

Reflecting on Revolution

Revolutionizing Education: Youth Participatory Action Research in Motion. Julio Cammarota and Michelle Fine (Eds.). New York: Routledge, 2008. 248 pp., \$34.95 (paper). ISBN-13: 978-0-415-95616-1.

Reviewed by
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In *Revolutionizing Education: Youth Participatory Action Research in Motion*, editors Julio Cammarota and Michelle Fine offer a compelling and complex vision of urban youth engaged in social justice research and action. In chapters that interweave theory, research, description, images, case study, narrative, and reflection, readers are invited into the world of participatory action research (PAR), and specifically youth PAR (YPAR). Although familiar to readers outside of the U.S. context, especially in Third World countries where participatory action research originated, PAR is still fairly uncommon here. Like other critical, community-based, activist approaches to research, PAR is critiqued on the grounds that it lacks rigor, objectivity, and generalizability. *Revolutionizing Education* challenges this depiction of PAR, instead offering rich portraits of the power of “research conducted ‘with’ as opposed to ‘on’ youth, around the issues they find most important in their lives” (p. vii). Such research transforms the lives of participants and helps them to develop the habits, skills, and dispositions needed to also transform their worlds. As the editors suggest, this is a truly revolutionary approach to research, one that is firmly grounded in the belief that research should be participatory, should highlight indigenous knowledge, and should actively contribute to creating a better world.

Revolutionizing Education is a rich, multifaceted, engaging, yet sometimes uneven, book. In our review, we begin by providing an overview of the book and then reflect on the book through dialogue, a strategy that matches the spirit of PAR. We conclude by unpacking the central theme of “revolution” and how it plays out across the various chapters. The editors open the book with an introduction to the concept of PAR and the ways in which it involves a pedagogy of resistance that has the potential to enable oppressed youth to name, understand, challenge, and transcend their own oppression. Describing YPAR, the editors suggest that it is marked by a common pattern:

Young people learn through research about complex power relations, histories of struggle, and the consequences of oppression. They begin to re-vision and denaturalize the realities of their social worlds and then undertake forms of collective change based on the knowledge garnered through their critical inquiries. (p. 2)

In a second introductory chapter, Shawn Ginwright describes his work with PAR and how it helps youth to foster a “radical collective imagination” as well as the hope, vision, and creativity needed to transform society.

The heart of the book follows the brief introductory reflections: Five chapters each illustrate a case of YPAR in action, largely collaboratively written by the youth members of the research collectives themselves. Following each of these five case study chapters, there is a brief response chapter in which a more senior scholar comments on the project and the potential of PAR. There are also two final chapters of reflection on the broader goals of participatory research, one that connects YPAR to the No Child Left Behind Act and a second that is written in the form of a hypothetical letter to a tenure and promotion committee defending the

value of PAR. Like the two introductory chapters, the final two chapters seem to be geared primarily to defending the value of PAR to a scholarly audience.

YPAR in Action

The first three cases described are part of the City University of New York PAR Collective: Echoes of Brown/Opportunity Gap, Collective of Researchers on Educational Development and Desire (CREDD), and the Fed-Up Honeys. The final two cases are located in high schools: the Tucson-based Social Justice Education Project (SJEP), and the Los Angeles-based Institute for Democracy, Education and Access (IDEA). Each of these projects involves a mixture of high school- and college-age youth and either older researchers, most of whom seem to be working on their doctoral dissertations (although this is not entirely clear), or classroom teachers.

Based on 3 years of research camps where students learned to identify and performatively document the realities of oppression in their lives, students in the Echoes of Brown/Opportunity Gap project illustrate how they learned to see the systematic dimensions of their personal struggles and to transform pain “into structural analyses and demands for justice” (p. 36). They created performances of their data, as well as a DVD and book documenting their efforts. The 12 youth involved in the CREDD project describe how they worked together to understand and challenge how many marginalized students are pushed out of schools and effectively closed out of other educational opportunities. In terms of actions, they are in the process of creating a youth guide for the GED, developing a website, and disseminating their insights in what they call “an extensive community talking tour” (p. 58). The Fed-Up Honeys, a group of young urban women of color, explore how they used research to speak back to the ways in which

their Lower East Side neighborhood is disappearing (and being replaced by a “trendier,” wealthier, and Whiter population) and to challenge the prevailing stereotypes they are subject to, including that they are at risk, a burden to society, and likely to be teen mothers. Their work included the creation of two websites, a “youth friendly” research report, and a campaign where they posted stickers around their community to disrupt stereotypes about young women of color (p. 117).

