Engaging Diversity and Marginalization through Participatory Action Research: A Model for Independent School Reform

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Abstract

Authored by a university researcher, school practitioner, and high school student,[2] this article examines how independent schools can utilize participatory action research (PAR) to bolster diversity and inclusion efforts. A case study approach was taken to showcase a two-year PAR project at a progressive independent school that sought to: (a) enrich institutional knowledge of student diversity, (b) capture the present-day schooling experiences of historically marginalized students in independent school settings, and (c) develop a dynamic action plan to ameliorate school issues that emerged through the PAR inquiry process. Committed to institutional research that informs school policy and practice, we argue that PAR provides a rigorous, student-centered, and democratic model for independent school reform.

Keywords: participatory action research, diversity and inclusion, independent schools, school reform

For over two decades, independent schools in the United States have become increasingly diverse institutions (Goldman & Hausman, 2000; Horvat & Antonio, 1999; Merrill, 1967; Monroe, 1993; Slaughter & Johnson, 1988; Yoder, 1991). Student characteristics exhibiting significant shifts include race and ethnicity, socioeconomic status, language, immigrant status, sexual orientation, and religion. Much of this diversity can be attributed to the adoption of more inclusive mission statements and enrollment policies (Macpherson & Goldman, 2002; Macpherson, McHenry, & Sweeney-Denham, 2001; Zweigenhaft, 1992), as well as institutional partnerships with organizations centered on providing academic enrichment to low-income students of color (Perry, 1973), which facilitates these students' access to competitive and elite independent schools (Datnow & Cooper, 1997; Zweigenhaft & Domhoff, 2003). Through these unprecedented efforts, more students of color from lower socioeconomic backgrounds have been admitted to these distinct learning environments (National Association of Independent Schools, 1996, n.d.).

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Partly due to the predominantly White and affluent student populations of independent schools, Black and Latino students have historically experienced social and cultural marginalization (Cose, 1993; DeCuir-Gunby, 2007; Fine, Weis, Powell, & Wong, 1997; Hall & Arrington, 2000). While these students of color may have improved academically when compared to Black and Latino students in public schools, their marginalization in these arguably elite settings has contributed to the persistence of an achievement gap (Kuriloff, Soto, & Garver, 2012). The 2014–2015 SAT scores, for example, illustrate how Black/African American, Mexican/Mexican American, and Puerto Rican students in independent schools outperform their counterparts nationally, but scored, on average, 100–220 total points below their White and Asian/Asian American peers attending independent schools (Torres, 2016). Examining the Black–White achievement gap in highly selective independent high schools, Kuriloff et al. (2012) contend that the difference in academic performance between Black and White students in independent schools cannot be consistently explained by the same factors associated with the gap in public schools, such as the lack of social and economic resources. A core finding revealed that Black students attending independent schools needed to learn how to "do prep school" (p. 95; e.g., manage dynamic schedules, meet high academic expectations, participate in mandated sports or extracurricular activities). Black students, furthermore, needed teachers who were culturally knowledgeable and equipped to challenge independent school cultures, which are historically rooted in White upper-class social norms.

Committed to the values of student diversity and high achievement, many independent school leaders and teachers have attempted to foster a more inclusive learning context (Kuriloff, Reichert, Stoudt, & Ravitch, 2009; Kuriloff et al., 2012), in which all students can excel academically, thrive socially, and, therefore, acquire the critical knowledge, skills, and worldviews necessary to reach their full potential in school and life. Previous scholarship exploring diversity and inclusion at independent schools has typically focused on the teaching and learning experiences of people of color within these distinct academic settings. Empirical studies, for example, have explicated the experiences of teachers of color (Kane & Orsini, 2002), African-American diversity coordinators (Hall, 1999), and students of color and their parents (Slaughter-Defoe, Stevenson, Arrington, & Johnson, 2012). Herr (2010), however, contends that private institutions still need a richer and more contemporary exploration of students' of color experiences at school, with the goal to more substantively inform debates related to whether or not independent schools can be considered a viable educational opportunity for students not served well by traditional public schools. This case study explores a two-year participatory action research (PAR) project at a progressive independent school that sought to: (a) enrich institutional knowledge of student diversity, (b) capture the present-day schooling experiences of historically marginalized students in independent school settings, and (c) develop a dynamic action plan to ameliorate school issues that emerged through the PAR inquiry process.

