PROYECTO LATIN@ ON STAGE AND UNDER THE MAGNIFYING GLASS

THE POSSIBILITIES AND LIMITATIONS OF A HIGH-PROFILE INSTITUTIONALLY SPONSORED YOUTH PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH PROJECT

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ABSTRACT

While many educators committed to critical pedagogy must find ways to do their work "off the grid and under the radar," there are instances in which conditions allow for projects to be implemented with institutional supports and resources. While these conditions are unusual, it is important to understand both the possibilities and limitations of such opportunities and to consider what they teach us both about critical pedagogical approaches as well as the educational institutions within which we work. In this article, we turn the spotlight on "Proyecto Latin@," a collaborative project implemented under the auspices of the University of Toronto and the Toronto District School Board. This unique partnership, particularly the youth participatory action research (YPAR) phase, has engendered much public attention as well as institutional, community, and public scrutiny. Using the key tenets of YPAR as our theoretical framework, we provide a general overview of our work with Latin@ students, which was implemented as a senior social science credit course. We discuss some of the tensions that arise in doing YPAR under such institutional constraints, and take up the challenges and possibilities of conducting research with, by, and for youths while "on stage and under the magnifying glass." Particular challenges that we will discuss include: pub-

lic expectations, community and media perceptions, negotiations of our roles as project co-facilitators, and the tensions that arise when attempting to embody the youth-centred principles of YPAR while delivering a senior social science credit course (241).

Critical educators working within the context of public schools often find strategic ways to engage different forms of pedagogy within the constraints of their respective institutional structures (see Gurn, 2011; Leard & Lashua, 2006; Morrell, 2008). Often times such strategies involve working "off the grid and under the radar" of school authorities (Kress, DeGennaro, & Paugh, this edition). Rarely do school districts not only support, but also provide additional resources for the implementation of critical pedagogical practices, in part because such pedagogical practices can challenge the very foundations of schooling as an institution (Darder, 2002; Gaztambide-Fernández & Sears, 2004). Because these instances are unusual, they also draw increased attention and scrutiny.

In this article*, we document such a rare instance and share our experiences of doing critical education while *on stage and under the magnifying glass*. We turn the spotlight on "Proyecto Latin@," an ongoing collaboration between Latina/o youth and adult allies,[1] implemented under the auspices of the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) and the Centre for Urban Schooling (CUS) at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE) of the University of Toronto. Here we begin by providing a general overview of research on the schooling experiences of Latina/o youth in the TDSB as well as the background context of our project. Drawing on a Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) theoretical framework, we outline our experiences as YPAR researchers and reflect upon the challenges and possibilities that arise in doing such work in a unique context that is fully supported by the school board.

LATINA/O STUDENTS IN TORONTO SCHOOLS

While academics and educators in the United States have researched the academic achievement of racialized minorities for decades, work on the educational trajectories and needs of racialized (or "visual") minorities in Canada has received little focused attention until recent years.[2] Research on Latina/o students in particular has been sparse, partially because of the fact that immigrants from Latin America only began to arrive in Canada in large numbers after the 1970s, primarily driven

by political uncertainty in places like Chile and Ecuador. Despite subsequent im- migration "waves" and in comparison to the numbers of immigrants from other parts of the world, Latina/o immigrants and their children comprise only one percent of the Canadian population (Statistics Canada, 2007).

The TDSB's 2006 student census, which was the first to collect information on students' ethnic/racial and cultural background, reveals that Latinas/os com- prised 2 percent of the student population (Yau & O'Reilly, 2007). In 2006, the TDSB also released the results of a five-year cohort study, which indicated that roughly 40 percent of Latina/o students were not completing their high school graduation requirements within the five years typically required (Brown, 2006).[3] Additional research released over the following two years indicated that Latina/o students were consistently scoring at low levels in various school subjects and standardized literacy tests, increasing concerns about their academic achievement (Brown & Sinay, 2008; Yau & O'Reilly, 2007). These findings, which closely mirrored evidence from the U.S., also marked the first time that such research became publicly available in Canada.

In May 2008, members from Toronto's Latina/o community met with re- searchers from the Centre for Urban Schooling (CUS) and TDSB staff to dis- cuss these findings and to explore as well as address the factors contributing to the scholastic underachievement of Latina/o youth. From the ensuing dialogue emerged "Proyecto Latin@," a collaborative project that would address the pro- cesses shaping the schooling experiences and engagement of Latina/o youth in TDSB schools.

Exploratory Research

The dearth of research on the schooling experiences of Latinas/os in Canada ne- cessitated that the initial stage of "Proyecto Latin@" take on an exploratory ap- proach (Stebbins, 2001). To better understand the issues facing Latina/o youth in TDSB schools, we sought the perspectives of the students themselves; we probed how they described their schooling experiences, how they explained the high per- centage of Latina/o early school leavers, and what they suggested as ways of sup- porting the academic engagement and success of Latina/o students (Gaztambide- Fernández & Guerrero, 2011).

