

ARISE to the Challenge: Partnering with Urban Youth to Improve Educational Research and Learning

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines Action Research into School Exclusion (Project ARISE), a two-year research partnership between K-12 students and university researchers. Based on the principles of participatory action research (PAR), the project intentionally brought together university researchers, K-12 students, and pre-service teachers to bridge research and practice for the purpose of improving learning across these three constituencies. This project sought to better understand and improve the schooling experiences of youth at risk for exclusion from school through disciplinary action. Using several sources of qualitative data, this paper demonstrates the application and value of the partnership at multiple levels of educational practice.

INTRODUCTION

Despite mounting research on urban schools and the high-poverty, high-minority students they serve, long-standing problems in K-12 urban education persist and have, in some cases, worsened. As much educational research is seen as impracticable by school practitioners, one significant issue identified as a barrier to urban school improvement is the disconnection between research and practice (Stringer, 2007). This is due, in large part, to the incongruent “manner in which both theoretical and practical knowledge are conceived in relation to each other” (Roblyer & Edwards, 2000, p. 467). Many university-based educational researchers do not experience the particular challenges of the people they are studying and are not grounded in the everyday schooling conditions that influence the issues they are investigating. Researchers customarily enter the field in the role of “experts,” having already defined the problem(s) in their own terms. Subsequently, they “define [their] results in terms that academics create and less so in terms of the issues and perspectives of the people who are the subjects” (Córdova, 2004, p. 34) of their research. As a result, academic research can lack relevance and effectiveness in the local school context and with the populations being served there.

University-based research and aca-

demical researchers play a significant role in the training of teachers. Particularly in the case of new teachers entering high-poverty, high-minority urban schools, research suggests that this training is often sorely inadequate (Ladson-Billings, 2001; Lynn, 2007; Owens & Konkol, 2004; Webster Brandon, 2003). What academic researchers often fail to do in both of these interrelated endeavors—research and teacher training—is to frame the work around the perspectives of their most essential stakeholders i.e. the K-12 students. In the vast majority of school-university research partnerships, students serve as “data sources” and/or recipients of teacher practice; they are rarely genuine partners in educational improvement. This researcher and author views it as a tremendous squandering of expertise. Both university-based researchers and their teacher education students could learn a tremendous amount from young people’s unique and valuable insights into the conditions of schooling, (Brown & Galears, 2009; Brown & Rodriguez, 2009).

This paper examines *Action Research into School Exclusion* (Project ARISE), a two-year research partnership between K-12 students and university researchers. The project sought to better understand and improve the schooling experiences of youth at risk for exclusion from school through

disciplinary action. Based on the principles of participatory action research (PAR), the project intentionally brought together university researchers, K-12 students, and pre-service teachers to bridge research and practice for the purpose of improving learning across these three constituencies. This paper demonstrates the application and value of this partnership at multiple levels of educational practice.

CONTEXTUAL CONTEXT

The Role of Youth in the Work of the Academy

The involvement of youth – whether voluntary or involuntary, direct or indirect – has been essential to university-based educational research and practice since the early 20th century (Tyack, 1974). However, their participation has largely been characterized by a lack of control despite being the primary focus of this work. Some adults – e.g., parents and teachers – have also experienced a relative lack of power in educational endeavors within the academy. However, the silencing and objectification of youth has been particularly severe due to hierarchical power relations in schools and society, as well as the embedded cultural beliefs about children and adolescents.

As Buckingham (2000) asserts, young people are denied the right to self-

determination because they “have been defined in terms of their [supposed] lack of rationality, social understanding or self-control” (p. 14). This reflects a widely-shared cultural perception that because young people do not have the capacity to discern and address their own needs, responsible adults must act on their behalf (Buckingham, 2000). This perception is manifested in schools, particularly those serving children who are Black and Latino/a, low-income, and “low-achieving.” In these schools, young people’s activities tend to be highly regulated, regimented, and configured in ways over which they have little control and into which they have little input (Noguera, 2008).

Young people’s lack of power over the conditions of and investigations into schooling also reflect the dominant and long-standing belief within the academy that “naming the world [and others’ experiences within it] is the task of an elite” (Freire, 1970, p. 90). It also reflects the false dichotomy between the revered “scientific” knowledge of academic researchers and the “experiential” knowledge of local informants (Gaventa, 1993). Thus, while they may contribute “raw data,” youth have largely been considered unqualified to interpret that data and to discern how it should be used to inform institutional policies and practices. The devaluing of local knowledge, in combination with perceptions about the intellectual capacities of youth, creates a double jeopardy. This is intensified for socioeconomically and educationally disenfranchised youth who have been unduly scrutinized and problematized within academic research literature and disempowered in research processes.

The work within universities directly impacts the daily lives of low-income youth of color, through its influence on school policy and practice. Denying them any control over this research violates the democratic ideal that people should have “the opportunity to speak [their] mind, be heard and counted by others, and... to have an influence on outcomes” (Cook-Sather, 2006, p. 363) in matters related to their lives. Affording low-income youth of color some influence over the investigations and

decisions that impact their daily lives, however, is not merely a matter of ethics. These young people hold vital knowledge on experiences of schooling from which university-based researchers are largely distanced (Fine et al., 2005).

