

9-2018

## "We didn't have courage": Internalizing Racism and the Limits of Participatory Action Research

Jennifer Lucko

*Dominican University of California*, [jennifer.lucko@dominican.edu](mailto:jennifer.lucko@dominican.edu)

<https://doi.org/10.1111/aeq.12254>

**Survey: Let us know how this paper benefits you.**

---

### Recommended Citation

Lucko, Jennifer, ""We didn't have courage": Internalizing Racism and the Limits of Participatory Action Research" (2018). *Education | Faculty Scholarship*. 1. <https://doi.org/10.1111/aeq.12254>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Education | Faculty Collections at Dominican Scholar. It has been accepted for inclusion in Education | Faculty Scholarship by an authorized administrator of Dominican Scholar. For more information, please contact [michael.pujals@dominican.edu](mailto:michael.pujals@dominican.edu).

"We Didn't Have Courage":

Internalizing Racism and the Limits of Participatory Action Research

Suggested Running Head: Internalizing Racism and PAR

### **Abstract**

This article follows a group of Latino/a English language learners conducting Participatory Action Research in a segregated school. I examine how students' perspectives on civic engagement shifted after they joined an after-school initiative that brought them together with students from a private Jewish day school located directly across the street. Even as students formed new perspectives on civic engagement throughout the year, internalized racism framed how they understood their capacity for civic action.

Keywords: segregation, democratic citizenship education, immigration, Participatory Action Research, internalized racism

We live in an era of resegregation. The push to integrate American public schools is largely a goal of the past—even as the overall population of public school students has become increasingly diverse. During the 2011-2012 academic year, 55 percent of Latino/a students and 45 percent of Black students in California attended intensely segregated schools (i.e., 91-100 percent minority students), and half of these children also attended schools with a student population that was more than 90 percent low-income (Orfield et al. 2014).

In this article, I explore the relationship between pathways for civic action developed within intensely segregated schools and the ways in which students begin to conceptualize their own civic identities. To that end, I follow a group of Latino/a English language learners conducting Participatory Action Research (PAR) in a middle school in Northern California and examine how their perspectives on civic engagement shifted after they joined a new after-school initiative that brought them together with students from a private Jewish day school located directly across the street.

PAR has been promoted as a pedagogical approach that actively fosters civic and educational engagement by providing young people opportunities to analyze and engage with inequitable distributions of power and resources (Camarota and Fine 2008; Clements 2005; Dyrness 2012; Ginwright 2008). During the 2014-2015 academic year, I found the PAR project elicited a real enthusiasm among the students for positioning themselves as engaged and responsible members of their community, but their work was tempered by deficit-oriented perspectives about Latino/a immigrants, marked by a tenacious focus on describing community residents as less-than ideal neighbors. The transition from a segregated classroom to a more

integrated after-school program provided a welcome prompt for the students to consider how civic action might require collaboration within a diverse group of people. What stands out in this study, however, is that even as the Latino/a students began to construct new perspectives on civic engagement in the after-school setting, the ways in which they understood their interactions with the Jewish students drew heavily from deficit frames. Thus, regardless of the learning context, the Latino/a students always identified problems to overcome in terms of Latino/a deficiencies.

### **Civic Identity and Internalized Racism**

In the wake of Donald Trump's election, the growing uncertainty about the future of American democracy has added urgency to Bradley Levinson's appeal to educational anthropologists to "reengage the discourse of citizenship with difference, in order to deepen the practice of democratic education in the United States" (2005:330). In this study, I seek to contribute to studies of democratic citizenship education by examining why a group of intensely segregated Latino/a students first analyzed the civic behaviors of community members through a deficit lens as they began a PAR project, and tracing the persistence of these deficit frames within the context of an integrated after-school setting. Building on frameworks that theorize the close interconnection of schooling and the emerging civic identities of immigrant children and the children of immigrants (DeJaeghere and McCleary 2010; El-Haj 2009; Kahne and Sporte 2008; Levinson 2005), I argue that internalized racism was entwined in the ways in which students came to understand their capacity for civic action and begin to conceptualize their own civic identities. Following Levinson (2011), I use the term civic identity to refer to a student's sense of belonging, attachment and commitment to a public or publics.

Over the last 100 years, scholars have considered internalized racism primarily as a psychological construct to investigate the consequences of racism on the individual psyche (Kohli et al. 2006; Pyke 2010). In the psychological paradigm of internalized racism, an individual internalizes racist ideologies and stereotypes perpetuated by the dominant society, which leads to self-doubt, dislike or even disgust for oneself or one's racial group. One consequence of internalized racism is that oppressed individuals may participate in the practice of "defensive othering" by attempting to position themselves as different from other members of the subordinate group (Pyke 2010).

Pyke (2010) argues that internalized racism has become taboo among many anti-racist scholars because the tendency to focus on an individual's behaviors or beliefs—rather than foregrounding the role of racism, inequality and institutionalized oppression in an analysis of internalized racism—can easily lead to blaming victims for their own oppression. Yet given that all systems of hegemonic inequity are partially maintained through the internalized racism of the oppressed, Pyke contends that a critical approach to studying internalized racism is necessary to understand the reproduction of social inequality.

In the field of education, researchers have also highlighted the psychological burden that non-white students face within school contexts of normative Whiteness (Akom 2008; Castagno 2008). Others have considered how educational policies and practices systematically erode the positive cultural and ethnic identities of students of color, a process Angela Valenzuela described as subtractive schooling (Malsbary 2014, Quiroz 2001; Valenzuela 1999). Most recently, scholars have used ethnographic research to explicitly trace how educational policies and practices contribute to internalized racism. Lilia Monzó (2016), for example, argues that schools

perpetuate internalized oppression by cultivating deficit perspectives among Latino/a students towards their parents.

