

Gaining New Perspectives, Accepting Diversity, and Embracing Collective Thought: Revolutionizing Education with a Participatory Agenda

Philip Ray Jones¹, Ph.D.

Abstract

This essay is a critical analysis of Julio Cammarota and Michelle Fine's text entitled *Revolutionizing Education: Youth Participatory Action Research in Motion*. The essay illuminates the idea of how the most innovative, creative, and transformative levels of research among students, educators, as well as all education professionals across the broad education field ultimately materialize as a result of "collaborative" inquiry among "all" participants within a research group. Moreover, this essay highlights Cammarota and Fine's call to all educators to acknowledge the transformative power of the "we" rather than the "me" in regard to research in the field, classroom instruction, and student learning on multifaceted levels across the broad educational spectrum.

Keywords: Youth Participatory; Collaborative; Action Research; Constructivism; Critical Theory; Interpretivism-Hermeneutics

1. Introduction

When one reflects upon the definition of a researcher, one conventionally thinks of a "sole" individual conducting a scholarly investigation on a specific topic. Western society has conditioned many of us to believe that the only valid research utilized to initiate change is that conducted by the "expert." Cammarota and Fine strongly opposes this very narrow and conventional view of the researcher in their book entitled *Revolutionizing Education: Youth Participatory Action Research in Motion*. In this text, professional educators on all levels are challenged to see the power of the "we" rather than the "me" in regard to research and learning in the classroom. This philosophy is interestingly aligned with a vast range of teaching philosophies across the education field, which has a strong focus on the learning effectiveness of creating a highly "participatory," "liberated," "emancipated," and "collaborative" learning environment as advocated by education pioneer Paulo Freire. Moreover, we as educators are also challenged in Cammarota and Fine's text to see how the intellect, imagination, and insightful perspectives of the youth of contemporary society can cohesively unite with that of specialists in an effort to produce insightful results. There are several intriguing arguments in Cammarota and Fine's text that clearly illuminate the innovative paradigm of Participatory Action Research (PAR), the epistemological underpinnings, various research paradigms used in PAR, and the overall analysis of authors that reflect the comprehensive image of Participatory Action Research.

2. Youth Participatory Action Research

Cammarota and Fine (2008) directly identifies their text as an innovative piece of literature that prioritizes the involvement of young people in research topics that conventionally impact their lives:

The praxis highlighted in the book – youth participatory action research (YPAR) provides young people with opportunities to study social problems affecting their lives and then determine actions to rectify these problems [. . .] YPAR teaches young people that conditions of injustice are produced, not natural; are designed to privilege and oppress; but are ultimately challengeable and thus changeable. (p. 2)

¹Assistant Professor of English, Texas Southern University – Department of English, 3100 Cleburne Street, Houston, TX 77004.
E-mail: Philip.Jones@tsu.edu

Cammarota and Fine are asserting here how YPAR is an innovative initiative that extends beyond the realm of the expert. It reaches out to the youth within the community enabling them to take a “collective,” “active” role in researching problems that dominate their lives. They are also illuminating how conventional society has systematically conditioned young people to believe that dire situations within their lives are created by various societal entities and are ultimately transformable. What Cammarota and Fine are suggesting here is that young people must begin to realize that the social injustices in their lives are the result of “nurture” rather than “nature,” and are therefore designed to suppress creative collaborative thinking, imagination, and transformative insight, which are primary characteristics of YPAR.

Through YPAR, the “me” is transformed into a “we,” which yields imaginative, diverse research results. Cammarota and Fine (2008) state, “In most PAR projects, the researcher is not a lone investigator but individuals in a collective. Together, or individually in a group, they are systematically addressing the same problem” (p. 5). This passage very cohesively illustrates the embodiment of YPAR’s agenda. Research is collected through a collective form of “teamwork” rather than individually. Creative ideas are interacting, developing, and being challenged across a vast range of ages, cultures, religions, and intellects to produce a collective body of knowledge, and an action-based agenda for change within a given community. Wheatley (2002) interestingly mirrors Cammarota and Fine in her view on the value of collaboration, collectively engaging in conversation with others, and embracing new perspectives: “New voices revive our energy, and often times help us discover solutions to problems that seem unsolvable” (p. 55). Wheatley interestingly echoes a very important aspect of YPAR regarding her statement on changing the members of a conversation in an effort to transform its dynamic. Cammarota and Fine (2008) state, “Research is therefore a collective process enriched by the multiple perspectives of several researchers. Second, the researcher, or more appropriately, researchers, are more or less “insiders” in a given situation” (p. 5). As Wheatley states above, bringing new people into a conversation about research, education, community issues etc. creates a new dimension of intellect and perspectives that can ultimately yield many unknown answers that have been previously hidden, or limited due to the conventional act of “sole” researching. When the expert brings in the voices of the youth to a research project, young people are no longer considered “the other” within a given community or organization. Everyone becomes an “insider” with a united focus on effectively understanding, developing, analyzing, and changing situations.