University researchers have developed expertise, written books and journal articles, and built careers upon the data extracted from youth, but the young people themselves have rarely benefited directly from these endeavors. However, a small but growing number of researchers are conducting research *with* and not simply *on* youth. Through this research, young people have gained valuable intellectual, academic, and professional skills and opportunities to insert their perspectives into realms of power and influence (Brown & Galeas, 2009; Brown & Rodriguez, 2009; Fine, Roberts, & Torre, 2004; Ginwright & Cammarota, 2007; Irizarry, 2009; Rogers, Morrell, & Enyedy, 2007). Project ARISE is an example of such research that holds youth development central to the mission of improving educational research, theories, and practices generated within the academy.

Methodological and Pedagogical Bases

As both an empirical study and an educational experience, Project ARISE was organized around the theoretical, methodological, and pedagogical precepts of PAR (Freire, 1973; Shor, 1992). PAR is “systematic inquiry, with the collaboration of those affected by the issue being studied, for purposes of education and taking action or effecting social change” (Minkler, 2000, p. 192). In PAR, local knowledge is essential to understanding and intervening into problems. Representatives from the population under study act as co-researchers and are actively engaged in all stages of the research process (Córdova, 2004; Gaventa, 1993). This methodological approach reflects the imperative that socially marginalized peoples must interrogate and intervene into the conditions of their own marginalization in order to achieve the social transformation they desire (Freire, 1970).

As is often the case in PAR initiated by university researchers, I initially ap-

proached the youth in Project ARISE with a broad topic: the experiences of students excluded from mainstream learning environments. The youth and university researchers (two doctoral students and I) worked collaboratively to identify pertinent subtopics, design the study to investigate those issues, collect and analyze data, and represent and use study findings. The youth researchers came to the project with a wide range of competencies but no experience in empirical research. Thus, building upon existing knowledge and skills was a significant part of the project. To promote optimal participation, learning, and personal growth, Project ARISE was guided by several vital principles. There was an intentional and explicit commitment to treating and representing all team members as complex, intellectual, and valued human beings. The project capitalized on existing and developing knowledge, skills, experiences, needs and desires in ways that allowed everyone to participate in meaningful ways. Many research strategies were developed “in situ” to respond to immediate and emergent needs, unlike in more traditional academic research where methods are determined in advance of fieldwork.

PAR itself is a form of liberatory education in that it provides the opportunity for local researchers to “remake[s] authority... [and] exercise their own powers of reconstruction (Shor & Freire, 1987, p. 16-17). By engaging in and exercising control over the terms, outcomes, and uses of empirical research, they develop expertise in a form of knowledge production that has traditionally been the prerogative of university researchers. Dialogue is a critical tool in this process, providing opportunities for researchers to deepen their knowledge and apply it to the problem(s) under study. ARISE used dialogue to promote critical thought and action among all the participants—the researchers and our audiences—in the realms of research and practice.

Because PAR is aimed at *action*, or intervention(s) into the problem(s) under study, it is designed to produce knowledge that is directly relevant and applicable to the local context. Action

is not the finale of the research process, but “co-researchers test practices and gather evidence” (Reason & Bradbury, 2008, p. 1) in an cyclical approach to gathering, analyzing, and applying data. Action is a means of examining and enhancing the validity of the research findings as well as for creating social change. One means through which this was achieved in ARISE was by using study data and findings to design a series of workshops for pre-service teachers that deliberately bridged research, theory, and practice.

The next section of this paper gives an overview of the design and implementation of Project ARISE. In describing some of the research activities and the data collected, I provide examples and resources for those conducting PAR with youth, particularly in urban schools.

PROJECT ARISE

Study Setting and Selection of the Youth Researchers

The study was set in “Achieve,” an urban K-12 special education alternative school in the Mid-Atlantic, serving all Black and Latina/o, mostly low-income, students with a documented disability—emotional, behavioral, learning, physical and/or speech. The goals of the research were:

1. to better understand the schooling experiences of adolescents excluded from mainstream public schools for disciplinary reasons,
2. to build on the strengths and address the challenges of students at risk for disciplinary exclusion, and
3. to develop an action plan to improve the schooling experiences of these students.

The ARISE research team included nine youth researchers, two of my doctoral advisees, and me. The youth researchers were 11th- and 12th-graders—three African American boys, two Latino boys, three African American girls, and one Latina girl. They were targeted because I believed that they would be better able than younger

students to meet the social, intellectual, and commitment demands of the project and they were recruited through informational meetings in their English classes and school staff referrals. Additionally, the aim was to enlist 8-12 students who would continue into the second year of the project.

