerformance read aloud more often, while the students who were "far below basic" barely volunteered at all. Each of the students read aloud at least once in the first two weeks we met and again at the end, so I was able to compare those two readings.

Instead of looking at traditional vocabulary development and direct cognitive strategy instruction as the keys to "reading to learn" at the high school level (McEwan, 2007), my focus in the group was to use generative themes and generative words, as well as problem-posing dialogue (Freire 2000; Shor, 1992). The goal was to help the students participate in dialogic pedagogy, develop analytic skills, develop their own voices and find researchable areas of interest that would lead them to read and write authentically, and engage in meaningful debates. I looked to their reactions to texts, synthesis of new information, and ability to connect their learning to their own lives as indicators of literacy development. In addition, the goal was constantly use the student co-researchers' experiences as the point of departure for any reading or discussion. According to Shor (1992), "By starting from the students' situation, problem-posing increases their ability to participate, because they can begin critical reflection in their own context and in their own words" (p. 45).

One way I measured the students' reading comprehension growth was through a marginalia exercise that the students completed at the start of June and then at the end of October. "Talking to the text," a feature of the Strategic Literacy curriculum (Shoenbach et al., 1999), requires students to put their thoughts, questions, reactions, and connections to a text directly on the reading material in the margins or within the text. I handed out a

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page of quotes by Freire (see Appendix D) and asked the students to talk to the text after

providing them a brief example of what a marked page would look like. They were

instructed to write down any questions or confusions, as well as reactions and

connections on our first day together as a group. After ten minutes, only Jacqui and

Genny had written anything down, and both wrote just one question on the five quotes

and a few scattered question marks. During that first session, students said that they knew

that Freire was talking about education and schools, but did not understand what any of

the statements meant. I explained them briefly, but could tell that I was losing them and

that eyes were glazing over. Instead, I told them we would discuss all these concepts over

the course of the project, and said "I promise you will understand these quotes by the end

of the class in August." I felt fearful when I made that promise, however, knowing that

Freire's writing is above the high school level (the quotes I provided had a Flesch-

Kincaid Grade Level score of 12.7) and the average level of the group was at 6th grade

reading level, and some students were as low as 3rd or 4th grade level[15]. I wasn't sure if

the students would be able to understand the Freire quotes without my constant defining

and explanation.

By October, however, the same "talking to the text" exercise evidenced

comprehension (see Appendix J). First they wrote their thoughts and interpretations in

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[15] Due to the independent study nature of the program at FHCHS, students are required to score a baseline reading score of 2500 on Scantron's EdPerformance test, which correlates to late 5th grade reading level. However, I used a Lexile test to generate more data on students' comprehension and grade level reading. The Lexile test placed students as low as 3rd or 4th grade level reading. I used EdPerformance as the quantitative pre- and post-test because this is the assessment used by FHCHS to demonstrate progress and assign students to "Standard" or "College Prep" classes.

one color when reading the quotes independently. Then we worked in pairs and as a whole group to make meaning from the quotes. In both cases, students demonstrated comprehension. On their own next to the quote, "washing one's hands of the conflict between the powerful and the powerless means to side with the powerful, not to be neutral" (Freire, 1985, p. 122), Samantha wondered what "neutral" meant, but most of the others students wrote notes that indicated comprehension. Iris interpreted the quote as "people who decide to stay away from problems might actually be harming someone," and Natalie wrote "I think it means if you know someone's doing something wrong don't stay neutral." Eva further inferred "If you don't say anything nobody will speak up for you either" and Paulina wrote "You should always say the truth never be an accomplice." Jacqui wrote "I think this means to see something bad happening and do nothing about it is the same thing as doing something bad." All of these "talking to the text" examples evidence much deeper comprehension of the quote, one which we had not discussed since the first day (see Appendix J).

In addition, our group discussion about the quotes as a group evidenced both individual comprehension and the ways in which the students had learned to rely on ideas from the whole group to help with meaning-making. Their basic comprehension of the quote was evidenced when they talked to the text in writing first. Discussing the Freire quote on power, students shared their own experiences, ranging from seeing a girl abused by her boyfriend at a party and no one speaking up to not recycling. Jacqui told the group, "When you do nothing about it, it's like siding with the person who's hurting the other person." They were also able to apply the quote to their group projects. The Roots

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of the Problem group that studied dropout/pushout issues said that students who are pushed out are often powerless to teachers, administrators, and school boards who make regulations that harm students. The Environmentalism in Action group said that in the case of the electric car, the gas companies were powerful and all the people who knew that these companies were stopping production of the EV1 electric car to make a profit and did not protest were siding with the companies. Their ability to work together to connect to the quote and apply it to the independent research they had done suggested that they had gained sophisticated reading strategies over the course of our project. Not only had the use of generative vocabulary encouraged students to develop abstract definitions of the word "power", they were also willing to struggle with a difficult concept in a way they were not at the start of the project.

Codification and Decodification

Critical Literacy and the methodology of Youth Participatory Action Research coalesce around Freire's concept of codification (Freire, 2000; Freire, 1973). Codification is words or images created by the participants that represent experiences or challenges of their community (Shor, 1992). Decodification is the process of analyzing codes by their constituent elements, dialoging about and "reading" the codes in a group which Freire referred to as an "investigation circle" (Freire, 2000, p. 117). Not only is this process directly aligned with the skills of a sophisticated reader of words (Shor (1992) includes in his list the steps of the process "describing, summarizing, identifying, relating, probing" (p. 208)), but it is also the same as the YPAR "systematic approach for engaging young

people in transformational resistance, educational practice, and critical epistemologies"
(Cammarota & Fine, 2008, p. 9).

The students' discussions of social justice theory was followed by a generative list
of "social issues" in their communities which included more than 100 issues, including
some of issues that student co-researchers voted as being most important to them:
"people dying a lot every single day, war in Iraq, student high school drop outs, people
locked up for any reason, violence in families, air pollution, homelessness, teen
pregnancy, diabetes, global warming, obesity." These generative themes came into more
focus through the choosing of research topics, a process necessary for the YPAR projects.
Students decided on dropout/pushout issues and environmental justice, but not before
participating in decodification of these themes. They analyzed the issues that led to
students dropping out of school and environmental injustices beginning from their own
experiences and by engaging in critical dialogue that limited my "teacher-talk" (Shor,
1992, p. 93) and placed student voice at the center of our work together. In this type of
environment, I became the learner along with the student co-researchers and no longer
held the authoritarian voice that I had at the start of class.

This codification and decodification process had interesting consequences for the
more traditional literacy skills of the students, evidenced by the terms "abusement" and
"global warming." Much like Shor's (1992) use of codification with his community
college students in New York, the student co-researchers in FHCHS, while behind grade
level reading, were in many ways "postliterate" (Shor, 1992, p. 47). They already knew
how to decode words in the traditional sense, could read simple texts independently and

fluently, and pronounced the majority of multisyllabic words correctly, even if they did not know the meaning of these words. Like Shor's students, the student co-researchers in this project did not need to use represent codes in pictures like many of Freire's adult learners, and instead we used words. Unlike Shor's "postliterate, mostly white urban group of working college students in New York City," (Shor, 1992, p. 47), the student co-researchers at FHCHS could not completely bypass the literacy skills gained by working with generative words.

When generating "social issues" and listing them on butcher paper, Eva mentioned the term "abusement," and I wrote it on the list exactly as she had said it. Later, in a discussion about the social issues of most importance to the students, Eva asked, "I have a question. For abusement, does that include like raping and stuff like that?" In my Masters program, I was taught that instead of pointing out grammatical errors, I should respond to the error by using the correct form of the word in my response. I responded, "It's your list so if you're saying abuse is an issue in our community then you could include in that child abuse domestic abuse, rape, whatever you want to include." I used the word "abuse" three times on purpose, in an attempt to point out to Eva in a non-threatening way that the "proper" term was "abuse," not "abusement." In that same group session, Eva used the term "abusement" twice more, right after I had responded with the grammatically correct form of the word. She said the two issues she cared most about were "abusement and student immigrants" and said if she were mayor she would dedicate her whole social services budget to battling "abusement." Later in the group session, Eva referred to the term in the context of what actions we could take

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on the issue: "I keep thinking about like violence and abusement but I don't know if there really is anything that we can do about it like preventing people from getting raped and guys hitting woman, child abuse." When coupled with "child," Eva knew to use the term "abuse." Over the course of the next hour, Jacqui and Iris both referred to the word as "abuse" several times. By the end of the group session and during a later written assignment, Eva replaced the word "abusement" with the word "abuse."

In this example of how a postliterate student co-researcher struggled with the grammatical structure of a word, it was through the codification of social issues of interest to the youth and decodification of the roots and effects of different types of abuse in their communities led to a more traditional acquisition of language skills. Eva's invented word "abusement" was in the form of a noun and used with contextual accuracy in her statements, yet the error might have embarrassed her in one of the community college classes she was taking for credit. It was interesting to note that my reflective correction of her did not work, but that in the dialogic alternative of the group, she was able to hear the word used by her peers several times, as well as engage in a conversation where she was using the term in an authentic way.

After analyzing the "abusement" issue in this way, it was interesting then to discover during one of my final interviews with Eva that she herself claims to have no problem being corrected in her speaking or writing:

Eva: I like being corrected, I do. It depends on the way [teachers] say it. I don't
like them correcting me like if they're trying to insult me but I do like being

corrected if I'm wrong at something and I know they're just trying to help me not

trying to insult me then I don't take it the wrong way.

Jesse: Do you take the corrections in and change it the next time?

Eva: Mmm hmm, like I spelled "liar" wrong last time, I spelled it l-i-*e*-r, and

they're like it's not lier, it's l-i-a-r and they changed it so now every time I spell

liar I know how to spell it.

In this explanation, the "way" a teacher corrects Eva refers to the level of respect the

adult shows in making the correction. Perhaps if I had simply told Eva the correct word

in the context of our discussion and done so with respect, she also would have learned the

correct use of the word.

A similar situation occurred with the Environmentalism in Action group and their

transition from wanting to study "global warming" to exploring what they meant by that

code and naming their research more accurately. In our first discussion on choosing

social issues to study, Eva misused the word "loitering" for "littering" and the group had

a broad definition of global warming:

Iris: I think we should study global warming.

Jesse: Okay, so what's an example of something we could do?

Iris: Plant trees?

Gaby: Recycle.

Eva: Does global warming or whatever have to do with loitering?

Jacqui: Littering? Yeah it has to do with like…wait, someone explain global

warming.

Iris: It's just like the pollution we're throwing into the air like all the trash, the cars, less trees.

Genny: I think they should have a lot of garbage cans, like every corner. People are too lazy to just like throw the trash because it's so far away.

After it became clear that the student co-researchers were talking about more general environmentalism and had both a global and local concern about the environment, I showed them the Principles of Environmental Justice (1991) and they began to do more research on issues in their own local environments. In our discussions about the environment, the students began to talk about global warming as one environmental injustice among many. They ended up naming their group Environmentalism in Action, and their focus was much more local, focusing on issues of dirty local environments, lack of green space in their communities, and different environmental hazards among communities of different income levels.

Situated Literacy

The research topics did not simply engage the student co-researchers' interests. There were specific activities required to complete the research that had positive effects on students' literacy. Students practiced and improved their literacy skills in speaking, reading, and writing in ways that I had not anticipated. The first was through the group-run nature of the group. In previous teaching experiences when I have provided students with reading materials far above their independent reading level, I worked to define words, translate difficult concepts, and summarize main points. It was the opposite in this project. When students worked in pairs, they would ask each other clarifying questions

and work together to make meaning of the difficult texts. Whereas in past classes I have led 'Literature Circles' based on pair or group reading where students are assigned roles such as 'Discussion Director,' 'Summarizer,' 'Illustrator,' 'Literary Luminary' (Daniels, 2002) to facilitate discussion and comprehension, these roles emerged much more fluidly and authentically in the YPAR project. Students had to read and understand challenging texts in order to move to the next stages of research. They had ownership over both the process and the majority of the reading content, so their reading was situated in their research and the questions that they asked. Even when we were reading the foundational texts of Freire, students understood that it related to the work we were doing and it had been mentioned in some of the PAR projects that we read about (Institute for Participatory Action Research and Design, 2008), so they worked hard to make sense of the texts as a group without requiring my "translation." The teacher's impulse to explain difficult texts or summarize for students can come from many places, including the desire to "get through" curriculum without slowing down to ensure comprehension, the patronizing assumption that students cannot understand complex ideas, or banking education notions of the teacher as "narrating subject" (Freire, 2000, p. 71) who narrates ideas to students and takes away their ability to make meaning or transform ideas on their own. These impulses of "translation" are harmful to students both in the dehumanizing effect they have on students and in the deleterious outcomes that they have on reading development. If teachers constantly interpret or translate difficult text for students, they never have the chance to wrestle with and make meaning of these texts themselves, thereby stunting their reading growth (Shoenbach et al., 1999).

The consistent group discussion format that we used until the two research groups began meeting independently also created a structure for meaning-making. Each of the six times I asked students if they would prefer to read texts on their own or together, they choose a group reading. Likewise, when I gave them the choice of small group and whole group discussions, they consistently chose the whole group. Together, they were able to help each other understand much more of each text than they would have alone. One place where this is most observable was in the area of vocabulary. All but two of the students (Karen and Samantha) said they used context clues and dictionaries to figure out the meaning of words they do not know in the "Personal Reading Survey" (see Appendix C) that I asked students to complete on the first day of class. Yet in group discussions, they all said that they often did not understand the definitions of words in dictionaries and had a hard time figuring out challenging words in context if the sentences were "too hard." In our discussion of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire, 2000), the students tried reading the text on their own first before we read it as a group:

Genny: It was kind of interesting.

Eva: I didn't get it. I just know that it was about a teacher who was teaching and the students are listening...

Genny: And there were like words I didn't understand.

Eva: I have a limited vocabulary.

Jacqui: Okay, it's about...well Freire is saying that teachers teach us like as if they're depositing stuff...they think we're ignorant so they teach us and we're just absorbing it. I don't know about you guys, but before, like in regular school? like

they would teach me something, and during the break I would forget. Like when I

come back from summer school, I don't understand anything. So I think that that's

what this means, just like give you the information and we're just absorbing it,

like we're not really using it.

Jacqui's rephrasing of the 'banking education' and what Freire meant by "deposit" was

aided by the use of her word "absorbing." Throughout the discussion that followed, the

synonyms "put" and "absorb" were used to describe the "deposits" of banking education,

along with the idea that students are not sponges that can hold information that is placed

into them without discussion or student interest. Although Eva originally said she didn't

"get it," she said many things in the discussion that evidenced her comprehension and

referred back to the text, for example: "they're saying that kind of education doesn't work

because the teachers know it all and we don't. That's what it said here" and "they don't

want to make people feel like they're powerful. Being capable to do more things than

what they do."

Transcription as a Literacy Tool

Another part of the process that aided literacy development was transcription.

Halfway through the summer, as I was transcribing group sessions and realized that both

student research groups had decided to conduct interviews and were using tape recorders,

I began investigating the educational value of transcription. There are several scholarly

defenses of transcription as a learning process (Wells, 1996; Lintunen, 2005), but these

have much more to do with phonemic awareness and phonetic transcription for learning

foreign languages. They were useful in their defense of transcription as a basic reading

skill (Lintunen, 2005, p. 1), but the focus on foreign language acquisition did not correlate to the student co-researchers' own schooling in English since the elementary years. In addition, there was a dearth of research that looked at the related listening, phonemic writing, and comprehension skills required to complete a quality transcript of an interview.

In the Environmentalism in Action group, each student interviewed three community members and completed transcripts of the interviews. Ray was one of the students with lower literacy skills and spelling issues that often made it difficult to understand his written work. Interestingly, the transcripts that he completed independently had few spelling errors and several multisyllabic words such as 'environmental,' 'recycle,' 'littering,' 'pollution,' and 'community' spelled correctly. At first I thought he might be relying on the spell-check feature of Microsoft Word to correctly transcribe these words that he heard on the interview tapes, but Ray misspelled the word 'bottle' as 'boodle' throughout, so I assumed he was spelling phonetically. The transcripts also displayed an understanding of the context of what the interviewee was saying. Genny's transcript involved the following exchange:

Genny: How do you think the problems in our environment affect our health and safety?

Male 16: Well first of all I think the waste affects our health and safety is when we are breathing the smog and this causes respiratory affect and people dumping chemical into the ocean affects people who eats fish and the beaches that have broken glass and oil in the ocean and wont let people swim.

There were certainly misspellings of some of what was said: 'affect' instead of 'effect', no apostrophe in 'wont'; but the overall meaning of the interviewee's statement was transcribed effectively and her later analysis of this statement evidenced comprehension of what she wrote.

The students' own reflections of transcribing their interview data were also illuminating. While they did not see it as particularly educational ("I just wrote down what she said"), they did enjoy conducting the interviews and completing the transcripts. Whereas the literacy autobiography was met with groans and late submissions, once students figured out a schedule for sharing the tape recorders they had no trouble completing interviews and completed multi-page single-spaced transcripts on time.

Although I am an advanced reader and writer, my experiences with transcription allowed me some understanding of what the students might have gained from the experience. Although the students said they wrote down what the interviewee said "word for word," I know that in order to transcribe accurately and meaningfully, one has to understand the meaning behind a response as well as accurately hear the words said on tape before writing it. In addition, transcribers must be skilled in using context clues because you must interpret words that are not clearly spoken using the context of the entire sentence. Also, I believe the accuracy of the students' translations reflect an advanced comprehension of spoken English: without fluency in a language, you cannot aurally interpret words and phrases while simultaneously writing them down.

I also noted that the students improved in their transcription skills between the beginning and end of the project. While at the start of the transcription project, students

paused the playback on their tapes frequently, often after each word or two, by the end they were playing back whole sentences before transcribing or simultaneously listening and transcribing. Their typing, a key technical literacy skill since all student compositions must be completed in a word processing programs, became faster and more accurate. Most students completed from four to five pages of transcripts from interviews with classmates, teachers, or family members. Whereas the literacy autobiography and classroom reflections of a page or more were greeted with groans and complaints that it was "too much to write," the transcription, completed as a necessary part of seeking answers to their research questions, was completed quickly and with no objections. The students even said they liked the process of listening to their interviews again and seeing the responses on paper, as it was an easier way to analyze their questions and begin to draw conclusions. As a listening and writing activity, the voluminous transcriptions completed by the group struck me as a situated learning activity with literacy benefits.

Participation, Trust, Power, and Belonging

In order to understand the findings that this research evidenced in terms of the transformative power of the YPAR Group Literacy Group and student co-researcher's participation, it is important to provide background on typical student participation in group instruction at Future Horizons Charter High School (FHCHS). FHCHS formerly functioned as a typical independent study high school. Students received work packets and came in only twice per week for an hour to receive help from a teacher and take tests in order to receive academic credit. Eighteen months before the start of this project,

administrators decided that low standardized test scores in math, as well as teacher

discomfort with the subject, required single-subject credentialed teachers to run small

group classes and tutor student in math. A year before the start of this project, I

convinced the same administration that literacy was an issue for many of our students,

particularly those struggling with English language acquisition. I was the first "Literacy

Specialist" and others were quickly hired to fulfill the need in many of the other 34

school sites. After several months I became the "Literacy Coach," helping to train and

supervise the eight other Literacy Specialists. There are currently nine Literacy

Specialists and 15 Math Specialists at the school who recruit student for Small Group

Instruction classes and attempt to keep them engaged in classes that run anywhere from 5

to 12 weeks.

In the Small Group Instruction department, our biggest struggle is with student

attendance. We see an average attrition rate of 35% across the two subject areas. This

means that when the Math Coach and I train new instructors, we advise them to recruit

about one-third more students than they aim to teach. Since our ideal class size is eight

and our maximum class size is 12 in most cases, we typically recruit 12-18 students per

class so that the attrition does not affect our outcomes. In addition, student attendance is a

struggle. For our students, many of whom were transferred or dropped from school

because of poor attendance, the addition of small group instruction at FHCHS presents a

challenge for them. Most had grown accustomed to the two-hour twice-per-week

schedule when small group instruction was introduced, and resent having to come in for

two-hour classes several times per week. In addition, many of our habitually truant

students formed habits of nonattendance that are hard to break. In the small group instruction program overall, attendance hovers between 60 and 70 percent for both Math and English classes. Teachers relate to us that they barely ever have a day when all enrolled students are in attendance. Tardiness is also an issue, but one that we have not yet addressed as a department.

Problem-Posing Dialogue and Trust

We offer yearly trainings on how to maintain student participation and attendance, with topics ranging from communication with parents and teachers to helping students earn credits quickly to building community among students and providing engaging and student-centered lessons. I expected that I would see the same attrition and attendance rates in the YPAR project, particularly after the disastrous drop in June from 12 students to three. Tardiness remained an issue for the group, although there were students like Ray, Jacqui, and Catelina who were almost always early to group. In terms of attendance and attrition, however, the results for this group were unprecedented. From July through October when the core of 12 students met, the average attendance was 84%, and out of the 22 days we met there were four days where attendance was 100%. Attrition was low; the only student who did not complete the group was Hugo, and that was because he returned to juvenile hall.

As the adult responsible for keeping attendance, I was constantly surprised to find only one student of the twelve absent, as I was accustomed to teaching required classes with only 60% of students in attendance. The class was not required, but students needed to attend all sessions or make up excused absences in order to receive full credit for the

course. During the first week of classes in July, I explained to the student co-researchers that this was their project and that they needed to be able to trust that each other would be in class. During the same session, I asked students what motivated them to come to the group, and Karen responded "cuz we're getting five credits." We discussed intrinsic versus extrinsic motivators, and most students said it was the credits that brought them to the group.

At the end of the 12-week group, I asked students in their final interviews what had kept them doing their research and coming to the group twice per week. Their responses indicated that the promise of five credits was no longer their key motivator:

Catelina: You learn things you don't usually talk about in class.

Genny: I feel like it's an opportunity for me to express myself.

Samantha: Because it teaches you a lot of stuff, of new stuff.

Jacqui: To me this is an interesting class, I like it. Because like I said you get to see different things and you get more knowledge of different people.

Kat: It's more interesting. And like I want to speak my mind.

Iris: like in regular classes you just sit there and like, if the teacher asks you something you answer, otherwise they hardly pay attention to you. But in this class it's like you actually want to know what we think.

Natalie: Like people who seem that they're less interested in school, they're feeling like they have no meaning in this class or they have no point of coming to school. They need to know...something to motivate them to do something great. I believe this class motivates them because it gives them

their part to say and they could say their opinion and it won't be rejected by somebody else.

