The Courage to Critique Policies and Practices from Within: Youth Participatory Action Research as Critical Policy Analysis

A Response to "*Buscando la Libertad*: Latino Youths in Search of Freedom in School"

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ABSTRACT

This response to "*Buscando la Libertad*: Latino Youths in Search of Freedom in School" by Jason G. Irizarry demonstrates how youth participatory action research (YPAR) as an instrument of subverting oppressive school policies and structures is a form of critical policy analysis (CPA). As an evolving method, CPA acknowledges the absent voices in policy, questions policy inequities, fosters empowerment, and influences policy. Youths who engage in YPAR, as demonstrated by Project FUERTE, have the courage to critique school policies that have the power to alter their educational trajectories, which offers more hope for change than scholarly elites who critique policies from the ivory tower. This response concludes with suggestions for educators. In order for sustainable changes in school policies and structures to occur, youths partaking in YPAR need collaborative support from principals and teachers.

IN RESPONSE TO "*Buscando la Libertad*: Latino Youths in Search of Freedom in School" by Jason G. Irizarry (2011a), I illustrate how Project FUERTE's (Future Urban Educators) application of youth participatory action research (YPAR) to accomplish freedom from oppression and freedom of expression is a form of critical policy analysis (CPA). Scholars of educational policy who use CPA in their work understand it to be both a theory and a method for critiquing policy—specifically for appraising the intended versus the unintended consequences of a policy; division of power, resources, and knowledge; and social stratification within schools and any related institution (Young, Diem, Lee, Mansfield, & Welton, forthcoming). The application of CPA is evolving. However, recognizing the silent and absent voices in policy, questioning policy inequities, fostering empowerment, and influencing policy are central to this work (Young et al., forthcoming), and these tenets are applied here to frame Project FUERTE's YPAR project as CPA.

Through praxis (Freire, 1970), a reflective, problem-solving, and action-oriented process that is the very foundation of participatory methods such as YPAR, Project FUERTE worked collaboratively to identify policies and structures that silenced Latino students' voices and marginalized their identities, hindered their opportunities to learn, and rendered their cultures and histories absent from the curriculum. Irizarry identifies the struggles of Latino youths to disrupt and transform the harsh sociopolitical contexts in which they are educated as freedom of expression. That is, for the students in the project, schooling was largely a "subtractive" experience (Valenzuela, 1999). The students' response to the assault on their cultural and linguistic identities represented a search for freedom of expression.

In addition to disclosing how school policies silenced them, students of Project FUERTE also questioned policy inequities by identifying ways in which White students were privileged in discipline policies and sanctions and ways teachers' pedagogical practices offered Latino students, as "raced" individuals (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1996), unequal educational opportunities to learn. The overall purpose of this response to Irizarry's work is to demonstrate how students who use YPAR as a vehicle for change are in fact

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engaging in CPA. Moreover, unlike scholars in the ivory tower, who are critiquing both the intended and the unintended consequences of school policies and practices, YPAR is a method in which Latino youths can go beyond what the scholarly elite can accomplish by simultaneously critiquing, subverting, and altering school policies in which they interact with daily. However, in order to truly alter oppressive institutional structures, students engaging in YPAR need collaborative support from institutional agents—teachers, principals, etc.

Review of *"Buscando la Libertad"*

In his article, Irizarry demonstrated how YPAR serves first as a theory in which Latino youths can critically examine school structures that either foster or inhibit their educational opportunities. Second, Irizarry situates YPAR as a method of inquiry in which Latino youths can take action-oriented steps toward subverting oppressive school structures in order to reclaim power over their personal educational pathways. As a result of recent demographic shifts, the school political and structural constraints experienced by Latino youth at the high school participating in Project FUERTE are similar to those experienced by youths not only in many urban schools but in many suburban schools as well (see Orfield & Lee, 2005). Low-income students and students of color are disproportionately enrolled in the lowest academic tracks, have disproportionately lower chances of completing high school within four years, and receive limited resources and supports to matriculate to college (Balfanz & Letgers, 2004; Rubin, Wing et al., 2006; Solórzano & Ornelas, 2002). Moreover, Latino youths specifically are the target of despotic school policies and practices—such as egregious disciplinary tactics, surveillance, suppression of language and cultural identity, and inequities in opportunities to learn.