Background

Participatory Action Research: A Process Model

PAR is a collaborative inquiry process; it is a methodology that strives to both produce knowledge and empower individuals to act on that knowledge (Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Gordon, 2008; Johnson, 2007; Kuriloff et al., 2009; McIntyre, 2008). In the past, researchers conducting community-based social action projects have used PAR to understand, document, and/or evaluate the impact of social problems, social programs, and social movements within a specific community or group of people (Fine et al., 2004; Gordon, 2008). More recently, school-based faculty and social scientists have utilized the PAR approach to co-construct knowledge in order to inform school improvement efforts aimed at student learning and social development. This inquiry approach to school improvement ensures the integration of multiple perspectives, which can be vital for bringing about institutional change in the form of modifications to school policy and practice (Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Kuriloff et al., 2009). The PAR process begins with a team identifying a pertinent school issue, or the PAR team might be called upon to address an issue previously identified by administrators or other key school actors (e.g., students, families, staff). Next, the evidence-based process entails developing a set of core research questions, systematically collecting relevant data from varied sources, dynamically and rigorously analyzing data, and developing robust and feasible recommendations to address the school issue. A school-based PAR project might then assess the implementation process and the results or outcomes that are linked to the recommendations enacted by school constituencies. Taken together, these action-oriented efforts are meant to gauge the overall effectiveness of the PAR process at addressing the identified school concern.

Although limited at times by institutional constraints (e.g., unwillingness of school leadership to accept research findings, lack of fiscal resources to support recommendations), PAR is widely considered a laudable and democratic approach to school change that particularly privileges students' perspectives (London, Zimmerman, & Erbstein, 2003; Ozer, Ritterman, & Wanis, 2010; Schensul, Berg, Schensul, & Sydlo, 2004). For example, PAR has been employed to create safer spaces in independent schools by examining bullying in a single-sex school for boys (Stoudt, 2009), as well as to explore the institutional politics of teacher development in an early childhood learning environment (Henderson, 2014). These empirical studies convey the importance of inquiry-based collaborations with families, students, and faculty to interrogate language, institutional discourse, and power structures that are "learned, embodied, and performed" (Stoudt, 2009, p. 16) in elite institutions. In most institutions, "real change" fails to happen "instantaneously" (Henderson, 2014, p. 35). Compelling evidence is necessary to disrupt power structures built over multiple generations. Stoudt (2009) and Henderson (2014) both illustrate the dynamic processes of engaging collaborative inquiry as a method to document, analyze, and understand how the school-related experiences of students, faculty, and parents represent a promising approach to inform school change.

Committed to institutional research that informs school policy and practice, we argue that PAR can bolster diversity and inclusion efforts at independent schools and provide a rigorous, student-centered, and democratic model for independent school reform. A

portrait of a multi-year project at The Pine School[3] (TPS) will be showcased to specifically illustrate how PAR: (a) deepens school knowledge of diversity among student populations; (b) offers contemporary experiences of students of color at independent schools, especially students from low-income backgrounds; and (c) facilitates development of a robust action plan intended to address school issues that emerged through the PAR process, and thus more effectively support the achievement and social development of historically marginalized students. Our goal is to offer a process model for employing PAR to ameliorate student marginalization that has been typically associated with the social categories of race, ethnicity, and class (i.e., low-income Black and Latino students, and Asian immigrant students) in U.S. independent schools.

This article begins with a description of the partnership between TPS and a research consortium of schools at a northeastern university. We then provide a vignette of the independent school, which describes a recent assembly that served to ignite a renewed commitment to inclusion, particularly in light of increased student diversity. A detailed overview of the PAR project follows, including the data collected and analyzed to determine if and/or how a rigorous PAR process can be used to identify, understand, and respond to the adverse schooling experiences of Black, Latino, and Asian students. Subsequent themes, findings, and dynamics are then relayed and organized by the central domains examined for the specific PAR project at TPS. The article concludes with a discussion of PAR in relation to school reform in private and/or independent institutions.

The Partnership

In May 2010, TPS joined a consortium of independent schools in partnership with a university-school organization (Benson & Harkavy, 2002; Harkavy & Wiewel, 1995) affiliated with a private university in a major northeastern city. Schools in the consortium commit to a multi-year school improvement model, which involves rigorous participatory research with a diverse constituency of students, teachers, administrators, and university researchers. School-based research teams investigate key issues aligned with the organization's mission to support how schools foster the greatest sense of hope in the lives of 21st century students, and co-create evidence-based action steps to enhance students' social and academic experiences within independent and other private learning environments (Kuriloff et al., 2009). TPS collaborated with the university-school partnership organization with the desire to thoroughly examine the school's increased student diversity and bolster campus-wide inclusion efforts through evidence-based changes to school policy, practice, and traditions.

