STUDENTS’ PERCEPTIONS OF BELONGING: A PHOTOVOICE PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH PROJECT

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ABSTRACT
In this paper, we analyze a PhotoVoice project - the Belonging Project that included 22 youth co-researchers and three researchers from the University of British Columbia. The project focused on concepts of belonging and exclusion and resulted in recommendations to a school district in Canada, a photo exhibit, and two of the co-researchers being interviewed by a local radio station about the project. This paper details the tensions between what the co-researchers saw as necessary for schools to be places that create a sense of belonging and how the role of students is constructed through policies from the district to provincial levels and through societal attitudes about schooling and young people. We also detail debates in the school district (simultaneous to the Belonging Project) concerning policy to address homophobia. Finally, this paper is a story about the challenge of undertaking youth participatory oriented research within the confines of schooling.

KEYWORDS: Belonging, PhotoVoice, participatory action research.

INTRODUCTION
Schools are charged with the task of teaching students’ democratic values and civic responsibility; however, rarely are students engaged in meaningful ways in determining the policies and practices that govern their day-to-day school lives. This article documents a participatory action research project that involved secondary students as co-researchers in a project that aimed to make space for students to be heard and seen in the decisions that impact their school lives.
WHAT WAS THE PROJECT ABOUT

We worked with 22 youth who were students in two secondary schools (grades 8-12) in a large school district in British Columbia, Canada. The youth who expressed their interest in the project in response to our call for participation were co-researchers with three university researchers (two of the university researchers, Michelle Stack and Fei Wang, are the authors of this paper). As co-researchers the high school students worked with us to develop the research process. The project was initiated by a request from a senior school district administrator that was made to Michelle. The administrator asked her to conduct a project with high school students in the district that focused on belonging. She hoped that by giving students more say in their schooling that they might find school more enjoyable and be more likely to graduate. She saw the research project as a way to engage students in talking about what they do like and do not like about their school and what they think could make school a place where all students want to attend and feel a sense of belonging. A number of meetings were held with district staff, parents, teacher representatives, and school trustees to discuss what a research project that engages youth as co-researchers might look at and what commitments the district would/could make to listen and engage student co-researchers.

To our co-researchers we brought a proposal to use photos as a way to get at when they and their classmates feel belonging and exclusion at school. The co-researchers liked the idea of photos and determined how they would ask classmates to participate. We met with the co-researchers over a six-month period. Our research questions focused on the following:

1) Can youth participatory action research (YPAR) using PhotoVoice be useful as a strategy to build the research capacity and involvement of students in decision-making within a school district?
2) What opportunities were afforded through using an YPAR approach using PhotoVoice in a school context?
3) What were the constraints in using an YPAR approach using PhotoVoice in a school context?

This paper focuses on the latter two questions. We focus on these questions as university researchers who do work in schools in hopes of engaging in collaborative research with the aim of facilitating more equitable school policies and practices. We draw on participatory action research as a way to see secondary students as having the capacity and desire to be part of developing the policies, practices, and curriculum that shape their daily schooling lives. Doing research that seeks to see students as active participants in society encompasses possibilities for expanded ways of relating across generations.

The question of whether and how children and teens should be engaged in decision making at schools is a longstanding debate. Studies in adolescent psychology have found that a sense of belonging for students in secondary schools is connected to “democratic” school practices (Gardner, Brown, Young, Young, McCann & Myles, 2016; Schall, Wallace & Chhuon, 2016; Torre & Fine, 2006). Secondary students who feel they have a say in what they learn and policies at their schools report a greater sense of community. Critical
pedagogues argue that students are not merely empty vessels ready to be filled (banking education) but people who come with different ways of seeing and interacting based on where and how they are positioned in the world. From this perspective, issues of race, gender, sexuality, disability, and social class are at the forefront (Frymer & Acland, 2011; McCarty & Lee, 2014; Nagasawa & Swadener, 2017). Our research took place within these larger socio-historical and political representations of schooling and youth, and so as we will detail the Belonging Project was exciting, challenging, difficult and contradictory.

