CONNECTING THE STRENGTH OF THE RESEARCH TO THE STRENGTH OF THE TEAM PARTNERSHIP

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ABSTRACT
This paper explores how a youth-adult team’s partnership shaped their participatory action research (PAR) on youth engagement in educational change. Findings revealed that their experiences of partnership shaped their research by: 1) enhancing their relations with participants; 2) improving their capacity to navigate research complexities; 3) expanding and deepening their reflection and analysis; and 4) strengthening their research commitment. These results demonstrate the potential interconnectedness between a team’s experience of partnership and the strength of the research. In doing so, constructions of youth-adult PAR become more deeply positioned within a participatory paradigm because the quality of team relations can become as important as the research itself.

KEY WORDS: Youth-adult partnership, Participatory action research, Collaborative research, Research partnership, Team relations, Collaborative self-study, Research rigor, Democratic, Social justice education.
INTRODUCTION
Collaborative self-study invites practitioners to create inquiry spaces to collectively explore, understand, and interpret their practices with the intent to better understand, describe and improve their work (Bullock & Christou, 2009). As a youth-adult participatory action research PAR team, we shared the desire to better understand and describe how our partnership practices and experiences shaped our research on youth voice and engagement in educational change. While our partnership was complex, messy, and time consuming, we shared a felt sense that it was an indispensable strength to our research. At times, we heard ourselves say aloud that our partnership was the glue holding together and sustaining our research throughout its twists, turns, and commitments. While we could explain team members’ contributions, describe our research tasks and knew the benefits of team dialogue in moving the research forward, we lacked adequate understanding of how our team relations that made us feel like genuine partners were shaping our research. Team relations we identified as making us feel like genuine partners included: being in real relationship with one another; sharing power, responsibility and passion; being flexible; and experiencing individual and group change/transformation (Gardner et al., 2016). As a PAR team of three youth/students and three adults/educators, we conducted a collaborative self-study to better understand and describe how these partnership relations shaped our research.

Our findings revealed four central ways our partnership shaped our research, including: 1) enhancing our relations with participants; 2) improving our capacity to navigate research complexities; 3) expanding and deepening our reflection and analysis; and 4) strengthening our research commitment. Given PAR’s commitment to a participatory paradigm, with respect to how research is conducted and its intended impact to further social justice and democratic change, understanding how team relations can empower the team and the research was key.

Our collaborative self-study was conducted during the final year of the PAR research. We describe the PAR study to outline the context within which our self-study occurred.

Specifically, our PAR research comprised a five-year mixed method educational study on youths’ perspectives, experiences and visions related to youth engagement in social justice educational reform in high school. Youth participants between 15-25 years were recruited within educational and community settings. Data collection methods included interviews, focus groups, creative workshops and a survey. The PAR study was conducted by [us], a six-member youth-adult team who collaboratively carried out and coordinated all facets of the 5-year research process (e.g., data collection, analysis, dissemination). This team comprised three youth/students between 17-19 years old who experienced educational barriers – Linda, Elizabeth, Allie; two teachers who teach at an alternative high school that emphasizes a flexible, supportive setting to meet individual needs of learners – Ann, Carol; and a faculty of education university professor - Morgan. Members’ locationalities and subjectivities varied in terms of financial means, age, sexual orientation, heritage/ethnicity, formal education, lifestyle, job status, family, geographical location (rural/urban), and migration. The six-member ‘youth-adult team’ was supported by a ten-member ‘support
team’ of educators, youth and youth-serving community professionals. The support team provided input and support to the research youth-adult team. Recruitment of all team members took place by word-of-mouth and posters in a local youth-serving organization serving marginalized youth and an alternative education center for youth facing educational barriers. Team members decided for themselves whether they were on the ‘youth-adult team’ or ‘support team’. All team members held a shared commitment to addressing educational barriers facing marginalized youth and sought to expand youths’ voice/engagement in social justice educational change.

**Literature Review**

Understanding how a team's partnership experience shapes their PAR research is an important area of study. PAR holds clear expectations of team members’ participation across the research; it highlights the strength and influence of research when undertaken by those directly concerned with and/or impacted by the issue under study.