The PAR research group at TPS consisted of eight members from the upper school (administrators, teachers, and students), as well as a research associate (a Black man who is a doctoral candidate in education) and co-director (a White woman who is a university professor of education) from the university-school organization. At the helm were the upper school head (a White man), TPS's director of multicultural affairs (a Black man), and the research associate. This leadership team devised criteria to invite faculty and

[3] The names of people and locations have been replaced with pseudonyms.

students to participate in the PAR group. Individuals needed to: (a) exhibit prior knowledge and commitment to diversity and inclusion at TPS (e.g., Faculty Diversity Committee, Student Affinity Groups, diversity-related student clubs/organizations); (b) demonstrate aptitude and skill to contend with the dynamic, emotionally fraught, and highly complex nature of diversity and inclusion initiatives at independent schools; and (c) express genuine interest in and have the professional time for fully engaging in a rigorous participatory research process. The final eight-member PAR group consisted of two administrators (one White man and one Black man), three teachers (two White men and one Latina), and three students (one biracial teen boy, one Latina teen, and one Asian teen girl), with direct research support from the research associate and co-director. Although neither the co-director nor the upper school head attended the bi-weekly PAR research group meetings, the co-director met with the leadership team (including the upper school head) and the research group at least once each academic semester to discuss the progress of the project and co-facilitate or facilitate PAR group member trainings on various methods associated with PAR.

A Tipping Point: Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Assembly

Introducing university-school organization staff to the culture of TPS entailed the PAR group vividly depicting their recent participation in the annual Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Assembly (2008–2009 school year). Narratives revealed the myriad ways in which the upper school gathering was memorable for students, teachers, and other school staff. A segment of the assembly invited students to share personal stories of overcoming adversity in their everyday lives. Several of the narratives illuminated how students' particular identities (e.g., race, ethnicity, class background, religion) adversely shaped their experiences at school. Student voices previously silenced or unheard were literally amplified at the school event honoring a Civil Rights leader who called for equality, justice, and integration. According to school adults on the PAR team with long tenures at TPS, the honesty displayed by students was unprecedented, especially among students of color from lower income backgrounds. Disheartening and deep-seated realities of school life at TPS were brought to the fore, and the figurative barrier of silence was broken, even if just for the short duration of the assembly. Numerous self-reports to PAR group members suggested that attendees left the school auditorium with a heightened awareness of the divergent and varied schooling experiences of TPS students. Given the misalignment of student narratives with the school's mission to embrace diversity, shock and bewilderment ensued, followed by alarm, compassion, and a sense of urgency. The PAR group deemed the Dr. King, Jr. assembly a *tipping point* that brought the school to action, in the hopes of more fully reflecting its core institutional values and beliefs.

The PAR research group could enumerate the multiple diversity initiatives, programs, and services at TPS (e.g., student affinity groups, diversity-related parent associations, multicultural field trips), but due to this wide array of diversity efforts, they simultaneously mentioned how the assembly feedback forms revealed that students and faculty began to bemoan the school's overemphasis on diversity and inclusion. After the Dr. King, Jr. assembly, the multiple school efforts were suddenly considered insufficient; programs and initiatives needed to be better integrated throughout the school environment, and more explicitly governed by a diversity-based institutional mission.

The PAR group expressed a genuine desire to harness the spirit of community uplift sparked during the school event and leverage the pivotal moment to marshal the school-wide support essential to the collaborative PAR research process. Before the assembly, for example, school staff either addressed diversity-related incidents or practices (e.g., racist jokes among students, lack of diversity in school curriculum) on a case-by-case basis, or simply ignored them out of anxiety, unfamiliarity, or a lack of knowledge and skill to react productively. The PAR team recognized that the school's prior efforts had failed to thoroughly unearth and address the adverse effects of this school practice. The Dr. King, Jr. assembly had rejuvenated inclusive community-building efforts, which were later bolstered by the rigor of the newly initiated PAR process. "Diversity work" at TPS became undergirded by both a local and empirical knowledge base derived from PAR with the university-school partnership organization.

Method

Engaging Diversity and Marginalization through Participatory Action Research

This two-year (2011–2013) case study of a PAR project exploring diversity and inclusion at TPS involved the analysis of: (a) an upper school student survey (N = 282; 75% response rate) and (b) 60–90 minute interviews with the PAR group at TPS, including the head of school (a White man), who supervises the upper school head previously mentioned, and the university-based research associate (N = 10). This article, however, focuses on the analysis of the student survey, which illuminates how the PAR process provided TPS with a democratic, student-centered, and evidence-based approach to conducting diversity work, with clear implications for school reform at independent schools. From 2011 through 2013, TPS averaged 512 students in the upper school; 40% of upper school students were students of color, of mostly Black, Latin American, and Asian descent. Three-fourths of the students of color were eligible for TPS's tuition assistance program.