Kohli et al. (2006) suggest educational researchers consider how three factors—unequal educational resources, curriculum and classroom pedagogy—intersect in ways that create racialized school experiences and contribute to internalized racism. In the analysis below, I explain how school wide practices, a multicultural curriculum and direct classroom instruction taught the ideal of an American meritocracy to one group of Latino/a English language learners, which not only legitimized the American status quo but also contributed to internalized racism among the students. I found that students conducting Participatory Action Research often reflected the ideology of the American meritocracy in their analysis of community problems as they critiqued the perceived civic apathy of their Latino/a neighbors and participated in defensive othering (Pyke 2010). Based on a conceptualization of community involvement as solely a personal choice, the students tried to differentiate themselves from other Latino/as by positioning themselves as conscientious members of their community who were willing to work hard to better their community.

Kohli et al. (2006) also draw attention to the fact that the unequal distribution of educational resources for schools segregated by race and class contribute to racialized school experiences that can lead to internalized racism (Kohli et al. 2006). In this study, the initial segregated school and community context of the PAR project certainly worked to obscure the stark inequalities that exist between schools in the area. However, when the Latino/a students were confronted with the realities of economic and educational inequity after their project shifted to an integrated after-school setting, deficit frames persisted that informed the ways in which

students understood their ability to participate in a diverse group of peers. This case example suggests that integration alone does not address processes that marginalize groups of students in society and shape students' sense of belonging in, or commitment to, a diverse community.

### **Situating the Research: The Resegregation of American Schools**

A report published by UCLA's Civil Rights Project entitled, "Segregating California's Future" has found that Latino/a students are more segregated in California than in any other state in the country (Orfield and Ee 2014). African Americans are also highly segregated in California; only in New York and Illinois is the average African American student more likely to attend a segregated school (Orfield and Ed 2014). Furthermore, the high correlation of Latino/a and African American students with the percentage of poor students in a school frequently creates schools doubly segregated by race and class. The average Latino/a student in California, for example, attends a school in which more than 70 percent of the students are poor (Orfield and Ee 2014).

In Marin County where I conducted my fieldwork, patterns of educational inequity clearly fall along racial and ethnic lines. In 2012, The American Human Development Project published "A Portrait of Marin," a research report documenting the vast disparities in education, health and income between residents in Marin County (Burd-Sharps and Lewis 2012). In the educational section of the report, the study highlights the finding that high schools serving predominantly white, affluent students not only obtain higher academic results but also receive more resources to educate their students. For example, one high school in Marin with a student population that is 83 percent white and less than 6 percent economically disadvantaged receives \$11,000 per student—not including family donations to the school. Less than four miles away,

but in a separate school district, a high school receives only \$8,000 per pupil to serve a population that is 60 percent Latino/a and more than 50 percent economically disadvantaged.

There is a long history of Latino parents in California fighting to have their children attend integrated schools. Indeed, the landmark Supreme Court case *Brown vs. Board of Education*, in which the Court ruled that state laws establishing separate schools for African American and white children are unconstitutional, was preceded by the California court case *Mendez vs. Westminster*. Mr. Mendez initiated this lawsuit with four other Mexican-American fathers against four school districts in the Los Angeles area after his children were denied entrance to their local school on the basis of their skin color. As part of the case, the attorney for the plaintiff used social science evidence to argue that separate schools for Latino/a children lead to feelings of inferiority that can ultimately undermine their participation in American society.

Following the successful lawsuit, Governor Earl Warren signed into law legislation ending school segregation in California. Yet since 1991 many of the desegregation policies created after *Brown vs. Board of Education* have been systematically dismantled, not only in California but across the nation. In the 1991 Supreme Court decision on *The Board of Education of Oklahoma City v. Dowell*, the Court ruled that Oklahoma City was released from its federal injunction to integrate the schools because the city had been previously declared in compliance with the court order. This case set a precedent for school districts to be released from desegregation orders; by 2009 45 percent of school districts under court oversight were released from federal mandates (Childress 2014).

In a subsequent case in 2007, *Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle School District #1*, the Supreme Court provided additional legal grounds to dismantle school



desegregation policies. In this decision, the Court ruled that school districts could no longer use race as a criterion for integrating schools. Community school movements, in which typically middle and upper class parents organize to break away from a larger school district that includes poorer neighborhoods, have been instrumental in the resegregation of the public school system because of existing residential segregation. Although the 2007 Supreme Court decision still allows school districts to use socioeconomic criteria to restructure segregated school assignments, community school movements across the nation have undermined integration policies by creating new school districts that are smaller, whiter, and wealthier (Spencer 2014).

Currently, there are no statewide educational policies or state initiatives in California that acknowledge the resegregation of the public school system or promote school integration. In their report on the resegregation of California schools, Orfield and Ee (2014) argue that despite nearly 60 years of social science research documenting the consequences of segregation and the benefits of integration, California educators and elected officials have tacitly accepted the *Plessy v. Ferguson* standard of separate but equal schooling. Yet not long after *Brown v. Board of Education*, scholars began to question whether integration in and of itself actually creates equal educational experiences for marginalized students. In 1976 Derrick Bell, whose legal scholarship provided much of the foundation for the development of critical race theory in the mid-1970s, pointed out that simply compelling school districts to integrate does not resolve generations of discrimination and racism against minority students. He argued that educational reform efforts should focus on improving educational quality for Black students rather than striving for racial balance in schools. Moreover, Bell believed that low academic performance and high numbers

of disciplinary actions should be expected in integrated schools where the racial subordination of Black students was the norm.

