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*Crossing the Street: Civic Engagement and the Politics of Belonging
among Latino and Jewish Middle School Students in Northern California*

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In this paper, I draw on 10 months of fieldwork with English language learners in Northern California to explore the possibilities and limitations of Participatory Action Research (PAR) in schools doubly segregated by race and class. Today much of the progress integrating American public schools that occurred in the decade following Brown vs. Board of Education has been reversed—even as the overall population of public school students has become increasingly diverse (Orfield et. al. 2014). During the 2011-2012 academic year, 55% of Latino students and 45% of Black students in California attended intensely segregated schools (i.e., 91-100% minority students), and half of these children also attended schools with a student population that was more than 90% low-income (Orfield et. al. 2014). Participatory Action Research has been promoted as a pedagogical approach that actively fosters civic and educational engagement by providing young people opportunities to analyze and engage with inequitable distributions of power and resources (Cammarota and Fine 2008; Clements 2005; Dyrness 2012; Abu El-Haj 2007; Ginwright 2008; Torre and Fine 2008). During the 2014-2015 school year, however, I found that intensely segregated 6th grade students from Spanish-speaking immigrant families conducting PAR in their segregated

neighborhoods drew heavily from deficit-oriented perspectives as they attempted to analyze and understand the civic apathy of neighborhood residents during the early months of their research. What stands out in this case example is how the Latino students began to consider the ways in which political agency and citizenship are constituted in relationship with others when, halfway through the academic year, the PAR project was embedded in an integrated after-school program in partnership with a private Jewish day school located across the street from their public school. In what follows, I argue that the integrated setting prompted a shift in the Latino students' understanding of civic participation in California and fostered new ways of imagining their own civic identities.

To develop this project, I collaborated with a classroom teacher in the fall of 2014 to embed PAR in the curriculum for a 6th grade class of nine English Language Learners grouped together for two instructional periods in English Language Arts because of their low reading skills (kindergarten to third grade reading levels at the beginning of the academic year). I asked the students to use photography to identify strengths and problems in their neighborhood, investigate these problems by conducting interviews with community members and take action to address one of the problems. As students worked to identify the strengths and problems in their neighborhood, civic engagement became a central theme in our classroom discussions and aligned their PAR project with my broader ethnographic work. I conducted participant-observation approximately twice a week at the school, completed a series of taped and transcribed focus-group sessions with the students about their interactions in the integrated setting

and participated in after-school programs and events with students, parents, and teachers at the school.

By the beginning of December 2014, I had worked with the students to create a “Prezi” that documented the progress of our PAR over the fall. In the Prezi slides the students embedded their best photographs to depict problems in their community, highlighted their work analyzing these photographs, included compelling quotes from their interviews with community members about the problems, and referenced their Internet research exploring the work of other middle school students who had participated in civic projects. To celebrate our progress that fall, the class invited the principal and vice-principal of the school to listen to a presentation of our work the first week of December. Yet while the day was a celebration of the students’ research, in hindsight I realized that within the segregated context of their work, the structural interdependencies between groups in the community were not apparent to the students--both in the ways in which students conceptualized the causes of civic problems as well as in how they understood the solutions to these problems.

On the one hand, most of the students in the class selected pictures for the Prezi that depicted problems created by the negligence or civic apathy of their neighbors. For example, two of the students took pictures illustrating how neighbors in their apartment building failed to dispose of trash properly. In their pictures the two students captured images of the dumpster area and backyard patio area of their apartment buildings strewn with broken glass, discarded furniture, boxes, random trash and, in one instance, a dead, rotting mouse. Another student took pictures of a prominently displayed “No Dogs” sign

at the entrance to his neighborhood playground, a picture of a man with two dogs standing in the middle of the children's play structure, and several images of dog waste in the playground. Several other students took pictures of trash littering a park and their neighborhood.

Moreover, when writing about the images they selected for the presentation, most students focused on the failure of community members to take responsibility for their actions. For instance, one student displayed water steadily dripping out of the outdoor water tap because someone in her apartment building had failed to close the tap tightly in the midst of the California drought. When analyzing her picture she wrote:

This picture shows that people don't care because they don't turn off the water.