PHOTOVOICE METHODS AND YOUTH PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH
We drew on PhotoVoice and YPAR in hopes students who are learning English or students who are better able/prefer to communicate through images could participate in the research and share their views and recommendations with the school district. Photos taken by co-researchers and their classmates were the primary source of data used in this study. Images as data are representations that can be interpreted in ways that allow us to see ourselves and each other differently. PhotoVoice is traditionally used with groups who have been marginalized and silenced in the political arena (Sutton-Brown, 2014). Drew and Guillemin (2014) provide a cogent explanation of the process of knowledge generation through images:

We argue that images are not ascribed with one true meaning, but may have multiple meanings, that may change over time, or indeed remain relatively stable. We consider meaning generation to be a co-construction between the participant, the researcher, the audience/s and the images themselves; they are all elements involved in the process of meaning-making (p. 56-57).

Finding ways to make room to listen to all students requires innovative methodologies. The use of participatory visual methods allows student researchers “greater voice in the research and the professional activities that impact on their lives” (Yates, 2010, p. 280). Developed by Wang and Burris (1997), PhotoVoice methods draw on PAR principles that see “knowledge as an agent of social transformation” (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011, p. 348). Participants are encouraged to document, critique, and disseminate their experiences through images as well as words. PhotoVoice can provide rich, nuanced accounts by “giving the lens to participants” (Han & Oliffe, 2016, p. 111). PhotoVoice can make room for participants to actively represent and report on what is important to them (Catalani & Minkler, 2010). PhotoVoice can provide youth with the opportunity to develop their creativity through visual self-expression and helps increase their problem-solving ability to engage in community change (Gray, de Boehm, Farnsworth, & Wolf, 2010; Woodgate, Zurba, & Tennent, 2017).

PhotoVoice projects completed by groups of participants can increase collective knowledge about an issue, both through discussion amongst participants (Boxall & Ralph, 2009) and through sharing photographs in broader community forums (López, 2005; Moletsane et al., 2007; Wiersma, 2011). Photographs carry “documentary and interpretive meaning, either posed or natural” (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011, p. 530). Arts-based approaches allow for distancing (this image might or might not be about
me), and multiple interpretations of meaning and feelings (Batsleer, 2011). This approach treats the meaning of the visual evidence as ethnographically and reflexively constructed and has the potential to directly communicate to the public the perspectives of the participants (Yates, 2010).

Participatory Action Research (PAR) draws on critical pedagogy and is a systemic process of learning, in which students - the co-researchers in this study - are acting not only as facilitators of knowledge but also raisers of issues (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011). In the context of this study, the rationale for using a participatory action research methodology was to make room for students’ voices and engagement within the school curriculum. Julio Cammarota and Michael Fine (2008) explain that PAR can provide opportunities to challenge inequity and transform unjust institutions. In this model, teenagers are agents with the ability to observe injustice, experience it and collectively imagine and work towards a better world. PAR is one way of doing so.

Cynthia Jardine and Angela James (2012) provide a cogent analysis of the limitations around projects that included youth as co-researchers. School based YPAR does not change the reality of state high-stakes testing or the criteria used by post-secondary institutions to determine what knowledge counts and, based on this, who is seen as worthy of admission. Butterwick and Roy (2016) point to the importance of PAR going beyond creating a space for people who are marginalized to listening and understanding what happens or does not happen within structures of power. They ask what are the conditions needed for people to have influence who are often excluded from the decision-making that impacts their lives.

Bell hooks (1994) challenges the notion that a researcher gives voice to others and instead talks about “coming to voice” (p. 148), which is not merely about telling one’s experience. “It is using that telling strategically - to come to voice so that you can also speak freely about other subjects” (hooks, 1994, p. 148). Cornwall and Jewkes (1995) maintain that Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) has the potential to change and expand conversations about what school could look and feel like for students and staff. However, they also demonstrate how understanding the "location of power" is essential for analyzing who is present in a school-based project and who is absent. What messages do young people get explicitly and implicitly about who should volunteer to participate in YPAR projects? How do youth self-select based on who they see as having influence?

YPAR is essentially a socially interactive process in which the positionality of researchers may influence what they may bring to research encounters and their interpretation of outcomes (Bourke, 2014). In this research, the relationship between the three researchers and 22 co-researchers may vary for different parts of the study, but the three university researchers are not experts on the setting under study, rather collaborators with the co-researchers who are insiders and experts on their schooling.