Although the project demanded high-level intellectual work, there were no academic prerequisites. My previous experience as a teacher demonstrated that youth who have not done well in school can and will engage in academic, intellectual pursuit when:

- it is relevant to their own lives,
- their knowledge and experiences are legitimized,
- they have control over the terms of their learning, and
- they are offered opportunities to access and present their learning in modes they can grasp.

The most important qualities in recruiting the youth, as was anticipated and demonstrated throughout the project, were high levels of interest in and commitment to the project.

Conducting research with students in school, during school hours, can present many challenges, the first of which is getting into the schedule. In the case of ARISE, I was able to secure an elective block for two consecutive years with the help of an administrator whom I knew at the school. During the 2006-07 and 2007-08 school years, the doctoral students and I taught a *Social Action Research Seminar*. This is where much of the work of the project took place. The seminar, which met for four hours per week, was offered through a school program designed to prepare students for life outside of and after high school. Having a strong [research proposal](#) that clearly delineated the benefits for the students and the school, as well as a detailed curriculum that outlined how those benefits would be achieved, were vital. It was especially important to show how the project planned to strengthen students’ academic skills in literacy, mathematics, and critical thinking.

Being the teacher of record came with many of the demands of a class-

room teacher, such as lesson planning, accountability for student learning, and working within the time constraints of class periods. Facilitating Project ARISE—in addition to my teaching, writing, advising and committee responsibilities at the university—consumed more of my time and energy than I anticipated at the outset. As such, the assistance of the doctoral students was invaluable. In addition to acting as co-researchers, they helped to prepare lesson plans, facilitate seminar sessions, conduct interviews, and take observation field notes while I was teaching.

Further, as a faculty member, I was accustomed to many conveniences—a well stocked library, a copy machine, computers, the internet (without restrictions), pertinent software, video equipment, technology assistance, paper, and writing utensils. Such resources are often not readily available in high-poverty urban schools. I brought laptops, video equipment, handouts, books, and other supplies to and from the university, as I had no secure place to store them at the school. Thus, PAR researchers in urban schools must be prepared to provide all or most of the resources needed for their projects.

One aspect of PAR research that is seldom written about is how to cope with the personal needs and challenges of local researchers that significantly impact the work. Although I had experienced this as a traditional classroom teacher, these challenges were profoundly intensified in Project ARISE. Research team members spent a lot of time working closely together in and out of the seminar (e.g., workshops at the university and out-of-town trips to conferences) and we developed close relationships. In a research collaborative, especially in PAR, successful implementation of the study requires the participation and, thus, the well-being, of every team member. As an adult and university faculty member with significant resources, the young people depended on me to assist them with a variety of challenges in their lives. In talking to colleagues doing similar work, I learned that others have also experienced receiving late-night phone calls of distress, attending court dates,

talking to social workers, helping young people to find a place to stay, and counseling them through trauma and grief. However, as will be explained more fully, although the demands of school-based PAR projects with youth are great, the benefits can be tremendous.

The Research Process

In the first week of the seminar I gathered information on the skills and interests of the youth, did team-building activities, and introduced the nature, purpose, and use of empirical research. I did not front-load the project with theoretical information, as is customary in training academic researchers. As most of the youth researchers had histories of academic challenge and disengagement, it was important to begin the project with activities that would allow them to experience early success. Rapid transition into the hands-on activities helped to build confidence and enthusiasm among the youth.

The ARISE study had a two-tiered design. The entire research team examined the schooling experiences of students at “Achieve” through interviews with students and teachers. Additionally, the doctoral students and I investigated the youth researchers’ experiences in the seminar. Data for this aspect of the study included in-depth interviews with the youth, their journals and work products, and audio and videotape of seminar sessions and presentations. Participation in this part of the project was voluntary which was explained at the outset, and assent and consent forms were provided for the youth and their parents. This aspect of the project, which is not the primary focus of this paper, was conducted as a more traditional ethnographic study. However, because there is still relatively little documentation of the processes and methods used in PAR studies in K-12 educational settings, data from this meta-level perspective is included to help build this knowledge base.

The areas of investigation in ARISE were organized around the experiences and concerns of the youth researchers who had direct knowledge of being excluded from school. We used two strategies put forth by Shor and Freire

(1987): “choosing problem-themes from student culture... [and] Studying academic or formal subjects in a situated manner” (p. 19). The first research activity was *Mapping Your Educational Journey*. On a planning form, all research team members (youth and adults) recorded the schools they had attended, significant events that had happened there and the feelings they evoked. They then translated their information into a poster, which was presented to the research team. Team members used the *Mapping Connections* guide to keep track of incidents and feelings depicted by the presenter that they could relate to their own experiences. Through this collective analysis, which included discourse and concept mapping, the team generated initial research subtopics. This activity put the young people’s experiences at the center of the research and built solidarity within the group.