The PAR team sought to complicate faculty members' and students' perceptions of student diversity, as well as highlight the schooling experiences of low-income students of color. Through a process of inductive and deductive coding, the team employed a dynamic analysis procedure to explicate school-specific insights. Fully embracing a participatory research approach to examine how PAR facilitates diversity and inclusion at TPS, this paper is authored by the research associate (now a university professor), a school practitioner affiliated with a teacher residency program in the northeast, and an upper school student who participated in the PAR group (now a college student). This collaborative approach was taken to integrate multiple perspectives and constituencies, with the intent to establish or build upon foundational school knowledge that informs institutional policy and practice.

Exploring Student Diversity and Schooling at TPS

Named the *Upper School Identity Project*, the PAR project at TPS centered on thoroughly exploring the increased diversity of its student population, with a particular focus on the schooling of students historically marginalized due to their race and/or class. From a qualitative and practitioner inquiry stance, the central task of the project was to

construct a rich portrait of student diversity at TPS and offer a more nuanced interpretation of the variation among schooling experiences linked to student identity. The core research questions included: (a) How do TPS upper school students describe their personal identities? (b) How do students describe their schooling experiences at TPS? (c) How do upper school students' schooling experiences at TPS vary by their identities? and (d) How do student diversity and schooling experiences influence TPS's school culture and community?

The primary data source was a qualitative student survey administered via email (i.e., Survey Monkey) to the entire upper school student body (N = 512). The online survey was comprised of two open-ended writing prompts, which asked students to draft narrative responses (200–300 words each). The first prompt required students to provide a self-description, guided by the questions "Who am I?" and "What qualities, characteristics, or traits best describe your personal identity?" The second prompt asked students to describe the TPS school environment; students were specifically asked, "How would you describe The Pine School?" Student responses (n = 282; 75% response rate) were analyzed using a two-tiered procedure that consisted of: (a) *open-coding* (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990), and (b) *thematic analysis* (Creswell, 2013; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

Each PAR group member had extensive qualitative research training, which covered topics including developing research questions and methods for rigorous qualitative data analysis. These trainings were either solely led by the research associate or research co-director, or at times co-facilitated by both university researchers. To enhance validity, a purposive sampling technique was employed to conduct *member checks* (Creswell, 2013; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011) with two representative groups of TPS students. Sampling criteria of particular interest for these groups included: grade level, race and ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic background, immigrant status, and native language. Member checks were deployed to systematically elicit feedback on emergent findings and themes. The *Upper School Identity Project* to date has been presented in a poster format and as a formal plenary presentation at a roundtable event coordinated by the university-school partnership organization—a year-end event held at the host university for the partnership organization that commemorates the PAR projects conducted with students at independent schools in the consortium.

The PAR research group at TPS took great care to unearth pertinent findings, themes, and dynamics, most notably in the form of weekly analysis meetings, shared detailed memos reflecting preliminary analyses, and member checks. The PAR project was originally designed to be one year in length, but due to considerable lag with student completion of the online survey, and the PAR group's commitment to the integrity of the PAR process, the project timeline was extended in order to reach the targeted 75% response rate. Once the PAR group achieved this rate, the sheer amount of narrative data, and commensurate analysis needed, further compelled the group to extend the project into a second school year. Once we completed data collection, the data organization and cleansing lasted approximately three months. Ultimately, the PAR group agreed that data analysis would have been significantly undermined by a one-year timeline. Post-project interviews with the PAR group revealed a genuine desire to maintain fidelity to the

research process, in order to garner resonant insights that could meaningfully inform school improvement and/or reform.

The qualitative research principles of *depth* (detail and complexity) and *saturation* (relevance and resonance; Creswell, 2013; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011) supported the analysis and identification of salient narratives related to the research questions of the PAR project, which centered on student diversity and identity, schooling, and the larger TPS school community. Several findings, themes, and dynamics emerged within each of these domains. This article, however, will highlight a subset of these critical insights that the PAR group believed either furthered institutional knowledge of diversity among its student population, or illuminated school-specific experiences of marginalized students of color at TPS. The next section highlights the interrelated domains of the PAR project at TPS: (a) student diversity and identity, (b) schooling experiences at TPS, and (c) school culture and community.