**RESEARCH PROCESS**

**Planning Stage: Political and Ethical Consideration**

At the initial stage, meetings (not audio recorded but with notes taken) were held with the
senior leadership team of the district to discuss the parameters of the project, how data would be used, issues around confidentiality for students, and process and policies for informing the appropriate authorities if a young person states they are considering suicide or being abused. It is sometimes the adults who have a difficult time with uncomfortable conversations that challenge the notion of school as a place in service of all students. The adults who came to meetings about the project were keen to support it.

We talked about the perceived risks of listening – offensive language or images and anger. Michelle mentioned in all the YPAR projects she did with youth there had never been a problem with youth, intimidating or bullying anyone else but there had at times been issues with adults doing so towards the youth co-researchers. We agreed the idea of the project was not to intimidate or humiliate – not to bully – but to bring up issues that might be difficult for the adult to truly listen to such as homophobic bullying in schools and to make a commitment to act based on the research.

Michelle as the Principal Investigator for the project maintained ownership of data, including consent forms, notes for discussion and meetings with co-researchers, and questionnaires. She also kept a copy of photos that the co-researchers shared with her or that participants uploaded to a protected site that was setup with UBCs technology staff. She received informed consent from co-researchers to do so.

The impetus for the project was a request from the school district superintendent in late 2013 to Michelle. The superintendent wanted to see more engagement of students in creating more inclusive schools. At our first meeting, we (Michelle and senior staff) discussed ideas around PAR and the possibility of using video, drawing, podcasting, and photography as a way to talk with students about what could make school a place where they and their peers want to be. We discussed starting the project with one school. We also discussed having the project off-site in hopes that some youth who feel excluded at school might feel more included at a non-school site, but we did not have the budget for this.

There were also concerns about liability – the school has responsibility for students during the school day and moving them off-site would create added steps and most likely staff costs to the research. We thought about having the research after class hours or on the weekend, but many students work, have extra-curricular or family responsibilities, or both, so this too would exclude students who might otherwise participate.

At the second meeting with school district staff and two elected school trustees, Michelle spoke about principles of PAR and the responsibility of the adult not only to listen but to make changes based on the research when possible. Shifting from being a voice to listening to marginalized voices requires a different type of listening and doing. The district was, at the time of the project, in the midst of a review of the district Code of Conduct; some meeting attendees hoped the Belonging Project could be part of the Code of Conduct review. Those present at the meeting agreed that focusing on the Code of Conduct would limit the discussion and result in a dialogue that was adult focused.
We also agreed that ideally, the proposed process would take place over years. In the first year, a cohort of 15-20 students from grades 9 to 12 would be trained as facilitators in YPAR. In the second year, new students from other schools would be invited, and those who wished to continue from the first cohort could assist with training new students in YPAR. The aim was to build capacity in the district for student-led research and greater engagement with decision-making based on their research findings.

Another meeting was held that included school trustees and a representative from the teachers’ union. Students were not involved in these early meetings. We did consider asking that students be present at the initial meetings but decided not to do so. We felt it was important that those in positions of structural power be clear on what their parameters were for listening and responding to the work of co-researchers. After the parameters were agreed upon we met with all youth who wished to participate and for the group to decide together how or if they wanted to continue and how communication about the project with the adults would proceed.

Some district staff, a union representative, and trustees wanted to expand the project to all schools, and others wanted it expanded to include teachers and other staff in schools. Based on a letter from a Grade 11 student who was the president of the Rainbow Club (a club focused on inclusion for students who identified as LBGTTQ+), we expanded the project to two high schools. The student had heard about the project from a teacher. He argued his school had many students who wanted to be involved in the project. Simultaneously, labour strife was growing between the teachers’ union and the provincial government, which resulted in a strike that went on for months. The upshot was a delay of close to a year in the project, which limited the time to engage students in the research. We met again with school district personnel (in fall 2014) - post-strike - and Dr. Genevieve Creighton partnered with Michelle. Genevieve is an expert in PhotoVoice research and focuses on research that engages youth.

Also, in 2014, a neighbouring school district, after an acrimonious debate, passed a policy aimed at being more inclusive of diverse Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity (SOGI). Some of the elected and staff district officials did not want to follow suit, but others did. Those opposed to a specific policy to include diverse sexual and gender identities cited concerns about the opposition of “many” parents and extensive media coverage happening in a neighbouring community when the policy was introduced.