Many youth-adult PAR studies relay how team members shape the research in positive ways. Youth members have been credited with making research youth accessible, relevant, doable, and impactful (Galletta & Jones, 2010; Rodriguez & Brown, 2009). Adult members offer research knowledge, experience, and skills in moving the study forward, and do so in ways that engage youth researchers in active, meaningful ways (Atweh, 2003; Powers & Tiffany, 2006). The interplay of team member strengths and contributions is often central to notions of what makes youth-adult PAR research cogent and strong. Team relations comprise an equally central facet of partnership. By team relations, we refer to the kinds and quality of interactions, experiences, dynamics, connections, and relations of power within the team. If combined member contributions strengthen research, what about team relations? In this paper we explore how our team relations as a partnership shaped our research.

Multiple indicators point to the importance of team relations in youth-adult PAR studies. Studies affirm PAR’s principle of democratic team relations (Brown & Galeas, 2011; Galletta & Jones, 2010), highlight the importance of team building, and cite efforts to foster safe, respectful, and inclusive team environments (Cahill, Rios-Moore & Threatts, 2008; Torre et al., 2008). Challenges to youth engagement in the research team are often identified with the goal to better address these barriers (Dentith, Measor & Michael, 2009; Guishard, 2009). There is recognition that negative images of youth (e.g., deficit-based views of youth as lazy, dangerous, irresponsible, apathetic) undermine youth-adult relations (Wotherspoon & Schissel, 2001). Members have provided accounts of positive impacts gained from their team environment (Lind, 2007; 2008; Torre et al., 2008). While these discussions illustrate the importance of team relations, Torre et al. (2008) indicate this “is typically not discussed in PAR” (p. 23). When youth-adult PAR teams do not examine and report what made them feel like partners, it is challenging to understand exactly how team relations shape research. Instead, connections between team relations and the research are often implied or relayed in general terms.
There are implied assumptions that good teams relations are needed to be able to effectively move the research forward (Lind 2007; Torre et al., 2008). Cahill et al. (2008) indicate that in “becoming a research collective” that their “interpersonal interactions were critical to our feeling good about the project” (p. 97). Challenges in youth-adult team relations are bound to affect facets of the PAR research (Bland & Atweh, 2007; Kirshner & O'Donoghue, 2001). For instance, Atweh (2003) states, “[t]he boundary lines between the authority that we had [as adults] and the freedom that we advocated for the students were sometimes confusing to them, as well as to us. At times, students and their schoolteachers were hesitant to proceed on a decision without checking if it was what university staff wanted them to do” (p. 34). Tensions identified between addressing the demands of the research and meeting the needs of the youth team members can illustrate differences in felt purposes between the two (Brown & Galeas, 2011; Harper & Carver, 1999; Powers & Tiffany, 2006). For instance, Bland and Atweh (2007) refer to the tension between fostering youth development and forwarding the research agenda. Understanding how teams’ experiences of partnership shape their research is a valuable area of study within the youth-adult PAR literature. Our collaborative self-study contributes to this project.

**Methodology**

**Methodology:** Collaborative self-study created a complementary, collective inquiry space (to our PAR team work) to better understand, describe, and interpret how feeling like partners shaped our research (Bullock, 2009). We felt invited to ‘sit’ with our experiences, individually and collectively (Louie, Drevdahl, Purdy, & Stackman, 2003, p. 156), via reflection, question asking, and dialogue (Ilkeze, 2012). Within the context of this qualitative inquiry, we recognized reality and meaning as socially constructed and, therefore, subjective, partial, situated, and on-going (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Within the context of our self-study, we drew from hermeneutics because of its emphasis on “understanding meaning” according to “the world as the participants have come to understand it” in the goal to “create new realities through communicative processes such as dialogue” (Friedman & Rogers, 2009, p. 33). Consistent with hermeneutics (and aligned with collaborative self-study), our interpretative process was rooted in on-going dialogue with each other and with our data/texts in the goal to create rich descriptions and meanings of how our partnership shaped our research (Smith, 1991).