Findings

Student Diversity and Identity

"I'm far too complex to be defined, but I'm not sure everyone else [at TPS] is." At TPS, "too complex to be defined" was a key finding related to students' perceptions of themselves, whereas perceptions of other students were governed by a clique mentality and steeped in negative stereotypes associated with various identity descriptors (e.g., "über rich," "JAP," "girly-girl"). A White, 10th-grade teen girl said, "I am a person who is unique, caring, and different, not generic like most others." Students self-identified in complex, unique, or "undefinable" terms; at the same time, students seemed unaware that their classmates held similar ideas about their own identities. Related to the above descriptors, student identity was also linked to popularity among peers at school, and students often associated popularity with peers who were part of a discrete clique of students. Such characterization of school peers illustrated a stark insider-outsider dynamic mediated by popularity. Extending this dynamic, a Black teen girl in the 11th grade stated, "I am not one of the 'popular' people, but those people simply have different values [than] I have for my life right now." As implicated by this quote, these divergent values narrated by students also revealed feelings of invisibility or loneliness. This popular-invisible dynamic was not absolute in that students were exclusively placed in either category, but the perceived boundary still profoundly shaped students' identities, peer interactions, and overall experiences of the TPS school community.

Religion: "I usually hide this part of myself." Religious beliefs were central to students' identities, with a wide array of religious affiliations (e.g., Jewish, Christian, Muslim, Buddhist). Students were generally hesitant to discuss religion or deities at school, and explicitly communicated that they rarely brought up the subject for fear of being ostracized or misunderstood by peers. A White 10th-grade teen boy said:

> When I interact with other schoolmates I usually hide this part of myself and just show them what they want to see because I assume they won't understand who I really am. I go to church every Sunday, and I believe that God is everything, but I can't dare talk about him at school; who will understand?

This facet of students' identities was largely considered taboo, and thus was largely left unspoken on school grounds; it was rarely discussed in class or in school common areas (e.g., cafeteria, hallways, library). Student narratives expressed a desire to engage religion in a more explicit, concrete, and expansive manner, and not only occasionally in the classroom, but also throughout social programming on campus.

"Making a lot of money is one of my motivations in life." Economic capital or capital accumulation was also a core component of students' self-descriptions, as well as a discrete lens through which students viewed their peers. Consequently, access to economic resources largely governed self-perceptions of TPS students in relation to their classmates. A White 9th-grade teen boy relayed the following perception of himself:

> Making a lot of money is one of my motivations in life. Seeing all of my friends' parents at TPS, how they live, and the privileges they give their kids really hit me. I'm jealous and I want to live like that. Sometimes I've wished I could trade lives with my friends. This is my motivation to go to a great university, get a great well-paying job, and be able to live just like I want to.

Additionally, a White 12th-grade teen girl narrated how she was perceived by school peers in relation to socioeconomics: "People see me as a spoiled, selfish, rich girl, and I wish so much that they do not see me like that. I wish people saw me for who I am." Moreover, the phrase, "having money" was frequently used by students to describe both themselves and school peers, and highlighted students' self-consciousness regarding their class background.

Racial identification: "If someone asked about me, I would not say race right away." Student narratives depicted conscious, deliberate efforts to showcase aspects of themselves other than their racial background, but in a way that did not downplay discussion of their racial identities altogether. A Latina in the 11th grade said, "If someone asked about me, I would not say my race right away . . . for I feel there are things more important than race." Similarly, a 10th-grade Black teen boy shared, "I'm not going to tell you my race, because I feel that the way we look is not important at all, to our overall self . . . Race is just a factor of the huge equation of humanity." Although students at TPS considered race a central facet of their identities, the social category was not the totality of their self-perception or description. Race was furthermore associated with students' cultural backgrounds and the histories of particular racial and ethnic groups in the United States, and throughout the world.[4]

Korean immigrant students. Asian students, mostly of Korean descent, felt ashamed by and pressured to conform to both negative and positive stereotypes of Asian Americans or Asian immigrants (e.g., limited English language proficiency, high mathematical intelligence, remarkable work ethic). Narratives of this Asian ethnic subgroup from Korea (i.e., the largest Asian ethnic group at TPS) illuminated how many Asian students felt restricted by these stereotypes. A teen girl in the 11th grade from Korea wrote:

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[4] Students provided their racial background in the demographics section of the open-ended survey.

> I am a Korean girl, born and raised in [the northeast]. I do not know about my heritage, and I do not know anything about my ethnicity either. My first language is English, and second, Korean. I hardly speak Korean around the house, because my parents are fluent in English, I don't have many Asians friends, and I don't do typical Asian things. I'd say I'm not the smartest person, which fails to match the stereotype of Asians, and my parents are not strict, sending me to tutor[s] everyday [sic]. My family is very "Americanized," and we don't act like foreigners. When I was young, I used to speak some Korean, and I often visited Korea as well. Now as a high schooler, I have not been to Korea in over four years, and I'm not up-to-date with news there. I stopped speaking the language, and I stopped going there, and I stopped my interest in my ethnicity. I guess, I'd say that I am a Korean-American who sometimes wishes she didn't have to hide her background to fit in, but sometimes it's necessary.