Following Bell, critical race theorists argue that without changes to the curriculum, school policies, and classroom instructional practices, minority students often encounter hostility and institutionalized racism in desegregated schools (Ladson-Billings 1998, Zamudio et al. 2011). Accordingly, researchers have demonstrated that one effective strategy to promote civic activism in integrated school settings is to bring together marginalized youth with shared experiences in a segregated “safe space” to nurture collective forms of identity (Lewis-Charp et al. 2006). Likewise, Villalpando (2003) argues that Latino/a students in institutions of higher education often seek to develop relationships along ethnic lines as a form of self-preservation that allows them to nurture collective forms of community activism and support one another’s efforts to advocate for social justice. Thus, critical race theorists caution that integration does not automatically lead to equal educational experiences for marginalized students, while segregated school contexts have the potential to counter internalized racism and foster community engagement--particularly when marginalized students are provided with analytical tools to understand institutionalized racism and existing social inequalities. In the next section, I describe how my fieldwork site and the design of the initial PAR project provided the lens through which I trace the persistence of internalized racism among a group of Latino/a English learners, first in a segregated school setting and then within an integrated after-school program.

### **Fieldwork Site and Research Methods**

I conducted nine months of fieldwork at a K-8 school in Northern California during the 2014-2015 academic year. The total enrollment at the school was 735 students, which included

597 Latino/a students (81 percent) and 572 students (78 percent) who received a free or reduced price lunch (California Department of Education). More than half of the students at the school (398) were English Learners and an additional 60 English learners had been redesignated as Fluent English Proficient that year (California Department of Education).

When designing this study I was committed to conducting Participatory Action Research *with* students impacted by segregation in schools and students who have much to gain from citizenship education—rather than only conducting research *about* students or *for* students (Dyrness 2008; Paris and Winn 2014). As an instructor in a teacher-credentialing program, a former elementary teacher, and an educational researcher interested in exploring how English Learners conceptualize civic engagement in California, I wanted to use my privileged position to provide students an opportunity for civic action that I feel is not provided in most middle schools--and particularly in those schools with high populations of immigrant children and the children of immigrants. At the same time, I embedded PAR within my broader fieldwork so that I could use participant-observation, interviews and focus groups to explore emerging themes connected to civic engagement and the civic identities of English Learners.

I first met with the principal of the school in August 2014 to discuss the idea of a Participatory Action Research project focused on civic engagement. The principal suggested I partner with the Literacy Coach at the school, a highly qualified, innovative teacher who had been assigned a sixth grade English Language Arts class comprised of nine English Learners, all native Spanish speakers, who were reading several grades below grade level (kindergarten through third grade level at the beginning of the academic year). Three of these students had been born in the United States, one had arrived in the country before he began school, four

students were enrolled at the school in the third or fourth grade, and one student had just immigrated the previous year.

For a little more than two hours each day, the teacher worked with the same group of students for two consecutive instructional periods and an advisory session. She agreed that I could join the group during that time twice a week and, during one of the academic periods each day, work with a small group of four or five students on the Participatory Action Research project (i.e., each student met with me in a small group once a week). The PAR project was presented as an optional component of the class, but the nine students in the class were enthusiastic about the research and, with the support of the principal and classroom teacher, I did not have any difficulty obtaining consent from each student's parent or guardian to participate in both the project and my wider ethnographic study. In addition to facilitating PAR, I conducted participant-observation, worked with individual students, had regular conversations with the teacher about the classroom students and the school, periodically attended PTA or after-school events and compiled daily field notes. The majority of interviews and group sessions were conducted in English and literacy activities with students were always completed in English. Yet since the students knew that I had previously lived in Spain they regularly code-switched from English to Spanish when interjecting comments or questions.

From the beginning of the school year until the winter break in December 2014, I focused the small group work developing the Participatory Action Research Project: learning about student-led civic research projects, discussing photography skills, identifying strengths and problems in students' neighborhoods with photography, analyzing the photographs through writing, developing interview questions for community members and summarizing interview

results. I did not use a published curriculum but developed the sequence of the activities based on The Youth Empowerment Strategies (YES!) Project (Wilson et al. 2007). Although the students only received direct instruction in PAR for approximately one hour per week, the students were highly engaged in the project and civic engagement also became a recurring theme in classroom discussions.

Then, in the beginning of December 2014, the project took an unexpected turn when an ongoing collaboration between the school principal and a Rabbi from the Jewish congregation located directly across the street from the public school resulted in an invitation to bring together a small group of middle school students from the public school and the private Jewish day school. The Rabbi envisioned a collaborative social justice project and I agreed to help facilitate with the understanding that the integrated group would continue the PAR project and develop an Action Plan to address one of the problems the students had identified during PAR that fall. To meet the interests of both groups we decided to focus on building students' civic leadership skills over the course of eight after-school sessions. We agreed that I would collaborate with another Rabbi from the congregation and, in subsequent years, the two institutions could build on our collaboration to develop a more extensive year-long program. I believed the integrated setting would prompt new perspectives among the Latino/a students once they had the opportunity to explore civic engagement outside of a segregated context.