As is vital to the research process, we then expanded our understanding of the subtopics by connecting them to more “formal” theories. Because most of the youth had very underdeveloped reading skills, we used a combination of documentary films, audio, and texts to make the ideas accessible. Two particularly helpful resources were *National Public Radio*, which has archived radio shows on a variety of school-related topics, and articles written by Dr. Pedro Noguera from New York University. We found Dr. Noguera’s scholarly texts to be among the most textually accessible and many of them examined issues pertinent to the study. They were also available, online, for free. The doctoral students and I abridged other articles and used an intense guided reading strategy (Brown & Galeas, 2009) and concept maps to make complex ideas accessible and to relate them to understandings generated by the research team. Additionally, each youth researcher kept a journal which helped me to assess their understandings.

Having synthesized others’ ideas which deepened the teams’ initial understandings of the subtopics, we developed a central research question for each subtopic. We then identified information needed to answer each

question as well as the means through which and from whom we could get that information. All of the questions lent themselves to interviews—with students and/or teachers—and an interview protocol was developed for each subtopic and constituency. I prepared guidelines for these activities, replicating the ideas within academic texts on qualitative research methods (Bodgan & Biklen, 2003; Kvale, 1996; Maxwell, 1996), which were largely inaccessible to the youth researchers due to how they are written. Based on Kvale’s (1996) *Interviews*, I developed a list of interview tips and the team viewed several online videos on how to conduct video-recorded interviews. The youth practiced interviewing with each other in a “fish bowl” activity. One youth researcher interviewed another while the rest of the team took notes on process, using the “tips” sheet. Each practice interview was debriefed by the team in order to improve technique before interviewing participants. The young people were particularly adept at creating relevant research questions and following up on interviewees’ responses to uncover the complexities of the experience of school exclusion.

Data Collection and Analysis

When the actual interviewing began, about a month into the project, it was one of most exciting activities for the youth researchers. They interviewed thirty students in grades 9-12 and six teachers at the school for 15-20 minutes on each subtopic. *Interviews* were conducted in teams of three, with one team member interviewing, one filming, and one responsible for set-up, staging, and prepping the interviewees. We rotated responsibilities to ensure that everyone gained experience in the three areas. As interviews were conducted, two technologically savvy youth researchers downloaded the video footage to a computer, burned the interviews to DVD, and converted audio to mp3 files to be transcribed by the doctoral students and me. The enhanced levels of the technical expertise of the youth researchers played a vital role in carrying out research.

Using transcripts from the first few

interviews, I then began to train the youth researchers in coding. Struggles with reading and lack of enthusiasm indicated that coding large amounts of text was not a feasible analytic strategy for most of the youth researchers. Although all team members were familiarized with the process, only two young people worked on coding transcripts. Because it was important that all team members participate in analyzing the data, we developed a strategy for directly analyzing the video footage. I created a protocol that prompted researchers to identify significant words, ideas, concepts, emotions, and body language while viewing the interview on video tape. In teams and individually, youth researchers analyzed the footage using the protocol. They generated both deductive codes based on the experiences of the researchers, the outside texts, and inductive codes based on what was significant to the participants. By logging footage time, we were able to match up codes identified through video analysis with the corresponding transcript text.

From this point, the text and data analyses proceeded largely in a traditional manner. This was a collaborative, team-based activity, preceded by training in the nature of concepts and theoretical analysis (again after adapting texts on research methodologies to make the ideas accessible). We placed the data into matrices by code and used a constant comparison method of analysis, in which “incident[s] in the data [are] compared to other incidents for similarities and differences” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 73). We did this to get more clarity on each code and how it compared, conceptually, to others. This was particularly important as coding was conducted by many different individuals. As a result, some codes were kept intact and others were collapsed, broken out into more precise codes, or eliminated. Afterwards, we combined codes conceptually by grouping them into categories based on patterns that emerged among them. Categories included language bias, physical activity, heterosexism, and respect. Thereafter, theoretical comparisons were made by examining the “properties” (the characteristics that define each category)

and “dimensions” (the variation of characteristics within each category) of each category (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 101). This informed the ways in which we grouped categories under the broader themes of *teacher-student conflict* and *student-student conflict*.

After completing the first phase of coding and analysis, we decided on the “action” component of the study. This was designed to “bring together action and reflection, theory and practice, in participation with others, in the pursuit of practical solutions” (Reason & Bradbury, 2008). It included presenting the study findings to the school community and at national research conferences, writing a final report for school administrators, writing journal articles, and conducting workshops for pre-service teachers. The youth researchers participated in all of these activities. Below, I will describe the workshops for pre-service teachers in further detail, as another example of action.

WORKSHOPS FOR PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS

The ARISE research team conducted four workshops for pre-services teachers in the College of Education of the 4-year university at which I was teaching at the time. Two were in the class, *Introduction to Special Education*, one was in *Diversity for Teachers*, and one was in *Social Foundations of Education*. Each workshop, which was videotaped, began with the youth researchers presenting the research questions, study design, findings, and implications. This was followed by a variety of activities developed by the team, including large- and small-group discussions, role-playing, and case studies based on particular themes identified within the data. Each presentation also included a spoken word performance by one of youth researchers who was also a poet.