Although they involve similar dynamics and growth, the other two YPAR cases are primarily located in schools. Students in SJEP describe their experiences as part of core high school social science classes aimed at meeting “the cultural, social, and intellectual needs of Latina/o students . . . by employing a curriculum that centers on social justice, critical race theory, and Funds of Knowledge” (p. 132). Their work documenting the inequities in schools led to structural improvements, library updates, and the expansion of multicultural course offerings. Similarly, student researchers in IDEA participated in summer seminars to learn how to engage in research on their own communities and to creatively call attention to the injustices in their schools and the larger society. Among other projects, these students created an Educational Bill of Rights, oral histories, and research reports aimed at addressing the challenges in their lives. In all of the five cases, participants have also been involved in sharing their work at conferences, at community meetings, and in books and journals.

Engaging the Book

As a text, *Revolutionizing Education* is both compelling and messy. It is difficult to determine the target audience (e.g., academics, youth researchers, teachers, social justice advocates), although it ultimately will most likely appeal to a more scholarly audience already familiar with PAR. The introductory chapters are brief, only offering glimpses into the history, ideology, successes, and methodological and practical challenges of PAR and YPAR. The descriptions of the five projects are rich yet sometimes hard to follow, as they are multiauthored and do not adhere to parallel organizational structures. Some are written primarily by adult researchers with sections dedicated to youth voices, whereas others are written by the youth members of the

collectives themselves. In some, the focus is mostly on group dynamics and challenges; in others it is on how the lives of the individual participants were transformed through being involved in a research collective. In several chapters, the authors provide a theoretical overview of PAR as part of describing their projects, whereas others jump right into their work with the group. As a reader, one sometimes enters the cases in the middle and, like an explorer, tries to fit the pieces of the collectives together. Narrative segments by individual participants are interspersed with examples of activities, goals, and reflections. Chapters include concept maps, photographs, images, poetry, and excerpts from dialogues. In all of the cases, it seems as if the authors struggled to fit all they wanted to say, and clearly could say, about the projects into reasonable chapter lengths. We both found ourselves wanting more background information on the projects: how they were started and sustained, how participants were recruited and selected, what roles were played by adult researchers and institutions, and most notably, what the effects of the projects were on the communities (not just the participants). Although the insightful commentaries by senior scholars with name recognition (Maxine Greene, Sandy Grande, Pauline Lipman, Luis C. Moll, and John Rogers) might help draw more readers to the book, they were not particularly useful in helping us to reflect on the projects or on PAR. It probably would have been more helpful to have comments by scholars known for their work with PAR, especially if one of the goals of the book is to illustrate the value of PAR to a wider research community. Similarly, the concluding chapters, although offering some interesting perspectives and insights, would have been more helpful if they had focused more directly on broad issues and themes that cut across the projects.

Given the complex, multilayered, and multivocal nature of the book, we searched for a way to review the text that in some way matched the spirit of the book. Inspired by the youth researchers, we tried to model the processes they had used in their collectives, particularly collaborative and dialogic writing. For example, in their work, the Fed-Up Honeys freewrote their reactions to issues in their communities,

shared excerpts, took reflective group notes, and then constructed knowledge together. Similarly, the students in SJEP engaged in dialogic authoring processes to come to richer understandings of their worlds (p. 136). We decided to begin by each reading the book and freewriting our initial thoughts and reflections before we ever talked about the book. We assumed we would have fairly differing reactions given our backgrounds and social positionalities: Kathy, a philosopher of education with more than a decade of experience as a professor, and Paula, a graduate student and native of Colombia who has experience with PAR as a professor in her home country. After completing our individual written reflections on the book, we shared them with each other and then engaged in extensive discussions about the book. In many cases, we were surprised by how similar our reactions were: For instance, we were both struck by the power of the individual stories and left with similar questions, primarily about PAR as a research process and about the scope and impact of action in PAR. We also both were drawn to the issue or question of revolution, especially as an organizing frame for the book. Although “revolution” appears in the title and introduction to the book, it is only implicitly addressed throughout the chapters, as none of the authors talks about their work in particularly revolutionary terms. Yet we kept coming back to the idea of revolution: What is revolutionary in the text? What might it mean to revolutionize education? The more we talked, the more we came to see how the issue of revolution emerges in three spheres: revolutionizing youth engagement, revolutionizing research, and revolutionizing action.