In the after-school setting seven of the nine Latino/a students from the PAR project (two students decided they did not want to stay after school) joined eight students from the Jewish day school. Once the project shifted to the after-school setting, however, the focus on the development of an Action Plan dissolved as the facilitating Rabbi and I realized it was necessary

to build communication and collaboration between the two groups after our initial icebreakers and intercultural storytelling activities generated much silence between the 15 participating students. Instead, we designed experiential team building activities for each session, including soccer games, a hike in a nearby state park, a student guided tour of the Synagogue, a Spanish lesson, a collaborative poetry writing exercise, and a Saturday morning Earth Day event in which students helped to clean a neighborhood creek bed littered with garbage. During these group activities I consistently connected the theme of community engagement to our discussions, but the original design for the PAR project was abandoned when we were unable to develop enough rapport between the two groups to genuinely develop a collective Action Plan.

There was considerable overlap in the content between the after school program and the classroom because the language arts teacher generously gave her own time and came to most of the after-school sessions while I continued to conduct participant-observation twice a week in the classroom. For example, the students wrote a personal narrative about their family history in the classroom following a failed intercultural storytelling activity in the after-school setting. This extended writing project allowed me the opportunity to work with individual students and learn more about their families, their daily lives, and their experiences immigrating to the United States. However, given the fact that the students were now exploring community engagement in the after-school program, the classroom teacher felt compelled to target her lessons on foundational literacy skills and the designated curriculum rather than focus on advancing the PAR project in class as we had done that fall. At the same time, the classroom teacher continued to provide regular opportunities for me to hold focus groups—at times in small groups and at times with the entire class—so that students could debrief their experiences in a safe space.

My findings are drawn from detailed field notes compiled at the end of each day of my ethnographic fieldwork, student work samples, and a series of recorded and transcribed focus group sessions that I conducted with the seven students participating in the after-school program. On completion of my fieldwork, I coded my field notes, student work and focus group transcripts using a grounded theory approach to identify themes pertaining to civic engagement and civic identity. This focus on civic engagement and civic identity was based on the original purpose of the study to explore the relationship between pathways for civic action developed within intensely segregated schools and the civic identities of English language learners. Thus, the findings below are based on my analysis of the limitations of PAR in the segregated setting, the unforeseen complications of attempting PAR in the integrated after-school setting, the ultimate breakdown of the project, and the potential for PAR in future settings.

### **Teaching the American Meritocracy: Reach for Your Dreams**

The students I worked with learned the ideology of an American meritocracy through school-wide practices, a multicultural language arts curriculum and classroom pedagogy. Upon walking into the school a large banner announces that students are not just entering an ordinary school, but an “I CAN” University. On the school website and in Student Parent Handbook the phrase “I CAN” emphasizes the expectation that every student will be academically successful at the school. Each month during the 2014-2015 school year, the “I CAN” philosophy was advanced with a school-wide focus on one monthly character trait, including curiosity, grit, gratitude, self-control, courage, optimism, integrity and zest. These traits are based on the work of Carol Dweck (2008) and intended to create a mindset in which children understand the potential for improving their abilities through personal effort and perseverance. Dweck defines

this mindset as a growth mindset because it encourages an individual to grow his or her abilities. She differentiates a growth mindset from a fixed mindset in which an individual believes abilities cannot be improved through effort.

The students were also explicitly told that every student enrolled at their “I CAN” University is on a pathway to college. To promote college awareness each teacher at the school was responsible for selecting a college for his or her class to adopt and displaying the pennant, poster or other college materials from that college on their classroom walls. Middle school students learned about individual colleges through regularly scheduled presentations and it was common to refer to middle school students by the year in which they were scheduled to graduate from college (e.g., College Class of 2025 instead of Sixth Graders). Through the “I CAN” messaging, students were taught that anyone could achieve academic success and college admission through individual hard work, perseverance and dedication.

In the classroom, the sixth grade language arts teacher had selected literature that dovetailed with the “I CAN” philosophy by highlighting the efforts of immigrants in the United States to achieve the American Dream. That fall, the sixth grade students read Esperanza Rising by Pam Muñoz Ryan, The Circuit by Francisco Jiménez and All for the Better: A Story of El Barrio by Nicholasa Mohr. Each novel focused on hard working and resilient immigrants from Latin America who found happiness in the United States despite having to overcome great hardship. The teacher regularly made connections between the characters in the literature and the monthly character traits emphasized throughout the school, once again highlighting the power of effort and perseverance.



At the end of each day the students lined up at the door to be dismissed. Every day, without exception, the teacher waited until all students were quiet to recite a motivational poem with them. This poem was written on chart paper next to the door so that students could read along, but the teacher preferred to read each line and have the students repeat after her. The poem began as follows:

Teacher: What you want to do.            Students: What you want to do.

Teacher: And what you can do.        Students: And what you can do.

Teacher: Is limited only.               Students: Is limited only.

Teacher: By what you dream.         Students: By what you dream.

At the end of the poem the students were told that, “And when you reach the top, keep climbing.” The poem provided a daily reminder to students that they too could achieve their dreams if they were willing to work hard enough.

By upholding high academic and behavioral expectations for every student at the school, the teachers and school administrators undoubtedly inspired students to develop the necessary personal characteristics they would need to complete high school and continue on to college. At the same time, however, the teachers remained overwhelmingly silent about present day inequalities and injustices that students faced in their day to day lives. Indeed, during the time I was conducting fieldwork in the classroom, the teacher did not dwell on social justice issues when these points arose in the literature or make connections to students’ own experiences with inequality and injustice. For example, at one point in Esperanza Rising, Mexican and Mexican American workers, including US citizens, are deported to Mexico because they are striking against the inhuman working conditions in the fields during the Great Depression. The class was

reading this section of the book together and the teacher briefly paused to ask, “Is that fair?” Most of the students either orally responded “yes” or nodded their heads “yes.” When one student suggested, “They were causing problems” the teacher explained, “But they were born here, they were citizens.” She provided wait time for the students to contemplate this answer, but then moved on in the reading without further exploring the topics of the working conditions for laborers in the fields, organized strikes, citizenship or deportations. When I asked her later about her decision to continue with the reading at that moment--even though most of the students did not appear to understand the injustice of deporting striking workers to Mexico--she explained that it was a practical decision. The class needed to continue reading to stay on pace with the other sixth grade English classes.