3. Epistemological Underpinnings

A significant epistemological underpinning that tends to cohesively integrate into the concept of YPAR is Interpretivism-Hermeneutics. The primary aim of PAR in education is to extend the art of interpretation to the youth in an effort to create a more diverse, collaborative community of researchers. Research expands beyond the singular realms of the scientist, teacher, professor, physician, and other professional adults who conventionally hold the title of “expert.” Chapter three of this text entitled *Participatory Action Research in the Contact Zone* illustrates a very unique, inspirational example of *Interpretivism-Hermeneutics* as it discusses the creation of a contact zone within a youth project entitled *Echoes Arts and Social Justice Institute*. These diverse youths unite to discuss their views and interpretations about history. The contact zone provides a safe place detached from the conventional, formulaic presentations of the history textbook and allows young people to freely exercise their own interpretations of historical events:

The *Echoes* project brought together an internationally diverse group of young people – by gender, race, ethnicity, class, sexuality [. . .] We consciously created a “contact zone,” a messy social space where differently situated people “meet, clash, and grapple with each other” across their varying relationships to power (Pratt, 1991:4). (Cammarota & Fine, 2008, p. 25)

This unique group of diverse youths with the support of adults collaboratively intertwine their intellects, imaginative perspectives, and oppositions in an effort to create interpretations that give a significant meaning to their own lives and experiences.

4. Qualitative Research

Cammarota and Fine illuminate the research method of “qualitative research” in the text. The youth within the contact zone are combining their diversity to creatively shed light on various worldly and community issues in a quest to find clarity, and transparency. They are exercising an “open-ended” sense of interpretation among all members to make sense of the issues that surround their lives: Qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible [. . .]

This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them. (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008, p. 4) This passage reflects well the “qualitative” sense of collaboration that the members of the contact zone are exercising. They are reflecting upon, and openly analyzing personal experiences, and listening to each other’s stories of injustices that have significantly impacted their identity. Cammarota and Fine (2008) present a very interesting discussion in chapter five of the text entitled *Different Eyes/Open Eyes*, which provides a deep level of insight into the level of self-actualization and strong sense of identity that materializes when one intimately observes and internalizes the conflicts in one’s life, and verbally expresses their concerns with others:

Conscientization involves the critical reflection upon the contradictions in one’s own everyday life and the transformation of oneself as part of this process. Dialogue is a key component of conscientization, according to Freire: “it is in speaking [. . .] that people, by naming the world, transform it.” (Freire, 1997[1970]:69). (pp. 111-112)

This passage cohesively supports the collaborative communication of issues exhibited in the contact zone in chapter three of the text. Cammarota and Fine are challenging us here to acknowledge the “transformative power” of dialogue among peers. Through dialogue, a new level of consciousness is born. The lens through which one views the many injustices of the world not only becomes much more comprehensible, but ultimately transparent. As Tesch (1990) states, “Action research is explicitly geared toward improvement of unsatisfactory situations. Its main characteristic, however, is the involvement of ‘practitioners’ [. . .] Action research [. . .] turns research itself into a transformative activity” (p. 66). This contact zone of youths is exposed to each other’s sexualities, cultures, religions, and ideologies. They are able to interpret views and information through diverse lenses which enables them to become independent “meaning makers” of history and other aspects of humanity.

5. Interpretivism and Self Enlightenment

Cammarota and Fine are illuminating the concept of Interpretivism-Hermeneutics in the sense that this contact zone is exercising interpretation as an artistic vessel that transcends them to levels of thinking that had been previously suppressed by the formulaic, structured, scientific information in history books:

Approaching hermeneutics dialogically undermines self-certainty, romantic individualism, and material isolationism and seeks the process of deconstructing and understanding the multi-faceted layers of our post-modern identities [. . .] What we see is a multiplicity of conscious and unconscious interactions revealing the self as complex, emerging, and changing rather than fixed and rational. (Slattery, Krasny, & O’Malley, 2007, p. 539)

In this passage, Slattery, Krasny, and O’Malley are illustrating how Interpretivism is ultimately the force that demolishes the suppressed imagination and the robotically constructed ideas that mainstream western education and society have conditioned us with. We experience a transformative metamorphosis into enlightened individuals with the freedom to create personal meaning of educational issues, cultures, social justices and injustices, and ultimately gain insight into our innermost purpose in society:

The truth is, however, that the oppressed are not “marginals,” are not men living “outside” society. They have always been “inside” – inside the structure which made them “beings for others.” The solution is not to integrate them into the structure of oppression, but to transform that structure so that they can become “beings for themselves.” (Freire, 2007, p. 69)

6. Critical Theory

Regarding additional or secondary paradigms present within the text, Freire dramatically captures the embodiment and essence of the “Critical Theory” paradigm. He is asserting how we as a society have never been “outsiders,” but ultimately crystallized within the dark, strict, repressive realms of authoritative society:

Critical theory is always concerned with what could be, what is immanent in various ways of thinking and perceiving [. . .] In the spirit of Paulo Freire, our notion of an evolving critical theory possesses immanence as it imagines new ways to ease human suffering and produce psychological health (A.M.A. Freire, 2001; Slater, Fain, & Rossatto, 2002). (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008, p. 410)

Here, Denzin and Lincoln clearly capture the innermost goals of the contact zone. The youths are not only collaboratively questing for answers that will ultimately improve their quality of life as a result of their suffered injustices, but are also emotionally and spiritually progressing beyond their own ego and establishing a common ground upon a sea of diversity.

Freire's argument on oppression fits well with the suppressed intellectual growth and development experienced by the youths within the contact zone. Hall (2005) states, "If the research process is genuinely and organically situated in a community, workplace or group which is experiencing domination then we need not, I believe, be afraid that the knowledge which is being generated will be used for purposes that the community or group does not wish for" (p.18). Hall is asserting how the oppressed welcomes the sharing of newly created knowledge that has the power to liberate and transform a dominated space. The contact zone is an assembled group of youths whom have been severely dominated and oppressed by not only the injustices within their community, but also the "meta-narratives" that have predetermined human perspective. They are embracing the opportunity to become collaborative researchers within their own element. Reason & Bradbury (2001) states, "Participation is fundamental to the nature of our being [. . .] As we are a part of the whole we are necessarily actors within it, which leads us to the fundamental importance of the practical" (p. 23). Here, Reason and Bradbury highlight how collaborative participation is an integral aspect of life that fosters the internal growth and development of the self.

Many young people have been conditioned to the injustices that surround their lives, but as Freire discusses in the text, assimilating young people into the oppressive systems of society is not the answer to liberation. We must allow young people to become critical theorists of the life experiences that evolve them as human beings and to challenge the meta-narratives that have controlled and suppressed their lives for decades, yet benefited various other groups in terms of gender, race, and socioeconomic status: "Critical theorists challenge what we think we know is true by demonstrating how it serves the interests of certain individuals and groups at the expense of other individuals and groups. Critical theory is therefore explicitly political and, according to Marx (1983), 'the relentless criticism of all existing conditions' (p. 93)" (Kilgore, 2001, p. 54).

In this passage, Kilgore aligns with Denzin and Lincoln on the idea of questioning existing situations and journeying into the nucleus of society's injustices. Kilgore firmly asserts that to achieve the ultimate level of intellectual, social, spiritual, and aesthetic enlightenment, we must begin to thoroughly investigate not only the origination of injustices, but also *how* and *why* these injustices are allowed to continuously exist within society. Moreover, Kilgore also suggests that we must investigate why certain entities consciously feed these injustices ultimately creating a cancerous plague of suppression upon society.

The above author's discussions are aligned very cohesively with Cammarota and Fine's discussion of PAR and the contact zone in the sense that the ultimate goal is for young people to collaboratively unite and "interpret" the world through their own cultural lenses, and attack the real-life issues that greatly impact their everyday existence: "No matter our age, religion, race, gender, or sexual preference, *Echoes* gave us the opportunity to converse honestly about race, politics, discrimination, and our place in it all, past and present [. . .] I felt that by the end of the almost year-long *Echoes* project, there were no barriers among us" (Cammarota & Fine, 2008, p. 26).

This passage exhibits how the youth in a community have firmly joined hands to immerse themselves in a collaborative quest to understand the controversial issues that surround their existence as human beings. In this contact zone, these young people are free from the suppressive, authoritative, and structured voices of conventional society and are allowed to comfortably penetrate beneath the surface of issues that have plagued their lives with unanswered questions.