In the Spirit of the Book

Playing with the idea of revolution, we then engaged in a dialogic review of the book via e-mail over several days, an edited and refined version of which we share below. Although we realize that in some ways it may be difficult to enter some aspects of our dialogue without having read the book, at the same time this experience of entering in the middle mirrors how we both experienced reading *Revolutionizing Education*. After our dialogue, we come back briefly to the ways in which this book revolutionized our thinking about pedagogical engagement, the

possibilities and potential of doing research that matters, and social justice activism.

Kathy: Without a doubt, what I was most drawn to in the book was the passionate and inspired models of engaged learning. So much of the critical literature in education talks theoretically about student empowerment, but the five projects bring these theories to life, offering rich, vivid portraits of what genuine pedagogical engagement looks like. I was continually moved by the energy, insight, commitment, and imagination of the young people involved in the research projects. Often when I am talking with students about qualitative research, I implore them to “show, don’t tell” their findings. I love the way the projects do this, showing us what transformative learning looks like and offering multiple places to enter the sometimes messy process of PAR. I was also moved by the stories of how the individuals involved in these projects were personally transformed, from disengaged objects of education, to subjects with agency in their lives.

Paula: This book definitely provides evidence of the power of PAR among oppressed groups, in this case primarily youth of color. We see how participating in PAR helps them to unveil oppression and to transform their own realities. I was not only amazed at the creative way these young researchers designed their own instruments of data collection and analysis, but also the powerful ways in which they represented their findings, especially through poetry and performance. Revolutionizing education in this book means youth becoming socially engaged individuals, critical intellectuals, and agents of their own learning. However, it is not clear to me how this engaged participation is moved from the research group to transforming the local community.

Kathy: There is certainly some tension in the projects as to where transformation is most located. While much of the meta-talk in the book is about social transformation, what we most see as readers is the ways in which engaging in PAR changed the lives of the individual participants. We see them developing a sense of agency in the world, as well as cultivating the habits and dispositions necessary for civic engagement and

democratic life. Ruby puts this well in reflecting on her experiences as part of the Fed-Up Honeys: “I just see with different eyes now. Open eyes . . . like people always used to say Ruby open your eyes, open your eyes . . . And I just think that just recently I’ve been opening my eyes” (p. 90). Similarly, Luis, a participant in the SJEP, writes, “I hate how I would have turned out if I had not experienced being a part of this project. My entire outlook on life has changed” (p. 141). Sometimes we can underestimate the value of this personal transformation, even as it is clearly a necessary precursor to all systemic and structural change efforts.

Paula: The authors demonstrate how YPAR offers many possibilities both for the youths themselves in terms of self-transformation and for future social change. YPAR is politically powerful in the sense that it helps young people to become familiarized with the idea of social engagement and provides them with the tools necessary to transform local communities, such as organizational and social skills and the habits of leadership necessary for responsible citizenship. In contrast to the disengagement many young people regularly feel in schools, YPAR offers a revolutionary notion of participatory education. The youths who “talk” in these chapters describe how they lose their learned fear to voice their opinions and to intervene in their worlds. We see their new sense of empowerment when they are presenting their research at academic conferences, or talking with representatives of congress, or organizing rallies.

Kathy: What is also compelling in their stories is how they give us a powerful image of what it means to do research that matters. I love the “hybridized” methods they use, drawing on so many different sources of data collection, from familiar methods (e.g., surveys, interviews, focus groups) to more emergent and experimental strategies (e.g., performances, photo and video documentaries, mapping, interactive games, slambooks, graffiti walls). In almost all of the projects, they start by brainstorming the issues, questions, and concerns that they have about their lives and their communities, and then develop the methods they use to answer those questions. Too often,

I think university-trained researchers feel constrained to follow certain research procedures, and in the process, passion and creativity get sacrificed in the name of these established protocols.