Another middle school teacher in the district who taught English learners provided me with several reasons to explain why she avoided topics of social justice in her class. I had contacted this teacher the previous summer because I thought she might want to partner with me on the PAR project. After hearing about the project, the teacher confided that she felt uncomfortable with the idea because she didn’t want to have discuss the project with angry parents who might challenge the legitimacy of her curriculum and might even complain about the project to the principal. When I questioned this reasoning, she went on to describe another social justice program that occurred at the school. In her opinion, the program left the students feeling not only angry and resentful, but also alienated from the school and the very teachers trying their best to help students succeed. She argued that the students were better served if teachers were “proactive” and “empowering” and focused on the curriculum students needed to finish high school. This teacher felt strongly that when students reached out to her with personal

problems or immigration issues, the best approach was to privately reassure students and then redirect them back to the curriculum. As an example, she explained that the previous year she taught a student who was worried and upset about having to go to court because of his legal status. She did not ask the student any specific details about the situation but took time to listen to the student's concerns and assured him, "It will be okay, you'll work it out."

By focusing on individual character traits necessary to achieve success, the school culture provided teachers a way to empower students and create high expectations. The teachers, after all, were also highly constrained within the context of the segregated school system and doing everything in their power to support their students. In the next section, however, I consider how this emphasis on individual behavior--coupled with the lack of attention given to students' personal experiences with inequality and injustice--led to unintended consequences as students focused on individual behaviors in the PAR project.

### **PAR and Defensive Othering: "I Can Solve Problems in My Community"**

By the beginning of December 2014, students had selected their best photographs of community strengths and problems, summarized the photographs in writing and conducted interviews with adults to investigate the causes and solutions to community problems. I decided to work with the students to create a "Prezi" showcasing the progress of the PAR project over the fall months and the students enthusiastically agreed to invite the principal and vice-principal of the school to listen to the presentation of their work. In hindsight, I realized that the "Prezi" clearly reflected the narrative of the American meritocracy emphasized throughout the school by focusing on the role of individual choice and behavior in civic engagement--both when analyzing the causes of civic problems as well as when conceptualizing solutions to these problems.

On the one hand, most of the students in the class selected pictures for the “Prezi” that depicted problems created by the negligence or civic apathy of their neighbors. For example, two of the students took pictures illustrating how neighbors in their apartment building failed to dispose of trash properly. In their pictures the two students captured images of the dumpster area and backyard patio area of their apartment buildings strewn with broken glass, discarded furniture, boxes, random trash and a dead, rotting mouse. Another student took pictures of a prominently displayed “No Dogs” sign at the entrance to his neighborhood playground, a picture of a man with two dogs standing in the middle of the children’s play structure, and multiple images of dog waste found throughout the playground. Several other students took pictures of trash littering the same park or the streets of their neighborhood.

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

This picture shows that people don’t care because they don’t turn off the water...This is a problem because we are in a drought right now. This picture make me feel frustrated because people do not care that we are in a drought and that they are only wasting water.

After selecting a photograph that depicted one problem in their community, students shared their pictures with neighborhood adults and conducted interviews about the pictures using a list of questions that the class had collectively written. In the process of conducting the

interviews, the impression that their neighbors were apathetic or even selfish was reinforced. For example, students asked the questions, “Why are they doing this?” and “Why do they not care?” One student recorded the following response in his interview notes: “People do not care because they are selfish.”

On the other hand, even as students highlighted the civic shortcomings of individuals in the neighborhood, they also received the message during their interviews that it was these very residents who needed to take responsibility and fix the problems in the community. For one interview question, students decided to ask adults in their community, “Who has the courage to fix the problem?” In her interview notes one student wrote, “The person who has the courage is my dad.” When they inquired, “How do we solve this problem?” one student was told, “We will solve this problem by talking to the people who did this and telling them to stop.”

This strong emphasis on individual responsibility led students to conclude that people in their community should simply work harder to better their neighborhoods. Furthermore, students were eager to position themselves as different from “selfish” residents who “don’t care.” The week before the December winter break I asked the students to write me a personal letter with the promise that I would respond to them over the break. I provided several questions to prompt their writing, such as, “What did you learn about yourself and your community while working on this project?” The following quotes taken from the students’ letters reflect the students’ defensive othering of their Latino/a neighbors:

“The thing I learn from myself is that I can solve problems in my community and make my community a better place to live. Something that I learn about my

community is that their were problems and neighbors don't care or don't pay attention to the problems.”

“My community is dirty because they throw trash everywere. I learned a lot about my comunity and now I care more about it. I learned I am a good helper. I learned they are dirty.”

“I did learn something from my community. I learned that there was a lot a trash. The only problem is there is trash that people see that they dropped it but they are to lazy to pick it up.”

While the PAR project had encouraged students to identify themselves as responsible and civically engaged members of their community, it also reproduced internalized racism among the students. After publicly recognizing their Latino/a neighbors as irresponsible, selfish and apathetic, it was not surprising that students attempted to distance themselves from other Latino/as in their community.