One very effective learning strategy was the analysis of a video-based case study. The research team produced a 12-minute play entitled, *Classroom Chaos*. It exemplified issues within the research data connected to the themes of *teacher-student conflict* and *student-student conflict*. Some of the issues depicted were the banning of non-

English languages, teasing between students, student embarrassment, and inattention to students’ personal needs. The play was scripted, directed, and acted out by the youth researchers. It was videotaped, burned to DVD, and used as a teaching tool in the workshops. After viewing the video, the pre-service teachers examined the ways in which teachers can either ameliorate or contribute to the variety of causes of conflict that can arise in the classroom. This was an effective way to bring data to life and to increase understandings of how issues that emerged from the data can play out in the classroom.

As part of the workshop curriculum, each pre-service teacher was required to submit a 2- to 3-page reflection on the presentation. These reflections and the video footage of the presentations then became part of the study data set. We analyzed them to ascertain the effectiveness of the presentation, looking for both agreements and discrepancies between the pre-service teachers’ understandings and what we wanted to convey. These analyses were then used to strengthen subsequent presentations.

The Issue of Respect: A Closer Look at One Presentation

One of the workshops conducted in the *Social Foundations* course contained thirty-one pre-service teachers who had not yet done their in-service training. This included two Asian, three African American, and one Latina student and the remainder were White. The research team focused on causes of conflict among teachers and students in this workshop. The youth shared research findings and personal reflections related to various topics, including racism, language bias, and heterosexism. Across all of these topics, *respect* was a significant theme, and the youth researchers discussed multiple ways in which research participants experienced disrespect. One was the banning of non-English languages in the classroom. The two Latina/o youth researchers presented this subtopic, which they related to their own experiences. After presenting the data, one youth researcher, Christina,

spoke about personal experiences of being removed from the classroom for speaking her first language, Spanish.

I was talking my language and [the teacher] didn't like the way I talked so she kicked me out a couple of times. I kept getting in trouble because I kept speaking in Spanish. Right now, I speak more English, but at the same time you want to keep learning your own language so that you won't lose what you learned. And that's my culture... Teachers don't understand the way the students are with their language. In the end, don't disrespect a student just because they're speaking their own language. (workshop, 04/29/07)

Christina explained that when speaking their home language is forbidden or punished, students experience it as disrespect. She shared the vital connection between her home language, culture, and identity. This was reiterated by José Angel who also described being removed from class for speaking Spanish. "June," a pre-service teacher, took exception to the youths' perspectives, saying, Like if we all started speaking our own language, saying what we wanted, how is the teacher going to teach anything or control it? It's hard in schools when you're told to teach something in, you know, standard English, and when [teachers] don't understand Spanish and [students] alienate the rest of the class... If I'm giving a lesson and, you know, and everybody needs to know what's being taught, like, speaking another language is just a very big distraction. (workshop, 04/29/07)

In response, José Angel spoke back very authoritatively in Spanish to the pre-service teachers, advising them to "use your mind" (workshop, 04/29/07), rather than responding in reactionary ways to the use of different languages in the classroom. Mike, an African American youth researcher, weighed in, and advised pre-service teachers to learn some Spanish, just as he had done, in order to better understand and connect with Spanish-speaking students.

June demonstrated little empathy or concern with how her own actions, as a teacher, might impact students. This was also illustrated in her reflection paper, in which she wrote, "The problem is that a student is disrupting the class lesson. I would not allow any student to speak their language when others are trying to learn because it's a huge distraction." (reflection paper 05/03/07) She continued, ...all I kept hearing was respect, respect, respect. What about respecting teachers first? The students seemed very idealistic in what they want out of their teachers. How long do they expect teachers to spend at school and with their students, if many have to work second jobs as SAT prep teachers or coaches just to make ends meet? They, as students, did not seem to understand the politics of education that exist today. How and why is it expected for teachers to know every little detail about every single student? (reflection paper, 05/03/07)

June discounted the young people's appeal for respect, posing it as naïve and based on inadequate knowledge. She implied that the difficulties that teachers face exempt from them from demonstrating respect in some of the ways identified by study participants, including getting to know students personally. Nor was she the only pre-service teacher who expressed defensiveness about demands for respect. For example, Steve, another pre-service teacher, said to the youth, You talk about respect and it's easy to put it on the teacher but it also has to come back to the students. They have to want to learn. They have to be open to showing respect to the teacher. From your point of view, it's the teachers that don't understand you but from the teacher's point of view it's the kids that don't want to learn. It's the kids that are trouble-makers. It's the kids that are loud and disruptive... So, all of you seem intelligent enough and you seem like great students, but it's the other kids. (workshop, 04/29/07)

Steve suggested that teachers and students have equal responsibility for classroom relations. He also insinuated that students who are disruptive, loud, resistant, and disobedient did not deserve respect. He insisted that students must meet particular conditions like wanting to learn, being open, and showing respect to the teacher. This was in opposition to what the researchers reported—that students both need and deserve unconditional, basic human respect. Steve's comment was skillfully addressed by one youth researcher, who pointed out that teachers are paid adult professionals, who must respect and invest in the success of their students regardless of the troubles they may cause.