**Self-study process:** Our self-study process comprised a dynamic interchange of individual and group exploration and analysis over 6 months. We often compiled reflections individually, in pairs, or groups of three before meeting once a month for whole group sharing, dialogue and analysis. Topics of exploration were jointly constructed and included unstructured and structured explorations. For instance, we discussed and wrote freely about how we felt our partnership shaped our research – being led by wherever these explorations took us. We completed individual and group brainstorming via thought webs of how we felt our partnership shaped our research. We also engaged in structured reflections. For instance, we explored how each of the team relations that made us feel like genuine partners (i.e., being in real relationship with one another; sharing power, responsibility and passion; being flexible; and experiencing individual and group
change/transformation) shaped our research. We wrote reflections on specific ideas/experiences/themes/team relations from our thought webs, discussions and writings. We shared our writing with the group for discussion, debate, and to further build on individual and collective insights. These conversations led to further individual reflective work, followed by further group discussion, until we felt saturated in our engagement with a topic/issue and observed a pattern of repeating reflections across our individual and collective work.

**Data analysis:** Data analysis was on-going and comprised varied analytic strategies. Data included individual and group writings, thought webs, session notes, and e-mail correspondence. We began by reading and re-reading the data set and sharing initial impressions, thoughts, and queries. This led to further discussion, comparison/contrast, and to more selective readings to examine developing themes/insights related to our self-study question, followed by moving back to the data set as a whole. This back-and-forth process was guided by the “hermeneutic circle” that “seeks to understand the whole in light of its parts, repeatedly testing interpretations against the available evidence until each of the parts can be accounted for in a coherent interpretation of the whole” (Moss, 1994, p. 8). This dialogic and inductive process was creative and intuitive as well as rigorous and structured (Moules, McCaffrey, Field, & Laing, 2015). We opened up and explored possibilities. We also systematically analyzed and organized the data - sorting and resorting and identifying and revising themes and sub-themes - to continue deepening and sharpening our analysis in relation to how our partnership shared our PAR research (Creswell, 2014). Cross-checking our analytic work further, we each examined our central themes/sub-themes to ensure they accurately represented the data.

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<tr>
<th>Table 1: The Quality of Team Relations/Partnership Strengthening the Research</th>
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<td><strong>Enhanced quality of relations with research participants</strong></td>
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| - meeting youth research participants where they are (e.g., genuinely listening to, valuing and relating to youth)  
- partnering and co-creating with youth participants |
| **Better navigation of the complexities of the research topic and process** |
| - examining the research topic in its complexity  
- dealing with disjuncture(s) between youth, community and university contexts  
- trusting in the messy unfolding of PAR’s emergent process |
| **More rigorous reflection and data analysis via:** |
| - greater breadth and depth of critical reflection and analysis  
- sustaining reflection and analysis over time |
| **Strengthened research commitment via:** |
| - sustaining our 3-year funded study over 5-years allowing its full completion |
RESULTS
Our results indicated that our quality of team relations as a youth-adult partnership: 1) enhanced our relations with participants; 2) improved our capacity to navigate research complexities; 3) expanded and deepened our reflection and analysis; and 4) strengthened our research commitment (see Table 1). Each theme is further explored within the context of its sub-themes. We narrate this section using our names - youth/students (Linda, Elizabeth, Allie), teachers (Ann, Carol) and university education professor (Morgan).

Enhanced Quality of Relations with Research Participants
Our quality of connection as a partnership enhanced the quality of our relations with research participants. In our partnership, we learned that being in real relationship with each other made us feel like research partners. By real relationship, we meant, as Morgan shared, “meeting each other where we are”, and recognizing that we are “persons with complex lives and identities”. Elizabeth highlighted the importance of our “genuine connection”; she commented that she felt comfort “being herself”. Allie spoke of our “mutual commitment and caring towards each other”. Linda added that we were in a real relationship by “being honest with each other even when it took courage or felt messy”; she said it meant we “dealt with conflict when it happened” and in a manner whereby we each “felt respected, heard, and valued”. Carol emphasized the importance of our “flexibility with each other and research participants”. Ann indicated our team was “real” by each bringing “our strength and vulnerability”. Being in an authentic team relationship also necessitated being willing to be challenged and to grow and change as individuals/researchers; it meant being open to engaging in on-going self-reflection. We realized that we drew from our team environment and experiences of being in an authentic/real relationship to make us better able to relate, connect, and partner with youth participants. Morgan wrote during a self-study session:

I realized ethical guidelines and focus group skills were only initial steps in preparing for youth focus groups. Increasingly, I saw how we drew from our partnership relations as a guide. . . . We understood the value of fostering a relaxed, informal environment during focus groups . . . of sharing food, using jargon free language, taking breaks, and of everyone being free to come and go during a session. . . . Because of our partnership experiences, we trusted the value of allowing focus group conversations to get, what others might call, “off track” and of supporting participants to express themselves in ways that felt most comfortable to them even if it was socially nonconventional (e.g., swearing, participants talking at the same time) . . . . I learned to let go of what to expect or how to fully prepare for a focus group so there was more room to co-create the process with participants. I took these risks because they worked well for us as a team, often igniting valuable creativity and group insight. As an academic researcher, at times, I was worried I may be losing my standards (having the right conditions to collect robust data). . . . at times it was hard to let go and trust the process but what I saw were youth participants being more honest, open, and genuine in our conversations, something we experienced as a team.
As a PAR team, we shared power by making joint decisions across the research and working together as co-learners; we often interchanged roles and responsibilities. We valued each of our voices and contributions, and shared ownership and responsibility for the research. Linda described:

As youth team members, we were inspired and ignited during the research because we experienced that our voice had equal weight. We all shared ownership for the research. Youth and adult team members took turns facilitating meetings, coordinating with the group, writing meeting minutes, planning meeting agendas; we took on the same tasks as our adult partners. As youth team members, we transformed from curious youth to fully engaged researchers. This experience of sharing power as a team impacted our outreach with youth participants.

During youth outreach sessions, we stepped away from managing sessions in a preconceived orderly, top-down or efficient manner; connection, co-learning and partnership with participants came to outweigh a mindset of gathering data. Concepts like outreach and data collection felt better replaced by the phrase ‘connecting and co-creating with participants’. As a teacher, Ann described how our team experiences shaped her outreach with youth participants:

This was the messiest research experience I have encountered, but also the most real. As a team, we considered each other’s diverse identities and needs from the beginning, not just the goals of the research. This meant a great deal of flexibility on all of our parts. I had to concern myself with things I never had to in past research groups . . . if a team member needed transportation, it became a group concern. . . . This team experience deepened my ability to listen and, therefore, by the time we arrived to the stage of meeting youth participants, I wanted to listen to who they are as persons rather than just getting answers to research questions. The youth were my primary focus and then the research task . . . This was a new experience for me as a researcher.

Linda shared that the “realness” of our partnership challenged her “to engage in deep, meaningful self-reflection” as a youth, which meant she had to process her own fears and emotions related to viewing herself as a “youth leader” of educational change. In a similar way, Allie wrote,

Through the closeness of our research team, I was able to slowly explore how I felt about myself with the team, and how this impacted my perspective on youth. . . . I came to realize that I was not truly believing in myself and I did not realize how this transferred into me not believing in other youth. Our genuine partnership meant that the team challenged me by always treating me as capable and of equal value in my views and perspectives as any other team member.
As a result of these experiences, Allie wrote,

I then found myself taking this realization further. If I am good enough now, if I have important ideas and knowledge to share now as a young adult, then other youth are too. I realized I had only believed in them as far as I believed in myself. I am now able to look at other youth as they are and know that they have truly valuable insight, and their perspectives are a source of real knowledge and importance to our world. . . . I did not realize that by transforming aspects of myself through our partnership, I was transforming who I was as a researcher in ways which only further strengthened our research. When I saw myself differently, I began to see and work with youth differently.