In the spring of 2009, we collected data from six schools across Toronto us- ing a traditional approach to qualitative research. Over sixty students between grades nine and twelve who self-identified as Latina/o provided their perspectives through 12 focus groups and 33 individual interviews. While the focus groups covered different topics on Latina/o student engagement and educational experi- ences, the interviews focused on students' individual schooling experiences, per- spectives on the educational experiences of their family members and peers, and recommendations for improving academic achievement. Participants identified

with almost every country in Latin America, particularly with Colombia, Mexico, and El Salvador, which represent the majority of Latina/o immigrants in Canada (Statistics Canada, 2004, 2007). The linguistic ability of the participants in either English or Spanish also varied, as did their academic profiles and socio-economic backgrounds.

An analysis of the interview and focus group data revealed four crosscutting themes. First, the students identified language barriers as an impediment to their academic success and engagement. While they emphasized the importance of learning English, they described how factors like improper placement in English as a Second Language and other courses hindered their learning. Second, the students described how their family's economic circumstances affected their experiences both inside and outside of school. For some students, these economic conditions meant that they had to work full-time night shifts and attend school during the day. The third theme dealt with how stereotypes related to physical appearance and language negatively affected their relationships with teachers and peers. They decried stereotypes of Latinas/os as academically incapable and prone to violence, theft, and laziness. Fourth, while reporting the negative images and expectations held by teachers, students were also emphatic in their descriptions of the constructive interactions and the positive impact that some teachers have had on their individual experiences.

The students also offered many suggestions for change across the school system, within their schools, and in the classroom, including: the implementation of courses in Latin American history; a funded peer-to-peer program; and the expansion of extracurricular activities emphasizing Latin American heritage. They also highlighted the importance of patient and approachable teachers to help them with their schoolwork and important school-related decisions. The suggestions were included in a draft report on the findings from our exploratory research, delivered to the TDSB in the summer of 2010. In the fall of 2010, we also shared the findings with the students, who insisted that we follow up on their recommendations and include them in our future research. The students' passionate appeals catalyzed conversations with the newly appointed TDSB Superintendent for Inclusive Schools, Students, Parents and Community, who invited us to discuss strategies for the implementation of a pilot program built on our initial findings. The report, along with announcements about the pilot program, was released in January 2011, garnering intense media attention from various news media sources. The research was featured in both of the major Toronto newspapers as well as in live interviews with major radio and television stations. Even media sources in the U.S., unaware of either the presence or the challenges faced by Latina/o immigrants in Canada, took an interest in the report and covered its findings.[4]

More importantly, the report and the plans for a new pilot program generated great excitement among Toronto's Latina/o community, including many TDSB

educators committed to immigrant students, who saw the report not only as confirmation, but also as a way to make sense of their own experiences working to support Latina/o students. This widespread reaction coupled with the students' demands underscored the importance of returning to their schools and developing a participatory program in which the students themselves would determine how their suggestions would be implemented. We were particularly compelled by the students' interest in more student-centred approaches to teaching and learning as well as their desire to more directly engage in research aimed at supporting each other. As one student put it:

> Latino students like to get together in the school and like, I don't know, do like artsy stuff, research, like about their own country, or like, I don't know like, stuff like that. So like, but together you know, not in a class like thing. So like, they're interacting … like some activist stuff, and like, like social stuff, like social justice and all that.

True to this spirit, we saw YPAR as the logical next step, and with the support of the TDSB administration and the school principal at Urban High School (UHS),[5] we immediately began plans for the project that is the focus of this article.

Conceptual and Methodological Framework

When we began to consider the possibility of doing YPAR with the students in Proyecto Latin@, we were deeply self-conscious about the increasing popularity of participatory research among "social justice" oriented academics and the dangers of co-opting both methodology and participants (Fine, 2009; McCartan, Schubotz, & Murphy, 2012). We realized that the dangers of co-optation were even more salient within the context of a credit-granting project that had full institutional support. Despite our initial reluctance, we decided that it was more important to honour our commitment to the students and "do something" that would facilitate their engagement in their own forms of research and activism.

Guided by Freirean theories of critical pedagogy as well as Indigenous understandings of sovereignty and relationship building (see Tuck, 2009a), we sought to foster a dynamic and collegial learning environment that emphasized the knowledge of the students themselves (Cahill, 2007; Nelson, Ochocka, Griffin, & Lord, 1998). For us, the following principles were central to our work "alongside" youth (Tuck et. al., 2008): YPAR entails action-oriented and critical work enacted in the best interests of youth *by* and *with* youth; YPAR values youth knowledge about their lived experiences and opens up community space for them to critically examine these experiences; YPAR considers youth capable of becoming critical researchers, public intellectuals, and proactive advocates of change; YPAR is a critical "pedagogy for empowerment" (Canella, 2008) that opens up vast possibilities for transformative growth at the personal, community, and institutional

levels; and YPAR is a reflective process in which all participants critically examine their roles and contributions in the work.