These descriptions of the group in response to their motivation for attending regularly evidences the profound impact of the critical pedagogy and YPAR methodology utilized. As trust was built among the group and me and the student co-researchers began to exercise their power as co-teachers and co-researchers, they were far more interested in actively attending group sessions. As Freire (2000) promised, a problem-posing pedagogy that is dialogical and humanizing serves to change students from Objects of education and "enables teachers and students to become Subjects of the educational process by overcoming authoritarianism and an alienating intellectualism" (p. 86). The students came to class and stayed for the 12-week period in part because they felt their voices were honored and the topics discussed in group sessions generated by the students themselves.

Participation versus Resistance

Many students' choice to miss class or stop attending altogether is a form of resistance to the dominant structure of schooling (Shor, 1992; McLaren, 2007). Students make an active decision when they remove themselves from situations where, as Iris says, "If the teacher asks you something you answer, otherwise they hardly pay attention to you" or, as Natalie relates "they're feeling like they have no meaning in this class or they have no point of coming to school." This may provide answers to the questions of why student participation in small group instruction classes is so low, as well as why students left school or were habitually truant in the first place.

Shor (1992) refers to students' refusals to perform academically as "'performance strikes'… [t]hey are ways to refuse cooperation with a system that invests unequally in students and denies them participation in curriculum or governance" (p. 21). Taken one step further, the typical low attendance in high school classrooms at both traditional and alternative schools could be considered "attendance strikes," mass refusal to attend school or particularly classes, sometimes even organized into "ditch parties" where students all go to one classmates house to watch TV, play video games, or have parties. FHCHS does not suffer from the issues of overcrowded classrooms or lack of material resources that large comprehensive high schools do, but students are not generally involved in curriculum or governance decisions. Especially in the independent study curriculum, work is prescribed and there is little room to adapt assignments or allow students to conduct independent research or complete creative assignments.

The high participation levels of students in the YPAR project, then, can be analyzed as lowered resistance, particularly since the attendance improved as the project continued. Perhaps through removing the authority of the teacher and curriculum in the classroom, student co-researchers had the power to authentically participate in a libratory education practice, one which valued their voices and challenged them to act on their beliefs. Further, the 'Action' component of Youth Participatory Action Research introduced the students to true praxis: the cycle of action and reflection (Freire, 2000) that allowed students to create a space to problem-pose, learn, and organize without my authority. In this way, "the teacher-student and students-teachers reflect simultaneously

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on themselves and the world without dichotomizing this reflection from action and thus

establish an authentic form of thought and action" (Freire, 2000, p. 83)

Students did not just attend group sessions, although that became a measurable

participation outcome; they also participated in ways that surprised even them.

> Genny: I use to be very shy and conservative and now I feel better and confident
>
> that I can express my opinion towards everything we talk about in class.
>
> Natalie: Basically I was a shy girl. I didn't really talk when class started but as I
>
> began responding questions and coming often I started having tremendous
>
> confidence. I started talking to people without them talking to me first.

It can be inferred that silenced students are objects, whereas those with a voice are the

subjects of their own education. Group sessions certainly played out that way at first,

even when I was leaving group topics and activities in students' hands. Those who were

confident and vocal from the beginning, like Jacqui and Iris, directed the group, while the

quiet students like Genny and Natalie did not participate as much or offer suggestions,

and thus were left at the will of me and the other vocal students. What the students gained

through participation was a authentic influence over the direction the group took.

Whether it was choosing a research topic or planning actions to take to address research

questions, this development of voice allowed empowerment for all the student co-

researchers.

> Natalie: I feel for me like I'm going to be changing something soon or like...And
>
> I feel like I can talk more and I feel like I can lead like what you do...so it's good.

Praxis

In the four months span of the YPAR project, I never introduced the student co-researchers to the term 'praxis', yet what we did aim together for Freire's concept of cyclical action and reflection. Writes Freire, "liberation is a praxis: the action and reflection of men and women upon their world in order to transform it" (2000, p. 79). Our reflection took place both inside and outside of group sessions. Group discussions were at first based on the roots of social problems' in the students' communities, as well as a foundation in critical pedagogy. Students began Chapter Two of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2000) in small reading groups, taking turns reading the text both out loud and silently and we discussed the first several pages as a group. Then students read the rest of the chapter at home before we discussed the entire chapter. Our discussions in class focused on banking education versus critical literacy and libratory pedagogy:

> Eva: [Freire]'s saying that kind of education doesn't work because the teachers know it all and we don't. That's what it said here.
>
> Jacqui: Like what Freire said, if you go to the jungle and people have been living there for a long time, it's more respectable what they know than what you know. You may know how to read a book, but you don't know how to survive in the jungle like they do. Knowledge has to be respected.

We discussed of systemic oppression and the ways in which banking education benefits the privileged and keeps students from working towards their own liberation by looking at the following quote: "The more students work at storing the deposits entrusted to them, the less they develop the critical consciousness which would result from their

intervention in the world as transformers of that world" (Freire, 2000, p. 73). When asked their opinions, students defended the truth in the statement, and then asked who was oppressing students, the teachers or some broader power. They landed on "the man:"

Ray: Yeah, who is the man anyway?

Jacqui: The president.

Eva: Uh uh, mm mm.

Jacqui: That darn George Bush.

Eva: That one from school...I can't ever remember, do you know?

Jesse: Well there's a state superintendent...There's a whole group of people that are not students making decisions.

Eva: Yeah, that's what I figured out. We all call it the man.

Iris: Yeah, and then they all get together and it's one big man.

Jesse: So are all these people men?

Iris: No.

Samantha: No, well yeah.

Eva: I think it's a man and a woman but we just refer to it as the man because we can't...go by a certain name.

We then discussed how this compared to a story of Frederick Douglass we had read about how slaves were kept from learning to read.

Jacqui: They don't want them too--

Natalie: To know that they have rights.

Eva: That's what I was going to say, they don't want to make people feel like they're powerful. Being capable to do more things than what they do...So they have to keep people ignorant.

For the students, YPAR became their form of praxis. They trusted themselves, each other, and the process, and the power they maintained through YPAR allowed them become active in their own learning, as well as their own development of critical consciousnesses. In the same discussion about banking education and Freire's critical pedagogy, I asked the students what Chapter Two of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire, 2000) had to do with their own YPAR projects, and their responses indicated both understanding of the connection and pessimism about making change from the positionality of "oppressed" students:

Ray: Sometimes we can't do anything about it. We don't have enough power to do things about it.

Jacqui: Yeah, because if I want to do this, my dad won't let me because he's a big meany.

Eva: Sometimes you've gotta prove to them in some way, you've gotta give them a reason why you can do this even if they say no, you've gotta make them change their mind.

Jesse: It's true, sometimes when you want to prove people wrong or highlight an injustice that is happening, what you're talking about research and YPAR specifically, you need to prove things to people.

Ray: We have to find facts.

Jacqui: The cause and the effect.

I sought what students would find helpful in transforming their literacy experiences in school, and I partially defined "transforming" their worlds for them: I considered growth in reading, writing, and speaking skills as transforming the students' place in the world. Therefore I was putting YPAR to the test as an educative tool. I wondered if the reflection and action that students were taking within their projects would have any effects on the students' own perceptions of their literacy as well as their objective literacy skills.

The students' perceptions of themselves as readers and writers were varied. At the conclusion of class, I asked students about their experiences in the project, and whether they thought they had become better readers as a result of it. While this question may have been somewhat leading, I wanted to find out whether they saw the same changes in themselves as readers that I observed:

Genny: Yeah I think I am a good reader. Cuz sometimes I ask questions about what am I reading about?

Eva: I think I've gotten a lot better at it. Cuz before I remember when I used to be in [X] High [School] and [Y] High [School] and all those other schools I went I would stutter a lot. And I still stutter but I don't stutter as much as I used to, so usually how I try to practice my reading is by participating in front of the class saying I want to read out loud. So I don't know if you've noticed…I always want to read (laughing). Yeah, so, I think I've improved a lot for my reading skills.

Kat: I don't have much practice. If I read a lot a lot the easier it gets for me. But it's kind of hard.

Natalie: I'm starting to like read more words. I feel like I can print out some words that are more grown up and more professional. I feel pretty strong in reading.

Ray: I'm not very smart but I don't know. You have to read words every day. I'm good with languages.

Content Standards and Reading Levels

In the process of choosing social issues that students were interested in researching, the student co-researchers often asked why they had never been given this type of curricular freedom before. They referred to either classes in traditional schools in which they "did not learn anything" or where they were constantly unable to understand the content taught and provided with teachers who could not explain concepts in a way they could understand. Cecilia described what she learned as a co-researcher in the project in the following way:

We worked in groups, did interesting research and I got to use a tape recorder, something new for me. I seriously like this class, I feel like I got some good ideas like for example research on some topics we are interested in. I think interviewing and doing surveys was fun. We learned new stuff, and got to work together. We also do our work not just simply by sitting in a classroom and doing work without stopping and, I think that really that helps a student do better at something, because that way it is not boring.

Once the project got underway, the student co-researchers became accustomed to the free-form discussions that we had most days in the group and began to bring in issues they encountered in their own worlds for discussion, including teen pregnancy, issues with health care, and lack of employment for young people. They also used the internet to find information related to their issues: students who drop out/are pushed out, and environmental justice.

All of this was in strong contrast to the curriculum typically offered students both at their previous traditional public schools and at FHCHS' independent studies program. "Content standards" guide instruction in typical California classrooms and indicate what each student should learn, as they purportedly are "designed to encourage the highest achievement of every student, by defining the knowledge, concepts, and skills that students should acquire at each grade level" (California Department of Education). The acquisition of knowledge and concepts is the focus of these standards, which build on each other each year. The content standards do not address how content knowledge-building is possible when students are faced with overcrowded classrooms, ill-equipped teachers, and constant school transfer. The student co-researchers identified many of these as barriers towards building upon what they were "expected to know."

During a discussion about the value of generative-theme and problem-posing curriculum versus what they had experienced in traditional classrooms, students in the YPAR project began reflecting on the troubles they had with teachers focused on content standards. Iris said "if you go to a new grade level they expect you to know everything up to a certain point of what they taught you last year and that's it." Students with a history

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of school failure feel incompetent and poised for further failure in this type of learning environment. What's more, the that idea that learning is groups of skills or facts that can be forgotten from year to year rather than the skills of analyzing, criticizing, and challenging history and literature negates students' own experiences and generative themes.

My own concept of relying on reading levels to categorize and assess students was challenged by the results of this project. I selected this group of students based in part on their below basic achievement on a norm-referenced test, identifying the fact that students with lower literacy levels are more likely to fail or be pushed out of high school (Mercado, 2001). I was aware at the start of the project that there was a conflict between the measure of literacy I was using (traditional literacy skills) and that which YPAR and the group project would develop in students (critical literacy skills), but I did not anticipate the extent to which students would challenge my notion of both types of literacy skills. The students were able to read college-level texts both on their own and as a group, and the studies and background research they found online and in books was written in levels much higher than many of their EdPerformance scores suggested they could comprehend. There were many instances when the students described a text as "too hard" or would get to the end of text and claim that they did not understand what they had just read, yet their reactions to texts and integration of them into their own research projects evidenced far more comprehension than they reported.

Both through working together to make meaning of difficult texts and by interacting with their reading through the "talk to the text" strategy, these "below basic

readers" evidenced much more advanced literacy skills than these labels suggested (see Appendix J). I pondered the cause for this inconsistency, and hypothesized that the ownership over their generative themes and the opportunity to develop the students' voices offered part of the answer. The discrepancy between standardized tests assessed the students as capable of and the student co-researchers' authentic abilities became much more apparent when the curriculum and pedagogy honored the young peoples' voices.

Distinctiveness of Voice

As the student co-researchers began discussing their previous school experiences and the social issues they wanted to study, the distinctiveness of each of their voices, as well as a group identity, began to emerge. Although at the start of the group in July I chose many of our guiding questions and curricular materials, even in directed discussions students expressed their individuality and guided topics towards aspects of the issues that interested them most. The moment that research groups formed, the student co-researchers began exploring their relationships to the research topics and guiding their own reading and discussions. As the student co-researchers became their own leaders and teachers, the uniqueness of each individual and group's voices rose to the surface.

Developing Research Questions

At the start of the group, I told students my own research questions for the project I was doing with them, and let them know that they would be coming up with research questions later for topics that interested them. I explained that developing research

questions was often the hardest part of the research process, and that there were many steps we would go through before we developed the "burning questions" we had and that often questions lead to more questions and are never fully answered.

Before we began using activities from the Youth Involved in Leadership and Learning Curriculum (Hofstedt & Brink, 2008), I asked the student co-researchers to work together to compile a list of questions about their worlds. I told them to think about what issues aroused their curiosities, and things in their worlds they wished they knew more about. The following was the list of questions they had in early July:

1. Why do people get so mad about immigrants?

2. Why do people let society's thoughts about them affect their lives?

3. What is the reason for the war?

4. Why do we have to finish school to get a career if school doesn't have anything to do with what we become later in life?

5. Why do Democrats and Republicans have conflicts?

6. Why is the economy being blamed on immigrants?

7. Why is their so much racism in this society?

These questions struck me as very insightful and challenging, and led me to question why we would focus on only a few topics. What had started out as a warm-up activity to get the students thinking in terms of questioning and dialogue led me to rethink why we were moving so methodically towards a research project. I told the student co-researchers that part of the purpose of our class discussions would be to discuss and hear different views on these provocative questions. I also explained that the foundational reading we would

do about critical pedagogy would help provide us with a lens for how to view some of these questions. Of course, we never came up with definitive answers to any of these questions, but we discussed many of them at length, including issues of institutional racism, immigrant scapegoating, and the purpose of school. We also discussed the possibility of creating a follow-up course to address more of their questions.

Several different activities helped the students decide on topics that interested them, problematize cause and effect relationships, and finally settle on the research questions they would explore in their research groups. We looked at a variety of research topics from the Participatory Action Research Collective's websites and identified the research questions in those projects, debating what made them quality research questions. Students identified different categories, including "interesting" and "things we could do something about." We used an activity from the Youth Involved in Leadership and Learning Curriculum (Hofstedt & Brink, 2008) that included a checklist for "testing" research questions to ensure that they were "specific and focused, effects people in your school and community, easy to understand and explain what it is and why it matters, important to other youth, could use more examination or deeper understanding, has realistic or possible solutions" (Hofstedt & Brink, 2008, p. 160).

From the original list of social issues, students co-researchers began to research and discuss issues in which were most interested. Several student co-researchers who originally wanted to study teen pregnancy and domestic violence decided that they were more interested in their questions about the issue of student dropout/pushout issues. Ray remained interested in the needs of students with Attention Deficit Disorder, but did not

want to conduct his research independently while the rest of the group worked

collaboratively. Eventually, everyone decided to be part of either the Environmentalism

in Action or Roots of the Problem research group.

Environmentalism in action group. The Environmentalism in Action group (EIA)

began with broad concerns about global warming, pollution, and diseases caused by

environmental degradation. After learning more about youth participatory action research

and the time constraints of the project, they decided to focus more on local environmental

issues. Their goal was to identify the environmental issues that students at the school site

found most pressing and develop service projects that would address these concerns.

They also developed a survey that asked students to think about the different

environmental concerns in neighborhoods with different socioeconomic statuses as a way

of introducing the school community to the concepts of environmental justice. The

members of the Environmentalism in Action group were Genny, Samantha, Iris, Natalie,

Ray, and Karen, and the following were the research questions they developed:

1. What is the biggest environmental issue in our community?

2. What do you think we can do to make a difference in our community?

3. Do you think people would cooperate if our community would work together to

   fix our environmental problem and what would you do to make the change?

Roots of the problem group. The Roots of the Problem group (ROP) was

passionate about the importance of their research topic. We had debates in class before

they choose their research group wherein student co-researchers argued the merits of each

research topics in order to convince vacillating students to join their group. During these

debates with the Environmentalism in Action group, the Roots of the Problem group made quite clear that they thought issues of students dropping out and being pushed out of schools were far more detrimental to the future of students at the school site. The students in this group—Catelina, Eva, Hugo, Kat, Jacqui, and Paulina—all identified many people in their lives who left school before graduating, including family members and friends, and decided that they would do a comparative study. Their research method was to interview students who left school and never returned, those who left and returned, and those who were still in school, in order to identify the causes of student dropout/pushout (see Appendix L). They wanted to identify anything that people in a support position with students could do to help students stay in school as part of Kat's larger plan of "paying it forward." They planned to create workshops for students to help convince them not to leave school even if steps were taken to push them out. The Roots of the Problem group created the following research questions:

1. Why do students drop-out?

2. What is it about school that they don't like?

3. Is there anything anyone can do to stop people from dropping out to keep people in school?

Exercising Power

Two of the main reactions to the YPAR Critical Literacy Group by the student co-researchers were surprise and appreciation at the permission the project gave them to exercise power. Perhaps the fact that several of the students knew each other before the start of class and there were two sets of siblings in the group led to a level of comfort in

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the group. Even so, I was surprised that there was little need for me to assert authority over the students. They exhibited respect for me and the other members of the group from the start of the project. The only system I needed to implement at the start was talking one at a time because when they would get excited to discuss a topic, they would often talk at the same time. This led to both difficulties hearing each other in the group and issues for me when I began to transcribe our group sessions. I told the student co-researchers that I thought we needed to make a greater effort to speak one at a time. We played a game focused on listening and sharing the floor that I often play with groups of students. The goal is to count to ten as a group without organizing who will take which number. If two people speak at the same time, the group must start from the beginning. The group took only three tries to get to ten, the students enjoyed the activity, and some students described the metaphor of the game for our group. That was the last day that speaking one at a time was discussed; the group just naturally fell into that rhythm. I found it striking that a group of teenagers could manage the adult nature of our discourse, and told the students I was impressed.

One of Hugo's reflections halfway through the project in August provided some explanation of why the group treated each other with the level of maturity and respect that they did:

I became more responsible and aware of people's opinion and respect them. I also learned to appreciate the information that I receive and understand it. I also learned that everybody has different knowledge and we can all learn from each other.

The exercise of Hugo's power included being "responsible" for other people's opinions. We started out in a group discussion format that required each young person voice their thoughts and respond to others. Then they worked in research groups that shared the responsibilities of their two projects. Since the group was predominantly student-facilitated, they held both the power and the responsibility, and they responded by exhibiting a great deal of respect for each other and the process.

Unlike Hugo, who sometimes stayed quiet at first during group discussions, Jacqui was far more dominant of discussions when we first started meeting. In August wrote in a reflection:

> I think this class has helped me socialize and interact in a group more. Before this class I never let anyone talk or give their opinion it was always about what I thought and in this class I learned to back down and let people give their opinions and also respect them and their opinion.

In terms of critical literacy development, this exercise of sharing power and voices was integral to the transformation of the student co-researchers. Whether it was Hugo becoming aware of the ideas of other students, Jacqui learning to truly listen to others, or the research groups working together to develop and report on their own projects, the exercise of power had a profound effect on the students. It served as a strong contrast to the typical classroom environment they were accustomed to, as well as providing a radically different type of literacy experience for the student co-researchers.

Sense of Belonging

   The alliances and sense of community provided by the project served as a contrast to the isolation that students can often feel in an independent study program, as well as allowing students a space to discuss the more pronounced sense of alienation they felt when they were pushed out of traditional school. During a group discussion about the Roots of the Problem group's definition of "pushout," Kat disclosed her own experience*:*

   Kat: I was told by my dean that I guess they didn't want me there cuz I was kinda bad. They just didn't want me there so they were like I had an option, my friend told me that she came over here [to FHCHS] so I just told them "can I get that?" and they were so excited for me to leave. They were so excited. Like..they just give you so...

   Natalie: It almost feels like they're going to throw a party after you leave.

Similar experiences were expressed by the other student co-researchers with a combination of indignance and upset. Many of the students at FHCHS arrive with the goal of recovering enough credits to return to traditional schools senior year to graduate with their peers. While the students expressed preference for the independent study program at FHCHS, they also felt deprived of the social aspects of high school. The YPAR Literacy Project provided a degree of social outlet for the students, as well as a vocabulary for expressing the injustice of their loss. Whereas at first the student co-researchers took responsibility for leaving traditional school, the critical framework for our group allowed them to develop a more nuanced perspective of the institutional injustices committed by some schools. They began to see that many of their shared

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experiences had to do with being marginalized by school and society, as well as the different purposely opportunities afforded students from dominant groups. An interview quote that the Roots of the Problem group chose to include in their final project reveals the estrangement from people and systems felt by many of the student co-researchers in their educational experiences: "I thought I didn't have a choice. School was hard for me and I was going through a period in my life when I felt everyone was against me and wanted to see me fail."

Becoming Critical Researchers

The student co-researchers had agency in the project to utilize critical literacy as a lens for analyzing their position in society and to use the methodology and outcomes of youth participatory action research to change aspects of the social structures in which they live. The reality of the project's time constraints, however, meant that the students began to explore their own critical consciousnesses, what Freire termed "*conscientização*" (Freire, 2000, p. 67)*,* in terms of a framework for viewing the world and their place in it. The timeline and scope of the project allowed for exploration of critical consciousness and the beginnings of transformation from being made objects of the education system (Freire, 2000) to becoming agent for change. It is my hope that the critical lenses through which we viewed dropout/pushout issues, environmental injustice, and other social issues the students identified are true "critical thinking skills" that students will use throughout their lives.

Reading Their Worlds

During a focus group on reading proficiency and educational injustice, I shared with students the rates of reading proficiency by race and socioeconomic status in California (Lucille Packard Foundation for Children's Health, see Appendix F). We discussed the measures used to determine reading proficiency, and students said that they felt standardized tests, while frustrating and boring, were fair measures of the levels of their reading. The following classroom discussion about the link between race, economic advantage, and reading ability evidences the critical consciousness with which students in the group began to read their world:

Jesse: So we will talk about questions number four. Who or what do you think is responsible for these numbers?

Kat: People.

Jesse: Which people?

Kat: Different people.

Jacqui: I think we're responsible for the choices we make and for what we decide to do. I think if we decide to work hard and study I think we will succeed like become higher in life, but if we don't try and we don't do anything than where are we going to go?

Kat: But sometimes...

Karen: Or sometimes the teachers like how they teach us..

Kat: We get discouraged..

Karen: Yeah.

Kat: Because they act like..

Iris: It's how far you push yourself but at the same time it's like some people...yeah everyone has the same opportunity but some people have an easier way of getting there than others. So it's like you struggle a lot more.

Kat: Yeah it's like discouragement it's like you see them, and why is it easier for them but why is it hard for you.

Jacqui: Like me, like I have found...like I have taken a lot of criticism I see that as like if you judge me I try to do my best to try to prove you wrong.

Karen: Like I remember when I was in like 3rd grade I had this teacher and he was so mean and then I had to go to another class and they like show me more..yeah. and then I learned more than the class that I was.

Jesse: Mm hmm, so you think the teachers are responsible.

Karen: Yeah, well sometimes—

Samantha: Well sometimes they are..

Iris: It all depends.

Jesse: What does it depend on, Samantha?

Samantha: Like, you know Hispanic people, they come from like Spanish people so they… Like for us, our first..

Karen: Language.

