Project POWER:
Promoting Our Will Through Education and Research

Martin J. Wasserberg and Louie F. Rodriguez
Florida International University, USA

Abstract: Project POWER utilized participatory action research to critically examine issues facing students in an urban high school, setting the stage for the co-creation of spaces for student-teacher dialogue. The project culminated in a dialogue between the students and their future teachers at a university in Miami, Florida.

I got [a] paper that said "congratulations" in [class] today. That's my first time! I don't never get none of these things. My sister brings them all the time, but my parents get mad at me 'cause I don't never get no type of paper that says "congratulations." – Larry, 11th grader

Larry's comment above was captured during a classroom dialogue about the significance of supportive teachers. Classroom dialogues can help build relationships across social, cultural, and power differences (Nagda & Gurin, 2007) and have implications for student identity development (Stables, 2003). Classroom dialogues are therefore especially important when considering social justice outcomes. Project POWER (Promoting Our Will through Education and Research) was a year-long participatory action research (PAR) project originating with a partnership between a university researcher and a local classroom teacher. The project ultimately engaged a high school class in a dialogue with future teachers to give them a voice in defining the types of teachers they would like. The project took place in the context of a historically struggling urban high school. Results provide insights to how youth can be meaningfully engaged within the school context, as well as how university researchers can collaborate with local high schools.

Rationale

The struggle to provide equal educational opportunities for Black and Latino/a children in urban schools remains a significant challenge to the nation. A cursory look at the largest and most racially and economically segregated school districts would demonstrate that dropout rates among high school age youth of color exceed 50% (Orfield, Losen, Wald, & Swanson, 2004). In particular, urban high schools tend to be large and overcrowded, conditions that often deny students adequate opportunities to learn (Fry, 2003). Most schools also struggle to provide equitable resources and qualified teachers and to resist the counterproductive tendencies of zero-tolerance policies, particularly for youth of color (Kozol, 1992, 2005). The surrounding communities are typically characterized by concentrated poverty, violence, and political disenfranchisement (Noguera, 1996).

Within the everyday realities of the work of teachers and students, schools serving low-income youth of color are increasingly finding themselves in the position of meeting Adequate Yearly Progress, a system of accountability based largely of standardized test scores, based on No Child Left Behind standards (U.S. Department of Education, 2007). Thus, the governmentally created top-down policy mandates have in many ways determined how and what is taught, and subsequently the quality of relationships between students and school adults

(Rodríguez, 2008). Within this era of *test-prep pedagogy*, alternative dialogical pedagogies are helpful in resisting the marginalization that is so often reproduced in urban schools as a way to forge a new pathway for youth engagement in schools and to collaborate with struggling schools to explore what is possible despite policy and cultural constraints.

Theoretical Framework

Given the challenges associated with teaching and learning within the context of struggling urban schools, the epistemological approach to research was rooted in justice and equity. The researchers aimed to create a process whereby the youth were direct agents throughout the research process. Thus, a PAR framework was utilized, whereby the youth identify problems and issues that are directly relevant to their lives (Cordova, 2004).

PAR researchers believe that student-researchers possess expert knowledge and experiences in their everyday social contexts that are too often denied or subtracted from youth within the school context. As Cordova (2004) explains, "it is in direct interaction with those experiencing the 'issue' that [researcher] practitioners are able to determine the contours of that issue, the problems, the needs, and thus, the appropriate research questions" (p. 46). The researcher-"researched" relationship is thus fundamentally reformed through the process of PAR work, positioning as equal the value of the latter's experiences.

Parallel to the principles of PAR work, the researchers involved in this project also drew from Freirian pedagogy, which focuses on consciousness-raising for the purposes of realizing the liberatory possibilities of education (Freire, 1974). Freire emphasizes that a liberatory education means communication and dialogue and that it is the role of the teacher to maintain the dialogue with problem-posing and critical analysis. Within the context of classroom dialogues, the researchers drew from the realities, challenges, and experiences that were most familiar to the students' lives. Using Freire's problem-posing pedagogy, the students in this course used their own theories about such issues as school dropout/pushout rates, teacher quality, socioeconomics, and racial dynamics as theoretical bases to examine other issues in schools and communities for the remainder of the project. Problem-posing pedagogy necessitates that the traditional researcher-"researched" relationship is transformed through dialogue.