Those who did not want a specific policy argued that the district Code of Conduct was infused with language around respect and dignity for all. They hoped the Belonging Project would move the district towards a specific policy aimed at improving the school life of LBGTTQ+ students.

Soon after a third university researcher joined us. Dr. Fei Wang (co-author of this paper) focuses on school leadership, mental health, and social justice. Recruitment involved a very general invitation open to all students and also efforts by teachers and counselors to approach specific students. An information flyer was sent through various district channels including e-bulletins. We asked that the school principals and teachers from the two
schools inform all students about the project with an invitation to participate and contact us (through email, text or phone) if they had questions about the project. We also asked them to approach students from diverse demographic backgrounds who might be interested, with particular attention to social class, gender identity, sexuality, race, ethnicity, and disability. Students who expressed an interest were provided with an information flyer (many co-researchers saw the flyer through teachers, counsellors and other students) created by Michelle and Genevieve. The flyer detailed the focus and significance of the study, an invitation to the students, the duration and stages of the study, and data collection and analysis. All students who made a decision to participate and who had their guardians’ consent were accepted as co-researchers in the study, 22 in all from two schools.

**Developing stage: Recruitment of PhotoVoice participants**

At the first meeting with co-researchers, we explained what PhotoVoice was and asked the students if they’d like to be co-researchers in a PhotoVoice project aimed at hearing from them and their classmates. All were keen, and from this point, we discussed what questions would engage their classmates. The consideration given to students who might not belong to any identified group (e.g., artsy, jock) was profound. One co-researcher talked about the need to go beyond their circle of friends so that a project on belonging didn’t become exclusionary. Other co-researchers talked about how to engage students who were pessimistic about the possibility of change. The co-researchers spoke to their own experience of in and out groups, which is consistent with academic literature that focuses on how high school groups mirror what the larger society values (Kelly, 1993; Nygreen, 2013).

We conducted activities to raise awareness about how we come to see each other. We looked at misogynist images and asked why these images exist. We also looked at homophobic images and asked the same thing: “How do we come to think we belong or don’t belong through images?” We talked about how different camera angles are used to make people look innocent or evil and how this is often related to stereotypical and oppressive hierarchies of power.

We talked about what belonging meant and how to get at the concept in different ways. The co-researchers agreed that asking people, “Where do you feel comfortable having lunch?” "Where do you go for help?” "Where do you meet friends?” will help get at the concepts of belonging and exclusion. One participant spoke about the importance of involving athletic teams: “Those people have a lot of influence over other people in their grade.” This led to the discussion of involving other leaders of teams and groups in the school.

There was a discussion about how to make sure anyone photographed had consented. The co-researchers were also concerned that their classmates understand that the pictures did not need to look professional and that all experience was valid. Students also spoke about the importance of word of mouth and the need to talk with friends and to reach out to people they might not be comfortable with or know. Social media was used to tell their classmates about the project, including Facebook, Myspace, Instagram, and Snapchat.
The co-researchers were responsible for designing the details of the project, promoting the project in their schools and, in collaboration with the researchers, analyzing the collection of photographs and identifying themes through a group discussion. As part of this research, students were invited to submit photographs that represented their experience of "belonging" and "not-belonging" at school. If they wished, students were able to add captions or narratives when they uploaded their photos to the designated website accessible only to the UBC researchers. Adding a caption was not made mandatory on the website as it might have discouraged students from uploading their photographs.

The student-activist who had successfully pushed for the project to be expanded to his school spoke to us about his goal of providing support for LGBTQ+ students and his hope the Belonging Project could help. When we asked if we should have separate groups for gender variant youth, he said this would be a good idea but not if it said this in consent letters that went to parents. He explained many students are not "out" to parents and so it would be best to frame this as a Belonging Project and to have a general group that could break into smaller groups.

Acting Stage: Engaging Peers in the Project, Analyzing Photos and Sharing What We Learned

The UBC researchers took the co-researchers through the process of analyzing photos during our first and second meetings. In the second meeting, co-researchers created dozens of posters that they posted throughout their schools to encourage their classmates to participate. These posters included the timelines of the photo project, the format for submission, and the ethics and guidelines for photographs. The co-researchers also spoke to teachers and classmates and encouraged all students in the two schools to submit photographs and narratives that answer the questions: "When do I feel included at school?" and "When do I feel excluded at school?" They designed guidelines for photographers, which included making sure to get signed consent for any images of people, not worrying about whether the picture looked professional, being respectful and not taking images that could hurt or embarrass people, and focus on what they saw as belonging or not belonging.