Central to the enacting of these youth-centred principles was the circle, both as a way to understand community and as the format that marked the beginning and the end of each class meeting. We drew our notions and uses of the circle from both Indigenous frameworks and practices (e.g. Battiste, 2002), as well as the concept of "culture circles" from critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970; see also Souto-Manning, 2010). In addition to becoming a key means of collaborative decision making about course components like lesson topics and evaluation, our weekly circles also served as a decolonizing pedagogical tool through which the students were able to take ownership of their learning space (McGregor, 2004; Tuck et. al, 2008). We carried out our sharing circles acknowledging that our work was taking place on the traditional lands of the Mississauga Anishinaabe and the Haudeno-saunee Confederacy. As Latinas/os, we bring our own Indigenous histories and heritages from other parts of Abya Yala, the landmass known as America. Yet at the same time, we recognize that our presence on this particular land is premised on continued colonization by the Canadian nation as a settler colonial state (see Haig-Brown, 2009; Lawrence & Dua, 2005; Sehdev, 2011).

This multi-layered consciousness created a profound sense of caring for our learning space as a "spiritual and material entity" (Haig-Brown, 2009, p. 4), an entity through which we collectively shared our pasts, our presents, and our re-lationships to them. The relationships built and nurtured through this sharing generated a deep sense of community and kinship, which one student described as giving her the feeling that "truly … we were a family."[6] Another student described this ongoing sharing as among his "best moments of the course, when everyone could speak and have their voices validated."[7]

However the youth choose to articulate their perspectives, YPAR provides them with an alternative space for reflection and sharing, allowing them to openly engage in acts of solidarity and collectively search for solutions (Rodríguez & Brown, 2009). As the youth engage in critical analysis and action, they develop a repertoire of skill-sets that moves them closer towards "liberating themselves" (Freire, 1972). These skills, which become integral to their research design, imple-mentation, and dissemination, also contribute to their growth as well as their con-fidence as critical researchers and advocates of change (Fox et. al., 2010; Tuck et al., 2008). Indeed, as Canella (2008) argues, the practical and affective effects of YPAR constitute a critical "pedagogy for empowerment," because the "process of conducting research into one's own life often changes the way people think about their lives and about their own social roles" (p. 112). In turn, this process provides youth with the tools to interrupt hegemonic practices and the leadership potential to address these practices across the various domains that affect their lives (Cam-marota, 2008; Fox et. al., 2010; Torre, Fine, Stoudt, & Fox, 2012; Tuck, 2009a).

The community aspect inherent to YPAR requires that all co-researchers consider and engage in open dialogues about their own positionalities and contributions to the work, particularly given the ever-present threat of co-optation, either by the sponsoring institutions or by the adult-facilitators themselves (Fine 2009; McCartan, Schubotz, & Murphy, 2012). These positionalities, which entail features like (but not exclusively) race/ethnicity, language ability, social class, educational attainment, and gender, all work in tandem to create varying degrees of oppression and privilege. While the youth may share similar experiences and concerns, the different "location" of each individual yields different nuances in experiences and perspectives. The YPAR process allows the youth to co-create knowledge through their different standpoints in different ways (Gemignani, 2011; Torre, Fine, Stoudt, & Fox, 2012).

Proyecto Latin@ at UHS

The YPAR project that we describe here was a credit course piloted at Urban High School (UHS), which has been identified by the TDSB's Urban Diversity Strategy as a high-needs school with a large population of underperforming and racialized groups (TDSB, 2008). UHS also has the highest number of Latina/o students in TDSB high schools and, importantly, a supportive principal who was eager to allow space for new and innovative opportunities. In collaboration with the students, a team of four adult facilitators—the authors of this article—designed and implemented the YPAR course: Rubén Gaztambide-Fernández is the Principal Investigator for Proyecto Latin@, and an Associate Professor at OISE; Cristina Guerrero is a Ph.D. student at OISE and Graduate Assistant for Proyecto Latin@ as well as a TDSB high school teacher with over six years of experience; Mónica Rosas is the Course Instructor, and she is a TDSB teacher with over six years of experience in various TDSB Alternative Schools and Programs; Elizabeth Guerrero is the Undergraduate Research Assistant, and she is an experienced tutor for students with literacy and language challenges. Being fully bilingual, the four facilitators endeavored to accommodate the learning and language needs of all students, regardless of whether they were bilingual, English-dominant, or Spanish-dominant.

The YPAR course at UHS was designed based on four insights drawn from the first phase of Proyecto Latin@. First, the course was designed to be fully bilingual, based on the observation that language was one of the most challenging barriers that Latina/o students faced throughout their schooling. This bilingualism provided the students with the opportunities to choose the language they wanted to use through the course as well as improve their language skills in both Spanish and English. Second, based on the observation that students often have difficulty accumulating the necessary credits to pursue post-secondary education due to a lack of information and/or institutional support, the project was pre-

mised on the ability of students to earn senior course credits. Third, based on the observation that students face economic challenges that affect their ability to fully engage in school, students were paid as "research assistants" on a monthly basis, based on their regular attendance to the weekly class meetings ($25.00 for each class attended). As an additional financial incentive, students who completed the program were offered an opportunity to obtain summer employment through the TDSB's "Focus on Youth" work program.