7. Constructivism

Cammarota and Fine also illuminate the paradigm of "Constructivism." The youths within the contact zone are given the opportunity to become the "meaning makers" of their own existence. Crotty (1998) states, "Constructivism taken in this sense points up the unique experience of each of us. It suggests that each one's way of making sense of the world is as valid and worthy of respect as any other" (p. 58).

Crotty presents an eye-opening argument here on how we as individuals have been stripped of our interpretive senses due to the conventional, parasitic structures of societal norms. We have been hypnotized by the constrictive, scientific voices of the "positivists" within society and have ultimately become nothing more than human "string puppets" robotically controlled by established norms. The contact zone has escaped this oppressive phenomenon and established a realistic sense of meaning to their place in the world. Slattery et al, (2007) states, "The complexity of understanding aesthetic experiences is difficult for those committed to a modern mechanistic understanding where such experiences do not conform to the logic of positivism, behaviourism, rationalism, and structural analysis" (p. 551).

This passage clearly addresses how we as individuals have been conditioned by conventional western society in which structure, science, and logic prevail as the ideal methods of understanding the cultural and community issues that comprise our lives.

8. Conclusion

Cammarota and Fine's text very strongly highlights the essence of Participatory Action Research. Cammarota and Fine challenge us to acknowledge how as a society, we as educators, as well as general members of the community have been so suppressed by a positivist-structured society that the art of "collaboratively" connecting with other cultures, ethnicities, and social communities are ultimately foreign and viewed as "the other." Sociologists, political scientists, and economist struggled with the question of how to contain social change within a national ideology of 'exceptionalism' which was liberal and ahistorical in nature. The leading US sociologists of this period – Ogburn and Chapin, among others – gradually exchanged politics and history for science and initiated a preoccupation with scientific method (Halfpenny 1982). (Gartrell & Gartrell, 2002, p. 641)

Gartrell and Gartrell are illustrating how a positivist movement guided social change and was ultimately structured within the realms of this mind frame. The constricting, rational, and robotic forces of science engulfed the freedom and diversity of political and historical action, which ultimately suppressed the aesthetic, collaborative, and interconnectedness of interpretivism. Slattery et al. are speaking back to Gartrell and Gartrell asserting that the positivist structure is ultimately a curse on human development, creative insight, and diversity of thinking. Hall (2005) states, "Participatory Research originated as a challenge to positivist research paradigms as carried out largely by university-based researchers. Our position has been that the center of the process needed to be in the margins, in the communities, with women, with black and Asian people, and so forth" (p. 18). Hall presents a brief glimpse into the birth of PAR and illuminates how marginalized groups who became the center of PAR have pushed the suppressive forces of positivist university experts into the shadows. Hall (2005) states, "One might say that PR has 'come in from the cold,' that it has come in from the margins to become an accepted member of the academic family" (p. 5). A positivist structure is deteriorating to the human spirit and results in the deadening of insightful understanding. It is the participatory, critical, interpretivist and constructivist paradigms that enable an enlightened appreciation of diversity and an aesthetic sense of self-realization, which ultimately creates a strong sense of wholeness within the self.

References

- Cammarota, J., & Fine, M. (Eds.) (2008). *Revolutionizing education: Youth participatory action research in motion*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Crotty, M. (1998). *The foundations of social research: Meaning and perspective in the research process*. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications.
- Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (Eds) (2008). *The landscape of qualitative research*. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Freire, P. (2007). Banking v. problem solving models of education. In Curren, R. (Ed), *Philosophy of education: An anthology* (pp. 68-75). Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing Ltd.
- Gartrell, C. D., & Gartrell, J. W. (2002). Positivism in social research: USA and UK(1966-1990). *British Journal of Sociology*, 53(4), 639-657.
- Hall, B. L. (2005). In from the cold? Reflections on participatory researcher from 1970-2005. *Covergence*, 38(1), 5-24.
- Kilgore, D. W. (2001). Critical and postmodern perspectives on adult learning. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, 89, 53-61.
- Reason, P. & Bradbury, H. (2001). Introduction: Inquiry and participation in search of a world worthy of human aspiration. In P. Reason, & H. Bradbury (Eds.), *Handbook of action research: Participative inquiry and practice*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Slattery, P., Krasny, K. A., & O'Malley, M. P. (2007). Hermeneutics, aesthetics, and the quest for answerability: A dialogic possibility for reconceptualizing the interpretive process in curriculum studies. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 39(5), 537-558.
- Tesch, R. (1990). *Qualitative research: Analysis types and software tools*. New York, NY: The Falmer Press.
- Wheatley, M. J. (2002). *Turning to one another: Simple conversations to restore hope to the future*. San Francisco, California: Barrett-Koehler Publishers.