Similar to Allie, Linda shared how her self-reflection within the partnership changed who she was as a youth researcher. In processing her own doubts and fears related to “Youth voice and leadership, she indicated that she “could relate to youth participants when they were confused, struggling or uncomfortable [in talking about youth voice in educational change] because I have experienced those feelings and have overcome the obstacles that youth face when conceptualizing themselves as leaders”. She further shared that she “was better able to assist youth participants in finding their voice and articulating their ideas” and became “more sympathetic to their emotions and histories” due to her experiences of feeling heard, valued and being treated as “an equal partner” on our team. Elizabeth expressed how our partnership informed her work as a youth researcher. She stated:

By working through our barriers and conflicts as a team, our research strategies and outreach were more effective because we knew how to better partner with youth. I remember a focus group with youth who were facing lots of educational and social barriers . . . and going in thinking, well, we might have issues with engagement, but I said to myself, I am going to engage youth just like we engage as a team- candid, casual, equally respectful, being real, not trying to pretend to be some objective, professional youth researcher. The group went over time because they were so engaged. I left having gained so much insight.

**Greater Ability to Navigate Research Complexities**

Without our experience navigating the complexities of our partnership, we would not have been so interested, committed, and/or able to pilot the complexities of the research topic and PAR process. Our study of youth engagement in educational change would have been less layered and complex. We would not have been as creative or determined to deal with the disjuncture(s) between our respective youth, community and university contexts; nor would we have been as committed to trusting in the messy unfolding of PAR’s emergent process.

**Engaging the Complexity of our Topic**

As a team we explored our own stories related to our research topic with intentions to locate ourselves, better understand the subject of our study and ‘walk our talk’ by exploring
our own stories before asking youth participants to explore and share their narratives. Sharing our high school stories – exploring experiences of voice and agency (or lack thereof) to ignite educational change – as Linda wrote, allowed us “to become radial researchers as a team – working from the inside-out, rather than from the outside-in”. Elizabeth shared, “many of the stories let us see a very vulnerable side of the team member, but we were developing very strong bonds at that point so we knew our stories were safe”. In “diving deep” into our individual/collective stories, we echoed Allie’s comment that “our stories allowed me to see how complex, how similar, and equally how different everyone’s high school stories are”; as Ann stated, “Wow!”. This partnership experience changed our relationship to our topic of study because we were changed. Morgan reflected,

We knew we wanted to invite youth who felt marginalized in high school to share what voice and agency they wanted to create educational change . . . but after our storytelling we saw how complex and multi-dimensional this inquiry needed to be . . . we couldn’t turn away from this complex view . . . it wasn’t so much about possessing more knowledge or facts, but about gaining an embodied understanding due to the realness and diversity of our sharing.

Elizabeth relayed that researching “the complexity” of our topic meant being more impactful: "Working on our own stories taught me so much about myself and team members. . . and then taking that complexity and applying it to the real world through our research. . . it was exciting and more impactful.” As a teacher, Carol passionately stated, “I wanted us to offer youth the same opportunity to explore their complex stories as we did”. Engaging the greater complexity of our topic shaped the development of our research tools (e.g., interviews, focus group, survey) and outreach strategies. Everything took more time and skill-building. For instance, the youth survey we developed became comprehensive; it shifted from our envisioned 3-4 pages to 12 pages in length. We spent many months developing relationships with youth-serving organizations (rather than solely recruiting directly to youth), realizing that youth need familiar, comfortable settings in which to share their (complex) stories.

**Navigating Disjuncture(s) Between Contexts**
Partnering across different contexts and lifeworlds was complicated. Our lives (e.g., work, school, home) and schedules were rarely perfectly aligned, causing team tension and frustration. We sought open spaces in a constantly shifting landscape to accommodate members’ realities and commitments; meetings were scheduled, rescheduled, cancelled, and impromptu. During a discussion we noted: “We held meetings in our homes, at school, community centers, conferences, restaurants, the university, retreat sites, by speakerphone or skype, as well as with and without our children, depending on access to transportation and childcare arrangements and more!” We were all pushed beyond our comfort zones in order to engage as a team. As Ann confessed,

If I was to stay in this group and be part...of a real partnership - I had to accept things as they were not how I wanted them to be. Our partnership and
research was very exciting and frustrating – it was alive and if I had major control issues (ok maybe just a few) this group would have shattered those.