A total of 20 students (9 females, 11 males) between grades 10 and 12 and ranging from 15 to 22 years old enrolled in the course. The student-researchers identified themselves with Latin American countries like Mexico, Ecuador, Colombia, Uruguay, and Guatemala. Two students were born in Canada and the remaining eighteen were born in Latin America. Some of the students over 18 had been enrolled in post-secondary programs such as architecture and computer science in their home countries.[8]

To receive course credit, the students were required to fulfill 90 instructional hours as well as the content and skill expectations mandated by the Ontario Ministry of Education in one of three courses: Introduction to Anthropology, Psychology, and Sociology; Challenge and Change in Society; and Philosophy: Questions and Theories. Each course included curricular components that required the students to develop and implement their own research projects. Each student's course placement was determined according to her/his grade level and in consultation with the Guidance Office at UHS. The classes took place during Saturday meetings from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. at UHS and three additional gatherings at OISE, two of which were daylong research camps held on two Sundays. The third OISE meeting was a Friday evening course review. The process of research implementation and data collection also required additional hours during two extended Saturday classes.

YPAR in Action … and On Stage

Premised on the basic assumptions of YPAR, we sought to provide the students with a participatory and consensus-based forum as well as the tools to explore the issues they deemed relevant to their schooling experiences and communities. Through group discussions and various visual exercises like body mapping, problem trees, self-portraits, and social maps, the students determined that issues like identity, stereotypes, and discrimination were some of the key problems that they wanted to explore further. As the students considered what they had learned from each other throughout class meetings and activities, they expanded their engagement with social science issues and theories to develop their research. The students collectively pondered the social, academic, and economic issues affecting the Latina/o community and determined that their overarching research question

would be: "How do social institutions such as the government, mass media, and the school system impact the happiness of Latina/o students in Canada?"

After exploring a variety of data collection and analysis strategies in a full-day research camp, the students decided to engage in four interrelated sub-studies, employing different research methodologies and addressing particular aspects of the overarching research question. The first sub-study implemented mixed-media collages and round-table discussions to examine how Latina/o youths in Toronto high schools understood happiness. The second sub-study incorporated self-portraits representing Latina/o youths' perceptions of happiness inside and outside school. The third sub-study employed interviews and focus groups to explore the relationships between identification as Latina/o and academic success. In the fourth sub-study, the students implemented a survey that aimed to compare the levels of satisfaction that adult Latinas/os experienced in their home countries and in Canada.[9]

The students learned about and piloted different components of the research process during subsequent research camps, sometimes working in sub-groups and other times returning to the larger group. Each of the four course co-facilitators worked closely with one of these four sub-study groups and served as a guide in the organizing, research proposal writing, data collection, data analysis, and dissemination processes. Each group was responsible for processing, organizing, categorizing, and analyzing the data they collected, which provided opportunities to develop ancillary skills. As one of the students described, the long process of transcribing as well as preparing for the public dissemination served as a valuable means of promoting not only collegiality, but also improved language skills in both English and Spanish:

> My biggest accomplishments in this course was my group project, and my speech for the expo, that my brother also helped me on … [I]t was also stressing trying to transcript [sic] all the things that people said, … what kept me going was my imaginary picture of the big outcome. Writing the speech was hard, since my language academic skills are not that great, and I wanted it to be powerful for the audience, but at the end it got done.

In addition to learning about research methodologies, the students learned about course programming and networking with various members of Toronto's Latina/o community. We collectively devised an itinerary of guests that the students felt would help guide the process of identifying key themes, questions, and methodologies. For example, a local artist engaged students with poetry and spoken-word as a way of addressing social injustice. On another occasion, a doctoral student shared her work with street youth in Ecuador, and provided the students with survey samples and tips for them to consider for their own projects.

While this continuous stream of guests provided the student-researchers with the opportunities to network and learn more about different ways of engaging in research, it also raised their visibility, putting them "on stage" in front of the TDSB and Toronto's Latina/o community. For instance, the UHS Principal and the TDSB Superintendent of Inclusive Schools, Student, Parent and Community regularly visited the students, would often share meals with them, and engage in conversations about their work. As information about the course became more widespread, increasing numbers of people and organizations approached us and inquired about delivering workshops and/or visiting to observe the students. Regardless of who entered the project space, we soon realized that we were constantly subjected to attention and scrutiny as well as the expectations of delivering tangible indicators of student engagement and success to multiple audiences.

While the project was publicly held to high standards, the news that the students had in fact engaged in research projects involving high-level tasks like writing research proposals and running statistical analyses was sometimes met with incredulity, particularly from the public and the media. For example, a local newspaper article omitted the YPAR basis of the course, despite Rubén's long and detailed explanation of our work, and instead sensationalized the stipends that were paid to the students for their work as researchers. During a live interview with a Spanish-language radio station, a member of Toronto's Latina/o community called to express her disbelief at the fact that the youth were actually conducting high-level qualitative and quantitative research. While the students expressed their vexation at such instances, they also indicated their motivation to continue working on their projects, share them with the public, and enact initiatives that would dispel the persisting stereotypes that cast them as incapable, unintelligent, and "at-risk."