### **The Breakdown of PAR and the Persistence of Internalized Racism**

In January 2015 I began working with a Rabbi from the Jewish congregation to facilitate the after-school program. The after-school program was presented to the students as an opportunity to practice being a leader within a diverse community. We discussed how the students were already acting as community leaders when they took care of the environment in their neighborhoods and I explained that they would now be able to collaborate with other students who lived in the area. By the end of the first session, however, the complexity of bringing these two groups of students together was apparent in the English learners' silence and timid approach to the icebreakers that day. For example, in one activity called, “Can I see your

smile?” students were supposed to approach a partner and request in a silly manner, “Can I see your smile?” The goal of the partner was to answer, with a serious expression, “No, you cannot see my smile.” While the Jewish students walked like a chicken or turned their heads upside down while speaking to elicit a smile, the Latino/a students were unsure how to improvise in the situation. One Latina student turned to me and asked perplexedly, “What am I supposed to do?”

After the session, I conducted two focus groups with the Latino/a students in their Language Arts classroom to learn their perspectives on the interactions in the after-school setting. While I had anticipated that students would want to explore differences in English language ability, race, or class background, I was unprepared when students in both focus groups were most eager to discuss and make sense of students’ different approaches to the icebreakers. Moreover, the students did not view their behavior as simply different, but in comparison to their Jewish peers they perceived themselves to be less capable. While the Jewish students were identified as “funny” and “courageous,” most of Latino/a students considered themselves “shy.” In the first focus group one student made the following observation:

Student 1: They’re really funny!

Author: They’re funny? OK. Is that something that is the same or different?

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

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

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

Student 2: To have fun.

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

In the second focus group the students also began with a discussion of the initial icebreakers and emphasized the shy nature of the Latino/a students.

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

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

Student 6: (Contradicting Student 5) *Some* of us are shy.

Student 5: They have courage.

Author: Would you say that's the same?

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

At this point in the conversation the classroom teacher walked by the focus group and challenged the notion that students were shy. Instead, she suggested that the students lacked the same amount of confidence.

Classroom teacher: Shy? None of you are shy in *this* class! Maybe they have more confidence, but you're definitely *not* shy!

I regret not prompting the students to consider how the Jewish students' prior experiences or English language ability allowed them to skillfully participate in the icebreaker or asking the students to share personal experiences in which they had demonstrated humor or confidence. Instead, the discussion began a new direction and, when the theme of confidence later resurfaced in the conversation, I followed the common classroom practice of connecting students' behaviors to the individual character traits regularly discussed in their classroom.

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

Student 1: They are more confident.



Author: So what character trait do you need to overcome this difference?

Student 4: Courage!

Student 7: I have to stop being shy.

Student 6: Courage.

Student 5: To be more confident.

A few days after this focus group I met with the Rabbi to debrief our first after school session and plan for the next. We both noted how the whole group activity placed the Latino/a students at a disadvantage and decided to break the students into pairs so that the English learners would not be expected to speak in front of a large group. We agreed that for the next session we would ask each student to bring a personal item that reminded the students of their families. Later, I obtained permission from the Latino/a students classroom teacher to discuss this assignment with the students during class time, brainstorm ideas for what to bring, and practice orally explaining why this item was important to the student. During the brainstorming the students generated a list of possibilities, including a necklace that had been given as a gift by a grandparent, a soccer shirt from Guatemala, and the image of the Lady of Guadalupe on a religious card. Students were also provided sentence frames and practiced orally sharing their chosen item with another person (e.g., “This item reminds me of my family because...”)

The second after-school session began with all of the students sharing a snack together. To break an awkward silence, the Rabbi mentioned that cookies weren’t the healthiest after-school snack, and asked the group if there were any healthy foods the students enjoyed that could be provided as an alternative. One of the Jewish students sarcastically commented, “Well I *love* kale,” and a few of the Jewish students smiled at the joke. The Latino/a students’ classroom

teacher interjected, “Does everyone know what kale is?” When she was met with blank stares from her students she described kale and then explained that “kale” is an uncommon word.

This brief exchange illustrates the language differences that privileged the Jewish students’ language skills despite the Latino/a students’ bilingual abilities. When the snack was finished and the students split into partners to share their personal items, I joined the student who had come up with the idea of sharing her necklace from her grandmother. After listening politely to her partner discuss a few family photos that he had pulled up on his personal laptop, the girl explained she had forgotten to bring an item from home. I knew, however, that she wore her necklace everyday so this could not be the reason why she did not want to share with her partner. As I surveyed the room I quickly realized that splitting the students into pairs had done little to generate conversation between the students.

In fact, the Latino/a students possessed a large repertoire of stories about their families and personal history, and they were quite eager to share these stories when their teacher designed in class writing assignments that supported the students as they explored and developed their ideas over the course of a month. In the integrated setting, however, the students had remained silent. In their initial analysis of the unbalanced group dynamic, the Latino/a students had concluded that the Jewish students possessed levels of confidence and courage that they simply lacked. Thus, when comparing themselves to their peers living in the area, the Latino/a students identified themselves as less capable of participating in and contributing to a diverse group.

However, as the after school sessions progressed and the students continued to have discussions in the safe space of their segregated classroom, they began to critique the idea that the Jewish students are inherently more courageous and confident than Latino/a students. In the

following excerpt taken from a focus group in March, two students begin to develop a narrative that counters the ideology of the American meritocracy by suggesting that some groups have more opportunities than others, and that these opportunities provide advantages to some students.

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

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

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

In the segregated classroom students also began to recognize that their opportunities for interacting with students beyond their own segregated school and neighborhood were highly constrained. That is, not only did the Jewish students have more experience “speaking in front of others,” but the Latino/a students did not have opportunities to learn how to be courageous in diverse settings.

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

Student 1: No.