While educational policy and research discourses are still deconstructing the "achievement gap," "achievement debt," or "opportunity gaps" (Ladson-Billings, 2006; Milner, 2010; Noguera & Wing, 2006), Latino youths can right now be equipped with tools such as YPAR to become more critically conscious (Freire 1970) of unequal structures that subtract from their schooling (Irizarry, 2009). Nationally, high school reform efforts have failed to provide equitable schooling experiences for Latino youths, (Gándara & Contreras, 2008). Nevertheless, the students of Project FUERTE demonstrated how YPAR was one mechanism for them to claim their right to educational opportunities, despite limited efforts of both school policy and leadership to alter deleterious institutional structures in their high school. Irizarry refers to the students' struggles to combat problematic policies and practices within their school as a search for freedom from oppression.

The students of Project FUERTE engaging in YPAR experienced both conflict within themselves as they internalized the repeated policies and practices that oppressed them at their school as well as teachers' and administrators' resistance to the students' use of YPAR as a demonstration of the democratic practices and learning that could be achieved in the classroom (Irizarry, 2011b). By confronting their own internal and institutional struggles as they engaged in YPAR, the youths of Project FUERTE were

declaring their right to freedom from oppression and freedom of expression. Irizarry's approach to working with students was grounded in critical theory and, once applied to policy, constitutes CPA.

REFRAMING PROJECT FUERTE AS CRITICAL POLICY ANALYSIS
In the subsequent sections, I reexamine Irizarry's article to identify specific ways in which Project FUERTE engages in CPA. I review how educational scholars use critical methods, specifically participatory action methodologies, to conduct policy analysis. As a CPA method, YPAR critiques distributions of power in institutions, promotes democracy, and enhances the educational skills of youths in the classroom.

By identifying the silent and absent voices in school policies and practices, uncovering policy inequities, empowering each other to enact policy changes, and influencing policy by sharing their research findings with educational leaders and policymakers, Project FUERTE participants were in fact conducting a critical policy analysis of their experiences at their high school. FUERTE exposed school policies and actions that censored the voices and identities of Latino youths. YPAR raised students' consciousness of school policies that continued to impede Latino students' opportunities to succeed in school and matriculate to postsecondary education. Eventually FUERTE, aggravated by the school's continued hostility toward Latino youths, formed a collective movement to take power over their personal educational pathways. The final goal of CPA is to inform policy. FUERTE continues to challenge the top-down approach of policy development and implementation by both sharing their research findings with policymakers and contributing to the professional development of educators in order to retain a national, state, and local impact on educational policy and practices.

CENTERING POWER IN POLICY ANALYSIS
By applying critical theory to deconstruct educational policy, CPA is a method for unveiling how schools as institutions unequally distribute knowledge, power, and resources (Marshall, 1997; McLaren & Giarelli, 1995; Young et al., forthcoming). Critical methods of inquiry emerged out of discontent with unequal structures such as social class and race (Anderson, 1989). Scholars who use critical theory to critique educational policy do so with the aim of "transforming and freeing individuals from sources of domination" (Anderson, 1989, p. 254) and the oppressive structures that educational policies support. Therefore, CPA imports critical frameworks—critical race theory, LatCrit, queer theory, feminist theory, to name a few—in order to critique educational policy discourse and implementation. Moreover, social theorists such as Bourdieu (1991) critique ways in which schools as institutions stratify and reproduce inequalities.

Participatory methodologies such as action research and participatory action research go beyond distant theoretical critiques of policies and practices by integrating agency with critique (Fischer, 2003). Therefore, youths who engage in participatory methods have the prospect of simultaneously challenging and changing educational policies that directly impact them.

Youths practicing YPAR have the hope of accomplishing more than scholarly elites, who perform their theoretical critique from afar. Scholarly elites simply raise awareness of issues without providing concrete change.

As a CPA framework, participatory action methodologies can renew the social capital of those practicing the inquiry while maintaining the integrity of the democratic processes (Fischer, 2003). The Latino youths of Project FUERTE, by engaging in YPAR, gained social capital such as numeracy, literacy, and rhetorical skills and resources to foster democratic practices in the classroom and beyond (Irizarry, 2011). The skills Latino youths acquired from YPAR were also valuable social capital resources that assisted them in navigating opportunity structures within school.