While life realities and logistical challenges often worked to pull us apart, they also drew us together. We said aloud, “We each felt we genuinely mattered”; that we were “each worth the hassle” of figuring out how to meet and work as a team even though it was often difficult, frustrating, and time consuming; it was hard, on-going work but we also knew the importance that each of our voices held in moving the research forward. Over time, our partnership’s patience, perseverance, and creativity grew.

We connected these experiences to being able to manoeuvre the disjuncture between university policies and our partnership. A “shared tenacity” to work together had grown and we reminisced how “this came in handy”. During a discussion, Morgan asked the group, “Remember when I said, we worked so hard to become a partnership, and have experienced its value, that I’m not willing to go back” when, as Linda reminded us, “university rules were trying to pull us apart”. University policy indicated youth team members needed to have a high school diploma to be eligible to become a paid research assistant. When travelling to conferences, university procedures only allowed travel (money) advances for the academic team member not for youth or teacher members. The university ethics board initially rejected our ethics application. We were instructed to add procedures that we felt, as a team, were “paternalistic to youth and our community partners”. But as Elizabeth said to the group,

We could have accepted the university rules but we didn’t . . . every team member was not given equal rights or value . . . that’s not what we were about. The fact that we, and in particular Morgan, as the academic team member, challenged these policies and decisions and that we got these changes made was awesome!

Reflective of the group’s sentiments, Morgan stated, “In every case of misalignment with the university we found a workable, and often, creative solution, because that’s what we learned to do so well as a team”.

**Trusting in the Messy Unfolding of the PAR Process**

Learning to trust the unfolding of our own messy partnership helped us to ride the twists, turns, and on-going emergence of PAR research. During group discussions we made the comments: “when we hit roadblocks, we didn’t just try to control things”, “I remember listening and waiting”, “there was more courage to improvise”, “learn by trial and error”, “we created with what we had in the moment”, “didn’t work by protocol” and “PAR’s on-going reflection and action became second nature after all that we worked through as a team”. We agreed that, had our partnership been less messy, authentic, and valuable, maybe we would have conducted a safer, more conforming practice within the scope of PAR (more akin to traditional research seeking order, structure, and consistency).
Expanded and Deepened Reflection and Analysis

Our reflective and analytical work felt strengthened because of the realness, safety, and trust within our partnership. Linda wrote about the importance of "youth language":

Because our team accepted youth language, slang, lifestyles ... and was not pre-occupied with youth "behaving" appropriately in an "adult" context ... my reflections, dialogue and analysis as a youth researcher were more authentic. I could concentrate more on the data analysis and not on resisting team dynamics that would have been oppressive for me.

Allie described our analysis work as a “lighting up” across varied perspectives, stating, “We frequently complemented and contradicted each other, offered different perspectives and insights, and created sparks for one another, lighting up an endless flow of ideas and realizations ... our connection as a group allowed us to do this”. Elizabeth emphasized the analytical breakthroughs amidst the “clashes”, sharing, “Often times our ideas clashed and we would have to talk things out for quite a while before we came to an agreement. ... But surprisingly, we had quite a few breakthroughs during these times because we wanted to understand the other’s perspective”. Linda shared, “Our differing perspectives created a mosaic of insight on our data much richer than any one member’s view ... as a team, we became more than the sum of our parts”.

We agreed with Ann when she shared, “As we grew in trust, we were able to really challenge ourselves to dig deep in our analysis ... our shared vulnerability bred deep honesty”. In this way, our partnership spawned greater openness for on-going dialogue, which supported a sustained breadth and depth of inquiry. As Carol stated, “We spent a tremendous amount of time analyzing and reflecting on the themes of our research and on our own experiences, philosophies, and worldviews”. Situating our analytical work within the culture of our partnership, Morgan described:

It was a partnership relationship that had the strength and flexibility to hold diversity, tension, juxtaposition, and contradiction in caring relation. This kaleidoscope of engagement created a research culture that felt surprisingly fresh (e.g., on new ground), renewing (e.g., energizing), anticipatory (e.g., desiring more), and sustaining over time. As a result, I watched how we really engaged and owned our reflections and analyses ... we felt close and connected to our “data”. There was a lot of energy in the room.