Author: No. Why not?

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

Student 2: Yeah we didn't have courage.

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

In hindsight, these moments of insight were missed opportunities to interrogate deficit frames that positioned Latino/a students as less capable than their Jewish peers. Indeed, it was only in a segregated space that students were able to freely discuss their interactions with the Jewish students or explore their understanding of discussions in the after-school setting. At the same time, the integrated setting proved instrumental in generating new perspectives on civic engagement among the Latino/a students. For example, it was during the second half of the year that students began to consider how civic action often entails collaboration within a diverse group of people--in addition to individual responsibility. In this excerpt, taken from my final focus group in May 2015, students discuss the importance of having opportunities to connect with others and highlight the potential for change when people work together:

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

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

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

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

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

Me: It's like connecting with.

Student 2: Yeah, that. That.

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

Student 3: Yeah, pero también estamos conociéndonos, estamos todos los shy kids.... Cómo say shy en Español? (Yeah but we're also getting to know each other, we're all shy kids...How do you say "shy" in Spanish?)

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

Student 4: To be friends with others.

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

Given the unbalanced dynamic between the two groups of students in the after-school program, the Rabbi and I worked hard that spring to build collaboration and communication between the two groups of students. Yet the time spent on rapport building activities made it unfeasible to genuinely develop a collective Action Plan. At the same time, by successfully maintaining a focus on community engagement and civic leadership the Latino/a students began to develop an awareness that they too could be courageous leaders in a diverse group. In preparation for the final after-school session, I asked the students to document what they had learned from the after-school program. They wrote their ideas down on notecards and practiced reciting their cards before speaking in front of the group:

"I learned to be courage when I speak in front of others."

"I am couragus because I learned how to make new friends without hesitating."

"I learned to not be afraid to talk in front of a large group to be courages and talk about the problem."

As the students developed an awareness of their own leadership abilities, they better positioned themselves to engage with opportunities that strengthen civic collaboration between

diverse groups of students as they arise. Thus, during the brief period that the two groups worked together, the Latino/a students began to imagine a possible trajectory of civic engagement that extended beyond their own segregated neighborhoods. In this end-of-the-year thank you letter to me (an assignment from their teacher), one student beautifully articulated her emerging civic identity as a confident, courageous leader—as well as her hope to further develop this identity in a future integrated setting.

You have inspired me to not be afraid of speaking in front of a place where there are many people around me... Thanks for inspiring us to make a change in the world. Thanks for letting us know about how to be a leader. Thanks for helping us know kids from across the street because even though they are across we didn't know about them... I hope you come back.

### **Shifting the Narrative: From Individual Responsibility to Social Justice**

When I began working with students in the fall of 2014, I originally envisioned a Participatory Action Research project that not only increased civic engagement, but also created a sense of pride among a group of newly empowered students. Instead, I found students' analysis of the perceived civic apathy in their neighborhoods drew heavily from deficit-oriented perspectives. Although I had encouraged students to explore strengths in their community, the series of critiques about the behaviors of neighborhood residents listed in the December presentation came across as disheartening, at best, or at worst, practically hopeless. Not surprisingly, students attempted to articulate how they were good neighbors and residents unlike the "other" Latino/as living in their neighborhoods.

Given the emphasis placed on the role of individual behavior in achieving success it is unsurprising that the Latino/a students first turned to tropes of personal responsibility and perseverance when asked to analyze the civic apathy of neighborhood residents documented during Participatory Action Research. In itself, teaching students character traits such as grit and self-control can be an effective pedagogy to develop important skills certainly necessary for academic success. Yet when this singular focus was coupled with a lack of discussion about social inequalities, students were only provided one lens through which they could interpret a group's successes or failures. Equally important, the students were less likely to identify the role of opportunity structures in achieving social and economic upward mobility because they had very few opportunities to interact with students across racial and class lines within their segregated school. The unintended consequence was that discourses of an American meritocracy contributed to internalized racism among the students.

The findings of this study suggest that educators and educational policy makers must seriously consider the effects of resegregating our public school systems. While the academic consequences for students segregated by race and class are well documented, educational researchers have only begun to explore how segregated schools contribute to internalized racism among marginalized children. At the same time, this study demonstrates that simply placing marginalized students in an integrated setting does not readily lead to new critical perspectives. Indeed, asking marginalized students to collaborate with their privileged peers can easily reinforce deficit perspectives.

By tracing the trajectory and eventual breakdown of this PAR project, I hope to call attention to the limits and opportunities of conducting PAR with marginalized students in

intensely segregated schools. On the one hand, this study demonstrates that conducting PAR with youth will not necessarily lead to critical consciousness--particularly when issues of social justice are not addressed. Instead, I found that regardless of whether the students were in a segregated setting or an integrated setting, students required analytic tools to help them make sense of the larger social structures and inequalities that shape internalized racism. On the other hand, the integrated after-school setting did prompt a group of Latino/a students to consider how access to opportunities influence individual behavior and begin a counter narrative to the discourse of an American meritocracy. Through this process, students increased their positive self-awareness and began to forge new civic identities in which they identified their own ability to collaborate within a diverse group of people to create change. If researchers are attuned to the ways in which internalized racism can frame students' perspectives and conscious of the need to support critical analysis, conducting Participatory Action Research in an integrated after-school program has the potential to provide marginalized students attending intensely segregated schools a pathway for civic action within diverse communities.

#### References

Akom, A.A.

2008 Black Metropolis and Mental Life: Beyond the "Burden of 'Acting White.'"

*Anthropology and Education Quarterly* 39(3): 247-265.