Samantha: Language is like *espanish*, so it's kind of hard for us to learn English or whatever and for people that come from people that speak English, that's why I think it's kind of..

Iris: I think everyone is likejust responsible you know, but it's like at the same time..

Jacqui: I think everyone should put their own participation. Everybody has an effect on everybody. You see what I mean?

Kat: Yeah, if you see your peers, they're like not doing anything, then you're just like well I should just do nothing. Because nobody goes to school...there's no encouragement in school. Nobody goes to school everybody's just like "well, my friends aren't going, so I should go." You know?

Paulina: I think it's something that Iris said too. Depends on the parents, because it's different education, like wherever you come from, and like it's like Mexico and like US it like different, they teach differnt. And it's like your parents too they teach you different like what they learned over there and like it's something different over here. And it's different, like kids and parents.

Jacqui: Yeah, cuz in Mexico if you don't listen they like hit you.

Samantha: My mom used to have a Mexican boyfriend and then sometimes I would ask him for help in math and he would like teach me in different ways than they teach over here. It's like different way they teach over here.

Iris: And I think it's also that Hispanic people they work a lot more, they have like two jobs trying to survive so like they don't have as much time to like go to school and keep up with the kids what they're doing than like a white guy like yeah he works, he gets great money, so he doesn't need to have two jobs to like survive. So he can afford to like spend time, go to school, see how his kid's doing,

as like a Hispanic person wouldn't cuz most of them need to have like more than one job, or if they have one job it's like a really hard job so by the time they get home they're just like really tired.

Kat: Yeah, like agitated. I think that's why we are the way we are, cuz of our parents too.

Karen: And cuz sometimes our parents push us and sometimes if you don't want to go to school, they'll be like then stay. Yeah.

Iris: They'll be like it's your decision it's your life you're messing up, not mine.

Jacqui: Yeah, my dad always tells me that, he's like my job is to get you to school, but if you choose ot to go to school, I can't tell you not to because at the end the only person that you're effecting is yourself.

Iris: Yeah, that's what my mom says.

Jacqui: At the end, you're the one who's going to be suffering with a low-paying job. My dad always tells me, I want you to be better than I was. Cuz my dad didn't graduate high school and my dad, well he did graduate but he never went to school after that, he never like went all the way, and my dad always tells me, "Be more than me. Look at me and become more than I am."

Genny: Yeah.

Karen: Yeah.

Iris: That's what my mom tells me.

All: Yeah [chorus of 'yeah's].

Paulina: Like most of our parents don't graduate. Like my mom, she had her kid after she graduated, so she couldn't like go to college, but after like a couple of years back she took a physical therapy so now since all of her kids are grown up now she can actually have time for herself and do it. So that's what my mom did and she's like really like...it's hard because your parents don't all graduate.

Samantha: It affects us.

This rich group discussion reflects the spectrum of critical consciousness displayed by the students by August. For example, at the start of the discussion, Jacqui expressed a meritocratic philosophy of education and reading achievement when she said "I think we're responsible for the choices we make." Other students disagreed, identifying issues ranging from teacher quality and parent education level to peer pressure and lack of parent involvement in school attendance as causes for unequal reading achievement. Iris' statements linking class and race when she spoke of "Hispanic people" who require two jobs to survive in contrast to a "white guy" who makes more money at one job was sophisticated, particularly considering that we had never discussed the class-race correlation in class. Additionally critical was her argument that opportunities may exist for everyone, but that low-income Latino/as "struggle more" to reach and take advantage of such opportunities.

There was a rift in critical consciousness between those moments when students repeated the advice and words of their parents and when they began to view issues of injustice through the new lenses we explored in the group. For instance, Jacqui repeatedly referred to what her father told her, and expressed a more meritocratic view, while

Paulina, Kat, and Iris gave examples of the opportunity divide between people of different race and class groups. Samantha and Paulina also referred to the language and school culture divides between parents and students and the effect of non-graduating parents on the next generation. Over the course of our four months together, many students echoed their parents' sentiments as those of Jacqui's father: "Be more than me. Look at me and become more than I am." Yet through their burgeoning critical consciousnesses, the students began to look at the complexity of social constructs that maintained their parents' subordinated economic and social statuses.

Roots of the Problems

The research group that had the most apparent development of critical consciousness was the Roots of the Problem group, who studied the causes of students dropping or being pushed out of school. The students in that group—Jacqui, Catelina, Eva, Hugo, Kat, and Paulina—began their research process with the hypothesis that people drop out of school either because they are lazy or because they have made bad choices. They had many discussions at first about the roots of this laziness, which the students at that point still tied to the decision-making of the students—getting demotivated by smoking marijuana instead of going to class, giving up on school because it was too hard, or missing so many days that going back became too difficult. At one point, Kat referred to students at FHCHS as the "worst students who dropped out of high schools." The students made links between lack of parent support and students dropping out, as well as dangerous school environments, but at first they had a difficult time with the term "pushout" that I introduced to them in July. They saw it as a word that was a

more "polite" way of describing "dropouts" in a way that "won't offend them." Eva said, "People call themselves pushouts to make themselves feel better."   In July and early August, the Roots of the Problem of the group did not view the term "pushout" as turning the onus of students leaving school before graduation as institutional failure.

I had to make a conscious effort not to indoctrinate students with my own views. I exposed them to research on school responsibility for student failure being unjustly weighted towards low income students of color (Fine, 1991; Slavin & Madden, 1999; Perie, Grig, & Donahue, 2005; Christenson & Thurlow, 2004), but I was concerned that in the context of their preliminary views, this could lead to more blaming of the student victims of unjust educational opportunities. I introduced them to the concept of student being pushed out, but did not try to convince them of the perspective. I realized that particularly from my position a white middle-class educator, it would be incredibly patronizing to spoon-feed them theories of justice. When we read from *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire, 2000), we had a discussion about what classes of people would be considered "oppressed" and who would be "oppressors." I explained the concept of "elitism" and characterized myself as part of the elite class. I knew that I had to trust the process of critical literacy and allow them to "read" the world themselves. Teaching that attempts to fill students' heads with libratory perspectives as though they were empty sponges to absorb a critical agenda, would perhaps be the most brutal form of banking education.

The students began to change their perspectives over the course of the interview and transcription process. As they listened to and read the stories of adults and young

people who left school before graduation, they began to piece together a much more complex, critical analysis of why students leave school. They talked to people who had to work to take care of their families, people who feared for their safety at school, students whose learning issues and lack of school support were so severe that they were unable to complete their work, and many students whose problems outside of school made continuing in school untenable. The students in the Roots of the Problem group became protective of the people they interviewed, and cautioned when reporting their data to the rest of the group "not to criticize people for what they do or have done" because many times the issues in their lives were outside of their control. In their final project, the suggestions this group made for improving student success rates in school evidenced a much more critical reading of the dropout/pushout situation:

1. More activities would keep students in school

2. Counseling for parents and students

3. Teach students to deal with each other

4. Have activities outside of school

5. Have subjects students would be interested in as a career opportunity

6. Teach students to have more self-esteem in themselves

Jacqui developed a critical consciousness about dropout/pushout causes that did not simply follow the philosophies of her father. She said:

I think I see [students who leave school] in a different way. I used to think maybe they dropped out because they're lazy, they don't want to do the work, but after the interviews and after all that, they do it because they really do have a reason.

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Like some of them drop out because they have problems at home. Others, they

have really big issues going on in their lives, they don't have...school is not there

right now for them. I think I see things differently and I don't judge as soon as I

see it. I learned to see things their way, in a different perspective.

Beginning Stages of Transformation

Considering the short amount of time the students and I spent together on their

YPAR projects, as well as the limited amount of actions we could take within the time

constraints of credit recovery and curricular requirements, I cannot claim that the student

co-researchers experienced total critical "transformation" (Freire, 2000). However, just as

Freire viewed theory as "always becoming" (Horton & Freire, 1990, p. 101), so too can

transformation be viewed as a journey rather than a destination. The students in the

YPAR Critical Literacy Group defined transformation as "a change over from one way of

thinking and acting to another, as well as a change in attitude" and 11 of the 12 students

identified aspects of transformation they felt in themselves (Eva felt that her daughter

was responsible for her transforming before the group even began). The critical

pedagogical foundations, group discussions, and YPAR projects gave students the

opportunity to channel their frustrations through reading and beginning to transform their

experiences in school. It also gave them an opportunity to view "class" in a new and

more emancipatory way. This project presented an opportunity for students to begin

transforming, but for these 12 students, I trust that trek has only just begun.

Becoming "Beings for Themselves"

This project created a space within an alternative school program to create transformative opportunities for students left behind by the status quo of traditional school. To create a "pedagogy of the oppressed," according to Freire, "the solution is not to 'integrate' them into the structure of oppression, but to transform that structure so that they can become 'beings for themselves'" (Freire, 2000, p. 74). In small ways, this project did transform the typical structure of FHCHS, transforming a group of students with low levels of traditional literacy skills into YPAR researchers and turning a classroom into a place of dialogue and problem-posing pedagogy.

During a group discussion in September about how society holds low expectations for Latino/as which can lead to negative self-worth, the following exchange occurred:

Genny: I think that they assume that they're better than..

Jesse: Who assumes?

Genny: The people.

Samantha: The country.

Iris: The Hispanics just assume. Everybody thinks that we're not going to do as good. Like why even bother.

Karen: Yeah, don't even try.

Iris: A lot people they just don't…A lot of people have great talents, and they won't push as hard because they're like, well...everyone thinks I'm not going to do as well so why bother. It's like you know they think less of you and you don't want to disappoint yourself either, so it's like why try.

This discussion had many echoes of the students' own attitude of the project at the start of July. They were pessimistic about their ability to change things with research, cynical about research in general, and negative about their ability to complete YPAR projects in four months. They were happy to be in a "class without homework" and immediately enjoyed the camaraderie of the group, but they were unsure of their ability to make changes in the structure of the class or the school. Their experience with the research projects seemed to change their minds about this, and made them all more optimistic about their ability to transform the structures around them. In one of their final reflections about "reading the world," Genny wrote about her experience in the Environmentalism in Action group:

> "Reading the world" is also being aware of whats going on around us to be alert and to see what we can do to help what goes on in the world. And also noticing the things that happen around us daily is really its really an inspiring phrase. I'm really glad to be part of this group. I'm glad I can really do something to change the world for the start our environment. I think its good start little so it can spread and out more and be the "Big things." I hope for what I'm trying to do help will inspire people to do the same like paying it forward. Well I'm actually looking forward to one day do more to help the world.

The students began to see themselves as change-makers through the small YPAR projects they completed, and all seemed more primed at the end of the group to do the "big things." Their concept of "paying it forward," a thread through all of their work and discussions, seemed to give them agency as individuals and a small group of students at a

small charter school. They never seemed frustrated with the small amount of chipping away at injustice they were able to do through their YPAR projects, but instead seemed empowered by their small victories to do more, both individually and as a group.

Transformation of Confidence

More than anything else, student co-researchers marked their transformation as students in relation to their growing confidence and ability to speak in front of others. They saw this as a major shift in attitude and marked it as an increase in their power to make change. Natalie said,

> My experience here in this class has changed my life a lot meaning that I feel really comfortable talking around people. Basically I was a shy girl. I didn't really talk when class started but as I began responding questions and coming often I started having tremendous confidence. I started talking to people without them talking to me first. I feel that I've grown in this class and I feel different in a good perspective.

Natalie made the connection in this same interview between this growing confidence of voice to critical perspectives and the way she viewed the world:

> I feel like I'm improving, like I'm understanding more of my English. I feel like I know things more and I'm getting more interested in stuff. Like more reading that often. I'm like getting interested in more to things like more history. I like history now...I'm liking it more than I used to. I feel like I'm doing...I feel for me like I'm going to be changing something soon or like...And I feel like I can talk more and I feel like I can lead like what you do...so it's good.

This transformation in confidence led some of the students from being the objects of education to subjects in their own learning. Natalie made the further transformation from shy student to developing the confidence to be teacher. Her statement "I feel like I can lead like what you do" marked a true turning point in her interactions with other students. I saw the same shift publically that Natalie saw in herself. While at the start of the project in July, Natalie was one of the quietest and most hesitant participants in group discussions, by September she was leading the Environmentalism in Action group. She exemplified the shift many of the students made over the course of the project through her growing self-reliance and leadership.

Beyond the Project

Since the project ended, I have worked progressively less at the North Valley Site, as I have taken on a broader administrative role in the 35 FHCHS schools. I stay in touch with the 12 YPAR Critical Literacy Group students over email and in weekly Tuesday visits to the North Valley Site. Although the students grew as leaders and developed their projects independently, I imagined that if we would come together as a group or do more action research, I would need to be the instigator. In this way, I did not grow enough over the course of the project to trust the student co-researchers to continue without me. Yet it is a testament to their transformation as youth researchers that several of the students have created their own projects.

Kat read in the newspaper about the crisis in American food banks since the economic collapse, and independently organized a canned food drive over the holidays. She asked me to help her deliver the collection to a local homeless shelter. Samantha,

Karen, and Jacqui decided that we should watch presidential inauguration of Barack Obama together, so we organized a viewing party together. Iris is in the first group of FHCHS peer tutors, and serves as a student advocate in group discussions about whether there are students who are "lazy" and "don't want to learn" or if their learning issues run much deeper than that. Jacqui, Kat, and Paulina want to start a student council group to address some of the lack of activities and leadership opportunities for students that they identified in their Roots of the Problem research. The student council would be the first of its kind at the North Valley Site.

While I hoped that the project would help the students begin critical transformation, I feel fortunate to become a spectator and support system as they spearhead their own projects and take ownership over their own learning and the school. It is the logical next step for a group that had already begun to transform the world of their school by the end of our project in early October. As subjects of their own learning and readers of their own world, I should expect nothing less.

Student Co-Researcher Transformation

As I revisit each of the 12 student co-researchers introduced at the start of the chapter, my goal is to allow their own words to speak to the transformation they witnessed in themselves. As the principal researcher, I will also present the ways in which I marked their literacy transformations from the start of class in July to the end of October.

Jacqui

During our final interview, Jacqui expressed much of what I had witnessed in her over the 12 weeks of the project, as well as describing the ways she read the world differently because of the group. Jacqui was confident sharing her opinions from the start, and one major transformation I saw in Jacqui was her ability to listen and share the spotlight with others, which she also observed in herself. By the end of October, Jacqui was having more troubles outside of school, and was at the verge of leaving to take care of her father. Her reflections about reading the world seemed to reflect her life experiences and those she heard from people she interviewed:

> To me this is an interesting class, I like it. Because like I said you get to see different things and you get more knowledge of different people. I think that I read the world better now, because I see the hard stuff that they go through. I mean the economy is messed up I think the economy at a point was always messed up, because there's people in this world that just don't give a crap and they'll just do anything that they want. And like, they'll throw trash everywhere and they don't care. I think people only care after something bad has happened to them. Then they change their minds about things. Like how they say you have to hit rock bottom before you change.

When directly asked about her ability to read the world and change it, Jacqui similarly related it to the difficulties she had experienced:

> Like I have a lot of things that have happened to me and I'm only 16, but like reading the world I think I'm not there yet. I haven't read the world like how I should, but I think that you read the world by like the things that happen to you,

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by the experiences that you go through. And I've been through a lot of

experiences, so I think I've read the world, but I think I've read most of the bad

part of the world than the good part.

Her statement about reading "most of the bad part of the world" was sad to me, as Jacqui

has one of the infectious laughs I've ever heard. She is always trying to help others, offer

advice, and lead people to positive outcomes. When I asked her to talk more about

reading the world, she responded:

Reading the world to me like it's, you've gotta like put yourself in other people's

shoes so I think that's what reading the world means... you have to put yourself in

what other people..what they go through every day. I think everybody reads the

world differently. Everybody has to go through different things, and sees the

world in different ways. I might be having the best day ever, and the person next

to me may be having the worst day ever.

This strong compassion for others was the lasting impression of Jacqui that everyone in

the group had. She helped lead the Roots of the Problem group towards the finding that

you cannot judge the actions of others if you do not know their circumstances. Jacqui left

for a few months, but is now back at school. Her teacher says that she notices that Jacqui

is more thorough in her work. Jacqui herself feels that she is a stronger reader now,

particularly when she can read something to herself aloud. She said, "when I read, I try to

break things down and try to understand pieces of it and then at the end go through

everything."

Genny

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Genny was not a vocal participant at the start of class, but by the end she had become a gentle leader in her group. She did not have as strong a personality as some of the other members of the Environmentalism in Action group like Iris or her sister Natalie, but she took the research very seriously and was extremely conscientious in her interviewing and transcription. She also played a major role in crafting her group's research questions. Genny is very curious, and pointed to that curiosity as part of what strengthened her reading: "I think I am a good reader. Cuz sometimes I ask questions about what am I reading about."

When she was asked to reflect on what she learned in the group and how she viewed "reading the world," she wrote the following:

We have learned a lot of making differences in our community. I've learned to work as a team and team work is something great. I've learned a lot of great things in this literacy class. It also has helped me to get involve and get information from focus groups. It has inspired me to do the same thing with other students. It helped me give my own opinions towards things in life.

I've learned not to be afraid of sharing my own opinion to other students. I feel I can do fine now from here to the future. I feel that we should have a lot of these types of classes it has made me feel more confident to express how feel toward things that happen in life.

When I hear the phrase "read the world" I think of it like knowing and doing something for the world, like for instance our research group worked on a research project hat has to do a lot with the world it's called Environmentalism in

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Action the EIA. Well we are trying to do is help and give oppinions towards helping the Environment. What we have done is give surveys to people to also help us out do a change in the world. I've also had worked on having interviews with individuals people of what they think we should do to help. "Reading the world" is also being aware of whats going on around us to be alert and to see what we can do to help what goes on in the world. And also noticing the things that happen around us daily is really its really an inspiring phrase.

During our final interview, I asked Genny if she felt she had experienced transformation, she responded:

Yes. Well like the way I've changed in this class...I feel like I feel more confident. Like I feel like I can talk to people without being afraid of what they think about it, you know? And I feel like it's an opportunity for me to express myself.

Jesse: Do you think that's important?

Genny: Yes it is because in a lot of places you know they need that.

Natalie

Natalie's transformation was pronounced in terms of her participation and ability to express herself in front of the rest of the group. She was extremely shy in July, never volunteering to speak. By late September, Natalie was one of the most vocal participants of the group, and this confidence was reflected in her writing and leadership of the Environmentalism in Action group. When asked during our final interview if she felt she had transformed, Natalie responded:

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I think I have changed...like in my ideas, like in my ideas, perspectives and things. I feel like there's a change in me, and I feel like I'm learning something new every day. There's some things I didn't know about and now I do and it makes you think more about it and that there could be a change. I didn't know there were so many people that...well I had it kind of figured out like there were people who were just selling themselves out for money, but I didn't know it was like almost the whole entire country. What I learned from my time in this literacy group was to get more involved and to speak up!

In her final reflection about what she learned and her perspective on "reading the world," Natalie wrote:

I feel I got so many great ideas and I felt that I made lots of new friends here. I used to be the girl who was always shy and was very quiet now I feel that I'm noisy, loud, and very confident. I have so many new ideas and so many questions, most of which came from this class.

I feel that I can express my self more and that I can do anything that I set my mind to. I feel positive, and that I can do my work more interesting and more expressive. I feel now that my work will make people think. My work will look more neater. And I feel I can improve my writing skills by rereading it, proofreading it, etc. Now I can make my writing more effective.

What I think reading the world means is your point of view in how you see the world and to reflect on how similar the nations do their things with our country like comparing and contrasting the similarities and the differences

between the countries. I also feel reading the world is also seeing how each of the countries relations with other countries reflect their attitudes towards others I feel I can do more like changing our environment and making a difference. I want people to be inspired by the way I'm being inspired right now. I feel my project is just another way of showing how people see their environment and what they do to make a change. I want people to know how the environment is being treated and how to make it a better place. So I believe I can make this difference by informing people about the issues that need to be taken more seriously than lightly. I want people to see my project as an inspiration of hope to see the world in a different way.

Catelina

Catelina identified her transformation in terms of her perspective on students who drop out of school, saying in our final interview, "for the project we're doing on the ROP [Roots of the Problem], I basically thought it was just because of laziness or something like that but I've seen that that's not the only reason why people drop out." In her final reflection, she also pointed to new knowledge that reflected transformation:

> We learned new stuff, and got to work together. We also do our work not just simply by sitting in a classroom and doing work without stopping and, I think that really that helps a student do better at something, because that way it is not boring.

> If I need help in a topic, research on it, or even interview if that helps. There are different ways to research, like interviewing, doing surveys, self

thoughts and internet. Mostly I think interviews helps more because of peoples experiences, and how they overcame with their issue. Also working in groups can also help because of individual thoughts. Also, making a class not that boring can help illuminate the grades by doing extra work. Like for example if other classes were not so boring, that the students didn't have to sit boldly and do work without stopping, if only other classes were somewhat like this class. Students would do better, or even improve at their class or subject.

I think reading the world means deeper in than just looking at the surface of things. If you discover or research in deeper than just appearances, you might discover something else than jus a certain perspectives. For example, when you read a book, you don't just read the words, and sentences and paragraphs, but you put all your senses into it, like imagination, memory, and scenes build up in your head. And reading the world is almost the same thing, just that instead of words you see the objects, obstacles, and people. Reading the world is also reading people, not just the objects or scenes. Reading people also means not just judging by what the person looks like but if you really want to know how the person is, you communicate to see if really the person is how she or he is. Like people say and have always been saying, "Don't judge a book by its cover." Seriously, people might have that issue of just seeing the outer surface, but not really going in deeper to the object, person, book, scene, or problem of any kind. Also, our project was called Roots of the Problem (ROP) and the way we read our project was by not writing what we think but to actually do the research and interview by

tape recording doing surveys or simply asking for advice. Working in groups also
helps an individual read the world a lot easier because of personal thoughts and
voices that might help in the subject.

Eva

Eva was the only student co-researcher who reported experiencing no
transformation over the course of the project. I concur that she had strong opinions from
the start that shifted little, but I also think that Eva's position as a mother and her many
negative experiences with school before we began meeting had already given her a
critical perspective, one that in fact did develop over the course of the project.
In response to transformation, Eva said:

> No I think I'm the same. I think I act the same and I think the same as before. I
> don't know, well I've always said my daughter has a lot to do with everything of
> how I am now, so she's the one that transformed me to something, somebody
> different. Because I realized that something new was coming to life and I should
> grow up and think more mature. Do something different for my life, something
> better in a positive way, and that's how she changed me. But the class...I like the
> class, but it hasn't tranformed me to anything different.

Eva was one of the student co-researchers who thought that laziness had a great deal to
do with why students dropped out of school, and noted a transformed perspective in her
final reflection:

> In this class I learned that many people have reasons why they do the
> things they do. For example people who drop out reasons why they do drop out

they may not be good reasons or bad but they are still reasons. I learned that you shouldn't critizize people because you don't know what their situations or why they are the way they are even thought sometimes it's hard not to critizize people because you don't like them. I also learned that there really is a lot of problems with the environment.