Asian students, and Korean students in particular, typically attributed the identity-related experience narrated by the 11th-grader above to TPS's academic program and pressure from their own parents to earn high letter grades on school progress reports. Korean students specifically raised concerns with how these stereotypes of Asian Americans were pervasive throughout the learning environment. They called for more diversity work centered on how TPS students, and the school at large, could be more inclusive, or more aware of variation among Asian students, with the goal to disrupt students' and faculty's monolithic views of Asians, and Korean students specifically.

Schooling Experiences at TPS

Academic success and academic competition. Students primarily attributed their academic success to adults in the school (i.e., teachers and administrators) who consistently communicated the importance of "hard work" and provided the necessary school and classroom supports to meet high academic expectations. These student narratives simultaneously illuminated how the TPS student body often assessed and evaluated their own abilities to enact a consistent academic work ethic. Students placed inordinate pressure on themselves to excel academically, particularly to become "desirable" college applicants, and acknowledged when their work ethic waned. Even when narratives clearly illustrated a steady work ethic, students challenged themselves to "work harder." A White 10th-grade teen boy stated:

> My grades are one part of my life that I would love to improve. I have about a 3.15 GPA, and even though I know I'm a lot smarter than that number, I don't try hard enough—I do try, but I consistently fail to come through when I need to get my grades up. Even through this, I still manage to get by with grades like Bs. If I could change one thing about myself, it would definitely be my work ethic. I wish I had the will to want to put the work in to really succeed at things, instead of sort of just being there, and being able to do the bare minimum.

TPS students, generally speaking, perceived a meritocracy in the classroom, whereby their narratives demonstrated little concern specifically with, for example, unfair grading by teachers. Most students associated their academic success or failure with their own

work ethic. Students' desire to do well in school, and the expressed linkage between academic excellence and a steadfast work ethic, also fueled a disconcerting competitiveness among students. A Black 12th-grade teen girl offered a poetic narrative illustrating such a student dynamic:

> Where is my tutor? I need my tutor. 5:35pm. Finally, she got here. "Write my English paper, I need to be in AP next year." "Start my college essay; I need to get into Harvard." These things happen, students are not honest with their work. It upsets someone like me who tries. Who does not get help from a tutor, who does not have my important work completed for me. Extra time is a whole different story. It feels like every student has it. Besides the few that actually need it, why? After an expensive, long test, everyone is always awarded with it. The competition rises about the walls as every student feels they need to have that extra edge. Community service. A typical TPS student could have 500 hours and still no heart. They rush to get as many hours as possible, to be the best prospective college student. Does that mean the person is kind? Is the person considerate? Yes. It's happened to me. The girl with 250 hours, who would never work a second in her life, if she could serve others all day.

Students often depicted emotionally fraught characterizations of their schooling experiences related to competitiveness at TPS. They believe that competition, at times, impeded their friendships or impaired their ability to genuinely connect socially or emotionally with peers. Some student narratives explicitly asked that teachers and administrators employ more effective strategies and approaches intended to mitigate competitiveness on campus.

Sports and other extracurricular activities. In contrast to academic competition, narrative responses highlighted how membership in a sports team fostered what students called "unity" and "togetherness." Of the plethora of extracurricular activities offered at TPS, students predominantly discussed their involvement in team sports; in several instances, students' sports affiliations framed or infused both their narratives centered on identity and their distinct schooling experiences. A White 11th-grade teen girl said, "First and foremost, I am a student-athlete. I love to play sports and care very much about education. I set goals for myself in school and in basketball, which is my main sport. I work hard in pursuing these goals." Addressing how sports aided student connection, a White 11th-grade teen boy said:

> Being a member of the athletic community, I have witnessed many aspects of school life concerning sports. One memory took place last year. It was nearly the end of the soccer season. It was the last home game for the squad and the respected coach. The bleachers were packed, and it seemed as if the whole school [was] there. The atmosphere was great; seeing such a blend of all types of students, not all soccer fans or players, cheering, singing, and encouraging the team on, truly made me proud to be a TPS [mascot] then. My closest teachers were there too. It felt like a whole school community event. I shall never forget that experience.