Paula: This is precisely the richness of doing PAR with youth: They bring in fresh ideas and are not caught up in calls for scientific rigor in research or the emphasis on products more than processes. I would have liked the authors to provide more information about the impact of the experimental/alternative methods they used, both on themselves and on the community. I think that this information is important as a way of illustrating the value and relevance of these methods. These young researchers worked well in research collectives. I appreciate the stories they share about the difficulties they encountered as members of a research team because they show us how these problems should be disentangled (analyzed and interpreted) as part of the research project itself. I expected them to also discuss these problems in their relationships to the systems of oppression that they are trying to challenge, but this is less evident in their stories.

Kathy: It is no doubt easier to talk about individual transformation and working through group dynamics than to assess the concrete impact of actions. What I see the young people in these projects doing is claiming space and setting in motion a process of change, as they say, “igniting the fire for future revolutions” (p. 40). Were more young people to be engaged in this kind of participatory research on their own lives, I have no doubt that we would inevitably see social and structural changes. Unfortunately, it is very difficult to institutionalize the kind of projects they engaged in. In all cases, the young people were voluntary participants (in some cases, they received course credit or stipends), which makes them a unique group to begin with, especially in terms of their levels of involvement, interest, and investment in social justice work.

Paula: I’m interested in what you said about the difficulty of institutionalizing PAR. What makes it difficult? Is it a lack of an infrastructure to support such projects? Or, even worse, is it an ideology that does

not trust indigenous knowledge and, particularly, the knowledge and work that young people may offer? In a speech given last year by the recently deceased Orlando Fals Borda, perhaps the most well-known advocate of PAR in Latin America, he explained the impact of PAR in our shared homeland of Colombia. He described the influence of PAR on social action around the country, including the creation of one of the newest political parties in Colombia, El Polo Democratico, which advocates for the strengthening of a participatory democracy. PAR, in this case, has been institutionalized. I think that PAR in the United States lacks the visibility and institutional support that it has in many other countries, including in Latin America, where it was first developed.

Kathy: Sadly, I think you are right about the lack of a democratic, participatory ideology in U.S. schools (and society). This is especially true in the No Child Left Behind climate of high-stakes accountability. The kinds of projects the young people in this book are engaged in are time consuming, complex, contextual, and emergent. You can't assess them in traditional ways or easily measure their impact on student achievement. Because of this, educational leaders seem to see them as a distraction from the academic purposes of schools, rather than the very heart of meaningful education. At the same time, the difficulty of assessing the broader social and structural impact of the youths' actions makes it hard to sell PAR to the wider educational community.

Paula: I think that this difficulty in assessing the impact of these actions is in part due to epistemological disagreements (among scholars, educators, educational researchers, social activists, corporations, etc.) about what knowledge is of most worth, what the scope of action in research should be, what actions lead to change, and what changes result in genuine improvements. Indeed, while reading the book, I wondered about the transcendence of the actions undertaken by these youth researchers. Is action in some of these PAR projects primarily about self-transformation? Do other researchers/educators value the importance of this scope of action, that is, action at the individual level that ideally

leads to social action? The experience of reading this book has left me with these and more questions about action. In a society that praises products over processes, many people like to measure the effectiveness of these projects in terms of the tangible effects of action.

Kathy: I too am left at the end with questions about action. I wonder, for example, if the participants in CREDD or the Fed-Up Honeys affected people in their communities through their performances, poetry, and sticker campaign. If so, how? Did these actions have the effects they intended? To what extent does this matter? I also wonder if all the implicit talk about "revolutionary" social change sets me up as a reader for unrealistically high expectations in terms of action or even what it would look like to narrate structural change (as opposed to the ways individual participants' lives have been transformed). I suppose one of the marks of a provocative book is that it leaves you with as many questions as it does answers.