The co-researchers wanted to communicate through a Facebook private group. Most said they did not use email but could be reached by texting their phones, but that texting could put them over on data plans and therefore end up costing them money. Facebook was agreed to be the best tool and texting as a secondary communication strategy. The co-researchers asked that the university researchers communicate times for meetings, etc. on the Facebook page; however, not all the co-researchers were given guardian permission to use Facebook so this required using other means of communication such as texting or other co-researchers keeping those not on Facebook updated. The youth not on Facebook said they wanted the group to use Facebook and that it was easy for them to look at a friend's account or be kept updated verbally. The Facebook group did provide a useful platform to communicate with co-researchers.

The university researchers reviewed the process around confidentiality with co-researchers. What did we want to learn? How to encourage people to participate? We discussed how much time to give. One person suggested a week, but another said that was
too long "Three days - one day to say 'I'm going to do this', the second day to procrastinate, and the third day knowing you have to do it. A week most people will just forget." We took notes and decided on a window of three days; however, we ended up accepting pictures over about a one-week period.

When co-researchers uploaded pictures as part of the data, they could remain anonymous or give their names and indicate whether they wished to be known as the photographer should their image be chosen for a photo exhibit.

There were some challenges with the requirement of the Behavioural Research Ethics Board and the wishes of our co-researchers. To maintain the confidentiality of photographers, we needed to use a secure site for uploading pictures taken by co-researchers and their peers. We all agreed a secure server was important. However, the site was somewhat cumbersome, and some co-researchers said their peers got frustrated and so didn't submit their photos.

ANALYZING PHOTOS
The research team met a week after the deadline for submitting photos. Photos that came after this date were accepted too. The co-researchers met again to look at 68 photographs, of which 26 came with captions.

The photographs and accompanying narratives and captions served as the launching point from which co-researchers reflected on individual and common experiences. All photos were shown on a big screen in the school library at one of the two research sites where the three university researchers and the co-researchers convened. The university researchers facilitated the photo analysis by engaging the co-researchers in a discussion about the photographs shown on the screen. Questions were asked to guide the discussion of the co-researchers, including what does belonging or not belonging mean to you based on the photographs displayed on the screen? Imagine a school as a place where you want to be, what would it look like? Themes and patterns were generated by co-researchers through group discussion and critical dialogue on all the photographs and accompanying captions.

For confidentiality purpose, students’ names are not reported in the quotes cited in the findings.

FINDINGS
The themes presented in the findings centre around the notions of belonging and non-belonging based on co-researchers’ perceptions of the notions and their interpretations of the photographs. A dominant theme was being forced to attend school and have little say in what or how one learns. This was seen as creating artificial relationships and pressure that hindered learning. There were two main themes: 1) Being forced to attend school, 2) What would make schools places students want to attend.
Forced to Attend School

"Once you enter the school building, there is an expectation."

One theme throughout the discussion over photographs was students being forced to attend school. One student spoke of not belonging, not feeling right in a space: "I have no choice but to be in." Similar comments were: "I wouldn't keep in touch with friends after school," "forced in same classes," and "don't have interest, just have to be there." Belonging or not belonging also defines the process of being and becoming and the construction of individual and group identity. A sense of not belonging arises when students are being judged or not valued. Co-researchers commented: "people treat you differently than they may treat others", "you feel like you can't relate", and "if you are not comfortable with yourself, you won't feel comfortable wherever you are." Another theme was the importance of respecting different interests and strengths in sports and the arts.

Co-researchers indicated that the images show what it feels like to be "disconnected", "outcast", and "different" or "invisible or too visible." Schools are spaces where collective interaction and behaviours may contribute to the construction of attachment and create a sense of belonging. However, co-researchers spoke about how the images point to differences in who feels connected and disconnected in these spaces. Co-researchers commented that the images of classrooms were overwhelmingly negative, for example this image of a student with his/her head on the desk (see Image 1).

Co-researchers discussed what this image and ones similar to it meant. These are comments from different co-researchers: "You feel you are tied down in an area where you have to stay with people who you don’t want to.” “It takes lots of efforts to come to school to face people who harbour lots of negative feelings towards me.” “Lots of my relationships in my life were not built in schools. I was forced to try to be friends with people at schools. Outside the school, it is so much more ideal.”