It is interesting to note Steve's specious compliment to the youth researchers that they "seem[ed] like great students" who were "intelligent enough," unlike the "trouble-makers" he described. Steve introduced the idea that these youth, engaged in high-level intellectual work, were fundamentally different from others in their peer group. Thereafter, other pre-service teachers also posed the youth researchers as different from their peers, focusing on imagined, troublesome "other kids." For example, two White women asked the youth researchers,

Do you guys think you can go into some of those public schools and maybe do talks with some of them to help motivate *those* students? (workshop, 04/29/07) Is there anything that you can do to help influence *those* students, students that might not want to graduate, students in your own school? (workshop, 04/29/07)

Such comments took attention away from teachers' responsibility and placed it onto students. The irony, however, was that the ARISE youth researchers **were** those "other kids." As was explained at the outset of the presentation, they had all had significant troubles at school, including multiple suspensions and expulsions. One of the most vital objectives of the presentation was to help the pre-service teachers understand the significance of

respect, caring, and support for all students, including those with disciplinary troubles. However, in our review of the data from the presentations, we realized that some pre-service teachers had not fully grasped this point. In the next workshop, we focused more intently on language use and the importance of respect and asked the pre-service teachers to read an article on each of the topics in advance.

I give this particular account as an example of the disconnection between the objectives of the presentations and the understandings of pre-service teachers, which will provide context for the following section. There were actually many more examples of connection and genuine learning and growth in the workshops. This will be discussed below, as I examine how project ARISE benefitted the pre-service teachers, the youth researchers, my doctoral students, and me.

IMPROVING RESEARCH, LEARNING, AND PRACTICE ON MULTIPLE LEVELS

Pre-Service Teachers: From Abstract to Concrete

Teacher education programs often provide pre-service teachers, who are predominantly White and middle-class, with inadequate opportunities to build understandings of and respect for the knowledge, culture, experiences and perspectives of students in urban schools (Ladson-Billings, 2001; Lynn, 2007; Owens & Konkol, 2004; Webster Brandon, 2003). The workshops conducted by the ARISE team addressed this issue, bringing K-12 students and pre-service teachers together in a learning experience where power between them was inverted. When marginalized youth presented as researchers and experts, this disrupted pre-service teachers' existing beliefs and introduced new ideas for consideration. Much of this was related to race and culture, as the following pre-service teacher wrote in her reflection about one presentation:

Many people, including myself, think about race issues in schools as a huge part of the history of the 50s and 60s, not necessarily an issue of today. What came as a shock to

me was how frequently these issues still arise. (reflection, 05/03/07)

Another wrote, "The discussion that stood out to me was our discussion on language. I had originally believed that only English should be spoken in the classroom but after listening to these students, I now believe that different languages should be incorporated." (reflection, 05/03/07)

For individuals like these two White, English-speaking pre-service teachers, the significance of racial/ethnic and linguistic bias can be difficult to grasp if they are not personalized in some way. In teacher education programs, interactions between K-12 students and pre-service teachers are often structured around pre-practicum observations and student teaching. They tend to focus on the instructional, rather than the relational, aspects of teaching and learning. In these contexts, opportunities for analytic dialogue, centered on students' experiences, feelings, and perspectives, are limited. Within the ARISE workshops, such dialogue, based upon empirical research findings, helped the pre-service teachers to more concretely understand the challenges facing urban students. As one pre-service teacher reflected, I guess from growing up in a predominantly white, middle-upper-class town I have never really experienced any traumatizing events that have to do with race, sexual orientation, language, etc. I have never really thought about how lucky I had it until I heard their stories. I have to admit that I was really naïve as to what really goes on in the school system... (reflection, 05/03/07)

One objective of the workshops was for the pre-service teachers not only to gain a deeper understanding of student experience but also to consider how everyday teacher practices can promote learning and engagement, especially for students who have had difficulties with school. Many of the pre-service teachers, like the one quoted below, demonstrated evidence of this in their reflection papers.

Our class saw firsthand how our

very own system we are about to enter, holds the very students back that we are meant to promote. We can use this experience and learn how to reach troubled students. The ideas received by the students of respecting the students and being patient with the students [are?] is very beneficial for a soon-to-be teacher. (reflection, 05/03/07)

Clearly, one such workshop is woefully inadequate for promoting substantive change. It would be useful to pursue further research on how such workshops might produce a long-term effect on pre-service teachers when they have classrooms of their own. Even without such research, however, the pre-service teachers' reflections and high level of engagement in the workshops demonstrated that the vast majority of them were eager to learn from the youth and were compelled to think more deeply about the issues presented in our research. Previously, many had abstractly explored issues of diversity, as evidenced in their reflections. However, during the workshops they gained a more concrete understanding of racial/ethnic, cultural, linguistic and experiential differences and their impact on teaching in learning. Having dialogue with young urban researchers helped the pre-service teachers better understand how their beliefs and practices can play out with students in real classroom settings.