Teacher-student relationships. Given that TPS teachers often served as coaches too, students overall considered sports to further enhance close teacher-student relationships. Overwhelmingly, students praised teachers at TPS, with only a few exceptions. Relationships with teachers were regularly in the foreground of students' narratives about campus experiences, and were replete with what students called, "high expectations, unconditional care." Students identified teachers as possessing a genuine regard for students' social and academic success, evidenced by their creative instructional strategies and consistent availability for support. A Latina in the 11th grade said:

> My favorite thing about [TPS] would have to be the teachers. The teachers make the school. They are probably the biggest reason I came to TPS, instead of my local public school. They are incredibly nice. They are friendly, but most of all they will help you if you need help. I have never been declined, asking for help on an assignment from a teacher. The ratio between teachers to kids in one class is significantly lower then that of any public school. This way, teachers can get to know you better.

Students considered teachers a profound benefit to the TPS school environment. Other phrases such as "very smart" and "dedicated professionals" were used to describe teachers across all subjects, and, most notably, exuding from these depictions of teachers was what students called "undeniable love." Teachers were viewed as incredibly supportive of students' success both inside and outside the classroom. Alongside teachers, grade-level deans and other administrators were collectively believed to be what "make the school" and what "makes it a community."

School Culture and Community

Desire for "peer connection" at school. A desire for what TPS students described in terms of "peer connection" or *sense-of-belonging* (Battistich, Solomon, Watson, & Schaps, 1997; Becker & Luthar, 2002; Osterman, 2000) was a prominent theme encompassing all three domains of the PAR project. Students were effusive about the academics and social programming at TPS. Across all four grade levels, students considered TPS to be a positive learning environment with a stellar and rigorous curriculum, extensive academic supports, and a broad array of extracurricular activities and athletic programs. A noteworthy segment of students, however, communicated a general lack of genuine and deep connection among school peers. A White 12th-grade teen boy articulated this sentiment well:

> While [TPS] may offer *everything* I wish a school could offer, it doesn't feel the way I wish this school felt . . . and the thing that feels the most off about [TPS] is that many students openly say they have an unquenched thirst to connect to one another.

This mystifying experience for TPS students was supported by their difficulty expressing what they were thinking and feeling to each other, as well as to their teachers. Such a sentiment emerged in narrative responses to both the first and second writing prompts. The sense of peer connection among students was mediated by their own

identities, interactions at school, and the values and beliefs associated with TPS's school culture and community. Student narratives across previously explicated project domains (i.e., student diversity and identity) illustrated how the specific findings, themes, and dynamics in this current domain (i.e., schooling experiences at TPS) influenced both peer connection and disconnection.

In pursuit of change. Similar to "peer connection," this final theme of "change" cut across all three domains of the PAR project at TPS. Students demonstrated a clear acknowledgement of ongoing school-wide change; indeed, school improvement was deemed central to the ethos of the TPS school community. Emphasis on institutional change from students' perspectives, however, was contrasted with more conservative perspectives attributed to veteran teachers and some administrators, who explicitly or implicitly advocated for or sought to maintain less inclusive customs and traditions (e.g., admissions policies, curricula, and instructional methods). Despite reports of these conservative views, students still felt the school community had become increasingly open to, and engaged in, self-reflection—for instance, the institution's PAR work with the university-school partnership organization. Although some students were resistant to the institutional changes in progress at TPS, particularly in light of the perceived overemphasis on diversity and inclusion among students and faculty, most students nevertheless welcomed the time for reflection. Students in support of change highlighted aspects of their own schooling, or those of their peers, to justify adaptations to TPS policies and practices, particularly those related to student diversity in enrollment. Consistent with this narrative finding, a Latino teen in the 11th grade stated:

> TPS has its fair share of flaws, but what I'm astounded by is the effort of both students and teachers always wanting to change, become better, and always [striving] for excellence. . . . TPS, in my opinion, prides itself on diversity, but I'm a little bit skeptical about that diversity when I see the handful of Spanish and Black kids in my grade, or the fact that I'm the only Hispanic student government member.

Even though only a few students were involved in the actual PAR group, many students remained hopeful that TPS would continue to do diversity work by involving students in ongoing PAR processes, and that the larger school community would move toward becoming a more inclusive learning environment.