Strengthened Research Commitment

Our individual reflections and joint discussions made clear that our partnership played a significant role in sustaining our commitment to the research. While we were passionate about our study of youth engagement in educational change, it was equally the quality and experience of working together that grew and sustained this commitment over time. Without our experience of partnership, we agreed that our three-year funded study would not have been sustained over five years, allowing its full completion. Elizabeth wrote, “Our partnership has had a huge impact on my commitment to the issues we are working on and
the project itself... Without it, my commitment to the research would not have lasted for five years”. Linda shared with the group, “Because we were always growing and developing, I didn't want to leave the research; I was always interested in what would happen next and felt I would benefit”. When discussing what it felt like to be engaged in a long-term research project, Allie indicated:

I have never experienced a group like this. We went beyond prescribed youth-adult roles and I wanted to stay a part of this... We were all choosing to be part of the team. Had I felt pressured to commit, for instance, I would have backed off from participating. We did not act out of obligation... I realized that this freedom strengthened my commitment because it made me want to give as much as I could.

Speaking to the challenges and perspective shift that is required when working in such close partnership, Ann indicated:

In this group I enjoyed building a relationship with people who I was doing research with and that came with unexpected challenges. I had to be concerned about the people as well as the task at hand, the research. My commitment to the research was strengthened by the partnership because I became more acutely aware of the passion of each individual in regards to the research. We were a unified group of people getting a task done, not a group of individuals.

As a partnership, we agreed that our commitment to the research also became a commitment to the other team members as the relationships deepened. Over time we came to realize we wanted to see and support each other’s empowerment as researchers and persons as much as we were interested in the research itself, or in focusing on ourselves, and our own accomplishments. This further strengthened our research commitment across the many joys and myriad of challenges that we encountered.

**DISCUSSION**

When we began our collaborative self-study exploration, we shared a felt sense that our experience of partnership was shaping our research. We were not, however, able to clearly identify and describe this impact. Through collaborative self-study, we identified four ways in which partnership shaped, and more specifically, strengthened our research. The importance of each finding is discussed. While self-study findings are not intended to be replicated, it is our hope that our results may lead to insights, and even appreciation, by other PAR teams in their own research contexts.

Contrasting forms of research where team members are hired, replaced, and/or led by one researcher, the commitment and retention of PAR team members are central to democratic collaborative engagement. Retention of youth team members can be challenging (Brown & Galeas, 2011; Guishard, 2009). Our findings revealed facets of our partnership that shaped, energized, and sustained our research (e.g., being in real relationship with one another;
sharing power, responsibility and passion; being flexible; and experiencing individual and group change/transformation) (Gardner et al., 2016). Our research affirms PAR team efforts to foster these dynamic qualities. Importantly, through this exploration, we came to understand that our commitment to the research was not just sustained by our passion for social change. It equally resulted from our desire to engage in a space with forms, qualities, and possibilities of relations as a youth-adult team that we did not experience elsewhere. Being together and figuring out how to be together, as partners, became as equally motivating as the research. It was a space of aliveness and creative struggle that fed and sustained us. This realization offered us a new way of conceptualizing our work and commitment as researchers. In particular, it gave us a way to orient ourselves in relation to the diverse factors comprising our commitment, allowing us to ask, to what extent are any of these factors, in any moment, fostering our aliveness and creative struggle in being and becoming better partners.