I also think you should always carry a positive attitude instead of a negative because you can do more with a positive mind than a negative mind and people can tell when your a positive person because you feel confident doing many things and as you know confidence showing person.

What it means to read the world is that you can see all the problems that are going on in the society like the pollution in the sky and how it affects us. You can read the world by all of society's problems like how younger teens are getting into gangs and how they are going around representing some stupid 'hood and killing one another knowing that they are killing their own race. How there's so much violence out of this world like you see people walking in the streets all bruised up and with black eye's because people are hitting each other or husbands are hitting their wifes and rapeing them and their own kids or other people or pressuring them to have sex when they don't want to. You can also see and read how Immigration has became a problem because the U.S. has agreed to make latin people's lifes impossible to that we can go back from where we came from or they try to deport us all. How they don't want to give us licences because we aren't

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born here. You can read the world in so many ways that it's endless to say how you can read the world.

Samantha

Samantha had a key role in the Environmentalism in Action group. She worked with Natalie to create a survey about environmental justice and volunteered to find participants to complete it. This was unexpected, as Samantha was quiet and shy at the start of class. She usually worked in tandem with her twin sister Karen, and would become embarrassed if she had to speak to strangers.

In her final written reflection, Samantha wrote:

> The skills and attitudes I learned from this class is that there's a solution to every problem I have in life or in a subject. And how to follow directions in everything. And also that I can do anything to a problem in our community. I also feel that I could or can express more about a certain subject and do not need to be scared about what I say or think about a certain subject.
>
> For me, "read the world" means how you look at problems in our world or community or what you think about stuff around us. Or the point of view you see a problem in our world. Some of examples on how I read the world in my project is that environmentalism is not so good in our community. Also that few people care about it. And that we should help around and also that a lot of our streets are dirty and not a lot of people don't see that or help around and that people or us should care about our world.

When I asked her if she felt she had transformed over the course of the project, Samantha responded:

> Yeah in some way I have. Probably by how to look at stuff, not in me but outside the world and I look at things differently now. Probably global warming, I take it more serious now than I used to and then on the teen dropouts too. I see that there's a lot of people dropping out of school.

Karen

In terms of voicing her ideas and participating in discussions and group activities, Karen had changed drastically over the course of the project. She went from giggling shyly whenever I would ask a question to leading group discussions and voicing her opinions. One area she did not change in was her confidence with writing. It took until almost the end of our time together for Karen to turn in her literacy autobiography assignment. When she finally turned in her five-paragraph essay, she said that she had a lot of trouble figuring out what to write in each paragraph and how to "tie" her ideas together. She had similar trouble completing reflections in group, usually writing one or two short paragraphs before stopping. In the more authentic assignments completed by the researchers in her YPAR group, Karen had a much easier time. She completed her tasks, including interviewing and transcribing the interviews, as well as collecting surveys.

When I asked her if she transformed, Karen said:

> I think I did cause I talk more and I answer more questions more. Sometimes I don't talk and I don't talk sometimes with people and yeah..cuz the class is fun and

all that. That it's not boring like in my old classes I used to have in regular school.

And I learn more. To be independent of working by myself.

In her final reflection, Karen wrote:

I learned knew ideas in this class. They were researchers, interview, projects. I learned that I need to talk more in class and answer more questions. And also write more. And don't ask my friend to do my work or my homework.

I think reading the world is helping our community. In the world. To help our world to be a better place. Also because the streets are dirty and sometime clean. I see the world by discover new things and looking the world deeper so we could see the world seriously. Doing my project in my group is showing me that we have to help our community. And clean. I think we could do more we can keep it clean.

Hugo

There was not much of an opportunity to witness the potential transformative effects of the group project on Hugo. He returned to juvenile detention in early August. I trust that if he had been able to finish out the project with us, he would have become less shy and worked well with his group, Roots of the Problem. During our preliminary interview, Hugo said, "I'm not quite good at presenting. I get shy. When there's a lot a people. When there's just a little bit, not that shy." Just before Hugo left, he was beginning to share his ideas more with his group. He was going to integrate the juvenile justice issues he was interested in into the research questions and work of the ROP group.

Iris

Iris took on a strong leadership role in the group, sometimes taking on the role of reprimanding other members of the Environmentalism in Action group for not doing enough work to finish their research. Her feelings about personal transformation had much to do with her perspective of school and the possibility of classes being engaging:

Jesse: Based on the definitions of transformation we have discussed in class, do you feel like you've transformed in the last four months?

Iris: Yeah. Just because it's just a very different type of class where you interact with other people and you put your opinion in and it just keeps me a lot more interested.

Jesse: Why does putting your opinion in keep you more interested?

Iris: Well it's like in regular classes you just sit there and like, if the teacher asks you something you answer, otherwise they hardly pay attention to you. But in this class it's like you actually want to know what we think. I learned that not every class has to be boring and you don't just have to sit there and suck in everything you are taught. Everyone has their own opinion and should not be afraid to speak up. There is no right or wrong answer because it is your personal opinion.

When asked about reading the world in her final reflection, Iris wrote:

Reading the world means to like point out things that stand out about a certain something. The way I read the world is by noticing how people don't pay attention to damage they are causing to our world. A lot of our streets are really dirty and people don't seem to care because they still do it. They don't seem to understand that it's causing problems to our world and our health. If they would get educated

about the issue than maybe they would try and help out. When this class first started I thought it was going to be a lot of work and really boring. My opinion has completely changed. I definitely think that there should be more classes like this instead of the same old boring ones.

Kat

Perhaps more than any other student in the class, Kat experienced a strong critical transformation. She is now committed to attending college and studying Chicano Studies, Journalism, or Sociology. Halfway through class, at the end of July, Kat wrote about her experiences in the group:

My experience so far has been very productive and fun. I like debating about things that are important. I just pretty much like to show people that I can be smart. In my opinion I really do feel like I think differently than I did before the class started. I feel like I'm more involved in a way.

When I asked Kat at the end of the project if she felt she had transformed, she said,

Yeah. Ok well I don't know and like in a political way...I like listening to things like that, watching things like that. Even like how do I explain it? It's more interesting. And like I want to speak my mind.

During our final interview, the following dialogue transpired when I asked if there was anything Kat wished to add:

Kat: I love the class.

Jesse: Why?

Kat: Because I get to speak my mind, and I love it because I have a lot to say.

Jesse: Why do you think that classes like this do not happen in school a lot?

Kat: To not get them thinking. Like motivated to doing something that isn't right. Like not right, but just something that it's against what the schools or the policies say. I think people, teachers are scared of what the kids are capable of.

Jesse: Why do you think they're scared?

Kat: Because they're capable of a lot. A lot a lot.

Jesse: Do you think that kids know that?

Kat: No. I know there's certain people like me, like type of people like me that talk, not talk but want to be involved in things like that, but other people don't...wouldn't know because they haven't been told about it.

Kat's discussion of why critical consciousness for the oppressed could be dangerous for the oppressors was extremely insightful and indicated that she could apply abstract educational philosophy to her own experiences in school.

Ray

In many ways, I feel that I failed Ray. He was interested in studying ADHD and the educational injustices committed on students with attention disorders. Since none of the other student co-researchers were interested in this research and Ray did not want to work alone, he ended up joining the Environmentalism in Action group but never becoming as engaged as the other student co-researchers with whom he worked. I influenced his decision. I did not trust Ray to complete a project independently because of my experiences trying to help him focus and complete work in another class. When he said he did not want to work alone, I asked him to choose one of the other groups. Ray

participated marginally with the Environmentalism in Action group. He had excellent attendance throughout the project, and often offered insightful opinions about what we discussed, but he always seemed distracted and I did not talk to him one-on-one about why until it was too late, in the last week of the project during our final interview when I asked if he thought he had transformed:

Ray: I'm not as talkative. Too much going around, I got to think of one thing, I've got to think of another. It doesn't leave me as much time to talk. It's like mental. Have you seen anything weird with me? I think I have memory loss.

Jesse: Sometimes I don't know if you're picking up stuff we're doing or if you're busy thinking about something else.

Ray: It's both. Or actually I just think of something else, like house problems.

Jesse: Do you think it makes it hard to transform your thinking if you've got other stuff on your mind?

Ray: Yeah, of course it does. If I've got other things and you're talking, I can't put them all together. If I didn't have anything going on and I took this class, I would have probably taken it more seriously, help out my group a little bit more.

Jesse: Do you take the issues in the class seriously?

Ray: Oh yeah. Right now cause I have a lot of things going on. When they're in there and talking I try to take it seriously. If anybody has a question I'll answer it. If they want my help I'll help them out.

Jesse: What do you think we should do for students who are having trouble focusing in school?

Ray: There isn't an answer. You just gotta let it go. I don't think they want your help, for real.

Even though Ray missed out on a lot of the activities and research we did in class, he reflected that there were positive literacy effects he experienced from working with his group:

I learned a lot during these two months of class I have done a lot of reading talking to the text and understanding the world I have worked in teams I got along with everyone I didn't like sharing my ideas but we had to work together and I opened up to every one I started to read out loud and have discussions with my team helped out with E.I.A that's my team for our research on the environment. Talking to the text for big tests like history or English chunking for paragraph that I didn't understand big words little stuff becomes into big stuff and when I brake it down with talking to the text or chunk to make it easier for me to read or understand it I enjoy doing it because I would understand most of it and not struggle.

Ray remains at the school, but he still has a hard time focusing on completing enough work each month to recover credits. He has the credits of a second-semester 10th grader even though he is now eighteen years old, and was recently asked to participate in a dropout prevention program at the North Valley FHCHS site, and reports that he enjoys the classes focused on helping him with goal setting and envisioning his future. Ray is excited to participate at the American Educational Research Association conference in

San Diego with the other students, and identifies this trip as a motivator to complete his work.

Paulina

Of all the students, Paulina was the only one I encountered resistance from when our group first began to meet. She was suspicious of me and the project, and challenged my promise of five credits for the class if she attended each session. A Geometry course that Paulina needed to graduate was offered at a nearby FHCHS site during the same time the YPAR Critical Literacy Group met, and Paulina asked if she could do both. I told her that she could for two weeks, as long as she did all the reading the group was doing, did some independent research for the ROP group of which she was a member, and planned and led a few discussions when she returned. She rose to those challenges, and was able to complete both her Geometry class and the YPAR Literacy project. After learning about some of the discipline issues she encountered at the two previous traditional high schools she had attended, I realized that my trusting her while still holding high expectations for her led her to stop challenging me. It was as if she realized we were not combatants, but on the same side and at equal levels in the project we were conducting. From the moment she returned from the math class, our relationship was that of trust and respect, and I never had another discipline problem with her again.

When asked what she learned in class, Paulina responded:

I learned about literacy research. I learned also how to communicate and interact with other students. How to do Power Points, work with new people, hear other people opinions. Discuss about things that affect the world, like

Environmentalism and ROP student that drop out of school. These are all subjects that interest us the students.

I also learned to interact with other students here other student and teachers thoughts. Think about what affect the world and how we can help. Having a positive attitude can help me with my future and to give a good impression to other people. Share answers and opinions. Help other student or people understand what is going on when they are confused. I think this are some of the skills and attitudes that can help me with the rest of my life.

I think to read the world means that how you see the world, what is your point of view of life. Read how student interact and why do students drop out and dont graduate. I read the world in my project by seeing, learning and hearing other student and adults opinions and personal things of why they dropped out. Like some students will say because they needed money, too much pressure, keeping their grades in a good level, the pressure of graduating, bullies at school, student treating them bad and telling them stuff that puts them down and makes them not want to come to school. This helps me understand why students do what they do because they have to go through all this things sometimes through all this things sometimes we critize but we shouldn't because you know what they say "don't judge a book by its cover" that's why I try to know the person first before I go and talk smack about them before really getting to know them and have a conversation that is one part of life but there is many things that go on.

Principal Researcher Transformation

I read Paulo Freire for the first time in 2000, when I had just begun my teaching career. The book was *Literacy: Reading the Word and the World* (Freire & Macedo, 1997). Intrigued by the ideas that book contained and how they might be able to help me in my own struggles as a first-year teacher, I tried to practice the emancipatory pedagogy described in the pages of the book, and failed. I did not possess the confidence or authority as a teacher to truly engage in a partnership with my students. I was too busy trying to get them to stay in their seats.

That Summer while traveling through Guatemala and studying Spanish, I read *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire, 2000), and scribbled furiously in the margins, exclamation marks on paragraphs spoke my experience so accurately, and questions like "but how can I make this happen?" and "This may work for adults, but what about high school students in Watts? Where is the discipline?" littered the pages. It was that same copy of the book that I passed around for the student co-researchers in the YPAR Critical Literacy Group eight years later. When I photocopied chapter two for them, it was from that same copy. The tattered orange book now holds a history of meaning for me.

As a first-year teacher, I was not able to truly integrate critical pedagogy into my teaching practices. I was too busy trying to keep my head above water and make it to school in time for Homeroom. Many years later, I teach in an alternative school environment that removes many of the discipline issues of traditional school by working one-on-one with students or creating small groups of no more than 12 students for group

instruction. I have grown more comfortable with my role as a teacher, more confident of my expertise in the field of education and of English language and literature.

Even though I am a more developed and confident educator, I began this dissertation project very afraid. I had read enough research to believe that critical literacy could be effective at the high school level, and I was eager to see if critical literacy practices and student-created curriculum would have a positive effect on the learning of secondary students with a history of school failure. I thought the population of students and teachers at the North Valley FHCHS site would respond well to the type of project I was proposing. I was excited to work with student co-researchers as opposed to treating students as research subject. Yet, still, I was scared.

I worried that the students would not take the research project seriously, I feared that I would not be able to recruit enough students, and that even if I did, I would lose too many students from the project over the four months and fail to work with the 12 students long enough to find out if the project and methodology were transformative. But probably my most significant fear was that I was not truly a critical educator; I was afraid I could not relinquish my control over students and class discussions to allow for authentic student collaboration and co-research.

On the first day of class in June, I talked too much. I dominated the conversation, filled in silences with my own voice, gave students activities to do, forced them to work with a partner, called on people to answer questions. I acted in ways that I had not anticipated, practicing habits I was sure I was trying to break. And all but a small number of those students never returned. Certainly, the month vacation played a part in that

attrition, but also I was not fulfilling the promise I had made to the students as I recruited them. I said "this will be your class" and "you will discuss and research topics and issues that are important to you." Instead, on the first day, I told students about how student-focused, fun, and transformative the class would be. But I did not show them.

By July, I had begun to learn my lesson. I tried to truly listen to the student co-researchers, silencing myself so that the dialogue could take place between them, practicing patience while they all became comfortable sharing their thoughts and voices. During the book he "talked" with Myles Horton, Paulo Freire says "…a good teacher is the teacher who, in being or becoming permanently competent, is permanently aware of surprise and never, never stops being surprised" (Horton & Freire, 1990, p. 66). Although I have been teaching for eight years, I felt that this experience was the first time that I have ever been a "good teacher" in Freire's sense of the term. My curiosity began with the questions I posed in my research, but surprise came from truly seeking answers with the students. My awareness of this surprise led me to my own transformation. The revelation could only come through my experience of the project and the questions, ideas, and experiential knowledge that the student co-researchers possessed and shared.

What resulted was a corroboration of what I already believed in addition to new awareness gifted to me by the student co-researchers. I knew that increased literacy does not result from scripted programs or one-size-fits-all "interventions." I understood that the more curriculum and strategies imposed upon students without their participation, the more they would resist learning. The student co-researchers provided collaboration in a critical literacy project based on their own interests, experiences, ideas, and voices. Their

assessment of that project and the resulting transformations they saw in themselves encouraged my own perspective shift. I am now unequivocally committed to the idea that literacy requires far more than decoding, fluency, and comprehension. The foundation that we built together was based on a reading of the world that identified hegemonic forces and resisted them through deep thought, dialogue, and action. Our shared and individual experiences with the YPAR Critical Literacy Group have forever altered the way I view students and my role as a teacher and school leader. We must always begin with the concrete reality of the students and build complex thought, analysis, reading, and writing on that foundation.

I was not a perfect critical pedagogue; I still had paternalistic thoughts about my importance in the research process and feelings that the student co-researchers needed me in order to facilitate their actions. These subsided as the research progressed, but old thought patterns and habits are difficult to transform, and it takes more than four months to do so. As the principal researcher in this project and both a facilitator and participant in this class, one of the most important lessons I learned was the extreme challenge that critical pedagogy presents for both the teacher-students, and the student-teacher. Direct instruction and authoritarian teaching require much less effort on the part of both teachers and students. Students are not invited to participate actively, and teachers can rely on predictable lesson sequences and "measurable" outcomes. Far less inevitable are the related practices of YPAR and critical literacy, but they are also far more valuable and empowering for both students and teachers. According to Shor (1992):

Empowering education is thus a road from where we are to where we need to

be…This is no easy road to travel. Any place truly different from the status quo is

not close by or down a simple trail. But the need to go there is evident, given what

we know about unequal conditions and the decay in social life, given the need to

replace teacher-talk and student alienation with dialogue and critical inquiry (p.

67).

I am grateful to have started down that trail with 12 magnificent student co-researchers,

and I am hopeful that it will eventually bring us all further than empowerment, but to

equity and justice for the young people who will continue to ask the most critical

questions.

Culminating Summary

Many themes and significant lessons emerged from this research, but the five

most pronounced and discoverable themes that the student co-researchers evidenced

were: growth of reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills; trust and power;

distinctiveness of voice; development of critical researchers; and beginning stages of

transformation. This chapter followed the student co-researchers and me from early July

to late October, 2008, through the stages of our YPAR Critical Literacy Group and the

student-facilitated projects of the Environmentalism in Action group and the Roots of the

Problem group.

I recontextualized the project in the setting of FHCHS, the alternative charter high

school with qualities that made this type of YPAR project possible. The setbacks of June

were followed by a group of 12 student co-researchers, ten girls and two boys. Describing each student using aspects of their previous literacy experiences allowed the stage to be set for describing the YPAR Critical Literacy Group and the projects each research group completed.

Viewing the YPAR literacy project in the context of its curriculum and methods, I presented each emerging theme from the research data, ending by revisiting each student co-researcher to present in their own words the transformations they saw in themselves. The final section on my own transformation as teacher and principal researcher allowed me to reflect upon the collective impact that critical literacy and the methodology of youth participatory action research has on both the student researchers and their adult allies. The final chapter will continue to analyze the data and emerging themes, as well as providing discussions and implications for further study.

CHAPTER 5

ANALYSIS AND IMPLICATIONS

This chapter continues to analyze the findings from chapter 4, as well as continuing to answer some of the three stated research questions, organized around the themes that emerged from the data. I pay particular attention in this chapter to the educative power of the methodology employed: youth participatory action research (YPAR), to transform students' experiences with both traditional and critical literacy. This chapter is organized as follows: after revisiting my research questions, I organize my final analysis around the emergent themes introduced in chapter four, as well as the three research questions I explored. I then delve into the implications of my findings and my own experience as the adult ally of this project before concluding with recommendations for practice and further research.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study. I will explore themes that relate to the research questions throughout this chapter.

1. According to low-income Latino/a high school students with a history of school failure and below basic reading levels, what kind of critical literacy instruction would impact their literacy experiences in school?

2. In what ways do the curriculum, pedagogy, and methods of the YPAR Critical Literacy Group impact students' perceptions of themselves and experiences with

reading, both within the class context and their positionality in the larger

community?

3. In what ways does this YPAR Critical Literacy Group project create opportunities

for transformation for students, teachers, and the school?

Significance of Findings

Five main themes related to the theoretical framework of the project emerged

from the data, and helped to begin answering the research questions. These themes were

significant in that they offer evidence of the educative and transformative power of youth

participatory action research and set the stage for recommendations for future practice

and research:

1. Growth of reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills

2. Trust and power

3. Distinctiveness of voice

4. Development of critical researchers

5. Beginning stages of transformation

Analysis of Emergent Themes

Growth of Reading, Writing, Speaking, and Listening Skills

Traditional literacy. At first I thought I would use the EdPerformance test to

measure traditional literacy growth. Scantron's EdPerformance computer is the test that

we use at FHCHS to decide whether students should take remedial, college preparatory,

or advanced classes. I thought this test was also a good choice because school administrators use it as a marker of reading growth over the course of a school semester. As I was administering the test to students towards the end of our project, however, I heard comments such as "what does *this* have to do with our research projects," "why are we doing multiple choice now? We haven't done multiple choice this whole time," and "these stories are so boring I don't even care what the answer is." I realized that this was a wholly unsuitable tool for measuring the students' progress. Not only was it standardized and completely isolated from their experiences and schema, but the test itself was in complete contrast to all we had done over the 4-month period. Without problematizing the test with them and explaining why I was giving it, I told them this was part of my own research findings. I asked them to trust in their own power to research important issues and make change, and then I gave them the same type of dehumanizing examination that represented much of the negative school experiences I asked them to talk about. Half of the group had minor increases in their EdPerformance score (a scale of 1000-3000 that compares student achievement on a multiple choice reading comprehension and vocabulary test to students in neighboring schools), the other had no change or lower scores than the previous time they had been tested. I had a short conversation with the students, apologizing to them for asking them to take the test, and explaining the different ways I would be analyzing their improvements in the foundational traditional literacy skills of comprehension, fluency, and vocabulary development.

Comprehension. The student co-researchers evidenced comprehension through the talk to the text activities (see Appendix J) at the start and end of the project. While at the beginning of the project, they had very little understanding of these college-level texts even when engaging in group discussions about them, by the end of the project in October they were able to make meaning of the complex ideas both on their own and as a group. This growth in comprehension can be attributed to our use of generative themes through the lens of critical literacy. The students came up with topics of interest, but we always approached these issues a critical analysis of issues based on the foundational readings we did (Freire, 2000; Shor, 1992; Horton., 2003), so the quotes that they used the talk to the text method on had a new relevance to them when we looked at them again in October. In addition, they practiced active reading strategies with both the foundational texts and the research they found on their topics. Independent and group reading was always followed by a group discussion that helped put the reading into context and allowed for the students to hear multiple perspectives on the reading.

The student co-researchers also exhibited strong comprehension strategies in their transcription skills. When words were inaudible, they were able to use context clues to discover what the interviewee said. Their quick development from stilted, inaccurate transcribing at first fast, fluent transcribing within weeks evidenced their growing aural literacy and comprehension of spoken words.