Project POWER

The research took place in an urban high school classroom in Miami, Florida, comprised of 20 (18 Black, 2 Latino/a) 11th graders who volunteered to participate in the project that met for approximately 7 hours weekly throughout an entire school year (during class sessions two or three times per week), known as project POWER. The research team consisted of a university professor, a graduate research assistant, the classroom teacher, and the student researchers. All classroom dialogue was videotaped for analysis.

In PAR, student creativity is vital and the role of researchers involves support and critical questioning to compliment and strengthen the analysis, skill-building, and social and intellectual development of the participants. Equally central to PAR work with youth is its aims to affect social change and projects defined by youth are almost inevitably framed as social justice issues (Minkler, 2000). Within the context of a high school history class, project POWER utilized problem-posing pedagogy to dialogically generate several topics for student-research. One of the first questions the class addressed related to the role that public schools play in low-income communities serving historically marginalized youth. Driven by lessons on the history of the U.S. educational system, including but not limited to an in depth analysis of *Brown v. Board of Education*, the initial question was, "How has the school system worked for us and how has the system worked against us?" A number of testimonies and reflections emanated from the

students' experiences. The students spoke about lack of voice, "they [administrators] don't take us seriously… they don't allow students to voice their opinion." They spoke about a longing for positive reinforcement from teachers as demonstrated by Larry's quote above. Students also questioned who was defining what they were learning, "they only give us what they want us to know… just give us everything and let us decide what is important to us!" The students also began to question how their social context impacts what actually happens in schools and the degree to which state-level and district-level policy-makers understood this connection. It became apparent to the researchers that the students had limited opportunities to explicitly tell their stories, and it demonstrated to the student-researchers that their stories are not unique and the students had more in common with one another than they had known.

Relationship Development Between Researchers and Student-Researchers

The researchers typically shook each student's hand or ensured that they were acknowledged at the door or at their desk. Students tended to appreciate the attention. For example, one student named Eric was absent 45 school days by mid-January. Aware of Eric's sporadic attendance, the researchers made it a point to check-in with him everyday he was present, extend support, and relay the message that his presence was valued. After a couple of months, Eric began to go out of his way to say hello to the researchers and also shared some personal stories and struggles he was experiencing in life. After initially contributing to classroom dialogues with statements such as "school seems like a seven-hour prison sentence," he later repeatedly remarked that the PAR research course was a central reason why he continued to come to school. Eric's experience is unique and each relationship the researchers had with students varied. Nonetheless, the researchers have demonstrated that it is possible to engage with students in a unique way and the quality of their engagement is, in part, a function of the commitment to relationship-building. Student-adult relationships are vital to student learning, development and engagement in school, particularly with historically marginalized youth (Nieto, Bode, Kang, & Raible, 2008). Thus, relationship-building driven by respect is a central form of engagement and practice exercised by the researchers in the classroom.

A key element to forging relationships with students was acknowledging every student as they walked through the door. Although such a practice may seem commonsensical, it is amazing how rare such occurrences are, especially in large urban high schools (Conchas & Rodriguez, 2007). Because of the focus on testing, the social climate of the school is typically tense, driven by rules and regulations such as new time and bell schedules, stricter hallway rules, and new procedures for granting bathroom passes to students (Kozol, 2005). Thus, these new restrictions on human engagement have had a negative impact on opportunities to engage or prioritize relationships. Within the project POWER classroom, the researchers made a deliberate attempt to forge relationships.