Youth Researchers: Becoming an Authority

Through Project ARISE, the youth researchers engaged with complex theories and ideas about the conditions of schooling. Drawing on their own experiences as vital points of departure, they learned to conduct empirical research and create multiple representations of learning. The project provided spaces in which they could use their own "funds of knowledge" (Moll, 1992) to engage in learning with clear and relevant purposes.

Low-income students of color, particularly those with histories of academic and disciplinary troubles in

school and who are attending alternative schools, often experience curriculum that is not rigorous, interesting, or relevant to their lives (Brown, 2006; Fine, Burns, Payne, & Torre, 2004; Lange & Sletten, 2002; Laudan, 2006). When they talked about the intellectual quality of their learning in Project ARISE, they often contrasted it to other academic settings. For example, Lance remarked that the research seminar was “more mature than the other environments... We have to think of a way to present these projects in a way that other people understand, and [there] has to be a bit of professionalism inside of this” (interview, 04/30/07). Further, Bruce said, “it’s been great because like I got to do things that I really could have not done. Like two years ago, I probably was just like sitting class and not really doing anything.” (interview, 03/06/07)

Lance discussed the challenging and enlightening work of interpreting someone else’s words, saying, “I’ve learned more about how other students feel about school. I was watching the DVD that I’m helping edit and I was listening to the answers to the questions and I was trying to understand where they’re coming from as to why they don’t do the work. I kind of got a better understanding... [I] Still can’t understand it fully, but I have a better understanding because I’ve heard a lot of – I’ve seen like interviews with the students. I’ve heard them talk and thought and analyzed what they’re saying.” (interview, 04/30/07)

Additionally, Gary said that he can better “understand where teachers are coming from” and “understands [his] peers more” (interview, 02/06/07), through his analysis of the interviews.

The youth also talked about how they valued the opportunities to bring their own perspectives to the research process, as Daneel and José Angel explain below.

Daneel: ...the research that we do in the Arise Program... helps people who are trying to become teachers better understand how they can react to a child when they’re teaching

them or to better teach children. I think it’s unique to do something like that and to like give your point of view on how you feel on some of these issues. (interview, 05/24/07) José Angel: I actually loved it [the presentation] because I actually got to speak my mind. I spoke my language at it too. I got emotional, but I spoke my mind. You know, I spoke the words that I really wanted to speak to people, that I wasn’t gonna hide anymore. (interview, 02/07/08)

José Angel’s comments speak to the ways in which students often feel that “adults in their schools do not listen to their views nor do they involve students in important decisions affecting their own activities or work” (Mitra, 2004, p. 652). Research shows that this is particularly true of marginalized students of color (Alonso, Anderson, Su, & Theoharis, 2009; Fine, 1991; Fine, Burns, Payne, & Torre, 2004). The youth researchers talked about their authority to speak, juxtaposed to common perceptions about young people like themselves.

Marcos: You know we can make a change in the world. You know, how kids can actually go up to grown-ups, ‘cause most of the time grown-ups think kids are, like, gangsters, you know, come from the ‘hood – just because you come from the ‘hood, they think you’re bad. You got a gun on you, you know what I’m saying? (interview, 02/07/08) Chantal: I see that it’s a need for teachers to understand us as students. Sometimes we get a bad reputation because of our actions, so we’re called the “underprivileged youth” at times... So, I mean, I just think it’s my job as a youth that is being called that to stand up and say, “No. We have a voice too!” (interview, 02/07/08)

For the youth researchers, all of whom had had significant difficulties with school and had been labeled as “learning disabled” and/or “emotionally disordered,” Project ARISE provided a vital opportunity to prove to others that

they were as competent and as worthy as they came to know themselves to be.

Learning among the youth researchers can be seen as a process of becoming an authority, which is far more powerful than merely being a research subject, even in a study that is subject-centered. For example, “student voice” research highlights the perspectives of youth, but they often have little control over the development of the research, and the academic researcher’s interpretation of their voices is the ultimate authority. This is because research-based knowledge is more valued and thus taken more seriously than anecdotal or experiential knowledge (Gaventa, 1993). Not surprisingly, when young people *become* academic researchers, they also gain authority through the experiences of doing so. They acquire research skills, develop “expert” knowledge, use empirical data to back up their assertions, and hone written and oral presentation skills. Also, not surprisingly, gaining authority helped to build self-assuredness among the youth researchers. As José Angel declared at one presentation, “We’re young kids. We’re 16, 17, 18, teaching grown-ups. So you can’t tell me I didn’t learn anything!” (workshop, 04/29/07)

University Researchers: Improving Practice Within the Academy

During my first year as a doctoral student, I was teaching in a high-poverty, predominantly Black and Latino/a urban high school beset with the many problems found within and outside of these types of schools. In that year, I took a required curriculum theory and development course taught by an insightful professor whose K-12 teaching career had ended more than 25 years earlier. As she shared research-based “best practices” of curriculum development and implementation, I was most often left with the thought: “This will never work in my classroom.” That experience continues to serve as a cautionary tale about the imperative of keeping my own work as a university teacher and researcher grounded in the everyday experiences of K-12 teachers and students. As a

result of my own learning and development in Project ARISE, I am more than ever convinced of that imperative.