As part of the course's culminating activities, the students organized and publicly disseminated their work for the first time at a research celebration at the University of Toronto. In front of an audience of over 150 people, including fellow students, teachers, parents, university and school board representatives as well as other members of the community, the students presented their research findings. This culminating event was a powerful way for the students to showcase the hard work that they had done throughout the semester. It was also an important moment for the students to demonstrate their leadership and to engage in conversations about the future of the project with important stakeholders.

Dilemmas in Doing YPAR within a School Context

While this unique course has been cited as a success by the students, school board, and community, and has garnered much public attention, here we want to emphasize that doing such work under continuous scrutiny came with many challenges. We do this as we remain committed to honoring and protecting the youth

voices as we move forward. As critical educators, it is only through a thorough reflective process on the project's trajectory that we can begin to envision its next steps. We recognize that many of the challenges are similar to what other YPAR practitioners have faced under similar as well as different circumstances, and want to underscore that particular aspects of our work may or may not be applicable to other YPAR projects (see Kohfeldt, Chun, Grace, & Langhout, 2011).

Our project was unique in many respects, not least of which was the fact that it represented a student-centred collaboration between a public school board and a university-based research centre. It was also unique because it introduced an opportunity for Latina/o students to gain school credit within a YPAR framework (cf. Cammarota, 2008, 2009). An especially contentious factor, particularly in the view of the media and the public, was that the students were paid as "research assistants" while working towards credit. The issue of how to compensate research participants properly has been discussed in the literature, particularly "in such a way as to prevent the compensation from acting as an inducement to participate" (Neill, 2005, p. 55). More pertinent to our research is the question of how to remunerate the participants for their labor as student-researchers and recognize their contributions *as researchers* to the overall research project (see Kirby, 1999; McCartan, Schubotz, & Murphy, 2012). The news media did not deal with any of these issues, instead choosing to focus on the controversy over whether students should be given financial incentives for things like attendance, good grades, or high achievement in standardized tests (see Brown, 2011), none of which were relevant to why we chose to pay the students. The institutional constraints in combination with these other factors created tensions and challenges in our work as researchers and co-facilitators. How would we negotiate the institutional requirements related to obtaining an official course credit while remaining true to the participatory democracy ideals that undergird YPAR?

The "Push and Pull" of YPAR Facilitation

Central to YPAR is the view that each project's scope and direction should be ultimately dictated by the youth themselves. In the bid to nurture horizontal relationships of power between the youth and adults working on the same project, the adults had to actively strip socially constructed roles as school "teachers," "academic researchers," and "professor." This created tensions between accepted notions of what we, as critical educators, "expected" the students to learn and demonstrate through the course of a research project, from beginning to end, versus solely facilitating the students' agenda in the creation of their own forms of knowledge, sets of expectations, and the importance given to both.

Such tensions surfaced at the outset, particularly for Rubén, a researcher with over a decade of experience with more traditional forms of qualitative research. Because he knew that we were expected to produce a set of "findings" from our

work with the youth, his impulse was to begin collecting data from the beginning. In keeping with our commitment to consensus decision-making, he consulted with the students about audio- and videotaping the class discussions. When the students expressed concern about how the presence of the recording equipment might limit their ability to express their ideas freely, Rubén reluctantly agreed to relinquish his need as a researcher to record the process from the start. It took some time before the students themselves began to recognize the value of documenting their own process, and in subsequent classes students decided that they wanted to regularly record their conversations. After we handed control of all recording devices to the students, they took shared responsibility not only for deciding when and how to record various aspects of our time together, but also for helping each other learn how to use the equipment.[10]

Mónica and Cristina, the two teachers involved in the project, encountered challenges related to balancing their professional and curricular responsibilities as teachers with their roles as YPAR co-facilitators. In our case, balancing YPAR with the curriculum guidelines for *three* social science courses created an especially complicated process in which we felt that the potential for authentic YPAR facilitation versus "guiding" students was at times compromised. This shift in our roles from teachers to facilitators/co-researchers also created tensions for the students, many of whom struggled with their own sense of agency, power, and decision-making. Because these opportunities to openly express their needs and take ownership of curriculum were new to the students, many of them seemed to experience initial discomfort with this level of involvement, particularly at the beginning of the course. Some students would redirect what they considered difficult decisions to the "teachers," especially in terms of how the course should be assessed and evaluated. For instance, one student expressed her belief that it was the teacher's responsibility to determine how the course would be evaluated. Another student shared her initial difficulties in a student-centred learning environment that provided her and her peers with the freedom to provide input that would be collectively discussed and incorporated.