Paula: I think that this is not only a matter of the "provocative" nature of the book; it is also a manifestation of the nature of PAR. Emancipation is a central goal of PAR. The youth authors demonstrate in this book how they emancipated themselves from their old passive identities as either undeserving of opportunity or victims of systems of oppression. Their empowerment was the result of continuously deconstructing and reconstructing their lives and their relationship to others and their communities. I wonder if, and how, they have been able to continue with this process and if their institutional support has continued as well. Or, perhaps more ideally, have they become more self-sustaining?

Rethinking Revolution

As should be evident in our dialogue, there are many places to enter this text, and in fact, we could easily write volumes about each individual chapter. Reflecting on the book as a whole, however, we kept returning to the question or issue of revolution. That is, we found ourselves trying to make meaning of the revolution insinuated in the title, although not spelled out fully in any of the chapters. We see the authors gesturing toward the revolutionary nature of

YPAR in three different areas: in engaging youth in their own education, in cultivating meaningful and relevant research, and in bridging the theory–practice divide through critically informed social action.

In terms of youth engagement, the cases in this book challenge many of the damaging commonplace stereotypes of youth (as either dangerous or indifferent), as well as the passive nature of much of public education, by showing evidence of young people actively involved in systematic analyses of their schools and communities. As they come to understand the complex dynamics of oppression and privilege, they become empowered to intervene in their worlds. The pedagogical participation of these youth is not limited to data collection and analysis, but it also involves their engagement in a process of self-transformation that ideally results in the agency necessary for critical and responsible citizenship. The youth researchers also offer us lessons on how to establish and maintain democratic participation within collectives, which is especially evident in how they described their processes of working together and negotiating conflicts and challenges.

Along with offering a revolutionary vision of youth engagement, the book offers some revolutionary ways of thinking about research on and with youth. YPAR is a research process by which oppressed youth learn about traditional research strategies but bring their own unique ways of being in the world to these approaches, creating new methods and powerful new forms of data collection and analysis. As the participants in CREDD describe, PAR is a "politic . . . rather than a fixed set of methods" (p. 51). This politic involves research transparency, as well as co-constructed and collaboratively negotiated research questions, designs, analyses, and products. As Fine suggests, YPAR is research that entails "provocative means to awaken a sense of injustice and provoke social action" (p. 220).

In terms of offering some perspectives on revolutionary action, this is the issue least developed in the book, as it was difficult to assess how the actions undertaken by the youth moved beyond individual transformation to concrete social change in local communities. We both found ourselves wondering about the evaluative component of YPAR. Did the actions of

the youth, particularly when they presented and performed their analyses of injustice, have the intended effects? Did they lead to meaningful changes? We saw some glimpses of institutional or structural changes but found ourselves wanting more reflection on the issue of action. What impact did the presentations, art work, campaigns, and websites have on the local communities? The commentators on the projects shared similar concerns. For example, Greene pushes the researchers beyond naming inequities to undertaking more systematic inquiries about power, wondering how “a young person’s feeling of being personally and unjustly injured” can “lead to or be related to common or collaborative action” (p. 47). Perhaps, as Lipman alludes to the issue, assessing the impact of actions requires a much longer view than the time span of these projects (p. 128). On the question of action, we concur with Grande that the “most significant contribution to the field” made by the youth researchers “may come more from who they are and how they engage than from the research they conduct” (p. 85).

In the epilogue to the book, Fine discusses a powerful notion for assessing the

impact of research: provocative generalizability. This concept “refers to researchers’ attempts to move their findings toward that which is not yet imagined, not yet in practice, not yet in sight” (p. 229). Implicit in this notion is an invitation to contemplate new possibilities for research and to consider a compelling new “standard for social research: does the work move readers to act?” (p. 229). In the end, we are left wondering about exactly this question when thinking about *Revolutionizing Education: Youth Participatory Action Research in Motion*. Does it move us to act? What might, or should, this action involve? Without a doubt, this book certainly moves us to think and to further explore how we might conduct more meaningful, participatory, collaborative, and pedagogical research. It also moves us to want to know more about PAR and more about why this approach to research is not more commonplace in the United States. Although perhaps not as revolutionary as the title seems to promise, *Revolutionizing Education* is a compelling read that will no doubt provoke many important reflections and conversations about youth engagement, research, and

social change. It also can help to inspire the hope, creativity, and imagination we so desperately need to make this a more socially just world.

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