This is outside of my house. This is a problem because we are in a drought right now ☹. This picture make me feel frustrated because people do not care that we are in a drought and that they are only wasting water ☹.

Another student had documented several cars speeding through a stop sign located directly in front of his apartment building along with his family's car that had been in an accident. He wrote:

This is a problem. This picture shows that when people drive to fast a accident can happen. Also people can be run over. I took the picture on my balcony. This picture makes me feel upset because people can be run over.

After selecting a photograph that depicted one problem in their community, students shared their pictures with neighborhood adults and conducted interviews about the pictures. In the process of conducting the interviews, the impression that their neighbors

were apathetic or even selfish was reinforced. For example, students asked the interview questions, “Why are they doing this?” and “Why do they not care?” One student recorded the following response in his interview notes: “People do not care because they have not had an accident but when they do they will care.” Another student wrote, “People do not care because they are selfish.”

On the other hand, even as students conceptualized the problems in their neighborhoods from a deficit oriented perspective, they received the message during their interviews that “we” need to take responsibility and fix the problems in the community. Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the fact that the neighbors were identified as the cause of the problem, the solution to the problem was assumed to rest within the community members. For one interview question, students decided to ask adults in their community, “Who has the courage to fix the problem?” In their interview notes two students wrote, “The people who have the courage to fix this problem are all of us (in the neighborhood)” and “The person who has the courage is my dad.” When they inquired, “How do we solve this problem?” one student was told, “We will solve this problem by talking to the people who did this and telling them to stop because it is bad for the earth.” Another student captured the following response in her notes: “We can solve the problem by working together.”

Based on an analysis that placed responsibility for both the community problems and the solutions to these problems on the neighborhood residents, students began concluding that individuals in their community should simply work harder to better their neighborhoods. Moreover, the ways in which they imagined their identities as engaged

citizens was limited--students considered civic engagement to be a personal choice and an individual responsibility to act in the neighborhood where you live.

Then, in the beginning of December 2014, the project took an unexpected turn of events when an ongoing collaboration between the school principal and a Rabbi from the Jewish congregation located directly across the street from the public school resulted in an invitation to bring together a small group of middle school students from the public school and the private Jewish day school. The Rabbi envisioned a collaborative social justice project, and I agreed to help facilitate the integrated group with the understanding that we would not only include the students working on the PAR project but also execute an action plan to address one of the problems identified through students' research.

Seven of the nine students conducting PAR decided to participate in the integrated after-school program along with eight students from the Jewish day school. I worked with a Rabbi from the Jewish congregation to plan and facilitate the series of 8 after-school sessions that culminated in an Earth Day Cleanup one Saturday morning in April to address the problems of environmental pollution and littering in the community. The Rabbi and I agreed to frame the sessions as a leadership development program. In the permission forms sent to the parents we explained, "Our purpose is for teens to learn how to collaborate with others to enact change in the world and create a more just and equitable society."

We agreed that the first session would be primarily devoted to several ice-breakers to build community between the students. By the end of the session the complexity of bringing these two groups of students together was particularly apparent in

the English learners' silence and timid approach to the icebreakers. For example, in one activity called, "Can I see your smile?" students were supposed to approach a partner and request in a silly manner, "Can I see your smile?" The goal of the partner was to answer, with a serious expression, "No, you cannot see my smile." While the Jewish students walked like a chicken or turned their heads upside down to elicit a smile, the Latino students were unsure how to improvise in the situation. One Latino student turned to me and asked perplexedly, "What am I supposed to do?"

After the session, I conducted two focus groups with the Latino students in their Language Arts classroom to learn their perspectives and support their analysis of the interactions in the integrated setting. To facilitate conversation I provided a Venn Diagram and asked the students to identify similarities and differences between the two groups of students. In both focus groups the students began a discussion about the students' different approaches to the ice-breakers.

Student 1: They're really funny!

Me: They're funny? OK. Is that something that is the same or different?

Student 1: No, we're not really funny. We're actually like the shy ones.

Me: Oh, ok, let's write that down then. So. They're funny. You said you thought that the (school's name) students were more shy?"

Student 1: Yeah, I didn't even know what to do. Wait. Why did we do that exercise?

Student 2: To have fun.

Student 3: Because we're supposed to get to know them!