Fluency. Reading fluency has to do with a person's rate of reading and automatic decoding, as well as his or her ability to use expression when reading aloud. The more we read texts aloud in group, the more that student co-researchers who never volunteered to

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read, like Ray and Karen, began to read in front of our YPAR group. Natalie, Iris, and Jacqui were fluent readers from the start of class, and were always the first to volunteer to read aloud. I did not note much difference over the course of the project in their reading fluency. Marked improvements were most noticeable in the less fluent readers. Ray was an inconsistent volunteer at first, but after he took over retrieving and printing articles on environmental justice from the internet (Ray loves anything to do with computers or the internet), he began reading aloud his findings to the group, and in August and September a noticeable growth in fluency was apparent.

Karen was the student whose reading fluency improved most over the 4-month period of the project. For the first two months of our group meetings, she never once volunteered to read aloud, even though she would participate in group discussions. Her growth in fluency became most clear when she was presenting with the rest of the Environmentalism in Action group for an adult audience at LMU. She had taken one slide of their PowerPoint presentation and prepared to present on their research questions. At the last minute, however, Genny decided she did not want to present on her slide on research findings, which included more text, so Genny and Karen switched. Karen, the only student co-researcher categorized as "far below basic" before the group began, read from the slide she had not prepared beforehand. She sounded confident and read with expression, pronouncing each word accurately, a stunning improvement compared to the fluency that she exhibited during our first one-on-one interview at the start of July. I believe that the consistent exposure to related words and concepts through the group

research projects and group discussions, as well as the increased interest level of the students, led to improved fluency for the most struggling readers in the class.

Vocabulary development. In chapter four, I discussed the development of vocabulary based on generative themes discussed in class. I used the examples of two terms: "global warming" and "abusement" to show how oral literacy practices had a positive effect on students' growing vocabularies. "Global warming" as redefined by students more specifically as opposed to their original concept of the term as referring to all environmental issues. The consistent use of the word "abuse" by other students helped Eva self-correct her invented noun "abusement."

Additionally, the repetition of both a critical literacy and YPAR terminology added complex words and ideas to the student co-researchers' written and spoken vocabularies. For example, students began replacing "global warming" with "environmental justice" and "dropout" with "pushout." The more research and discussion they did on their research topics, the more their terminology changed. They also began to use terms such as "investigation," "research questions," "transcription," and "youth participatory action research" with clearly complex interpretations of what these research terms signified. Besides these terms that they used in their speaking and writing, they grew their reading vocabularies to include difficult words such as "precepts" "neutral," "domination," and "abstract," (Freire, 2000) all of which appeared in the talk to the text activity that we did with Freire's quotes at the start and end of class. Those words they did no immediately recognize were defined by the rest of the class and comprehended within the context of the entire quote.

Critical literacy. Emancipatory critical literacy (Freire & Macedo, 1997) served as a framework in the group for helping student co-researchers think about the contexts of their lived experiences and histories, analyze these critically, and use them in their own literacy development. The moments of clear critical literacy development for both groups of student researchers were around their research questions.

The Roots of the Problem group started out with the attitude that most students who drop out of school are "lazy" and "give up." All six student co-researchers in that group came to the realization by the end of the project that there were much more complicated class and race injustices leading to the widespread pushout of so many students of color from high school. When they said they learned from their research "not to criticize people for the things they do or have done," they also mentioned that issues such as parent education level, poverty, lack of resources, inadequate teachers, crowded classrooms, and negative self-perception all lead to situations in which students feel they have no choice but to leave school.

The Environmentalism in Action group preliminarily saw litter, tagging, poor air quality, and other environmental issues in their community as the direct cause of "lazy people" and community members who did not care about their environment. Later, when designing in interactive survey for students at FHCHS, they included two side-by-side pictures of a dirty ally and a clean side street, asking survey participants to reflect on where the photos might have been taken, and what it said about the two communities and the city services provided to each. This choice of visual images evidenced in the six students from the Environmentalism in Action research group an ability to begin reading

the world, as well as asking others to do the same. Before creating this survey, the student co-researchers found an article on how the Green Movement was predominantly run by white people even though environmental degradation has a disproportionate effect on people of color (Jones, 2007). They were further engaged in the topic by the idea that they were youth of color researching the topic, and felt that they should analyze the environmental issues in their community through the lens of environmental justice instead of blaming community members for their inaction.

According to Freire, emancipatory literacy is "one of the major vehicles by which 'oppressed' people are able to participate in the sociohistorical transformation of their society" (Freire & Macedo, 1997, p. 29). While we began the process of analyzing the injustices in education and the environment through two YPAR projects over the four months we spent together, we did not have time to realize most of the actions recommended by the students. Critical literacy takes time, and while the student co-researchers certainly began to read the injustices around them and take steps towards counteracting these injustices and educating others, they were not able to fully realize the Freirian concept of emancipatory literacy within the confines of this short project. What they were able to do is develop critical perspectives on social issues that interested them, and move from the perspective they had learned from dominant discourse—to blame the victims of injustice, to a much more nuanced reading of their worlds.

The impact of traditional literacy on critical literacy. An interesting relationship emerged between traditional literacy skills and the student co-researchers' ability to read the world through the lens of critical literacy. My initial premise was engaging students at

the North Valley FHCHS site with the lowest reading ability to observe the transformative effect of critical literacy and YPAR on their reading, school experience, and self-perception. Generally speaking, the student co-researchers who came in with slightly higher levels of traditional reading ability evidenced greater growth in the areas of critical literacy development, critical consciousness, and transformation.

As an example, Karen and Kat were on contrasting ends of the literacy spectrum in terms of student co-researchers. Karen was the only student-co researcher whose EdPerformance test placed her at "far below basic," while Kat was categorized as "basic." Beyond the test, Kat identified reading struggles but read aloud fluently and often volunteered as a leader in small group reading circles. Karen, on the other hand, never volunteered to read aloud in July or August, and had a hard time decoding multisyllabic words. Kat turned in her Literacy Autobiography on time, and while she did not use paragraphs in her essay, it evidenced some strong writing strategies. In it, she also discussed the benefits of her bilingualism and her desire to go to college. Karen's Literacy Autobiography was turned in very late, and was extremely short. It listed the books she remembered from elementary school, and used very short words and sentences to express her ideas. Kat was a vocal participant in the group, while it took Karen a long time to voice her opinions in group discussions.

These divergent traditional literacy strengths seemed to also have a related effect on critical literacy development. My final interviews with these two students exposed the varying degrees to which they were able to "read the world" after four months in the YPAR Critical Literacy Group. When asked about her transformation, Karen said

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I think I did cuz I talk more and I answer more questions more. Sometimes I don't talk and I don't talk sometimes with people and yeah..cuz the class is fun and all that. That it's not boring like in my old classes I used to have in regular school. And I learn more.

When I asked her about whether she thought she was good at reading the world, Karen responded, "In some ways yeah, and another ways it's hard. Understanding like the economy, why's it getting worse every time, yeah." In contrast to Karen's responses about her ability to read the world through critical literacy, Kat had a much more nuanced understanding of why reading the world could be a threat to the status quo:

Kat: I think people, teachers are scared of what the kids are capable of.

Jesse: Why do you think they're scared?

Kat: Because they're capable of a lot. A lot a lot.

This divergence in critical literacy development along the lines of traditional literacy skills can be attributed to several factors, including the difficulty of reading some of the foundational critical literacy texts (Freire, 2000, Shor, 1992, Freire & Macedo, 1997), understanding critical literacy vocabulary, and disengagement with school and learning prior to the start of the group beginning. I do not think these issues are insurmountable, however, particularly if the YPAR group could have met for longer and I had more time to spend one-on-one with student co-researchers who were having trouble understanding some of the more advanced concepts. Karen experienced improvement in her fluency and comprehension; I believe that, if given more time, Karen would reach the same level of critical literacy that Kat did. Both Karen and Kat would have benefitted

from a longer time engaged in the project, but since Kat began with more reading and writing skills, she was able to practice critical literacy more quickly that Karen was. From this vantage, the YPAR project should have allowed more time for all the students to develop both traditional and critical literacy skills.

Trust and Power

At first, I characterized the student co-researchers' high attendance and increased speaking and writing during our sessions as improved participation in the YPAR Critical Literacy Group, particularly in comparison to other small group classes at the school. At the root of their participation, however, was the intersection of trust and power. The student co-researchers began to trust me and the other members of the group as we worked more closely together. They also experienced the benefits of having power over their own curriculum, pedagogy, and methods of learning in the group. At first hesitant to choose research topics and lead their own discussions, the student co-researchers began to express excitement at being "in charge" of their learning by late July. Their growing connections, as well as the self-efficacy they felt as co-researchers, co-learners, and co-teachers, led to a pronounced increase in their presence and participation in the group.

One of the predominant causes of school leaving for FHCHS students, both from the traditional schools they come from and from our program, is poor attendance and work product. When asked during orientation meetings with students and their families why they left their previous school, most students simply say they "stopped going." The student co-researchers described "ditch parties" where they would avoid attending school

for anywhere from a day to a semester, as well as their choice to ditch certain classes because they didn't like a teacher or subject, or because they had a conflict with another student in the class.

The high attendance of the student co-researchers in the YPAR Critical Literacy Group, then, spoke to several key benefits and rationale for this type of curriculum and pedagogy to be used with students previously disengaged with school. Whereas in most small group instruction classes, daily attendance is typically between 60 and 70 percent, the YPAR Critical Literacy Group had attendance percentages averaging 84%, and out of the 22 days we met there were four days where attendance was 100%. Students did not just attend class passively, most students participated actively. My interviews with the student co-researchers and their reflections often referred to their growing participation in group discussions and their interest in the topics we discussed. Once student co-researchers began their smaller research projects, attendance was even higher (although attendance for the Environmentalism in Action group was superior to that of the Roots of the Problem group). This heightened participation in contrast to school non-attendance and school leaving provides evidence of transformation for the students in the group.

Distinctiveness of Voice

The students came equipped with voices. They had adamant opinions based on personal experience and learning from the past, and several of the students were happy to share them from the start. Jacqui and Iris, in particular, shared their voices willingly, sometimes silencing the other ten student co-researchers. It was not for me to "give" students voice, but rather a benefit of both the YPAR process and the problem-posing and

student-centered aspects of critical literacy that the student co-researchers found a receptive audience of other empowered voices willing to dialogue. The transformations of Natalie, Kat, and Genny serve to illustrate the power of a YPAR project to bring silenced voices to the fore. In the beginning of the group they never shared their opinions out loud, even though Natalie and Kat would read aloud and all three wrote comprehensive reflections. By the end of our time together, Natalie and Kat were the leaders of their respective research group, and all three girls were much more active participants in group discussions.

Iris provided some explanation of my contribution as the adult ally to this process when she said:

Well it's like in regular classes you just sit there and like, if the teacher asks you something you answer, otherwise they hardly pay attention to you. But in this class it's like you actually want to know what we think.

I watched in July as the student co-researchers directed their comments directly at me, making eye contact with me but not with any other student co-researchers. Although by the end of our time together they worked actively in groups and began speaking to each other more directly in group discussions, I do think that my genuine interest in their opinions and thoughts, as well as the trust we created together, had a positive effect on the degree to which they were willing to share their voices. Even at the start of the research process when I conducted interviews with student co-researchers, they were surprised that I was so interested in what I thought. They were fascinated by my transcription process and delighted in seeing their spoken words on paper. As I drafted

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the proposal of this dissertation, they kept asking how many pages it was and how many of those pages had things they said on them. In group discussions, as well, I made a concerted effort to allow their voices to dominate discussions and lessen my "teacher talk." I genuinely did want to know what they thought, which made the theory of critical literacy and methodology of YPAR both much easier to practice. It was unlike past teaching experiences, where I have feigned in the expressed opinions of students but I was really just waiting for one of them to provide the answer I was looking for. They seemed to discern that difference.

The YPAR projects facilitated a sharing of their voices because they became the experts on the topics they studied. The benefit of having two separate research groups was that they were responsible for teaching each other what they knew. Oral literacy, an important component of literacy development, was practiced by the student co-researchers as they discussed their research methods and findings, as well as their proposals for action. In their presentations for the adult audience at LMU, they likewise had to practice oral literacy and share their experiences with an audience of strangers. I was worried about the student co-researchers feeling threatened by some of the methodology questions the audience asked them, and ended up amazed at the ease they displayed in answering the questions with poise and confidence.

When developing a presentation for the 2009 American Educational Research Association, the student co-researchers brainstormed about their experiences in class and how to express this to an academic audience. Two words came up frequently on their brainstorm list: "liberty" and "opportunity." Jacqui, Natalie, and Paulina decided to

create one word to express both concepts, and included a list of phrases about their transformations titled "Libertunity of Voice." Besides the distinctive voice and power that this word implies, their creation of a new word exhibits authentic grasp of language and grammar, as well as a playful freedom to create their own vocabulary. They described "libertunity" as a combination of liberty and opportunity, and included examples such as:

- We were motivated to come because there wasn't a teacher to bring us down (make us feel dumb). We actually were able to participate freely.

- It wasn't just about our projects, we opened our minds to the world around us.

- We talked about critical consciousness and about our lives and what we've been through and what we've done and our opinions.

It intrigued me that they placed these concepts under the concept of voice, and was encouraged by the power and "libertunity" they felt the group offered them. When creating the presentation, they suggested that other students should have the same opportunity to express their individual voices in a trusting environment.

Transitionary models. Shor (1987) discusses transitionary models required to help students and teachers transition more smoothly to student empowerment in any critical literacy model. He contends that students are unfamiliar with the power of their voices and accustomed to a teacher/student divide that places the teacher the authority role. There were issues of attrition with the first incarnation of the group, and Eva was one student co-researcher who experienced no evidence of transformation from her experience with the group. Yet in general, YPAR Critical Literacy Group exhibited very

few issues with being given authority and the opportunity to voice their opinions and dissentions. Shor suggests a gradual shift of power and Freire in his discussion with Horton (Horton & Freire, 1990) asserts that an educator of children must maintain authority that is still humanizing to the learner. Yet for the first time in my teaching career, I did not feel that I needed to release power slowly or maintain authority. The student co-researchers definitely appreciated my guidance and came to me with research issues and group conflicts they wanted help sorting out, but I never felt I needed to "manage" the group or that there was much in the way of growing pains for these student co-researchers to lead themselves.

I have several hypotheses on why this was true, and why the transitionary models would be crucial in other types of YPAR groups. First was the size of the group. If I had tried to conduct this research with a typical high school class of 25 to 30 students, I believe the transition period and transitionary model would have been much more crucial. In a group of 12, students experience a more intimate environment. It was much more obvious when someone as not interested in a discussion, and they would keep each other engaged or change the direction of our topic. There is also not as much opportunity for the group to become chaotic in a small group. When two groups of six, or four groups of three, engage in discussion, the noise level is still conducive to learning. Also, the group consisted of two pairs of sisters and six students who were acquainted with each other before we started. They already had harmonious relationships, so the core of the class knew how to work together without much guidance.

Another reason for the easy transition to a student-run group might have been the amount of natural leaders at the start of the group. Jacqui and Iris were in different research groups, and both had the ability to organize, delegate, and coach the other students. This meant that from the beginning, Jacqui and Iris took the role that I may have been tempted to fill had there not been natural student leaders. One thing I did try to help the student co-researchers implement was "step up, step back," where if one person was dominating discussion, they controlled themselves and encouraged or allowed others to participate. I used myself as an example of this. In addition to being in the authority role as teacher in most other types of classes I taught, I also share many personal characteristics with Jacqui and Iris—as a natural leader I can also be headstrong and opinionated, dominating conversations if I do not control myself. My sharing of these experiences, as well as my encouragement that everyone force themselves to say at least one thing per group meeting as a way to get into the habit of offering their voices to the discussion and becoming more comfortable sharing, seemed to help students like Jacqui and Iris open up the discussion floor for others. It also seemed to help those like Natalie and Karen volunteer to speak more often as the group proceeded.

Development of Critical Researchers

The young people involved in this project developed from hesitant students in July to critical researchers in October. They began to explore their own critical consciousnesses; both through the lenses that the foundational critical literacy texts and published YPAR studies offered them, as well as through the research they subsequently conducted. Their approaches to environmental justice and dropout/pushout issues, as

viewed through a lens of critical literacy and YPAR, used problem-posing and dialogue to dig deeper into causality and social injustices that lead to an unequal distribution of wealth, quality educations, and clean environments. The research methods imbedded in YPAR required reflection, engagement with community issues, and defining actions that they felt empowered to take to change their social realities. They began to understand oppression and hegemony as concepts, and took preliminary steps towards verbalizing their understanding of their place in the social structures of the school and their communities.

Freire's concept of critical consciousness, or *conscientização*, is not a precipice of enlightenment meant to be reached and then put aside. Rather, critical consciousness is a fluid and variable relationship with an individual's social reality that can be changed through individual and group action. As such, I see the student co-researchers as having started up the mountain with greater tools for empowerment and change. While the scope of their projects was limited, they developed research questions and went about answering them through critical YPAR methodology. Our lack of fulfilled action as a group means that they are all at different levels of trusting their own empowerment. For example, Kat instigated a food drive on her own, Iris is part of the Peer Tutoring group, and Natalie says she wants to study Sociology or History in college. All three girls say it was their experience in this class that encouraged them to do these things. I believe that some of the other student co-researchers, however, will need more learning and encouragement to take the step towards action on their own.

Although I presented the student co-researchers with a variety of examples of YPAR research during our first few weeks together in the group, including popular culture and media analysis, they chose to focus on social issues that they identified in their daily lives and in their communities. This may have been influenced by the fact that we read and analyzed many of our examples of YPAR projects from the CUNY Graduate Center PAR Collective website (Institute for Participatory Action Research and Design, 2008), and did not focus as much on the teaching and analyzing of popular culture (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2005). Creating YPAR projects around issues of youth popular culture may have been a productive avenue for our YPAR Critical Literacy Group to take, but the student co-researchers did not choose it. One of my recommendations for further research centers on critical media studies as a possible future YPAR project. As described by Duncan-Andrade and Morrell (2005), educators and administrators are currently overlooking "a critical literacy resource in their midst—urban youth engagement and familiarity with popular culture" (p. 285).

Regardless of what topics the YPAR Critical Literacy Group focused on, the student co-researchers certainly could not be expected to become fully aware of the social and political contradictions in their societies (Freire, 2000) after four months spent together. However, they were able to create and implement projects as critical researchers in their own right, creating for themselves a far empowered positionality than that of "remedial" literacy students. I do believe that the important steps they took indicate that with more time, this type of project could help students develop a more critical reading of their worlds and develop further actions to take against oppression.

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Beginning Stages of Transformation

The time we had together as a group was limited, as was our ability to complete the student co-researchers' suggested actions; these restrictions kept the student co-researchers from experiencing substantial transformation of their literacy experiences within the context of the rest of school and the larger community. We were simply not together for a long enough period of time to allow for it. I do see evidence that the beginning stages of transformation were experienced by student co-researchers within the context of our small group environment and the brief sojourns we took outside of the school walls. Student co-researchers told of their positive experiences in the group, describing the ways in which the structure and student-initiated content of the group and curriculum helped them share their opinions more and experience an educational environment where their ideas were valued.

The student co-researchers began to gain a critical understanding of their place in society. This was evident both in the forms their research took and in the ways they continued to ask "but why?" about injustices they experienced daily. Whereas at the start of the group, students were referring to students who left school as "lazy," by the final weeks of the group, students were engaging in complex dialogues about the hegemony of "excellence" and the ways in which society's impressions of Latino/a students can lead them to actualize these low expectations. Iris said, "It's like you know they think less of you and you don't want to disappoint yourself either, so it's like why try." Some of the student co-researchers also began to comprehend how the type of resistance epitomized by YPAR served as a threat to the dominant culture. Kat's asserted that "…teachers are

scared of what the kids are capable of….because they're capable of a lot. A lot a lot."
This reflects understanding of the idea that resistance to oppression and counter-hegemonic actions that YPAR projects could create would cause oppressors to fear a shift in the status quo. In other words, the status quo relies on kids themselves not knowing "what the kids are capable of." The student co-researchers began to interpret and view critically their place in society, and experienced very preliminary stages of what it would be like to resist it.

One of the other markers of beginning transformation that I witnessed in the group was their growing interest in post-secondary goals. Once they experienced college-level texts and became more comfortable with group discussions, more students talked about attending college. Two students, Paulina and Iris, signed up for classes at the local community college. Just one trip to LMU convinced many of the students to apply there and got them thinking about college majors and the possibility of a four-year college when they had not before. Exposure to some of the basic principles of critical literacy helped the student co-researchers hold even their own previous opinions and experiences up to a more critical light. They know now that every class does not need to be run by a teacher; that problem-posing dialogue constitutes real learning; that every student who drops out of school is not lazy; that there are interesting and difficult texts that they can understand on their own; and that there are social realities that they have the power to help change.

Transformation is non-linear. There are contradictions inherent in doing critical literacy and YPAR work in a credit-based linear school environment. Four months was

all I could wrangle from students and teachers; the institutions of secondary schools have distinct benchmarks and timeframes. Especially in an independent study environment with the goal of credit recovery, ample time and space for critical reflection and action research are not available. Myles Horton felt that popular education must take place outside of the institutions of schools (Horton & Freire, 1990), and it is certainly true that within the constraints of school systems, roadblocks exist for discovering true transformation and *conscientização*. Yet that does not mean we should stop planting seeds of transformation as educators and students. Even in the environment of No Child Left Behind (a policy that is perhaps the apex of anti-popular education), these student co-researchers began their transformations because together we were able to create a project that both provided space for transformation and met the literacy and credit recovery needs of students.

Critical transformation is not linear, but instead a process that begins the moment a person becomes critically conscious and starts to read the world. I did not give the co-researcher that; they had begun the process long before they met me, picked up new information and experiences in the YPAR project, and will continue on the long roads of their separate lives. They will no doubt take this and other experiences of critical literacy and critical consciousness and incorporate them into their values and choices. Certainly, they have not reached any sort of pinnacle of transformation. This does not mean that the project was any less valid. In fact, I believe that it means that the project was true critical literacy: the creation of a space to begin reading injustices and systemic oppression.

Complete transformation is not a realistic or even desirable goal; transformation is a messy and complicated process.

I know that it would be a travesty to stop now. The student co-researchers are at fragile junctures on their roads. We could stop now and this project would just be an anomaly in their experiences of learning and mine of teaching. There is too much history of distrust, boredom, monotony, and even trauma in their school experiences for one 4-month group to truly change the way they perceive themselves and readers, students, researchers, and potential activists. Both the students and I must continue to move outside of our comfort zones by putting their ideas into action and "paying it forward" by offering this type of learning experience for other students at FCHCHS.