Bell, Derrick

1976 Serving Two Masters: Integration Ideals and Client Interests in School Desegregation

Litigation. *The Yale Law Review* 85(4): 470-516.

Burd-Sharps, Sarah and Kristen Lewis



2012 A Portrait of Marin. American Human Development Project of the Social Science Research Council.

California Department of Education. Ed-Data Education Data Partnership. Retrieved from <http://www.ed-data.org>

Cammarota, Julio, and Michelle Fine

2008 Youth Participatory Action Research: A Pedagogy for Transformational Resistance. *In Revolutionizing Education*. Julio Cammarota and Michelle Fine, eds. Pp. 1-12.

Castagno, Angelina

2008 "I Don't Want to Hear That!": Legitimizing Whiteness through Silence in Schools. *Anthropology and Education Quarterly* 39(3): 314-333.

Childress, Sarah

2014 A Return to School Segregation in America? *Frontline*. Retrieved from <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/a-return-to-school-segregation-in-america>

Clements, Je'anna

2005 How Crazy can it be? An Assessment, Three Years Later, of Outcomes from a Participatory Project with Children in Johannesburg. *Children, Youth and Environments* 15(2):105-116.

DeJaeghere, Joan, and Kate McCleary

2010 The Making of Mexican Migrant Youth Civic Identities: Transnational Spaces and Imaginaries. *Anthropology and Education Quarterly* 41(3):228-244.

Dweck, Carol

2008 *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success*. New York: Ballantine.

Dyrness, Andrea

2008 Research for Change versus Research as Change. *Anthropology and Education Quarterly* 39(1):23-44.

Dyrness, Andrea

2012 *Contra Viento y Marea (Against Wind and Tide): Building Civic Identity among Children of Emigration in El Salvador*. *Anthropology and Education Quarterly* 43(1): 41-60.

El-Haj, Thea Renda Abu

2009 Becoming Citizens in an Era of Globalization and Transnational Migration. *Theory into Practice* 48(4):274-282.

Ginwright, Shawn

2008 Collective Radical Imagination: Youth Participatory Action Research and the Art of Emancipatory Knowledge. *In Revolutionizing Education*. Julio Cammarota and Michelle Fine, eds. Pp. 13-22.

Kahne, Joseph, and Susan Sporte

2008 Developing Citizens: The Impact of Civic Learning Opportunities on Students' Commitment to Civic Participation. *American Educational Research Journal* 45:738-766.

Kohli, Rita, R.N. Johnson, and L.H. Perez

2006 Naming Racism: A Conceptual Look at Internalized Racism in US Schools. *Chicano/Latino Law Review* 25:183-206.

Ladson-Billings, Gloria

1998 Just What Is Critical Race Theory and What's It Doing in a Nice Field Like Education? *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 11(1): 7-24.

Levinson, Bradley

2005 Citizenship, Identity, Democracy: Engaging the Political in the Anthropology of Education. *Anthropology and Education Quarterly* 36(4):329-340.

Levinson, Bradley

2011 Toward an Anthropology of (Democratic) Citizenship Education. *In A Companion to the Anthropology of Education*. Bradley Levinson and Mica Pollock, eds. Pp. 279-298.

Lewis-Charp, Heather, Hanh Cao Yu, and Sengsouvanh Soukamneuth

2006 Civic Activist Approaches for Engaging Youth in Social Justice. *In Beyond Resistance!* Shawn Ginwright, Pedro Noguera and Julio Cammarota, eds. Pp. 21-36.

Malsbary, Christine

2014 "Will This Hell Never End?": Substantiating and Resisting Race-Language Policies in a Multilingual High School. *Anthropology and Education Quarterly* 45(4): 373-390.

Monzó, Lila

2016 "They Don't Know Anything!": Latinx Immigrant Students Appropriating the Oppressor's Voice. *Anthropology and Education Quarterly* 47(2): 148-166.

Orfield, Gary and Jongyeon Ee

2014 *Segregating California's Future*. University of California, Los Angeles: The Civil Rights Project.

Orfield, Gary, Erica Frankenberg, Jongyeon Ee, and John Kuscera

2014 *Brown at 60: Great Progress, a Long Retreat, and an Uncertain Future*. University of California, Los Angeles: The Civil Rights Project.

Paris, Django and Maisha Winn

2014 Preface. *In Humanizing Research*. Django Paris and Maisha Winn, eds. Pp. xiii-xx. Los Angeles: SAGE Publications.

Pyke, Karen

2010 What is Internalized Racial Oppression and Why Don't We Study It? *Sociological Perspectives* 53(4):551-572.

Quiroz, Pamela Anne

2001 The Silencing of Latino Student "Voice.": Puerto Rican and Mexican Narratives in Eighth Grade and High School. *Anthropology and Education Quarterly* 32(3): 326-349

Spencer, Kyle

2014 The Uncomfortable Reality of Community Schools. *Frontline*.

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/the-uncomfortable-reality-of-community-schools/>

Valenzuela, Angela

1999 *Subtractive Schooling*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Villalpando, Octavio

2003 Self-Segregation or Self-Preservation?: A critical race theory and Latina/o critical theory analysis of a study of Chicana/o college students. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 16(5):619-646.

Wilson, Nance, Stefan Dasho, Anna Martin, Nina Wallerstein, Caroline Wang, and M. Minkler

2007 Engaging Youth Adolescents in Social Action through Photovoice. *Journal of Early Adolescence* 27(2): 241-261.

Zamudio, Margaret, Caskey Russell, Francisco Rios and Jacquelyn Bridgeman

2011 *Critical Race Theory Matter: Education and Ideology*. New York: Routledge.