A second focus group of students came to a similar conclusion about the shy nature of the Latino students.

Student 4: The game that we played, not everyone played it.

Student 5: They're not shy. And we are really shy.

Student 6: (Contradicting Student 2) *Some* of us are shy.

Student 5: They have courage.

Me: Would you say that's the same?

Student 6: Some of the kids in our school, yeah....

At this point in the conversation the classroom teacher walked by the focus group and introduced the idea of confidence.

Classroom teacher: Shy? None of you are shy in *this* class!

(Silence from the students)

Classroom teacher: Maybe they have more confidence, but you're definitely *not* shy!

Although the teacher moved on to another group of students in the classroom and the focus group conversation began another thread, the theme of confidence resurfaced at the end of the conversation, along with the need for courage to participate in the diverse group of students. Courage is a character trait that the students had regularly discussed in their classroom that year. One character trait had been explicitly promoted throughout the school each month and the students' Language Arts teacher regularly emphasized the monthly trait in her curriculum.

Me: Ok, now I want you to choose the difference that you think is the biggest obstacle that you will have to overcome to become a leader.

Student 1: They are more confident.

Me: What trait do you need to overcome this difference?

Student 4: Courage!

Student 7: I have to stop being shy.

Student 6: Courage.

Student 5: To be more confident.

The need for confidence and courage became a recurring theme in our focus group sessions when we analyzed the group dynamics in the integrated setting. In our final focus group session students articulated several conclusions about their work in the after school program. First, they recognized the importance of getting to know students who

did not attend their school and the potential for working together in a group to make change.

Me: What do you like about being with the kids?

Student 1: Uh...Playing games. Eating.

Student 2: Um, I forgot how to say it in English.

Student 3: (Speaking to Student 1) No, not food, I mean...

Student 2: Um, what's it called? Um....Convivir! How do you say convivir in English?

Me: It's like connecting with.

Student 2: Yeah, that. That.

Student 4: No it's not. Because we just are having fun, just playing.

Student 3: Yeah, pero tambien estamos conociendolos, estamos todos los shy kids. Como say shy en Espanol?

Me: Timida..... ok...um...so....what was the program about?

Student 4: To be friends with others.

Student 6: The reason that they made the program was to meet new people and to help our environment and community.

Student 2: Also it's like when you work together with a group you make a big change.

Second, the students articulated the need to support each other in their attempts to be courageous in diverse groups.

Student 7: Also you have to be courageous because....all....some...all leaders... to make change...that you....have to be courageous in everything because sometimes many people are afraid of things and then... it's something that can help you be a leader.

Student 2: You have to be courageous so you never give up and you um..help um each other to do um each other's part.

Third, students realized that the differences in confidence and courage between the groups was rooted in different experiences and opportunities available to each group of students.

Student 4: They are, like, courageous and they're, like, they have more confidence in themselves than us.

Student 2: They, like, maybe they got more opportunities speaking in front of others.

Student 7: Maybe, like, they have, like, experienced this before so now they have learned how to like be courageous.

Finally, students argued for the need for integrated programs that would allow them to interact with students beyond their segregated school.

Me: Do you think you'd be able to make any connections with them if we didn't have the program?

Student 1: No.

Me: No. Why not?

Student 3: Because we didn't really talk to them, we didn't really know about them. So we couldn't, like, do that.

Student 2: Yeah we didn't have courage.

Student 7: We do have courage but it's the thing that even if they are across the street we don't know them...so...we actually....sometimes we can't....go over there because....they...they are how they are...a little different from us...we don't care, [but] we can't spend time there.

In practice, conducting PAR with youth in a contact zone addresses a problem virtually ignored in educational policy—the near total isolation of minority students in intensely segregated schools from both white students and their middle class peers. In the early stages of the PAR project students focused on individual choice and responsibility as they reflected on their role in making their community a better place to live. By the end of the year, however, one aspect of students' emerging civic identities was an interest in civic engagement within a diverse community that extended beyond their own segregated school and low-income neighborhoods. All of the students were eager to continue participating in an integrated setting and asked repeatedly if the program could be expanded the following year. Moreover, they had begun to imagine a civic identity in which they not only worked confidently and courageously in diverse groups of people, but also belonged to that community.