Analysis of Methodological Implications

YPAR Revisited

This youth participatory action research (YPAR) project relied on the foundational elements of participatory action research (PAR), but with an educative and youth-centered focus to all of our work (Cammarotta & Fine, 2008). Having immersed ourselves in the history of action research and participatory action research at the start of the project, our work was based on the cyclical structure of action research, which includes recursive steps defined in a variety of ways, such as "plan, act, observe, reflect, replan…" (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005, p. 563), "investigation, examination, criticism, and reinvestigation" (Freire, 1982, p. 30) or "diagnose, act, measure, reflect…" (James et al, 2008, p. 15). This process of action and reflection helped the students identify social

issues they experienced or observed in their communities. We were then able to follow

the methodological process to pose research questions, investigate the issues, reflect, and

begin to take action. Simultaneously, the students and I were creating a space in the

classroom where some of the methodologies of YPAR were examined for their impact on

students' literacy skills. These methodologies included but were not limited to text-based

focus groups, interviews based on students' questions, analyses of media texts, sharing of

personal experiences followed by critical analysis, conducting and transcribing

interviews.

Praxis

YPAR offered our group a methodological bridge between theory and practice, as

well as between traditional and critical literacy. As Freire (2000) describes praxis:

> When a word is deprived of its dimensions of action, reflection automatically
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> suffers as well; and the word is changed into idle chatter, into *verbalism*, into an
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> alienated and alienating "blah." It becomes an empty word, one which cannot
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> denounce the world, for denunciation is impossible without a commitment to
>
> transform, and there is no transformation without action (p. 87).

Revisiting this description of praxis after experiencing the project with my students, I am

struck by how close their descriptions of experiences in English classes with reading and

writing are to Freire's characterization of "an alienated and alienating 'blah'" (Freire,

2000, p. 87). Karen, the student in the group who struggled most with her reading, said

she had never found a book she liked. She said she just did what she "was supposed to"

do in school. Iris described her frustrations in a former class in this way: "she would

make us read a lot. Like every week was a different story and an essay but we did everything on line...but she wouldn't really help us. And that's why I'm here." Not only were the materials and concepts removed from the worlds of students, but the curriculum and methods for discovering literacy seemed alienating to the students.

The lack of interest that the student co-researchers expressed for reading and writing changed drastically with the additional opportunities for action and transformation. Once the young people found that they could "do something" with the questions they asked and research they collected, they were extremely engaged and curious, evidenced by their attendance and involvement in their smaller research groups. The methodology of YPAR provided this bridge between theory and practice. The methodology itself was the "critical literacy instruction"; it became what we did and how we learned. Transformative in the student-led nature of the process and necessarily focused on both reflection and action, YPAR was essentially our form of praxis. As Myles Horton (1990) said long before youth participatory action research had its name, "participatory research and education are the same thing." (Horton & Freire, 1990, p. 120).

YPAR and Development of Critical Researchers

At the same time that YPAR offered the student co-researchers and I a method for "doing" critical literacy through action research, Freire's incitement to "read the world" (Freire & Macedo, 1997) and develop critical consciousness happened naturally for the young people when they began analyzing social issues through the YPAR lens and developing into critical researchers in their own rights. According to Cammarota and

Fine (2008) "[In YPAR] education is something students do—instead of something being done to them—to address the injustices that limit possibilities for them, their families, and communities" (p. 10). From our early analyses of data on reading achievement, scripted curriculum, and the causes of school leaving, to the student co-researchers lists of social issues and their smaller research group choices of environmental justice and dropout/pushout issues, reading their worlds stayed at the center of focus throughout the four month project.

The YPAR methodology also offered the young people access to a new identity: that of critical researchers. Instead of simply becoming students of critical literacy and learning about critical consciousness, they had the chance to become actors in their own lives: struggling for answers to research questions, learning from family members and peers they interviewed, and developing action plans to change the injustices they viewed in their worlds. The methodological implications for the student co-researchers were certainly educative: they grew their literacy skills, learned research methodology, and experienced ownership of a project with goals they set themselves. In addition, however, critical literacy, and beginning stages of critical consciousness and transformation were reached because the students became critical researchers in their own right. This positionality offered them voice and power, as well as a more authentic purpose for the work they did in school.

YPAR, Traditional Literacy, and Critical Literacy

Reading the world and reading the word (Freire & Macedo, 1997) were necessarily entwined throughout the YPAR project. This was due to the texts that we

used to learn about the foundations of critical pedagogy (Horton & Freire, 1990; Freire, 2000; Shor & Pari, 1999a; Institute for Participatory Action Research and Design, 2008) and because by the third week of the group, students were selecting their own texts to begin answering their research questions. These texts consisted of academic research and journalistic articles far above their "independent reading level" (measured by the EdPerformance test), as well as recorded interviews that student co-researchers were transcribing fluently by October. The methodological implications of YPAR were opportunities for the development of traditional literacy, including speaking and listening in text-based discussions, focus groups, and interviews; reading and writing in talk to the text activities and written reflections. The methodology of YPAR also created crucial opportunities critical literacy practices, including beginning with the learners' interests in mind, student co-researchers determining the content of "instruction," focus on meaning, not mechanics, themes drawn from learners' social reality, and student co-researchers involved in evaluation (Shor & Pari, 1999).

The methodology of YPAR addressed a variety of student needs, everything from student co-researchers' growth in comprehension and oral reading fluency to their ability to ask themselves and each other "but why?" about a variety of social issues that they identified and arrive at sophisticated analyses about hegemony and resistance. It required complex thinking and critical analyses of the world. In addition, the methodology motivated student co-researchers who formerly had little ownership over the processes of their reading and writing processes to seek difficult written texts and transcribe the words of other to begin answering questions that they themselves posed. In this way, the

methodology of YPAR had very important implications for the ability of the student co-researchers to read and write their worlds.

YPAR and Distinctiveness of Voice

Another emancipatory benefit of the methodology we used in the project was the transformative effect it had on the student co-researchers' self-perceptions and their ability to trust that their voices have the potential to create change in their school and communities. While student co-researchers developed their voices through the process of the project, they came in with distinct and developed voices in July. More accurately, the process of YPAR helped them develop a critical vocabulary and critical consciousness, then provided them an audience and process for expressing their unique voices.

Youth, and especially youth from low-income communities, are seldom engaged as potential knowledge producers. YPAR is an approach to research for action and change that conceptualizes youth as legitimate and essential collaborators….if we are to understand how to eradicate the social conditions that contribute to [social] issues, then we must listen to the young people who are most affected by them (Morrell, 2008, p. 158)

I would take Morrell's characterization of YPAR one step further: it is not just for "us" to "eradicate social conditions." Youth themselves have power to incite change at the school and community level, to "pay it forward" as Kat suggested by involving other young people in their action research and activism. Particularly older teenagers like the student co-researchers in this project could defy Horton's claim that "Adults run society. Students don't run society. They have very little say within the schools let alone…the

larger society." (Horton & Freire, 1990, p. 183). In truth young people have the ability to communicate with and organize other young people. Moreover, youth become adults, and the power of voice that they discover as youth co-researchers in a YPAR project such as this one could have long-term and far-reaching effects on them and the people and situations they encounter for the rest of their lives.

Limitations

Many of the challenges we faced as a YPAR group had to do with time constraints imposed by the nature of FHCHS and credit recovery. While we were able to move together through the steps of PAR cycle that include "plan, act and observe, reflect, revised plan, act and observe" (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005) for my research questions about the transformative effects of critical literacy and YPAR, the students co-researchers' own action research projects stalled in October when the credit portion of the group ended. They created research questions, collected and analyzed data, and presented their findings for an adult audience, but the recommendations they had for taking actions in the areas of environmentalism and dropout/pushout issues have not yet been realized.

The Environmentalism in Action group proposed the following actions:

- Attend city council meetings
- Start student council
- Put more trash bins and recycling bins
- Plant trees and not waste electricity
- Make workshops for students to inform them about the issue

We are only at the beginning stages of starting a student council, and my absence at the North Valley site due to my growing administrative responsibilities has contributed to the lack of an adult ally for the student co-researchers, helping to cement for me the need to engage multiple adult allies in the process of any YPAR project. Several of the student co-researchers participated in a tree planting community service activity. Student co-researchers found out information about recycling in the neighborhood of the school, but the budget does not allow for it at this time.

The Roots of the Problem group suggested the following:

- More activities would keep students in school

- Counseling for parents and students

- Tell teachers to minimize amount of work or give students enough time to finish it

- Teach students to deal with each other

- Have activities outside of school

- Have subjects students would be interested in as a career opportunity

- Teach them not to worry about money right now, but to focus on education

- Peer Tutoring

Of these suggestions, only peer tutoring is currently being implemented, and only one student co-researcher is involved in the group. In both groups, we discussed creating workshops to teach other students about the research conducted and to learn about critical literacy and YPAR methods. This has not yet happened.

I believe that one of the issues is that our group took place, for the most part, within the confines of the classroom. The students' teachers and the local administrator saw their presentation and were proud of their accomplishments, but were not involved in the group in any meaningful way. With all the other administrative and teaching duties these teachers have, they would normally not offer to work with the student co-researchers to spearhead these suggestions. The student co-researchers had a great deal of energy around their ideas, but as soon as the group stopped meeting, they went back to their normal appointment schedules and only four of them: sisters Karen and Genny and Samantha and Natalie, changed their appointment times so they could continue to come to school together. Eva, who was good friends with Natalie and Samantha over the course of the project (the girls' mother watched Eva's daughter while Eva was at school) says that they have grown apart since circumstances in Eva's life changed and she needed to find full-time employment in order to move from her parents' house.

Beyond the student co-researchers parting ways after the end of the project, my responsibilities at FHCHS take me out of the classroom more each month. As Literacy Coach, I first had my own groups of students, but now spend most of my time on program development and evaluation as well as observing teachers and planning and delivering professional development workshops. I also now supervise a G.E.D. program contracted by a non-profit organization aimed at helping young people trying to leave gang life. Without consistent presence at the North Valley FHCHS site, I find it harder to serve as the adult ally to the student co-researchers who could help bridge their action plans with the needs of the school administration.

This is a limitation that presents an ethical concern since the young people engaged in research aimed at helping me complete my doctoral dissertation. Had I simply absolved myself of responsibility for the student co-researchers due to the demands of my growing administrative role, I would have illustrated much of the critiques of adult-led YPAR (Brooker & MacDonald, 1999; Fielding, 2002; Giroux, 1988; Miron & Lauria, 1998), which say that student co-research done wrong co-opts student voices to carry out an adult agenda. In order to combat this, I began by bringing the student co-researchers to Loyola Marymount University (LMU) at the end of the project in October. Our aim was to share the research for a supportive adult audience before sharing it with the school administration. Alongside a faculty discussant and colleagues at LMU, I applied for the student co-researchers and me to present our research findings at the 2009 American Educational Research Association conference in San Diego, California. The students and I secured funding through FHCHS and will be taking a two-day trip to present at this professional conference. The Superintendent of the school agreed to fund the trip as long as we presented and completed a summary draft of some of our findings.

I see the conference session and subsequent presentation for school administrators as an opportunity for both the findings to have an affect on the larger school and educational community and for the student co-researchers to witness the impact of their own work. Additionally, our trip to Loyola Marymount University allowed students to both begin sharing their work in front of a supportive adult audience and to see other post-secondary options. Many of the student co-researchers have only been to one California State University and one Community College campus, both within a 10-mile

radius of the North Valley site. During and after the campus visit to LMU, all the student

co-researchers, who had previously told me their dream was to attend their local

California State University, said their goal was to attend LMU and to study sociology,

psychology or education. I am now working with the post-secondary specialist at the

North Valley Site to ensure that this group of student co-researchers, as well as other

interested students, receives consistent information on the requirements to join a cohort

of students in a teacher preparation program at the local community college that works

with students to transfer them to LMU. We have also discussed the admission

requirements should they want to apply directly to any four-year university.

The research method of youth participatory action research provided many

opportunities for empowerment and beginning transformation for both the student co-

researchers and for me. Future presentations to both the academic research community

and the administration at FHCHS have the potential to impact the way our school thinks

about instruction and student involvement in curriculum decisions. Already, a few

FHCHS sites that have heard about our work have started advisory boards that include

parents, students, and teachers, as well as implementing Peer Tutoring classes and

Student Achievement teams led by students who want to help their classmates succeed

academically and reach graduation. Another consequence of this research methodology is

the heightened sense of responsibility that I as the adult ally have for these student co-

researchers.   I learned this lesson too late: there should have been one or more other

adult ally involved in the project with us so that my absence would not stand in the way

of their continued action. In positioning myself as the only adult ally for the student co-

researchers, I gave myself too much power in the group. With multiple adult allies, the student co-researchers would have been able to proceed without me.

It would be much easier once this dissertation is completed and my degree granted to consider it a self-serving professional and personal development goal and never look back. Had I done a case study of these students, or used quantitative methods to find out their perceptions of the types of curriculum that would advance their literacy skills, I may not have felt the burden of responsibility for what I had asked them to do. I would never trade in my choice to do YPAR with these 12 student co-researchers; I learned a great more from them than they learned from me. Yet now I must return the favor to each of them. I have promised to help them on the road to college, and I will not hand off that responsibility to someone else. I asked them to develop ideas for actions to take in their local communities; as their sole adult ally, I will ensure that they continue to receive the tools necessary to realize these ideas. I asked them to share their personal experiences, challenge the limits imposed on them by an unjust education system, read their worlds, and create change. It is the least I can do to fulfill the promises I made to them when they agreed to join me on this journey.

<div align="center">Analysis of Findings</div>

Validity and Replicability of Findings

The aim of this project was not traditional validity or replicability to other settings. Catalytic validity, focused on a spiral of knowledge and action and the impact of the research methods on the researchers themselves (Anderson et al., 2007), was the

validity we sought. However, I believe that the work the students and I did together does offer one example of how critical literacy and youth participatory action research can be used as an effective (even, perhaps, superior) alternative to traditional literacy practices. There is no blueprint for this type of teaching and learning, as the goal is for students to develop and implement their own agendas for transformation. This is what creates its most daunting challenge and its greatest potential.

The 12 student co-researchers with whom I worked do not represent all students. They brought their own unique experiences and voices to the YPAR Critical Literacy Group. Yet the critical pedagogy and YPAR methodology of the group positively impacted their self-perceptions around their abilities to practice traditional and critical literacy, participate in action research, and create change for themselves, their school, and their communities. Their experiences suggest that the methodology of YPAR and critical pedagogy and critical literacy can serve as a strong foundation for curriculum and pedagogy in a high school setting.

Alternative Education

The student co-researchers reminded me of both the advantages and contradictions of "alternative" education. The flexible curriculum, schedule, and credit-awarding procedure of FHCHS provided a very conducive environment for this type of project, albeit limiting our timeframe. The students completed their other work independently and were awarded credit for participating in the project, a benefit that most likely would not have been as easily granted them at a "traditional" high school. In a district public school or traditional charter school environment, I would have had a much

harder time finding time, space, and financial support to conduct this research with students. The environment of an alternative program served as a great benefit to the student co-researchers and me as we planned and conducted our research.

The existence and connotations of "alternative education" require that we problematize several injustices that they expose. What it is about "traditional" schools that create a need for "alternative" programs? "Alternative programs" are defined as an alternative method of high school completion for students who are not successful in traditional high schools (Hill, 2007). Why, then, in a country that only graduates two-thirds of its high school students and merely 50% of its African American and Latino/a students (Orfield et al., 2004), and where 47% of African American and 46% of Latino/a 8th graders read below the basic level (Adolescent Literacy Research Network, 2007), would we not try integrate "alternative school" methods, such as small class and school size, curricular freedom, one-on-one student/teacher relationships, flexibility and responsiveness to change (Conley, 2002) into our "traditional," failing schools?

The connotation of the word "alternative" has come to mirror the term "special" in the student lexicon, morphing into a shameful insult when followed by the word "education." When Kat referred to FHCHS students as the "worst students who dropped out of high schools," it became clear to me that the benefits I relished in working in the alternative school environment could quickly turn negative in the students' perceptions of what brought them to the school. Although many of the student co-researchers in the group came directly from their traditional high schools or middle schools to FHCHS, everyone but Paulina and Natalie referred to themselves as "dropouts" when the group

first began meetings. The title of the school: Future Horizons Charter High School, does not reference the term "alternative," but many of the student co-researchers who had never before attended a charter school assumed that "charter school" and "alternative school" were synonymous. They also believed that independent study was unique to charter schools, and that all charter schools are independent study.

I believe that this research would have been much harder to embark on in another, more traditional, school setting. The rigid structures, confining scripted curricula, and constant focus on test scores at many conventional public high schools would have made this type of YPAR project more difficult. Yet I had no trouble proposing credits for the students based on the ways in which youth participatory action research and critical literacy address California State Standards for English Language Arts.

I do not believe that alternative curriculum and pedagogy are only possible outside traditional school environments; although Myles Horton would emphasize that true popular education can only take place outside of mainstream educational institutions (Horton & Freire, 1990). When young people create their own learning experiences, structure their own research, and carve out spaces of resistance in any type of school, it serves an alternative to the status quo. Certainly, we need more alternatives in all schools.

Independent Study

One aspect of this project filled an important need for the student co-researchers was the dialogical and collaborative aspect of our work together. Students in independent study programs are tasked with "recovering" lost credits quickly through learning high school subjects on their own, primarily through the use of a textbook and guiding

questions in a work packet. There are discussions between student and teacher to ensure comprehension, but there are limited opportunities for students to engage in discussions or debates with other students, or to create meaning as a collaborative social process (Vygotsky, 1978) or through dialogue (Freire & Macedo, 1997). Some critics of independent study would say that students are not really learning in this type of school environment, but rather memorizing facts and evidencing knowledge in a superficial way on standardized assessments. I would argue that the independent study program at FHCHS offers a unique alternative for students who would otherwise be at greater risk of leaving school before graduation, and the supplement of small group instruction at FHCHS offers many students the opportunity to supplement independent learning with meaning-making in a social context.

Yet it was apparent very early in the group that the student co-researchers were hungry for this type of dialogical environment. I was surprised by how quickly their ability to express themselves in a group and share their thoughts with others developed. Perhaps they were tapping into previous classroom experiences and responding to end of their previous social isolation. Also, the topics we discussed were far outside the realm of their typical curriculum, and relied on them sharing their experiences and analyzing the social contexts of their learning and place in society. They were very interested in the topics, and seemed eager to share and debate opinions. There is not much opportunity for this type of curriculum and pedagogy in traditional schools, but even less so in an independent study program, where the curriculum and assessment is very standardized and completed in isolation. Alternative methods of creating classes and awarding credits,

however, provide a unique, and possibly contradictory, opportunity for creating and organizing YPAR projects in this environment.

YPAR as a Pedagogical Approach

As a pedagogical approach, the adult ally plays an important role in the authenticity of the project. Curriculum guides, activity books, and lesson plans can be helpful in laying the foundations of research methodology and critical theory, but as part of the process of framing questions and conducting research, these "guides" would be anachronistic in most YPAR projects. For this project, it was key that I had studied many foundation critical pedagogy (Freire, 2000; Darder et al., 2009), critical literacy (Shor, 1987; Freire & Macedo, 1997; Shor, 1992; Macedo, 1994), and popular education texts (Horton & Freire 1990; Horton, 2003) and planned the beginning of the group so that I could help students lay a theoretical groundwork for the work they would be doing. This type of learning environment requires that the adult ally has true intentions of helping to create a student-run YPAR project. Although I sometimes found myself practicing old habits of trying to control the group process and talk at students (rather than with them) several times over the course of the project, I had the consciousness to know that I was doing it. In this way, I could admit my mistakes to the student co-researchers and we could move on from them.

As a pedagogical approach, both YPAR and critical literacy require that the adult ally has confronted his or her own privilege, whether the privilege of class, race, gender, or simply age. Says Freire (2000):

Certain members of the oppressor class join the oppressed in their struggle for

liberation, thus moving from one pole of the contradiction to the other…It

happens however, that as they cease to be exploiters or indifferent spectators or

simply the heirs of exploitation and move to the side of the exploited, they almost

always bring with them the marks of their origin: their prejudices and their

deformations, which include a lack of confidence in the people's ability to think,

to want, and to know. (p. 60)

These "marks of their origin" require that adult allies resist and unlearn much of their

corroboration in the status quo. During this project, I was better at some times than others

at moving away from the authority role as the students' teacher and becoming an adult

ally for a group of student co-researchers. This is a hard transition that requires a great

deal of trust in the process and in the young people themselves. Without making an

authentic effort towards true participation for the student co-researchers, however, I think

the beginnings of transformation that the students experienced may not have occurred.

Certainly, the literacy experiences of the student co-researchers were transformed

through participation in an action research project that they chose and designed. Through

forming research questions, leading text-based research and discussions, conducting and

transcribing interviews, and engaging in continuous dialogue about social injustices, their

causes, and actions to take against the injustices, the student co-researchers learned a new

way to think. They also learned that their words, both spoken and written, had the power

to "pay it forward." Their increased interest in the social justice topics they chose led to

reading and research that was different from what they had previously experienced. The

growing sophistication of their analysis, both when they asked "but why?" when reading the world and when they interviewed, transcribed, and read literature related to their research topics evidenced emergent transformation in the experiences of the student co-researchers.

<p style="text-align:center">Connectedness of Student Co-researchers to Teachers and School</p>

My third research question asked, "In what ways does this YPAR Critical Literacy Group project create opportunities for transformation for students, teachers, and the school?" In order to begin answering that question, I started with the student co-researchers and their own experiences with the project. Since in an administrative role I have less presence at the school site, the students themselves were left to create connectedness to the rest of the teachers and students. In my increased administrative role, I have more ability to bring the methodologies and findings of this research to the rest of the school sites.

Spreading the Word

The existence of our group and discussion of its positive results did have an impact on both the student co-researchers and the teachers at our school site. Teachers asked me how the attendance was so high in the group, and staff were impressed with the level of sophistication and knowledge that student co-researchers displayed in their final presentations. In addition, as people begin to learn that I will be taking nine of the student co-researchers to an education conference to present, they are more curious about our research findings and how the group was conducted.

The students themselves have also shown signs of the group's impact on their achievement. Genny, Eva, Hugo, Iris, Kat, Natalie, Karen, and Paulina all share the same teacher, and the teacher has recognized a shift in the students and their focus on school. They all turn in more work than before the group began meeting, and Paulina and Iris are more focused on graduating early. Ray still struggles in the program, but has been recruited into a dropout prevention program and has done enough work the past few months to continue moving towards graduation. Jacqui left the program due to the illness of a family member that she had to care for, but she has returned and is completing more work than before. She says she is motivated to stay on track so she can join us at the conference in San Diego.

These students serve as an example to the teachers and administrators of the positive effect that a YPAR Critical Literacy Group can have on the students involved. This reputation helps me to validate the inclusion of more student-led research projects and the integration of student-designed curriculum as I adopt more of an influential role on the administrative team.

Future Opportunities

Student co-researcher Kat's constant refrain that we needed to "pay it forward" with all we were learning together through our problem-posing dialogue, research on issues of importance for students, and findings from interviews and focus groups resulted in the idea of workshops for students and teachers. The student co-researchers need more adult involvement in order to actualize such workshops, but I am confident that they now have the facilitation and problem-posing skills to plan and run these workshops without

much supervision. In addition, many of their ideas for actions, such as student council, tree planting, counseling for students and families, more academic activities, and opportunities for socialization at the school are plans that can be implemented with more help and supervision from myself and other members of the staff.