REVEALING SILENT AND ABSENT VOICES

Educational policy scholars understand CPA as a method to disclose who is included, not included, and pushed to the margins due to school policies and practices (Young et al., forthcoming). Latino youths of Project FUERTE were silenced in school because their educational rights were repeatedly called to question by those in power. Teachers and principals engaged in the oppression of youths because they deemed the very presence of Latino youths in school as a threat to their personal property and rights. The systematic assault on Latino youths in the study reflected larger forces at play in the subordination of youths of color in schools (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).

Teachers should aim to make the classroom space and their pedagogical practices more democratic (Dewey, 1938). Although they did not name it as such during the course of their work, YPAR as a critical policy framework created a space where the students of Project FUERTE could exert a freedom of expression to identify, challenge and speak back to school policies and individual acts among educators that were reflective of privilege and power and that made Latino youths virtually invisible in their own school settings. The teachers' and the administration's silencing of Latino student identity—such as omitting Latino history from the curriculum and penalizing the use of Spanish in school—was reflective of larger issues of power and the efforts to control the growing population of Latino youths in this community.

The experiences of students in FUERTE are reflective of a growing assault against youths of color. For example, SB 1070, the anti-immigration law in Arizona, adds to the burden of racial profiling and police surveillance experienced by Latino youths in schools across the country (Foxen, 2010). Also, the overrepresentation of Black and Latino youths in special education and exclusionary discipline practices is directly related to what is now called the school-to-prison pipeline (Kim, Losen, & Hewitt, 2010). Through these policies, Latino students are explicitly and implicitly told by those in power that they do not have a right to an education.

Central to CPA is the raising of subaltern voices. FUERTE students recognized their acts of expression—styles of dress, accents, and cultural values—that were identified by teachers as threats were essential to fostering a sense of community and support among their peers. Therefore, FUERTE participants became conscious of how their freedom of expression, not the silencing of their identity, was an asset to their schooling.

QUESTIONING POLICY INEQUITIES

Scholars of educational policy who take a critical epistemological stance typically examine how school policies and practices place low-income students, students from working-class families, and students of color in the bottom strata of opportunity (Anyon, 1981; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1996) and serve as a function of social reproduction (Anderson, 1989; Welton, 2011; Willis, 1977). Whether they study unequal structures such as tracking to lower academic courses (Oakes, 1985; Solórzano & Ornelas, 2002) or stratification of access to rigorous academic preparation for college (Welton, 2011), critical policy researchers examine these structures from afar, but students of Project FUERTE, by using YPAR, critically examined their daily personal interactions within the very structures that oppressed them. Irizarry identified Project FUERTE's process of questioning policy inequities and opportunity structures as freedom of oppression.

In the beginning stages of using YPAR to critically examine oppressive school policies and institutional forces that shaped their educational pathways, students struggled with understanding what it meant to truly free themselves from oppression (and the struggle is still ongoing). Irizarry distinguished the students' ability to simply be critical of school policies and practices from their actual achievement of empowerment and agency. Project FUERTE was able to identify oppressive policies such as the school's harsh surveillance of Latino students and the educational resource advantages of White students. However, participants' initial critiques were matched with their own internalized oppression as they accepted "that's just the way it is here" or "Latinos are not smart." Students in Project FUERTE were initially good critics of policy inequities, but due to the overwhelming oppressive forces at their high school, the students internalized their oppression and responded with acceptance of their social position (see Stanton-Salazar, 2001).

FOSTERING EMPOWERMENT

As CPA continues to evolve in educational policy research, critical scholars envision CPA as a mechanism for fostering empowerment, promoting social justice, and bridging policy and practice (Young et al., forthcoming). Participatory research methods such as YPAR aim to empower the average citizen to take action in the policy decision-making process, which is vital to the "contemporary struggle for participatory democracy" (Fischer, 2003, p. 214). Furthermore, both the empowerment and "self-help strategies" within participatory methods counter institutional elitist tendencies (Fischer, 2003, p. 214).