What was at stake in the dilemmas described here is what we came to understand as the "push and pull" inherent to the process of facilitating a group of youth involved in a project such as ours, and the tensions between guiding and facilitating the process. All four of us, in different ways and at different times, felt the need to intervene when things did not seem to move as we had imagined they should move, or when the youth arrived at conclusions or made observations that we felt were problematic or in need of reconsideration. After a guest workshop on gender during one of our class meetings, for example, the youth engaged in an intense discussion about gender roles and sexual violence, which generated conflict and division between the students. While debating whether women who dressed "provocatively" brought sexual violence upon themselves, one male student meta-

phorically likened scantily-clad females to steak, asking the question: "If you throw a piece of steak out onto the streets, how do you not expect the dogs to go after it?" This question incited uproar among the female students, who retorted that such perspectives were not only sexist, but also a reproduction of the very patriarchal and oppressive attitudes that their workshop that day had aimed to challenge. They added that men had the responsibility to respect women and to understand what constituted consent for sexual activity, insisting that they deserved the freedom to determine how to express themselves, including what to wear.

In instances like this, we often felt torn between our commitment to honoring the students' insights and their own process of discovery, and our own political views and preconceptions of what the students *should* think, or *should* do. Our preconceptions were shaped by what we had read about YPAR, about the images we had consumed about youth engaged in critical pedagogy, and about the imaginary subject of critical pedagogy who arrives at a critique of society and works to transform it. There were times during our early discussions about school experiences when students seemed to offer a powerful critique of power, racism, and colonialism, for instance, in relationship to why the English language was important for school and future success in Canada. Yet such insights seemed to vanish when we began to develop research questions, and explore the reasons why some of the students believed most immigrants from Latin America were "happy" to be in Canada. As "critical" educators, this analysis of the immigration experience seemed frustratingly simplistic to us. We continued to probe the question of what constituted happiness, which in turn seemed to generate disagreement and conflict among the students.

We realized in the process that we had constructed an image in our minds about what YPAR was supposed to yield, and that this romanticized image of the active youth was not necessarily (or singularly) what was developing in front of us or what we were witnessing (see Guishard, 2009; Nishad, 2011). Yet, once we stepped back and accepted the students' initial research questions, we began to facilitate further discussion. We realized that what mattered most at this point was not whether students had developed "critical consciousness," but rather, that they were engaging in conflict through difficult dialogue about ideas that perhaps they had previously taken for granted. Posing questions as a way to address their own conflict and developing the inquiry projects that they eventually implemented became crucial for all of us to move beyond the assumptions we brought to the work. For us as adult facilitators, this move led us to the realization that asking probing questions about happiness was a way of centering students' desires, allowing for counter-stories and shifting epistemologies to re-focus on "complexity, contradiction, and the self-determination of lived lives" (Tuck, 2009b, p. 416).

BALANCING ACTS UNDER A MAGNIFYING GLASS

Despite our intention to involve the students in all our decisions, Proyecto Latin@'s relationship with the TDSB in a credit-course context meant that there were particular decisions that none of us had the authority to make. As the course instructor and one of the four co-facilitators, Mónica encountered a particularly unique set of challenges related to her responsibilities to the students and to the TDSB. Her responsibilities as the course instructor involved many hours of administrative and curricular tasks, such as maintaining accurate attendance and grade records and creating differentiated marking schemes, assignments, and lesson plans to meet the credit requirements for all three courses. These tasks, however, were at times contradictory to her role as YPAR facilitator. She had to carefully balance her two roles, often switching between them in order to honour the principles of YPAR while upholding her responsibilities with the Office of Continuing Education and the provincial curriculum. Despite Mónica's careful balancing of these roles, she still experienced tension with an administrator as well as conflict with three students. While the project maintained its commitment to transparency and balancing expectations, the constant vigilance of the TDSB administration did impose a continued stress upon the students and facilitators and the relationships between them.

Another key challenge involved balancing our roles as YPAR practitioners and professional educators in our relationships with the student-researchers. While the Ontario College of Teachers Ethical Standards mandate a clear hierarchical separation between adults and students, YPAR entails more collegial relationships that include addressing each other by first name. To maintain the flow as well as the commitment to a democratic process for decision-making, we regularly communicated with the students through e-mail, telephone, and even online conversations. Our project Facebook page was a useful resource for both the student-researchers and the co-facilitators, and became a key site for posting announcements, homework documents, photographs, and for making collective decisions. While we recognize that some teachers may be apprehensive to such practices, we also emphasize that YPAR work does require breaking from traditional and hierarchical education practices.

"All eyes on us"

Perhaps one of our greatest challenges involved negotiating the vast amount of media and public attention on *Proyecto Latin@* and underscoring the commitment to an egalitarian process between its facilitators. Despite our best efforts at embodying the power-sharing principles of YPAR, our professional titles, institutional affiliations, and gender, in particular, influenced the disparate perceptions of and interactions with each of us. These incongruities were especially overt with

regard to Rubén, who was not only the research team's only male, but also a professor with a doctorate from Harvard University. While the fact that Rubén's positional authority was necessary for the bureaucratic and public relations tasks relating to the University, the stark differences in the ways that others individually regarded us created tensions between us that required open and often challenging conversations.