Partnering with the youth researchers greatly contributed to the reliability of the study's data, authenticity, and findings, as well as to my own development as a researcher. The youth raised issues of vital importance for excluded students. They helped to devise effective interview questions and to interpret the words of student participants in authentic ways. These are just a few examples of how they drew upon their unique expertise—which neither I nor the doctoral students had—to enhance the quality of the study. Their insights and guidance increased my skill in ascertaining how research participants make sense of their own experiences. They also helped the adult researchers to suspend or “bracket” preconceptions about the topics under discussion (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 6), a skill that is vital in empirical work.

Many university researchers and their work are “buffered... from the subtleties, nuances, and untidiness of human behavior in schools” (Davis, 2007, p. 570) when they work outside of the many school-based factors that influence the topics they study. In contrast, as a classroom teacher in the research seminar, I had to directly work inside and through many challenges that arose in the study. Through a process of simultaneously learning and doing, I had the opportunity to make sense of the research within the everyday contexts and work of students and teachers in ways that were both theoretical and practical. One example of this is how I adapted the data coding process. Many student research participants echoed the sentiments of one study participant who stated, “They [teachers] give us easy work. They treat us like we're stupid” (interview, 11/11/06). She, like most of the youth researchers, had intellectual capacities that far exceeded their extant academic skills. Connecting research to practice, I was compelled to find ways to meet the youth researchers where they were, both academically and intellectually, and to develop their abilities. This imperative was driven

by the participatory principles of the research, the goals of the study, and my responsibility as a teacher. Bridging important gaps between research and practice added legitimacy, relevance, and empathy to my university work with pre- and in-service teachers.

The ARISE workshops were one of the many ways in which I was able to draw upon the research to enhance my teacher development practice. In the seminar, the ways of working with the youth were just as important as the work itself. One vital aspect of the workshops was modeling respectful, caring, and productive relationships with young people. In the workshops, the doctoral students and I supported the development of the youth researchers as experts in their own right. When necessary, we addressed instances in which their intellectual contributions were discounted, demeaned, or misunderstood.

As discussed earlier, the workshops uncovered some beliefs and assumptions held by pre-service teachers, how they might be enacted in the classroom, and their potential effects on students. I was struck by how this might easily go undetected. Espousing the values of cultural competency and respect for youth in a college classroom does not mean that one will know how to put them into practice in the classroom. As an example, I return to the previously mentioned discussion on respect and language prohibition. The defensiveness and arrogance with which June responded to the youth researchers provided insight into how she, as a teacher, might respond to students whose perspectives and experiences are different from her own. Teachers who fail to interrogate their own racial/ethnic, class and language biases are likely to have profound difficulties in working with language “minority” students and students of color, whose numbers are rapidly growing in our public schools. They may unintentionally enact their biases in the classroom, to the detriment of their students. Pre-service teachers' interactions with the youth researchers helped me to more fully understand what competencies they must develop in order to be successful class-

room teachers, particularly in urban schools. With this understanding, I am able to design educational experiences that better address the learning needs of the pre- and in-service teachers.

Lastly, Project ARISE improved my practice of training the next generation of researchers and teacher educators. University faculty are rarely given direct instruction in how to train doctoral students through their research projects, even though this is a vital part of our work. Because ARISE was a PAR project, my doctoral advisees, like the youth researchers, were full participants in the research process, developing their own skills in research design and the collection, analysis, and use of data and findings. Engaging with them in the methodological and pedagogical work of ARISE, I was well positioned to help them identify and build the competencies and understandings that they will need to carry out their own research in urban schools.

CONCLUSION

Project ARISE demonstrates that it is a myth that youth with underdeveloped academic skills, particularly formal literacy skills, cannot engage with complex ideas in a meaningful way. In fact, denying struggling students access to rich intellectual experiences is precisely one of the ways in which schools ensure that many low-income and “disabled” youth of color never advance beyond remedial learning. When we delimit youth's capacity to help us understand educational issues, we stymie their intellectual and personal development at the expense of the quality of scholarly knowledge and the interventions they inform.

As demonstrated in this paper, genuine collaboration with youth, particularly through PAR, has many benefits. In capitalizing on their expertise, not merely as “data sources” but as co-researchers within the contexts of schools, outside researchers are positioned to develop more sophisticated understandings of school-based problems. Such partnerships also increase the likelihood that research will be relevant and applicable to schools and

the young people they serve. Further, teacher educators' work is strengthened and gains legitimacy and relevancy when they co-construct knowledge with K-12 students and bridge the gap between theory and practice so prevalent in teacher education programs throughout the country. In utilizing youth expertise more effectively in university-based work, we will gain deeper understandings of the conditions that limit some students' success and how they can be effectively addressed.

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