Community Building

Also integral to the success of the project was the ability of the students to work together in groups. In order to develop and foster this ability, the researchers initiated a series of community building activities. One such community-building ritual involved a progressive unity clap that has roots in the farm worker struggle in the southwest as part of the larger civil rights movement in the 1960s and 1970s and a community-building strategy used during the Chicano Movement around the same time. Each classroom meeting began and ended with a gradual building of applause, starting with one person clapping and continuing until the classroom gels in a simultaneous rhythmic ovation. The progress of the "clap" can be viewed as a metaphor for an observed shift in the classroom climate. Early in the project, the clap was off beat and disjointed,

and the classroom was less than cohesive. Critical student dialogue was sometimes countered with "that's stupid," or other similar remarks from peers. Through dialoguing, relationship development, and community-building exercises, the classroom climate took a positive turn. Before long the clap came together as one rhythmic entity, as the class developed a collective identity. Remarks such as "that's stupid," were replaced with "let's hear her opinion." The class became self-regulating, as one student put it "if we don't let [student's] talk, they are not going to want to participate and we will never hear what they have to say." In the context of the PAR project, as evidenced by the description of the particular research project to follow, this mutual respect was vital to the success of individual groups.

"What Kinds of Teachers Do We Want?"

Again, within the context of a high school history class, project POWER utilized problem-posing pedagogy to dialogically generate several topics for student-research. The particular research project to be discussed here was driven by mid school-year lessons on the history of community organization, including but not limited to an in depth analysis of the Chicano student walkouts of 1968. This developed into one of the most significant research projects that was tackled by project POWER and began with an examination of the student-initiated question, "What kinds of teachers do we want?" After engaging the group in an open dialogue about effective and ineffective teachers, students were assembled into work groups by topic of interest. Within the dialogue, students agreed that the following characteristics are vital to being a good teacher: being (a) supportive, (b) motivational, (c) inspiring, (d) respectful, and (e) aware of how to keep a classroom "alive." Once issues were identified, the researchers guided the student-researchers in various possible data collection techniques, data analysis, and presentations possibilities. The student-researchers were then charged with creating a 20 minute presentation that incorporated creative pedagogies such as interactive discussions, multimedia, and skits/plays/scenarios. Groups conducted and analyzed a number of interviews with a purposefully selected sample of teachers and students to complement their presentations.

In the spirit of university collaboration with local high schools, the university professor involved in project POWER arranged for the student-researchers to present their research to classes of pre-service teachers at a major public university. In addition to the classroom dialogue, which sparked the research project, a second dialogue was initiated between the high school students and their future teachers (a university classroom of pre-service teachers) as part of an effort to explore ways in which the K-12 system and universities can build together creatively to improve urban schools. Some examples of remarks contained within student presentations included: (a) "It's important to us for teachers to be inspiring…To inspire is to make you want to do something without getting something in return;" (b) "If the teachers do not respect the students, students will not respect teachers either;" and (c) "The majority of teachers are unsupportive… many of them create tense and stressful classroom atmospheres. As students, we react to the classroom atmosphere."

The overemphasis on test-preparation in the lowest-performing schools across the country has in many ways stifled opportunities to engage in a meaningful dialogue. In fact, observations by the researchers have demonstrated that dialoguing has become a subversive and revolutionary act given the lack of will or opportunity to do so within the school environment. However, through project POWER, the researchers and student-researchers have demonstrated that when given the opportunity, students are ready to engage. This can occur when an environment is created that is genuinely committed to fostering dialogue and student engagement.

Towards Youth Engagement

In large part, the purpose of project POWER is to set a foundation for building a large-scale dialogue about education as a constitutional right for youth, involving educators, researchers, students, and communities who have been historically marginalized by the educational system. By engaging youth directly in action research projects and co-creating spaces for critical dialogue, project POWER demonstrates how our nation's youth can enact their will and struggle for their position as agents of social change in their schools and communities. The "What kinds of teachers do we want?" research project described here exemplified this potential. After the culminating dialogue between the student-researchers and pre-service teachers, pre-service teachers offered the following comments, among others: (a) "I would never have thought for one second that they were from an [underperforming] school. That in itself shows my own personal bias towards lowering my standards for that group before even having met them;" and (b) "Meeting with students and dialoguing about what they need and want in the classroom must be a part of the curriculum… we should visit schools of different demographics to talk and ask questions to students." The researchers involved in project POWER firmly believe from their involvement in the year-long project that despite the constraints and pressures facing the most marginalized schools, liberatory engagement with youth is possible in the school context.

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