A future opportunity also exists in the recruitment and training of other adult allies. I learned through this process that one person cannot and should not be the sole adult ally in a YPAR project. Such a setup runs the risk of creating a paternalistic environment wherein student co-researchers rely on one adult to serve as gatekeeper to the rest of the adults at the school and in the community. Students could begin to think that their actions will not be realized without the participation of that one adult, contradicting the goals of YPAR in the first place. In addition, the risk of an adult leaving a school site, as has partially happened with me in this case, could leave the students feeling abandoned and disempowered to continue. Had one or more adults worked with us on this project, the student co-researchers would have more people who could serve them in the advisor role, helping them to continue to carry out actions.

Recommendations for Practice: YPAR as Critical Literacy Practice

The most exciting part of this research has been experiencing the ways in which the research methodology of youth participatory action research, critical pedagogy, and critical literacy are so intimately related and mutually beneficial. YPAR is the research manifestation of praxis, problem-posing dialogue, collective action, and knowledge co-constructed by teacher-students and student-teachers. As an educative tool, the

possibilities for YPAR are endless. I can see the research method integrating into group research projects in every high school subject: from social science projects based on school and community issues, to math projects that integrate students' research interests into the acquisition of math knowledge, for example looking at population growth, school finance data, or student dropout/pushout statistics. In the English curriculum, I can envision new ways of analyzing both literature, journalistic, and informational texts to incorporate personal histories of students and their families as well as projects that look at textbooks and reading lists to ascertain whose stories are most privileged, as well as taking actions to change this curriculum. All of these possible YPAR projects are from my own imagination; I trust that students could do a better job than me of designing them. I also know from the work the student co-researchers and I did together that such projects have great potential to positively affect the students' reading abilities, critical literacy, and perceptions of themselves as both students and change agents.

There are certainly situations when this type of curriculum and pedagogy would not be effective, most notably if a teacher was not interested in allowing students the agency and voice necessary to undertake an authentic YPAR project. YPAR will never work as a policy, pre-packaged curriculum, or required teaching strategy, nor should it. By its very nature as a grassroots, student-centered approach to involving young people in curriculum planning, teaching, and research; there is nothing "scripted" about it. If administrators attempted to encourage YPAR in classrooms, professional development would have to focus more on the teachers relinquishing some of their learned behaviors as authoritarians and often oppressors of children and teenagers, and I believe we have a

long way to go before this would be a reality, even at alternative schools. What I offer in this section is what I see as the opportunities that YPAR as a practice of critical literacy offers to FHCHS and other schools, as well as the challenges that it presents.

Opportunities

   Problem-posing dialogue in the independent study context. Independent study typically relies on isolated learning and standardized assessment. That is a reality of schools who try to help students recover credits quickly and stay viable in the economic climate of public charter schools. Theorists such as Vygotsky offer arguments against the viability of this type of learning environment. If, as he posited, learning takes place in the "Zone of Proximal Development" that requires problem-solving with adults and peers (Vygotsky, 1978) and collaboration is required for learning to take place in his social development theory, how can students learn working in isolation? This notion conflicts with the entire model of independent study programs, and problematize their effectiveness. The small group instruction component that has been added to the instructional plan at FHCHS highlights the possibility of supplementing independent study with targeted group instruction based on student needs. Since the problem-posing approach and reliance on dialogue found in both YPAR projects and critical literacy approaches was effective with the group of 12 student co-researchers in this project, integration of both into the small group instruction department would benefit both students and teachers. Students crave more socialization and opportunities to discuss issues that matter to them and affect their social realities. YPAR offers one solution to the problem of isolation and powerlessness that can accompany independent study.

Co-created knowledge also serves as a positive influence on students' critical and higher-order thinking skills. Much of what we did in the YPAR Critical Literacy Group mirrored a college seminar. Even the far below basic readers in the group made meaning of college-level texts when it was approached in a problem-posing, dialogic environment. Although college is not the only way for students to create new social realities for themselves, it is certainly a benefit for low-income high school students with histories of school failure to experience success in a college-like environment. In addition, the ways in which YPAR forces student co-researchers to go outside the confines of the classroom to learn from and teach others extends learning outside the limited time students in independent study programs spend in school.

Youth-incited learning. In order to commit to authentic YPAR and critical literacy in schools, learning must be situated in students' lived experiences. Research topics should be entirely decided upon and explored by students, without adult biases and ideas influencing decision-making. Students should be made aware of the explicitly educative purpose of the YPAR project, but they should also read and see models of other YPAR projects to help them expand their notions of what is possible for youth to complete. In order for projects to provide enough time for action to proceed, students need to be given ample time to learn the foundations of critical pedagogy and critical literacy, as well as the research methodologies of YPAR.

Traditional and critical literacy. There is no reason that critical literacy and traditional literacy practices and skills need to be pitted in conflict with each other. The ultimate goal of reading and analyzing difficult texts requires all types of customized

methods for each learner. Particularly when students have encountered negative school experiences or life challenges that leave them reading far below grade level in high school, both traditionally reading instruction and critical literacy instruction can be used in tandem to best support learners. For instance, there were severe reading comprehension and writing challenges that many of the student co-researchers faced that made it extremely difficult for them to communicate effectively in reading and writing. Several of the students I had taught before in a basic reading class, others I would like to continue working with to teach active reading strategies.

A larger issue is the lack of reading and writing experiences that students find interesting and engaging. This is where YPAR and critical literacy offer a unique opportunity for allowing students to guide their own learning and choose their own texts. Effective comprehension and fluency activities would integrate very well into a curriculum where students choose generative themes and reading materials based on individual or group interest. Pre-packaged curriculum textbooks, and novel lists do not allow this type of freedom for the learner, but critical literacy and YPAR practices would. Transcription itself became a literacy activity in the YPAR Group, as did authentic reading and writing based on personal experiences and the topics of group research projects.

Challenges

Personal to political. One of the challenges of YPAR as an educative critical literacy practice was helping young people move from personal stories and confessional discussions to a more political "reading the world." Although the students in the group

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have experienced many adult situations, everything from motherhood to working to help support their families, they are still teenagers and often had a hard time seeing outside of their family and peer group. It could be hard in group discussions (particularly ones that they facilitate) for them to take a wider critical view of dominant discourses or unjust social structures. I do not think this is a reason not to engage students in YPAR, but rather a challenge to keep in mind as a practitioner. Ways to combat discussions that are consistently confessional in nature is to bring up the issue with students and to investigate their position in the wider community and society and what it is to truly "read the world." What's more, even if student co-researchers never get beyond their own experiences and those of the people they interview, they are still connecting to the literacy tools of problem-posing, inquiry, research, and taking action based on a problem.

Time constraints. Time constraints can limit student action potential within their research projects. Had the student co-researchers in the YPAR Critical Literacy Group moved through the entire action step, it might have contributed to further transformation for both the researchers and the larger school community. Time is always at a premium, both at traditional and alternative, public and charter schools. Some administrators and teachers of students who have "fallen behind" feel the pressure to cram as much curriculum into the heads of students so that they can receive credits or pass a standardized test. We must be cognizant of how and why we do this, as well as the negative effects this type of hyper-banking education has on young people. Iris described being treated as a glass of water filled to a certain point with knowledge each school year: "if you go to a new grade level they expect you to know everything up to a certain point

of what they taught you last year and that's it." With our constant rush to "make up" for what students are missing in their educations, we often get into a race that does not consider the students' needs.

In a school environment where an action, rather than a final test, was the result of a semester's or a year's worth of work, students would likely be must more invested in the result of their learning. For example, if we had the time to complete some of the students' action suggestions, such as workshops for other students on dropout/pushout issues and environmental justice, the students would have become even more expert in those topics. They also would have continued building literacy skills through their reading, research, and curriculum planning and possibly numeracy skills though looking at more advanced statistical research. Instead, we were pressured to complete the five credits faster so that students could move more quickly to recover credits. I also felt the pressure of my own academic and work requirements to meet deadlines. Thus the project has so far been left has finished. This challenge is one that I believe could be addressed through cross-curricular YPAR projects that award students credits in multiple subject areas. In addition, the entire school community including administrators that make curriculum decisions would need to subscribe to the benefits of this type of pedagogy in order for more time to be granted to different YPAR groups.

Broader Implications

We must stop discrediting alternative educational institutions, and bring some of the lessons from "alternative" education to all public schools. Unfortunately, instead of

creating safety nets to provide all our students excellent educations at various types of high schools, we have created a caste system where many students attend comprehensive high schools that serve as "dropout factories" where students are made to feel lucky for graduating and rarely encouraged to go to college. The fact that we isolate struggling students from traditional schools and place them together in often negatively-viewed alternative schools shifts the blame from failing schools that put our children at risk to "failing, at-risk" students. It is the young people who bare the brunt of these injustices: literacy injustices, school failure, dropout/pushout experiences, and disengagement with school. The school system itself should address these issues. Students who find that school does not work for them should not be required to find learning environments that do; schools should be changed, with the help of student researchers, to meet the needs of all students and provide them the types of learning environments where they learn to read, write, and speak at a level that will allow them access to college.

Particularly in the area of literacy development, definitions of what it means to be "literate" should continue to be expanded to include political consciousness and the ability to "read the world" (Freire & Macedo, 1997). The YPAR Critical Literacy Group evidenced what critical literacy theorists and practitioners have established that traditional literacy skills such as fluency, oral literacy, and comprehension are increased through a focus on texts and topics that have meaning in the social realities of students (Shor, 1992; Peterson, 2009). What's more, the continued segregation of skills so prevalent in scripted curriculum and boxed reading programs at the secondary level

serves to limit students' ability to participate in the totality of their learning, further

disengaging them from the learning process.

According to Shor (1992):

When educators offer problem-posing, democratic dialogue in the classroom, they

challenge socialization into myths, values, and relations of the dominant culture.

They also challenge the structure of authority in school and society, against

unilateral power and for shared responsibility (p. 117).

To extend this concept to students having control of their own research and

learning, YPAR allows young people themselves to challenge the hegemony of the status

quo, and to create new spaces for learning and empowerment. If young people defined for

themselves what it was to be literate, however, it would include the ability to read any

text they encountered, to never feel shut out by the skills they never had the opportunity

to learn. Both critical literacy and the ability to read any text at the same level as those

who make decisions and lead schools, communities, and nations are necessary for

students to truly empower themselves. Only then can students begin to read and change

the world and their place in it.

<div align="center">Recommendations for Future Research</div>

I believe this project preliminarily answered my questions about the impact of

critical literacy and YPAR on the literacy development of 12 high school students.

However time limitations and some of the lessons learned over the course this project

could inform future research. This project evidenced that partnership of YPAR as a

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research methodology and the theoretical framework of critical literacy provide

significant educative opportunities for students as co-researchers.   As a study of the

effect of critical literacy and YPAR on one group of 12 students, innumerable similar

YPAR studies could be undertaken and different findings experienced by the

participating student co-researchers and their adult allies. Future research examining

literacy development might examine some of the issues raised in our project:

- Student researchers alongside adult allies could create curriculum around critical

  media literacy, social activism, or educational justice issues and recruit other

  young people to participate.

- Year-long or multi-year YPAR Critical Literacy Groups could be created that

  offer students more time to research, create, and implement projects. Such groups

  should provide students in need of credit recovery multiple opportunities for

  credit, including the possibility of college credit.

- A YPAR project could focus on the explicit use of transcription as a method of

  literacy development, engaging the student co-researchers in more in-depth

  qualitative research methodology, including conversation analysis and discourse

  analysis.

- Adult allies could work alongside student co-researchers classified as English

  Language Learners (ELL) to discover the educative impact of critical literacy and

  YPAR methodology on students acquiring skills in English language and literacy,

  as well as to implement youth participatory action research projects at the school

and community based on the concerns and interests of a group of ELL-classified students.

- An alternative high school could be created that uses critical literacy as a theoretical lens and YPAR as a learning method across curricular areas.

Future research could also be undertaken in these divergent areas:

- The project could be replicated with a focus on numeracy, with a YPAR group and their adult ally investigating the effects of a project on the mathematical skills of a group of student co-researchers.

- A group of student co-researchers interested in literacy injustices could come together with more than one adult ally to research the causes and action-based solutions for literacy disparities based on race and class.

- A similar study could be conducted in a traditional public high school and challenge my assertion that the environment of an alternative school is more conducive to this type of study.

- A long-term YPAR project could be designed that followed a group of student co-researchers from 9th through 12th grade to measure the transformative effect of YPAR on students in terms of graduation and college-going.

- A YPAR project could be conducted outside of the traditional school milieu (at a non-profit or youth development organization) that brought together youth of different socioeconomic and race/culture groups to see the transformative effects of a more diverse student group working together to challenge and transform their communities.

My Transformation

> As [oppressors] cease to be exploiters or indifferent spectators or simply the heirs
> of exploitation and move to the side of the exploited, they almost always bring
> with them the marks of their origin: their prejudices and their deformations, which
> include a lack of confidence in the people's ability to think, to want, and to know.
> (Freire, 2000, p. 60)

Did I transform? Maybe if I begin with a confession, my recounting of a highly subjective experience will be more trustworthy. I tried to have the student co-researchers call what we did a "group" instead of a "class." I thought that by changing what we called ourselves, we would shift our perspectives. I tried enthusiastically for a week to call it a group, then for one week more, halfheartedly. The students always called it a class; they still call it a class: "Jesse, when are you teaching a class again? We miss our class!" And yes, they are still students to me. The language might have mattered if we had spent a year or their entire high school careers together. We were together four months. To them, it was a really cool class. To me, in all honesty, they are still students.

Yet another moment of truth: I honestly thought that *I* could create spaces of transformation for students. Deep down, I believed myself some unlikely hero in the story that would liberate "my" students through curriculum and pedagogy that put their words and experiences at the center, and that incited them to take actions against injustices and contradictions. I wanted to believe that was not the case; I reworded my research questions, read a little more Freire. I told myself I was more evolved than my embarrassing savior complex, that I would not allow "prejudices and deformations"

(Freire, 2000, p. 60) to interfere with entering into a true partnership with the student co-researchers. I had high hopes in my ability to reach critical consciousness through the sheer number of books I had read in preparation for this dissertation project. I did not really believe that I would need this experience like "my students" needed it, for I was already critically "aware."

Had I honestly placed myself in the category of "oppressor" as Freire would have, my discovery and transformation was utterly predictable. I needed the experience of this YPAR project as much as, if not more than, the student co-researchers in order to begin a process towards transformation. The critical literacy foundations and YPAR methodology of this project forced me for the first time to do as Freire (2000) suggested for the very first time and "think *with* the people" (p. 132). I have always considered myself a critical educator who genuinely respects students. This experience gave me a new lens for looking at the past eight years of my teaching, during which time I have adopted the role of a pseudo-critical educator, generally towing the party line. I followed rules, assigned students a reading level and group, did my best to prepare kids for standardized tests, asked for shared voices when it was convenient, and tried to maintain "control" of the classroom. I did my best with what I knew; now, thankfully, I know more.

I know more now because I have experienced another way. The student co-researchers did not trudge along like so many of my students have over the years, having bad days and good days, some of them developing skills, some of them letting the class roll of their backs because other things were on their minds or more important. All of the young people who worked alongside me on this project came to the classroom eager

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twice a week for four months. They spoke excitedly about their weekends and their

research, what they were learning about and how so much of it seemed to apply to so

many other things they were seeing out in the world each day. I watched them change

their own minds as they went from blaming "lazy" students to viewing social issues in

the contexts of various social and political injustices. I did not congratulate myself. For

the first time in my career as a teacher, I felt that these teenagers were truly teaching each

other and learning for themselves.

So how did I transform? I learned that once I experienced true critical pedagogy,

I could never go back. There is an odd permanence in the fluidity of transformation. It is

like seeing the Grand Canyon for the first time and realizing how small you are; even if

you try, you cannot possibly wake up the next day and once again believe you are the

center of the universe. It is impossible to erase experience; once gained, critical

consciousness is irreversible. I believe I was well-poised for change. I believed

philosophically in critical pedagogy theories I had studied up until this project, but it took

serving as an adult ally in a YPAR project to truly internalize the theory through my own

experience. It was this praxis that led to my pedagogical transformation.

I approach the classes I teach and teachers I coach with a newfound understanding

of authentic student voice and co-teaching. Much of what I was doing before was

banking education dressed up as critical pedagogy. I asked students to tell their stories,

but mostly to make it easier for them to swallow the pill of information or "skill-

building" I wanted to give them. I avoided conversations about race and class in coaching

sessions with teachers because I was worried about conflict and dissent. Since

experiencing students enthusiastically problematize the world and their place in it while developing their abilities as readers and writers, I now wonder why I would ever approach the teaching of an English class any other way.

In a recent Advanced Placement English class I wrote, I included units on "Writing the Self" and "Advocating for Others" as part of the composition curriculum. My coaching sessions with teachers since the summer have included the "but why?" activity the student co-researchers and I did together. As a group, we talked about the roots and social constructs that lead certain students to "give up" on assignments or "not try their best" according to the teachers. I no longer accept negative views of students and their families in professional development sessions I lead. Whereas before I sometimes overlooked these comments in what I saw as an attempt to get back to the topic at hand and stay supportive of instruction, I now consider it my job to hold adults accountable to their learned biases and sometimes demeaning attitudes towards the students we teach.

I transformed as a teacher and literacy coach because I personally experienced the power of critical literacy and YPAR in a group alongside student co-researchers. But really, I transformed because of Catelina, Genny, Eva, Samantha, Hugo, Iris, Kat, Natalie, Ray, Jacqui, Karen, and Paulina. This project was about them, and the power that they had to transform their own school experiences. I am lucky enough to have learned from them (and with them) how to be a better teacher and how to trust unconditionally their abilities "to think, to want, and to know" (Freire, 2000, p. 60).

The following poem is pieced together from the reflections and short poems I wrote during our time in the YPAR Critical Literacy Group, as well as some poetic quotes borrowed from the words of the student co-researchers.

Small Victories in Gray Areas

I already knew
you were capable of "a lot,
a lot a lot"
I knew how tired you were
of losing things, being pushed around,
told come back another day,
told come in today or else,
told do this thing or that thing,
(never told why)

or else there were consequences, all kinds.

Consequences:
underserved, mistreated, unemployed,
on assistance,
at the fry machine
they kept warning you about,
back when you were in school.
No piece of paper to prove yourself,
you thought it was a losing game anyway,
because they said
"only 50% of you will graduate,"
and you've never been
in the lucky half.

I know how the books they hand you
are crawling with words and pictures,
void of relevance, revelation, respect for nations,
full of invocations to gods of money
money you don't have,
never had,
never will have
if we go on like this.

I know because I followed the rules,
pushed you around,
told you to come back,
told you to come in or else,
there'd be consequences,
handed you the books,
(never saying why)
told you I was sorry,
"you know I wish there was another way"
but if we could just get past
these requirements,
you could fly,
we would fly.

You knew,
I didn't know it then,
but you knew.
It was all in you
bruised and battered,
folded on itself,
silenced,
wound up tight,
covered in a hard shell
of angry and disappointed

You knew
My students?
You were never mine.
You were yours,
voice intact,
ideas original,
thoughts profound,
ready to write,
(and read,
and talk,
and think)

because you were right,
you were always right:
"if you don't read,
it is like
if you don't exist."

You were yours,

and we were right,
it started to work.
We had our
small
victories
in gray areas.

But then
we followed the rules,
ended on time,
back to reality.
And I know
how tired you are,
of losing things.
I know,
because I'm tired too.

And yes,
they're "scared
of what we're
capable of,"
but we can't stop reading
(and writing
and speaking
and thinking,
and listening,)
just because we're tired.

In fact,
we must do it now.
We must act.
Because we are tired.
Before we forget.

APPENDIX A

PARENT/GUARDIAN CONSENT FORM

Date of Preparation: February 28, 2008

Loyola Marymount University

1) I hereby authorize Jesse Noonan, FHCHS teacher and Ed.D. candidate at Loyola Marymount University to include my child in the following research study at Future Horizons Charter High School titled: The Transformative Power of a YPAR Critical Literacy Group at an Alternative Charter High School

2) My child has been asked to participate on a research project which is designed to test the effectiveness of a YPAR Critical Literacy Group with high school students at FHCHS and which will last for approximately four months, **from July 1, 2008-October 23rd, 2008, Tuesdays and Thursdays from 1-3 p.m.**

3) It has been explained to me that the reason for my child's inclusion in this project is because he/she would benefit from extra reading and writing support in order to improve his/her literacy abilities. In addition, my child will learn research methods and reading and writing (literacy) strategies over the course of the class.

4) I understand that if my child is a participant for the length of the project and completes all assignments, he/she will be offered 5 elective credits towards graduation. Jesse Noonan will provide reading, writing, and other literacy supports for my child, as well as providing two additional hours of tutoring per week (Tuesdays and Thursdays, 3-4) to help my child with his/her other independent study assignments. These procedures have been explained to me by Jesse Noonan and/or my child's AR teacher .

5) I understand that my child will be videotaped, audiotaped and/or photographed in the process of these research procedures. It has been explained to me that these tapes will be used for teaching and/or research purposes only and that my child's identity will not be disclosed. I agree that the tapes shall be retained for research and/or teaching purposes for an indefinite time. I understand that my child and I have the right to review the tapes made as part of the study to determine whether they should be edited or erased in whole or in part.

6) I understand that the study described above will involve active participation in a participatory action project in which students will interact with each other and the school community as they learn from each other and make recommendations for further YPAR Critical Literacy Groups.

7) I also understand that the possible benefits of the study are 5 elective credits once the course is completed in August, as well as research and literacy skills gained over the course of the class.

8) I understand that Jesse Noonan, who can be reached at (818) XXX-XXXX will answer any questions I may have at any time concerning details of the procedures performed as part of this study.

9) If the study design or the use of the information is to be changed, I will be so informed and my consent reobtained.

10) I understand that my child and I have the right to refuse to participate in, or to withdraw from this research at any time without any repercussions at Future Horizons Charter High School or with my child's teacher.

11) I understand that circumstances may arise which might cause the investigator to terminate my child's participation before the completion of the study.

12) I understand that **no** information that identifies my child, including his/her real name, date of birth, or student ID# will be released without my separate consent except as specifically required by law.

13) I understand that my child has the right to refuse to answer any question that he/she may not wish to answer.

14) I understand that in the event of research related injury, compensation and medical treatment are not provided by Loyola Marymount University.

15) I understand that if I have any further questions, comments, or concerns about the study or the informed consent process, I may contact Birute Anne Vileisis, Ph.D., Chair, Institutional Review Board, 1 LMU Drive, Suite 3000, Loyola Marymount University, Los Angeles CA 90045-2659 (310) 338-4599, bvileisis@lmu.edu.