An example of these tensions occurred during a visit from a reporter, who spent the majority of her time in a separate room talking to the two male adults present, the University Professor (Rubén) and the TDSB Superintendent. Despite Rubén's requests for the reporter to also consult with the two female teachers, Mónica and Cristina, the reporter only spoke with them to ask for recommendations on students to interview. These differential interactions became even more apparent when the reporter's photographer asked Mónica to suspend her lesson and move aside so that Rubén, the University Professor, could be photographed while "delivering a lesson." When Mónica refused his request, the photographer circumvented her, asking the Professor to stand by a group of students at a nearby table. Oblivious to the dynamic that had ensued between the photographer and Mónica, Rubén complied with the request, stood by the table, and engaged the students in lively conversation as the photographer clicked away.

Rubén's complicity in the perpetuation of erroneous (and patriarchal) assumptions of our YPAR work only became evident to him two days later, when the article and its accompanying photograph were published under the misleading heading: "Saturday program pays Spanish-speaking students cash to study their peers." Focusing on this small—and controversial—detail, the article made no mention of YPAR or the fact that the course was facilitated by four adults, including two female teachers. Through the image of the smiling Professor standing beside a group of immigrant students, our YPAR work, at least in this instance, was reduced to a traditional school activity that also perpetuated hierarchies between the male adult and the youth. In a sense, the fact that our project was taking place "on stage and under the magnifying glass" made the gendered tensions between us all the more visible, something that perhaps would have been obscured had the project remained "under the radar and off the grid" (Kress, DeGennaro, & Paugh, this edition).

Yet another example of the erroneous perceptions of Latina/o youth and our work involved the incredulous attitudes of other educators, including some of the teachers at UHS. For instance, two of our students were invited to speak at a panel for teachers at UHS about their experiences in the course. While the students' commentaries were well received by many teachers, there were others who insisted that these two students were exceptions and not representative of Latina/o students. Needless to say, such racist expectations illustrated precisely what the students often insisted were stereotypes that they had to confront in

school. Again, it was the visibility of our project that made these attitudes all the more evident, through the reactions of teachers as well as the public at large. In this way, being on stage and under the magnifying glass, while presenting many challenges, also made the importance of our work and the experiences of Latina/o youth that much more visible and, subsequently, difficult to ignore. In the end, in fact, it was such visibility and the positive reputation that the project gained among students at the school and the Latina/o community at large that allowed us to retain the support of the school board to continue doing this work for a second year and to begin conversations about expanding to other schools.

CONCLUSIONS AND POSSIBILITIES

While working on stage and under the magnifying glass presented many challenges and dilemmas throughout our work, these circumstances also opened up the possibility for influencing change at a systemic level. The prospects for this change, however, are higher when the "system" itself supports YPAR initiatives aimed at providing youth with the tools to "speak back" regarding their concerns and needs (Lipman, 2008). While there may be some concern about the prospect of co-opting student voices and YPAR methods as part of an inherently oppressive system, in our view there is also the possibility of transforming the system from the inside, which in turn provides students with the empowerment to take control over their own learning.

Through *Proyecto Latin@,* the students engaged with multiple processes in their own quest to proactively "speak back" to the issues that were important to their daily lives as Latina/o youth. In addition to learning about social science research, they learned that personal and systemic change is possible when they actively participate as makers of their own curriculum. In their final reflections, numerous students expressed their pride in the relationships and the skills that they had built during the course and indicated their commitment to continuing to develop their potential as leaders for their community. During a conversation with the principal and a member of the guidance office at UHS the following semester, we were delighted to hear that students who were part of the program had become active participants in the school community, advocating for their own educational rights and pursuing their educational dreams. Some of these students later joined us as we began to make plans for another YPAR course building on their previous research, which they named "Community in Action." Such demonstrated commitment on the students' part reflects the kinds of work that they and their peers had hoped would happen after the pilot course. While one student-researcher indicated that it would be great "to continue the research to help the Latino community," another youth indicated his desire for the group's

work to be shared with "the Ontario Ministry of Education, where a real change could be made."

The students involved in the "Community in Action" follow-up YPAR course continued to build on the work of their peers from the previous course. Several students from the pilot YPAR course have continued their involvement with "Proyecto Latin@" in different ways, whether as enrolled students in the "Community in Action" course or as guest facilitators. In addition to sharing their work at four academic conferences, including the 2012 AERA Annual Meeting and the TDSB Futures Conference, a group of students met with the TDSB's Director of Education in May 2012 to present and discuss their recommendations for further change.

One important question is whether and how projects like this pilot phase of Proyecto Latin@ can be further expanded and sustained in the long term across the TDSB and in other school districts, so that students in many other schools and communities can benefit from the experience. As we finalize this article, we are continuing our conversations with the TDSB and pursuing funding opportunities to expand the work we have started. In tandem, we would like to continue the dissemination of the results of the project to other high schools and educational forums, as well as actively support other student populations/groups and educators who are interested in teaching and learning using a YPAR framework.