Institutional arrangements and organizational norms also contribute to disengagement of the students, as one student put it: “Once you enter the school building, there is an expectation. There is standard. It is very artificial. It’s not meaningful, and very shallow.”

Homophobia and Heteronormativity.

Finally, the images touch on issues of heteronormativity. Perhaps the moment the university researchers noticed the most discomfort among the co-researchers was around discussion of homophobia. There were images of bathrooms with homophobic language and an image taken in a bathroom with the word "Gay" scratched into the locker door (see Image 2).
The image captures openly homophobic rhetoric. Though the researchers encouraged conversation on the topic during the group discussion, there was a noted change in the energy in the room. There seemed to be an increase in tension around issues of safety concerning students of LGBTQ+ students. Co-researchers who were vocal with the university researchers about homophobia spoke within the group about feeling excluded but did not talk directly about homophobia or heteronormativity. One co-researcher commented: “I’m forced to be at school and people hating you for who you are - they don’t want you there, but you don’t want to be there either.” The tension in the room mirrored the silences and discomfort we observed in discussions with adults. To talk specifically about heteronormativity, it was feared would cause conflict and anger with many parents. However, others wanted a direct conversation and policy for this very reason. The discomfort, anger, and silence indicated the power of heteronormativity and the negative impact of this on students and staff. The student activist who spoke with us stated the lack of support for a specific policy sent a clear message to students and staff.

What Would Make Schools Places Students Want to Attend
Co-researchers’ analysis of the photos varies significantly from space to space. Images outside the classrooms often represented happiness, acceptance, and friendship. That said, there were some pictures from within the school, of the art and music rooms (see Image 3) that co-researchers said were about belonging and seemed to be about happiness. Many of the photographers chose not to label their images, and so the co-researchers discussed what they thought the images meant.

Such images may suggest the positive effect of the art and music experience to students and their sense of belonging in schools. The co-researchers related this to self-acceptance. And this led to a discussion around feeling like one can or is allowed to take up space.

Belonging can also bring about a sense of identity and safety. A co-researcher spoke about how she sometimes felt alone among a
multitude of people, “and that being alone does not necessarily mean lonely if you are comfortable with who you are and have a safe space.” Others spoke of comfort as “comfortable with unfamiliar” or “comfortable as peace with where you are.” The importance of being able to express self with no pressure and not being worried about appearance was a major theme from the research. Many pictures that co-researchers interpreted as examples of belonging were taken outdoors of individuals and groups.

Fostering a culture of belonging is critical in helping students maintain a sense of personal involvement in a school community that contributes to their mental and emotional wellbeing. Based on the analysis of photos, co-researchers were asked to reflect on the question: Imagine a school is a place where you want to be, what would it look like? In response, some students described the meaning of belonging through their experience of the opposite - not belonging. One co-researcher commented that, "You don't appreciate the sun until you see the rain" and "Everything comes with the opposite. Belonging comes with non-belonging. Having a place you don't belong helps you learn." Some co-researchers were concerned about sounding negative: "Too much negative going on... you need to pick what you like." These comments highlight their social struggle as well as their resistance to a system that judges them on narrow metrics, such as grades. As one co-researcher stated, "people care more about the marks, not their learning. Instead of focusing on grades, you could learn personally. Tie learning to people's need and personalize it more." Though participants acknowledged that “there is never going to be an ideal school,” having a healthier environment that takes care of students’ “mental health,” “pays more attention to passion,” and “makes connections based on students' interest” appears to be important in fostering a culture of belonging.

The recommendations for change made by co-researchers revolved around more choice for students in determining what and how they learn and who they learn with. A dominant theme wanted to be respected as capable and willing to be part of their education and to be engaged in defining problems and acting to create schools they and their peers want to attend.

"We are here, we know what we want, come hear what we want”. The co-researchers also decided they would like to hold a photo exhibit at the end of the project. They felt an exhibit would motivate their classmates to take pictures and submit them. The discussion focused on making the exhibit interactive and a "collage, something that finishes the project and cements it for people." Many co-researchers believed the chance to be in an exhibit would motivate participation. "People love to show off." They felt it was important to invite people from the school board – "we are here, we know what we want, come hear what we want – way to talk to the school district."