16a) In signing this consent form, I acknowledge receipt of a copy of the form, and a copy of the "Subject's Bill of Rights".

16b) In signing this consent form, I acknowledge receipt of a copy of this form.

17a) Subject is a minor (age_____),

_____   _____

Mother/Father/Guardian   Date

Witness_____ Date_____

or

17b) Student's Signature (if over 18) _____ Date _____

Witness_____ Date_____

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FORMA DE CONSENTIMIENTO

La fecha de la Preparación: Febrero 28, 2008

Loyola Marymount University

1) Yo por la presente autorizo Jesse Noonan, maestro de FHCHS y candidato Ed.D en la Loyola Marymount University a incluir a mi niño en el estudio siguiente de investigación en FHCHS titulado: El Poder de Transformative de una Clase Crítica de la capacidad de leer y escribir en un Instituto Alternativo del Fletamento

2) Mi niño ha sido pedido participar en un proyecto de investigación que es diseñado para probar la eficacia de una clase crítica de la capacidad de leer y escribir con estudiantes de instituto en FHCHS y que durará para aproximadamente cuatro meses, **del 1 de julio de 2008 el 23rd de octubre de 2008, los martes y los jueves de 1-3 de la tarde (20 de mayo 3-4 de la tarde).**

3) Ha sido explicado a mí que la razón para mi inclusión de niño en este proyecto es porque él/ella beneficiaría de la lectura del exceso y escribir apoyo para mejorar sus habilidades de la capacidad de leer y escribir. Además, mi niño aprenderá los métodos de investigación y leyendo y escribiendo (la capacidad de leer y escribir) las estrategias sobre el curso de la clase.

4) Entiendo que si mi niño es un participante para la longitud del proyecto, la él/ella recibirá optativa 5 créditos hacia la graduación. Jesse Noonan proporcionará leyendo, escribir, y otros apoyos de la capacidad de leer y escribir para mi niño, así como proporcionar dos horas adicionales de dar clases privadas a la semana (los martes y los jueves, 3-4) ayudar a mi niño con sus otras tareas independientes del estudio. Estos procedimientos han sido explicados a mí por Jesse Noonan y/o mi maestro de niño.

5) Entiendo que seré grabado en vídeo, audiotaped y/o fotografiado en el proceso de éstos investiga los procedimientos. Ha sido explicado a mí que estas cintas serán utilizadas para propósitos de enseñar y/o investigación sólo y que mi identidad no será revelada. Concuerdo que las cintas serán retenidas para la investigación y/o propósitos docentes para un tiempo indefinido. Entiendo que tengo el derecho de revisar las cintas hechas como parte del proyecto para determinar si ellos deben ser redactados o deben ser borrados en el total o en parte.

6) Entiendo que el proyecto descrito encima de implicará la participación activa en un proyecto participativo de la acción en los que estudiantes interactuarán uno con el otro y la comunidad de la escuela como ellos aprenden de uno al otro y de las recomendaciones de la marca para clases críticas adicionales de capacidad de leer y escribir

7) Entiendo también que los beneficios posibles del proyecto son 5 créditos optativos una vez el curso es completado en agosto, así como las habilidades de investigación y capacidad de leer y escribir ganadas sobre el curso de la clase.

8) Entiendo ese Jesse Noonan, que puede ser alcanzado en (818) XXX-XXXX contestarán cualquier pregunta que puedo tener en tiempo con respecto a detalles de los procedimientos realizados como parte de este proyecto.

9) Si el diseño del estudio o el uso de la información son de ser cambiados, yo tan seré informado y mi reobtained del consentimiento.

10) Entiendo que mi niño y yo tienen el derecho de negarse a tomar parte en, o para retirar de esta investigación en tiempo sin cualquier repercusión en FHCHS o con mi maestro de niño.

11) Entiendo que las circunstancias pueden surgir que quizás cause que el investigador termine mi participación antes de la terminación del estudio.

12) Entiendo que ninguna información que identifica a mi niño, inclusive su nombre verdadero, la fecha del nacimiento, ni del numero de identificación será liberado sin mi consentimiento separado sino como específicamente requerido por la ley.

13) Entiendo que tengo el derecho de negarse a contestar que ninguna pregunta que yo no puedo desear contestar.

14) Entiendo que en caso de investigación relacioné la herida, la compensación y el tratamiento médico no son proporcionados por la Universidad de Loyola Marymount.

15) Entiendo que si tengo más preguntas, los comentarios, o concierno acerca del estudio o el proceso informado del consentimiento, yo puedo contactar Birute Anne Vileisis, Ph.D., Chair, Institutional Review Board, 1 LMU Drive, Suite 3000, Loyola Marymount University, Los Angeles CA 90045-2659 (310) 338-4599, bvileisis@lmu.edu.

16a) A firmar esta forma del consentimiento, yo reconozco recibo de una copia de la forma, y de una copia de la Declaración de derechos del Sujeto.

16b) A firmar esta forma del consentimiento, yo reconozco recibo de una copia de esta forma.

17a)

Firma de estudiante _____ Fecha _____

Testigo _____ Fecha_____

and

17b)   El sujeto es un menor (la edad _____),

_____   _____
La madre/padre/guardian   Fecha

Student's Assent

Dear _____,

You are being asked to participate in a research study at your school, Future Horizons Charter High School, by teacher Jesse Noonan. Jesse is also in a program at Loyola Marymount University to receive her doctorate in Education. This research is the focus of her final project, called a *dissertation*.

- You are being asked to participate because your teacher recommended you for participation. Your EdPerformance scores and class placement show that gaining more literacy skills could help you on your independent work.

- The class will be held for approximately four months, **from July 1st 2008-October 23rd, 2008, Tuesdays and Thursdays from 1-3 p.m.** In July, you will help plan the class along with 11 other students and the teacher/researcher. Together, you will decide the topics, readings, films, websites, etc. that will be discussed in class, as well as mini-research projects you may want to conduct with the rest of the class. From June through August, we will work together on research and literacy projects, which will include both meetings at FHCHS and outside of the center.

- You have the right to refuse to participate in, or to withdraw from this research at any time without repercussions in school. However, if you withdraw before completion of the class, you may not receive the five credits.

- You may be videotaped, audiotaped and/or photographed in the process of these research procedures. These tapes will be used for teaching and/or research purposes only and your identity will not be disclosed. The tapes shall be retained for research and/or teaching purposes for an indefinite time. You have the right to review the tapes made as part of the study to determine whether they should be edited or erased in whole or in part.

- There will be no risk to you for participating in the project. Your name, birthdate, and, student ID# will **not** be used in the write-up of the project. We will work together to choose a fake name to use to identify you.

- You will gain experience in literacy strategies and research techniques along with the rest of the group over the course of the summer. You will learn what Participatory Action Research (PAR) is and participate in this PAR project. In the future, there may opportunities to travel to share this research at conferences or try to publish the work in educational journals.

- You can always contact Jesse Noonan at (818) XXX-XXXX with any further

questions. Please keep a copy of this form for your records

Student's Signature_____ Date _____

Researcher's Signature_____ Date_____

asentimiento de estudiante

Estimado _____,

que Usted es pedido tomar parte en un estudio de investigación en su escuela, FHCHS, por maestra Jesse Noonan. Jesse es también en un programa en la Universidad de Loyola Marymount de recibir su doctorado en la Educación. Esta investigación es el foco de su proyecto final, llamó una disertación. You are being asked to participate because your teacher recommended you for participation. Your EdPerformance scores and class placement show that gaining more literacy skills could help you on your independent work.

- La clase será tenida por aproximadamente cuatro meses, **del 1 de julio de 2008 el 23 de octobre de 2008, los martes y los jueves de 1-3 de la tarde**. En mayo, usted ayudará el plan la clase junto con 11 otros estudiantes y el maestro/investigador. Junto, usted decidirá los temas, las lecturas, las películas, los sitios web, etc. que será discutido en la clase, así como mini-investigación proyecta usted puede querer realizar con el resto de la clase. De junio por agosto, nosotros trabajaremos juntos en proyectos de investigación y capacidad de leer y escribir, que incluirá ambas reuniones en FHCHS y fuera del centro.

- Usted puede ser grabado en vídeo, audiotaped y/o fotografiado en el proceso de éstos investiga los procedimientos. Estas cintas serán utilizadas para propósitos de enseñar y/o investigación sólo y su identidad no será revelada. Las cintas serán retenidas para la investigación y/o propósitos docentes para un tiempo indefinido. Usted tiene el derecho de revisar las cintas hechas como parte del estudio para determinar si ellos deben ser redactados o deben ser borrados en el total o en parte.

- Usted ganará la experiencia en estrategias de capacidad de leer y escribir y técnicas de investigación junto con el resto del grupo sobre el curso del verano. Usted aprenderá qué Investigación Participativa de la Acción (la IGUALDAD) es y toma parte en este proyecto de la IGUALDAD. En el futuro, allí puede las oportunidades de viajar para compartir esta investigación en conferencias o prueba para publicar el trabajo en diarios educativos.

- Usted siempre puede contactar Jesse Noonan en (818) XXX-XXXX con más preguntas. Mantenga por favor una copia de esta forma para sus registros

Firma de estudiante_____ Fecha _____

Firma de investigadora_____ Fecha_____

Student Flyer

Action Research

- -Be your own Teacher
- -Research what you want to Research
- -Snacks   -Meet people
- -Earn 5 credits   -Fun Activities
- -Learn New Things!   -Go places

SUMMER SESSION 2008

Dates: July 3,-

Sept. 29th, 2008

Time: Tuesdays and Thursdays

1:00-3:00pm

APPENDIX D

Banking Education & Talk to the Text Activity

Freire's concept of "Banking Education"
The following statements come from Chapter Two of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, written
by Paulo Freire (2000)
*Please check whether you agree or disagree with each of the statements below as it applies to your
overall experiences in school. Then put some thoughts or questions in the third column. Thank you!*

Statement	True for Your Overall Experiences Agree or Disagree	Thoughts/Questions
the teacher teaches and the students are taught	Agree_____ Disagree_____	
the teacher thinks and the students are thought about;	Agree_____ Disagree_____	
the teacher knows everything and the students know nothing;	Agree_____ Disagree_____	
the teacher talks and the students listen—meekly (passively, obediently)	Agree_____ Disagree_____	
the teacher disciplines and the students are disciplined	Agree_____ Disagree_____	
the teacher chooses and enforces his choice, and the students comply (follow)	Agree_____ Disagree_____	
the teacher acts and the students have the illusion of acting through the action of the teacher	Agree_____ Disagree_____	
the teacher chooses the program content (what is done in class, and the students (who were not consulted) adapt to it	Agree_____ Disagree_____	
The teacher confuses the authority of knowledge with his own professional authority, which he sets in opposition to the freedom	Agree_____ Disagree_____	

of the students		
The teacher is the Subject of the learning process, while the pupils are mere objects	Agree_____ Disagree_____	

Please Talk to the Text on the Following Quotes!

On Power

> "Washing one's hands of the conflict between the powerful and the powerless means to side with the powerful, not to be neutral."

--Paulo Freire, Brazilian educator and educational theorist (*The Politics of Education*, 1985, p. 122)

On Students

> "They call themselves ignorant and say the 'professor' is the one who has knowledge and to whom they should listen. Almost never do they realize that they, too, 'know things' they have learned in their relations with the world." (Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 2000, p. 63)

On Education

> "Education as the practice of freedom--as opposed to education as the practice of domination--denies that man is abstract, isolated, independent and unattached to the world; it also denies that the world exists as reality apart from people. Authentic reflection considers neither abstract man nor the world without people, but people in their relations with the world. In these relations consciousness and world are simultaneous: consciousness neither precedes the world nor follows it." (Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, p. 81)

> " ..In school, students soon discover that in order to achieve some satisfaction they must adapt to the precepts which have been set from above. One of these precepts is not to think." (Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, p. 155)

APPENDIX E

Personal Reading Survey

Name:_____

Teacher:_____

Age: _____Grade: _____

Personal Reading Survey
Please read and answer each question to help me with my project and our work together
this Summer. If you do not understand a question, please ask me!   Thank you!

1. What do you usually do when you read (check ALL the ones that describe what you
    do)

    ○ I read silently
    ○ I read aloud to myself in a quiet voice
    ○ I Try to pronounce all the words correctly
    ○ I try to read with expression
    ○ I try to get the reading over with as fast as I can
    ○ I try to figure out the meaning of the words I don't know
    ○ I look up the words I don't know in a dictionary
    ○ I get distracted a lot while I'm reading
    ○ I have trouble remembering what I read
    ○ I try to understand what I read
    ○ I look over what I'm going to read first to get an idea of what it is about
    ○ I picture what is happening in the reading
    ○ I ask myself questions about what I am reading
    ○ I put what I'm reading into my own words
    ○ I read a section again if I don't understand it at first
    ○ I try to read smoothly
    ○ I try to concentrate on the reading
    ○ I think about things I know that connect to the reading
    ○ I do different things. It depends on what I'm reading.

    2. In your opinion, why do people read?
        _____
        _____
        _____

3. Do you think you are a good reader?   Please explain

_____
_____
_____
_____

3. What do you think someone has to do to be a good reader (check ONLY the three most important ones)

read aloud well

read with expression

pronounce all the words correctly

know the meaning of most of the words

read fast

enjoy reading

read a lot

read different kinds of books

understand what they read

be able to talk about what they read with others

concentrate on the reading

know when they are having trouble understanding

use strategies to improve their understanding

4. Do you read in a language other than English (if no, go on to question 5)?
   If yes, which language(s)?_____
   In which language do you read best?_____

5. What kinds of things do you read OUTSIDE of school (Check ALL the things you read)

newspapers

short stories

novels

video game magazines

letters or email

magazines

comic books

song lyrics

religious books

web pages

how-to books

other (explain)

_____

6. What kinds of books do you like to read?

_____

_____

7. Do you ever talk with a friend about something you have read?

Frequently

Sometimes

Never

8. Do you ever talk with a family member about something you have read?

Frequently

Sometimes

Never

9. In general, how do you feel about reading?

_____

_____

Reading Focus Group Questions

1. How did you learn to read?

2. Do you think all schools are equally good at teaching students to read at the high school level?

3. Did your schools do a good job of preparing you for high school?

4. (Using Kids Data Literacy Handout) What do these numbers tell us?

5. Who or what is responsible for these numbers?

6. What kind of reading class would help you to have a better experience with reading in school?

Data

(from kidsdata.org)

Reading Proficiency

Third Grade Students Reading At or Above the 50th Percentile on the CAT/6, by Race/Ethnicity: 2007

California	Percent
African American/Black	27%
Asian	55%

Caucasian/White	59%
Filipino	45%
Hispanic/Latino	24%
Native American/Alaska Native	36%
Pacific Islander	36%

Reading Proficiency

Third Grade Students Reading At or Above the 50th Percentile on the CAT/6, by Socioeconomic Status: 2007

California	Percent
Economically Disadvantaged	24%
Non-Economically Disadvantaged	57%

From Jesse's Research

We said, what we know, the solutions we have, are for the problems that people don't have.
And we're trying to solve their problems by saying they have the problems that we have the solutions for.
That's academia, so it won't work.
So what we've got to do is to unlearn much of what we've learned, and then try to learn how to learn from the people."
--Myles Horton, founder of the Highlander Center

"[In YPAR] Education is something students do—instead of something being done to them—to address the injustices that limit possibilities for them, their families, and communities" --Michelle Fine, *Revolutionizing Education*

- According to a U.S. Department of Education study, "47% of Black and 46% of Hispanic 8th graders read below the basic level" (Adolescent Literacy Research Network, 2007)
- While 43% of white students in 2005 read at or above the 'proficient' level, only 20% of "Hispanic" and 16% of "Black" students scored at the same level.
- On average, only about 50% of African American and Latino/a students graduate, and African American boys, the most vulnerable for school failure, have a graduation rate hovering around 43% (Orfield et al., 2004).
- **high school dropouts constitute 82% of the adult prison population**
- While 68.9% of all California high school students receive a diploma, only 57% of Latino/a students graduate
- A recent report from the Pew Hispanic Center (Fry, 2002) found that while many 18-24-year-old Latino/as who graduate high school choose post-secondary education (35 percent, compared to 46 percent of whites), Latino/as are over-represented in two-year community colleges and over half of these students never receive a bachelor's degree.
- Many Latino/as are "products of under-funded, under-staffed and under-performing high schools, and as such have not had an adequate preparation for college work" (Fry, 2002, p. 12).

Nikaury, a youth researcher from the Lower East Side of Manhattan, stunned an audience at Teachers College Columbia University with her astute reflection on participatory action research, and its benefits: "I used to see flat. No more...now I know things are much deeper than they appear. And it's my job to find out what's behind the so-called facts. I don't see flat anymore." (Quoted in Fine, M. 50 years after Brown.)

APPENDIX G

Preliminary Interview Questions

1. Please tell me about your experiences with reading.

2. Tell me about your experiences with writing.

3. What are some things (lessons, activities, ways of doing class, etc.) you have done in English classes in the past that have helped you with your reading and writing?

4. What are some things you have done in English classes in the past that have **not** helped you with your reading and writing? In what ways were they unhelpful?

5. What would the perfect Reading/Writing classroom look like to you?

APPENDIX H

Mid-Process Interview Questions

Mid-Process Questions

1. We defined transformation in class as a change over from one way of thinking and acting to another, as well as a change in attitude. Do you think you have transformed in any way since we started this class?

2. How do you think of yourself as a student?

3. How do you feel about your ability to read words? Explain.

4. How do you feel about your ability to read the world? Explain.

APPENDIX I

Final Interview Questions

1. Please tell me about your experience in your research group.

2. What do you feel like you learned from being in this class?

3. What does "reading the world" mean to you?

4. Do you feel like you transformed at all from July to today?

5. Is there anything else you would like me to know?

Student Talk to the Text Examples
October 20, 2008

Jacqui

On my own

Together

On Power

"Washing one's hands of the conflict between the powerful and the powerless means to side with the powerful, not to be neutral." *Washing hands out of the conflict is not resonable. We must deal with our problems.*

On Students

"They call themselves ignorant and say the 'professor' is the one who has knowledge and to whom they should listen." *Students are not ignorant.*

"Almost never do they realize that they, too, 'know things' they have learned in their relations with the world." *Everyone knows something in a certain subject although we sometimes forget we know it.*

Chapter 1

On Education

"Education as the practice of freedom as opposed to education as the practice of domination denies that man is abstract, isolated, independent and unattached to the world; it also denies that the world exists as reality apart from people. Authentic reflection considers neither abstract man nor the world without people, but people in their relations with the world. In these relations consciousness and world are simultaneous: consciousness neither precedes the world nor follows it."

learning is dominant

In a way people follow things in life and ignore some.

Chapter 2

In order to make ourselves satisfied in some ways we must take on precepts our teacher places.

" ..In school, students soon discover that in order to achieve some satisfaction they must adapt to the precepts which have been set from above. One of these precepts is not to think."

Like for example one of the above precepts is not thinking.

Meaning to not have thought beyond what they want us to think.

Catelina

▇ on my own
▇ Together

<u>On Power</u>

"Washing one's hands of the conflict between the powerful and the
powerless means to side with the powerful, not to be neutral."

If you don't say anything nobody will speak for you either.

<u>On Students</u> *I think that your doing something wrong by washing your hands, and doing nothing.*

"They call themselves ignorant and say the 'professor' is the one who has
knowledge and to whom they should listen."

Not true nobody is ignorant, it's all in you but yes you do have to listen.

"Almost never do they realize that they, too, 'know things' they have learned in
their relations with the world."

Well maybe be true, sometimes I think you do know things that they have learned in their relations with the world.

They don't realize that they have a saying and they can think on their own.

<u>On Education</u> *Ex. knowledge is power*   *ex: To take control.*

"Education as the practice of freedom—as opposed to education as the
practice of domination—denies that man is abstract, isolated, independent and
unattached to the world; it also denies that the world exists as reality apart
from people. Authentic reflection considers neither abstract man nor the world
without people, but people in their relations with the world. In these relations
consciousness and world are simultaneous: consciousness neither precedes
the world nor follows it."

their point of view.

there's no world w/o people.

Chapter 2

" ..In school, students soon discover that in order to achieve some satisfaction
they must adapt to the precepts which have been set from above. One of
these precepts is not to think."

Precepts?   *It's a rule.*

What it means is that students should suck up and not speak your mind.

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Natalie

on my own
Together

<u>On Power</u>

"Washing one's hands of the conflict between the powerful and the
· powerless means to side with the powerful, not to be neutral."
— I think it means the if you know someones doing wrong dont
<u>On Students</u> stay nuetral the Dont wait until somethings like get taken
away and if you they come for you no one will be
there to help you

"They call themselves ignorant and say the 'professor' is the one who has
students
knowledge and to whom they should listen." I think this means that the
belive thier thoughts are not important and they should listen to the

"Almost never do they realize that they, too, 'know things' they have learned in
person with
their relations with the world." — I think this passage is trying know more "know-
ledge"
to say that even if others know different
Chapter 1   things k————— to this that you may know
human experiences   things that others dont and you can
that nobody else has   Show them the your way of doing things

<u>On Education</u>   differently

Knowledge is power   to
"Education as the practice of freedom, as opposed to education as the
take control over
practice of domination denies that man is abstract, isolated, independent and
unattached to the world; it also denies that the world exists as reality apart   no poeple
from people. Authentic reflection considers neither abstract man nor the world   no
without people, but people in their relations with the world. In these relations   education
consciousness and world are simultaneous: consciousness neither precedes
the world nor follows it." — ? I guess its trying to say with all
the knowledge everything tries to
Chapter 2   give you it really doesnt mean
anything
without the proper knowledge

" ..In school, students soon discover that in order to achieve some satisfaction
rules
they must adapt to the precepts which have been set from above. One of
rules
these precepts is not to think." — trying to say our opinons are
)
What does that mean
to not important.

—no free thoughts

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APPENDIX K

Critical Literacy Observation Protocol*

Critical Literacy Principle	Observed	Notes
1. Start with learners' needs and interests		
2. Involve learners in determining the content of instruction		
3. Focus on meaning, not mechanics		
4. Contextualize work on form (Connect form to function and meaning)		
5. Center instruction around themes drawn from learners' social reality		
6. Encourage dialogue and critical analysis of social realities		
7. Use a variety of participatory tools to explore themes		
8. Move toward action outside the classroom		
9. Involve students in evaluation		

* Adapted from E. Aurbach, in *Critical Literacy in Action* (Shor & Pari, 1999a)

APPENDIX L

Roots of the Problem Group Interview Questions

Questions for people who are in school

1. How do you feel trying to finish school?

2. Why do you want to finish school?

3. Would you ever leave school?

4. Do you have any plans after graduating school? Why or Why not?

Questions for people who left school

1. Why did you stop coming to school?

2. How did you feel leaving school?

3. What do you think the outcome would be if you never left school?

4. What are something's that would have kept you from leaving school?

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