It is important to underscore that while lesson plans and course activities can be replicated, inherent to the nature (and the outcomes) of our work were the very specific relationships we built with each other and with the student-researchers. At the beginning and end of each class, gathering in a circle and engaging in different activities helped to integrate team building and decision-making about the direction of the course. As the student-researchers got to know each other better, they also created a class support network through which they shared their personal triumphs and disappointments with everyone. This collective sharing became especially important during our lunchtimes, when the student-researchers and facilitators would share meals together and continue to build relationships with each other.

During the public research celebration at the University of Toronto, every student had the opportunity to express what each of them had learned, engaging with members of the public in an event that was organized *by them* in order to disseminate the knowledge *they* had constructed. Through their final written reflections we were made aware of how the course helped the students develop their sense of self-worth, respect, creativity, autonomy, and the ability to make meaningful and relevant contributions to the lives of others. This work demonstrated what the students themselves suggested in the first phase of *Proyecto Latin@*, that when students are supported to engage each other through peer-to-peer interaction in a context that values their cultural experiences and allows them to express

and construct their own knowledge in their own language, they can succeed, even when the demands are high. This process is at the heart of what we came to view as critical instances of "transformative learning" within the context of YPAR.[11]

As we found in our work, the YPAR process provided the students with the opportunities to critically and collectively think for themselves and view their social context with "different eyes and open eyes" (Cahill, Rios-Moore, & Threatts, 2008, p. 89). Several students indicated that the guest presenters provided them with valuable opportunities to *"abrir puertas"* (open doors) and *"hacer conexiones con la gente"* (make connections with others). Two students from the class teamed up with the Spanish language radio station *Radio Voces Latinas* and now facilitate a youth radio show on Sunday evenings. Such experiences underscore the powerful ways in which different aspects of YPAR changed students' perceptions of themselves, their social roles, and their capabilities (Canella, 2008). As one student shared, YPAR helped her learn more about herself and develop a sense of belonging with her peers, which in turn heightened her desire to help her community:

> The course makes you make a part of your culture … I learned a lot, not just about [research] technique, in groups, but also about the personal, the people, how it feels, and also how to help, get involved in my community, for my community, that's what I liked the most, what most influenced me in my life.[12]

ENDNOTES

1   We have chosen to use the term "Latina/o" as a pan-ethnic identification, which is not widespread in Canada, is clearly political, and is informed by a long tradition of mobilizing Latina/o pan-ethnicity as a political strategy (Alcoff, 2005; Padilla, 1985). Because nouns are gendered in Spanish as either male or female, the practice of writing 'o/a' at the end of a noun, as in 'Latino/a', is meant to abbreviate the gender inclusive expression 'Latino and/or Latina.' We use this convention in this article, but we deliberately place the 'a' before the 'o' as a way to interrupt gender hierarchies that typically place men before and above women. For the title of our project, we use the graphic sign '@' to further interrupt the gender binary, by using a sign that might suggest that not all gendered experiences can be captured within the binary implied in the o/a (or even a/o) convention.

2   On the educational trajectories and challenges of African-Canadian students, see Dei and his colleagues (e.g., 1995, 1997), and Codjoe (2001, 2007). Work on the education of Canada's Latina/o youth is quite sparse, mostly focusing on individual and family factors as well as student-teacher relationships and students' experiences with school administrators (see Gaztambide-Fernández & Guerrero, 2011; Schugurensky, Mantilla, & Serrano, 2009).

3   In the most recent research released by the TDSB, the "dropout" rate is estimated at a much lower 20 percent for students of Latin American decent as well as Spanish-speaking students (TDSB, 2012). Despite this dramatic difference, which might be attributed to methodological differences, as a group, Latina/o students have the second highest rate of non-completion in the TDSB. This "cohort study" only keeps track of students who started in 9th grade, and does not account for the many youth who arrive in Toronto at an older age and begin high school

at a later point (see Gaztambide-Fernández & Guerrero 2011; Schugurensky, Mantilla, & Serrano, 2009).

4   See Salazar, "Why Do 40% of Latinos Drop-Out of Toronto Schools?" available online at http://latino.foxnews.com/latino/lifestyle/2012/02/02/latinos-drop-toronto-schools/

5   Urban High School (UHS) is a pseudonym.

6   Translated from the original Spanish by the authors.

7   Translated from the original Spanish by the authors.

8   Many students who have completed the equivalent to high school in their home countries are denied accreditation and forced to return to high school if they wish to pursue higher education in Canada. This was one of the biggest challenges that students identified during the first phase of our research (Gaztambide-Fernández & Guerrero, 2011).

9   The PowerPoint presentations for each of these sub-studies can be found online at http://www. proyectolatinotoronto.com/second-phase.html

10   Regarding such moments when "compliance with academic integrity conflicts with the operational aspects of participatory research," see McCartan, Schubotz, and Murphy (2012, par. 38).

11   These insights are the subject of Cristina Guerrero's forthcoming doctoral dissertation.

12   Authors' translation from Spanish.

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