Discussion ensued around how to make the experience interactive for the audience. The co-researchers then created a questionnaire for audience members. The questions revolved around what audience members got out of the exhibit and what they would suggest for creating more of a sense of belonging at schools. The photo exhibit was held at a community centre near the district. A co-researcher also took audiences around to see the pictures and asked if they had questions or feedback. Two co-researchers shared their
experience and hopes for the Belonging Project on a local live radio show a day before the exhibit and invited people to attend. One of the co-researchers (the president of the Rainbow Club) used the opportunity to urge the district to be more proactive in creating inclusive and safe schools for LGBTQ+ students. He called for the district to follow the lead of the neighbouring district and pass a specific policy for protecting LGBTQ+ members of the school community.

REFLECTING
After the photo exhibit, the university researchers wrote a report based on the verbal input from co-researchers and our sessions with them. The co-researchers were sent a draft of the report through the Facebook group. The draft was written based on their analysis of what the photos meant and what they learned from the responses to the exhibit. We had hoped for a process of reflecting with the 22 co-researchers, but this was not possible. They were preparing for final exams and, soon after, graduating or away for the summer holidays. However, through Facebook and texting, we did get some reflections from co-researchers and in some cases extensive feedback on the draft report written by the university researchers.

The university researchers along with three co-researchers, district staff, teachers, trustees and parent representatives met after the photo exhibit. The co-researchers spoke to the findings of the PhotoVoice research project and made recommendations for changes around belonging in a report to the school district. Because of exams and end of term many co-researchers who wanted to attend were unable to do so.

A final report on research findings by the researchers was made available to students, teachers, parents, school administrators and other interested parties. Based on our observations and discussions with co-researchers, we believe Photovoice methods can be used to integrate students’ voices into the development of school policies and practices, but there are structural limitations. This project took place within schools, which provided opportunities for participation because students were already present at the school or had transportation provided by the school district to get to the research meeting. We met at one of the two schools from which we drew participants. This was convenient but may have been problematic in limiting conversation because the meetings were held at open spaces in the school library where there was a constant of flow of teachers and students.

There was a time conflict with other events and meetings in the school district. The turnout for the art exhibit was lower than expected, but the students present reported they felt good about the event and the opportunity to speak at it. In collaboration with Nathan Lee and Maymoona Gaid (youth researchers), Quinn Kelly (video producer and at the time high school student) and Kim Ngo (video director and editor) we created resources for educational purpose, including a promotional video for youth who wish to engage in an YPAR project. (https://belongingresearch.com)
DISCUSSION
There were many relevant changes during the period when this research took place. For example, a province-wide Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity policy which sets out rules for inclusion was sent to all school districts in the province; however the fundamental ways of seeing the role of students as recipients of adult policies and decisions remain largely unchanged. Change in how youth experience school, however, requires a societal shift in thinking about and representing young people, from troublemakers to fellow travelers in institutions fraught with possibilities and limitations for inclusion and democracy.

Schools are told to be inclusive and prepare students to be good democratic citizens. Within this framework, students are works in progress who are told they are individuals but to graduate and move on, post-secondary education requires them to all be assessed in the same way regardless of their social location or their interests. They are recipients of education, not active constructors of their environments. The co-researchers were aware of the contradictions and many of them spoke about supportive teachers who also felt caught in contradictory policies and aims of schooling.

Photographic images taken by students can help us understand when students feel included versus when they feel excluded at school. A sense of belonging is inevitably connected to space, whether it is physical, social, or cultural. The images of students' bathrooms are the spaces where adults rarely go, but they become a place of refuge as well as a place of great fear for many students. This research prompts us to rethink what space means to the students and what makes a space – face-to-face or online – one of belonging or not belonging. The expansion, location, and constraints of students' life space have become a sign of either social inclusion or exclusion (Lapidot-Lefler, Friedman, Ariele, Hai, Sykes, & Kais, 2015).