Collectively, the findings, themes, and dynamics presented in this article provided the PAR group at TPS with a generally representative understanding and evidence-based documentation of students' everyday experiences on campus. While none of these insights are particularly new or unique in educational research on diversity and schooling, they do illustrate the value of the PAR inquiry process for diversity work in independent schools. Prior to enacting PAR, teachers, administrators, and students at TPS had hunches or anecdotes about student life related to diversity and inclusion, without research to substantiate their impressions. Emboldened with this new school knowledge of TPS, specifically related to student identity, diversity, and marginalization, PAR group members devised what was considered a feasible and dynamic action plan in light of institutional constraints (e.g., diversity work fatigue among students, resistance from veteran teachers), which was comprised of "next steps" that sought to ameliorate the

school issues evidenced by the collaborative PAR process. TPS's action plan is comprised of five interrelated phases: (1) convene a diverse, yet smaller subgroup within the larger PAR group (including students) to facilitate subsequent phases of the TPS action plan; (2) draft a research report that accounts for multiple school constituencies (e.g., teachers, students, administrators, board) to disseminate critical insights acquired through the PAR process; (3) conduct a robust inventory of diversity-related initiatives, programs, and services at TPS; (4) partner with school leaders of TPS's diversity efforts (e.g., the director of multicultural affairs) in order to translate findings, themes, and dynamics from the PAR project into specific changes to (or the creation of) school policy and practice; and (5) design and conduct a substantive evaluation of new policies to ensure optimal impact of institutional changes. This five-part action plan, in sum, demonstrates the renewed commitment of TPS to evidence-based diversity and inclusion that privileges the perspectives and experiences of its student population.

Conclusion: PAR and School Reform

TPS is an independent school that utilized participatory action research to productively respond to increased student diversity in their upper school. Although the school offered multiple student organizations or clubs related to diversity, regularly held events on campus to celebrate such diversity, and even hired a new director of multicultural affairs to orchestrate and enrich these aspects of student life, the Dr. King, Jr. assembly offered a palpable moment for the school community to reevaluate the efficacy of these preexisting efforts. Multiple constituencies, both within and beyond TPS, were convened to enact PAR with the goal of gaining a robust understanding of students' current lived experiences at school. In doing so, TPS engaged in a school-based reform model that, we argue, has demonstrated promise for informing institutional policy and practice in independent schools.

Albeit daunting, this much-needed empirical and rigorous process model for school improvement among independent schools is reinforced by democratic principles governing the inquiry approach overall. We contend that the locally derived knowledge embedded in PAR enhances the applicability of emergent findings and themes, and significantly informs recommendations for specific changes to school policy and practice. Several scholars posit that university-school and school-community partnerships are valid and rigorous, and constitute a suitable method for enacting institutional change (e.g., Benson & Harkavy, 2002; Harkavy & Wiewel, 1995), especially at independent schools in the United States (Kuriloff et al., 2009), which are historically known to exercise exclusionary practices and exhibit stark power differentials mediated by social position (e.g., student or school adult) and demographics (e.g., class and gender; Cookson & Persell, 1985, 1991; Domhoff, 2002; Klitgaard, 1985).

New knowledge garnered through the two-year PAR study of diversity and inclusion at TPS reflects the inquiry method's utility for school reform, with key contributing factors being the student-centered and democratic processes fundamentally embedded within PAR. In recent years, PAR has become increasingly popular because it privileges student perspectives and relies on democratic ideals that help mitigate the power differentials among university researchers, school professionals, and students (Fine et al., 2004; Gordon, 2008; Kuriloff et al., 2012). PAR takes the inquiry stance that all PAR

group constituencies possess expert knowledge. During this PAR project at TPS, for instance, the university researchers were not considered the sole conduits of expertise. The PAR group, with its composition of researchers, school professionals, and students, co-constructed knowledge related to student diversity and marginalization through the collaborative inquiry process. This process allowed for a more nuanced and rich institutional understanding, which was necessary for developing an effective action plan that could lead to meaningful changes in policy and practice at TPS.

There is limited empirical research utilizing PAR processes to investigate diversity and inclusion efforts at independent schools. We argue that in the absence of PAR processes, the impact of institutional change is diminished, whereby, for example at TPS, diversity-related initiatives, programs, and services failed to adequately mitigate student marginalization, largely rooted in stereotypes associated with racial and class identity categories. TPS's partnership with the university-school partnership organization symbolizes a renewed commitment to its stated school mission centered on "community," "intellectualism," "excellence," "honor," and "integrity" within a diverse learning environment.

Educational reform in the United States has not adequately addressed the complex dynamics of American schooling (e.g., structural racism, implicit bias rooted in negative race and gender stereotypes; Anyon, 2005; Lipman, 2010; Payne, 2008). Instead of facilitating systemic school reform, bureaucratic and authoritarian reform approaches have perpetuated institutional distrust, which both undermines school improvement efforts and demoralizes teachers, administrators, and other school staff (Pupik-Dean & Nelson, 2015). We, in the end, continue to argue that PAR is a robust independent school reform model with notable promise for meaningfully informing institutional policy and practice. Although beyond the scope of this article, we, along with others (e.g., Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Gordon, 2008; Morrell, 2004), further contend that the benefits and challenges of PAR can substantively transform all learning contexts, private, independent, or public.

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