We began our PAR research confident that we were all youth-positive, friendly individuals who rejected negative constructions of youth, particularly of youth facing marginality. We did not realize that our experience as partners would offer a whole new quality of experience and growth that would inform our research in multiple ways. In particular, taking the time to explore and tell our stories (related to our topic of PAR research) transformed us as a team. Vulnerabilities and strengths were shared as complex, unique individuals creating visceral connection across our diverse identities and lives. This experience shifted us towards engaging our individual and group complexities. We gained the capacity to feel greater connection, and importantly, to stay connected across team tensions and differences. In this process, youth-adult divisions increasingly lost their meaningfulness. In conjunction with working from this more complex sense of humanity, a shift occurred in our priority as researchers. We placed equal importance on our quality of team relations as we did the priorities of the research. As our findings revealed, this further informed our relations with participants. Listening to, as well as connecting and partnering with participants in their complexities, became as equal a priority as the research itself.

While uncertain what to expect, giving priority to our quality of team relations clearly strengthened our work as researchers, which in turn, benefited the research. Our reflections on these experiences further allowed us to re-examine assumptions about research and the researcher. In reflecting on their PAR work, Kemmis and McTaggart (2005) indicate, “[d]espite our critique of established ways of thinking about social and educational research, certain remnant elements of conventional perceptions of research continued to survive in the forms of research we advocated, for example, ideas about theory, knowledge, and the centrality of the researcher in the advancement of knowledge” (p. 596). They then explain, what they “now value” (p. 598) and understand as PAR researchers. Our own findings challenge some of the seemingly taken-for-granted facets of PAR that may serve to maintain rather than challenge youth-adult binaries; codes of ethics and training youth in research skills (e.g., interviewing) are two examples. We realized that our experiences in being and becoming partners prepared and guided us in our work with youth participants in ways research codes of ethics and interviewing skill strategies could not offer alone. Our experiences as partners heightened our rigor as researchers. While
codes of ethics denote important rights and responsibilities towards participants, they do not designate viewing, respecting, and connecting in partnership with participants as whole persons, nor do they place the quality of researcher-participant relationship before the research itself; instead they place the ethical treatment of the participant as necessary in order to proceed with the research. Similarly, our team experience of sharing and telling our stories in openness and vulnerability prepared us for participant interviews and focus groups in ways that simply training in interview skills could not offer. We had not anticipated that our team relations would shape our practices and understandings of research in these ways. While youth-adult PAR studies highlight the contributions offered by youth and/or adult members, our findings highlight the contributions of the quality of team relations themselves in strengthening the research—something in need of further exploration.

Research topics, contexts, partnerships and participants are increasingly complex. Bravely, participatory forms of research proceed with the intent to engage rather than avoid this fullness of (research) life. Our findings do not pretend it is easy to acknowledge and navigate complexity. We found, however, that by striving to navigate the tensions and complexities within our team (rather than avoid, simplify or control them), we became more skilled, creative, and committed to navigating the complexities of our research contexts, topic, and participants. We became less willing to accommodate youth-adult binary policies and practices within and across contexts because our quality of team life became better without these divisions. Significant within these changes was our shift in perspective. We learned to seek the opportunities and strengths that were offered because of, rather than in spite of, these complex terrains. Often youth-adult PAR studies indicate limitations to the research because of complexities and tensions across contexts; our findings highlight the potential value of also examining their benefits within the team and within the larger research contexts.

Building co-constructed knowledge as a team, in the goal to give voice to marginalized voices and gain insight to effect change, is the work of PAR. Perhaps one of the most considered questions by PAR researchers is the extent to which such co-construction genuinely takes place. Not surprisingly, our findings reveal that our experience of feeling like partners strengthened our depth and breadth of reflection and analysis as a team. Without qualities that made us feel like partners we would not have shared or exposed our views in such a full manner. These findings affirm the value of tending to team relations, like a gardener, with equal parts tenderness and tenacity.

Our findings suggest that youth-adult research teams need substantial opportunities to be in partnership and to struggle towards partnership. In doing so, we found we were taken deeper into an experience and understanding of a participatory research paradigm, which in turn, has strengthened our research and changed who we are, as researchers, in profound ways. Our identities as change-agents has shifted from being ‘united in our struggle’ against educational injustice to being ‘united in our connection’ as a team; this has brought greater sustenance and resilience to our efforts as change-makers and social justice researchers.
References


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