Project FUERTE participants moved from simply critiquing policies that subjugated them to actually asserting agency toward altering school policies. This shift occurred when a caring Latino teacher was forced by school administration to resign from his position. Infused by anger over policies that removed a positive resource (a valued teacher) from their schooling, students began to collaborate and organize, and to develop the skill set to take action

and question the school policy decision-making process. According to Holloway (2005), theoretical critique of social and political inequities represents a collective struggle, or a collective "scream." This struggle helped students understand how they could both be empowered by and have power over their educational pathways. YPAR as a form of critical policy analysis becomes revolutionary and "emancipates" the "power-to" those who have been marginalized by political processes (Holloway, 2005, p. 213). Freedom from oppression can be defined as the power-to question the very policies that create inequalities in Latino students' opportunities to learn.

INFLUENCING POLICY

The final goal of CPA scholars is to influence policy by sharing their critiques with those responsible for creating and implementing educational policy (Young et al., forthcoming). The skills students acquired through the process of learning to problematize, engage in empirical research, and share their deeply personal findings with policymakers and educators gave students in Project FUERTE the tools to navigate any future political and structural challenges.

A deficit representation of Latino youths is typical rhetoric for educational policy and research (Yosso, 2005). When Project FUERTE students captured the ear of educators and policymakers during presentations of their research, they had the power to reposition themselves not as the policy problem but as people possessing a range of knowledge and skills to present policy solutions (Yosso, 2005). By engaging in YPAR, students acquired aspects of community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005), including "resistant capital" to help them resist the challenges of educational inequality in school settings, "navigational capital" so that they could effectively navigate institutional structures, and "aspirational capital" because students realized their cultural identity was important, or their "way of seeing mattered" (Yosso, 2005, p. 78). YPAR as an act of CPA helped Latino youths recognize the assets they possessed for influencing political change.

Collaborating with Latino Youths

The youths of Project FUERTE displayed courage and took risks when questioning school policies and structures that had the power to shape their educational futures. The disheartening inequalities in our educational system reveal that, as educational scholars and leaders (teachers, principals, etc., at the levels of district, state, etc.) who shape policies and practices, we have not done our part to make decisions that protect the future of Latino youths and other groups of young people who are underserved by schools. Nationwide educational inequalities for Latino youths are largely due to educational scholars and leaders "wittingly or unwittingly" aligning ourselves with elite interests (Fischer, 2003, p. 214). Participatory inquiry can critique this aforementioned alignment in order to sustain democracy and social justice (Fisher, 2003). By participating in YPAR, Latino youths can "choose how they live their lives" (Fischer, 2003, p. 215) instead of school policies and structures choosing for them.

Unique to Project FUERTE, the students engaged in critique of the school from the inside, as part of a school-sanctioned class.

The students brought important emic perspectives to the study of Latino education and applied these to transform the school from within, a difficult task, to be certain. In contrast to most school reform initiatives, which are top-down and developed externally, FUERTE offered context-specific solutions, developed by youths, to improve schools. However, adults in the school, like most adults across the nation, were reluctant to put youths of color in positions of power and listen to them.

Instead, an inequitable opportunity structure continues to plague the education of youths of color. According to Irizarry, his students' educational outcomes were "largely reflective of the opportunities they were offered as students" (2001a, p. 8). Although all of the students completed high school, their aspirations for higher education were suppressed because of the poor quality of their past educational experiences. Thus, in order for educational opportunities to increase, students need both the "technical and political" aspects to change within their educational setting (Anderson, 1989, p. 262). Youths working single-handedly toward change may not be enough to transform both technical and political structures in schools. Youths need educators to employ agency and join them in their efforts to transform schools and other oppressive institutions.

Youths using YPAR as a method to critique policy within school settings should have the support of teachers, administrators, and mentors who serve as "institutional agents" (Stanton-Salazar, 1997) and collaborate with students to accomplish real action-oriented change in schools. For student voice to revolutionize schools, a "mutual agreement," or a community-of-practice between school adults and students, is needed (Mitra, 2005, p. 531). Not only can adult collaborators help foster students' development as leaders but adults can serve as advocates by helping students negotiate institutional push-back and resistance to change, making students' quest for political transformation within school a reality (Mitra, 2005). We must place youths in the position to critique and engage in more democratic practices and dialogue in school so that repressive school policies and structures do not determine their fate. As educational leaders, we must listen to, collaborate with, and assist youths in taking power over navigating their educational trajectories.

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