There are risks, limitations, and opportunities within secondary schools for students to be change agents through sharing and analysing photos. How voice is produced in the PAR process, whose voice is represented, and how the research product is used and interpreted are all contentious issues in PhotoVoice research (Yates, 2010). A multiplicity of interpretations can expand conversations and understanding of one another, but images can also be interpreted as confirmation through the process of selection and exclusion. An issue that came up in meeting with adults was around negative media, particularly around what was seen as lack of action to deal with homophobia. The school district still had choices as to what images to forefront, and what themes to focus on. As Genevieve Creighton, Oliffe, Ferlatte, Bottruff, Broom & Jenkins (2018) cogently state: “Photographs can also be misleading, they can be repurposed by the ‘user,’ and they can be misinterpreted by the viewer” (p. 451). These challenges reflect the complexities of PAR and the issues of power, control, and ownership (Gardner et al., 2016).

REFLECTING AS UNIVERSITY RESEARCHERS
As Gardner and her colleagues (2016) demonstrate, a plethora of research points to the benefit of PAR for young participants, but less research talks about the impact on adult
partners. Our process as academics was an iterative one of individual journal writing and field notes and coming together to discuss what we understood from our work with youth co-researchers, and some of the tensions and contradictions we were experiencing stemmed from researching youth empowerment in structures that provide little decision-making influence for youth. As university researchers, we spoke about the advantages of working with school district staff. District staff organized transportation and food for students. The photo exhibition and professionalism put into the art exhibit were all led by a district staff person. Furthermore, district staff had an understanding of the rhythms of the school year within the district, which as university researchers we did not. This knowledge was invaluable.

Reflection is a key component of the action research that allows researchers to continuously monitor and examine the progress of the YPAR project. Through reflection, we have identified challenges and limitations that occurred in the process of the research, such as issues around time and space. The co-researchers had busy schedules – preparing for exams, sports, clubs, jobs, and family responsibilities. Finding the time to meet and implement the YPAR without causing too much disruption to students’ schoolwork was considerably challenging given the compressed time due to issues outside of our control (the strike). The busy schedules also meant the time to build trust among the co-researchers was limited, but such relational trust is pivotal to YPAR. Finding time for the photo exhibit was equally challenging. Having students from different social groups did mean some co-researchers talked about learning about people they saw in the hallways but with whom they had not socialized. They learned about assumptions they made about other social groups and that they both had similarities and differences in how they saw the school.

A challenge that emerged is the pressure on schools to react to incidents of violence (bullying, harassment, assault) with a promise of new policies and practices. In this cycle of reaction, issues of structural oppression that are often at the root of these incidents – including homophobia, racism, sexism and ableism – remain largely untouched.

Time and funding are needed to sustain a culture of YPAR, which was our original hope, but this was not realized. Competing demands for the co-researchers and university researchers made sustaining face-to-face projects impossible. If we had more funding, we would have conducted one-on-one interviews with administrators, parents and trustees who were part of the project to get at these tensions.

Some co-researchers spoke about wanting to conduct Photovoice projects with groups they belong to. The project opened up conversations around underestimating the capacity of students to be involved in their education. What we repeatedly heard from the co-researchers was how surprised they were they could be part of doing research, that they could learn so much from the discussions about photos and be part of making changes in their schools, but they were also very aware of things that made this difficult. Some spoke about teachers who were open to their ideas but, like them, constrained.

This project also speaks to structures that require thinking about whom and what is being protected. The process of uploading pictures to a university protected website was cumbersome for participants and most likely decreased participation.
PAR projects need to focus not only on creating conditions for speaking out but also for listening. Listening is uncomfortable and requires openness to look at structural oppression, and this is a difficult struggle for school administrators charged with contradictory policies and contested aims of schooling. On the one hand, school and district leaders are told to create equitable and safe environments for all that respect the rights, interests, and limitations of all. On the other hand, the entire structure of schooling – particularly heightened at the high school level – is based on sorting and categorizing students as strong/weak, compliant/difficult, troubled/troublesome, academic/vocational, normal/special education, girls/boys, high needs/low needs. How this categorizing is done is based on longstanding narratives grounded in racism, heteronormativity, ableism, and classicism.

A PhotoVoice project can result in hearing from students who are often not heard from. It can result in students speaking with each other who did not talk with each other before the project. Just as importantly the action and participatory research process revealed as much about institutional structures as it did about students’ experiences; this, in and of itself, is an important aspect of moving towards structural change. There are so many aspects of the structures of school that are taken for granted, and PAR projects, such as this one, can shed light on what “goes without saying” about schools.

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**REFERENCES**


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